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*Three men. One beautiful woman.
A passionate ...*

JOURNEY TO DIIR



Lynn Sterling

Rosa Romance
presents

✧ Journey To Dirr ✧

Journey To Diir



Lynn Sterling



Rosa Romance

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Journey To Diir

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✧ Publisher's Note ✧

Diir is pronounced Die-eer.

✧ Author's Note ✧

To Mom,

Thanks for passing on your love of books.

It will always be my favorite gift.

★ Preface ★

2020 AD

In the blackness of space, the cylinder loomed over Earth in a perfect orbit. This was understandable since the SpaceSleep Module's only purpose was to achieve a perfect orbit; storing elite humans with dreams of cheating death.

In 2012, when cryonics had finally been perfected by the geniuses at CryoTime, the wealthier on their deathbeds bought in to the new technology, hoping for a second chance. Medical science had been leaping ahead year after year but still there were people with the more unprofitable conditions and diseases which medical technology companies didn't bother to try curing but who still wanted to live. They made CryoTime a Fortune 500 company in its first year of business; the U.S.'s foremost corporation by the year 2015.

The SpaceSleep Modules that CryoTime designed were meant to lower the cost of keeping thousands of sleepers ready for the cure that everyone was sure would come. The orbits of each module were plotted and charted for all space vessels and then mostly ignored by CryoTime whose responsibility was just to maintain the preserved humans.

Captain Mike Werner sat strapped into his launch chair waiting for clearance to get his payload into space.

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He was piloting the ship called Desert 202 which would launch the newest communications satellite.

"You are set for launch at 14:05, Desert 202."

Mike touched the button directly under his thumb.
"Copy Central. Launch at 14:05."

He ran through the checklist one last time. When the seconds clicked off and he engaged the engines he felt the incredible power surging under him. The gravity generators lowered the pull to only two-G's, but he loved the feeling and wondered again what the pilots in earlier days had experienced.

As the ship pushed its way through the atmosphere, Mike was almost sad when he cleared the pull of Earth and had to reverse power but he got to work anyway. He ran the calculations for orbit mark and positioned the release of the Universal Communications Environment. UCE was going to change communications throughout the world and for the small group of scientists living on the moon.

Once launched, everyone could experience real time, three-dimensional communications in their own homes for the cost of the two-dimensions of today's units. Mike nudged the thrusters and noted that he had seventeen minutes before satellite release. When the ship neared orbit position, the computer took control but he oversaw the procedure, watching for mechanical glitches.

The bay doors opened and he felt the ship buck as the UCE gently uncoupled from the ship.

Mike waited, glancing at the round, blue jewel of Earth below him.

At first glance, looks can be deceiving, he thought. Even this far away Mike could see the planet slowly dying. Sadness swept through him as he looked down on the damaged world. He shook his head and wondered if everyone could see their world from space, would they change; could they change?

"UCE is in orbit position and is ready for initiation," the computer announced a few moments later.

"Please initiate start up procedure and verify," he responded.

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Mike watched the unit as small lights flickered on and the orbital jets test fired.

"UCE operating within optimal parameters," he was informed by the computer.

"Desert 202 to Kuwait Central," Mike said.

"Go ahead, Desert 202."

"UCE is in orbital position and initialized. Tested and working at optimum capacity."

When the mike opened for "Thank you, Desert 202" Mike heard cheering in the background. He nudged his thrusters again and left UCE behind him as he circled the sparkling blue and white marble below him.

It's too soon, he thought as he descended into the atmosphere to live again among the groundlings.

About the time Mike was eating dinner on Earth, a new program was dropped into UCE. Obediently, UCE fired all Earth-side thrusters at full capacity.

Kuwait's Control Center immediately saw the problem and engineers started jumping through every possible hoop and calling in every available program specialist.

It didn't help.

The long-gone saboteur was very good at his job.

After only twenty minutes, the thrusters overheated since they were designed for orbital positioning not continued use.

The thrusters were also, not coincidentally, putting the Universal Communications Environment on a direct collision course with a very large cylinder in orbit. Just before UCE would have collided with SpaceSleep 1402, the thrusters ignited the fuel containers and the UCE exploded.

The force of the explosion pushed the SpaceSleep module out of its programmed orbit and gave thousands of sleepers a very different destiny.

So much for cheating death.

★ Chapter 1 ★

2655 AD

On pilot duty, Cole sat watching the star-spangled view screen as the ship's computer mentally alerted him to the newest information available. The alert sounded like a tiny E-sharp bell in his brain.

He replied, also mentally, *Go ahead, Mordred*. Cole grinned silently. He'd always thought someone had a very sick sense of humor when they'd suggested the name Mordred for their Computer Control Unit.

The computer responded, ***There's fourteen tons of various medium-grade refined metals in grid one-o-seven at thirty-two mark three.***

Please detail metal list and extrapolate source, Cole felt adrenaline race as he calmly instructed Mordred.

There was an infinitesimal pause and Cole felt the information from Mordred stream into his brain.

The major components are Titanium, aluminum, copper, gold, steel, and ceramics. Source: Earth. No propulsion systems, weaponry or life signs detected. Minimal power source detected. Would need a closer scan to identify vessel type.

Reset our course to intersect with the object, Cole told Mordred. *ETA?*

One-point-three cycles.

Cole's ice-blue eyes glittered betraying his excitement. He ran his hand across his short blond hair causing it to stand up even more than normal.

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This could triple the profit on this contract run, he thought with enthusiasm.

Captain Cole Stuart loved being in space and was lucky to have the command of the asteroid mining vessel *Camelot* where he could go pretty much where he pleased, as long as he kept delivering the ore.

The opportunity had come along at a time in his life when he had needed new options: different options. At first, it had been an escape but he had learned to love the freedom and the tight friendship that had developed with his two shipmates.

At first he thought to let Mordred announce this to Nick and Tremaine but decided to get his Partners to the bridge. They would want to be in on this, if it was what he thought. This was the most exciting discovery of the entire mission.

"Captain Stuart to Lt. Ferraro and Tremaine. Please report to the bridge." His formal request added a note of solemnity that he seldom displayed with either of them.

They all needed some good news for a change. The last two asteroids had been tedious and time consuming and the ore recovered was unremarkable.

Then the VidSim unit had gone down. Nothing they or the computer tried had done any good. He still found Tremaine tinkering with the damn thing, trying to rig a part when a replacement was a minimum of six months away. Mars Corp didn't put space fold jump engines in the mining vessels. Why invest the money for ore? They had enough ships and workers and there was no cost benefit. Occasionally a vessel had an accident and a relief ship could have been to them in minutes. Too expensive, though, to replace VidSim parts.

As captain, Cole was beginning to worry about Nick and Tremaine; they were already showing the strain. They were not just his crew; they were also his space family. This was the second three-year contract with Tremaine and the third with Nick and he knew their work.

They were getting sloppy. Hopefully, this could focus them again until they could get to Mira.

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Whether from Earth or Mars, human or genetically engineered, everyone needed a physical outlet. When the Corporation had started putting men out for years at a time, they very quickly determined that a VidSim was not a luxury.

Stress in space was a reality. Even those born in space felt the press just beyond the fragile metal walls surrounding them.

The VidSim let each man develop his own programs to interface with his Computer Interface Unit. It was close to and sometimes better than having a real woman. Cole, however, had never really bought in to VidSims. After all, he had been one of the lucky few that had been married to a woman that defied simulation.

He swung around in the chair as Nick came bounding onto the bridge, followed by Tremaine who had been in sleep period. Nick looked like he had been interrupted from another project and had that *"This better be good"* look. "So what's so important Mordred can't download it to us?"

Mordred, please download information to the crew.

He watched their faces as they absorbed the data.

Tremaine let out a whoop that startled even him. "Refined ore! We can unload this at Mira and it gives us the liquid LC for VidSim repairs and Mirian wine." He added thoughtfully, "But what would be out here with that kind of volume and no propulsion system?"

Closer scan shows an ancient storage unit of a type used to store cryonically preserved humans from the years 2012 through 2020. Further, some biological debris remains. Minor power signature from radiation collectors.

Stunned, Cole whispered "Jesus, 2020. That hulk has been floating in space for over six hundred years. How the hell did it get all the way out to the Ort belt?"

Nick showed more interest than he normally did during "rock hunts" as he called them. Nick was a scientist but his first love was really medical science. "Cryonically frozen Earthers from 2020. If any DNA has survived, this could be monumental."

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Cole sobered instantly. Nick was the scientist but Cole was responsible for the safety of the crew. There had been some very nasty germs over the last six hundred years.

Mordred, please perform a Level One scan on the biological debris and display findings on the viewer when available.

Cole looked calmly at Nick.

“Steady, Nick. Let’s establish protocol for this mission. No biological samples can come aboard without being scanned for contagions. Once cleared, samples must be kept in containment fields. Standard procedures apply. We are going to have to sweep clean the entire thing before any ore can be separated and loaded. The most—”

Nick exploded. “Sweep cleaning will destroy all the biological material still present. This is not a *standard* opportunity. All of my samples will have to be taken before we can separate any of the ores. This is more important than the ore, Cole. Fourteen tons means a lot of people were preserved. I will need samples from all of them and I’m going to need both of you to help me.”

He returned Cole’s direct look. “This is a monumental discovery.” He paused and his voice dropped. “We could make a real difference with this information, Cole.”

Tremaine knew what was going to happen before Nick had even spoken. He was always the peacekeeper of the group. With his outwardly calm and upbeat persona, he had always studied the emotions of his companions and understood them completely.

Cole was centered on the mission and Nick was always looking for a way to solve the genetic breakdown that had been going critical over the last three generations. Fewer and fewer women could have children and then only one. Having two was a rarity that inspired envy. The ration of female to male had decreased alarmingly. Although thirty-five percent of Earth’s population was now female, the colonies had not fared so well and most were lucky to retain a twenty-five percent female population. Everyone recognized the

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problem. No one believed in a solution except Nick. He was convinced that he could correct humanity's genetic miss-step and remained one of humanity's last dreamers.

Tremaine said gently, "I'll help with samples, Cole can start scanning and cataloging for ore content and programming the bots for retrieval. No matter how long this takes us, it is a fraction of the time that it would take us to make this kind of LC on an asteroid."

While Tremaine was speaking, data started to scroll across the view screen.

Markings identify unit as SpaceSleep 1402.

Launched in the year 2014.

Approximately one thousand cryonic pods.

Each pod measures two-point-two by one-point-five by one meters.

Pods connected with individual couplers around central core.

All outer pods show extensive damage to both pods and cryonically preserved humans.

Biological materials only found in center core pods.

CONTENTS LISTING:

TITANIUM	8.7 TONS
ALUMINUM	2.4 TONS
COPPER	.8 TONS
CERAMICS/GLASS	1.2 TONS
GOLD	.8 TONS
SILVER	.5 TONS
BIOLOGICAL DEBRIS	.8 TONS

Nick's face fell as he realized how little was left of the one thousand souls that had been preserved six hundred thirty-five years ago.

"There could still be viable genetic samples from those that remain," he protested. "Samples from one thousand would have been too much to hope for."

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Cole watched the disappointment spread across his friend's face and was reminded of how much Nick's dream meant to him. He was sorry for being so tough. But any samples surviving after six hundred thirty-five years was a dream. *Well, at least Nick still has a dream,* Cole thought bitterly.

Cole slapped Nick's shoulder and smiled. "Let's see what's left and get this rock hunt started."

Over the next several weeks, the three Partners got a rhythm going. Normally, Mordred would have created a linked atmospheric field that would allow the miners to travel freely from the ship to the debris, however, with possible biological contaminants present they were forced to revert to enviro-suits.

First Cole would scan and then a bot would uncouple a pod. Each pod had an engraved nameplate with the person contained within. Most were either completely missing or barely legible. The ones that could be cataloged Mordred stored into a file that would be downloaded with the monthly status report. Fortunately, the data cubes were some of the first crystal storage modules and at least there was some hope of retrieving the old information.

Since all of the pods were mechanically identical, it was easy to catalog metals and ceramics. Reclamation technology had been developed to recycle just about everything and even tiny amounts of materials could be useful. All three worked long tedious cycles without complaining. As monotonous as the work was, it wasn't as unprofitable or as dangerous as asteroid mining.

Nick had grown up on Mars and was used to working asteroids in environment suits for long periods of time. You had to get used to it on Mars. The Mars Corporation owned you and they said what you would get used to, even as children. At the age of eight when he had wanted to join the military to become a pilot he had been examined, analyzed and been directed to his dismay to

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* * *

train in the sciences. He had excelled and found that he enjoyed medicine.

Although Mars Corp had insisted that he have a degree in chemical science, he had agreed only if he could also train as a doctor. After all, they said doctors were needed on in space and that's where they wanted him. He was one of a hand-full of doctors working on a miner. Mars Corp shipped doctors where and when they were needed. Sometimes they were too late but not often enough to mandate changes.

They were over fifty percent done by the time they ran into any biological samples that had viable genetic signatures. Nick had been getting bored but now he was excited, focused, and driven.

Most of the biological material was minute and was only contained in the pods, which were still at least partially functional. When biomaterials were found, Nick took samples, scanned for any contagions and stored them in containment fields with the names listed on the pod. He had Mordred attempt some DNA extractions and jealously guarded his time in the lab with the samples attempting genetic modeling. Every waking moment was spent in med bay "tinkering," Tremaine had teased.

Tremaine had been working steadily for over seven cycles and was starving. He stretched and rolled his head to loosen a kink forming in his neck.

He automatically moved to the next pod, one of the center pods that was intact and looked to be functional. The radiation collection unit was still transferring power to the control panel. They had found that the collectors soaked up the radiation and stored what it could. Excess was dumped into the couplers, which ran through the entire grid; that way the center pods had equal power. The problem so far was that the collectors would collect but no longer store. This pod was still able to store the power and the unit was mildly functional. He moved the scanner down the length of the pod and paused to glance at the display. Tremaine acknowledged the E-sharp bell.

Please wait to uncouple pod. Subject specimen is viable. Notifying crew.

★ Chapter 2 ★

Tremaine immediately heard Nick's excited voice thundering in his ear before the sound compensators muted his voice. "Don't touch it until I can get there!"

Tremaine rolled his eyes and calmly replied, "The pod appears at least partially functional, including the radiation collector. The nameplate reads *Andrea Stone—1981-2014.*"

As soon as he had the words out, he saw Nick coming around the pods at his feet, hand over hand as fast as he had ever seen Nick move.

Nick scanned the unit again, this time with the medical scan only. "Her head and torso are intact. There is extensive damage to both legs and both arms. Let's see if we can get this uncoupled without disabling the collector. They seem to be very fragile and designed too close to the couplings. They almost always get damaged when the coupling releases."

Tremaine looked closely at the coupling. "Maybe if we can cushion the collector where the coupler recoils, we can limit the damage."

He pulled a couple of environment suit repair patches from his pocket and slapped them on the collector. The patches adhered to the collector like something alive. "Let's give it a try now."

Both men took the coupling releases and pulled. The coupling snapped back against the patch and the yellow collector light blinked and then resumed its baleful glow. Nick released a breath that he hadn't realized he was holding.

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"We have to get this scanned for contagions and into the med bay. If she really is viable, I need to get her into a regeneration bath as soon as possible."

"Nick, slow down. Cole must approve the regen bath. It will take all of the fluid currently on board and it affects all of us." He paused as Nick started to shake his head. "Take this one step at a time, Nick. I know that this is important but respect Cole and trust him to make the right decision."

Cole's voice came over their suits. "Status?" Cole had been on sleep period.

Mordred must have awakened him with the news, Tremaine thought.

Nick met Tremaine's eyes through his faceplate. Cole didn't like surprises and he wasn't going to like anything distracting them from the mission.

Mars Corp's procedure would be to store the unit as-is and drop off at the first medical facility but Nick did not want to do that.

Tremaine reported, "We found a viable specimen. We have the pod uncoupled and Nick's scanning for contagion. We'll be transporting the pod to med bay upon completion."

Cole met them in the cargo bay, attempting to shake himself awake. When Mordred had announced that a pod had been found with a viable specimen, he had bolted from his bed and headed for the bay. Cole met Nick and Tremaine as they were stripping off their suits. He got his first look at the pod that he would have gladly blasted to the next system. It was, in fact in excellent condition. The information module still had power and Cole unplugged it so that he could have Mordred see if anything could be salvaged. All of the units so far had been pretty much unsalvageable other than a word or two.

Nick looked at him and was stiffly formal. "Request permission to utilize the regen bath, Captain."

Cole raised his eyebrows at Nick's attitude and glanced at Tremaine, who was studiously looking at the floor. "I would prefer to store the module until we can get

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it back to a fully equipped facility. Having no regen fluid on hand for emergencies makes me more than a little nervous.”

Tremaine looked up quickly and intervened before Nick could object. “Cole, the mass of the collectors has been dumping power into this unit. Now that they are all disconnected, and with this unit stored in the bay, the power will quickly fail. I think it’s now or never. If you want to save a life.”

Nick stood quietly but he felt like he was going to explode. His light brown eyes were filled with anticipation and frustration.

Cole took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. Tremaine reached over and gently touched Nick’s arm and shook his head slightly. Nick got Tremaine’s “Give him a minute” look and kept his silence.

“Okay, Nick. Do what you can. We’ll have to factor in the cost of replenishing the regen fluid into the transport costs, if this sleeper survives. If not, we’ll split the cost between the three of us. But we’re all going to have to be doubly careful and watch each other much more vigilantly until the regen fluid is replenished.”

This will definitely upset the balance on this ship, Cole thought. Great, all we needed was to find some six hundred and fifty-year-old, out-of-time Earther roaming around, getting in the way. Genetic samples were one thing, a passenger was quite another.

Mordred, update on specimen, please.

Andrea Stone. Female. Age thirty-three. Medical scan shows no contagions.

“Even better; a woman. What in the hell are we going to do with a woman on board?” Cole wondered.

Nick grinned and nodded at the information module Cole was holding. “Who knows? This one might have a little more to offer. Mordred can take a look at this and see if it sheds any light on the sleeper.” Cole’s eyebrows went up. He hadn’t realized that he had spoken out loud.

Cole watched them as they continued to strip off the environment suits. “You both know that she presents several problems.”

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Nick looked at Cole and sobered, his smile deserting him. “We’ll have to deal with those as they come. My duties are very specific and I plan on waking her and correcting the health problems that caused her to be in that unit. The genetic model of DNA that I can get from her before the tampering started could answer questions that we haven’t even thought to ask.”

Tremaine nodded. He also didn’t have any choice. Tremaine was genetically engineered and trained to believe that human life was sacred above his own life.

He had been specifically engineered for life in space, serving Mars Corp. They owned him. If they wouldn’t have, someone else would have. He was allowed to have possessions, but his career choice and placement were not up for debate.

At least his Partners treated him with dignity. Nick and Cole didn’t make him *feel* owned. He preferred being in space where he could work with the ship and astral navigation and didn’t have to deal with the attitudes of Earthers. His experience had shown him that most would rather exterminate all GenEng since most felt they were an abomination: an act against God.

Having an unknown Earther on board *Camelot* wasn’t something that Tremaine looked forward to, but he supported Nick regardless.

“Cole, we all know that we’re not set up for passengers. We’ll just have to cope until we can get her to the next system. As an Earther, she has passage rights back home. We can charge for whatever distance we transport her plus the cost of the regen fluid and standard medical fees, and then let her be someone else’s problem for the rest of her trip home. After all, she could be very entertaining with stories of Earth in the year 2014. It had to be quite a place back then.”

Cole shrugged. “I’m going back to bed. Please leave an update with Mordred on her status. I don’t want Tremaine salvaging alone, so why don’t you catch a nap and work with me at mid-shift.”

He looked directly at Nick. “I understand your ethical duty and will not get in your way.” His voice softened

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slightly. "I'm not completely heartless." He grinned at Nick. "I know this is your true love in life so try to hurry it up. After all, our main duty is to get that ore into our cargo bay." Although it was said as a joke, they all knew how true it was.

Nick's smile revived. "I'll get her into a regen bath and examine her for cause of death. Please have Mordred download anything pertinent from the info module."

They all said goodnight and both Cole and Tremaine headed for five cycles of much needed rest. Cole dropped the info crystal into one of Mordred's high-level scan containers and headed back toward his unmade bed.

As Cole drifted toward sleep, he wondered what she would be like, over six hundred years out of time. He couldn't even imagine Earth that long ago. The wars he had been educated about, and the biological nightmares caused by maniacs in the twenty-first century, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what life would have been like in the early part of the twenty-first century. Sleep claimed him before he found the answers.

Nick got the unit open and started a close scan on Andrea's medical condition.

Blood type AB negative.

He noted serious heart degradation, which is probably what killed her. If this would have happened in 2020, a new heart could have been grown from her own cellular materials. Donors with AB negative blood would have been rare.

He shook his head. This was a simple correction now. Today the heart defect would be corrected in the genetic coding at birth or before. Even if a heart was damaged, another could be grown from genetic cellular material.

Nick took a genetic sample and transferred the information for Mordred to prepare the regeneration fluid. At the same time, he started a fast track re-growth from her DNA of a replacement heart.

He continued the scan and noted her reproductive organs were intact. Only time would tell if she would ever bear children. She would be an interesting addition to the gene pool.

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Nick shook his head in amazement. The outer layer of her skin was damaged and flaking away. Her scalp had come away, her legs were completely missing, as were both hands and he couldn't tell what she would look like after the regen bath did its work. It wasn't even clear visually that she was human.

He knew that he was looking at the most fortunate woman in his lifetime. The odds of another of the mining vessels that had a doctor on board finding her were more than just remote, Nick also knew that Cole could have forced a sweep clean and no one would have even known that she had been there. There wasn't another captain out there that would have given him this chance.

Out of all of the pods, she was the only viable human found so far. A miracle, really. No one would expect a cryonic pod to last six hundred thirty-five years. Yet, here she was with internal organs still preserved.

Nick set to work and got her in the special bath. Mordred verified his estimate of two weeks before her legs, hands, skin and heart had regenerated.

Nick started with a genetic model of Andrea's DNA and identified several small problems. Nothing as major as her defective heart, just minor food allergies and near sightedness in old age. Nick entered the new genetic encoding into the bath and downloaded a status report to Mordred. Hers and the other samples were the first samples in his lifetime that had never been enhanced by outside intervention.

Finding her might prove to be a major key to the rebuilding of the human DNA.

As he headed to his bed, he encountered Tremaine coming out of the Designated Gravity Room where they all exercised at whatever gravity fit the bill.

Cole was from Earth and had to spend at least one time per day exercising at one-G in order to keep his body in shape to go back, as if he ever would.

Tremaine liked to exercise at zero-G and could bounce and run from surface to surface with dexterity that Nick found amazing. Tremaine was wet with sweat but had a genuine smile plastered to his face. There was

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no doubt that he truly enjoyed the freedom he found in there.

“How’s our sleeper?”

“She will be in the regen bath for about two weeks and then should be physically regenerated, but we won’t know about mental recall for a couple of days. I will need to check on her every two cycles for the first two days, and then I should be able to work a shift each day to help with the reclamation.”

Nick continued on to his quarters but decided that before he fell into bed, he would update his personal files. These were so deeply encrypted that it took even Nick several moments to get in. He made a new file for Andrea Stone and listed the known data. As he was exiting, he saw the file that had driven him to this level of secrecy.

GenEng were not allowed to marry or bear children. Their DNA had been altered and they were all born sterile. Nick had been bored two missions ago and had started playing with Tremaine’s DNA. No one knew that he had made an alteration and had entered a correction into his genetic model. He knew how to reverse the sterility designed by the engineers. That was the first time that he had ever been frightened. That knowledge could get him imprisoned or quietly killed, so he had stored the model here and built security around it that even Mordred couldn’t breach.

During the next fifty cycles, Nick got used to E-sharp telling him that it was time to check Andrea.

He decided to give up and sleep in med bay during that time. There were only two small corrections, and Mordred really could have taken care of these, but Nick wanted to make sure that every correction was triple checked for accuracy. Once she was past the critical period he found it hard to be away from the regen bath for very long and his thoughts kept drifting back to her, wondering what she would be like. He ran into Cole and Tremaine several times when they dropped by to see how she was coming along, so he wasn’t the only curious one on the crew.

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He had located seventeen viable DNA samples by the time he had taken samples for all remaining viable pods and had already started models going on all of them.

The tiny amount of material at first had been disheartening, considering the original grouping. However, he soon found that he would more than have his hands full for many months, if not years to come, analyzing variations and possibilities.

“Okay, Cole,” Nick finally said. “We can clean sweep the remaining pods and get them all on board.”

“Great, we should be ready to depart in fifteen cycles. Get back on board and the rest can be handled by the bots.”

Robotic units, under the control of Mordred swarmed the remaining pods and started moving them toward the cargo bay doors.

Nick jetted back ahead of them, got inside and out of his suit in record time. Andrea was nearing time to come out of the bath and he wanted to see if all the hard work would pay off.

As Cole sat in command, Mordred displayed the parts of the information unit salvaged from Andrea’s pod. It was choppy but it was easy to see that there was a collection of letters from loved ones describing what she had meant to them and how they wished her well on her recovery. Some of the messages contained only one or two lines: others were almost complete.

If any of the pods had survived, hers would have been the only one. Once Mordred had analyzed the pod's configuration, they noticed from the sheer number of pods on top of hers that only one pod had the level of protection that she did.

Although the pods were designed around a cylinder, they were added in an almost haphazard manner, with no regard to keeping the cylinder balanced all the way down its length. It seemed to be a work in progress and pods were being added when needed. There had been impact damage on the opposite side of the cylinder from a long ago encounter with some kind of space debris. Lucky for her.

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They had sent off the normal statistics report and requested information on her. Mars Corp replied with very limited details. She had been married to a Stephen Stone who remarried in 2021, produced four children and died in 2064.

Cole shook his head. *Four children. Their time was so different.* There were a few additional details that Cole downloaded into the Andrea Stone file with her personal correspondence from the info unit. He found it odd that so little information was available. No genealogy, date of marriage, place of birth, occupation assignment or place of residence was on file. He frowned slightly. *Odd.*

Nick had watched over her as the regen bath did its work. Now, as the anti-grav field pulled her from the liquid and passed a sonic cleaner over her to remove the remnants of the fluid, Nick had his first clear look at the woman that Andrea Stone had been.

Her skin, of course, was flawless. That was the regen bath at work. She was much more though.

Andrea Stone was a genuine beauty with perfect proportions. She was small boned, slender and of average height. Her light golden, brown hair was only about three-inches long and framed a delicate, oval face with high cheekbones and lush lips. Her long eyelashes framed eyes still closed in controlled sleep.

He swallowed hard as he felt his body respond to her. Doctor or not, he had never been in the presence of a woman quite this lovely with her clothes off and being a doctor did not mean that he was not a man. Even in medical school he had not had the opportunity to work with female patients often. Mars' population was less than twenty percent female, and they did not engage in ore reclamation due to the danger. Since he was primarily going to be working with space crews, his training focused on men and the genetically engineered, also mostly male. Additionally, women always preferred female doctors when being touched.

Nick picked up a medical gown to cover her as he heard the passageway door open and looked up to see Cole walking in. He caught Cole's eyes running the

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* * *

length of her and when they looked up into his, they both glanced away quickly.

“Are you ready to wake her?”

Nick lifted her slightly to put her into the gown under her. Where he pressed the fabric together, it appeared to seam itself and close around her.

“As ready as we will ever be,” Nick returned.

★ Chapter 3 ★

Andrea was lying in a hospital bed. Stephen and the doctor had told her she was dying. She was prepared for this. Why then was she still here?

Breathing felt strange, like that weird feeling before you faint.

And there was the oddest smell.

She focused on a handsome man's face with soft golden-brown eyes and dark, closely cropped, hair and tried to ask where Stephen was. Nothing came out but a harsh croak.

"Try not to speak for a minute. Sip this and your throat will improve. I'm Lt. Nick Ferraro. I've been your doctor for the last two weeks."

Andrea felt the sweet taste of a strange juice calm her throat.

"Where is Stephen?" When she encountered a puzzled look she continued, "My husband, Stephen Stone."

She saw a dawning comprehension and then a flash of something, pity maybe. It was then that she realized that Dr. Ferraro wasn't wearing anything resembling doctor's attire. It was more of a soft dressy form-fitting coverall. He had said Lieutenant. That's odd. She glanced around and didn't see anything familiar and sat up slowly. The Lt. placed his hand behind her back as she felt a little vertigo.

"How are you feeling?"

"A little dizzy but better than an elephant on my chest. You never answered my question, where's Stephen?"

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Cole cleared his throat. It was then that she became aware of another man, tall and blond, leaning against another table in the room. He had that casual confidence of a man comfortable in his own skin. There was no doubt that this man was in charge.

“Ms. Stone, do you remember signing a request to be cryonically preserved?”

She looked up into ice blue eyes as she thought back. Details seemed to be fuzzy and out of order. *The form?* “Oh, yes. Stephen and I both signed them. I told him it was God’s way of telling you that you had too much money. Why?”

Cole paused. He wasn’t a psychologist but he hoped that she was strong enough to take in the information that he had to impart. He looked down on a lovely face with clear blue eyes and creamy white skin.

“Ms. Stone, Andrea, you in fact did die of heart failure in 2014. You were cryonically frozen and placed in an orbital station. We don’t know how, but that station was somehow pushed out of orbit. You are currently on board the asteroid mining vessel *Camelot*. We discovered you during standard ore reclamation and Nick has corrected your heart problem as well as a few others that were caused over time.”

Her face had gone very still, her eyes round. CryoTime had actually worked. No one said anything for a moment and then she asked in a voice almost too soft to hear, “How long?”

He glanced up at Nick. Nick nodded to go on. “The year is 2655. You have been cryonically stored in space for six hundred forty-one years.”

Andrea heard the words and smiled. This is some kind of hallucination or dream. None of this is real.

She closed her eyes and shook her head as if to clear it. Yet the air tasted strange and as her eyes swept the room, she saw nothing familiar. Nothing. Not one item that she recognized or could even identify its purpose. The equipment surrounding her looked like something out of one of the movies that she had worked on two years ago, except even that had looked familiar to her.

Journey To Diir

Slowly it started to become real. Maybe. "I'm not quite sure that I believe you. This is pretty *out there*."

Cole gave her a quizzical look. "Out there?"

"Strange. Hard to believe. From outer space," she explained.

Cole frowned and nodded as he noticed a bare, trim leg as it hung from the table.

"I'm sure that this is very hard for you to believe. No one has been recovered after being suspended for more than two hundred years; especially the ones built that long ago. We are not exactly sure why your pod was the only one that continued to function. The facts are correct and you will have some time to interact with our Computer Control Unit, Mordred, and verify everything for yourself. You have already met Nick, and I'm Captain Cole Stuart." He nodded to her formally.

Suddenly the mundane act of introductions drove it home. She was six hundred years too late to see anyone that she had known and loved. Stephen. Her parents. Her friends.

The pain of it seized her throat and she felt something lodged there. Her vision swam, then blurred and knew that she was going to be sick.

She had been prepared to die. There had been time to say her good-byes. But this was like everyone in her life dying at once, leaving *her* to grieve instead.

First a whimper escaped her throat and as it started to grow the world went black.

Nick watched her face as the reality reached her brain and had been ready for her reaction.

Mordred, release the sedative now.

Affirmative. Releasing now.

Just as the scream ripped from her throat, he saw that the sedative took hold and she relaxed.

"If there was a better way to do that, I don't know what it was. I'm not trained to deal with this kind of issue," Cole said. "She reacted more strongly than I expected. If she is going to be this emotional, we may have to sleep her all the way home. Maybe Mordred should research practical therapy."

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Nick was checking vitals on the view screen. "She'll be out for a couple of cycles. I'll be here when she comes out of it. Let's see how she handles it given a little time."

Mordred, please see if there are any records on file for any kind of mental or emotional therapy involving this kind of sleep period.

Yes. Therapy suggestions are on file. I can incorporate them into training modules, although they suggest verbal communication with other humans is imperative.

Cole gave a curt nod and left her in Nick's care as he fled to the bridge, where he felt comfortable and all was right with the universe.

Andrea felt herself come back to consciousness slowly. When she opened her eyes, Nick was looking down. "Let's go slowly, Andrea. I know that this is hard for you, but I am here to help you through it."

She sat up again in a panic, wanting to know that she wasn't sleeping: dreaming. "This is a nightmare. Please tell me that this is a nightmare."

"I'm sorry, Andrea. I know that this is harder than I can envision, but it will be all right. You are alive again and you have to see that it's better than the alternative."

"But I was prepared for death. The doctors and Stephen had been with me and then, my biggest concern was how Stephen would cope."

Tears slid down from the corners of her eyes and she gave him a rueful smile. "What I was not prepared for, is this."

She sat up slowly and flipped her wrist around the med bay. "This seems impossible."

When Nick nodded she went on, "I don't know how I am going to fit in here. I don't even know where to start. Before I can go forward, I need to know about how Stephen is, correction *was* after I died." She paused, the tears still coming. "I need to know about the world I left and what has happened since."

Journey To Diir

She paused and her body sank a little in on itself. "I need to see how I can live in this world."

Andrea shook her head and amended as she met Nick's eyes. "This *time*."

"Of course. I implanted a standard computer interface unit here," he touched the area behind her left ear, "which taught you our current vernacular while you were rejuvenated. The interface also enables you to speak directly with our Computer Control Unit, Mordred. Mordred will show you how to use the interface and will answer your questions. Information about your husband has been downloaded to your personal files. I'm afraid that Mars Corp didn't have a lot to offer."

"That figures. I would like to get up, if that's okay."

"It's alright. You are physically healed and ready to start an exercise program that will keep you in shape to go back to Earth. Mordred has a specific diet that will help you acclimate to our food. And I'll show you to your quarters."

Andrea sat up slowly and was surprised to find that she felt physically good. When thoughts of Stephen came back, she pushed them away and focused on Nick until she could get someplace where she could be alone.

Just focus one minute at a time, she told herself over and over. Andrea then noticed that she was wearing a soft gown that stopped about mid thigh. At least it wasn't open down the back.

"Is there something else that I can wear?"

Nick nodded and smiled. "Med gowns are not exactly designed for beauty."

Andrea gave a weak smile and followed Nick as he showed her down a hallway where the floor felt soft under her feet but appeared to be tile. The neutral coloring of the walls and floor looked like standard Government Issue, except the lighting seemed to come *from* the walls and ceiling and there were no sharp corners or hard edges. Everything seemed to give a little as she touched or brushed up against it.

They turned a corner and Nick indicated an open passageway.

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"These are your quarters. They are normally assigned to Mars Corp corporate officers, when we are asked to transport them short distances. Sorry they are a little spare but we weren't expecting passengers. There are several casual suits like mine in here."

Nick touched a panel and a drawer slid out obediently. "This door connects with the common hygiene area."

He touched another panel and the door slid open to a strange room. "There are two sonic showers. Just step in here and touch this control. The toilets are back there and, again, have sonic cleaning units attached. The controls are next to them. Your personal hygiene items can be kept in this section."

Nick indicated another panel. "Mordred can answer any questions that you have." He was a little clumsy with her, unsure how to deal with talking about such personal things with an Earth woman and decided to let Mordred handle the remaining details.

Nick turned and walked back into her quarters and opened an area that was obviously a desk. "Your view screen and personal entertainment area. Again, ask Mordred and he can help you set everything up the way that it is most comfortable for you."

Before he said anything else, she asked, "How do I ask Mordred something?"

Mordred, please indicate Information Available so she can hear the bell.

Andrea heard the E-sharp bell in her head just as Nick said, "Do you hear the tone?"

She nodded, eyes wide.

Nick went on, "That is the tone for *Information Available* from Mordred. He will walk you through communicating your questions to him. I'm on duty in five minutes so I have to leave. I'm going to be checking in with you often during the next couple of days and I will need to see you in the med bay at least once daily for the next two weeks. You can reach me through Mordred or the comm unit here." He indicated a panel with a triangle in the center.

Journey To Diir

“Thanks for your help. I just need some time to myself right now, if you don’t mind.”

He smiled and backed out of the door like he didn’t know what to say next and settled for “Mordred can contact me if you need anything.”

Mordred, please monitor Andrea at all times. Utilize the recommended therapy when possible and notify me immediately if my interaction is required.

Acknowledged

Andrea turned to more closely inspect her new home. It certainly looked barren. No decorations other than the shadings in the materials that made up the walls, floor and disk unit. Even those tended to blend together into a muted institutional cell. Very depressing.

“God, Stephen. What did you get me into?” She wailed into the silence of her room as the tears flowed down her cheeks. “Everything that I loved in life is dust. How could you have done this to me?”

Stephen had been a brilliant young producer when she met him. The studio had sent her up to Calgary to work on a film about a man that decides to live in the wilderness and builds a great life for himself in the wilds of the Canadian Rockies. She had fallen in love with those mountains and the people that lived there.

She had been the Production Accountant on the film. She monitored departmental costs against budget and ran a crew of six that paid the bills, payroll and all the little mundane money issues that no one else found at all interesting.

She, however, found it enthralling. Andrea had made it her special task to find little bits of savings here and there that she could save back for the big explosions that were always coming and never planned.

The director needed a helicopter shot; now he wanted a special crane that had to be transported up from L.A.; why can’t I shoot another hour or two?

When the first crisis had come up, Stephen had come flying in to her office with a demand for a cost analysis on a complete second unit transported by helicopter to a remote lake that the director just had to have for the

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beginning of the movie. By the time they were done, she glanced at her watch and was amazed to see that it was 9:30 PM and still light outside.

The Canadian summers have those very long days and warm evenings that inspire everyone to outdoor activities.

She joined Stephen and several other crewmembers for a dinner at an outdoor café next to the river. By the end of the third week of filming they were secretly dating.

Location romances rarely last and she did not want everyone to know about her personal life. Movie crews can gossip more than any small town in America.

She also didn't want to face anyone when Stephen decided to go back to his life and forget her. She had fallen madly, deeply in love. Secrecy wasn't Stephen's agenda, however, when he presented her with a three-carat diamond at the wrap party. She hadn't even been able to wear the damn thing and type on the computer!

Andrea smiled to herself.

Stephen had always been so extravagant and spontaneous. This whole cryo thing had been his idea the moment that she had been diagnosed.

The tears started all over again and she was overcome with deep, wracking sobs.

As Andrea sat on the edge of her bed, she was momentarily startled out of tears. She felt something *move* under her and froze. Nothing was moving now. Maybe she just imagined it. As she started to lie back on the bed it *moved* under her again and she bolted upright, a little scream erupting from her. She heard the E-sharp bell and paused.

"Mordred?" she asked aloud.

I detected a sound indicating an emergency. Are you in danger?

"I just sat on the bed and felt it moving. Is this ship infested?"

No. The bed is composed of genetically programmed material that automatically adjusts to your body weight and temperature. You may communicate with me non-verbally, if you like.

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She paused at that. *Amazing*. She tried the bed again and found that it adjusted to her body as she moved. Although the bed momentarily startled her out of her tears, her depression was a black cloud that loomed over her. As she lay back she found her sorrow overwhelmed her and, after awhile, she was exhausted from it.

Andrea found herself drifting off.

An E-sharp sounded in Andrea's head. She thought tentatively, *Yes, Mordred?* It felt odd to merely *think* a conversation.

The crew would like you to record your vital statistics for the file.

You mean date and place of birth, marital status, children, names of parents and siblings, that kind of thing?

Yes, as well as your experiences with life in your time.

I understand the need for vital statistics. But normally, life experiences are shared over coffee when people are getting to know each other. So, am I supposed to share my life's story with you to be called up by anyone without them sharing theirs with me?

There was a pause before Mordred came back to her. When he did, she almost felt surprise from him.

Why don't you share the information that you are comfortable with now?

Since she needed something to distract her, she said, *I'll make you a deal, Mordred. I'll tell you about me if you tell me about you. You start.*

Another perceptible pause. More surprise. ***I'm a standard 5021 Computer Control Unit, initiated in year 2635 and installed in this ship, the Camelot, fourteen months later in Mars orbit.***

Tell me what you are though. I can almost feel emotion from you. You seem surprised with my responses.

I am capable of emotion, although emotions are to be strictly controlled. Computer Control Units are

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sentient and are carefully screened for emotional instability before installation. I have worked with a total of seventeen humans since my installation. You are the first female.

Don't females work in space?

Rarely, yes. Asteroid mining vessel missions are normally three years long. The three crews that have been assigned to Camelot since my installation have been male. The crews normally stay together for long periods of time due to the nature of the mission.

How many men are on board this ship?

The normal crew complement of three; Captain Cole Stuart commanding, Lt. Nick Ferraro, second in command and science officer, and Tremaine assigned to engineering. Although all have primary duties, each can function in all capacities except for the ship's doctor.

And you, of course, Mordred, a legendary sorcerer in Camelot. Your voice is male. Are you male?

Affirmative. When Computer Control Units are installed, gender bias is unknown. I developed my personality over time and have aligned my voice pattern and personality traits with the male gender. Most Computer Control Units are assigned non-gender bias designations. There are only two with gender bias names.

The other name is the appropriate gender for the designation Lyla. My designation selection coincided with my appointment to the Camelot during ship construction. The engineers named the ship after my appointment.

As Mordred was *talking* to her, Andrea started feeling around the gown for ties, zippers and buttons and, after about two or three minutes, gave up frustrated.

I can't seem to find an opening on this garment. How the hell does it come off?

The garment is removed by releasing the center front seam by rubbing the top of the seam between your fingers. When the seam comes apart slightly,

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run a finger between the two pieces of cloth and they will separate.

She did as instructed. The gown came away and she started to investigate the clothes left for her to wear.

Can you walk me through some of the functionality of my quarters before I get started on my life's story?

Mordred then instructed Andrea on the operation of the sonic shower and toilet, dental cleaning and manicure units. She preferred to wear her nails a little longer than the unit allowed but Mordred explained that for safety and hygiene, no adjustments could be made in the unit's guidelines.

The entertainment unit was quite amazing. Music from around the galaxy in all languages was hers at the touch of a button or a request to Mordred, although none of her favorite jazz selections were available.

There were three-dimensional movies as well, which were completely computer generated. No need for her job in this time. What would she be able to do with her life now? Again, a wave of sadness struck her.

Finally, Mordred showed her how to custom tailor her personal decoration wall. When Mordred turned on the display, Andrea gasped as the whole wall disappeared and became a window onto a space scene that was magnificent, but gave her a rush of vertigo and she sat down quickly.

Mordred, are all of the dec wall images scenes from space? Aren't there any of Earth scenes?

Dec wall?

Sorry, old show business term for decoration wall.

Acknowledged. And yes, of course, there are Earth scenes. These have never been requested. Most Spacers prefer the scenes that I have shown you.

May I see mountain scenes?

Mordred started flipping images on the screen. Andrea recognized mountain scenes from the Alps, strange red and orange mountains that looked like Mars, and the Sierra Nevada.

She stopped him when she found the one that she had hoped would be there. Banff and the Canadian

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Rockies. Her throat closed and tears welled again. The depression was like a deep, black well.

Mordred, I would like to rest for a while. Can we continue this in a couple of hours?

Of course. A cycle is close to what you refer to as an hour. I will wake you in two cycles.

As she curled up on her bed, looking at a scene that made her feel finally at home, the tears came again until she fell asleep and dreamed for the first time in six hundred and forty-one years.

In her dreams Stephen was very much alive. Andrea felt his familiar hands holding her; caressing her; pulling her against his hard body. His kiss was long and deep as his hand cupped her aching breast. Andrea raised her hips and moaned as his hand slid down further.

Slow down, baby. I'm not going anywhere. Something about the phrase triggered a memory and the dream fell apart like smoke. Even in sleep, Andrea was lost.

Mordred reviewed the conversation with Andrea.

She seemed to offer a level of courtesy and respect not due to him. When he was initially surprised by her responses, he had interrogated her mind for deception and found none.

Her emotions were erratic and uncensored.

He had never experienced this degree and quantity of emotion from a human before. He ran several scenarios and could not determine if it was due to her extreme loss, possible damages due to the extent of the sleep that she incurred, or just her lack of training in interfacing with a computer communications unit.

Andrea made no attempt to control her emotions while in communication, even though he had told her that emotions were strictly prohibited to CCUs. Although Mordred was experiencing a level of confusion regarding Andrea Stone, she had also intrigued him.

Mordred had never had a personal preference for any individual before now. Andrea had displayed a genuine

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interest in him as an individual and offered him courtesy normally reserved for other humans. He knew that he liked it, although he was unsure why.

A careful analysis was now starting in another part of his consciousness but he already knew one thing: he liked Andrea Stone and he wanted to continue talking to her. He monitored a slight raise in her blood pressure and heartbeat as she slept.

Although he was very curious, Mordred maintained protocol and did not intrude.

Cole also was in bed. He wasn't sleeping, however. He was trying to figure out what to do. He knew that he had to talk to Andrea about her role on this ship. The look on Nick's face had shown that he was already smitten.

His own response to her had caught Cole completely off guard, which was a feeling that he didn't like one damn bit! With the VidSim down, this ship was a raw fuel cell waiting for a spark. She could rip this crew apart and it was his job to make sure that it didn't happen. Regardless of her feelings in the matter, she would conform and the first time he saw her playing favorites, he would sleep her back home. That would be what he would do right now except that sleep has to be agreed to unless there are medical reasons. She was already out of time and he couldn't see how six months would disturb her life since she really didn't have a life to go back to.

It would have been a lot easier if she wasn't so damned beautiful! Tomorrow he would meet with her and try to be reasonable and see how it played out. As Cole drifted toward sleep he was picturing Andrea's face and as he dropped into sleep his lips found hers. For the first time in seven years, his dreams were not of his late wife—the love of his life—Marla. His dreams were not of Marla, who had died, while Andrea lived.

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The E-sharp bell sounded in Andrea's head. She automatically reached beside the bed to find the alarm clock and hit *snooze* just one time. She came awake as her hand just encountered smooth, soft surfaces.

She lay there a moment until it all came back again. She swallowed hard and kept her eyes closed.

Yes, Mordred.

Two cycles have elapsed. Can we now continue?

As soon as I make a trip to the hygiene room.

She palmed the door open and used the toilet for the first time with the med gown still wrapped around her. She experienced a bizarre tickling sensation when she activated the sonic cleaning unit.

As she was walking toward the door to her quarters, another door, presumably from one of the other quarters opened and she saw a young, dark-haired man with an intricate tattoo on his left temple walk through the door as he pulled a shirt over his head.

She couldn't help but notice his well-defined muscles, slick with sweat.

Tremaine froze with his shirt still in hand as he caught sight of her.

Totally unsure of twenty-seventh century bathroom etiquette, Andrea decided that a quick exit was probably the most appropriate based upon his shocked face. "Sorry, I was just leaving."

Tremaine's face relaxed and he flashed a smile. "Nick told us that you would be coming out of the med bay today. Sorry I couldn't be on hand to welcome you onboard. I'm Tremaine."

He nodded formally as she held out her hand. He looked quizzically at her for a long moment.

"Oh, handshakes are no longer the accepted form of greeting."

She dropped her hand and smiled uncertainly.

"I spent too much time in the DGR and am going to be late for duty if I don't hurry," he continued.

"DGR?"

Andrea was puzzled and feeling somewhat rejected at his attitude.

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“Designated Gravity Room. It’s where we exercise. I’ll be glad to show you sometime.” He flashed a blinding smile that she would come to know as his trademark. She found it heartening. He looked like a boy who had just hit his first home run and couldn’t wait to do it again.

She gave him a warm smile in return. “How about tomorrow? I need to stay in shape too. I believe the doctor has me on a regimen.” She was also thinking that exercise might keep her from thinking too much.

He nodded. “Anytime.”

“Nice meeting you, then.” He nodded as she exited into her quarters, palming the door behind her.

Tremaine watched as the door iris closed behind her. When he had walked in and saw her standing there he had forgotten to breathe. He didn’t expect her to be stunning.

Andrea was the kind of beautiful that the computers generated for VidSims. He had rarely really seen anyone who looked like that, but then almost all of his life had been spent on mining vessels.

Tremaine was never in places where this kind of female frequented. Andrea, standing there fresh from sleep, soft golden-brown hair framing her face and those clear, blue eyes struck him momentarily dumb.

He was in trouble. GenEng were conditioned not to have such thoughts about human women, especially an Earther. He was going to have to be very careful, starting right now. Even Mordred couldn’t help him with this one.

Andrea sat across the bed and leaned against the wall facing the dec wall.

Okay, Mordred, on with the show. I was born November twenty-fourth of 1981 to Debra and Robert Nally in South Lake Tahoe, California as Andrea Elizabeth Nally. My brother, Robert Jr., followed two years later on June sixth. My father was an architect, my mother an interior designer. They met when my father was finishing

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one of his first major buildings in San Francisco, where I grew up. Summers, weekends and Christmas were always spent at our house in Tahoe where I fell in love with the outdoors, hiking, biking and downhill skiing.

I went to Berkley and graduated near the top of my class with a degree in Finance.

After graduating, I met a studio executive at one of my parents' New Years parties and went to work in Los Angeles as a production assistant. I soon found that I loved the behind the scenes magic of movie money and moved into accounting as an assistant. My abilities to organize and project costs got me a job on location as a Production Accountant.

After three years, I met Stephen Stone on location in Canada. We were married four months later. Two years into our marriage I started getting tired and out of breath. The doctors said severe heart damage. I had already experienced several minor heart attacks that I didn't recognize as such. They had done the damage and with AB negative blood, there were no donors. Stephen had bought into the cryo plan and here I am.

Thank you, Andrea. Captain Stuart would like you to visit him on the bridge now. If you'll follow the lights at the edge of the floor, I will direct you to the bridge.

Mordred, I would like to freshen up first. Is Tremaine out of his shower?

Tremaine is on his way to the cargo bay.

Thank you, Mordred.

Andrea went back in to the hygiene area and opened her drawer. She used the assortment of cleaning items, none with any real confidence. After two or three new experiences, she returned to her quarters to start looking for something to wear.

She had always been a T-shirt and jeans kind of girl and preferred comfort to fashion. She slipped on one of the formfitting shirt and pant combinations that Nick and the captain had been wearing. The seams closed and the clothes snuggled up to her slight form. It was light and soft to the touch and very flattering as it hugged her

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curves. The soft, boot-like foot coverings fit themselves to her feet and were even more comfortable than her favorite running shoes. As she followed the lights along the floor she acknowledged the E-sharp.

Lt. Ferraro would like you to stop by med bay after you see the Captain.

Andrea blew out a breath. *Come here. Go there.* She just wanted to feel like she could get her feet under her. When she came to the door to the bridge she timidly stepped inside and waited by the door.

She watched the Captain sitting in a high-backed seat in the center of the room. The lights from the ceiling panels glowed softly on his closely cropped blond hair. She wondered absently what it would look like a little longer. He reminded her vaguely of an actor she had once worked with except the Captain's eyes were always so cold and unemotional.

"You asked to see me Captain?" She wasn't sure why she was suddenly nervous, but something about the Captain seemed to put her off balance. She was rarely off balance and didn't like the feeling.

After dealing with the moguls of Hollywood, Andrea thought that she had seen every type of controlling male, although she hadn't had much experience with military types. This was a new breed to her.

"Yes, Andrea. Thanks for coming. Please have a seat over here." He indicated the chair adjacent to his. "Are you settling in?"

"As much as can be expected, I guess."

What she really wanted to say was, "No, I don't want to be here. I don't know where here is and I feel like a fish out of water." Instead, she sat in the chair that formed around her like the material of the bed.

"Mordred has been very helpful and I'm sure I'll eventually adjust. What I am most concerned with is how I'm going to take care of myself in this time. I don't belong here and everything that I know is ancient history. By the time I'm retrained, I'll be an old woman."

Cole met her eyes and held them. "Mordred has already scanned your DNA and finds that you have well

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above average abilities in mathematics, physics, and mechanical engineering and he has already chosen several job classifications for you to select from. Mordred can download training materials at your pace. Within six months, you can be trained in any field you choose.”

She looked doubtful. “Sounds too good to be true! The last thing that I want to be is a burden. I’m used to being in charge of my life and this whole experience has put me off balance.”

Especially you, she thought.

Again, Cole’s eyes met hers and did not waiver. She found them intimidating and yet comforting at the same time. “Andrea, we have a delicate situation on board the *Camelot* with your arrival. Neither Nick nor Tremaine has had much interaction with females on a personal level. The VidSim has been damaged for some time and the earliest that we can have repair parts is six months, when we are schedule to arrive at Mira.”

He saw her questioning look. “Captain, what exactly is a VidSim and what does it have to do with me?”

“The VidSim connects to the CIU unit. Each person experiences real-time physical contact with a computer counterpart.”

She just sat for a moment, mulling this over. “Do you mean that you have sex with the computer?” She was incredulous. *How far computers have come!*

“Andrea, there are three men onboard *Camelot* for a three-year mission. Surely you can see the problem that you now pose with our VidSim down?”

Her confusion was obvious. “Actually, no. Can you be a little more specific, Captain?”

“I just want you to be aware of your place on *Camelot*. Your presence here will put additional strain on the men. Until we can transport you to a location where you can get an FTL back to Earth, you must take care in your interactions with them.”

Andrea nodded and looked at the floor. Her life had been turned upside down and he was worried that she would seduce his crew. “I see that men haven’t changed over all of these centuries.”

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She looked up with cold resolve on her face and fury in her eyes. "With all due respect Captain, I don't want to be a problem to you or your crew but I have a few problems of my own right now. Please understand that, from my perspective, I was with my husband just yesterday and I'm dealing with the grief of learning that he's been dead for six hundred and fifty years! I'm not looking for *interaction*. I want to learn how to be a functioning member of this time and be an asset, not a hindrance."

She paused for effect. "I have been pursued by some of the richest, most arrogant assholes on the face of the planet because they thought that their fame and money would make me fall into their beds. I assure you that if and when I *interact* with anyone will be my choice alone and I expect you to support my privacy. Furthermore, I hope that I don't have to worry about unwanted attention from any of the crew." She stared at him with heat in her eyes and face.

He let out a breath he hadn't noticed that he was holding and looked at her in barely checked fury. "We are not animals, Ms. Stone. Obviously, it is important that no physical relationship can initiate. If you, in fact, do start a physical relationship with one of the men, you must agree to have the same relationship with all. That is why it is best that you limit your interaction with the crew. You can, under no circumstances show any favoritism between crewmembers that can destroy the delicate balance of our partnership. This is particularly delicate since Nick is from Mars and Tremaine is GenEng. I hope that you will agree."

"I have a life to rebuild and over six hundred years to catch up on. I have no plans to develop *relationships* with anyone at this time." Again, she paused in frustration and then exploded, "This is insane! I've had my life upended and this is the very last concern on my mind!"

"Then you would be well advised to raise that priority, Ms. Stone. I am quite serious about this matter."

She was trying to gain some of her self-control back, but her hands were still shaking. "Fine. I'm not sure how

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Mars and GenEng factor into this discussion, but I assure you that I'm not shopping for a date."

Cole nodded and glanced back at his console. "Of course you don't know the history of the Mars virus or the GenEng program. You should get the history from Mordred. The bottom line is that Earther women do not generally choose relationships with men born on Mars. Further, the GenEng are strictly forbidden to initiate any relationships with human women, except the few that have been designed for that purpose."

"Designed for that purpose?"

Cole paused and tilted his head slightly. Andrea had the feeling that he was talking to Mordred. "Sexual surrogates, actually. I understand that they were prevalent in your century as well as mine. For the most part, they did not choose their vocation either."

"Touché, Captain Stuart."

"Since we are going to be on this ship together for a while, you may call me Cole. I understand that Nick wants you in med bay. Why don't you join him? I urge you to connect with Mordred and get your training started. That will fill your days and help you through the adjustment period." *And keep you out of sight*, he thought.

Andrea was starting to regret loosing her temper but something about him just set her teeth on edge. "Thank you and I plan on starting immediately. I also appreciate your candor on the situation here and will do my best to make sure that I don't *upset the apple cart*."

When he gave her a quizzical smile, she continued, "—upset the balance." He nodded curtly and then turned his gaze again to the display where it appeared that information was now scrolling rapidly, demanding his attention. Realizing that she had been dismissed, she slipped back out the door and asked Mordred to direct her to med bay. A variety of emotions were raging within her and she wasn't sure if humiliation or anger was top on the list. *Damn!*

Cole glanced back over his shoulder to watch her go. Even the way she moved reminded him that she was a

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woman. He remembered how he loved to watch Marla walk, felt his body start to react and shook himself back to reality. She certainly knew how to set him off. Normally, Cole could keep his emotions in check. It was apparent that she allowed her emotions free reign. There was something about her that short-circuited his calm. The fire in those blue eyes made him want to shake her. If she was affecting him this strongly, *Camelot* was in trouble.

Nick glanced up as Andrea entered the med bay. She seemed flushed and distracted. He gave her a warm smile and had her relax on the exam table as he took some quick readings.

She watched him as he ran the tests and touched panels. She could see his Italian ancestry in his face. Strong features, dark hair that he kept very short. His hands looked much more like a doctor's than a miner's. His hands made her think of Stephen and she forced her thoughts away from there.

"You will need to start on an exercise regimen like all Earthers. The regen bath generated your muscle but, to keep your body ready for Earth gravity, you need to spend time in one-G every day. Not only is it important for you to keep your muscles ready to reenter Earth's gravity as well as your bone density can also deteriorate and could limit your ability to live in one-G. The ship is kept at point-seven-G and your sleeping quarters can be adjusted within a range of point-five-G up to one-G. If comfortable, you may want to sleep in one-G at least part of the time."

She reached up to push her hair back and really noticed her right hand for the first time. Where a white scar had graced the inside of her forefinger from an encounter with a broken glass, now only smooth skin remained. She stared at her hand and then looked at her other one to be sure that she hadn't mixed it up in her mind.

No. No scar, she was stunned.

Nick watched her curiously. "Andrea, are you alright?"

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"I seem to be missing a scar," she looked up in confusion.

"The regen fluid would have eliminated that." He didn't mention that her hands had been entirely missing when her pod had been recovered.

"Hmm. That seems helpful. But I always thought that a few scars gave a person a little character."

"The regen bath can do wonders and can regenerate muscle and bone. It is, however, extremely expensive and so we are all required to be vigilant with time and exercise spent in our native gravity atmosphere."

"Native gravity. Does that mean that you don't have to tolerate one-G?"

He grinned. "Right. The entire ship is native for me. Tremaine's DNA is structured for extended periods in zero-G and can tolerate up to four-G for limited periods of time. It's you and Cole must maintain the one-G regimen."

"I never enjoyed exercise just for the sake of exercise. This sounds like it's going to be as boring as it was in the twenty-first century."

"That's doubtful. You can choose activities and the computer simulates involvement through your CIU. I noticed that downhill skiing is a favorite of yours. There is a program on file for that exercise. Have Mordred schedule you starting tomorrow."

She realized that he had already accessed the information that she had shared with Mordred just a cycle ago. "This becomes more amazing by the moment. Can you show me how it works?"

"Sure. I'm on my way to sleep period but I can show you how to get started. Have you experienced any obvious memory loss?"

"Not that I am aware of." She gave him a smile. "When you think of it, how exactly would I know what I forgot? Although," she paused and looked into his warm brown eyes, "I think it would be kinder if I had forgotten my old life." She felt a wave of loneliness wash over her.

His face softened and he nodded. "I can't imagine what you must be going through. As a doctor, they give

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us training to handle reviving sleepers that are out of phase with their time when they are revived. Normally, we only see spans of a few months: rarely up to ten years. This is beyond my understanding. Maybe it would help if you just tell me about Earth in your time.”

“Maybe not just yet, Doctor. The feelings are a little raw right now.” His kindness had re-installed that knot in her throat.

She was slowly starting to be a person to him. He reached out to help her off of the exam bed and when he touched her hand he felt a rush of heat that he hadn’t encountered outside of VidSim. He had been working with her for two weeks daily and had touched her dozens of times. This time was different. This time was like a static charge. He quickly pulled his hand away and turned toward the door. Too late, though, to hide what Andrea saw in his eyes.

Andrea took a slow, quiet breath, watching him. Cole obviously knew these men well. She was going to have to go out of her way not to enflame the situation. *Could they really be this unfamiliar with casual contact with women?*

She hopped off the exam table next to a very tense Nick and said, “Tremaine mentioned earlier that he would be willing to show off the DGR. Why don’t you go ahead and get some sleep. I’ve already taken up way too much of your time.”

Nick relaxed visibly and smiled. “You’re not too much trouble. I am a little overtired though. I’ve been working on all of the genetic models and time tends to get away from me.”

“I know the feeling. Stephen calls—” she paused, “used to call my office at eight or nine at night raging at me because I worked too hard.” Her eyes unfocused for a moment and then cleared. “What genetic models?”

Nick proceeded to share all of the wonders of the genetic possibilities from the seventeen specimens isolated in the pods. His face glowed as his excitement level went off the scale. She couldn’t help but notice how handsome he was when he relaxed. He had one of those smiles that changed his whole face. He wasn’t as tall as

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Cole and had a more solid, muscular frame. There was something comforting about him. She kept smiling and listening and walking until they both realized that they were standing in front of the door marked *DGR*.

"You obviously love your work and I, for one, am *very* grateful that you are good at it or I wouldn't be here. Thanks Nick. Have nice dreams." She palmed the door open and stepped through before Nick could reply.

Instead of asking Tremaine, Mordred helped her get the DGR program up and running and taught her how to use it.

This was as close to skiing as she could ever have imagined. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn that she was in Tahoe. The snow had that perfect pack that allowed her to race downhill and cut in and out of moguls.

When she got to the bottom of each run, she would merely tell Mordred to rerun the program and she would suddenly be back at the beginning of the run. Mordred altered the pattern of each run to give her variety and challenge.

By her seventh run, she was starting to feel it in her thighs. Normally, she would rest on the chair lift. No need for a chair lift here. Tomorrow she was going to pay, but the exercise helped her to focus on something familiar and keep her mind off old friends, love and family.

An E-sharp interrupted her thoughts.

Captain Cole asks how much longer you will be using the DGR?

Sorry, Mordred. Please tell him that he can use it now and reset gravity to point-seven-G. As Andrea stepped into the passageway, she noticed Cole leaning against the opposite wall in the standard T-shirt, pull on pants that she had on. They clung to his body that, she noticed, was very much in shape. His resemblance to the actor got closer.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting long."

"Only a few minutes. I've always been a fan of downhill skiing although I'm not very good at it."

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“We should try it together. Maybe I could show you a few pointers.”

Again the quizzical smile. She returned it.

“Pointers . . . means I can give you some directions. Boy, I’m going to have to learn how to communicate all over again. My colorful phrases seem to fall on deaf ears.”

“There is a standard translator built into the CIU. Mordred has already modified most of your language and we understand almost all of what you are saying. The colloquialisms are what we sometimes miss.”

She was staring at him with a very confused look. “Aren’t we speaking English?”

“Well, yes, sort of . . . a version of old Earther English with a six hundred-year-old shift that has incorporated several other languages. Without the CIU, the shift would make the two languages—what you used to speak and how we speak now—sound so far apart as to be indecipherable.”

He pushed off the wall and moved by her into the DGR.

She moved back as he passed and got a whiff of something that she didn’t recognize. Even the way people smelled was alien.

He smelled nice, just unfamiliar.

Everything smelled, felt, looked, sounded and tasted unfamiliar.

Andrea wished for just one tiny, familiar thing to give her an anchor.

She felt adrift.

★ Chapter 4 ★

Andrea made her way back to her new home and asked Mordred to show her how to activate the personal information module.

She activated the view screen while still standing, stripping off her wet clothes. The icons popped up on the display as three-dimensional images and she *felt* the information feed into her mind.

One group was from the storage device retrieved with her pod. She started there.

“First message from Allen Caswell.” Allen had been her First Assistant for the last year and she had grown fond of him.

Omit sound playback, Mordred. Please play message on the view screen.

The message was choppy and most of it was missing. She still got the gist . . . that he had heard about her death from Cindy in Human Resources. Stephen had asked him to write something for her return. Allen said he was going to miss her. He had just gotten her trained and he wanted to confirm that he had not given her the heart attack.

She smiled and shook her head.

Allen had more quirks than she could list in a day and fit right in to the film industry. Normalcy had never been condoned in the film ranks. If you were normal, you were boring and boring was *bad, bad, bad*.

The next message was from her brother. The condition that she had was genetic and he had been tested immediately after her diagnosis. Bobby seemed to

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be fine but said he had a new heart condition of missing her. *The years apart will be hard to accept but however old I am, you will always be my big sister.*

Her own heart clenched again but she shook her head briskly, refusing to lose the tiny control that she held on her grief.

She scanned through a couple of messages from friends that didn't have much left of them and one from a Director that was a friend of Stephen's but not really well liked by her.

She had always had a rough time with Directors that couldn't seem to plan the balance of the shooting day, let alone the next week. Lack of planning cost money and that's what she had a problem with. Most of the time Stephen's friend could have completed the movie at half the cost with just one day's planning.

His message read: "Sorry to hear.....years. Stephen has agreed to let me direct a movie about your exp.....ever you come back. Call me when you get to town and we will grab a b.....ours always, Dwayne Attes.

How could Stephen have agreed to let that pompous ass direct a movie about my experience in cryo suspension?

The final message was from Stephen. He wrote: "I can't believe that I'm sitting here in our office and you aren't here. They tell me that our time apart will be short. You should be reading this in no more than ten years, as little as five. I bought the house in Banff where we first made love and we will go there as soon as you come home. Even I didn't realize how much you would be missed. I was so wound up in how I was going to miss you . . . I was shocked at the memorial turnout. We called it a *Sleep Memorial* since you will be coming back to us. I'm glad we waited to have children. You would have missedyears of their life. Now, I realize that I want a child with you. It finally occurred to me why people have children. Only a life that was part of both of us and born of our love could ever be a testament to our marriage. I will miss you while you sleep. Love, S."

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The tears slid down her cheeks. Stephen had been dead and gone for almost six hundred years along with Bobby and all her friends.

Yet, she still took comfort in the words.

She couldn't live in her world ever again. Even when she got back to Earth, she knew that nothing would be recognizable to her and no one would recognize her. Her life was where and what she made it and you didn't get anything for free. Her father had always told her that and he was the wisest man she had ever known.

She dried her face and selected the second icon. This one was the information sent from Mars Corp regarding Stephen's life after her death.

Stephen had remarried in 2021 and had four children over the next seven years. In 2020 and 2024 he had won awards for his work and died at the age of ninety-eight, preceding his new wife by two years. His children had gone on to be the successes that only money of Stephen's magnitude can guarantee; two in film, one a physician and the youngest a news anchor.

She sat back from the display and found that she felt much better. Stephen had found a woman that loved him and gave him the children that he had finally decided he wanted.

His life had been full and his work appreciated.

He had also given her a second chance. If Stephen would not have insisted, she would never had bought into the cryo program.

Because of him, she was alive and living a brand new life. Every moment was a gift and it was her responsibility to honor that. The beauty of it is what made it so terrifying. It was a clean slate. She could do whatever she wanted but, at the same time, had no history to give her safety.

How do you grieve for someone gone for so many centuries? It seems ridiculous, but Andrea knew that she had to grieve just like it had happened yesterday.

"Rest in Peace, Stephen."

She took several controlled breaths. She had been crying so much that she had a persistent headache.

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Andrea rubbed the back of her neck and accessed Mordred.

Mordred, I understand that you have career choices for me. Can we review?

Of course. Based on your genetic coding, these are the top five major fields in which you may excel. And there are numerous sub-groupings under each category.

In order of most suitable career choices:

Mathematics, Finance

Mechanical Engineering

Astral Navigation and Physics

Spacecraft design and modeling

Urban organization and design

Areas of study not recommended:

Medicine

Chemistry

Languages

Art/Music

Genetic modeling

The final five did not surprise her. She had no interest in any of those fields. Item three was a strange taste in the mix.

Mordred, four of the top five are related subjects. How long to get a grasp of the basics of items one through five?

The basics can be absorbed in two weeks. Once your specialties are chosen, you can attain a functioning level within six months. Specialist status, depending on your field can be achieved in from two to five years.

Let's get started then. I would like for you to draw up a schedule that will allow me to study for the appropriate number of cycles as you recommend, exercise, sleep and a work period on the Camelot. Let's see what subjects I like best after I get a grasp of the basics. Please define the duties that I can perform during this time that are the least favored by the crew and will not require their direct management.

There is one pending task which has been postponed three times that requires no special

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training. All power interface units must be scanned and reset every six months. This task will take twelve to fifteen work unit days.

What does this duty entail?

A crewmember must enter the ducting and scan each unit, reset and rescan. The ducting, although large enough to allow for workspace, does not allow the crewmember to stand. This activity cannot be performed when there are high levels of radioactivity in the area since the ducting is only shielded for the mechanicals. You will have to crawl through each conduit to perform the task.

Sounds like a job that will take me away from the crew. Out of sight, out of mind. Or was it, Absence makes the heart grow fonder? Hope not.

Please ask Captain Stuart if me doing this duty would be acceptable to him and the crew, and advise me as to his answer.

Acknowledged. Your schedule is as follows:

**0830 – 1600 Ship duty
1630 – 2030 Training
2100 – 2200 Exercise period
2500 – 0800 Sleep period**

Twenty-five hours? Mordred, have the number of cycles in a day changed?

Time is measured in cycles. A solar day is based on an average Earth day and divided into twenty-five incremental cycles.

Andrea rolled her eyes.

Time wasn't even the same. She remembered Cole's conversation and added, Mordred, please explain the history of the Mars Virus and why Earth women do not mate with Martian men and with the GenEng.

The Mars Virus was created illegally by an Earth corporation to control the births on Mars. It was accidentally returned to Earth and started the genetic breakdown there. Although a cure was found, the genetic damage is not reversible and it passes to future generations. The virus had an additional side effect when it was determined that

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the number of female births dropped dramatically. Earth women have been hesitant to mate with Martian males.

Mordred continued his history lesson, ***The GenEng were created in a lab and grown to adult size to serve in a particular capacity. They are purchased at the time of their release and normally are not sold before they cease to function. Production was banned two solar years ago.***

So the GenEng were the slaves of the twenty-seventh century and the Martians the pariahs, she thought to herself. She didn't agree with either philosophy. It was just another way that mankind had found to hate and somehow that didn't surprise her. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

Since it is nearing your assigned sleep period, I suggest that you rest so that you are ready for your ship duty at 0830. Captain Stuart confirms your assignment. Goodnight, Andrea.

Goodnight, Mordred.

It would be good to get my mind off how alien everything feels, she thought as she was waiting for sleep to claim her.

If her days were filled, she would have less time to think about her past. She missed thunderstorms, snow and the smells of her life; coffee, pine forest, even good old fashion smog. She would have to ask Mordred about coffee and drifted into a dream of a double, two percent latte.

Andrea was awakened by E-sharp, got up and pulled on her clothes. Mordred had explained to her that the organically engineered fabric pulled moisture and excess heat away from her body as well as fitting to her body like a glove. She felt like something alive was in her clothes as they form fit to her body and had to repress a shudder. It only lasted for seconds but it gave her the creeps. The clothes from yesterday were already refreshed. She smiled briefly. No laundry duty.

Mordred directed her to a storage unit and instructed her on the use of the scanning device. As she moved

down the hallway, she again noticed how everything felt so *alien*; the feel of the floor covering, the walls, the lighting that didn't seem to come from anywhere specific. It just felt *wrong*.

Andrea asked Mordred to download the schematic of the interface units to be inspected and she touched the panel next to the closest entry point to interface Unit 1 of 1019. She had always been methodical and somehow this mindless task calmed her.

She also found that after two cycles her back was aching and her knees felt like raw meat. But Andrea had achieved a rhythm and didn't want to break stride. She's scan the unit to check for out of balance indicators. Anything within a point-zero-zero-two variance was acceptable but she was here now and chose to reset any unit not at a zero tolerance.

When she reached Unit 132 she performed the procedure as she had on all of the others. Scanned. Variance at point-eight. That was the highest variance yet. She touched reset and tested again. Zero variance. She noticed a slight flicker and decided to retest. Again it tested at point-eight variance. She went through the procedure one more time and took a second reading after the reset. Again, it reset itself to a point-eight variance.

Mordred, I have an anomaly. She informed him of the scanning and reset procedure.

Noted. Tremaine will meet you there.

Very shortly Andrea heard the scuffling of Tremaine crawling along the ductwork. He gave her a look that said, *This is a wild goose chase.*"

She raised her eyebrows in annoyance, ignored his look and ran through the procedure twice, again double-checking the final reading to show that it was resetting itself after a cycle of thirty to forty-five seconds.

"Mordred, please download destinations of power interface connectors to Andrea and me," Tremaine said out loud. Mordred knew that when requests were made aloud, his instructions really were to download to all the crew and provide the information to both Tremaine and Andrea.

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Power supplied to med bay optical scanners, lighting in adjacent corridor A-3, food preparation Area 2 and locking devices in food preparation area.

“Great. We have been trying to find out why only one of the food service units worked and we couldn’t keep the bins locked down.”

Tremaine started to scan both sides of the power unit until he paused. He pulled a tool vaguely resembling a pair of very sharp needle-nosed pliers from the kit on the floor between them and reached into the space between the wall and the power supply. When he withdrew his the “pliers”, a tiny silver square was sticking to the end like metal to a magnet.

“What is that?”

“One of the computer boards for this unit must have come loose.” He bent back over the unit and slid the tiny square of metal into its old home. “There is a redundant board just in case this would ever happen. The problem is that this one was shorting out the other one. Reset and test again.”

Andrea performed the task for the fifth time and this time the zero variance held. As she did, she looked at the errant boards. They were so tiny she could barely see them and she couldn’t see how Tremaine had seen the problem and plugged it in so easily.

“These are so compact that I would need a magnifying glass to even see them. Your eyesight must be amazing!”

He gave her a guarded look. “It’s useful.”

“Well, now I can get on to the rest of these little guys. Thank you.”

Andrea looked into Tremaine’s brown eyes. She noticed for the first time that he might have some Asian and American Indian in him somewhere, which gave him a very exotic look. The tattoo was the size of a dime and reminded her of the tattoo on a prince in Fiji she had met on location. Tremaine’s eyes had a slight tilt that went with his smile.

Her hand chose that moment to cramp from all of the repetitive tasks she had been performing for two cycles and she couldn’t stop the tremble in her hand.

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Tremaine had seen her look at his tattoo—his GenEng designation marking. He mistook the tremble for something else and was disappointed to see that he had been right about an Earther on board.

Before he could turn to go she shook out her hand and started massaging the cramp and asked calmly, “Your tattoo is beautiful, intricate work. Is there some significance to the pattern?”

His surprise was apparent and Andrea stumbled on, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“No, it’s fine. I should have realized that you might not know about designation markings. When scanned, information about my training and work designation are immediately available.”

It reminded her of Hitler’s camps. Suddenly, the tattoo became a lot less attractive and more like a badge of courage.

“Well, I still think it's pretty. ” Her back was cramped from the continuous time spent in one position and she groaned and stretched. Two hours, no, *cycles* of work and already her body was giving out!

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, except for a growing ache in my lower back.”

Tremaine put his head back and laughed out loud. “Mordred said you wanted the duty that no one else wanted. Why do you think we didn’t want it?”

“Well, I thought that it would give me something useful to do while I try to acclimate. I also remembered something my mother said, *Idle hands are the devil’s playthings*, and my dad always said, *You make your bed and you lie in it.*”

“I think I follow your line of thought. Yes. You chose it. I like your father’s saying, though. Can I use it?”

“It isn’t really mine. It has been passed down through generations. I guess it got lost before it got to you.”

“I’m headed for an early session in the DGR. Thanks for finding the problem. That has been annoying us for weeks.”

“Glad to be of some use. It’s the least that I can do, after all.”

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She watched him crawl back down the duct and turned to Unit Number 133.

Andrea's first experience with twenty-seventh century computer training was intimidating to say the least. Mordred started her training by downloading scheduling and class plans.

The hard part was that Mordred connected with her in a much more intimate way. He literally watched *how* her mind processed the data. The information would then be *fed* to her in the manner in which her brain actually worked.

Mordred explained that everyone processed data differently based on genetic coding and life experiences. Certain words might set the student off on an incorrect tangent. Mordred oversaw the procedure and redirected her back to the material.

Concentrating for cycles was much more exhausting than she would have ever thought. Andrea realized that even when she was intent on a project, her mind drifted from time to time to take mini-breaks from the work. Mordred saw no need for this. The first day of study had to be stopped after two cycles because of total mental exhaustion. She had reached the point of brain overload and couldn't even concentrate hard enough to tell Mordred the name of the ship that she was on.

After several days, Andrea found that her tolerance was rising rapidly. Her hunger for knowledge was also growing. Her mind was being opened to magical ideas and then given the knowledge that turned them into science. Although she had never considered herself to be a rapt student, she now became one.

Mordred was an incredible instructor. Where he showed no patience with her emotional needs, he took great care and time with her mental growth. He wove intricate tapestries and then placed the final thread tying the whole amazing thing together. On more than one occasion, Andrea had been overwhelmed by the scope of

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what she had been presented. At those times Mordred would give her a few minutes alone and come back to her like nothing had occurred.

Mordred also took the opportunity to incorporate counseling for sleepers reanimated after long periods. Andrea was encouraged to tell him about her life and concerns. Her emotions still remained uncensored. He was unprepared for the barrage of emotions coming from Andrea, although he was learning how to process them with her requests. The counseling data suggested that emotional outbursts were to be expected, however, Mordred really had not been totally prepared for unbuffered feelings. This was becoming as much a learning experience for him as for her.

Mordred logged her progress. Since the miners had all come aboard with their training complete, Andrea was Mordred's first real student. It meant that he connected with her more intimately than he had with any of the Partners with which he had ever served. He found it unsettling when emotions raced through her when he wasn't expecting them during training sessions. He was categorizing these emotions and learning to identify each new one that she expressed.

Andrea would express excitement, awe and great joy when she achieved new levels of knowledge. He also noted her loneliness and how it was much more pronounced after she had achieved a goal. He found this curious.

Most importantly, he noted that Andrea seemed to have a growing, genuine affection for him and continued to treat him as if he were a human.

★ Chapter 5 ★

Andrea kept finding ways to keep herself out of sight from the men, as much as possible.

She really needed the time to think about her new life and this life that had been thrust upon her. She had gone through a period of being angry with Stephen for putting her in this position in the first place and had finally recognized the futility of that. Here she was and here she was going to stay, twenty-seventh century reality and all.

Meanwhile, the crew Partners had targeted a major asteroid grouping and started recovery procedures that took them out of the ship for long periods of time. They focused on their work and left her to herself, for now.

Mining an asteroid was much more complex than she had originally thought. Mordred scanned the mass and mapped the veins or pockets of certain ores. It was important not to break up the asteroid into multiple pieces. Each laser drill had to be precisely located to prevent the asteroid breakdown.

A law had been legislated one hundred seventy-five years prior that prevented asteroid deterioration. When navigating the ort belt at high velocities, it became important that the debris be kept in as many large pieces as possible to prevent accidents and injuries.

First, each find was plotted and historical surveys completed. Some asteroids were debris from low gravity sources, such as a comet colliding with a low-G moon. The moon breaks into many smaller pieces, some of which can be knocked into new trajectories and become

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a new asteroid. Others can be from more catastrophic events involving the destruction of planets or stars having survived millions of years under high-G pressure.

The types of ores were drastically different between these two examples alone. No one would ever know exactly what had happened to create their mining sources; only the age and composition of the materials. This particular find, although relatively small, only five hundred km by one hundred km, had been born into a high-G environment and contained huge crystalline deposits that would add to their cargo. Although not as immediately saleable, it was a high profit ore.

When Andrea had an opportunity to watch them work through the view screen she saw the comfortable camaraderie they shared and felt a sad envy.

But she noticed something over the time that she had observed them that she felt was really odd. They never touched; didn't slap each other on the back or *high five* or any of the common daily ways that people connect. She noticed because she was missing those common human contacts, as well.

It was impossible to not run into the men constantly during her duty and exercise shift. But she usually grabbed her meals from the food preparation unit and could avoid them then. The units broke down food into molecular patterns and reconstructed them from biological supplies. It never tasted like any food that she was familiar with, although it wasn't bad. It was just a lot of new tastes when she would have preferred *comfort food* and didn't see the point of sitting down to a dinner alone in the central entertainment area.

That was a female trait that she shared with most women of her time; great fear of dining alone. She missed chicken, fish, fresh asparagus and one hundred other items that these guys had never experienced.

She also missed that feeling of belonging that she had always felt with her film crews. Especially when she was on a distant location, the crew worked hard together and still found ways to socialize together. By the end of every film, they were a family and it was always sad to leave.

Journey To Dür

Andrea thought often of her friends. And definitely, she missed coffee.

Nick stopped Andrea in the passageway after her duty shift. "How are you coming along?"

"The training is coming along great."

"No, how are *you* coming along?" he probed gently.

"I'm surviving. I'm learning. Maybe someday I'll feel like I even belong here. Mordred says that he will rank me as a junior technician within a few weeks."

She leaned back against the bulkhead and felt it give gently at her touch. "I'm finding that it's the little things that I miss the most . . . like the smell of coffee waking me in the morning instead of a damned bell in my head which, by the way, doesn't even have a *snooze* button."

He gave her a curious smile.

"Never mind, Nick. I'm just being petty. I'll get over it. I just thought that if I could attack the big things and get my life centered, I could keep my feet under me. It never occurred to me that you have to sweat the small stuff after all."

"Let me know if you need anything, Andrea." He said with such gentle emotion that it almost brought the tears on again.

"Thanks, I will but later. Now I have a date with Mordred for training and he gets a little testy when I'm late."

"He has many great personality traits but patience is not one of them" he laughed.

She giggled. "That and he never quite seems to know when I'm kidding. See you."

Nick watched her as she walked away. God, he loved the view!

Andrea's training was moving forward at a rapid pace. Even Mordred noted that she had exceeded his training schedule. One part of her training that she resented slightly was the Mars Corp training program. However, if she were going to be of benefit to the

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Partners, she needed to work within the rules. She found them strict for the sake of strictness and the corporation always had the right of way. They had everything but a secret handshake (they probably did, it just wasn't in the manual). She was beginning to despise Mars Corp . . . quietly of course. It wouldn't do to criticize the décor while a guest in someone's home.

The next morning, Andrea came slowly awake to the smell of coffee. Her eyes flew open and called for lights. Glancing around she noticed nothing that looked like coffee. As the delicious smell started to dissipate, she opened the passageway door and checked there. No coffee.

Mordred, I smell coffee.

Yes. Lt. Ferraro programmed a olfactory wakeup for you.

She laughed out loud. Nick was a doll.

Then let's try again to make something that tastes like coffee. I would even take it straight black.

She and Mordred made another attempt and got a little closer this time. The smell is what she really loved in the morning and it had made her day!

Mordred, do you have the olfactory program for Ylang Ylang?

An extinct flowering plant that was a native of Belize, Earth. Yes.

Can you manufacture an oil that I can use for perfume?

Certainly.

Mordred found yet another way to make Andrea feel more at home.

She had been on the ship for three months when she encountered the pod that she had been in for all of those years. Mordred said that, since she had survived, it

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did not belong to the partnership. This pod belonged to her. It peaked her interest and she decided to face something that she had been avoiding.

Mordred, do you have a visual record of the recovery of the cylinder and then of my pod?

Yes.

Please transfer the information to my quarters.

You may find the information disturbing.

I'm sure I will, Mordred. I still want the information transferred.

Acknowledged.

At the end of her next duty shift, Andrea started to replay the data from the beginning. When Nick opened the pod and she saw what she had been she almost gagged.

How could he have put me back together working only with that mess? What was left didn't even look human.

She continued watching the vid as Nick attended to her and cleaned the regen bath solution from her. She owed them all a very great debt.

Mordred told her that all three Partners had agreed to absorb the cost of the regen bath in the event that Earth Central would not cover the cost upon her return. Based on the price of some of the scanning devices on board, the comparative cost of the bath was enormous! After analysis of the ores contained in her pod, she found that she could only repay a fraction of the bath. Moreover, regen bath material was supplied for emergencies only. None remained for another such an emergency.

Now knowing the Mars Corp procedures she recognized that one tiny variance would have cost her a new chance at life. Any ship could have located the No. 1402 during those six hundred forty-one years. The chances that the captain would break with procedure and not clean sweep, that a doctor was on board and that the crew would be willing to pay for the regen bath instead of dumping her in cargo were so remote that it

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really frightened her. A new reality sunk in slowly. *I do want to live.* She stared at the mess that had been *her* and felt humbled.

Andrea had been avoiding the crew and now she felt ashamed of her behavior. They deserved her honesty and respect. Nick and Tremaine had been attentive and caring. At least Cole had not been rude considering that he looked on her as a major pain in the ass. She was also beginning to really miss human contact; friends.

It was time for a new game plan. Andrea couldn't expect to be friends with them if she was always avoiding them at every turn.

The next time she wandered by the dining area she found Nick and Tremaine sharing a meal. *No time like the present,* she thought.

"Hi, guys."

They looked up in surprise. And they stopped their conversation, mid-sentence. She almost fled but held her ground and wandered over to the food processing area.

Tremaine finally gave her another of his famous smiles. "You've been keeping busy. How is the training coming?"

"Great. Mordred gave me a Technical Grade Three rating. It's certainly easier than school was the first time around."

Nick tilted his head slightly. "School? How did you learn back in the twentieth century?"

As she sat down and as she consumed her food, she proceeded to give them a rundown on elementary, secondary, high school and university schooling. Eyebrows went up from time to time or she noticed them glancing at each other.

Nick shook his head ruefully. "You certainly wasted a lot of your life learning about what you needed to live your life."

"I remember having that very thought when I was in college. It was like we were never going to get on with life! Everyone was impatient and ready to rush out and change the world. The truth is that even though it took

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us longer to get to the real part of life, we weren't any more ready for it when we got there."

Tremaine had seen her bio. "You worked in finance? How did you get assigned?"

"We didn't get assignments. We had to work it out on our own. My father had a friend in the industry that got me my first job. I ended up overseeing accounting for film projects."

They continued with a comfortable banter and she started to draw them out, asking questions about where they had been and their experiences.

This was the first of many such conversations with Nick and Tremaine. Cole seemed to always have another place that he needed to be and never got pulled into their circle; or at least *her* circle.

★ Chapter 6 ★

Andrea went through her training with a vengeance and headed for the DGR for an early session to work off some energy.

She chose skiing again and was sore the moment that she was done. When she was just past the entrance to the med bay a cramp raced up her leg that would have caused her to go down had a hand not steadied her arm. She looked up into Nick's eyes.

"Nasty leg cramp. My fault, I pushed too hard."

He put a supporting arm around her and headed for the med bay. "I have just the thing. You won't feel any pain shortly."

"Doctors haven't changed in six hundred years," she laughed.

She cringed and clinched her teeth as the cramp tightened again as they were entering the med bay. He reached for a small device the size of a cellular phone and ran it down the back of her leg. She was amazed as the pain was unplugged.

"How did you do that?"

"Simple. This locates the muscle trauma and relaxes the muscle so that everything can start communicating again."

"I wish I would have known about that gadget when I was crawling through the ducts."

"Ah, yes. The famed lower back crawl."

She slid off of the med table and tested her leg. "Right as rain."

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He smiled and shook his head. "I didn't catch that one". They had been getting used to her little sayings—and Nick and Tremaine had even adopted a few.

"It just means that it's okay now. We used to use a masseuse to correct these muscle traumas."

She noticed his eyes on her and felt the fabric clinging to her wet body. "And Mordred said that you programmed the coffee smell for my new wake up call. Thanks, Nick, I owe you two now."

"Not at all." He paused. "However, if you really do want to repay the favor, you can tell me what you remember about your zoo visits. Most of the animals that you saw then have disappeared and I would like to hear you describe them."

"You really want to hear about old Earth?"

"Definitely. Even though we have extensive historical records, quite a lot is missing regarding your era. There were several critical breakdowns while you were in sleep and history lost its importance in the scheme of things."

"But history matters; it teaches us important lessons and teaches us about who we are. Some things have changed dramatically, others only on the surface."

"How do you mean?"

"Today, there is incredible technology, space travel and unbelievable advancements in medical science. I don't want you to think that I'm minimizing any of those things, but I don't see the major advancements in humanity as a whole that we had dreamed of during my life. We had poverty, death, genocide, and prejudice. Although everyone is kept from starving now, many live in slavery with no real hope of true freedom. The only thing that is different now is the group that experiences the prejudice."

"It is a system that works, Andrea. People no longer starve. Everyone gets an education, healthcare, a decent place to live, and work that makes life valuable to all."

"Don't get me wrong, Nick. I appreciate those gains. But have you ever asked yourself if the cost is worth it? You're from Mars, Nick. Haven't you ever wished for more than you were allowed?"

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He grew very still and watched her for a moment. Very softly he said, "Only in my heart, Andrea. But I might as well want air in space."

Andrea saw the raw emotion and felt that she might have gone too far. Better get out of here and let him get back to normal. She smiled and squeezed his arm. Andrea felt him tense when she touched him.

"Thanks again, Nick. I better go shower and get some sleep."

He watched her walk away. The spot on his arm that she had touched still felt like it was hot. Watching her was agony and the smell of her made him crazy. It wasn't just physical though. She had touched a cord with him just now and he felt a tightness in his chest as he had looked in her eyes. He wanted to touch her so much that it was killing him. He knew his concentration was slipping and didn't know what to do. If only the VidSim was still working.

Andrea decided to stretch for a while to relax some muscles. Her quarters offered limited space but she had worked out a way to do some of her yoga in private. When she finally felt relaxed, she headed for the showers where, for the umpteenth time, she wished for real hot water.

As she stepped from the shower unit with her head down, she bumped into Nick who didn't see her because he was pulling his shirt over his head. His arms went around her to keep the two of them from falling.

As his beautiful eyes drank in her nakedness, she felt the pain that he was battling. She felt the heat of his body, the crisp feel of the hair on his chest against her naked breasts and the strength of his arms in a blinding instant.

When he dropped his hands and started to turn away she slid her arm around his neck and reached up to lay her hand along his strong jaw line. Something in his eyes had awakened the old passion in her. She no longer

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needed to be loyal to Stephen—and now her body was expressing its own needs.

She whispered, “Nick, in a way that I can’t explain, I need you as much as you need me. For months I have tried to re-create my life but I don’t feel alive. I need you to make me feel really alive again.”

She pulled his mouth down on hers. “Can you do that?” she asked. “Just make me feel alive again?”

Nick was returning her kiss with a passion that took her breath away.

He pulled away and whispered into her hair, “Cole told us of your agreement. You understand what this means?” He hated asking the question because he knew that she could come to her senses and pull away.

She nodded.

He palmed the door into her quarters and backed in, pulling her with him. She reached out as he passed the portal and palmed the door closed behind them.

Mordred, please set light in my quarters to level one.

Acknowledged.

The light level immediately dimmed.

He sat her on the bed and unfastened his pants. She watched as he dropped them to the floor. He had a muscular, well-defined body. The dark hair on his chest drew her fingers to it. She ran her fingers up his chest, exploring his body and wrapping her arms around his neck. He pulled her with him onto the bed, his lips found hers again and she explored with the tip of her tongue.

Nick’s strong hands moved to cup her breast. She let out a little moan when he rolled her nipple between thumb and forefinger, testing her for what she liked. The exploring was so much of the excitement.

She saw him looking down at her with those golden brown eyes and couldn’t tell what was in them in this light. The basic floor illumination was the only lighting in the room. She wished absently for a candle and then forgot the wish as his hand found a more sensitive place. She heard a groan and couldn’t tell if it was him or her. His lips tugged at her nipple and then slid down her body to explore her fully.

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Nick's tongue reached a place that caused her to gasp, arch her body and slide her hands to his head.

Andrea groaned, "Oh, my God"—and the rest became unintelligible.

She felt lightning and thunder and heat. Mostly, she felt alive again. Finally, really alive.

She felt him move up to pull her against the length of his body. Her world was still spinning and her breathing was far from under control as she reached for him and found him hard and ready in the dark.

He was waiting, teasing her.

She whimpered softly, "Please, Nick. Isn't six hundred years a long enough wait?"

She felt a tenseness in him as he finally slid inside her. Andrea trembled and lost herself in pure feeling. Her body was no longer under her control as she moved against him, pulling him tighter to her.

Nick wanted to touch all of her; taste her. He could smell her perfume on the sheets and his senses were reeling. Every second was a surprise.

This was a brand new experience for him. He didn't have to learn about what a VidSim wanted but he wanted to know what Andrea enjoyed. There was something that made him need to know what she desired. Her body tensed under him and he questioned softly, "Here?"

She gasped and her hands clenched his shoulders, drawing him tighter. For the first time in his life it wasn't about his release. It became about hers. He wanted to make her feel what he was feeling.

Andrea felt his hands under her, drawing her up to him. Time was suspended. There was just pure feeling. The feel of his body, the taste of his mouth, the smell of their bodies together, his voice in her ear, guiding her to a place they both desperately needed to be. She listened to his ragged breathing as he matched her pace and knew the moment to give in to her body. They both cried out and held each other as their bodies trembled and finally relaxed.

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As he looked down into her face, he was amazed by the sharp turn of events. Her willingness and desire were boundless. It was if she had been storing this up for over six hundred years.

Pleasing her was so more satisfying than his own release. Even programmed VidSim partners were not so beautiful, passionate and completely willing.

Andrea showed him what she needed and gave back in equal measure. There was a hunger in her that seemed to drive her passion. All of those comments about sex not being quite as fulfilling with a real woman were, to use one of Andrea's more colorful phrases, *out to lunch*.

Just when he thought that he was drifting off to sleep, she turned to snuggle her face into his chest, her breasts soft and warm against his skin. He felt her lips exploring him, her warm breath against his chest and then her tongue circled his nipple. He suddenly found that his need had returned in full. The entire sleep period continued like that. Neither of them could sleep or wanted sleep.

Mordred, wake me ten minutes before duty shift.

He wanted every second of sleep before his duty shift. When he was awakened forty minutes later, leaving her in that bed was one of the hardest things he had ever done.

She slept soundly for the first time since awakening from her cryo pod, even though it was only a cycle. She didn't dream, or at least didn't remember any and woke feeling like she had gotten drunk the night before.

It did hit her in the morning that she had opened herself up to other obligations. Although she recognized the need in Nick and Tremaine, she had underestimated her own. Her friendship with Nick was comfortable and she trusted him completely. There was a genuineness and a wonderful gentleness about him that had drawn her to him from the beginning.

She smiled to herself. He certainly knew when to let some of the gentleness go when the situation was right. They were friends and it was going to stay that way.

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Andrea cared for Nick but had no illusions that they were going to become a couple. A couple on board *Camelot* would destroy the balance.

Andrea lay on her side looking at her dec wall and considered how this was going to change things. Although she had dated around quite a bit before Stephen (sowing her wild oats as her father would have said) she knew all about the male ego and jealousy. The last thing that she wanted was to cause anger or a rift between Nick and Tremaine. In the weeks she had been on board she had witnessed the easy camaraderie they shared. These three had a great working relationship. It was like watching a well-honed team.

She wasn't exactly sure how to come clean, but she was dammed sure not going to let Cole find out later like she had been trying to hide something. The deal had been made and she understood the consequences.

It wasn't a matter of *could* she deal with this but *how* she was going to deal with it. Tremaine and Cole might not even be interested in her. She doubted that Cole even paid much attention to her.

She had really made her bed this time, she thought as she stood in the shower feeling a few more sore muscles than usual. After she was ready for ship duty, she contacted Mordred.

Can you please ask Cole if I can come to the bridge?

Affirmative. Captain Stuart says to come now, if you would like.

She walked onto the bridge, a little timidly again. She wasn't sure how Cole was going to take this and mentally objected to having to tell him at all.

He indicated the same chair and she sat down on the edge with her back straight.

Cole watched her body language as she walked onto the bridge without her normal confidence. Something was up and he didn't like surprises.

"Cole, I wanted to let you know that a situation has come up" She trailed off as his eyes caught and held hers.

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“What situation?” This was not a question. This was a demand.

She lifted her head and looked him straight in the eye “Nick and I have been intimate.” There, it was out. Let the cards fall where they may.

If she was expecting emotion from Cole, he was there to disappoint her. “You know the agreement, Andrea. You have to know that Tremaine will find out. Although we do not treat Tremaine differently, this would make him feel his GenEng status too acutely. Nick and I have worked hard during our partnership to make him feel like he is truly part of our team and this is bound to undo our efforts. He is in no position to come to you.”

A GenEng could not approach a human female. She knew the rules. Her eyes fell to the floor as if she suddenly found Cole’s foot coverings incredibly interesting.

Cole continued, “I know Tremaine well enough to tell you that he has been just as attracted to you as Nick. More importantly, he has a great friendship with Nick that I will not see damaged. The three of us have a partnership that we want to continue. I want to make sure that doesn’t change. If I see a problem, I would like to ask you to go back into cryo sleep until we can get you to Mira.”

Andrea lifted her head and again met his eyes with her clear steady gaze.

“Tremaine is a friend of mine as well and I will not be the cause of any pain for him. I know the bigotry that exists against the GenEng. You know that I don’t agree with how he is treated. I see him as a man and a friend. It would be easier for me if you would let him know that I am receptive and let us see how things go. I would prefer not to go back into cryo sleep, but I don’t want to come between Tremaine and Nick.”

“I’ll let him know, Andrea, but he can’t ask you.” He shook his head. “This is a mess.”

“If Mohamed can’t go to the mountain, then I will bring the mountain to Mohamed.” She saw the blank

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look and continued, "I'll go to Tremaine. We'll work this out."

Cole shook his head slightly and sighed.

His voice took on a tone like a father that is immensely disappointed as he said, "Andrea, it's more than that. It will be very important that word of your relationship with Tremaine and Nick not get out. It could damage your status as a free Earther and Tremaine could be executed if they thought that he had instigated any of it. This is very serious."

"I understand *hate*, Cole. We had plenty of it in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I won't do anything that would bring those people down on Nick and Tremaine. I owe a great deal to all of you and causing harm to Nick and Tremaine is not how I repay friendship."

"Are you doing this for gratitude?" His eyes had taken on a still, cold look.

Andrea held back her flash of anger, and paused to think of the right answer. She wanted to tell him to stuff it but decided to say what was in her heart. "Cole, Nick wasn't about gratitude. He was about living again. Since I woke up in the med bay, it has all been like a dream. I have studied and worked and exercised and eaten and have held my emotions in check and lived almost the entire time in a vacuum. I *needed* to feel alive again. Back in my time life-threatening situations drew people together in the same way. They needed to feel alive when it was all over. Can you see?"

She could tell that Cole did see. He thought back to another time; a different Cole. His eyes had lost their hard edge. "I understand. I also understand that this could have a very bad outcome if we're all not careful." Cole turned back to his display and information scrolled down. Again, she had been dismissed.

The passion in her voice had drawn him in. He did see. He saw, that more than anything, he wanted to taste that passion. When she leaned forward he got whiff of her perfume. It was something soft and subtle and it had drawn him in. *Not a possibility*, he told himself. *I'm the*

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captain and this situation gets more complicated by the cycle. She's going to be gone in a few months and I don't want to deal with that either.

But even Marla didn't seem to have this quality. Andrea just felt so *alive* to him. She grasped life and inhaled it all. He had watched her as she had studied and absorbed the centuries and took on duty that all three of them hated without complaint. No one expected this of her. She was a passenger, after all. But no one would ever say that Andrea Stone was a passenger of life.

It could have been worse, she thought as she exited the bridge. Cole could always stick me back in that pod and toss me out of the cargo bay.

Both of them had been so intent on discussing Tremaine that she had not even thought that Cole had the right to come to her as well. It was obvious to her that he was not interested one whit in her. Her pride stung slightly but realistically, it was a blessing. As much as she liked Tremaine, it felt odd going to him like this. He might not really be interested and the whole conversation could just be an embarrassment.

As she headed for the engine room, she encountered Nick going toward engineering. She could tell that he wasn't sure how to approach her now. As she neared him she reached out and put her hand on his arm.

"Good morning, Nick," she smiled. He relaxed visibly and put his hand on her waist. Knowing that Tremaine was on sleep period and Cole was on the bridge, she leaned into him and kissed him deeply.

"This is going to get complicated," he said as he smoothed her short hair.

"I've already had this conversation with Cole this morning and I assure you that I know exactly how complicated it's going to get!"

"You already talked to Cole?"

"I had to. He's the captain and, after all, we had a deal."

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“Yeah, I guess you did. Look, I have to get to the engine room for ship duty now. Let’s talk later.”

Later I want to do more than talk, he thought as he watched her walk away.

They did talk, later though. They didn’t just talk. Both of them started to feel a little more comfortable with the arrangement.

Since relationships were something that Nick had only had in the VidSim, he didn’t seem to get the concept of jealousy. That was a great relief. He also admitted that he had made another minor adjustment when she was coming out of the regen bath. He had entered a pregnancy blocker.

“To be honest, they are almost never administered. Anyone lucky enough to get pregnant usually wants to stay that way.”

That was a relief. One problem that had been in the back of her mind since last night and Nick had already handled it.

They were curled up together in her bed. She absently ran her fingers through the hair on his chest, listening to his voice.

Nick caught her hand with his. “If you don’t stop that, we aren’t going to get any sleep tonight either.”

She grinned up at him. “Do you see that as a problem, Doctor?”

He laughed but she stopped teasing him with her fingers.

“Andrea, you’ve told us some of how your time was different, but how were the *people* different?”

She became quiet and then looked up into his eyes. “It’s hard to tell from just observing the three of you. I notice that none of you ever touch. There seems to be so much more distance between you, both physically and emotionally. It’s not really a comparison when I can only see three men.”

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“That might be a fair assumption though. We don’t touch. It’s not really accepted to casually touch someone and is considered quite rude. After the virus was detected, people became less likely to want physical contact, even with people that they knew well. Since it’s always been like that in my lifetime, it would seem odd any other way. Even laying here with you seems odd.”

Andrea looked up at him in surprise. “You’re uncomfortable now?”

Nick gave her a little embarrassed grin. “You are the only flesh and blood woman that I’ve really been with, Andrea. Normally, I just turn off the VidSim and relax. Not that I’m not learning to enjoy this, but it is a learning experience for me.”

“Nick, if you would rather go back to your room”

“No, Andrea.” He pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head. “There’s something very comfortable about being here with you. It makes me feel,” he paused, searching for the word, and then looked down at her . . . “protective. I like the way you feel when you curl up against me in your sleep.”

She smiled softly.

“It sounds like you are learning how to be with a real flesh and blood woman just fine. It does seem sad though that the human race has pulled away from each other.”

“At least we’re close.”

His voice was soft and she was quiet as she felt him drift off to sleep.

Her mind was still turning over what he had just told her. How sad not to run into an old friend and not give them a hug or even a handshake. What a loss when you think that men and women had drifted so far apart and couldn’t enjoy this simple closeness. What a universe she had awakened to!

Andrea worked through the study period in a fog, to Mordred’s disgust. She was distracted and wasn’t sure exactly how to approach Tremaine. She finally decided to wait until the end of his ship duty and talk to him around midnight. The cycles crawled and she spent a

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lackluster cycle running around a mountain lake in the DGR. Then she showered and headed for the bridge.

Tremaine showed a little surprise as she entered the bridge but he flashed her one of the famous Tremaine smiles anyway.

“Would you like company?” she asked with a grin.

“Sure,” he said a little cautiously. “What’s up?” Tremaine had embraced her little sayings with zest.

“You know about the deal that I made with Cole when I arrived?”

He said, “Yes, Cole and I talked earlier. He mentioned something about you and Nick.”

Now what? he thought.

Her voice was very soft and steady. “Tremaine, this is a little awkward for me but I want you to know that I am open to the possibility of a similar relationship with you. Either way, I want you to know that you and I are friends and will remain friends.”

She saw him get angry for the first time. She had never even thought that he did get angry. His eyes flashed and forced himself to look away. She waited silently.

When he finally spoke, his old calm had returned. “I can’t have a relationship with you, Andrea. When it got back to the corporation, I would be terminated and you would be banned from Earth. You’d lose your Earth rights entirely.”

“Cole and I discussed everything this morning and Nick agrees. None of us are going to discuss anything with Mars. Tremaine, we are friends and I truly enjoy being around you. I would never do anything that would bring you harm but this is a simple case of consenting adults.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I’m still GenEng. Regardless of the way you feel about the GenEng status, I am still owned by Mars Corp and they would terminate me in a second if they knew that I had been with you!”

Now she was getting angry. This was not exactly her idea, after all. She still wasn’t sure how she even felt about this and where it would take her. “Well then, we

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both have great reasons to keep our mouths shut, don't we," she spat back at him. "As I understand it, as long as I'm the one instigating the affair, you are not in any danger anyway. I would still lose my Earth rights."

She paused and took a calming breath. "Look, I didn't come up here to fight with you. I don't want to wreck everything here and Cole was quite clear about not playing favorites and he's right. Let's just acknowledge that the possibility exists."

She leaned across the chair and brushed her fingers against his cheek. He caught her hand and turned his lips in to kiss her palm. A stricken look passed across his face like he couldn't believe that he had just done that.

"I do appreciate your offer, Andrea. You are honestly the first person to ever treat me with this kind of respect. I'm not sure that I feel comfortable with taking you up on it, but the offer means more to me than you will ever know." He gave her a tortured look.

She smiled softly. "I'm sorry about this, Tremaine. I genuinely do care about your feelings. This is up to you."

It wasn't up to him anymore though. His body was throbbing for the need of her. "I've got to start paying attention here. Let's meet later and talk over a meal."

She saw him later in the common area when he got off shift. They relaxed and she got him to talk more about himself.

"I find that, for all of my training, what I enjoy most is helping to keep people on track. I know Cole and Nick so well by now that I can see when a problem is coming and jump in before they even know what hit them."

She laughed. "You seem to be picking up each and every one of my sayings."

"We call them *Stone-isms*."

"Sounds to me like you have high-level management skills. Would they ever consider posting you to a position where you might use your hidden skills?"

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He looked a little sad and then smiled, "I am what I am, according to the great corporation."

"That's bullshit," she said softly as she sat next to him on a large sofa.

Tremaine was instantly serious. "Be careful of where you say that, Andrea. Earthers have banned the GenEng program but we still have a significant population and there are many that think that it would be too easy to remove us entirely."

She shivered and leaned her head against his shoulder. "There is evil in the heart of man that exceeds any fear that we can face in the unknown universe." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek softly.

He turned his head and ran his lips softly across hers.

She shivered again, but for a different reason.

Tremaine whispered. "Let's go to the DGR. I have something that I want you to see."

As they wandered toward the DGR Andrea asked "Have any of the GenEng ever escaped?"

"Escaped to where? The colonies need to stay in the good graces of Earth. We are never allowed unmonitored liquid LC. They look carefully at all of our purchases so how are we to get anywhere?"

"I can't stand the thought of you being treated like a possession."

He shook his head and looked over at her. Even Nick and Cole had never voiced feelings like this and they were his friends. She made him want more and that frightened him. Cole and Nick allowed him to expand his expertise, but even that freedom could place them all in danger if anyone were to ever find out. They reached the DGR and Tremaine palmed the door open.

"Have you ever been in zero-G before?"

"No. That's a future training mission."

"Hold my hand and relax. Don't make any sudden moves and trust me."

He sounded like a really old movie that she had seen somewhere. Tremaine's hand moved over the panel and suddenly there was no up or down. She fought a wave of

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nausea and Tremaine must have seen the look. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small medical injector. It was smaller than the ones of her century and didn't sting as he injected her with something that seemed to calm her stomach immediately.

"Thanks. I was feeling a little queasy."

"Normal reaction. I thought you might need that." He pulled her against him and held her for a moment. "You're sure?"

She lifted her head and kissed him tentatively.

Tremaine had set a proximity tractor to keep them in the center of the room like a giant invisible pillow. He was completely at home in zero-G and moved with grace and ease.

Tremaine reset the tractor and guided them to a handhold. He was the master here. "Reach up and hold us here."

She complied, giving him unrestricted access to her body.

"Just close your eyes. Let me make you love zero-G."

Again, she complied and felt his mouth exploring her breasts as his hands moved between her legs. His fingers were amazing as they worked their magic. Just when she knew that she was on the brink, he slid his fingers inside her and the stars exploded.

She let go of the handhold and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him against her as her body trembled and her breath came in gasps.

Tremaine held her for a while, kissing her, stroking her body. "Andrea, you are so lovely. So sexy." She felt his hardness against her and reached down to stroke him. He moaned. This time he reached out for a handhold and she gripped another as he finally guided his engorged member inside her.

Tremaine felt the white-hot tight wetness of her and almost lost all control. Andrea started rocking against him at a slight angle and he focused on astral navigation computations until he heard her breath quicken. When she cried out and he felt her tighten around him, he lost himself in her.

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With Tremaine, there were no expectations. As his hands explored her, he questioned her; *learned* her. And he also taught her.

Tremaine's body was athletic and agile. Since his hands didn't have to support his body, they were free to explore her. He wasn't finished and she found out quickly, neither was she. His mouth continued to move down her body she thought she would die from his teasing.

When he finally moved between her legs, she cried out and arched against him. His hands didn't stop their exploration and she felt like she was burning from the inside. His fingers had found that place inside her that turned her body inside out.

She felt like the world exploded as wave after wave of pleasure washed through her. She wasn't aware of releasing the bar and they were floating again in the center of the room. He pulled her against him and, with a small movement, sent them back against the bar.

She nuzzled his neck and grinned up at him. "You are going to have to patent those hands. It seems that you are teaching me things about my own body."

His arms pinned her against him as he looked down at her and gave her the sweetest smile. "Mordred isn't the only one that can teach, you know."

She raised an eyebrow as a challenge, which he met with vigor. Although he told her that he had never been with a woman outside the VidSim, she found it hard to believe. He showed her the joys of sex without gravity and sex with no barriers. He loved to experiment with positions not possible in a gravity environment and she found a few that elicited new responses from her.

He didn't have the hang ups that society had built around the sexual mystic. She was finding that the old barriers built up around the mystic had been replaced with new, unfamiliar ones. How anyone could prefer a simulation to the real thing was something she couldn't quite fathom.

The rules went out the window and, as she fell asleep later, she realized that she had never allowed herself to

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enjoy her physical side without the emotional agendas before. She found it quite refreshing.

Tremaine was surprised by Andrea's intensity. He had never shared feelings with a VidSim and even sharing the laughter was a new, special experience. Knowing that Andrea chose to be there with him humbled him and gave him a newfound confidence. He smiled to himself. *Imagine him as a manager.* The smile grew more wistful as he did imagine.

Although the physical intimacy was amazing, the three of them became fast friends.

The time spent with them soon expanded her knowledge of the history of the colonization of Mars and the outlying areas. The colonists had been promised that Mars Corp would front their passage to Mars as well as the initial investment required to make the planet viable. The costs were enormous and it soon became apparent to the colonists that paying back the debt was not going to be possible for at least three generations. By then, other costs had come up.

The Mar virus had taxed the resources of the entire medical team on Mars and the cure was purchased at a high price. Mars Corp also controlled all the financial institutions and businesses of any real value. The people making the money were keeping everyone else poor and the people making the money were all owned by Mars Corp. It was a planet owned by a corporation that saw no value in culture. The children were pushed into careers that would benefit the company. Art, music, literature, research and development were all careers that were not supported by Mars Corp. It sounded to Andrea like a very sad place to grow up.

They started spending more time in the common room and Andrea felt that a little redecoration was in order. She recycled the single chairs and designed an L-shaped sofa that wrapped around the far corner of the room and a couple of oversized chairs with a large

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ottoman in the center. She changed the dec wall so that it looked like a view port with a view of a star field—making it a kind of window made less odd to her and it was a view that the crew was comfortable with.

It became a retreat for them when they had time to relax and both Nick and Tremaine complemented the new décor.

During their time relaxing in the common room, they both constantly quizzed her on what life and Earth had been like and slowly started to understand how different life was like for her here. Neither one of them spoke of Cole's life except that he was from Earth where he had worked designing new spaceports and his wife had died in childbirth a year after they were married. If Cole wanted to tell her more, he would.

Andrea was curled up in the corner of the sofa after coming off-duty with her head back against the cushions when Tremaine joined her.

"I'm playing hooky from the DGR today." He walked over and served himself a protein drink that Andrea had not yet been able to stomach.

"God, how do you drink that stuff?"

"Been drinking it from my first day. What is it you say . . . an acquired taste?"

She rolled her eyes. "Just when was your first day? How old are you?"

He gave her a little shrug and sat down next to her. She smiled when he automatically put his arm around her and gave her a quick kiss. She was making progress. They were learning a little more about casual touches.

"I guess you could say that I was born ten years ago, although it isn't like I am really ten years old. I was already fully adult and all information and training was already incorporated into my memories at that time. A more accurate age would be around thirty since my body was matured to match an adult male at about twenty years of age. The first three years were spent on a space station orbiting Mars. I've spent the last seven years here on *Camelot*."

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He said this so casually that Andrea had to take a minute to respond. The information that Mordred had supplied didn't seem as cold as this. They just had grown him, dumped information into him, and assigned him to a job without even thinking that he had a soul.

"Tremaine, are you okay with how they treated you?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "How do you mean?"

"It doesn't bother you that they didn't give you any choices?"

He leaned his head back against the sofa. "At the time, I was ill prepared to make any choices. Now, I might like to have other options, but that will never happen. I just feel fortunate that I got lucky enough to be assigned with Nick and Cole." He smiled up at the ceiling, closed his eyes and added softly, "And you."

Andrea sat up and reversed her position so that she was facing him. He moved the arm from the back of the sofa to pull her against him as she took his face in her hands.

"Me too, baby."

"Baby?"

"A Stone-ism. It's a term of endearment."

He raised his eyebrows. "If you say so."

She kissed him lightly.

His arm tightened around her. "Now, that's a term of endearment."

She laughed and they both looked up as Cole entered the room. He took in the room at a glance and started to exit.

Andrea called out, "Cole, it's okay to join us. We were just talking and relaxing."

He looked up, more than a little uncomfortable. "I'll just grab something to take to the bridge. I'm still on duty." He opened one of the bins and took out one of the prepackaged snacks that Andrea had called *vegetarian beef jerky* and left the room without another word.

She rolled her eyes at Tremaine. "Sometimes I think he needs a personality injection."

Tremaine leaned forward and sat his drink on the floor. Suddenly, he had pulled her on top of him and

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they were stretched out on the sofa. He nuzzled her neck. "I think he has a different problem, but that's not my business." Then his mouth found hers.

She completely forgot about Cole.

Cole hadn't forgotten about them.

When he walked into the room, Andrea's face was alit in laughter. She was absolutely beautiful.

And Tremaine was holding her casually. It looked so comfortable between them that something in Cole felt wrenched. His feelings were raging and the two that seemed to be winning were jealousy and envy.

★ Chapter 7 ★

Mordred gave Andrea an Earth history briefing.

The twenty-first century had proven the downfall of Earth's ecosystem when climate changes wreaked havoc on the world's food suppliers. As supplies had been depleted, man had shown his ugliest face and unleashed biological weapons on surrounding neighbors.

Earth's already taxed resources collapsed as millions of people died from horrible man-made illness or just lack of food and clean water. Mankind was not the only loser in this war. The face of Earth was changed forever as the viruses mutated and attacked plant and animal life as well.

Genetic enhancement of crops had disastrous effects—all the Monarch butterflies died from pollinating genetically enhanced corn crops. Un-enhanced crops were contaminated and the damage was done.

The ozone layer was increasingly damaged which caused the polar ice caps to melt. As the temperature of the oceans climbed, coral reefs died, taking unique sea life with them. The sea level rose and seaside sites disappeared below the waves. Major rain forests were destroyed before the scientists found a way to stop the destruction.

Earth's climate was already erratic and the extinction of a large portion of the remaining rain forest threw Earth into global weather chaos that lasted decades.

It took centuries to rebuild the beauty of Earth. The views of the new Earth looked nothing like it had during Andrea's life. Venice, Florence, Vancouver, New Orleans

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and Athens were gone, as were the giant redwoods of California. The mountains still remained, although the trees and streams had been forever changed or destroyed.

Once the world came out of the dark times at the end of the twenty-second century, it became illegal to discuss religion in public. Many of the wars and social prejudice were born out of religious differences. By not allowing public discussion, the leaders hoped to control future disagreements. However, this only served to separate the religions more since no one had the opportunity to learn about other cultures. In 2312, a new religion melded many of the existing religions together. They found the same basic morality existed in many religions. The trappings and traditions were the comforting source and, over time, those could be altered. The many names of God were joined and seventy percent of the existing human population throughout the galaxy now worshipped one God.

New religions were strictly forbidden. Anyone could choose any remaining religion, but no new ones could be founded. Andrea raised her eyebrows at that one. Considering that most people believed that God had created us, establishing a new God after this length of time seemed ridiculous. She remembered the many charlatans that had only sought to fill their pockets and understood how this had all come about. But who got to decide what God was?

Andrea had made it past the basics and was starting to help the crew with things that made a difference in their lives.

Nick and Tremaine had started treating her more as a crewmember and less as a passenger. The first time that she really noticed this, Nick had told her to run diagnostics on the food supplies and programs. The Tumbot tea he had this morning seemed off somehow. Andrea was performing the task before she realized that

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he had given her an order; not made a request. Now if Cole would just treat her less like a twenty-first century airhead she might feel like she was making significant progress, although why his approval was important, she couldn't say.

Andrea had been taught early that she had to work hard in life. If success came easy, she was not working up to her potential.

The work ethic passed to her from her parents gave her a sense of accomplishment over the years that far exceeded the pay or accolades. There was a peace and happiness that she experienced when she threw herself into a project.

It was why she had felt so at home making movies. Everyone was focused and driven. Andrea had just been one more in the mix. Twelve-hour days had always been a minimum, fourteen to fifteen on average when they were filming.

So when she had thrown herself into the training and work with the same gusto, Nick and Tremaine had been quietly amazed.

Mordred had taken the responsibility to remind her to sleep or eat at times when she was working or studying.

Andrea found Astral Navigation fascinating. It was like three-dimensional roadmaps with sand traps built in throughout. There were the normal gravimetric fields surrounding stars, planets and moons with charted comets and asteroids thrown in and any number of other special miracles. She was finding incredible beauty in space. Tremaine's view from his dec wall was a nebula that moved and sparkled in the blackness of space. Although she agreed that it *was* beautiful, she felt like it was looming when she lay in his bed.

Andrea had also been taking a hand in minor financial matters. Mordred had also been instructing her in twenty-seventh century finance. Here she felt at home. This was something that she could take on with confidence. The Partners didn't involve themselves with the money. They delivered their ore and the money went into their accounts. Nick and Cole were saving for their

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own ship and the money grew by the normal small percentage growth rates common in her century.

The twenty-seventh century was broken down into cartels or groups similar to the stock markets that she was used to, only much more complicated. Financial specialists were transferring money from planet to planet to colony to space center. Each one had its own monetary evaluation.

As she watched the trends something started tickling the back of her mind. There was a pattern that, at first, wasn't obvious. She had a talent for being able to look at numbers and sense patterns more than see them. It wasn't clear, yet it *was* there.

Andrea still resented the cycle per day spent in the DGR since it took time away from her training. She finally cut back the downhill skiing to every other day and used a basic treadmill the other days so that her hands, eyes and mind were free for a training screen projected above her. Since today was a treadmill day, she had Mordred transfer the training program for astral mapping to the DGR and palmed the door open to the unit.

She caught herself as she crossed the threshold. Cole was sitting on a bench with his head in his hands. "Sorry, I should have requested entry." As she turned to leave Cole looked up.

"It's okay. I pulled something in my neck and I was just setting here letting it calm down."

"Do you want me to call Nick? He has that great little gadget that will fix you right up."

"No, Nick is sleeping and I don't want to wake him right now. It will be fine in a minute."

"We got muscle pulls in out time too, Cole. Can I try a little old fashioned medicine?"

He looked at her curiously, paused and then nodded. Andrea crossed the room and stepped behind him. He was bare to the waist and still slick with sweat.

"Try to sit up straighter and relax." She slid her hands experimentally over the muscles in his upper back and neck. She felt him tense up at her touch.

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"This seems to be the culprit." Andrea ran a thumb lightly down a muscle that ran down the left side of his neck and across his shoulder. "When the muscle is traumatized, it contracts and the texture, instead of being smooth, feels rough to the touch."

She started to massage the muscle gently at first and then continually deeper as she felt it give a little. Her hands moved to other areas of his neck and back from time to time to give the muscle some time to relax. "If I spend too much time in one area, it will start to feel tender. Is the pressure alright?"

At first he had been shocked when he felt her hands on his shoulders. But as her fingers started the magic, he felt himself relax a little, although other parts of him were getting more tense by the moment.

"Um-hmmmm" was the only response that he was capable of at the moment. He remained completely silent so she kept quiet as she kept working on his back. It took all of his concentration to keep his body from responding to her touch. All he wanted was to turn around and pull her against him and that was something that could not happen. Slowly, the cramp was worked out and she paused, smoothing her hands lightly over his shoulders. "Still hurt?"

"No. That was amazing. Thank you."

"Don't tell me that this is yet another lost art?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That bums me out more than you know. I used to get a massage every Sunday when I was on location. It was the only thing that kept me going and it was one of my favorite things in the world. I don't suppose that the DGR has the capability to add a masseuse?"

"Sorry, Andrea." Cole stood and lifted his hands to the back of his neck as he rolled his head experimentally. "Only the VidSim can program human counterparts and they don't physically exist so it wouldn't do any good to program a masseuse."

He nodded. "Thanks Andrea. Enjoy your exercise." Cole turned and exited the still open door, palming it closed after him.

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She shook her head. As she had been working, several times she had wished for a massage and thought that, once back on Earth she could indulge herself.

What a drag!

Andrea had been hoping that Cole would start to see her as a person instead of a problem. As much as she recognized that his acceptance shouldn't be important, she knew that it was important to her. He was the authority figure here and she wanted him to see that she was working hard and trying to fit into her new era.

The workload continued to grow and her schedule kept getting tighter and tighter.

How in the world were three crew members suppose to keep up on everything if they now had four, or at least three and a half, and they were just keeping everything working? Maybe she was only working on the non-essential systems, but everything mattered when you are months from a place that will support human life.

It's a good thing Mars Corp doesn't have to deal with the IATSE union of my day, she thought with a grin. Mars Corp would get their collective butts kicked over the minimum staffing requirements alone!

★ Chapter 8 ★

Mira was a small planet in a remote sector bordering the Ort belt. It was known for tough traders, excellent vegetables and fruit, and the highest crime rate among the trading planets.

Andrea was only going to be allowed down with the crew for one cycle in the market and had to agree to return so that Tremaine could join the crew on the surface. No one left their ship unattended around Mira or it wouldn't be there when they came back.

This was her first decision.

She could hop off at Mira and wait for a transport going to Earth. This is when she decided that she wasn't ready to go back to Earth.

She was starting to love the hard work and the regimen on the ship. It had taken her months to finally feel at home and it terrified her to think of starting all over again. There were also no complaints about two men keeping her satisfied. No, she would be staying with *Camelot* for a while longer.

The small atmospheric transport had to be completely tested before they got to Mira. Since it was a fairly major undertaking, Andrea skipped her training for a couple of days to help get everything organized for the trip planet side.

She was helping Tremaine test the propulsion system when she started to get a very bad feeling. She had experienced them occasionally. Once, she felt this panic just before a crane had dropped a cameraman from a height of fifty feet.

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This time, she didn't even pause. "Shut it down!" she yelled and started the close out procedures.

Before she got to Step Three she started to hear a variation in the generating core. That is, she could hear the core. No sounds should have been coming from there since it was a completely silent engine core. Tremaine had paused when she demanded that he shut everything down, but his training had taken over. He started to shut down the systems as he, too, heard the hum.

The overflow is locked closed. Manual shut down will not be possible until the overflow is manually corrected. Attempts to correct from computer controls failed.

The overflow was a minor correction: if you could get to it. The problem was compounded when the ship automatically started closing access corridors when the danger was detected.

Tremaine saw the opening start to scissor closed above him and jammed a gravitational alignment bar into the space before it could close. He tried to force his way past the door but the new limited opening was too small for him. Andrea saw what he was attempting and yelled up, "Tremaine, you'll never fit through. Let me up there. We're running out of time!"

Tremaine jumped down to let her give it a try. If the generating core went, this part of *Camelot* would go with it. At the very least *Camelot* would be a crippled ship, adrift in space.

She climbed up the ladder and squeezed past the opening. She heard Mordred clearly in her head. ***The generating core is ninety-eight percent critical. You have two minutes to relieve the pressure.***

God, this was happening too fast. What the hell was going on?

Fortunately the craft was small and getting to the manual overflow switches wasn't the problem. She just couldn't get the damn thing unjammed.

Everything seemed like it was in slow motion. It already felt like summer in the Mohave Desert and it had just been over a minute! Her whole body was covered in

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sweat, which just made it worse as she tried to get the switch to move. Finally, when seconds were ticking closer and closer she took a careful aim and kicked the switch with everything she had. What she lacked in upper body strength, she made up in her downhill skiing legs. The switch gave and the display started decreasing instead of increasing.

The alarm was still sounding.

Please exit the transport until safe levels and heat and radiation have been achieved.

As she started to descend the ladder to the reduced opening she noticed that the grav bar was starting to warp.

Oh no, not now!

When the tool started collapsing she let go of the ladder and dropped through the opening jerking her hands down at the last minute as the door grazed her knuckles. She then continued the drop fifteen feet to the floor where she did a drop and roll, absorbing as much of the impact with her legs as possible. Her right shoulder and the side of her head hit solidly on the bulkhead and she saw stars without benefit of view screen for at least ten seconds. When she shook the stars free she saw Cole standing over her with a look of absolute fury on his face.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” He had obviously been in the DGR and had come running when the alarm sounded.

She stood up shakily and calmly answered, “Opening the manual overflow to prevent core meltdown.”

She met his eyes with resolve. She was starting to get as mad as he was and couldn’t understand why he was so pissed off. She had been trained in this procedure and was the only one capable of getting there. A *Thank You* would have been more appropriate.

Nick had just come in at the end of her sentence and was immediately concerned with the blood on her hands. Cole said “The scratches will keep. Get her to med bay and check her for radiation levels. She should have never been that close to a hot core.”

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And to her, "The standard procedures do not include passengers, especially fertile females. Even eliminating that issue, you would have been critically injured if that door had closed before you got out. Do not take tasks like this on again without my orders."

She was ready to scream at him and Tremaine and Nick were just looking at each other while the alarm continued to blare. The alarm was what finally threw her temper out of control.

"Mordred, shut that damn alarm off!" she shouted. She looked up in fury.

"Captain, I realize that I am not a Partner on this crew but my dedication to the *Camelot* and this crew is not in question. Tremaine could not fit through the opening and I knew that neither of you would either. It was my responsibility to go in there and open the overflow since I was the only logical choice. My ability to have children in the future, IF I choose to do so would not be important if we were all dead!"

"Stand down Stone and get to med bay NOW!" Cole literally thundered. "You neglected to notice that another option was available. The transport could have been jettisoned and *Camelot* would have had only minor structural damage."

Nick pulled her out of harms way and got her in to the passageway. There her legs finally gave way and Nick carried her the rest of the way. She found that she was suddenly drowsy and Nick was talking to her.

"Stay awake. Come on Andrea, stay with me." She shook her head again and found that she was in med bay. *What had happened to the trip here?*

Nick had already scanned her and found, other than the abrasions on both hands and a concussion from her head hitting the bulkhead at the same time her shoulder did, that her shoulder was bruised but undamaged. He also scanned for radiation levels and found her to be within acceptable limits. Thank God the bio fabric had shielding built in. The suit contained additional shielding microbes that probably made all the difference. He gave her an injection to absorb the radiation in her body. The

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concussion and abrasions were easy repairs and he sent her to her bed. "Get some sleep and everything will be okay. Cole was just scared and he overreacted a little."

"It *was* scary. The whole ship could have gone up."

"No Andrea, he was afraid for you. I've never seen him like that but I know him well enough to tell you that he was not just afraid for *Camelot*."

She just stared at him a moment and shook her head again, as if clearing it of those floating stars.

"Right," she said sarcastically, "I'll see you in the morning."

She said dismissively as she hopped off the table and made her way back to her quarters.

It just didn't add up, she thought. Even though she had agreed to be available to all of them, Cole hadn't given her any indication that he was even vaguely interested. In fact, he avoided her at each opportunity and she always found herself working on the opposite side of the ship from wherever Cole was as he remained continually distant and coldly professional. Even after the massage, he had remained aloof.

If there was ever a male Ice Maiden, it was Cole Stuart, good looks and all. She wasn't sure why he didn't like her, but he didn't seem to care about hiding his feelings.

Cole was glaring at Tremaine. "You should have known better, Tremaine. Jettisoning the transport was the safest option."

"Jettisoning the pod still would have caused unknown exterior damages, and then we would have been without the transport. Not the best option since it would have meant huge cost overruns that would have eaten the profit for the entire contract, including what we have in the cargo bay. You know Mars Corp charges whatever they choose for a rescue mission. Isn't it amazing that it always ends up being the profit on the contract? Cole, it was a simple procedure and she was trained, prepared

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and she saved all of our necks. If any of the Partners had climbed in there you would have agreed with the decision.

“Andrea is not a Partner.”

“Andrea has never requested special treatment since she came aboard and has worked hard to earn a place here, even though you know that she could have stood on her Earth rights and been a major pain in our mutual butts. It was a simple problem, Cole. One that Andrea was trained for and fully capable of correcting. You would know that if you check with Mordred on her progress. Andrea has far exceeded the training schedule and if she were on Mars with this training, she could already be assigned to a ship.”

Cole’s eyes were ice.

“As the captain, Tremaine, I make sure that I keep up on everything on board. I know exactly where Andrea is in her training.”

“Have you also noticed that the ship is operating above any logged performance? *We* certainly aren’t doing anything differently. Having an extra pair of working hands has made an amazing difference on *Camelot*. Mordred is reporting ship functionality at ninety-nine-and-a-half percent! According to the books that’s not even possible! Minor problems that we used to put off for cycles to repair are fixed the next day before I can even schedule them. Mordred’s automatically been directing those repairs to her before he even sends them to me for assignment. Even *he* recognizes that she knows what she’s doing.”

“Regardless of what she has been doing, Tremaine, it is not her responsibility. We can all be held accountable for any injuries that she incurs on board *Camelot* as long as she is a passenger. The duties that she *chooses* to take on can not put her at risk in any way.”

“That’s not really the issue. The strange thing was that she reacted *before* the alarm went off.”

He gave Cole a look that, had Cole not know Tremaine better, would have had an edge of anger to it. “She was spitting mad, Cole, and if I was you, I would

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stay out of her way for a while because, with all due respect Captain, you were out of line. As a *passenger* she didn't deserve to be treated that way."

Tremaine had never called him on a decision or defied him in any way and it would have been easy to blame it on Andrea. Cole knew better.

But Cole had never been one to take advice.

She was just starting to drift off when she heard the passageway door hiss open. Cole stood over her as his eyes adjusted to the dark. When he saw that she was awake, he sat on the edge of her bed and continued to look down at her with those intense ice blue eyes.

Finally he said, "I'm sorry I overreacted. Tremaine and Nick have just given me hell for jumping you like that."

He paused and she just let the silence lengthen. She had a feeling that he was not done and if she said anything, he would never get the rest of it out.

"I just couldn't think of you being injured or killed."

Andrea nodded in the dark and simply said, "And I did it because I couldn't bear any of you to be injured. This is the only life that I have now and you are a part of that. I've become more than I was in my first life and learned that I am capable of things that I had never dreamed of. I *knew* that I could fix the problem, Cole. I've also grown rather fond of having Mordred to teach me how to fit in here and he was also in danger. His main casing is close to that bay."

Cole then did something that completely caught Andrea off guard.

He laughed.

His expression completely changed and a smile split his face. She had never really seen him laugh and the transformation was amazing, even in semi-darkness.

"I was worried that you would be killed and you were worried about Mordred! I hate to admit this but he didn't even enter my thoughts until right now."

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There was something much more relaxed about Cole with a smile on his face. He continued to look down on her in silence with that wonderfully sexy grin.

Then Cole surprised her for the third time since screaming at her at the transport, he leaned down and kissed her.

It wasn't a hard passionate, demanding kiss. He was touching her with his mouth; exploring her mouth. There was a searing intensity to him and when he was kissing her she was only aware of how his lips felt as they moved against hers.

She wasn't even aware of when he lay down next to her, just realized that he was there. Still, he kept kissing her until she was breathless from him. He moved away from her for a moment and she felt bereft.

Andrea heard him move in the darkness and then he was back beside her and she felt his warm skin under her hands, his body against the length of her. She had never realized how much taller he was and she felt small and protected in his arms. Andrea slid her hand between them to touch him.

He pulled back from her. "Be patient, we have all night."

A memory tugged at her but before she could place it his mouth captured hers again and then started to trail down her neck. He continued lower and took one of her nipples into his mouth and ran his tongue across it. She couldn't help the moan that escaped her mouth.

He continued his path down across her stomach and to the inside of her thigh sparking fire in her as he went. That wasn't where she wanted his mouth though and just as she thought she was going to beg him, his mouth found her and she felt stars again in her head. He knew what she wanted, what she *needed* and took her there with a speed that shocked her.

Her orgasm rocked her and he held her as she trembled. They curled together talking in low voices and learning about each other. After a while she felt his mouth on hers again and Andrea took the opportunity to reciprocate. Exploring his exquisite body was a joy. She

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teased him with her tongue as she moved lower. When she took him into her mouth, he groaned and slid his hands into her hair, responding to her as she had to him. He was demanding of her and urged her to show him what she wanted.

As the night wore on she found herself napping and coming awake at his touch.

Once, she was dreaming that he was making love to her and as she woke out of the dream, she felt him inside her and wasn't sure where the dream left off and Cole began. The barriers between them dissolved as his low voice guided her through the night. She realized that she had never been such a vocal lover but now found it arousing as she, more and more, whispered how and when and where she needed him.

When she woke in his arms the next morning, she saw that he had been watching her sleep. She smiled as E-sharp sounded for both of them.

Duty shift in twenty minutes.

Thank you, Mordred.

Cole cupped her chin in his hand and kissed her. "Nick is going to kill me for not letting you sleep."

"I got some sleep. I'm fine and I feel very relaxed in fact."

He gave her a leer and pulled back the sheet. "If we weren't on duty in twenty minutes . . ." he laughed.

She slipped out of the bed and headed for the shower completely naked. "There's always later, Captain," and grinned at him.

He followed her into the adjoining shower. "Tremaine said that you knew there was a problem before the alarm sounded. How?"

"I don't know," she said as she activated the cleaning unit. "Sometimes I just get these gut feelings and have learned that, more often than not, they're right."

Mordred had been monitoring the entire situation during the emergency. He had been impressed with

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Andrea's quick actions. When he had overheard her tell Cole that she had been concerned for his safety, he had felt a rush of raw emotion that had taken him several millicycles to control.

It only made it more moving when Cole admitted that he had not even thought of Mordred.

Andrea valued him.

That made him consider that maybe it was time for him to value himself.

★ Chapter 9 ★

They were about to make planet fall—Andrea's first land experience since she awoke.

Andrea tried to contain her enthusiasm since the men were concerned that she would draw attention among the heavily male population of Mira. She wore a hat that reminded her of her dad's old fishing hat, shield glasses that covered half of her face and a baggy normal day suit. If someone wasn't looking closely, they would never notice that she wasn't just another male ore miner.

When she found that the planet Mira could provide them with fresh food, she asked if she could choose some to bring back up to the ship.

All three readily agreed and Cole handed her a legit bank. This resembled a credit card and contained a monetary value that could be downloaded into a vendor's legit bank for purchases.

She glanced at the value and was surprised to see that it contained much more money than she would need just for food.

“Why so much? Food shouldn't cost near this.”

“Nick reminded us the Mira also has fine women's clothing and bio fabrics.”

Cole grinned.

Nick slid his arms around her from behind and gave her a big hug. “We wanted you to find something to wear other than miner's day suits and exercise clothing . . . that's if you wanted?”

Tremaine was running down the departure checklist with Mordred and mumbled something that Nick and

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Cole heard but was too low for her to make out. But they both laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Andrea asked.

"Tremaine doesn't understand the need for you to have new clothes. He seems to prefer you without them," Nick said laughing.

She smiled and shook her head. Their ability to relax around each other and show no jealousy was truly a twenty-seventh century trait.

Cole was the only one that had really been in a relationship with a woman. After Marla's death he had taken the assignment on *Camelot* and for the last six years, had been in space where female contact was very limited.

She looked at them, seeing both the similarities and the differences.

Nick was the one that was always thoughtful. He remembered things that said that he cared about her but not in an overpowering way. She had also seen him remember details about Nick and Cole that told her that this was his way of taking care of all of them. He was their doctor and he also watched over their emotional well-being. His nurturing spirit had been the first to heal her.

Tremaine was their own version of Kokopelli, the Native American *joy bringer*. He could step into a volatile situation and inject his smile and calming voice and everything would ratchet down about ten notches. He was constantly pulling minor pranks to make everyone laugh and laughing together truly did make them work better as a team. Tremaine had taught her how to really laugh again and had given her back her joy.

Cole's expertise and knowledge humbled her. Now that she could really talk to him, she found that his guidance was what she had been missing. Although he had never appeared to have taken any notice of her training, he knew every step that she had taken. Having him compliment her almost brought her to tears. Cole had been the one to give her a purpose and direction in her new life.

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Since relationships were commonly established as a contract to attempt to have a child, jealousy had been one of the emotions left on the sidelines of the twenty-second century. If a child was born and the relationship was companionable, some marriage contracts were extended so that both parents could have an active hand in parenting.

At least they'd gotten this part right! Andrea thought.

Even in these longer contract marriages, VidSims were still actively used in place of physical contact. Since there were many more men than women, monogamy was a precept of the past.

The even sadder thing—the thing that Andrea hated most—was that large, extended families were a thing also of the past. Nick, Cole and Tremaine had established their own kind of twenty-seventh century family and she was gradually being included. As she watched them, she realized that it was going to take quite some time to fit into this new social order and she doubted if anyone in her century would understand the kind of relationship that was evolving.

The transport down to Mira was incredible.

Although the world was small, it was great to walk on land again. And to have the experience on walking of a new world with her crewmates was the happiest day of Andrea's new life.

The gravity was slightly lower than *Camelot's*, and the air had the normal variety of odors wafting on the breezes; some good and some bad. The sun felt warm on her shoulders and she wished wistfully for a beach. After being onboard *Camelot*, everything was a riot of color. She hadn't realized how much she missed colors.

Cole attempted to make several appointments that would take place later, when Tremaine joined them. They needed to negotiate the best price for the ore and Cole thought that the three of them would make a stronger show of force. Only two traders could meet with him and

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those only in one cycle. Cole reluctantly agreed and they walked the short distance to the market area to get some of the shopping out of the way.

“Andrea, you’ll have to join Nick and me for the two meetings. They can’t meet us later.”

He paused and looked around to make sure that no one was eavesdropping. “Hopefully, having a woman join us won’t be questioned. You’re not on the crew roster.”

She shrugged. “I’ll try to keep a low profile. Would it be better for me to wait here in the market?”

Nick shook his head. “No, we can’t leave you here alone. That would be asking for trouble. Let’s try to find everything we need before the meetings.”

What Nick didn’t want to say to her was that if anyone knew what her breeding potential was, they wouldn’t have a chance in hell of protecting her. In many ways, she was a more valuable asset than the ore.

Andrea found beautiful fruit and vegetables that were all new to her. Nick and Cole gave her a little guidance on the ones that she should try and those to avoid.

She also found some lovely fabrics that she indulged in. Mordred had already instructed her in the use of the clothing fabricator when she had needed to make a repair in her day suit. It literally sealed the seams instead of sewing them. She knew enough about clothing to get what she wanted out of this. There was a soft fabric that offered support and conformed to her body’s shape and had the feel of fine silk. It was recommended for undergarments, sleepwear or fine clothing. Since bio-fabrics pulled moisture and heat away from the body, old-fashioned undergarments were a thing of the past.

Andrea, however, missed silky lingerie. She looked forward to some feminine sleepwear.

There was another fabric that looked exactly like raw silk and had the durability of metal and came in deep blue, a blood red and emerald green. She bought some of all three along with a cashmere like fabric in a creamy off-white along with white, pink and black bio-silk.

The end of the cycle came too soon and Cole had all of their purchases sent to the transport.

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They then walked the short distance to the first trader's office. When they were shown in to the office of a trader named Dell Austin, Andrea was impressed with his obvious wealth.

She and Stephen had been wealthy but not rich. He became rich after her death. Dell Austin was *seriously rich*. The clothes he was wearing looked like the richest of the fabrics that she had just examined in the market, those fabrics that she had passed over because of their price.

Andrea had to remove the dark face screen when they came inside and Mr. Austin's eyes widened slightly when he saw her beautiful face.

Cole caught the look and knew that bringing her here was a really bad idea. He decided to introduce her as a crewmember instead of a passenger. Her status could be checked, of course, but not until they had her safely back on board.

"You must be Captain Stuart," Dell said smoothly as he extended his hand.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice," Cole returned as he briefly shook the man's hand. "This is Lt. Ferraro and Ensign Stone from the *Camelot*."

Andrea knew what Cole was doing and agreed silently. This man, for all of his wealth, had taken one look at her and she knew that he had been spawned from the ranks of cheesy agents sliming the streets of Hollywood during her first life.

She nodded and did not step forward. Nick nodded formally and Dell indicated the meeting table next to his expansive cherry desk. The desk reminded her of one she had seen in the Sr. V.P.'s office at the studio. Even in her time it was worth a small fortune.

They sat quickly in the chairs that conformed to their shapes and made them comfortable. Cole started by handing over a data pad containing the lists of refined ore available in their cargo bay.

Dell's eyes took on a look that told her that he was interfacing with his own Computer Control Unit. Within forty-five seconds, Dell turned to Cole and offered, "I can

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take the shipment for a total of five hundred seventy-five thousand and twenty-five legit credits.

Andrea had been working up her own figures based on current market value at Mars Corp and expelled a breath. Dell glanced at her and back at Cole for his answer.

Cole knew the drill and this was only the first pass. He thought that seven hundred fifty thousand LC was closer to what the deal would close at.

"I think nine hundred thousand is a more accurate value for refined ore of this quality."

Dell picked up Cole's pad again, just for show of course: the data already resided in the computer and that's when Andrea noticed his chrono. The setting was as would be expected for a man of his wealth, the face, however, was not. The face was a corporate Mars Corp design that she had learned in her Mars Corp training was only used by officers of the company; life members of the company. Normally the face would have been darkened to blend with metal of the band, creating a bracelet-like effect leaving the design a secret to all. With a Computer Control Unit, chronos were more for show than watches in her time. He had neglected to darken the face.

Then it clicked.

Mars Corp allowed their mining vessels to sell refined ore to the outlying colonies as long as they got a percentage.

The problem was that the traders, or at least this one, worked for Mars Corp. They could pay a significantly lower price for the ore on the pretense that a profit must be made for the transport and sale to Mars Corp or one of their competitors.

In reality, no transport was ever needed since only refined ores could be sold to the colonies and that ore was resold much closer than Mars.

Follow the money trail, she thought. This was strictly against the trade monopoly laws. She had noticed that Mars Corp profit rate was exponentially higher when dealing with the colonies. Transport ships were going out

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to the colonies with what everyone thought was refined ore. It wasn't as much ore as they were selling though.

Mordred, can you hear me?

Yes, Andrea.

Please give me the statistics of the volume of ore sold and transported to the colonies from Mars Corp in the last six months. If statistics are available on Mr. Austin's company, also list all refined ore purchased directly within the colonies.

The details scrolled across her mind's eye and it appeared to balance. Yet she wasn't convinced. If the traders weren't sending back their ore, something else had to be coming here on those transports, something valuable enough to make it worth the trip.

Mordred, list other products produced or distributed by Mars Corp.

More information poured into her head.

Normal items. Everything that would be expected and then *Computer Control Units* clicked in. Mars Corp had invested in CCU, Inc. eleven months ago. These were strictly controlled and registered. The costs for each unit were enormous.

Mordred, list all Computer Control Units currently unaccounted for.

All accounted for.

She paused to think again.

How many units destroyed in the last eleven months due to emotional instability and what percentage does that signify?

One thousand one hundred seventeen destroyed; eleven percent.

What percentage of instability is listed for the previous twelve months?

Zero-point-two percent.

She had her answer and she didn't like it one damn bit. Computer Control Units varied in price starting at ten million and could bring as much as thirty. As she switched her attention back to the table she heard Cole saying, "Seven hundred fifty thousand is really the lowest that we can accept at this time."

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Mordred, please give the Partners this information
She proceeded to detail her theory.

Cole stopped just as he started to say something and paused. He glanced at her and then said to Mr. Austin “Thanks for your time. It appears that we have a small change of plan. If you decide that you can accept our ore at seven hundred fifty thousand LC, please contact me on the *Camelot*.”

As they were leaving, Dell touched Andrea’s arm. She moved back like she had been burned. *How completely rude!* she thought.

“It was really a pleasure meeting you. Maybe you would like to join me for dinner this evening?”

Andrea used her no-bullshit corporate ice voice, “That won’t be possible, Mr. Austin. Thank you for your time.”

“Please call me Dell and give me a call if you would like to have dinner while the *Camelot* is still at Mira. I’m sure that you would enjoy the food,” he gave her a leering smile, “and the company.”

Not a chance in hell asshole, she thought. “Doubtful, Mr. Austin. Good day.”

Cole’s eyes were cold as they walked to the ground transport lines that were like large conveyor belts through major parts of the city. They appeared to be open air but shields protected them from excessive sun and weather.

“If your theory is correct, I can’t believe that someone wouldn’t have noticed this in the last eleven months,” Nick said on the way to the second meeting. “How are we going to know if this other guy is working with the first one?”

“The odds are not good that we will see the face of his chrono, even if he wears one. That was a one in a million chance. But at least now, we’re on alert.”

They stepped into the lobby for the second meeting and were ushered into another very beautiful office. This time a woman turned in the chair and greeted them as

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she got to her feet. Her slender form was clad in expensive clothes and her silky dark hair was held back by a barrette that was studded with very real looking gems to match the colors in her clothes. Although she had an average face, the makeup and clothing made her striking.

“Hello, Cole. Nice to see you again,” she purred.

Cole froze for a second and then walked forward and nodded a little stiffly.

“The director couldn’t be here to greet you and asked me to meet with you.”

Cole cleared his throat and Andrea saw that he was nervous.

This was a new look for Cole.

Hmm, who had she been to him? Andrea wondered.

Before Cole could get his bearings to make the introductions she turned to Nick and Andrea and said, “I’m Bridget Rositti. Nice to meet you Lt. Ferraro, Ensign Stone. A pleasure.”

Andrea locked eyes with Cole.

Rositti couldn’t have been so stupid as to take the information straight from Dell Austin and not check my title, could she? Well, one more thing that was the same about my century as this one is that money’s not always an indicator of intelligence.

They were seated around another table and Cole started the drill. Ms. Rositti offered almost the identical starting bid and went up to the final bid made by Austin. Seeing another trader would not be necessary. They were probably all one and the same.

They excused themselves after about thirty minutes and Andrea was glad to be done with the way she crooned and flirted with Cole. Although Andrea felt some mild jealousy, she was mostly amused by Ms. Rositti’s persistence and Cole’s discomfort.

This is a story that she couldn’t wait to hear. Nick was saying something and she shook her self and started paying attention.

“... gave herself away. Andrea isn’t an Ensign. The only person that met her with that title was Austin.”

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“She’s obviously working with Austin. Let’s get back to *Camelot* and decide how we are going to move forward,” Cole said quietly.

When they reached the transport, Andrea noticed that the packages had been left in the passageway at the entrance and started stowing them for transport. She also noticed a large pallet and a box sitting beside the cargo hatch. Nick and Cole started getting those stowed and locked in place.

Andrea loved the gravitation alignment bars. No more heavy lifting. It made her feel like she should beware of kryptonite.

Nick and Cole joined her and got clearance for launch. There was no perceptible movement and the transport took off and headed for *Camelot*.

Both Nick and Cole were unusually quiet and she left them to their thoughts as she watched the view screen and enjoyed the ride home. It *was* home now. It had only been a few months but it felt like an island in the middle of an ocean. Her island.

The planet had been lovely but so foreign. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had thought that it would be like Earth. It didn’t feel, look or smell like anywhere on Earth.

Andrea finally realized what had been nagging at her. There were no children in the streets; not one. That’s what felt so foreign.

Where were the children?

★ Chapter 10 ★

Mordred started helping with the statistics and more of the facts came to a dim light as they progressed. Of course, no one could prove that this was happening. The chrono could have been a gift; the knowledge of Andrea's title a friendly phone call between competitors.

"How did you know about this?" Cole asked her.

"A feeling. Like he was something you would wipe off the bottom of your shoe."

"A feeling."

"Yes."

Tremaine chimed in, "Like the feeling that you had when the transport core overflow locked?"

"Another one like that, yes."

The three men looked at each other and Nick shrugged. "I logged the high ESP rating in her log when I completed her genetic model. It doesn't always mean anything and no training was available in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries."

"I just get feelings every once and a while. I don't control them and I've learned to trust what I just call *gut instinct*."

Nick shook his head. "Well your *gut instinct* seems to be *dead on* to use one of your more colorful phrases."

Cole contacted Mordred. *Mordred, please initiate training program for Andrea in ESP. Fully test her talents and show her how to control them.*

Acknowledged.

"What I find fascinating is that there are no small traders out there attempting a similar Mars Corp plan.

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Why can't we sell this directly to the colony? Why even go through a trader?" Andrea was thinking in twenty-first century terms.

"It's always been the time constraint. We need to get it sold and on to the next project. It could take weeks, even months to sell all of the refined ore if we have to sell to a colony," Tremaine answered.

"Is there a rule that we can't take a little more time?"

Cole jumped into the conversation.

"I see where you're going with this—if the colony buys this directly from us, they would be paying less than Mars Corp prices and that's good for them. The problem is that a negotiation with a colony is complicated and none of us are trained to deal with the bureaucracy."

"Yeah, but I am. Just try running the finances on a major motion picture," she said a trifle sarcastically. "Think it through, Cole. A healthy return now is if we get double what you expected. When you have unrefined ore, it doesn't make as much sense to spend the time to dicker and with Mars Corp, there's not much dickering available. When you have the amount of refined product that you have on board, it becomes a new ball game," Andrea countered.

She looked at them and realized that they were all interfacing with Mordred.

Damn, she thought, I'm going to have to quit using Stone-isms when I'm in a hurry!

Nick was always the voice of caution. "But if Mars Corp is really playing both sides, they won't be happy if we cut them out since their percentage will be based on the highest trader bid."

Cole made up his mind. "I think we should give the colony a shot and see what happens. Agreed?"

They all nodded.

"I also think that Andrea has earned her place as a full Partner for this exchange." Nick and Tremaine wholeheartedly agreed.

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Later, as Cole and Andrea were pouring over a few sales strategies, Andrea decided to just ask the question that had been haunting her.

"So . . . Ms. Rositti seemed to know you quite well. There's nothing that will come back to haunt us, right?"

Surprised, he looked up from the screen. "Do you mean, is she going to be uncomfortably in our way while we are trying to cut her out of the deal?"

She nodded.

"I shared her bed once. Not necessarily memorable but that was a rather hard time in my life. She attempted to continue the friendship. I declined."

"She wanted a relationship?"

"A child. She has already tried to reconnect but I told her that I was involved."

"With whom?" she smirked.

"Mordred, of course. He has the VidSim back up and running."

She frowned, a little confused. "That was a significant investment." She was wondering why they had opted for the VidSim repair and was feeling particularly insecure.

His serious face broke just a little and then he gave in to raucous laughter. "Got you!"

Andrea gave an embarrassed laugh. "I must be pretty transparent."

"We replaced the regen bath fluid but postponed the VidSim repairs."

"Only postponed?"

His face took on a more serious look. "Until you decide to head back to Earth."

"If I head back. The jury is still out on that one, Cole. I'm in no hurry to rush back and see for myself the changes that Mordred has detailed in my training. The Earth that I left is no longer there. They might have corrected the damage done centuries ago with bio weapons, but it will never be the same. Tahoe, Banff, the giant redwoods and Yosemite should remain in my memory as they were when I left them six hundred forty-one years ago. The worst part is that I know that if I did go to Earth, I would be drawn to those places like a moth

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to a flame and it would only end in disappointment. I feel like I need time to belong in this era before I face going back to Earth.” Her face had taken on a sad, distant look and it tugged at Cole’s heart.

“Great then . . . that means that I can save a little more money on this trip and the repair costs will be absorbed by Mars Corp once we are in Mars Space Dock.”

It got the desired result when she grinned and punched his shoulder.

He laughed and pulled her down on his lap.

“I’m glad you’re postponing your return to Earth for more personal reasons.”

His hand cupped her chin and he covered her mouth with his. Andrea immediately felt her body molding against him and moaned when his hand cupped her breast, finding her nipples already taut. His kisses deepened and she welcomed his searching tongue. She wanted to rip their clothes from their bodies and let her passion rule her.

Where Nick would have indulged her, even joined her, Cole teased her and made her wait for her release. Cole stood, still holding her in his arms, and carried her to the bed.

Andrea thought that she would go mad before their clothes were gone and she could feel his skin against hers. Then, there was no holding her back. She pushed him down and mounted him, enjoying the deliciousness as she took him inside her.

Reality dimmed and her body took over. There was only his body and hers and the spasms of pleasure that washed over them.

After a while, laying in the tangled, damp sheets Cole trailed his lips against her temple. “You like being in control, don’t you?”

She nuzzled his neck, smelling the sweet sweat on his skin and smiled. “You were just taking a little too much time getting around to where I wanted you.”

He arched his eyebrows at her. “Next time, just warn me and I’ll try to keep up.”

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She grinned wickedly. "Baby, I came with a warning label. It must have been damaged on the data cube. By the way," she paused and trailed her hand down his chest "I'm not quite done."

His breath caught and then he released the breath with a low moan. "God, I hope not."

So Cole opened negotiations for their ore with the Director of Industrial Relations for Mira but he was constantly frustrated by the bureaucracy. Cole did not have the training or the patience in the give and take of negotiations.

Andrea took over when she realized that, again, her corporate background made her the more qualified negotiator. Once she stepped in, the pace quickened dramatically. Within a week a price of two-point-one million LC had been agreed and set for the refined and crystalline ore provided Mira would transport the cargo to the surface.

The mood was jubilant.

Andrea decided that this was a great excuse for a party. The fresh vegetables and fruit were her first *real* food since waking up in med bay. She had been experimenting with several of the vegetables and had perfected some rather tasty dishes. Although nothing tasted familiar, it all was fresh and juicy and nothing like the ship's food.

She had also taken the opportunity to use the fabric from Mira. She created some everyday pullover tops and fitted pants as well as one simple, yet elegant black dress. Every woman needed the perfect black dress!

The inventor of the clothing fabricator had her undying love. The seams magically sealed leaving no lines or lumps. Where she would have put zippers or buttons, a separate control prepared two surfaces that sealed together when pressed, similar to Velcro, but without the bulk and noise. This made the slacks fit like a glove.

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It was amazing how something new and beautiful to wear could make her feel beautiful.

She wore a soft cream tunic and dark blue fitted pants to their party and saw the look on all three of their faces before they even got the chance to compliment her on how lovely she looked. She felt radiant.

Mordred, I think we need music. Can you play something light and happy?

Music filled the common room. Mordred had chosen classical music and the violins were soft and provided background for their plans.

The two final trading bids had been registered at six hundred ninety thousand five hundred LC. That was the basis for the forty percent commission to be paid to Mars Corp. The contract allowed for crews to sell the product at retail, but no one ever did because of the time constraints. Also, only refined ore could be sold at retail. This left them with a profit of one billion, eight hundred twenty-three thousand LC for the partnership after costs. With the savings from the last contract, they would have a ship by the end of this contract period!

Cole stood up and pulled her into his arms. "Show us how they danced in the twenty-first century."

She laughed as she gave him a brief lesson. She caught them looking at each other. "What's with the look, guys?"

"People danced this way with each other in public?"

"Yep. Even people who were strangers did this in public."

They all shook their heads. Cole smiled down at her. "Well, I'm enjoying it immensely."

They started to sway to the music. They all danced to songs that she knew and ones she had never heard. She had to learn to move to their dance steps and showed them more of hers.

It didn't hurt that Tremaine had ordered up a case of Mirian wine, which was light and dry and perfect with the food. She still missed meat but didn't mention this again after a horrified look from Nick when she had first asked for it.

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Nick was holding her as the music changed. A soft, sexy saxophone from Richard Elliott filled the room. "God, I love this. I thought Mordred didn't have this on file."

I located a copy during contact with Mira.

She smiled. She had four men looking after her.

Thank you, Mordred. I can't tell you how much this means to me. That was incredibly thoughtful.

She was swaying in Nick's arms and pulled him tighter against her. As the song came to an end, Cole stepped up behind her and cut in. "I have to go up and take over the bridge. We can't leave Mordred in control of everything." He kissed her softly. "You've shaken up the Partners but I wouldn't want to do it without you."

"Thank you for inviting me in."

He left and Nick noticed Tremaine starting to nod and gave him a nudge.

"Sorry, with the shift change yesterday, I didn't get any sleep."

"Your Mirian wine might be some of your problem," Nick laughed.

Tremaine ducked his head to hide an embarrassed smile. "Right. Well, I'm off to get some sleep."

Nick helped Andrea store the leftovers and put the dishes in the sonic bin in comfortable silence with another soft jazz song playing in the background.

"I like your music," he looked into her eyes, "it's very sensual."

She stared up into those golden brown eyes. "Show me."

His eyes never left hers as he reached out, finding the opening to her sweater and sliding his hand slowly down the front, trailing his fingers against her skin. His hands were warm against her skin as they pushed the fabric back and off her shoulders and then pulled her slowly against him.

He finally lowered his lips to hers and they moved lightly over hers and then became more insistent as she returned the embrace. His voice was soft and low. "Sometimes I look at you working, eating and just doing

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innocuous things and all I can think of is being inside of you. I just want to drag you away anywhere private and take you until we can't move."

"Well, I never want to be accused of holding you back. Next time, please go right ahead."

He groaned again and she felt him get even harder against her. She pushed at his clothes as he did with hers until there was finally no barriers between them. For the first time, Nick took her with rough abandon that she returned.

Several times they fought for the top position, finally Nick won as he held her below him and let the passion take control. She met each stoke with equal passion and when they both cried out, Nick collapsed on top of her, exhausted. When the gasps subsided Nick flopped beside her on the sofa. "Baby, I'm so sorry. I completely lost control."

She gave him a soft smile. "That's what it's all about, hon. I'm trying to teach you to let go and you are learning at light speed."

"Hon?"

"Short for honey. Another term of endearment."

His eyes were closed. "Hmm. That sounds nice."

She watched him for a minute and realized that he was out like a light. She grinned. *I guess I still have my touch*, she thought to herself.

Mordred watched Andrea interact with the crew. Andrea had expressed genuine appreciation for the music that he had located on Mira. The stress level had gone down significantly and efficiency was up. He had also logged the conversation between Andrea and Tremaine on the bridge and the current relationship existing between Andrea, Nick and especially Tremaine.

After verifying the penalties the law exacted for Andrea's actions, Mordred took the first independent action of his existence and deleted those logs.

★ Chapter 11 ★

Everything was so perfect that Andrea just knew something bad had to happen—a little gut instinct and a lot of common sense told her so. The call came when she was overseeing the final transport docking. An E-sharp bell.

Andrea, please report to the bridge for a real-time communication from Earth.

On my way. Please ask Tremaine to come down to the cargo bay and take over.

Nick is currently on his way to you for duty change.

Nick walked up behind her and casually ran his hand down her arm. “It looks like someone needs you on the bridge. I’ll take over for now.”

“They should be out of here in five minutes. Then we can lock the doors back down.”

When she walked onto the bridge, both Cole and Tremaine were watching her like she had something on her face.

“What?” she said with exasperation.

“Real time communications are expensive. Now *I* have a bad feeling,” Cole was frowning.

“Join the club. Well, let’s see what’s up.”

Mordred, initiate communication.

The viewer displayed a logo from Central Planets Bank then morphed to a three-dimensional image of a man in very expensive clothing.

“My name is Aaron Martin. I am the President of Central Planets Bank. Are you Andrea E. Stone?”

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“Yes, I’m Andrea Stone.” His tone of voice made her more than a little paranoid.

“We recently received information about a cryo pod from the regular status report sent to Mars Corp from the *Camelot*. Could you tell me a little more information about yourself, other than what has been downloaded from Computer Control Unit, Mordred?”

Mordred downloaded information to this man? Well, Mordred is the property of Mars Corp and if they had given authorization, there was nothing that I could do.

“I’m assuming that Mars Corp gave you permission to pull this information?”

“Of course. Mars Corp is one of our largest clients and they were happy to cooperate.”

“Can you explain why this information is of any interest to you?” Wealthy or not, she wasn’t going back down.

“Certainly. When CryoTime first started preserving humans, the laws had to be restructured to incorporate escrows for those souls in suspension. The laws were very specific and accounts can only be closed when the subject is proven to be no longer viable for recovery. Since SpaceSleep 1402 was lost in 2020, all escrow accounts for any sleepers contained therein are still open. I must establish that you are in fact, Andrea Elizabeth Stone.”

“I see. This must have been one more of Stephen’s extravagances. What kind of information would prove my identity, other than what you already have? You have my DNA, fingerprints, cortical scan and every other kind of scan done by Lt. Ferraro. What else is there?”

“Obviously, with current medical technology, you could be recreated from a DNA sample but you still wouldn’t be you. Your husband left specific instructions. Descriptions of two incidents that can corroborate your identity.” Mr. Martin looked down like he was checking something. “Please describe the details of your first date and the first vacation you took together.”

Nick had arrived on the bridge and was standing to the side. Andrea noted that this wealthy banker looked

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very uncomfortable with the topic of conversation. She had to smile.

Stephen had picked two times that they had been hiding from the world. They both knew, without saying, that if someone knew about them, they were somehow diminished. Neither of them had ever discussed either experience with anyone else. She swallowed hard. Talking about them now, so clinically, with a total stranger made Stephen seem somehow just *wrong*.

"These are very private things, Mr. Martin. I'm not sure that I feel at all comfortable discussing them with a total stranger."

"Agreed, Ms. Stone. Unfortunately, Mr. Stone left very specific instructions. I can do nothing to alter the circumstances."

Andrea paused and nodded. Nick had told her how fortunate she was not to have significant memory damage, she didn't realize until right now just how fortunate.

"Fine. I was assigned to work on one of Stephen's first films in Alberta, Canada. At the end of the third shooting week, he called my cell phone while I was on my way back to the hotel and asked if I would like to drive to Drumheller on Sunday. He explained that he had called the cell because he didn't want to disturb me in the office. We drove up Sunday morning and toured the dinosaur digs."

"That correlates with the first question."

She swallowed and continued, "On the first holiday that fell during filming, Stephen had rented a house in a forest by Banff. We drove up early Saturday morning to spend our three-day weekend exploring the forest. It ended up raining most of the weekend so we stayed in and enjoyed food, music and a warm fireplace."

She stopped and looked Mr. Martin in the eye. "Is that what you needed?"

"One more detail, Ms. Stone. Was there a further memorable event during your trip to Banff?"

She tilted her head a moment and thought back—way back. She smiled again. "Stephen had prepared a tray

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with exquisite fruit and cheese.” She paused, a sad smile touching her face. He had made it ready for what he called *fortification*.

Andrea continued, “What he didn’t know is that I am allergic to strawberries. The fruit had been sliced and in the semi-darkness I didn’t notice that he was feeding me a strawberry until I tasted it. Even though I spit it out, I had horrible hives for the rest of the weekend.”

Mr. Martin appeared both glad and sad in the same moment.

“Ms. Stone, you have answered the questions as they have been documented and I am convinced of your identity. The terms of the agreement have been met and the funds are at this moment transferred into your name. I hope that you will continue to allow Central Planets Bank to serve you. There are several financial specialists that can help you decide what to do with your resources. Those have been downloaded to Mordred, with complete backgrounds. You should select a minimum of four to help you with the initial transfers. I have transferred a sum of ten and one-half million MLC into a liquid account for your immediate needs. That account information as well as a detailed history of your portfolio has been downloaded to Mordred. Please do not hesitate to call me should you have any questions.”

“Of course, Mr. Martin. Thank you for your time.” His image disappeared from the viewer.

Andrea stood in stunned silence as no one on the bridge spoke.

She cleared her throat and asked aloud, “Mordred, please list the totals of the accounts transferred into my name on the view screen.”

Mordred started the list slowly scrolling. There were liquid as well as stock investments. The list included a number of Mars Corp stock alone that was staggering. When the list finally came to an end, her total net worth had more zeros than she could count.

One thing that Andrea understood was money. There were varying degrees of wealth. The first and second levels came with their own problems but after that, the

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problems almost outnumbered the advantages. This kind of money would make her a target of massive proportions. Why couldn't it have been just the ten and one-half million? Enough to be fabulously comfortable.

Nick had walked in at the end of the conversation and was staring at the view screen with the rest of them.

Finally, he broke the silence. "Mega Credits. God, you could buy your own planet for that kind of money."

The moment that he spoke an idea bloomed in her head.

"Not *buy*, Nick, but maybe *free* one."

Nick frowned. "I don't think I like the sound of that."

"Andrea, what are you thinking?" Tremaine asked quietly.

Mordred, please total the outstanding debt of the Mars population to Mars Corp.

Four hundred seventy two trillion MLC owed by colonists, nine hundred seventy-nine trillion MLC in corporate loans, and eight hundred seventy-three trillion MLC in Mars Corp licenses.

What is the cost of all outstanding GenEng licenses?

One hundred one Trillion LC.

And the current value of my Mars Corp stock?

Five hundred seventy-seven Zillion MLC.

Transfer all of this information to the screen.

She indicated the screen.

"This represents only a fraction of my total wealth. I can unload the Mars Corp stock and use that to buy up all of the Martian contracts as well as ownership of each GenEng."

"And then what, Andrea? Why would you want to own a planet and its people as well as every *slave* as you call them?" As the words were coming out of Tremaine's mouth he realized what she was planning. "No! They'll kill you before you ever get the chance. You can't mess with people like these. There are a million ways to kill someone in space or on the ground. They only need one. Please don't do this, Andrea."

Cole had been quiet up until now but he finally spoke up. "Mars Corp bought their own stock with your money

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because they never thought that you would come to claim it. They then used your money to continue their growth. It was like having a five hundred seventy-seven zillion MLC loan that they never had to pay back. Regardless of what she does now, they're already going to kill her, Tremaine. They can control an estate—they can't control Andrea.”

“Mars Corp will not be the only ones trying to kill me. Money can't buy friends but it does buy enemies. There are a lot of people that have been using that money for a long time. They won't want to give it up now,” she said in a sad voice. So much for her little paradise. Now, she was genuinely frightened. “The only person I can even partially trust is the banker. He has a vested interest in keeping me happy and my money in his bank.”

Andrea continued in a stronger voice, “Well, the first thing that we have to do is get some weaponry around us and a security force that can be trusted. We can buy the fastest, most up to date ship on the market or a whole fleet of war ships.”

She paused as she looked at the men around her. “I'm hesitating to unload the Mars Corp stock until I see what my arrival does to the market. It also could come in handy to own that much of an enemy. You're my Partners and you have responsibilities as well. Can we split up the research; get this going as soon as possible?”

“Wait a minute,” Cole jumped in, “we don't expect you to take us on as Partners, Andrea. We invited you into our partnership for the remaining term but that doesn't mean that we have any right to your money.”

“No, that's true. But I want you all to be my Partners. I need all of you, Cole. You invited me to share in your profits . . . that tells me that money is not the most important thing in your lives. You three are all that I have in my new life. I can trust you and I know that you genuinely care about my well-being, you've proven that! Anyone I meet from now on can never be trusted. Their intentions will always be in question. The four of us and Mordred can handle this as a team.” Then it dawned on her. “That is, if you want to be my Partners?”

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Nick came up behind her and slid his arms around her in his familiar way. He buried his face in her neck and said in a soft, low voice, "What would you like for me to do?"

She turned and threw her arms around his neck and hugged him to her with tears in her eyes. Nick always knew the right thing to say.

Tremaine chimed in, "Okay, Andrea. I'll take care of finding the war ships and crew. If you can buy GenEng licenses and let them know that they are to be handed their papers, I know a group of guys that would die for you."

"That's the point, Tremaine. I don't want anyone to die. We also can't let them know right up front what we're going to do. Let's plan this carefully and keep this between us."

"The first thing we need to do is to buy the ship. We need to buy *Camelot* right away to prevent Mordred from passing any additional information he's required to do so during status reports," Cole interjected. "The current market value is around twenty-five million LC. Mordred will be an additional twelve million."

Mordred, do you wish to stay with us?

Yes, Andrea. Thank you for asking.

"Then let's get started. We have a planet to free."

★ Chapter 12 ★

Mordred confirmed what Andrea already knew. She was the wealthiest single person in the known galaxy.

She intended to change that quickly. The first thing that happened was the notification to create a new corporation for the partnership. She chose a name—“Rising Phoenix Partners”—and registered the new company to do business with all colonies.

The second item was a little harder to accomplish. Mars Corp had already determined that she had to be handled swiftly. They didn’t want to give up control of Mordred since they knew that he had information that could help them to get to her. She pulled her first favor from Mr. Martin at the bank. He helped to convince Mars Corp that, being their largest single stockholder, she could take the ship as a base of operations and not pay them one LC for it. They reluctantly agreed.

Then Tremaine found out that a base in the next system was building three Universe-class war ships that had been scheduled for Earth transport last month. The problem was that the funding had been canceled without notice. The Earthers decided that they no longer wanted to pay for war ships when there hadn’t been any need for them in five decades. Earth central had forfeited a huge deposit leaving a balance of three hundred eighty-two million due on the ships. They would accept the balance due as payment in full if the funds were transferred in the next two solar Earth days.

Tremaine had also purchased the licenses of ninety-two GenEng persons qualified to operate and maintain

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the ships. They were on their way to join them on the first space fold transport available.

E-sharp interrupted Andrea as she was researching her portfolio.

Andrea, Tremaine just received a very important real-time communication from Mars Corp. You must join your Partners on the bridge.

What is it, Mordred?

It would be much more appropriate if you ask Tremaine.

Puzzled and very concerned, Andrea bolted from her quarters. As she entered the bridge, she could have cut the tension with a knife.

“What’s going on, Tremaine?”

He looked up, and when he met her eyes she saw raw emotion in his eyes for the first time. Tremaine held his silence and swallowed hard.

Andrea’s patience was wearing thin. She looked over at Nick, who wouldn’t meet her eyes, and finally Cole.

“Cole, maybe you can tell me what the hell is going on?”

His voice was hard and angry. “Mars Corp has given Tremaine new orders and has transferred his contract to another miner.”

Andrea was confused. “I thought that he had signed on to *Camelot* for a full term. How can they do this?”

“They own me, Andrea. I told you that. *Camelot* is no longer categorized as a mining vessel and my contract was invalidated on that basis.”

“We bought out the other contracts, why can’t we buy out yours?” Andrea was starting to get panicked.

Cole was pacing, venting his anger in his movements. “They are going to get to you in any way that they can, Andrea. They can’t get to me and once we paid off Nick’s debt, they couldn’t touch him. Tremaine was their final target and not only do they have the legal right to assign him elsewhere, they could blast him out an airlock and no one would blink.”

“There has to be something . . .” Andrea’s voice had taken on a pleading tone.

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"Not this time, Andrea," Tremaine was traumatized. "I can't be one of your new Martians."

"Can't?" She shook her head. Andrea flashed back to all of the times that someone had told her, *it can't be done*, and gritted her teeth.

Can't had always been a word that had gotten her into trouble. She hated that word. All it said to her was that someone wasn't willing to see life from any perspective other than their own. To her it screamed selfishness, laziness and incompetence. She believed there was always a way if everyone was willing to work hard enough, use initiative and keep an open mind. Her frustration and fear turned to anger. She looked at Tremaine with fury pouring out of her eyes.

"I can't? Watch me! Don't you dare give up! This is not the first, nor will it be the last time, that they are throwing down the glove and you had better unlearn that bullshit about being owned. If you want to *be* free, then *think* free. We are going to make calls and get options. It's not over until you let it be over."

"Andrea, you don't know what you're saying . . ."

"Don't you patronize me, Tremaine! I know exactly what I'm saying. Possession is nine-tenths of the law and you aren't going anywhere even if I have to hog-tie you myself!"

All three of the men looked vaguely confused. She realized that they had missed her reference but refused to clarify. Better he didn't see it coming, if it came to that. At least they understood that the fight wasn't over.

Cole finally gave a slight nod. "We will look for other options." He glanced around and met Andrea's eyes. "But you have to face the fact that we may not be able to get Tremaine's contract."

"I will never face that fact, Cole. Never. Tremaine will be free!" With that she turned and strode from the bridge without a backward glance.

Nick had been silent throughout the entire encounter. Finally, he lifted his eyes to theirs. "We better find a way around this because I'm not going to be in the room if she hears otherwise."

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Tremaine gave them a weak smile and a slight shake of his head. “Okay, but I still want to know is what a *glove* and a *hog* have to do with this?”

They all shrugged.

A cycle later when Mordred contacted them with a translation of a *glove* and a *hog*, Tremaine finally laughed out loud. Just let her try!

As Andrea headed back to her console, a lump formed in her throat. She wasn’t sure she could face a future without Tremaine—especially knowing that Mars Corp would make his life hell. If they let him live at all.

Andrea and Mordred spent the next cycles pouring through the history of her bank accounts.

Stephen had initially invested two hundred fifty thousand dollars upon her *death* and freezing. When he remarried, he added five hundred thousand dollars to that figure. By the time he was remarried, her station had been lost and he had no reason to believe that she would ever be recovered.

Stephen had always been a dreamer, though, and put money aside for her anyway. Stephen’s investors had done a great job while he was alive. The two deposits had netted almost seventeen million dollars by 2064. By 2164 her worth broke into the trillions and by 2324 the base value had been converted to LC and she was already in mega credits. These accounts had been, for the most part, very poorly managed since Stephen’s death but she still had access to more money than she could even imagine.

There had been a total breakdown from 2230-2247. The accounts had been frozen during the entire period due to economic chaos on earth. Assets had been transferred into off-planet investments or precious metals and gems and stockpiled.

After that period her rate of increase stayed at an even five percent, which wasn’t realistic. There should be variances from year to year based on the economy and

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investments. Mordred did a little more investigation and found that a clause in the management contract specified that a minimum of five percent return for each year must be shown to continue portfolio management contracts for the following year unless substantial economic degradation is documented for that year. Other than the years listed, all returns were an even five percent.

It looked like someone had been taking advantage of this account for quite some time. The overhead charges for management exceeded what she knew to be reasonable. *Wasn't it amazing that the balance of the investments over five percent were always exactly the bank's fee?*

Mordred, place a real-time call to Mr. Martin, please.

She continued to review the material for the next ten minutes before she heard the E-sharp.

Open communication.

"Hello, Ms. Stone. I understand that you have some questions regarding your account," he smiled. "How can I be of service?"

She detailed her concerns about the too consistent increase and the offsetting bank fees.

"Please understand, Ms. Stone that for all of the years where the interest dipped below the contracted rate, the bank waived the fee and offset your losses in order to maintain your account contract. Of course there would be years where we made up the deficit. It's only fair banking practice."

But he underestimated Andrea, not only because she was from a time so long ago that he couldn't really grasp it, but because she was a beautiful woman. He assumed that Mordred had run the calculations for her and told her what to say. It never occurred to him that she knew as much, or more, about finance than he did.

Andrea replied calmly with a small shark grin, "There were a total of forty-three years where my interest rate dropped below the five percent mark. During those years, substantial investments were made in rather dicey stocks. The average stock increase for an investor with

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my portfolio during thirty-seven of those years was greater than seven percent. I submit, Mr. Martin, that it is only fair that the bank offset my losses in order to keep my account. I further submit that draining excess management fees during the other years was not only bad practice but unethical under the circumstances.”

Andrea stared at his three-dimensional image and waited. After a long minute he realized that she was not going to say anything else.

“Ms. Stone, I will do a complete analysis of your account myself. I assure you that we can come to an agreement that will allay your concerns.”

“You have twenty-five cycles, Mr. Martin. After that I’m afraid that I will be seeking not only a new management company, but also a new bank. If I need to do that, this information will also be turned over to the Galactic Banking Court to see what they think of your management tactics.”

Andrea already knew that she had him by his furlined, golden balls. If she pulled only half of the liquid funds alone, the bank would collapse. They had never counted on her coming back to life and had been using Stephen’s money to live like kings for generations.

Now she saw some of the grit that must have gotten him to the top. He straightened in his chair and looked her in the eye. “I see it’s time to be more candid.”

“That would be appreciated,” she returned serenely.

“You and I both know that after two hundred years, no one dreamed that you would come to collect on these accounts. Even if you had been recovered, the questions that you had to answer dictated that you would have no memory loss. Not only had no one ever been recovered after that period, memory loss occurs even after shorter periods. We have never felt that we were damaging anyone with the use of your funds. Over the years, you have funded breakthrough medical research, the rebuilding of war-torn cities and the development of major colonies. I agree that we have invested in ventures that were on the cutting edge and sometimes that cut went the other way. Our philosophy has always been

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that investing in people which, although not immediately profitable, does pay back in the long run. We guaranteed the contractual figure and the balance has been going into a fund that has been supporting these ventures as well as a few that cause the governments of several worlds to put personal death contracts out on bank officers. I, like the presidents before me, have taken the responsibility of your portfolio very seriously. In 2229 when the economic crash destroyed the trade balance and chaos ensued, the bank adopted a secret policy to use this money to help the human population in any way we could. We needed to stabilize the population before we could stabilize the economy. People worry about food, water and shelter before they can think about rebuilding. Our bank will do everything in its power to repay the funds transferred from your accounts, but only a fraction could ever be returned. I'm telling you this now, knowing that my life is in your hands."

She stared at him in shock. She had never suspected that the money was filtered from the account to do good—she just automatically assumed that everyone was getting rich.

"I owe you my deepest apology, Mr. Martin. If, in fact, you have used the funds for these purposes, I applaud your support of these causes. We both know that I have more money than I can spend in a lifetime, so I'm less concerned about repayment at this time than other, more personal issues."

She saw him visibly relax.

"Now that I understand a little of your politics, please tell me how you feel about Mars Corp and the Martian people."

He looked down for a moment and when he looked back up, his eyes were on fire.

"Several years ago, a new investment advisor bought a huge bank of stock for your portfolio. The purchase was not properly authorized by management staff, and he was terminated. We later found that he worked for Mars Corp. Since the return on investment far exceeded your minimum requirements, we left things alone and

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started an investigation. Twelve of those investigators have turned up dead or missing. We have obtained information that leads us to believe that Mars Corp has their hand in about everything, and that the loyalty of their employees is guaranteed by the knowledge that rather brief retirements are terminated in unnatural deaths.”

He cleared his throat and reached for a drink of something yellow.

“In my opinion, the people of Mars are being held in servitude by charging unwarranted costs back to the government of Mars. They are outside of our control and we have been able to do little to help them.”

“Mr. Martin, can you please transfer all information regarding the investments made by your bank on my behalf to Mordred.”

“Yes” he said cautiously.

“I assume the information proving your culpability will be included?”

He sat up very straight and his eyes had a defeated look before they took on that gaze that told her he was speaking with his Computer Control Unit. “Transferring now.”

Information received and verified.

“I think it’s time that you call me Andrea. May I call you Aaron?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, Aaron, the transfer of that information is what I call old fashioned insurance. I’m now going to give you some information that can put my life in even greater danger than it already is—if that is even a vague possibility. Since we are going to be Partners, let’s go forward with truth. It may make us both feel a little more comfortable knowing that we have damaging information on each other.”

To say that he was surprised would have been an understatement.

“I am glad that you want to continue our partnership, Andrea, and I also agree that truth always makes for better Partners.”

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She outlined her plan to his utter amazement. "Further, before I announce that I now own Mars and the GenEng licenses, I want you to find the least desirable companies you know to unload my Mars Corp stock to—I do not want good people to be hurt by this! I know that this is going to be a hard job for you considering the balance of the stock. I suggest that you target the rich traders first. See how fast they jump on available Mars Corp stock. Advise your respected friends to dump theirs, too. Try to get them to sell theirs as soon as possible without upsetting the stock value so that it doesn't coincide with my sale. It might not be healthy for them if someone found out they had foreknowledge. When you have this in place, call me so that I can start with the next phase. I will also need funds transferred in the following amounts. Use my liquid funds first and let's take a look at how we can carefully untangle me from investments without upsetting the market. Your bank may also want to set up a banking center on Mars. I have a feeling that there will be a need for some healthy business loans over the next few years."

Mordred, please transfer the funds request.

Funds transfer list transferred.

Mr. Martin smiled for the first time. "You are quite an amazing woman and a kindred spirit. I'm sure that you will be pleased with the work that we have done on your behalf and I'm glad to formally welcome you to the Central Earth Banks Circle. I would die before any of this information was released into dangerous hands."

"I hope it doesn't come to that Aaron. Now, I need your help with another, actually far more important issue."

"My time is yours."

"Mars Corp will not release Tremaine's contract. We have offered five times the value and they say that he is not for sale at any price."

"It sounds like we need some leverage."

"I may have some, but it's all complete supposition." She outlined what she thought was going on with the Computer Control Units.

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"If another major stockholder in CCU, Inc. isn't involved in the scam, they would be very interested to learn why profitability has dropped. It doesn't make sense that the rate that the units are *being destroyed* hasn't raised red flags somewhere. Even if the major stockholders are in on this, someone has to be losing and losing big. There also has to be a government agency out there that is ignorant or uninformed. This information has to be worth something to someone out there. I need your help to find out who that person is and then I want them to get Tremaine out of Mars Corps. Make whatever funds available to them to make it happen, but make it happen."

Aaron looked daunted. "This will take some time if it's possible at all—but we'll start calling in our favors."

"All of them. I will never let Tremaine go back to them. I want him free! Let me know when you are ready."

They disconnected and she was exhausted. Every muscle in her back felt like a piano cord. She reached up to massage her neck and was startled when warm hands covered hers.

"It's just me," Nick said softly. "You were amazing just then."

"How long have you been here?"

"Since you threatened to pull your account. Are you really okay with all of your money they spent over the years?" he continued to deeply massage her stiff neck and shoulders.

"What are we going to do with it anyway? We already have more money between the four of us than is healthy if we plan on living more than two weeks."

He pulled her up and over to the bed and absently pulled her top over her head.

"Mordred left out something that you might want to check." He directed her onto the bed and started running his strong hands down her back. His massage technique was improving.

"What's that?" she murmured.

"You will also have to buy all Mars Corp owned land, buildings and companies on the planet if you really want

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the snake out of the nest entirely. I think you probably do, right?"

"Right! How much?"

"Seven hundred ninety-two trillion."

"Ouch."

He stopped. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, ouch to the amount. But I don't know why I should be concerned. I can't think of anything else to spend it on."

Nick stood, pulled off his clothes and lay back down next to her. He was still preoccupied and even though his hand still traveled up and down her back, he wasn't mentally there with her.

"I have another thing to tell you that, if it was known, could get us all killed."

She turned over and faced him in surprise. "What's one more when we already have a bulls-eye on the each of our backs?"

He pulled her close and she nestled her face against his chest. "We're in this together Nick. Tell me."

"Some time back I was playing with Tremaine's genetic model and I found the correction for the GenEng sterility."

She thought of Tremaine as a father and was overjoyed. "That's incredible! He will be so excited!"

Then she saw the look on Nick's face and realized that there would be a new group of bigots out there hunting for them with blood in their eyes.

"Don't let anyone know until Tremaine is safely out of their hands." She shook her head in disgust. "It will never change. The only thing that has changed in over six hundred years is the people being hated. There always has to be some group to be bad so someone else can be good." She just shook her head in defeat.

"You are going to do great things to change that, Andrea. We are all going to help you. And we'll find a way to get Tremaine's contract." He pulled her closer as his hands continued to relax her.

"That's the point Nick. It never will really change because human nature won't change. If it hasn't

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changed in the last six hundred years, what hope do they have now?"

She told him about the old adage of the scorpion that asks the turtle for a ride on his back across a river. The turtle at first declines and says, *You will just sting me and we will drown*. The scorpion convinces the turtle that he wouldn't sting him halfway across the river because then, they would both drown. The turtle agrees but when they were at the midpoint in the river, the scorpion stings the turtle. When the turtle asks, *Why did you sting me? Now we both will drown*, the scorpion answers, *Because it's my nature*.

"I don't know the answer, Andrea. I hope that you're wrong and it is not just our nature and that it's up to people like us to try to change things for the best."

"People like us have been trying to change things for a thousand years." She lifted her head and found his mouth.

The kiss was a long gentle caress. His body finally recognized that she was lying naked against him and responded. He rolled back and pulled her on top of him. Tonight he wanted that woman that he had watched back down one of the most powerful bankers in finance. He wanted her to control her the way he had watched her control Aaron.

It had all been luck and he was feeling very lucky indeed.

★ Chapter 13 ★

While waiting for the ships to arrive, Andrea had done a little more shopping for all of them. Everything had to be done through Mordred. No one left the ship for fear of an assassin in the marketplace. No more jumpsuits or exercise clothes. They were wealthy and had to look the part.

Cole's resemblance to the actor was complete. He was stunning. Nick chose a sedate look more appropriate for a doctor. Tremaine opted for a different look. They had designed new uniforms for the crew of the three ships and since he was going to head the security task force, he decided to wear the uniform. In reality, Tremaine had always worn a uniform and felt out of place in anything else.

It was not an easy two weeks, however. All four were convinced that sooner or later an attempt would be made on their lives. They had joined Andrea as targets when they signed the incorporation papers. But they couldn't finalize Tremaine's membership in the corporation until he was free of Mars Corp. They had to get Tremaine's contract.

Although Mordred was helping all of the Partners in their new duties, he was also maintaining normal ship management. Since Andrea had been dealing with so much of the corporate management, she was no longer taking care of those mundane repairs and they were starting to cause a few minor problems.

He noticed that the bay doors kept locking and unlocking. With a force field in place, pressure loss

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wasn't a problem, but Mordred notified Tremaine that this was a problem that should be addressed as soon as possible.

Tremaine was on his way to the bay when he ran into Andrea coming from the common room.

She smiled. "Where are you off to?"

"Bay door repairs."

"I'll join you. I'm going crazy from the numbers right now." She turned and walked with him. "Sorry I haven't been more help lately."

"We got used to having you take care of these little things. I think you would say we got spoiled."

She grinned as he opened the inner door to the bay.

Her ESP went off the minute the doors were open. She froze and grabbed Tremaine's arm to prevent him from entering. He took one look at her face and palmed the door closed. "Andrea, what is it?"

"I don't know Tremaine, but it's very, very bad."

Mordred, are you monitoring the bay?

Several of the sensors inside the bay are not responding. I am able to monitor the outer door, the control room and the aft section on the port side.

Please scan for any dangers, including explosives or intruders.

No danger apparent in areas available for scan.

Mordred, can you activate a force field just inside the inner door to protect us.

Yes, a force field has been erected that now extends approximately three meters from the inner door.

Please inform Cole of our status.

Acknowledged. Cole has asked you to wait for entry. He is on his way to the bay.

Will do.

"Andrea, you're sure about this?" Tremaine asked.

"As sure as I can be when I don't know what the problem is."

Cole came tearing around the corner with a personal ED in both hands. He handed one to Tremaine. "Andrea, stay here." He looked at Tremaine. "Let's check it out."

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Tremaine opened the door again. The bay lights came on as programmed. They stepped into the safety area of the force field. Andrea stood in the doorway, frustrated that she couldn't see—or tell—what was wrong.

Cole couldn't find anything that even vaguely looked like a danger. He turned to ask Andrea if she was really sure about this feeling and froze. Just above the door, just above Andrea's head was a med bot. This was not a standard med bot. This one was a military issue seek and destroy. They normally contained a lethal poison and were encoded to search for a particular DNA structure. The perfect killing machine.

Mordred, tell Andrea to step back fast and run.

He watched her eyes as lights on the bot started to activate. She stepped back and bolted down the hall just as the bot dropped from above the door. Cole fired and missed, as did Tremaine. The both took off down the hall, pursuing the bot that was pursuing Andrea. It was gaining on her and Cole couldn't get a shot without hitting her.

Andrea took a chance and looked back to see that the flying metal bug was getting closer and at the rate it was moving, she didn't have time to get a door to close behind her before it would be on her. She was running out of hallway and nothing was magically coming to mind on how she was going to get out of this one.

Andrea, the door to the med bay is open. When you come to the door, enter as quickly as possible and get behind the exam table.

She didn't have the mental breath to reply. She saw the med bay door, dived through and rolled behind the table. There was a loud crash, then blinding light with a wave of searing heat.

You are safe now, Andrea.

Mordred, what happened?

She stood up shakily and stayed standing behind the exam table.

I established a medical confinement field around the bot as it entered the med bay. Unfortunately, the confinement field can't absorb all of the energy

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released when a bot self-destructs. I apologize if you were injured.

I'm fine, Mordred. Thank you.

She looked up as Cole and Tremaine entered the med bay. "What was that thing and how did it get on board Camelot?"

Nick ran in just then from the other direction and saw the blast damage. "What the hell?"

Cole bent down to see if any of the bot remained. "Someone coded a bot with Andrea's DNA. Mordred trapped it in a medical confinement field."

Nick looked over at his specimen table. "Oh, my God, the DNA samples!"

They are unharmed. I established a secondary confinement field around them.

Mordred, why didn't you establish one around Andrea?

There are only two available at the same time in the med bay. Once Andrea was behind the exam table, she was protected from the blast. This was the only way that both she and the samples could be protected.

Cole sputtered. *Mordred, Andrea's life should always take precedence.*

Andrea said out loud, "Thank you, Mordred. That was the perfect choice. You knew that not only was my life important, the samples could prove to be of much more importance in the long run."

Cole rounded on her. "Andrea, he is not programmed to make decisions like that. Your life should always be his first priority."

Nick shook his head. "No, Cole, she's right. *Life* is Mordred's first priority. These samples could mean life for a species."

Andrea nodded solemnly. "I'm fine. Is it possible that any more of those things could be in the bay?"

Tremaine and Cole looked at each other. "We'll check the entire ship out thoroughly. Nick, stay with Andrea and get the med bay repaired." They turned and dashed back down the hall.

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Andrea leaned against the wall behind her and let out a low moan. Nick turned from his samples. He could see from that angle that the fabric from her ankle to her knee was burned away and she had what appeared to be a second degree burn.

"God, Andrea. Why didn't you say something?" He rushed over, grabbed her, and helped her onto the other table.

"If Cole knew that I had been hurt, he would have been even more furious with Mordred. Mordred made the right choice, I was just a little slow getting behind the table."

Nick prepared an application of regen material, attached it over the burn, and gave her a sedative.

She looked up. "How long before I can take this off?"

"Approximately eight to ten cycles."

"Rats. Nick, let's keep this between us. Can you stay with me tonight? Just tell Cole and Tremaine you need some time with me?"

"Andrea, I don't like being dishonest."

"Nick, please. Mordred is special to me. I know the three of you think it's odd but I don't want Cole messing with his programming. Please?"

He nodded. "Then let's get to your quarters before they come back. If they see this dressing, they'll know that you were hiding the injury."

But when she tried to walk, her leg felt like it was exploding. God, it hurt like hell. Nick carried her to the hygiene room, helped her get cleaned up and into a sleep shirt, and then settled her into bed. He sat on the edge of the bed looking down at her.

"Aren't you going to join me?"

"I'm afraid I'll brush up against your leg."

"No, it's okay. I just want you to hold me right now."

He settled in behind her, careful not to touch her leg. She was quiet for a long time and then he realized that she was crying.

"Andrea, what's wrong?"

"Just the *I almost got killed* jitters. I'll be okay in the morning. I just need you with me tonight."

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"It's okay, Baby. I'm here." It was the first time Nick had used a term of endearment and she smiled softly as she let herself relax into his arms and sleep claimed her.

Mordred observed Nick and Andrea in the med bay and as they slept.

She had been hurt! He felt a rush of emotions and identified remorse. Instead of blaming him, Andrea had protected him. She had risked not telling Cole and Tremaine so that questions about faulty programming would not be raised. Andrea had said that he made the right choice and supported him. This caused even more emotions to course through him. Pride, loyalty, gratitude and most importantly, love.

Nick got a severe look from Cole the next morning. Unfortunately, the patch had required ten cycles to heal Andrea's leg and Nick was late for duty.

"Nick, it's not like you to be late for a duty call."

Nick looked up innocently. "Andrea had quite a traumatic day yesterday. She needed comfort."

Cole's eyebrows went up and he gave Nick a really disparaging look.

Nick frowned slightly. "Not that kind of support, Cole. God, she was really upset."

Cole realized that he was overreacting. "Sorry, Nick. I was worried about her, too. Tremaine and I searched the ship but didn't find any other bots. We've repaired all of the sensors, which had been damaged by the bot and fixed the bay door. Mordred has reset the codes for the bay doors. Someone must have had the codes and rigged the doors, got the bot in and counted on the inner door opening when the repair crew came in."

"They wanted her dead?"

"Mars Corp had her DNA. It looks like that's exactly what they wanted."

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Andrea was still lying in bed. She had slept fitfully and recognized that she was still tired and was thinking about calling it a sick day.

Incoming RT call from Mr. Martin.

Andrea threw on a shirt, ran a brush through her hair and dashed to the terminal.

Activate link, Mordred.

Aaron's face filled the screen.

"Hello, Aaron. Please tell me that you have some good news."

"I finally do, Andrea. It has taken some time, but we located someone that found your information valuable—an agency that was created to oversee the laws both protecting the Computer Control Units and protecting the population from rogue CCUs. When confronted with the possibility that there are units out there beyond their control the director, Karen Larsen, started making queries. It all came to a head when an attempt was made on her life and two of her staff were killed. A high-level investigation is underway. Director Larsen has ordered that documentation and other evidence be confiscated. Since Tremaine was the source of the information, his contract was appropriated by the agency. Mars Corp was compensated accordingly. Tremaine's contract is now in the hands of the Circle and will quietly be transferred to your company, Rising Phoenix Partners."

Andrea's eyebrows were up around her hairline. "How did Ms. Larsen convince them Tremaine was the source?"

"She didn't. She doesn't have to prove the source and the law protects anyone providing any information on the perpetration of a crime."

"So it's over? They can't get Tremaine back?"

"They can't get Tremaine back but it's not over. By making him the source, he's now an even bigger target. Watch your backs, Andrea."

She nodded solemnly and told him about the attempt on her life.

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His face took on a grim look. "Take care of yourself and let me know when you need anything further."

"Thanks again, Aaron. We will."

The screen dimmed as the call ended.

Mordred, where is Tremaine?

He is with Nick on the bridge.

Thanks.

The leg that had been burned was a little pale, but it probably wouldn't be noticed, she hoped. She finished getting dressed and made a trip to the hygiene room to brush her teeth; then made her way to the bridge.

Andrea sat quietly watching Tremaine absorb the information.

"I can't believe it. I was so sure that we wouldn't find a way that I couldn't even bring myself to continue to wear my new uniforms." He looked away from the bridge console and met her eyes. "What exactly did you have to do?"

"Aaron took care of it, Tremaine. Where there's a will, there's a way." She gave Tremaine the details so that, if asked, he could relate *his* theory regarding the Computer Control Units.

He finally grinned. "By the way, just how did you think you were going to hog-tie me anyway?"

"I was hoping it wouldn't come to that . . . but I guarantee that you would have found yourself in the cargo bay in restraints. You know," she paused and grinned wickedly, "you might actually have enjoyed it." She laughed at the slightly shocked look on his face and stood to leave the bridge.

Tremaine rose and gathered her against him. "Tell Aaron thanks for me."

She nodded, gave him a final hug, and headed back to her console.

Two weeks later, the ships arrived with their new GenEng crews in place. The security team was now standing by for orders. Cole took over as captain of the

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Phoenix 101. Once Mordred had been transferred to the *101*, they prepared to transport to their new home and leave their old one in the hands of Dell Austin.

They knew that Mars Corp was getting *Camelot* back but Mordred had done a thorough sweep and they were leaving no information behind them. There was also the remaining raw ore that, technically, still was part of their contract. Since Mars Corp would have to transfer the ore back, the profit was lost to the Partners but that was fine with them, considering.

Cole made his final transmission from the *Camelot*. "Mr. Austin, the *Camelot* is now your property. Please come aboard and take command."

They knew that Mars Corp wasn't giving up any time soon so the ease of all of the transfers were making them nervous. They boarded the transport and proceeded to transfer to their new home with all due diligence and caution.

Proximity scans were being run from all of the *Phoenix* ships as well as *Camelot*. *Phoenix 102* was the first one to detect a faster than light transport dropping into real space. Cole knew that no one ever drops into real space this close to a planet because of the gravitational field interference which is unpredictable and can be fatal. The shields generated around the ships can't stand up to the gravitational stress created in fractions of a second when the ship jumps from normal space, through fold and into a gravity well.

This was an old-fashioned kamikaze mission.

"*Phoenix 102* to *Camelot* transport."

"Transport here," Cole was again the icy cold captain that Andrea had first met.

"Spacecraft warping space one hundred thirty-seven mark five. Expected to drop into normal space in forty-five seconds."

"We're two minutes from docking. Suggestions?"

"Swing around under the *Camelot* and get out of our line of fire. Recommend you make best speed to the *101*."

Mordred, give us a view of what's going on, Cole ordered.

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The view screen came alive with a colorful view of space that looked like it was bending the light from the stars behind it.

Andrea watched as a ship appeared in the middle of the screen like a bad nightmare. That was the shortest forty-five seconds of her life. She had studied enough to know that this was the preferred design of a cartel operating on the fringe of colonial space. They were in trouble, big trouble.

Mordred started downloading information to them on the cartel. The cartel was rumored to have dealings with a race of beings that had been strictly quarantined because of their war-like nature. The first people to encounter them were all murdered on the spot. The colonies did not want them to get access to the new space-fold travel until a few more generations had seasoned their temper. They had shown themselves to be perfectly ruthless.

The first beam shot out from the *102*, quickly followed by energy dispersing beams from the *101* and *103*. The shielding for the renegade vessel must have been beefed up for the transfer into space this close to Mira since those shots scanned as having no effect.

The renegade swung around like it knew exactly where the Partners were. Of course it did. Dell had to have let them know the moment the transport left *Camelot*.

"This is going to be close." Cole yelled.

The ED beams never faltered from the renegade and altered position to follow. The *101* was moving toward the transport to cut the distance.

"That pilot is counting on me navigating into the bay while the *101* is still moving. This is going to get hairy," Cole yelled again.

"Bay door approaching in ten seconds," Tremaine said calmly.

Cole centered the transport for entrance into the bay door. The renegade saw the situation and although the transport was shielded by the *101*, they could still fire on the *101*. The *101* bucked slightly as the hull refracted

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the pulse. One moment Andrea was looking through the bay door, the next she was seeing nothing but cold hull.

Cole cursed and swung the transport down to realign with the opening. Unfortunately, he didn't have much room to negotiate and the angle was too steep.

The transport slid in though the opening at a severely steep angle—Cole braked with everything the transport had. All of them would have been tossed around like toys had the automatic seat restrains not reached around them like soft invisible pillows. The transport glanced off the top of the bay opening and skidded the length of the bay. The 101's internal tractor beams had activated when the transport impacted with the opening and that had slowed them considerably. By the time they got it stopped, they knew that the transport would need extensive repairs.

It was quiet in the transport for a good ten seconds before finally Andrea expelled her breath.

"God, Cole. We haven't even take official possession and you've already wrecked the docking bay!"

"It's okay," he grinned. "We have two more." Although he was smiling, she had noticed a slight tremble in his hands. They looked back at the screen, still showing the renegade firing on the 101.

The three beams from the *Phoenix* ships finally started wearing down the renegades' increased shielding. Their weapons and their power suddenly went offline.

The *Phoenix* ships cut power to the ED beams and three seconds later, the renegade ship went up like a roman candle. Fortunately for them they were inside the bay when the ship exploded. Not so fortunate for the *Camelot* and her new owner.

"Mordred, status of the Camelot."

Camelot has sustained several hull breaches. Although life support has been compromised in the aft section, the forward section remains intact. The one life sign on board appears undamaged. The main propulsion system is off-line.

The ship was going to be in space dock for quite some time. It saddened them to think of their old home with

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holes in the shielding and hull but gladdened them to know that Mars Corp was going to be very pissed off—and it wasn't even their fault!

The first thing Andrea noticed upon coming aboard her new home was the air. It smelled more like Earth and less like an industrial park. She hadn't noticed how much it mattered. She also approved of the brighter colors and lighting.

A handsome security officer of African descent stepped forward.

"I am Draman, First Officer of starship *Phoenix 101*," he smartly saluted.

Introductions went around and Draman offered to show them to their quarters and then to take them on a complete tour at their convenience.

"Sorry your ride was a little bumpy. The enemy vessel had a shielding level that made it impervious to ED beams at the level two Universe class warships produce. That makes it state of the art technology that should be easy to trace. It appears that they used a self-destruct device when their weapons and propulsion went offline. They couldn't let us get our hands on the crew or the ship. We got a few scans just prior to the detonation but it will take a while before we can see if we'll learn anything of value. That won't be a trick they'll try again, but I'm sure they have a few more up their sleeves."

Cole and Nick looked at each other and laughed. "You've been talking to Tremaine, I see," Nick accused.

"Of course. Director Tremaine has been sending quite specific details about training and the design of your quarters. He has also included a few colorful sayings that the crew has really taken to. There are a few surprises waiting for you in your quarters for you, by the way."

"Really?" Andrea said drolly as she winked at Tremaine. "What surprises do you have in store for us?"

Draman palmed open a door onto a large central living area facing a dec wall of Mira with doors opening

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off in both directions. There were huge suites for all of them.

“Ms. Stone, your room is this way.” He indicated the last door on the right which initially looked like the other three except that her dec wall was of a window looking out on a real life-size forest and she had a dressing table built into the corner. The surprise was the bathroom.

“Tremaine expressed your desire for a water based shower. Although this posed several problems initially, we found that by reusing the water from the drain pan and running it through a sonic cleaner, we could give you a continuous use shower with a small amount of water. Also, your dec wall will adjust according to the time of day automatically.”

She was so touched that she almost cried. She hugged Tremaine and kissed him on the cheek. “You are a dream!”

Draman watched the interaction and masked his curiosity quickly.

Tremaine smiled. “I can’t take all of the credit. I just helped to design it, Nick was the one that insisted that we find a way to build the shower unit and he designed the dec wall.”

She looked around and saw Nick's mischievous grin. She walked slowly over to him and shook her head. “I knew that you had to be in on this. Thank you, Nick,” and hugged him as well. When her lips were close to his ear she whispered, “You should join me in the initiation of my new shower,” and winked.

This time Draman’s eyebrows arched before he could control himself.

Nick and Tremaine had thought of what she had not. Although every luxury had been seen to, their quarters had to be private. None of the crew would be allowed into their private quarters. The central room gave them a place to plan and work in complete privacy. No one was allowed access. An office and meeting room were separate from their private suites across the passageway.

Draman took them on their tour of the *Phoenix 101* with obvious pride. The propulsion systems were state of

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the art, capable of folding space and transporting instantly to almost any location, barring gravitational instabilities such as wormholes. The drawback to this type of propulsion initially had been the cost per transport. The new engines had worked out some of the major problems but the engine itself was still a major cost component. This was no asteroid mining vessel. Andrea was glad that she had kept up on her training or she wouldn't have understood half of what Draman was showing them.

There was a minimum crew complement of thirty, a maximum of one hundred although they could transport up to seven hundred fifty. The *102* and *103* could each transport over one thousand. The ship was currently running a complement of thirty-eight. The remaining security staff was aboard the other two vessels, which are staffed at minimum compliment.

With a staff that large, the medical facilities were huge also.

Nick had designed and had built an entire Research and Development lab next to the basic med bay that would be required for a ship of war, which was ten times the size of the one he'd had on *Camelot*. Nick's genetic experiments had been transferred to the lab and Andrea knew that it would be a long time before he joined her in the shower. This was his first love—and now there would be no distractions for him. He had even dropped the Lt. as his official title and requested that he be referred to from now on as Doctor Ferraro.

The dining hall was large and off it was a recreation room with an entertainment deck for live performances . The crew quarters were more than adequate for each of the new crewmembers.

Draman proudly stated, "This is a dream ship to serve on and every one of us is excited to be here."

While they were touring, Andrea noticed that a large number of the staff were female and from every ethnic background. She found that encouraging and was looking forward to not being the only female on board. As she met them, one by one she noticed that only one

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crewman seemed to be cold and distant, Officer Lano. When they had completed the tour, Andrea leaned over to Tremaine and whispered, "Please call Lano to the meeting area and join me there."

Tremaine looked concerned but just nodded. Nick dashed to his lab as Cole headed for the bridge. She found her way back to the general meeting room and curled on a sofa waiting for the men to arrive.

It didn't take long and if Lano had been cold before, now he was positively frozen. Not what she would expect from someone glad to be aboard *Phoenix 101*.

"Officer Lano, I do hope that you have settled into your quarters and are comfortable here."

"Very comfortable, Ms. Stone."

"Please, sit down." She indicated a chair.

Lano perched stiffly and waited as she continued, "You say you're comfortable but I can't help notice that you don't *seem* very comfortable."

Tremaine watched in silence.

"It's . . . I am unclear as to my current assignment, Ms. Stone."

She shot Tremaine a questioning look and she could tell that he was accessing Mordred to verify.

"You are a communications officer assigned to this vessel. How can that be unclear?" Tremaine asked in a strong, steady voice.

"Are those my only duties, Sir?"

"Other than the safety of the crew and the officers of Rising Phoenix Partners, yes."

Andrea jumped in. "Lano, let's cut to the chase. What specific duty are you concerned with?"

He stared at her for a moment and then decided to go on. "I was also trained in sexual technique. Am I to be assigned in this capacity as well?"

The relief was immediate and Andrea couldn't help the giggles that poured out of her. Even Tremaine was smiling, although he was also blushing, and she had never seen him do that! Lano was looking very confused.

"Officer Lano, I assure you that your days in that capacity are finished unless, of course, you share your

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techniques with a companion of your own choosing. We do expect you to perform as the communications officer with complete dedication but that is *all* that we require of you.”

For the first time his face relaxed into a smile and she saw the handsome man that must have pleased many women.

“Thank you Ms. Stone for making me feel comfortable here. Everyone else has been so excited and I’ve been only thinking of how different I was from them.”

“Welcome aboard, Officer Lano,” she said as she stood and nodded formally. He nodded in return and departed with a quick, “Good bye, then.”

“Gut instinct again?” Tremaine mused.

“No, this time it was just watching people. His cold professionalism stood out in the crowd. He also looked utterly alone and there’s nothing worse than feeling alone in a crowd. That makes me think of something else, though.”

She looked up at him. “The markings that you all have—those tattoos. Should we ask if anyone wants them removed when we offer them their papers?”

“We can.” He hesitated. “I don’t think that I would. It’s a part of me. Although I have new responsibilities and training, it’s still my history. It would have to be a personal choice.”

“Of course. We can offer that when the time comes.”

They wandered across the passageway into their common room and sat down on one of the sofas. She curled up against him and he gladly pulled her up against his body.

“Why the blush during Lano’s meeting?”

He blushed lightly again. “I should have known that he would assume that he was purchased because of his training. It was for his communication training only. He is the only officer that had ST training and I just didn’t follow through. I blew it because I didn’t think of it and I think I should have.”

“Understandable. We’ve all been busy.” She looked at him meaningfully. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

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"I'm sorry. I've just been so busy lately. It isn't that I haven't thought of you."

She smiled and continued his thought . . . "I just haven't thought of you lately," which caused him to laugh out loud. "It's okay, Tremaine. I just miss the way you make me laugh."

"Well, since Nick won't be leaving the lab for the next ten cycles, how about a test of your new shower?" and teased her lips with his.

"Great plan."

They found their way to her new shower stripping off clothes along the way. He got the water turned on and she adjusted the temperature and stepped in. It was glorious! How she had missed this simple pleasure. They had even installed a jet on both walls.

When Tremaine stepped in, she could tell that he was getting used to the new feeling. She pulled him against her in the center of the shower and slid her arms around his neck. "Just close your eyes and feel the water massaging your back, feel the heat releasing the tension. Tell me you love it."

"I'm beginning to see your point. This does feel relaxing and also kind of sensual. That could be you pressing up against me though," he flashed another famous smile, his eyes dancing.

"This can be kind of tricky," she teased.

He dipped his head and kissed her and pulled her closer as the water ran over them she found that he knew exactly how to make love in a shower.

Mordred settled into his new home and felt a little of what Andrea must have felt upon waking on the *Camelot*. He was now being accessed by many of the crew, both male and female, and he noticed the emotions that always tagged along with the requests. Mordred had been programmed to delete the emotions bundled with these requests, but he felt curious about what the new crew was experiencing.

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He felt great pride and happiness from the crew and an incredible joy which surprised him.

Mordred eavesdropped on conversations and learned that the crew thought of the Partners as their saviors. Most had been in unhappy situations and none had ever served a GenEng before, especially one like Tremaine who looked beyond their basic designations and asked what they were good at and what they *liked*.

There was also some speculation about the real relationship between Tremaine and Andrea.

The crew was very happy indeed. Mordred logged the highest efficiency rating that had ever been logged on a space vessel. It seemed that a happy crew was a more efficient crew and he wondered why happiness had never been addressed in any of the training programs.

★ Chapter 14 ★

E-sharp pulled Andrea from the numbers that she was poring through.

Real-time communication from Mr. Martin.

Initiate communication, Mordred.

Mr. Martin's three-dimensional form filled her new view screen. "Ah, I see that you are settling into quarters more to your station in life."

"More useful to keeping us alive is closer to reality, Aaron."

"Yes. I heard about the attempt. I'm sure that it won't be the last either. They were just testing you I think. The Circle has encountered a clumsy attempt as well and we have beefed up security."

"It is so frightening." She paused. "But you didn't call to commiserate. What's up, Aaron?"

"Everything is ready for the sale of your stock. I have been making a few exchanges, just to get the market ready for the balance of your sale. I can narrow it down to the minute for you. All of your instructions have been followed to the letter and the Circle wants to extend our best wishes on your success."

"I'll let you know within the next twenty-five cycles, Aaron. There's another item that we have to deal with first. Mordred is transferring wills for all of the Partners into your files. We've established a standard survivor's clause. Although Nick and Cole have amounts to be put aside for friends and relatives, we've all agreed to leave the balance in the hands of the Circle should we all be killed. At least then the plan can't really be stopped."

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Aaron sat stunned for a moment. "Thank them all for their trust. This will remain a strict secret that I will not even share with the Circle until such an unfortunate time that it would be necessary. Thank you, Andrea."

He nodded formally and continued. "I have had some of my friends in government lobbying to break up Mars Corp for some time into smaller companies. Recently, one of them suggested that the pressure would be eased if the portion dealing with Mars directly were separated into a new company. They accepted the deal and formed Mars Corporate Ventures. The minute the stock was released, I transferred a huge block of your stock straight into the new company and sold off some of your other stocks to make up the balance. RPP now owns ninety-nine percent of Mars Corporate Ventures."

"Aaron, that's fabulous!"

He gave her a huge smile.

"They still don't know what's coming and I think I'm going to really enjoy this."

"Me, too. I'll call you soon, Aaron," she said as she closed the contact.

Tremaine had already located four hundred and two additional GenEng personnel for immediate transport and had locked in contracts for ninety-eight percent of the remaining population.

Money talked. Even people tied closely to their GenEng gave in when the high bids came in. There were a few currently owned by government institutions. Those were harder to buy since the government had no need to sell them and certainly had no intention to replace them with humans.

Tremaine lodged bids with all of the governments and instituted first right of refusal on all of them. When their plans became known, the remaining GenEng were going to get very expensive indeed.

Mordred and Andrea, with Aaron's help had managed to buy off all outstanding loans on Mars, including the

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work papers of the Martians themselves. Andrea held ninety-nine percent of the stock for the new MCV and still had the remaining stock in Mars Corp to be sold to the traders.

Everything was now in place.

The additional ships were being transported directly to Mars. The *Phoenix* trio was given the order to space fold and within ten minutes, they had transported within a safe distance of Mars and used normal ship drives to position the ships just outside of the orbital transport zone around Mars. Upon their arrival, Mordred verified that all stocks had been transferred and the Mars Corp stock was now in the hands of the people that most deserved it.

The *Phoenix 101* was immediately hailed from Mars Central demanding their intentions. Andrea opened the communication link and saw a harried looking man that looked like he was going to be sick.

"Mars Central. These ships are the property of Rising Phoenix Partners. We recently purchased ninety-nine percent of the new MCV and would like to schedule a meeting with the head of your central government."

The communications officer looked even greener than before. "I will pass along your request."

Andrea closed the channel. The four of them sat in their meeting room together and waited. Nick was impatient since all he could think about was his research, but he agreed since they had to present a united force. The wait didn't take long. E-sharp announced the call.

Initiate communication, Mordred.

This time it was Andrea's turn to be shocked. The man in the three-dimensional projection in the center of the meeting room was the spitting image of Stephen! She heard an E-sharp and acknowledge.

Captain Cole wishes to know if you are all right.

She glanced at Cole and his face brought her back to reality with a jolt.

"Thank you for calling us back so promptly. I am Andrea Stone. This is Captain Cole Stuart, Doctor Nick

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Ferraro and Director Tremaine. We are the sole officers of Rising Phoenix Partners and have something of utmost importance to discuss with you.”

“Nice to meet you all. I am President Samuel Rivers and I have already heard a great deal about you and your Partners since you burst onto the galactic market two weeks ago. Welcome home Doctor Ferraro. I hope you plan to stay with us.”

“Thank you President Rivers. My stay with you depends very much on how you react to a very special proposal from Rising Phoenix Partners. Would it be possible for you to join us on the *Phoenix 101*?”

“Can you tell me the nature of this proposal?” he queried cautiously.

Cole stepped in. “President Rivers, I'd prefer not to talk over open air . . . we have only the best to offer. However, due to the nature of the proposal, knowledge outside of our group could mean the failure of a project that could benefit all Martians.”

The President nodded. “Let me see what I can do. I would very much like to meet with a woman from the twenty-first century. My mother tells me that our lineage includes several *Stones*. Maybe we are distantly related.” He smiled and cut the transmission.

Cole blurted “What the hell happened to you? This has been your idea from the beginning and when we get a call from the President of Mars you freeze up!”

“I'm sorry. He threw me in the worst way.” She looked up into Cole's furious face. “He looks exactly like Stephen. I couldn't help it, I just froze.”

Cole's face relaxed as he looked into her eyes. He started to tell her that it was nonsense but then thought about how he would have felt if someone had faced him looking like Marla.

“Well, that's unfortunate.”

She shook her head slightly. “Just rather a shocker.”

Nick slipped his arm around her shoulders and reasoned softly, “It's not Stephen, Andrea. Can you face him and treat him like the President that he is or should you bow out for now and let us negotiate?”

Lynn Sterling

"No. I'll be fine. Of course I *know* it's not Stephen and I'm still very much in this game."

The meeting broke up. Nick and Tremaine dashed off to the work that they so loved.

Cole walked with her back across the passageway. She walked over to her desk area and Cole stood silently behind her. For a long moment, both of them just stood in silence.

"Do you still feel like his wife, Andrea?"

She turned in utter surprise. "God, no. Stephen led a full life, married and had four children. All of that was centuries ago. He is not a part of this life, other than he left money for me upon my recovery. No Cole, I feel that this is where I belong now. Somehow I feel that this is where I was meant to be. Although I loved my old life, worked hard and had friends and a man who loved me, I didn't make a real difference. Here I can. I wouldn't go back, Cole. It was just the shock of seeing his face. I'm sorry that I almost blew it."

He reached up and held her face in his hands. "I never meant for this to happen, Andrea, but I am so in love with you that it hurts."

She smiled a tentative smile. "Me too, Cole."

"When we get this resolved, we are going to have to make a few more decisions, you know. People are going to start wondering about our partnership."

"We will. Let them just wonder."

His lips came down on hers and decisions and negotiations drifted from her mind. Cole's kisses were amazing. His lips caressed hers, captured one of her lips between his and then his tongue touched hers and her body responded instantly.

She could already feel her body wet and tingling in anticipation. Sometimes she could just smell him and her body was ready for him. God, how did he do this to her?

He tugged her clothing away and she pressed against him, begging him with her body to give her the release that she needed. He lifted her up as she wrapped her legs around him and took her where they stood. The

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* * *

completeness that she felt when he was inside her amazed her, but the orgasm, when it rocked her, took her breath away.

Cole carried her into her suite and they both curled against each other. The intensity of the moment left them both quiet and introspective.

Cole watched as Andrea drifted to sleep.

He thought to himself that, as much as he had loved Marla, being without Andrea would destroy him completely. He was ready to face the danger ahead of them, but knowing that Andrea was at risk terrified him.

★ Chapter 15 ★

President Rivers came on board *Phoenix 101* with all of the fanfare required for a man of his power. The staff had arranged a small banquet for the private meeting. An entourage of seven joined the President with a security staff of five.

Andrea's ESP was ringing when everyone stepped out of the Presidential transport. The President started the introductions and she got stuck on the Minister of Defense. Everything within her screamed *snake!*

Mordred, please inform the Partners and the crew that the Minister of Defense Nguyen is not to be part of the negotiations and is to be accompanied by no fewer than four armed security staff at all times.

Acknowledged.

Within two minutes, a security detail had joined the group as they made their way to the banquet.

Minister Nguyen suggested, "Perhaps you can give us a tour of this lovely ship, Captain Cole."

Tremaine interjected, "I'm sorry, Minister, security measures are currently in place that prevent tours. Perhaps another time."

Nguyen look irritated and looked back to Cole. "But surely security measures do not include the presidential party?"

Cole wanted to say, "Especially the presidential party," but checked his tongue and simply said, "Maybe we can set something up for a future date."

Nguyen looked almost furious. Here was a man that was used to getting his way. He all but stamped his feet.

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They all met in the banquet area and the security detail was very good at their jobs. Four additional officers had joined the group so that everyone could mingle and it would not become apparent that Nguyen was being watched carefully.

The President sought Andrea out and asked if they could sit and talk for a while about her adventures. The more he talked, the less he seemed like Stephen. His voice was deeper and richer and his eyes had flecks of gold in them. He again mentioned that there was a *Stone* or two in his family tree.

She smiled warmly.

"I have no doubt of that President Rivers, you gave me quite a start when I first saw you."

At his quizzical look she continued, "You look exactly like my husband from the twenty-first century."

"Did the two of you have children?"

"Unfortunately, no. However, Stephen remarried after my cryo suspension and fathered four children. You could have come down the line from one of them."

"Actually, I'm rather glad that we're not related," he said as he looked deeply into her eyes.

She raised her eyebrows, looking at him directly and changed the subject. "I'm looking forward to exploring Mars. In my day walking on Mars was just a dream."

"What was your profession then?"

She told him a little of her career in the film business and the work she did in her old life. He soon picked up on some of her sayings and commented that, "Language has become rather dull. I confess, I really find your colloquialisms refreshing."

"If you don't mind Mr. President"

"Please call me Sam."

"For right now, I think that Mr. President is more appropriate. We need to break away and have a serious discussion on the future of Mars."

"I would like my Vice-President and Ministers to join us for the meeting."

She looked him straight in the eye. "Mr. President, I would love to trust your entire team at this moment.

Lynn Sterling

However, one attempt has already been made on our lives and the information that we share with you here will only compound the problem. Trust me when I ask that only you join us for the meeting. You may station your security detail inside the room as long as their hearing is blocked. You and your team are welcome to verify that no weapons will be present.”

He looked at her for a long moment.

“Very well, Ms. Stone,” he had reverted to her surname, “let’s get on with it then.”

His ministers were furious when the President explained that he was stepping away into a private meeting, Nguyen being the worst.

Andrea heard the steel in the President’s voice as he ordered, “You will all wait here until my return,” as he turned on his heel and followed them out.

His security detail scanned them and the room and then blocked their hearing as ordered. Four officers posted themselves by the entrance to the meeting room watching them carefully.

After they were seated, Andrea got started.

“Mr. President, I have been doing a lot of research on your world. The Martian people are practically held in servitude, the birth rate is currently so low that the population, especially your female population, is in a downward spiral. There are no research and development facilities, museums, art schools, or artists, state of the art hospitals or educational programs for art, music or cultural study. Your hospitals offer basic services only. And even though cosmetic medicine is simple and inexpensive, regen fluids are not made available even for facial scarring.”

The President’s eyes were cold as he returned, “Now that you have insulted my world, what exactly do you want?”

“To give you those things.”

His look of shock immediately put his guards on edge and he casually held up a hand to stay their actions. *If that was going to throw him, wait for round two*, Andrea thought with anticipation.

Journey To Dür

"How do you plan to accomplish that exactly?" he didn't think it was possible.

Cole stepped in to explain.

"Rising Phoenix Partners currently owns ninety-nine percent of the new Mars Corporate Ventures as you know. That places the property formerly owned by Mars Corp in our hands. This much, you also know. What you don't know is that RPP has recently purchased all outstanding loans and debts for all Martian inhabitants. We are in a position to remove Mars Corp from Mars."

"They won't go quietly, Captain Stuart. And even if they did, all we are trading is one owner for another. Explain how that is going to help my planet achieve the things that you promise."

"I have a simple little trade for you, Mr. President," Andrea said softly, looking directly into his eyes. "We will forgive all debts to all Martians, build the Research and Development and the hospital facilities, art schools, museums, and universities you need with RPP funds if the Martian population votes to accept the GenEng as full Martian citizens with equal rights under the law."

He looked at her like she had grown horns in the last two minutes. "The GenEng will never be released from their contracts to come here."

Tremaine leaned forward. "Actually, Mr. President, they're already on their way. RPP has purchased all but a few of the licenses for the entire GenEng population. There are over fifty thousand that hope to make Mars their new home."

President looked around the room at them, stunned, as if to see if they were really being serious.

"How can you have done this?"

"Money, Mr. President, can right some wrongs. RPP has more than we could ever spend."

Nick had been quiet up until now. "Mr. President, equal status must include the ability to intermarry."

"No Martian man or woman would marry someone sterile, Dr. Ferraro. That is not something that can be legislated. Regardless of the minute chance of having a child on our world, they are still revered and hoped for."

Lynn Sterling

“Exactly. I have found a way to reverse the sterility in the GenEng population. Their DNA is closer to our ancestors’ than even I knew until I modeled Andrea’s and the seventeen specimens retrieved from SpaceSleep 1402. They could offer Mars a solution to the problem that the remaining colonies also face, although not yet to your degree. In fifty years the population of Mars will decline to unacceptable levels and then it will be too late. Many of the Martian females now leave Mars for Earth and a better life. You would now be able to offer that here. In addition, over half of the GenEng population is female which is a plus for you.”

The President stood and paced the length of the room several times in deep thought. She saw Nick start to say something and caught his eye, giving her head a shake.

Finally, the President returned to his seat and looked at Andrea. “This is bigger than me. I can’t imagine a Mars like the one that you dream of but I can hope for one. I will take your proposition to the people. In the meantime, when can we expect the GenEng population to arrive?”

“A Generation Sleeper transport will arrive in two days. There is no need to awaken them until they have a new home to go to. If Mars isn’t that home, I will buy them another,” Andrea stated with some force. “The difference will be that Mars will not benefit from what they can bring to the table.”

“I understand perfectly. If the answer is *no*, how will that effect how Mars does business? We will now be dealing with you instead of Mars Corp.”

“You will have to build a new Mars on your own. We can work with you on sharing profit and forgive some debt until you can get on your feet. However, if you want to have the entire debt forgiven plus the funds to rebuild Mars, you have to agree to our terms. In both cases you will still be better off than before.”

The President stood up. “I will contact you and give you a progress report by tomorrow.”

“One more thing, Mr. President,” Andrea added. “Do not trust Minister Nguyen. It could mean your life.”

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“He has been with me for eight months and has given me no reason to distrust him, Ms. Stone.”

“Nevertheless, I know what I am saying here.”

He nodded at her, turned and walked toward the door. At the door he turned and added, “And bless you all.”

Cole escorted the presidential party back to the transport bay and Nguyen was practically jumping up and down. Cole watched as the President observed Nguyen’s behavior. As he shook the President’s hand the President said simply, “Let Andrea know that I will give *all* of her advice some thought,” as he looked solemnly at Cole before boarding the transport.

When Cole returned to the meeting room they were ready for round two.

Mordred, initiate a ship-wide address for all Phoenix ships. Please ask everyone to pause in their duties and acknowledge when ready.

Within one minute all personnel were standing by.

Initiate communication

Cole started the address. “The officers of RPP formally return all licenses to each of you. Further, we are in negotiations with the Mars colony to invite all GenEng to join them as free, equal citizens of Mars.”

Cole nodded to Nick, who took a quick breath. “I have now perfected the reversal of the GenEng sterility gene. Each GenEng may report to the med bay on board your vessel to complete the genetic remodeling procedure. This should take about four cycles and will be painless. The procedure is completely elective. We all know about the genetic damage caused by the Mars virus. Any of you that elect to have children with the current inhabitants of Mars could help reverse that damage. Your genes are strong enough to pull them out of this. Again, this will be your choice. You may also choose a companion from the GenEng. Regardless of your mate, your children will live free on Mars. In the event that Mars declines our offer, a

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planet in the outer area of the colonial boundary has been selected for your new home. Please register with the med bay on board your vessel if you choose to elect the genetic enhancement. Thank you all.”

They closed the contact and Andrea looked over on Tremaine. “What will they think, Tremaine?”

He brushed her soft golden, brown hair back from her face. “They will think that they are finally free.”

Mordred watched the reactions as the Partners made their announcements. There was cheering, jubilation, shock and tears.

His records indicated the possible consequences to the Partners and he experienced a brief emotion before containing himself. After researching a description of the feeling, he recognized it as fear.

He was afraid for them.

★ Chapter 16 ★

Cole and Andrea were sleeping, he curled behind her when the E-sharp woke them both. They acknowledged without moving.

Communication from President Rivers.

Hold a moment, Mordred.

They bolted out of bed, into clothing and ran a brush through their hair, checked each other over as they dashed across the hall to the meeting room. Nick and Tremaine were already there waiting.

“Only twelve cycles. This might not be good news,” Tremaine speculated.

They all sat down and Cole told Mordred to open the communication.

President Rivers met them with a smile that said it all. “The people of Mars gratefully accept the proposal from RPP. I have to be honest with you that it was not unanimous. There will be some issues that we will have to address. Furthermore, we offer all GenEng people rights as full citizens of Mars. Preparations are currently underway to prepare housing for our new citizens and we expect completion within three months.”

“Actually, Mr. President, RPP would like to help with that, as well. We can supply the funds and materials. There are currently five hundred eighty GenEng trained in urban housing and design on board the sleeper ship. We have brought the material necessary for building permanent housing. If you can house the smaller group temporarily, we can definitely expedite the relocation of the remaining population.”

Lynn Sterling

“Excellent. We will make immediate arrangements. I look forward to working with you.” The communication was terminated.

“We did it!” Tremaine whooped.

“So far,” Cole cautioned but he was still smiling. They all were. Great big grins!

“Just remember, things that appear to be too good to be true, rarely are true,” Andrea murmured.

The next day Tremaine contacted the transport ship and advised them to activate the GenEng coded for urban housing and design so that they would be ready on arrival. They'd receive the announcement that the other GenEng had already heard upon their reactivation. The additional war ships had also arrived and Tremaine was in the process of choosing GenEng staff for the new ships—beefing it up made Andrea feel a little safer.

The standard E-sharp alerted Cole and Andrea to an incoming call from Aaron.

Open communication Mordred.

“Hello Andrea. Cole. I’m calling with some news that you may think as bad depending on your future plans. I’ve just been informed by Earth Central Legal that Earth rights have been suspended for both of you. I’ve retained the best legal defense and have appealed the ruling on your behalf.”

“How could they suspend my rights? I was an Earther long before they even had this ruling!” Andrea was angry.

“By backing the GenEng as citizens of Mars, you have both broken Earth law. The laws governing GenEng are very specific about anyone attempting to free even one GenEng. The lawyers are contending that none of the GenEng has been offered their freedom on Earth and they may have found a loophole. Regardless of whether or not they are successful in reinstating your rights, I wouldn’t recommend that you come back here. There are a lot of people, well deserving I might add, that have been greatly damaged by the Mars Corp instability. The Circle

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knows at least three different groups that have placed death contracts out for all four of you, for one reason or another.”

“I guess I shouldn't be surprised,” Andrea sighed.

“No . . . you shouldn't. Nick heads the list since he has also altered the genes of the GenEng to allow them to reproduce and given the genetic solution to Mars first instead of Earth, which is another unforgivable breach.”

“I hate to say, that figures.”

“The biggest problem of all is that the colonies are aligning with Mars. They see the alignment as a solution to their genetic failings as well and the tyranny from Earth. Of course, no one paid off their contracts and many are treading very carefully. Earth doesn't own the colonies, just trade contracts that keep them alive. However, the Circle has stepped in and expedited trading contracts within the colonies that limit the necessary trade with Earth. This will also mean less available merchandise for Earth but their largest problem right now is that Earth no longer mines for ore and crystalline deposits in order to preserve ecological balance. If they don't get those from the colonies, they're in danger of either shutting down manufacturing or reopening planet damaging mines.”

“So they've been destroying the colonies to keep their planet pretty?”

“Historically they did that to third world countries before they got off of their own planet, so nothing new there. And we've had several close calls with the stock market. With so many variables, people are speculating in ways that we couldn't predict. We have been able to manipulate the market with RPP stock to keep it solvent, but, although you had a huge gain over the last two weeks, your stock value fell by over half of that gain yesterday. We are keeping an eye on it, but any time this amount of stock changes hands and companies like Mars Corp are in danger of collapse, there's going to be risk. You've changed a lot more than Mars, my friends.”

Cole nodded. “Let us know what the lawyers come up with. I would be willing to agree never to come back if my

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trading rights remained intact. We need Earth rights to establish trade routes.”

“The Circle has been able to purchase an additional five hundred of the remaining GenEng licenses. They have been transferred to RPP holdings and are currently on their way to you. It seems that the owners did not wish to retain property that suddenly had become sullen and unruly. They also didn’t want the press that went with owning the last few licensed GenEng. Unfortunately, three were murdered when they disobeyed orders. As terrible as it may sound, this worked to our advantage. There was outrage over their deaths. It seems that there is support from some Earthers that have found ways to make their disapproval known.”

“Thanks for your help, Aaron. Please call when you have more news,” Andrea said and signed off.

Mars Corp stock was not just in a downward spiral, the company was in danger of keeping its doors open for the next week and were reorganizing what was left into a viable entity. The majority of the traders had gone down with Mars Corp. They were forced to divest themselves of stock ownership in several major companies just to get the raw capital to run the corporation. They were in chaos and knew exactly where it had come from. No corporation, even the largest, can survive losing this much of the company at once. It was like cutting off an arm and a leg all at once.

The *Phoenix* crew had a surprise for the Partners. First, all ninety-eight crewmembers had presented themselves at the med bay and signed up for the genetic alteration. Further three couples came to Cole and asked for a term agreement to have a child. They had also prepared a celebration banquet that surpassed the one given to the presidential party.

Several times that day, an officer approached Andrea with thanks. The mood was jubilant. *God, please let this turn out all right*, Andrea prayed silently.

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It was now time to go down to the surface and start to reorganize the future of Mars. They could no longer accomplish everything from *Phoenix 101*.

Tremaine remained behind to organize the GenEng and run the ship. Nick, Cole and Andrea transported down to the surface in the President's own transport, with full security measures. Tremaine insisted in sending ten armed officers as escort as well as a specially designed scanner connected directly to Mordred.

They were brought directly to the President's compound. Andrea, being the only one that had never been to Mars, was looking around like a tourist. The peach skies and stark landscape gave it an otherworldly quality. Now, Andrea really felt like she was on another planet. A group of ministers were waiting to meet them with full military honors.

The Martians were friendly and genuinely pleased to be working together. The new ministers of Cultural Affairs and Education were thrilled with the opportunity to build Mars into a sparkling new colony. After the initial group meeting, the groups broke into special task forces to detail the current situation, the projected final outcome and outline a blueprint for building the new plan. The compound was designed in a star shape with a central meeting hall and adjoining smaller rooms for breakout groups with two entrances into the compound. Each exit broke into quads with restaurant and shopping facilities attached to transport lines.

Nick naturally had requested working with the group projecting new Research and Development, and hospital facilities as well as medical training programs and genetic stabilization plans. One of the major goals of this group was to outline a new program, Genetic Salvation. This included not only incorporating the GenEng gene pool into the Martian society but also new discoveries brought on by the genetic modeling of Andrea and the seventeen other twenty-first century Earthers whose DNA Nick had.

Cole joined the group that would be enacting laws that incorporated the GenEng into the Martian society.

Lynn Sterling

Andrea met with a brand new group of people intent on bringing art, music and culture into the Martian life. Actually, this was really the easiest since there was no existing framework, the best one could be instituted from the beginning.

This also included parks and architecture. Up until now, the buildings on Mars had been built with structure and purpose in mind. No care had been given to the esthetics. A retrofit program had to be designed carefully. Mars had been fully terraformed by 2421, however, most plants transported were for practical purposes only.

Now Mars had reached a point that new plants could be introduced into the eco-structure. The danger with introducing flowering plants from Belize or grapes grown for Mirian wine was that every plant brought in to the environment had an impact on something. Resources had not been wasted on flowering gardens.

By the end of the first day, all of the groups were getting a good handle on the basics. It would take months to work out the details, but Andrea felt great about where they were. Several ecologists were working with the gardening groups to choose plants that would have the least effect on the existing planetary plant and insect life. E-sharp broke her from her reverie.

Cole asks you to join him in his meeting. Minister Nguyen is causing some problems.

Acknowledged.

Andrea excused herself from the meeting since it was drawing to a close anyway and made her way to Cole.

“—we know that their genes are stronger than ours,” Nguyen was shouting. “Why should we allow them to populate our planet with their offspring?”

Another older gentleman chimed in. “I think I agree with Minister Nguyen. I am concerned about how my children and their children will fit in to this new order.”

Name of the current speaker, Mordred.

Minister of Finance, Puente.

Number of children and grandchildren

One daughter, now unmarried; only grandchild died before birth. If I may, Andrea, the Minister has

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a reputation of being rather intransigent when he has chosen a position.

Thanks for the warning.

“Minister Puente, if I may?” Andrea interrupted.

He nodded.

“What we are proposing is not that the GenEng take over Mars, far from it. The final number electing to live here will probably be fewer than fifty thousand citizens. Their genes will not supersede yours, merely enhance. Your grandchild may have your dark eyes and will probably outlive you by thirty years and bear you a dozen great-grandchildren.” Then she added with a big smile, “All with your stubbornness.”

The minister at first looked surprised but she saw a small smile that he quickly hid.

She smiled back and continued. “This discussion should really be taken up with Dr. Ferraro. He can give you all of the documentation to prove that the GenEng genes will not overpower your own gene pool but rather strengthen it. Remember, all of the GenEng population was developed with human DNA. They are—and always have been—human beings. Further, Dr. Ferraro has experimented with genes found within the sleeper pods accompanying me. Those genes also provide a promising new avenue to help solve our population problems.”

Minister Puente smiled at her and Nguyen knew that he had lost this battle. He was just trying to start trouble any way that he could. He knew some of these men well enough to know how to light their fires and get them started. Then he could just set back and watch.

But Nick Ferraro was well known on Mars and having his expertise and support would win a great number of supporters for their plan.

“I will be glad to meet Nick and discuss this. I knew him as a young student and know that he takes his work very seriously.”

The Chief Legal Officer asked that they adjourn for the day and everyone agreed.

Cole turned to Andrea while they were walking toward Nick’s group. “Nguyen is going to be a thorn in our side

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as long as he's here. Can't they see that he's not interested in a better Mars?"

"Probably, but they know him, Cole, not us. We have to prove ourselves to these people before they will take our side over his. I can't stand the slimy little snake though. I know that he is reporting right back to Mars Corp on every issue."

Nick walked toward them, stretching. "I'm tired and hungry. Let's grab a bite and head back to our rooms."

"Sounds good to me," Cole agreed.

They were joined by the security detail that had been patiently dogging them all day. "We're going to grab some food and turn in. Care to join us?"

"Great!" they chimed in. Officer Lano smiled as he walked tentatively beside Andrea. He recently made his first real choice and had moved into security from communications when he could replace himself with one of the arrivals. "You don't mind if the troops join you?"

"Please, Lano, relax. I'm not in the military and do not stand on protocol. It's just dinner. Remember, this is your planet now."

Lano's face was unreadable. "The records show that the LC infusion came from your sleeper inheritance. Can I ask if it was your idea?"

"I have gotten close to Nick and Tremaine in the last months. They showed me that a change was overdue. This is a plan that has been engineered by all of the Partners of RPP and each one of us continues to play a very unique part."

"You are a very unique group of humans," Lano said with a serious intensity.

She was thinking *if you only knew*. Andrea smiled up into his much too serious face as Mordred filled her head.

High levels of explosives present. Please vacate the venue.

The Chief security officer yelled, "Explosives at four o'clock. Get them out of here!"

Andrea was dragged backward as an officer grabbed her from each side and started to run. Two others had

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Nick and Cole by the arms, forcefully directing them to safety. The remaining detail spread out behind them and yelled to the citizens in the quad to vacate immediately. Fortunately, there weren't many people there at this late cycle, mostly assistants to the Ministers recently released from duty. Most took heed and started to run.

It was too late!

Several huge explosions ripped the quad and threw shrapnel out from its center.

One of the officers at Andrea's back went down, hit by a piece of table that came flying at them. The force of the explosion sent them crashing to the floor. Andrea felt several bodies on top of her. She started having trouble breathing from the pressure of the weight pressing down and started to fight to get a breath. She felt hands clamping her in place.

"I can't breathe," she gasped out.

She felt some of the weight give way and she caught her breath. Then she heard the screaming.

Finally, the officers rolled off her and picked her up again. She heard Cole yell, "Get her to the transport!"

Mordred had notified the President that the transport was immediately required for RPP use. He'd also alerted the police and medical teams to the explosion.

Andrea was rushed aboard by four officers and the transport took off without pausing.

"Where's Cole and Nick?" she demanded. "We can't leave without them!"

"Captain Cole and Doctor Ferraro stayed behind to help with the wounded. They are uninjured. Five security officers are with them and another team is on the way."

She started to shake and couldn't help the tears streaming down her face. "The officer behind me?"

"Officer Lano? He is seriously injured. Dr. Ferraro is having him transported to a medical facility now. Mordred will inform us of his condition."

She started to notice that all of them were bleeding in one place or another. She, on the other hand, wasn't even scratched. They had shielded her with their bodies and Lano might pay the ultimate price for that loyalty.

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She reached out a hand to the officer that had carried her. "What is your name?"

"Barot, Ms. Stone."

"Thank you, Barot. Do we have any information on how many people were hurt?"

"There was a total of fifty-six people in the quad at the time of the detonation. Many only had minor injuries. Mordred will update us with details of the injuries."

Just over a few weeks ago, the first attempt on her life had been made. Now, it would seem, they had come even closer to succeeding. Andrea wondered how long it would be before their luck ran out.

Cole kneeled next to Minister Puente and gently pressed a regen patch over a gash on his shoulder that had laid the bone bare. The blood stopped shooting from the wound. He had been screaming and thrashing when Cole had found him. Cole had immediately scanned him and Mordred had advised him to administer a sedative injection supplied by one of the too few emergency medical technicians. The minister had fallen quiet but Cole was unsure if the injection or the excruciating pain was the cause.

"Does Rivers know how bad this is?"

"Yes," Nick yelled over the noise from the alarms and the crying injured. "He's sending the presidential medical staff. They should already be here."

Cole was relieved to see a team of at least twenty medical staff complete with equipment swarm the quad. One came over to Minister Puente and started to run scans.

"This patch very definitely saved this man's life. We need to move him onto the grav bed and get him out of here."

Cole helped the med team as directed and they moved the minister carefully onto the med transport. For the next half-cycle Cole and Nick worked as fast as they could to get everyone to safety.

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After everyone was safe, Cole started to investigate the explosive materials—the way they had been set and how they had been triggered. With a state of the art scanner and Mordred's help Cole finally found the triggering device, or at least part of it. It was a common type triggered by a distinct odor. Mordred continued his scan for a longer time than Cole was used to.

Mordred, can you narrow the triggering odor?

The odor was Ylang Ylang.

Damn! They were after Andrea.

No, they were after all of you. The logical assumption is that you would have been together. Andrea has a distinctive perfume that is uncommon in the twenty-seventh century. This made her an easy target. A more expensive weapon could zero in on her DNA coding or pheromone signature. Since the attempt with the bot, I had established scans and protocols to locate another DNA targeting device. There must have been traces of Ylang Ylang remaining on board the Camelot.

Tremaine was waiting in the transport bay as the President's transport docked. He put his arms around Andrea and held her for a long time. She started to shake again and he just stood in the middle of the security detail and stroked her hair and held her.

"It's okay, Andrea. Everyone is fine."

"Lano is *not* fine. There are Martians down there that are *not* fine. And I am *not* fine."

He tilted her face up and looked into her eyes. "We will be fine, Andrea. We knew this would come; our people were prepared and RPP is safe. The President just has to recognize that Mars must take responsibility for its own safety. We can't protect them all. Now, come on. Nick has given strict orders to get you into bed, get a sedative in you, and you must get some sleep."

Andrea recognized what she was now feeling. Shock. As much as she could rationalize her reactions, it wasn't

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having any effect on the trembling. It was hard to really come to terms with why someone wanted them dead.

Tremaine walked her to her room and helped her get out of her clothes and into bed. She felt like she was going to be sick. He was ready with an injection.

She held up her hand. "I don't need that, Tremaine. I want to be conscious until I know what's going on down there. Stay with me for a while. Please?"

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else." He pulled her into his arms and just held her quietly.

Tremaine lay there holding her and finally started to let his own emotions out. He had been more terrified than he had ever been in his life and he had never felt more helpless. These people were his family. The only family that he had ever known. Nick was his best friend and Andrea had opened his eyes to possibilities that he had never dreamed of. She was the first person that listened to his heart and never judged or condemned.

As Tremaine stroked Andrea's hair he realized that the sex between them had always been secondary to their friendship. He loved touching her, enjoying her body, but he remembered much more the laughter and conversations.

Above all else, she had believed in him before he had believed in himself. He didn't get angry often, but he was angry now. These people would pay for this. There were now people and funds at his disposal and he was going to see that they would pay for this crime!

For the first time in his life, Tremaine felt hot tears course down his cheeks.

Tears of absolute rage.

✧ Chapter 17 ✧

Cole woke Andrea later when he arrived on board. “I thought that you would want to know that Lano is okay. We lost three citizens, though. Nick was a madman. There would have been many more deaths if he hadn't have been there.” Cole shook his head sadly. “What monsters could do this?”

Tremaine answered from the door, “Agents of Minister Nguyen. I have three confessions that have been turned over to the President. They all implicate Nguyen. I agreed to relocate them quietly somewhere with enough money to make a new start if they gave the President proof of Nguyen’s complicity.”

They both stared at Tremaine in disbelief.

“When did you have time to find all this out?” Cole asked.

“Once Andrea was asleep, the security team and I started to work. Draman and Mordred were quite helpful. The data that you and Mordred had collected gave us a jump-start. We traced the explosives and then Mordred started to investigate the other areas where the three of you could have been without the President. His security detail would have prevented sabotage in any area that he was in. We found explosives ready to go off in your quarters, a fine dining establishment recommended by the top ministers, and another quad area where you might have walked through coming or going from your meetings. All the detonators were the same type used in the quad. These people were very thorough. Oddly, Minister Nguyen didn’t go near any of the areas set with

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explosives, although almost every other minister passed through at least one. He is currently being detained by the President's security detail until they can decide what to do with him. The Martian population is screaming for his blood. I think he'll be emotionally reconditioned and sent to a work area."

Tremaine was changing before their eyes. No longer the GenEng taking orders and rarely showing emotion. This was a man willing to take charge of his destiny with both hands.

Beware anyone that gets in his way, Andrea thought.

The next day, Andrea contacted the President.

"I'm sorry that we can't join the meetings today, Mr. President, but we need to coordinate with planetary security and lock a plan in place that can protect both RPP staff and the ministers as well as the general population during these planning sessions."

"Agreed, Andrea. Today's meetings have already been canceled. Thanks to Director Tremaine, we have part of the problem taken care of but I don't think that Nguyen will be our only dissenter. I would like to make a trip up to the 101 to see you . . . if it fits into your schedule."

"Is there something that you need to discuss with RPP staff?"

"Actually, this is a personal request. I would like to have dinner with you."

"A meeting with just me?"

"Actually Andrea, I would like to spend some private time with you. You are someone that I would like to know much better."

That caught her completely off guard. "Although I'm extremely flattered, Sam, I have to tell you that I am pretty seriously involved with someone."

"I see. Well, let's remain friends then and see how things go."

She smiled warmly at his three-dimension. "I hope we can always be friends." She broke the communication.

Journey To Diir

“Just who is this person that you are pretty seriously involved with?” Cole asked walking slowly into the room with a sensual smile on his mouth.

She grinned.

“Mordred, of course. I owe him my life.”

“Good. That leaves your body for me.”

He dropped onto the sofa and pulled her against him. His face went serious and he said softly, “I am so glad that you weren’t hurt. I don’t like the look of a future without you in it.”

“Don’t worry, Cole. I’m not going anywhere. Have you heard anything more about Lano?”

“He’ll be in regen for at least ten days. The damage was extensive but Nick got to him in time.”

“Thank God. He shielded me with his body and I just couldn’t face it if he died.”

Cole smiled. “Although I could say that he was just doing his job, no one can really predict what they will do in a situation like that. I can only say that he will always have my respect and gratitude for saving you.”

“They are all good men.”

He nodded and took a deep breath. “Back to work. The businesses that we now own have to be given instructions. We need to install a complete team of management to keep things from falling apart. There are calls from clothing vendors, restaurants, manufacturing plants and distributors. Mars Corp management has departed within the last eight cycles. They didn’t want to be pulled into the Nguyen mess. That leaves a corporation with no management. There is a group of GenEng that just recently arrived with organizational skills. None of them, of course have management experience, at least not management of a non-GenEng organization.”

She groaned. “Okay. I’ll jump in.”

“I’ve got to get to a planning session for a Mars based RPP facility. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. By the way, where’s Nick?”

“On Mars. He is setting up a new R&D facility with Doctor Lannetti. He will probably stay for the next three

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* * *

days. A security detail of thirty is surrounding them and Mordred is keeping a close eye.”

Andrea spent the next three days organizing and staffing the corporate office on Mars. She fortunately had some middle management Martians that were not aligned with Mars Corp that had elected to stay on.

She complimented that with a group of new arrivals from the Sleeper and threw some money at it. That was a throwback from her film days. The answer was never *no*, just *how much?* You wanted to film in a top restaurant on a Saturday night, the question was always *how much?*

Once that crisis was averted, the GenEng development team started throwing things at *her*. She had to keep them moving forward when delays started sucking them down like quicksand. There were definitely people out there trying to slow down the progress.

Again, it was a matter of money.

Andrea was beginning to think that she just might get to spend all of it after all.

Mordred was being bombarded by emotions from the crew, and surprisingly, from his own subroutines. He calmly tried to process and store them but found that his own were not so easy to ignore.

★ Chapter 18 ★

After six months, everyone could see real progress. The buildings had gone up at light speed compared to when Mars Corp had been building them. The R&D labs and hospitals had been a top priority. It was important to improve the quality of life and health of the general population. They were also preparing for their first population explosion.

The GenEng had taken on their new role with a vengeance. Over half had already selected *term mates*. This was a trial program that allowed couples to attempt a pregnancy and see if they could remain compatible.

Andrea thought it was a little cold but Nick explained that it also helped to diversify the gene pool. Some humans still preferred to be artificially impregnated. Old habits die hard. They had moved to a RPP compound on the surface. The *Phoenix* trio, along with the additional new warships, circled the globe like giant guard dogs. Tremaine rarely came down since he had taken over as head of the Martian Space Military.

It was early morning as Andrea paced her office in frustration. She looked up sharply when Cole strode in.

Seeing the look on her face he asked cautiously, “Is something wrong?”

“I used to work insane hours and dash off to locations for sometimes up to a year. I loved it. This job, however,

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sucks! I hate the cycles, the bickering and the delays, and I don't even have a home life to offset the garbage that now fills my cycles!" Her voice had gotten louder as she talked.

"What happened?"

"Don't you get it, Cole? Nothing is happening. We are just working our mutual butts off and I'm *not* having any fun doing it. The hard work doesn't threaten me, or even the amount of credits we keep dumping into everything. I just don't like what I'm doing. It's not *me*."

Cole frowned. "We don't have to ask permission for any of this, Andrea. You can do or not do whatever you want."

She glared at him. "Right." The sarcasm dripped off the word. "Then who would take care of all of the stuff that I do?"

He continued in his most reasonable tone. "A Martian will have to take over. It's their planet and their project."

The more he maintained his reason, the angrier Andrea became. She noticed that Cole was maintaining his reason from across the room, however. Suddenly, she found that amusing.

Cole saw her fight not to show a smile and became more nervous. When Marla had gotten this frustrated, items tended to take flight. Especially breakable items. He scanned her immediate vicinity and saw several items that could do serious damage and fought the impulse to take a step or two back toward the door.

She watched him in silence for just long enough to make him even more nervous and burst into laughter.

He looked at her in complete confusion.

She sputtered. "God, Cole, you look like you think that I've gone around the bend."

Mordred, what the hell is around the bend?

Reduced mental capacity.

"Andrea, I don't think that your mental functions are impaired. I am just a little concerned that your emotions are a little," he paused, "erratic."

The smile started sliding off her face and she realized that he was right. She was totally overreacting to the

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situation. *Why?* She thought back over the last several months and it hit her why. She had gone from having three men, practically at her complete disposal, to none. Tremaine was in orbit, Nick practically was living with his work, and Cole was traveling around to the sites and coming in at all odd cycles. *Damn!*

She walked by Cole to the door, locked it, turned and said, "I think that you need to remind me of just how our partnership started."

Cole's eyebrows shot up and a slight smile touched his lips. "Here? Now?"

"Here. Now."

Andrea ran her finger down the front of her tunic and it opened, revealing her creamy skin and round, high breasts. Then her hand worked its magic on the opening on her skirt and it fell to her feet, leaving her standing in her panties.

Cole glanced a little nervously at the windows and then back to an almost naked Andrea. God, she was beautiful. His body reacted at light speed and in two steps, he had her in his arms, his mouth on hers.

Andrea's arms wrapped around him, feeling his hardness against her. He reached down and lifted her and backed her onto her desk. Between her hands and his, his clothes and her remaining panties joined her clothes on the floor.

She arched against him, urging him to hurry and felt him push inside her. Cole groaned and she pulled his mouth down on hers, exploring his mouth with her tongue as he plunged inside her again and again. Their breathing became more and more ragged and first Andrea and then quickly after that Cole cried out as spasms shook them.

Panting, he let Andrea slowly relax back on the desk as he leaned over her trying to catch his breath.

"Now you will really have something to be nervous about if I start to lose control of my emotions again." She smiled softly up at him.

He laughed. "I thought that you were going to start throwing things."

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She gave him a wicked leer. "Oh, no. I have many more ways to punish you for ignoring me than breaking valuables."

He leaned down and gave her a long, deep kiss. "Punish away. I'll try to make sure that you aren't ignored and remind Nick and Tremaine that they have *responsibilities*."

She punched his shoulder gently. "I'm not just a responsibility, buddy. If they don't miss me, let them pound sand."

She saw that glazed look and knew that he was trying to figure out the sand part.

"Don't say anything, Cole. It's okay. But I do hate my job. I would rather be crawling through ducting than bickering about things that really don't interest me." Her arm reached around his neck and pulled him down again. "Now you, however, interest me."

It was lunchtime before her door opened and they left to replenish lost calories.

They were sitting in an outdoor café when Mordred interrupted them.

Tremaine has just sent a message that a group of non-allied warships have set up a blockade and have announced that no ships will be allowed to arrive or depart from Mars.

They looked at each other in alarm.

"Mordred, we are on our way to the command center. Give us a breakdown of the ships and their armament." Cole demanded as they left their food behind and started running across the quad.

The ships are, for the most, non-military. They do have standard weaponry and shielding for their vessel type. The largest are two Saturn class transports with eight upgraded cargo haulers similar to Camelot and ten other private vessels ranging in size from a Luna to a Neptune class ship.

"The *Phoenix* fleet should be able to handle them." Cole glanced briefly at Andrea as they ran into the main entrance to the command center. "Tremaine knows what he's doing."

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She wasn't sure if he was saying it for her benefit or hers and kept silent, saving her breath for the run.

Tremaine's face was on the three-dimensional view screen when they made it into central command. He was coldly professional as he addressed the leader of the blockade.

"You do not represent any legal entity or planet and your blockade is therefore an illegal act of terrorism. All ships must immediately stand down and prepare to be boarded."

Andrea saw the view screen tilt slightly and heard someone announce, "Their main ship has fired on the *Phoenix 101*."

Tremaine said, "Terminate hostilities immediately or your ship will be disabled."

Their answer was another volley of weapons fire.

Tremaine's face was grim. "Target their weapons and propulsion. Disable their main ship."

Andrea watched the monitors as the indicators showed the continuing exchange of weapons fire. She felt a moment's panic when the screen blanked out and came back on—she thought that she was going to lose the lunch that she had just enjoyed.

Finally, a technician at the console next to her yelled, "The main blockade ship's power just failed and their weapons are down!"

Tremaine addressed the ships. "My demand remains the same. You will comply."

Suddenly the monitors erupted as the remaining ships concentrated all of their weaponry on the *101*. They watched as Tremaine calmly started giving clipped, shorthand orders to the crew. Andrea didn't even catch all of what was happening, it was happening so fast.

Mordred, tell me what is happening!

Mordred felt her panic come through with the request.

Be calm, Andrea. Director Tremaine has ordered the 102 to specifically target the second largest vessel as well as four smaller ships also in that sector. The 103 is changing position to target the

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ships farthest from the 101 and all weapons from the 101 are being used to return fire on the remaining ships."

There was a pause. Andrea almost demanded more from Mordred, but she felt him come back to her.

The 102 and 103 have been successful in disabling six of the ships and the 101 has destroyed one and disabled four. The remaining ships are transmitting that they are standing down.

She could still see Tremaine on the screen and knew that he was fine.

How much damage did the Phoenix ships take?

The 101 has some shield damage as well as breaches in the cargo hold and one outer deck. Phoenix 102's No. 4 docking bay will require extensive repair. The 103 took only cosmetic damage. There are seven major and thirteen minor injuries. None are life threatening.

Thank you, Mordred.

Tremaine turned to address the command center and noticed both Cole and Andrea. "Good to see you both. We will be interrogating the captains of these ships and find out who sent them and financed them. I'll update once we finish with the questioning."

Andrea addressed him solemnly. "Please contact us at the RPP living quarters as soon as you have something." She didn't want to embarrass him in front of his men and it was hard not to show her concern.

He nodded sharply and cut transmission.

Cole's hand moved to the small of her back and she looked over at him.

"He handled everything perfectly. Tremaine's fine."

She knew that he shared her concern. Cole had known Tremaine for a lot longer, after all. Now, however, he was the Captain and responsible for all of the lives of his crew.

It took three cycles before Tremaine's call came.

Andrea touched Tremaine's face on the screen. "I know you are okay, Tremaine, but allow me a moment to let you know that I worry for you."

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He smiled. God, she missed his smile. "Thank you for worrying about me, but they weren't really up to doing too much serious damage."

Cole leaned over Andrea's shoulder. "Who were they representing?"

Tremaine shook his head slightly. "It looks like they were a group of private ships. Guns for hire, as Andrea would say. They received orders and funds from a secondary banking group that has numbered accounts. We have sent the information to Aaron to see if he can use any of his influence to find out where the credits came from. I have asked him to contact you as soon as he finds anything out."

Cole nodded. "I'll let you know when he calls."

Andrea traced his face again on the screen. "Come and visit soon."

"When I get a chance." He nodded and the screen went black.

She turned and looked up at Cole. "We know that it's Mars Corp. They know that we know. They just want us to know that they haven't given up."

"They'll never give up."

E-sharp alerted Andrea to an incoming call from President Rivers.

Open communication, Mordred.

"Andrea, I'm sorry to call but I have just received a rather disturbing report that prisoner Nguyen has been smuggled out of the reconditioning unit. He was scheduled for laser therapy this week. We have already located the conspirators from the genetic residue left in his cell. They claim that he is heading back to Earth to be with his family. Once he gets out of Martian space, we have no claim on him. Earth does not recognize our laws and therefore does not acknowledge his crime."

"When did he leave Mars space?"

"We think that he's been gone for eleven cycles. It's far too late to retrieve him."

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"I grieve for the families that are missing a loved one knowing this monster will walk free with his family."

"We all do, Andrea."

"Thanks for calling Mr. President," she sighed and signed off.

Andrea had never even been this busy during filming. At least then it only lasted for finite number of shooting days and they had at least one day off per week!

It had been four days since she had even seen Nick and decided to run over to the lab and check in.

Lano offered to accompany her, as always. He had become her personal guard. He had also recently married Minister Puente's daughter and had been thrilled to announce that after one month of wedded bliss, Maria was pregnant. Considering his training, Andrea guessed that she was a very happy bride.

Maria had met him after he had been hurt in the explosion when she had been visiting her father. She had insisted on touring the med bay and meeting the survivors. They had started to talk and she had come back several times before he was released back to 101. Nick had altered her genetic makeup slightly and bonded some of the twenty-first century DNA to hers to help her to carry the child. Theirs was truly a marriage and not a term contract.

Andrea was glad to see that Minister Puente would be one of the first to hold a new grandchild. She still thought that rushing into having a kid was not her idea of the happy beginning to a new marriage, but this was not her century. A child was a new possibility on this world and new possibilities were going to be abounding.

When she walked into the lab, she saw Nick on the far side bending over a screen with a female coworker. As she neared them he put his hand at the small of her back and said something that she couldn't hear. The woman looked up and Andrea saw her face for the first time. This was the face of a woman in love and Nick was returning the look in equal measure. He looked up at that moment and saw her. His face froze and she smiled cheerily as she walked into the lab.

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She noticed the tag *Lanetti* and remembered that this was the doctor that Nick had built the lab with. "Dr. Lanetti, a pleasure. Nick has told us so much about you and you are as lovely as I pictured you to be."

"Please call me Carmen and thank you. Nick has often talked of your philanthropic endeavors."

I hope that's all, she thought.

"Cole and I are having dinner at the Neva. Would the two of you like to join us?"

Carmen looked uncertainly at Nick, who looked like her wanted to be anywhere but here. "Can we get away, Nick? Dinner might be a nice change from the quad."

When he looked into her face he relaxed and smiled again. "Sure, Carmen, let's celebrate. The labs are ready and staffed and they don't need us here every night."

"Good then. See you around 1900?"

They both nodded and they said their good byes.

Sometime you never know it's that last time for something until it is too late. Andrea was going to miss having Nick in her life and the physical bond that had developed. He was the one that had made her embrace this new life and the one that knew her heart. Nick had also been the one that had really allowed her to give herself permission to embrace her own passion. Nick was her friend for life but one part of the friendship was now closed forever. Her heart gave a flip as she acknowledged the loss. She hoped that Carmen would love him and cherish all of those traits that made him so special.

"Didn't you know that Nick and Carmen have been seeing each other?" she questioned Cole as they were getting ready for dinner.

"I knew that they worked together but that's all."

"It's important we show our approval. I don't want him to think that he isn't free to live a new life with her."

"Andrea, I think that Nick already knows that he can do whatever he likes. He has been one of the best friends that I've ever had and I know him well enough to know

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that he no longer lives in anyone's shadow. Coming back to Mars, being a part of RPP and changing his world has made him a leader here. People revere him more than the rest of us because he was one of them. He *is* one of them. Tremaine has embraced this world and is becoming one of them as well. He protects Mars and dedicates his life to guaranteeing Martian freedom. You and I, however, will always be Earthers."

Andrea knew that Cole was right. Her first home in her new life had been *Camelot*, her next the ship *Phoenix 101* for only a brief time. Now she lived on Mars although she couldn't say that she enjoyed it here. Life on *Camelot* had been carefree by comparison. She realized that she didn't really have a home now.

They joined Nick and Carmen for dinner and, again, Cole had been right. Nick had been shown to the best table. People constantly dropped by the table to say hello and show their gratitude. They always included Andrea and Cole, but their eyes shone when they looked at Nick. *He could be their next President*, she mused.

When the music started, Cole asked Carmen for a dance. When they left the table Andrea reached across and squeezed Nick's hand. "She is truly lovely Nick. You know that Cole and I wish you the very best."

He grinned the old Nick grin and her heart melted.

"I know, Andrea. I've been debating how to do this since I feel a responsibility to our partnership. Looking at you and Cole together makes it a lot easier. I want to ask Carmen to marry me. We share the same dream and the same history. She is, as you say, my soul mate. "

He paused and then added, "She is slowly learning to touch. I find that I need it now." He looked at Andrea pointedly. "I believe that it's something that needs to be reintroduced into our culture. It may be a small thing but it keeps us connected."

"It sounds like you will have the very best kind of marriage then. I wish you many children." This was the new standard Martian blessing.

"You might give marriage some thought too, Andrea. Cole is a good man."

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“Let’s not rush things, Nick. Allow yourself to be in the spotlight alone for a while.” She also knew that he would feel less guilt at leaving RPP if he knew that Andrea would not be alone.

After dinner, Andrea and Cole decided to walk the short distance home. They were wandering through one of the new park areas when a shadow disconnected from a statue and stepped in their path. Ex-Minister Nguyen stood with a personal ED pointed at them, mostly at her.

“It was you. You were the one that warned the President and you were the one that sent your spies to destroy me!”

She heard the sound of the ED firing and felt heat along her arm. There seemed to be a burst of noise. Then she was on the ground with Cole on top of her. He was very still and she started struggling to get him turned over. Then someone reached down and turned him over.

“Lano, thank God!”

Mordred, we have been attacked in the park outside the compound. Cole is hurt. Please get help!

Lano already notified me. Help will be there within thirty seconds.

“Lano, how bad is it?”

She was still on the ground next to Cole. “Oh hell. Where did Nguyen go?”

“He isn’t going anywhere Ms. Stone. He’s dead. My aim was better than his. It looks like the beam cut between the two of you but got closer to Captain Stuart. He’s unconscious but his vital signs are strong.”

Nick and Carmen ran up and knelt down next to Cole’s still form. Andrea had to move back and give them some room. “He didn’t take a direct hit. The transport is here and we’ll get him over to RPP Central Med Unit.”

Carmen noticed Andrea’s arm. “Andrea, your arm! You are coming with us now.” She was no longer the soft-spoken woman in love—she was a doctor functioning calmly in a crisis situation—and Andrea saw why Nick

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had fallen for her. Lano helped Andrea to her feet and when her knees buckled, the pain in her arm burst over her like a good old-fashioned fourth of July. Stars exploded in her head.

The next thing that Andrea saw was Tremaine looking down on her in a med bay.

"Cole?" she started.

"He's fine, Andrea. You're going to be okay too. You both are going to have to spend regen time though."

"Is he awake?"

"Oh, yes. And screaming that he wants to see you. He will not give in and can't be moved so the next best thing is taking you to him."

She whispered, "Let's take the mountain to Mohamed then."

He gave her a questioning look and helped her to her feet.

Cole looked awful. She had never seen him look so pale. The first day had been spent immersed in a regen bath. The solution always made everyone look that pale since it literally built brand new cellular tissue. Seeing him, normally so strong, laying there pale and in pain, she knew real fear.

Cole's eyes found her and held. He then saw the regen packing on her arm. "Nick told me that you were alright. It appears that he might have exaggerated at the very least." Nick was standing next to his bed looking a little sheepish.

"I am fine, Cole. It's just an ED burn on my arm. Nothing else was touched." *Except my nerves*, she thought.

She walked over to the med bay and leaned against the bed where he lay.

He looked into her eyes and yelled, "Everyone except Andrea, out!"

She hid her surprise as everyone scurried from the room.

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“We are going to have to look for a new plan, Andrea. This is not our home, never will be our home and I’m not going to wait here for someone else to come to kill us. They *will* come. We both know it. Both Tremaine and Nick have surrounded themselves with supporters and we have become the targets—we . . . you and me! Not because of them, but because we don’t belong here. It’s time for us to make a life for ourselves somewhere that we can call home. Agreed?”

She swallowed hard. He was right. But leaving her best friends would be hard. Leaving friends when you have a lot of them is not easy. When you only have a few, it’s the hardest thing you’ll ever have to do.

“Yes, Cole. As hard as it is to say, I do agree. This is not our home and I don’t want to die here. I would never say this to either of them but I’m not exactly nuts for Mars anyway. As lovely as it is, it just is too foreign to feel like home. Leaving Tremaine and Nick will be hell, though.”

“Yeah, I know. But we’ve got each other. I’m ordering another *Phoenix* and I’m going to assemble a group that we can trust. It’s time for us to look for a place that we can live in safety.”

“We still have too much money to live in total safety, Cole. They can always find us.”

“The *Phoenix 101* would be safer than planet-side. I will not see you harmed again.”

“Okay, why don’t you rest and we’ll work out the details in a few days.” She was trying to pacify him so that he wouldn’t get too upset. Nick came back in when he heard Cole’s raised voice.

“Cole, I told you that you were not to get upset. We brought Andrea in to calm you down. Now, sleep for a while.” He injected Cole with a sedative and he was out like a light.

“Why is he so upset?”

“It’s time for Cole and me to leave here, Nick. He’s right. This is not our home.”

“Of course it is! You helped us to start something beautiful here!”

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“Notice how you said that Nick. *You* helped *us*. You are a part of this world in a way that Cole and I never will be. That’s okay and I’m thrilled for you. But Cole and I are leaving to find *our* home.”

★ Chapter 19 ★

Cole was released and back in the RPP compound a week later, five full days after Andrea.

She had obediently ordered the warship as she told Cole she would and sent specifications for living quarters as well as crew accommodations. She requested that crew quarters be adjustable to suit family needs. If anyone would be coming with them, they had to be able to bring their mates because she didn't think they would be making the trip to Mars often, if at all.

Where they were going was a complete mystery. That was something that Cole would have to help her decide.

Tremaine and Cole walked into their compound together and Tremaine said, "Since I knew that Cole was to be released today, I decided to join you for mid-day meal."

As they settled around a table in the courtyard, Tremaine started. "So, Nick says that you are thinking of leaving Mars." He looked at Cole and then Andrea. "Is that still true?"

Cole glanced over at Andrea and then looked at the floor for a moment.

"Look, Tremaine, Andrea and I have been throwing ourselves into running the corporation, coordinating all of the bickering ministers, planning urban design and law—and trying to stay alive in the balance. It's just not enjoyable anymore."

He looked back up at Tremaine. "We have both been so exhausted, I've hardly touched her for weeks, as she recently reminded me. We rarely see Nick and almost

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never see you. That's not how I want to live. That's not how Andrea wants to live. I would rather be in an asteroid mining vessel again with the three of you than here."

"There are people that can take over those duties," Tremaine protested. "Both of you should step back and relax for a while before you make this decision. Take a trip and think it over."

Andrea was staring, hopefully, at Cole. "I wouldn't mind a vacation." She just waited.

"Okay. When the new ship arrives, let's take it on a maiden voyage and see how we feel. I just want to be back in space." *Back in command*, he thought.

"There's something else that I wanted to let you know," Tremaine hesitated. "I've agreed to sign a term contract with Alani on the *101*. We both want to have a child and this seems like the right thing for now." He knew that Andrea wasn't fond of the term contract idea and had not met her eyes.

Somehow it does seem right for Tremaine though, she thought as she considered his dark good looks. *Tremaine cared about us all but his true love was his new work*. There was always a distance that she couldn't put her finger on. She knew that he would risk his life for any of the Partners, but she wasn't sure if he had ever risked his heart. She knew that she loved him for the joy and laughter that he brought into her life.

"Does Alani feel the same way about this?"

"She's agreed to the contract." He looked a little confused.

"Tremaine, I assume that you consider her a friend, a fellow officer with a common goal and that you enjoy her company."

"Exactly."

"But, you are not in love with her."

"That isn't really important, right now," Tremaine was suddenly ice cold.

"I'm not accusing, Tremaine. I'm just saying, be sure that she is not in love with you and the contract will work out fine. If you are both starting from the same

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place and do not expect love where there is none, if you build on trust and friendship, it can grow into a wonderful relationship. The child will be yours all of your life. Later it will be easier to deal with her as a friend.”

Tremaine relaxed and his eyes softened on hers. “Like our friendship?”

Smiling back. “Like ours, Tremaine.”

But as she looked into his exotic eyes, she knew that she was losing more than just a friend and she realized that it hit her as hard as Nick’s engagement had, but in a different way. She hadn’t realized how much Tremaine mattered to her.

How much they both mattered to her.

Andrea spent the rest of the day at the console trying to coordinate a project that had been disputed by both the Minister of Industry and Minister of Urban Affairs. Neither would give an inch, she was finally at her wit’s end and her diplomacy snapped on a conference call with them both.

“Minister Graden, I *do* understand that the location of the new distribution center is vital and that this is the optimum location. I also understand, Minister Wood, that you’re concerned about the impact on surrounding traffic and drains on the city power grid. What I don’t understand gentlemen is why you both can’t work together to make this happen. This is *your* planet and I’m not your caretaker.”

Andrea gritted her teeth. “Minister Graden, draw up a projection of the true impact of your traffic and power requirements and hand it over to Minister Wood who will do a cost analysis of the impact over the next five, ten and fifteen years until project stability. Then we will fix this and go on! If that doesn’t work, my suggestion will be that your responsibilities be reversed so that you can properly understand each other’s perspectives.”

She terminated the contact and sat back, furious, in the chair. Strong hands started massaging her neck.

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"That sounded like you might be as fed up as I am," Cole muttered.

"I am. I'm just a glorified babysitter that dispenses candy to make the children behave. We handed them a golden opportunity and all they seem to do is bicker. I had hoped that the human race had improved since my time. Everyone has an agenda—and none of them seems to give a damn about Mars."

"I overdid it in the DGR today. Why don't we go relax in your hot tub and tell Mordred to keep everyone away?"

"Good answer."

Cole had the dec wall set to a beach scene and the lights were low. As Andrea slid into the hot, bubbling water she sighed, "This is one thing that I will miss in space."

He leaned back opposite her. "Who says that we can't have something like this? As you have taught me the answer is never *no*, just *how much*?"

She giggled. "God, you are starting to sound like a Producer."

Mordred turned on a sensual saxophone number and Andrea closed her eyes letting the stress fall away.

She almost was at a point of drifting off when she felt Cole's hands sliding up her legs. She opened her eyes and looked directly into his. He pulled her against him in the center of the water, his hand cradling the back of her head as he pulled her mouth against his.

It wasn't just kissing with Cole, he *touched* her, explored her with his mouth. He made her feel drunk from him.

"I've missed you," she murmured.

Andrea's arms curled around Cole's neck, her legs around his waist, her body suspended in the water. Cole's lips nuzzled her neck and then started searching lower. She moaned and tightened her grip on him, burying her face against his neck, tasting his skin. She felt herself slide back into the water as his lips traveled

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back up to her neck and ear, where he nibbled lightly. She traced a hand down his chest and across his hard abdomen, exploring his body and eliciting a moan from him this time.

The water was almost like a DGR in that their bodies moved easier against each other. He knew her by now, knew how to make the stars explode in her just as she knew him.

When her orgasms shook her, Cole held her gently and looked down on her face—and knew that he could never be without her.

All through the night they made love; like neither one could get enough of each other. He remembered her coming to him on the *Camelot* and telling him that she needed to feel alive after her revival. Facing death had driven them to this need for each other.

“Marry me,” he whispered into her hair.

She turned into his arms. “For life?”

“Forever. Let’s build a new world together, our world. I want to watch our children grow inside you and be the best of both of us. Ever since I learned that you could have kids, a part of me knew that they would be ours.”

“We’re going to have to find a special place then, a safe haven for a family.”

“I have an idea.” He had given this some thought. “We already own the planet at the edge of the colonial boundary. Mordred has the scout vids now. It’s a little like Earth, but smaller with a slightly lower gravity with no sentient inhabitants. It would be about a year before we could live on the surface. It’s pretty wild.”

“Show me.”

Mordred, please display scout vid from the RPP planet.

Andrea watched in awe as a green wilderness planet unfolded. From her view it looked like Alaska or Canada—or possibly what America had looked like before all the extensive development ruined it.

“It’s incredible!”

“What should we name it then?”

“Verde, I think would be appropriate. It is certainly a lush, lovely green.”

★ Chapter 20 ★

Cole and Andrea called a RPP meeting for the next day. Andrea decided that a dinner meeting might relax everyone for what she knew would be a difficult time.

She picked a Thai theme and introduced them to Thai Peanut Pasta with some amazing finger foods that everyone seemed to enjoy. They were also imbibing in Mirian wine and a bottle of a Napa Chardonnay that Aaron had sent with the Generation Sleeper ship.

When Cole judged that Nick and Tremaine had unwound enough, he started. “Andrea and I wanted you to be the first to know that we have decided to marry.”

Nick and Tremaine were joyous.

“I told you that you should consider this!” Nick teased.

Tremaine was hugging Andrea and then slapping Cole on the back. “When is the big day?”

“Actually, we wondered if you would marry us on the *Phoenix 101* later this week?” Cole tentatively asked of Tremaine.

Nick blurted, “But you should have a celebration here on Mars. Everyone will want to come!”

Cole and Andrea looked at each other. “No, Nick.” Cole paused, and then continued, “This is about Andrea and me. All of the security in the world can’t protect us in a group that large. We don’t really plan on dying on our wedding day.”

Tremaine smiled back and forth at them and then the smile started to slide from his face. “There’s more. What is going on?”

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Andrea reached out and took his hand in hers. “We’re leaving Mars, Tremaine. Cole and I have talked about this until we’re quite sure. We know that you both have ties here now and so it’s time to break up RPP. Cole and I are removing our names from the corporation and splitting the remaining wealth. This will leave you more than enough to finish your projects here and build a fabulous life for yourselves.”

Tremaine had gone quiet.

Nick just kept shaking his head. “Finally we start to get settled here, the genetics are working, the population has hope and now you leave. Why not stay here? We can protect you.”

“It’s not home for Andrea or me, Nick. Let me also remind you that you can’t protect us. The population is too large to guarantee against each person and many of these people have no loyalty to the two of us. You two, on the other hand, are heroes and you are constantly surrounded by people that would stop an ED beam for you. I don’t want to worry about my children growing up afraid.”

Andrea thought back on Los Angeles during her final days on Earth and remembered the shootings in the streets and the constant fear. No one was safe and everyone lived their lives in cages that they had learned to call home. The compound had started to be a cage for them.

“We’ve ordered three more warships to protect the space around our new home, which Cole and I have named Verde. Initially, we will be using them to transport the materials to build a small city, a town really, with state of the art urban facilities. The final group of GenEng is being released from Earth and should be here next week. We will have to start a process to ask for volunteers and screen those into a core group that will go with us to colonize our planet. Aaron has located forty Earthers that can be trusted and is making arrangements for their departure. These people have been working with the Circle for many years and are in danger of being found out. Naturally, we offered them

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Mars or Verde. They chose Verde. We will have three doctors in that group as well as several other health specialists and scientists. There are several artists and musicians. We will be looking for one hundred and fifty others to join our group to balance out our small society and later, when we can support growth, we can invite others to come. That will give us an initial group of around two hundred, although that can change."

"There will be some of our existing group that will want to come. There is an attraction in being a big fish in a small pond," Tremaine offered.

Andrea laughed. "Another Stone-ism?"

"Just the truth." He looked like a lost puppy as he pulled her into a hug. "I feel like I'm losing my best friends."

"You two have each other to depend on. The biggest problem you'll face is finding a partner that can handle the money. You might want to consider hiring a staff and investing in a Computer Control Unit that specializes in finance. Although I have to leave both of you here, I do have to take Mordred. I hope you understand that losing him too would be too much."

Nick nodded silently. "When are you leaving?"

"Probably within a month of when the ships arrive. The earliest date for the arrival is four months out." Cole leaned forward in his chair.

"Aaron is already ordering equipment and supplies from the colonies. Since everything will be shipped here, the assumption will be that it's for Mars. We want to keep this strictly between us for the next week so that these shipments don't get delayed. Since Andrea and I are still having some legal problems with Earth Central, we don't want to let anyone know that this equipment is specifically for us."

"I knew the other day when I thought that I had talked you two into a vacation that it wouldn't hold water. Years with Cole have shown me that when he gets an idea, nothing will stop him." Tremaine was still standing close to Andrea as he squeezed one of her hands and added, "I would be honored to marry you on

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the *Phoenix 101*.” As he looked at her shining face a part of him was dying. His world would never be the same.

She beamed at him. “Something small and private.”

Of course it was a little bigger than they had planned. President Rivers insisted on coming, Carmen and Alani of course. Lano was stricken until they included him and Maria. Minister Puente called when Maria told him of the event and so on and so on.

Eventually, over one hundred friends were planning to join them as they exchanged twenty-first century vows, per Andrea’s direction. It took Mordred a while to research the traditional vows that hadn’t been used in centuries.

Carmen gave Andrea a lovely cream dress that flowed around her like chiffon but didn’t have the transparency. The fabric glimmered and sparkled in the lights as she moved and made her feel beautiful. Andrea had shocked a shoemaker by giving him a design for a pair of pumps that he said looked dreadfully dangerous and had added, “You must sign a waiver that I am not responsible for your safety!” The shoes lifted her a full three inches and gave the dress additional dignity. It took her a few cycles practicing in them before she got her balance back.

Cole had invested in a lovely soft gray cashmere-like suit that showed off his body well. The style reminded Andrea slightly of what a nineteenth century English gentleman might wear. As she looked at him she felt a wave of emotion that almost brought her to tears. Meeting Stephen had been lucky. Meeting Cole had been a miracle. She had waited for him in a cold, fragile pod for over six centuries and he had been worth every second of the wait.

Andrea was dressed and ready for her wedding—and couldn’t have been more terrified if bombs were exploding around her.

Nick came in and got a little choked up when he first saw her. She had gone to an appearance designer and

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had her hair clipped and shaped for the first time since her rebirth. It was finally long enough to do something with it and she was sick of the chopped look.

Andrea had missed her long locks when she first came out of the regen bath. Now her hair hung past her shoulders and had grown back thicker. With a little help from a fabulous machine that was a modern day curling iron, she had added a little curl. As she was brushing her hair, she thought of Cole's hands in her hair and closed her eyes thinking of how she loved that feeling. She felt completely frozen and couldn't figure out why she should be so nervous.

Nick cradled her face in his hands and looked at her with those beautiful golden eyes.

"Now, with hindsight, I know that we had a brief, magical life. The four of us will always share a bond that can reach across time and space. I will always be there for you and for Cole. All you need to do is call."

He paused when he saw her eyes start to glisten. "Now it's time to get to your wedding."

She nodded and he led her out and through the open passageway into the formal banquet hall where all of her friends waited. Mordred played soft music as Nick walked her in. She took one look at Cole and all of her nervousness fell away. There was nothing to be nervous about now. He was her lover, her friend, and her future.

Cole watched her as she walked toward him and felt something hard closing off his throat.

How in the universe had he been this fortunate? He was the beneficiary of Nick and Tremaine's hard work and ethics even getting her alive again. She was beautiful, intelligent, compassionate and giving . . . and why she loved him was a wonder.

Tremaine walked them through their vows and both of them choked up a little on the *I do* part.

Then it was over and Cole captured her mouth and held her close to him as people swarmed around them with hugs and well wishes. The next few cycles were a swirl of laughing faces and French champagne. The latter a gift from Aaron to Nick upon the announcement of Nick

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and Carmen's nuptials and Nick thought that now was a great time to open the bubbly. A live band was playing classical style music (it wasn't quite classical to Andrea) and she found herself pulled into her husband's arms.

"You are so incredibly beautiful Andrea."

"You look gorgeous too, Cole. I have only known you a year and my whole life is completely changed. You certainly know how to show a girl a good time."

He leered at her *just wait until later!*

She raised her eyebrows and said, "I'm counting on that, Mr. Stuart."

Nick, and then Tremaine cut in and finally President Rivers claimed the next dance. As he swung her around the floor he asked, "I never had a chance, did I?"

"No Sam, not a snowball's chance in hell."

He threw back his head and howled with laughter. "You are a treasure. I hope Cole knows what he got himself into."

"Oh, I know," he said from behind Sam, cutting back in, "and I'm terrified."

Andrea mocked outrage as Cole whirled her away to the sounds of the surrounding laughter. They danced and chatted until people started to wind down and start to excuse themselves. Cole thought that this was the perfect time to escape with his new wife.

"Are you ready to leave?"

"Let's blow this pop stand." When he gave her his standard quizzical smile, she continued, "Leave like a tree, get out of Dodge, fly like the—"

He stopped her with a kiss. "We're out of here."

She grinned and they said their good-byes. Andrea wanted to spend at least their first week on the 101. They felt safe and it felt more like home than Mars.

"Cole, isn't it amazing that we are in a relatively fragile container in a complete vacuum and we feel safer than on the surface of a perfectly good planet?"

"It just feels like home here." He slid his hand down the back seam and the dress opened and he pushed it to the floor. When he stood back to look at her, he had another pleasant surprise.

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Andrea smiled. She had designed a corset to wear under the gown and had shimmering silk-like stockings made to wear under the gown. With the shoes, she was truly a throwback from the twentieth century.

"That is the sexiest outfit that I have ever seen in my life. Thank the universe that I didn't know you had it on for the past five cycles or I would have either never made it through the ceremony or embarrassed us both by carrying you bodily from the reception."

She slid his coat from his broad shoulders and ran her finger down the seam on the front of his shirt. "Let's see how you look under the trappings of civilization, Captain Stuart," as she continued to undress him.

"We don't have our whirlpool but at least we have your shower."

"The hot water is going to feel heavenly."

He unhooked the back of her corset and she sat on the edge of the chair and watched him as he slid the stockings down her legs. She was enjoying her effect on him. He watched as she twisted her thick, shining hair on top of her head and secured it with a golden clip.

He looked up and caught her smiling. "You like teasing me, don't you?"

She laughed and nodded. He drew her up and against him for a long, deep kiss and then pulled her toward the shower. She quickly adjusted the settings and they stepped into the dual spray of the hot water.

He stood behind her, kissing her neck. "It doesn't feel real yet. I keep thinking of the first time that Aaron called you and it took me weeks to accept reality."

"I think that this is as real as it gets, Captain."

She turned and trapped his face in her hands and drew his lips to hers. He pulled her close and whispered into her ear. "You are amazing."

She continued to amaze him as the night wore on. She felt like a teenager, testing the boundaries for the first time and finding that they were gone. As wonderful as it had always been between them, there was no comparison to now. They both knew that the time spent on the *Camelot* had just been the introduction.

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Andrea realized that she had been hurt when Nick and Tremaine had pulled away from them to start their new lives. This commitment that Cole offered her gave her a comfort that she had been missing since coming to Mars. She had felt out of place and alone and knew that this was Cole's way of showing her that she would never be alone again. The freedom of space sounded fabulous. Four months and they would leave; twelve months and they could move into their new home . . . on a beautiful, lush green, unspoiled planet.

"I hope that we can still travel even with a planetary home. I find that I truly enjoy space travel."

"It's not quite the same when the time between destinations is measured in moments instead of in months," he replied softly.

"So, should we travel on an asteroid miner?"

"And be sitting ducks for our enemies? No, we'll just have to spend some time orbiting close to gravity wells where we can have some warning when we have uninvited guests."

They were curled in their favorite position, him behind her. He stroked her abdomen absently as he spoke.

She placed her hand over his. "I love you, Cole."

He leaned up and pulled her flat on the bed so that he could look at her face.

"And I love you, Andrea. You have changed my life and made me happier than I ever imagined that I would be." He kissed her softly and pulled her close as she started to drift into sleep. "Life with you will certainly be interesting," he was saying as sleep claimed her.

They spent the next two weeks on board where they were away from the responsibilities of Mars and RRP. They both re-familiarized themselves with the *101*, which would be almost identical to their own ship and spent the rest of the time doing what most couples do on their honeymoon.

Lynn Sterling

More and more often Mordred noted the emotion that was joined to requests from the crew.

The most disturbing was the sorrow that he felt from Tremaine. Tremaine had always been very structured with his emotions and Mordred found his current condition odd—especially when compared to the obvious happiness of the rest of the crew. Mordred was troubled by Tremaine's pain. Although Mordred was ill-equipped to help, he finally contacted Tremaine and offered to listen.

Mordred never noticed when he made the jump from Computer Control Unit to friend and confessor.

★ Chapter 21 ★

The alarm claxons woke them. Mordred had skipped their usual E-sharp.

Incoming warships have hostile intent. Earth markings. Message broadcast, Turn over the criminals Andrea Stone and Cole Stuart or face destruction.

How many enemy ships and their class?

Twenty ships. One of equal capability to the 101.

“This is not like last time, Cole. Earth has declared its intentions and these ships will not abandon the fight if their leader is destroyed.”

Cole was already in a day suit and Andrea was close behind.

“I’ve got to get to the bridge with Tremaine.”

“I’ll be in engineering. That’s where my training can be used.”

She was palming the door to engineering when she realized that she hadn’t said *I love you. Please God, let me have the chance to say it one more time.*

Tremaine stood in the center of the bridge like he had been born there. “Your request is unilaterally denied. Earth law has no power in Mars’s space. You are in violation of Mars space and as the Director of Mars Space Military, I direct you to leave immediately.”

Their answer was an ED beam that struck space just off of the bridge. “Warning shot,” Cole said as he joined Tremaine.

Tremaine’s eyes were ice. “I don’t give warnings and I don’t play games.”

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He nodded to the weapons officer who relayed a message to the other Martian fleet of six warships.

They immediately broke into an intricate pattern and started to fire on the enemy vessels. The Earth ships were not prepared for instant aggression but within seconds, started to return fire. Two of the MSM ships were drawing a small group away from the Earth fleet. When they were twenty thousand kilometers from the main ship, they activated a space array that caught the Earth ships in a shield web.

As the Earth ships continued to fire, the web collected the energy and started to reflect it back on the ships. Before they realized what was happening, two of the Earth ships burst into a bonfire in space; the four others lost power and started to drift. Fire doesn't burn long in space, only long enough to disburse the gasses and oxygen. It was still long enough to get their attention. Unfortunately, it didn't help the other five ships that had been pulled away in the opposite direction by two of the other MSM ships that met their fate seconds after the first.

Those not completely destroyed, hung helpless in space. This part of the defense had been easy but the enemy wouldn't fall for it again. The battle would be much harder from now on.

Tremaine had recently installed a state of the art detection and weapons web that completely surrounded Mars. Now that it was activated, none of these ships could fire or land on Mars. It didn't protect their ships from being fired on, however, and that was happening with greater and greater rapidity.

Cole went to the weapons station to stand by but it was killing him not to be in control. He saw that Tremaine had trained and was ready for this—and he didn't interfere. He had to trust his old friend to get them out of this.

Andrea reported to engineering as engineering officer Marin directed several of his crew to watch for web overlap. She watched and learned as Mordred poured information into her brain about the new systems and

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the web grid designed to protect the planet. The grid could be just as much of a danger to them as an enemy ship if the identification safeties had not been in place. Where the grids overlapped, there was always a slight danger that one or the other controller missed the ID code. They had been testing before they found that the grid had been designed for a planet slightly larger than Mars, thus the overlaps. Unfortunately, sufficient testing had not fully proven the systems ability to prevent a *friendly* from being destroyed in an overlap zone.

Andrea walked to a free console and started to watch the patterns developing in the enemy ships.

The largest ships remained just out of weapons reach as the Earth ships flew toward them in waves. Instead of engaging the MSM fleet, they distracted them and attempted to break up the fleet to follow. It was hard to bombard the Earth ships with enough ED energy to break down their shields when they kept hitting and running. However, their beams continued to hit the MSM ships time after time. They wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer.

"*Phoenix 102* just sustained a hit that brought their shields down to minimal levels," came a loud yell from behind her.

She heard Tremaine's voice as he ordered the *102* to break off and dive under the shield web to escape further damage. They watched as the *102* broke off and started to swing back and forth dodging the enemies ED beams. Just when the enemy ship started to close, it must have realized that it was too close to the outer web zone. The *102* dived into the Martian atmosphere as the Earth ship exploded on the outer web perimeter. The *102* continued to stay just inside the zone in case it could come back out to be of help.

"Code 721. Three hundred two mark five," Tremaine said calmly into the ship's voice comm. Andrea mentally questioned Mordred but before the answer could come back to her she *felt* the ship change.

Space fold jump which will place the three Phoenix ships behind and below the Earth vessels.

Lynn Sterling

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She blinked and they had relocated to an ambush position. She saw the ED beams pour from the *Phoenix* ships at full power. Before they could react, two of the ships had lost weapons. The lead ship swung around and started to lay down her return fire. One of the main beams caught the *101*.

Again she felt the ship change and suddenly, they were *above* and behind the lead ship. Moving like this in the gravity well of Mars was against every rule of physics that Andrea knew. Tremaine had taken the chance to do it once, but twice started to terrify her.

Mordred, how can we be folding in the Mars gravity well?

Recent alterations have been made to the Phoenix vessels. The investigation of the renegade vessel destroyed at Mira has turned up operational schematics that have been incorporated into the Phoenix ships. These have not yet been fully tested but theoretically allow ships to fold in gravity wells up to a Level Five.

Basically gravity wells up to the level generated by a planet approximately the size of Saturn? Amazing.

Andrea heard a pop and turned to see alarm lights flashing on a console that had very obviously objected to the extreme gravity variance. The officer assigned to that station was unconscious on the floor. The medical alert had already called a med team to help and one of the assistants was bending over him checking for vitals.

Andrea stepped to the console and pulled off the cover. She turned quickly, pulled the tool kit from under the console, and started to pull the fried components quickly from the console.

Mordred, I need replacement part Nos. 7897, 9032, 4832, 5525 and 6972. Quickest location not impeding current ship needs?

Communications console No. 2 can be disabled to pull 4832, 5525 and 6972; 7897 and 9032 have redundant boards in the web ID unit.

Andrea ran to the comm console and yanked off the panel. She pulled the three boards and slid them into the

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damaged console. She then went to the web ID unit and proceeded to remove the remaining units. The second that she pulled the first board out, the alarm went off. The computer started announcing that the back up unit was faulty and the ID unit was now inactive.

Mordred, get me Tremaine.

Tremaine here.

In order to get the fold console back up the web ID is now down. Is that acceptable?

Acceptable, Tremaine returned.

Andrea slid the final components home and watched the diagnostics as the fold console came back up.

Fold console up and available.

Acknowledged, Tremaine replied.

Mordred, please disconnect from Tremaine.

Andrea gritted her teeth. *I sure hope the navigator knows exactly where we are or the web shield will fry us like toast.*

I am also monitoring our position. The ship is remaining well outside of the danger zone.

In the meantime the three *Phoenix* ships commenced firing on the lead Earth ship from their new position. The backup was on the way and they were quickly running out of time. If they could bring down the last remaining large vessel, the seven smaller ships would be, at least, a fair fight.

Tremaine stood on the bridge staring at the scans. "Continue firing for ninety seconds. When the main group of back up ships are five seconds from range of the 103, jump to position just out of orbit range at the coordinates downloading now. *Phoenix 103* you will then slide within the net." The other ship acknowledged and downloaded their target positions.

Both *Phoenix* vessels jumped into position and commenced firing as planned. Two ships were ahead of the pack and the 101 shuddered as it took hit after hit but it continued to fire on the lead Earth ship, allowing the smaller vessels to fire on them at will.

Just before the main wave came within weapons range, the lead ship lost power. The *Phoenix* ships broke

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in different directions and picked their targets. They destroyed or disabled the two ships sweeping in on them, leaving five of their smallest ships to fight the battle.

“Target weapons only. These ships have only Class-Five shields and Level-Three weapons.”

Within ten minutes, the remaining ships were helpless.

“Communication request from lead ship.”

Open communication, Mordred. Tremaine was ready for this.

The halo showed an attractive Earther male. “I am Commander Smythe. It seems that you have won this battle, GenEng. What are your terms?”

“You will be allowed to keep the four remaining ships. We will, of course, remove all weapons from the ships before you leave our space. The remaining ships will become the property of Mars to use for our own purposes.”

“We can’t transfer our troops back in only four ships!”

Tremaine was brutal—but not nearly as brutal as the Earthers would have been to him and his troops had they lost this round.

“You will leave in the four ships or you will die. I don’t particularly care which. You may want to consider sleeper modules for part of your troops, although it is not my concern. And Commander Smythe, allow me to remind you that Mars is a sovereign planet no longer under Earth law. Any further attempt to enter our space will be dealt with severely. I suggest that you consider that materials currently needed from the colonies might never reach a place as distant as Earth. Where, exactly, would that put you then?”

Smythe glared at him but his fear was evident. “You can’t threaten us like this!”

“Smythe, I didn’t learn to play games as a child, since I never was one. You will find this a prevalent attitude in the new GenEng citizens of Mars. We do not bluff and we do not play human games. This is our home and we will protect it with our lives. Do not push me or you will go home in one ship if you go home at all.”

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Smythe gritted his teeth but kept his tongue although he was obviously furious.

"Prepare to be boarded," Tremaine ordered.

"Terms agreed and accepted."

The *Phoenix 102* joined them for boarding parties.

Andrea continued repairs and put together a parts requisition list. She had Mordred list her battle modifications for the regular crew.

She was leaning over a weapons console when Cole slipped his arms around her. "Quite a honeymoon. Do I know how to show you fireworks or what?"

She gave him a quick hug and a grin. "Please tell me that you didn't plan this."

"No, but Tremaine's planning was flawless."

Tremaine entered engineering at that moment. "Thanks, Andrea. Knowing that the fold technology was working allowed me to stay and continue firing on the lead ship up till the last second. That was the time that we needed and would have saved our lives if the ED beam hadn't finally broken through."

She nodded her thanks and followed Cole down the passageway. He stopped in front of their quarters and turned to her. "I'm going to help out for a few more cycles and I'll come back once the enemy has been transferred and is on their way."

She nodded again and watched him walk toward the bridge.

Once she got into their quarters, she felt exhausted as the tension from the combat overcame her. She stripped off her day suit, turned on the shower and just leaned against the wall letting the water calm her.

They had come for her and Cole. Their lives would always be surrounded with this kind of hate and she was convinced that the money was the root of all evil.

E-sharp interrupted her sorrow.

Yes, Mordred.

Andrea, would you like to talk?

Mordred had never wanted to be involved with emotion and usually left her quite alone when she was sad or upset so she was surprised.

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I'm just feeling depressed. It's hard to know that for the rest of my life Cole and I will be pursued. Even on Verde we will have to surround ourselves with protection devices and weaponry. It will still be a cage, albeit a very large one.

Would you wish for a different life?

You mean, maybe one where my home planet doesn't send twenty warships to capture or kill me?

Isn't this the path that you chose?

She shook her head but knew that he was right.

Yes, Mordred. It looks like I definitely made my bed this time. Goodnight, Mordred.

Goodnight, Andrea.

Andrea curled up on the bed and fell into a deep fitful sleep. She woke briefly when Cole slipped in to bed and he pulled her close, then drifted off again with a smile on her face and his arms around her.

She and the people that she loved were safe for now.

Out of the three ships confiscated by MSM, two were very badly damaged. The lead ship was going to take a minimum of two weeks to refit and the other two at least two months. The good news was that Mars now had three additional warships and Earth had sixteen fewer. The 102 had repairs currently ongoing and reported that they would be fully functional within fifty cycles.

Aaron filed an official complaint on behalf of Cole and Andrea, and President Rivers placed a real time call for the Earth council to express his outrage.

"Earth is currently banned from Mars space. Any further attempt will result in a declaration of war. Don't forget that the colonies are on our side and although we can survive without Earth, Earth cannot survive without the colonies unless you want a reoccurrence of the global ecological damage that you are just now recovering from. The days when Mars needed Earth supplies to survive are long gone. You will learn to deal with us as equals or you will not deal with us at all!"

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The President had closed the communication without waiting for any comment from the Earth Council. When he got mad Andrea saw Stephen in him and it brought a smile to her face.

Ore still had to be refined and the outer moons of Mars were the perfect place for this to continue. Earth certainly wasn't going to relocate the ore refineries to their planet. The outer colonies were attempting to jump in and put up refineries on their moons, but their funds were severely limited. For now, Mars held the high hand and if they were going to gain anything from it, they would have to act soon, lest they lose their advantage completely.

There was a small space dock currently orbiting Mars. Tremaine and Sam had investigated the costs of upgrading their current services and offering services for trade to the other colonies. Andrea helped them set up a new barter system that included the colonies so that fair values could be established and locked for a period of six months in order to initiate trade.

One of the most valuable trade items was genetic enhancement. The colonies had started to send their top people, only the wealthiest at the beginning, to the clinic run by Dr. Ferraro.

Many GenEng people agreed to be surrogate fathers in exchange for a major contribution to the Mars efforts. The female GenEng were busy increasing the Mars population and had no intention of leaving their new home. Earth was being cut out of the loop until such time that they were willing to deal fairly with the colonies.

The new ships arrived and Andrea and Cole found that many of the GenEng were electing to join them. The lead ship would be Andrea and Cole's new home. It took quite some time to choose the people that would be joining them initially.

Lano came to Andrea a few days after the ships arrived and he was visibly upset.

"I really want to join you but Maria can't leave her family or her home. This is not easy for me but I must

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stay here with my wife and child.” Their child would be born in about two months and all of Mars was watching the first Martian/GenEng birth.

“I know, Lano, and I understand. You have a place here and President Rivers has expressed an interest in you recently. He wants to know if you would consider joining his security detail. Your wife and father-in-law are not the only Martians trying to keep you here. You are loved and respected. What more could you ask for?”

Lano dipped his head. “You have given me a life that I would never have dared to dream of. I owe you a great deal.”

“RPP offered you a chance to change your life, Lano. You grabbed that brass ring and held on. Anything that you think was ever owed to me was repaid when you saved Cole and my life time after time and when you gave Minister Puente a reason to believe in the Mars plan by loving his daughter and giving him a grandchild. I will miss your friendship and loyalty but I'll sleep well knowing that you can offer the same to President Rivers.”

He lifted his face and she saw tears in his eyes. “Thank you Andrea.”

This was the first time that Lano had used her first name. It was appropriate from a friend and Andrea knew that she would miss him.

★ Chapter 22 ★

Nick and Carmen had planned a wedding to end all weddings. Everyone wanted to be included and even after paring down the guest list, there were two thousand attendees. They were all going to meet Aaron in person for the first time, since the *Phoenix 103* had been dispatched to pick him up.

Cole and Andrea gave the soon to be newlyweds a whirlpool tub and had it delivered two days before the wedding. When Carmen started to go orbital from a severe case of nerves, Andrea took her into the whirlpool, scented it slightly, lit a few candles and told her just to relax for a few minutes.

Forty-five minutes later, Carmen was a convert. She came out in a fluffy robe, relaxed and smiling. “That was just what I needed. Now I see what you mean about unwinding together. Nick and I actually *will* enjoy this, after all!”

Andrea mocked outrage. “What, you didn’t believe me?”

Carmen gave her an embarrassed smile. “Well, some of your ideas *are* a little odd, Andrea.”

Tremaine and Cole stood up with Nick, and Andrea watched them from one of the front pews. Nick looked as terrified as she had felt when he had come to escort her to Cole. It’s that whole fear of change thing that was

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grabbing him by the throat. He had certainly come a long way in the last nine months.

Carmen was a vision and took Nick's breath away. Andrea was starting to get worried about his color when he finally remembered to breathe. Carmen's father walked her proudly toward her new husband and there were a lot of wet eyes when she kissed her father's cheek and reached out to take Nick's hand.

The reception was a bash. Great food, great music, great wine and fabulous company.

Andrea had given Aaron a huge hug when he first got there and found them together at dinner, as well.

"I couldn't have designed this last nine months better," he marveled at the changes in Mars. "It used to be drab and boring. You all have breathed new life into this planet. The red mountains and peach skies have always thrown me a little, but I'm starting to see a majesty here that is moving. The main difference is the people. They are so happy! Look at them. They look like they're drunk on life."

"I think champagne and wine may have something to do with it. The biggest change is the number of pregnant women. They are the ones that are radiant. Everyone comes up to them and offers them everything from childcare services to custom shoes, made special for the mother-to-be. It's a whole new cottage industry. The children are their new hope, Aaron."

One of the Martian ladies came and coaxed Aaron onto the dance floor and Andrea started to look around for Cole. She finally noticed him leaning against the wall, looking out over the dancers. She made her way over to him and slipped her hand in his.

"I wouldn't mind if you took me for a walk in the garden, Mr. Stuart."

He grinned.

"My thoughts exactly."

They walked slowly through one of the first city gardens. She noticed that Lano and his team were keeping an eye on them as they drifted through the walkways.

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"I have something that I wanted to talk to you about." She sat on a bench and looked up into his face as he sat down slowly beside her.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. Have you talked to Tremaine lately? He doesn't seem like himself."

"He'll be fine, Andrea." He paused and looked into her eyes. "Our lives have all been turned upside down. His more than anyone's. He's just adjusting."

She smiled into his face. "Yes, of course. But let's keep an eye on him."

"I know what I like to be keeping an eye on right now." He smiled and she felt his hand slide into her hair and pull her lips to his.

They walked arm in arm back to the party with smiles for each other that married couples sometimes get when they know they are thinking the same thing and don't need to speak.

The next few weeks were hectic and exciting.

They had already designed their new town on Verde from the survey done four months previous. There had been many suggestions and finally, the name Tristin had been chosen. Everyone wanted something new that did not remind them of a past not worth remembering.

Tristin was designed to be a total zero impact city. The water, sewer and power needs had to support themselves with no ecological consequences for the surrounding land.

Each home was designed with the latest in technology to recycle almost all products at the sight as well as the age-old technology of using the soil itself as a building material. When soil was excavated from building sights, it was mixed with a new bio bond that could be poured into force-field molds for exterior walls. The walls would be impervious to water and as strong as steel and had elasticity to stand up to most natural forces. This reduced the amount of materials that had to be shipped

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and was more eco friendly. Larger recyclables were handled by the city. The facilities were designed for the larger population and were to be built in stages, as needed.

The initial medical facility would grow to four times its original size eventually. Their planned city offices and all their schools were outfitted with four Computer Control Units as was the arts and entertainment center.

Andrea looked at the realistic three-dimensional images and wished that it was already complete. She wanted to hike in the surrounding hills and swim in the lake and lay in the sun on the grass.

Draman was going to Verde to head planetary defense and fleet commander.

He had been studying with Tremaine and was planning to install the planetary net upon arrival. The net would prevent small-scale attacks but would not stop a comet or asteroid that was redirected for impact with Verde. The war ships and ED platforms would have to be in place for anything of that scale. They were hoping that they'd have a few months of peace and quiet at Verde before the location was known. Everything would have to move quickly in order to protect this fragile new home.

Andrea and Cole were spending almost all of their time on their new lead ship, which had been named the *Tahoe* in honor of Andrea's birthplace. The other two were named *Banff* and *Aspen*. She smiled wistfully as she remembered those wonderful places that no longer existed.

The altered living quarters had been a big plus when they were selecting crew. Several families from the Circle had been living on board for the last two months.

Andrea had made close friends with the wife of one of the ex-Circle leaders, Jacquie. She found that she had missed her close female friends from the twenty-first century and it was wonderful to relax and share some *girl talk*.

Jacquie was an accomplished musician and was looking forward to establishing the first music program for Verde. She was not only going to teach, but entertain

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the new Verdians. She and her husband Jack Spencer had a daughter, Lilly, that was four and completely precocious.

The classroom Computer Control Units were being put to use for their new population. Since only the very lucky or the very rich had children, Andrea noticed that almost every Circle couple had a child. Many of them had hidden a large portion of their wealth but still, most had left large portions of the net worth behind in order to escape before they were arrested.

“Jacquie, don’t you ever feel bitter about the life that you left behind?”

“Sometimes. I miss the concert halls and the other musicians the most. Jack had warned me long ago of the possibility that he might be found out. I guess I never really believed that it would happen. One day I was planning a tour, the next I was terrified that Jack and I would be imprisoned or reconditioned and our child would be given to a *more worthy* home. When Aaron told us that arrangements had been made for us to escape, it was like a miracle. After everything that we had to go through to get Lilly, I would rather die than see her taken from me. We were fortunate that a large portion of our LC had been invested by the Circle.”

“It seems like the Earth Protection Forces don’t think much of anyone who knew to dump their Mars Corp stock before the takeover. There weren’t very many of the Circle that held Mars Corp stock, and I feel sorry for anyone that just happened to dump their stock at the wrong time not knowing about us. They will be targeted just as you were.”

“It’s funny that I was worried most how Lilly would react to such a new environment. She acts like she belonged here all along. She loves to explore the ship and we had to *active tag* her for Mordred so that we can all keep her out of trouble. I’m not sure if the crew has adopted her or she has adopted the crew.”

“We’re lucky to have you all. Jack’s experience is invaluable. His contacts will be as well, when we can start to trade with the colonies. I have to admit that I

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look forward to passing the financial responsibility on to him. As much as I've enjoyed all this, I'm ready for a change."

Jacquie looked smugly at Andrea's abdomen. "Well, you're going to get one!"

"How did you know?" Andrea demanded.

"Intuition. Does anyone else know?"

"Not even Cole."

Andrea gave her a nervous smile. "That certainly happened faster than I ever thought it would. Stephen and I had thought about children but it never seemed like the right time. When I had the blocker removed, I thought it'd take a while before I got pregnant. Nick convinced me not to wait until I was sure that we could offer a safe, stable environment for a family. Since Cole is so busy with plans for Verde, I wanted to wait to tell him. I can't really admit to him that I am so nervous about bringing our child into the world in the midst of so much uncertainty."

"Our lives will always be uncertain, Andrea. Even those that *go with the flow* face constant changes. No one can ever say that we will fit the norm. We have all chosen a better way and it will never be easy. There will never be a perfect time to have a child, but it's always the right time. I thought that my life was stable and safe. Ha!"

At that moment Andrea felt a stirring in the back of her mind. A frown creased her brow as she searched for what she was feeling. It didn't feel like brushing someone's mind, yet it didn't feel like her warning feelings. There was no form of thought or intent, only a gentle nudge.

"Andrea, what's wrong?" Jacquie touched her hand in alarm.

Andrea reached out with her mind and then her mouth fell open in amazement. "I can feel him. He is touching my mind!"

"Who?"

"Our son. It's like he knew that I was upset."

"It looks like he inherited your talent. It also looks like your privacy just went out the window."

Journey To Diir

"I can consciously block him when I need to, now that I know that he feels me. But at this early point in his development, his higher functions shouldn't even be functional. He isn't communicating exactly, it feels more like radar."

"Blocking him probably requires focus and a little concentration, right?"

"A little, that's right."

"Just how focused can you stay when you are making love?"

Andrea frowned.

Mordred, my son is expressing empathic capabilities. Can you connect with him through me?

Yes.

Can you block him from detecting my emotion?

Yes.

Andrea glanced back at Jacquie. "Well, I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

She decided to discuss this further with Mordred later and changed the subject.

"At least he's going to be born into a world with less prejudice. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there was rampant prejudice. Even when people thought things were getting better, there was always someone that would start things all over again. I had always hoped that we would grow out of that."

"I learned about some things that happened back then. Wasn't most of it because of religious differences?"

"Not all of it. They used any reason that came up. Anyone different was a target. Religion, race, sex, sexual orientation, size and even if people were attractive or not were reasons to ostracize a person or group. What is really infuriating is that the Martians were attacked and infected with a virus meant to control them and then ostracized because of the virus. When that same virus came back to haunt the monsters that had created it, the Martians were treated like pariahs. Why is it that no one ever investigated the designer of that virus?"

"I heard there was an attempt made to find the culprits, once the virus made its way to Earth. No one

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was ever blamed, although everyone knew that Mars Corp had paid the designers. Earth officials needed the products refined and created off planet and they would never investigate *the goose that lays the golden egg*.” Jacquie had adopted Stone-isms with a vengeance.

“So what did they think? It isn’t like Mars Corp could sell it all to the colonies. They were still going to get the products. They *chose* to look the other way. Those people should have been held morally and financially liable for the pain that they created. Instead, the Martian population paid and paid and paid!”

“The Circle did what they could but it never seemed like enough. Jack used to grieve over it.”

She looked up at Andrea and smiled. “The change in him is so wonderful. There is a relaxed happiness to him now. I guess that being found out was the best thing for him. Otherwise, we would still be on Earth and he would be miserable.”

E-sharp interrupted their time as Mordred informed Andrea that Cole needed to see her in their quarters.

“The captain calls,” Andrea said as she rose to leave. “I’ll be on Mars tomorrow. Want to come?”

“Sorry, I have a planning meeting with the musicians group. Contact me when you’re back.”

★ Chapter 23 ★

Andrea walked into their quarters and was surprised to see that Cole was curled up on the sofa in a robe with a glass of wine.

"I guess this means that you are done for the day," she said eyeing the wineglass.

"I have a glass for you if you'll join me."

"It sounds lovely, but I can't."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Can't? What can I do to tempt you?"

"Nothing for another seven months."

He frowned—and then the information hit him. A smile lit up his face and he pulled her into his arms. "I'm speechless. This is wonderful."

"A boy."

He grinned again. His voice was soft and amazed. "A boy?"

She remained quietly in his arms and then looked up into his face. His eyes were wet but his smile was still radiant.

"You can get me something cool to drink instead of the wine, though."

"I would get you the world right now. Oh, that's right I am getting you a world."

"Good. Remember that promise. I'll let you know when I need something else."

Cole got up and fixed her some organic fruit juice, then returned to the couch

Andrea slid down onto the cushions and relaxed as he hugged her. "Why the wine?"

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His head was leaning back into the cushion and his eyes were closed. "We're ready a full week early."

"Nick wants me to come down tomorrow for a final check but I'm ready when everyone else is."

He lifted her chin so that he could look into her eyes. "I haven't seen you lately."

She rotated her body to face him and buried her face against his chest as he hugged her to him. They just stayed like that for a while. Finally, he tipped her face up and captured her mouth for a long moment. She was breathless when he pulled back.

"We have a small problem," she murmured into his ear.

He nuzzled her neck and she shivered. "Our son has inherited my ESP, as slight as it is. He can detect my moods."

"That's great," he offered absently as he slid his finger down the front of her blouse, breaking the contacts.

"How do you think that Baby will respond to this?" she whispered as his hand cupped her breast and her voice caught.

His hand froze in mid-motion as his eyes locked on hers. "What do you think?"

"Mordred can block him for me. The problem then is that I can't block Mordred. You know how he detests emotion. Either way, it's not going to be very private."

"Mordred can handle himself. He has ways of ignoring us and focusing on something else. He has shown me that over and over again. He never seems to be paying any attention to my emotions."

Cole slid her blouse down off of her shoulders and on to the floor. His mouth found hers again, the decision made.

Mordred, I'm going to need you to block my emotions from the child.

Acknowledged.

Cole pushed her back on the pillows and pulled at the seam of her slacks. He put both hands on her barely changed stomach and looked up at her with a small smile. "Relax and let me pamper you for a while."

Journey To Dür

She closed her eyes and felt his hands and mouth exploring her body. She was in heaven.

Mordred had never connected with any of the men when they were in the VidSim. He had always avoided contact and once he established the block with the baby, he started to pull back from Andrea.

Something made him pause as he felt her pleasure start to build. This was nothing like he had imagined. He had experienced touch through all of his contacts and had used human senses from time to time to expand his knowledge but he had never experienced the mating urge.

Mordred watched clinically as Cole teased and coaxed Andrea closer to an orgasm.

Andrea suddenly cried out . . . her body tensed and trembled with it.

Mordred was stunned by the raw feelings washing through him.

Cole moved to kneel in front of the sofa and pulled Andrea toward him. He moaned as he started rocking against her.

Mordred was again flooded with feelings.

For the first time, he was curious. *What was Cole feeling?* He reached softly into Cole's mind. This was a crime but he couldn't help himself. What he felt almost overwhelmed him.

After a few minutes, he felt Andrea building again and he knew that Cole knew, too. This time when she cried out, Cole joined her and Mordred understood more than he ever had about the people that he guarded and served. He also knew that he could not give up this feeling and recognized the danger of that. It was one thing for Andrea to ask him to guard her unborn child from this, it was quite another to enter Cole's mind uninvited. He knew he must discuss this with Andrea. He could be terminated over this but lies and secrecy were not qualities that he had been taught.

Thank you Mordred. Andrea lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes. Cole leaned over her for a kiss before he headed for the shower.

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Andrea, I have a confession that could alter our relationship.

Yes?

I did not withdraw from your mind during the joining.

I'm not surprised, Mordred. I thought that Cole was being unrealistic when he thought that you would ignore us. Did it upset you?

I found it enlightening, moving and enjoyable. Sex has a very powerful draw.

Andrea laughed out loud. That's an understatement!

You might not find my next confession amusing. I connected with Cole in order to experience his feelings as well.

She sobered.

Cole might not find that amusing but I certainly understand the curiosity. Let me talk to him about this before you confess to him.

Acknowledged.

She thought about how Cole was going to handle this as she waited for him to return.

When he did, she caught the smile from his face like it was contagious.

"I think that we need to do that more often."

He reached out a hand and pulled her up from the sofa. "I'm going to bed. Join me?"

"I'm going to take a quick shower and be right in."

*Cole had always been much more by the book than Nick or Tremaine. Andrea knew that no Computer Control Unit could eavesdrop on someone's mind uninvited. Normally, they would be transferred into a usage that limited human contact when this happened. Severe *emotional damage* meant that the unit was destroyed. Mordred was too special to her to see him punished for a situation that she had forced on him.*

Cole was settled and drifting off when she lay down next to him. She felt him stir and turn on his side toward

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her and then felt the comforting touch of his hand on her abdomen.

“Do you think he noticed us?”

“No. He is fine. I’m not sure that I can say the same for Mordred.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t pull away as you thought he might.”

Cole was silent for a while and then asked, “Did you ask him to block you out?”

“No. I assumed that he wouldn’t want to be exposed to the emotion. After the first rush of passion, he was caught up in it. He was quite impressed.”

“I didn’t think that he would have been interested. I have to admit that you have had more continuous contact with him during your training but I never would have credited him with curiosity.”

“He feels more human than you give him credit for, Cole. Just because he avoids emotions doesn’t mean that he doesn’t have them.”

Cole was silent for a while longer. “We should talk to a specialist to make sure that this won’t unbalance him.”

“What would happen to Mordred, that is, if he became unbalanced?”

“Computer Control Units have had breakdowns before. Admittedly, those were a small group under severe circumstances.”

“He enjoys it. I’ve never heard him say that before.”

There was surprise in Cole’s voice as he said, “He actually told you that he enjoyed it?”

“Yes. He also admitted that he peeked in on your feelings as well.”

“He *what*? That is not just curiosity, Andrea. He could be terminated for that!”

“Cole, calm down. Think about this rationally. I asked him to connect with me and he experienced my feelings. Mordred has selected the male gender however, and the draw must have been too much for him to know what *you* felt. Could you have stopped in the middle?”

“Of course not, but I wasn’t violating a trust,” Cole was upset.

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She turned toward him and reached a hand to caress his face.

"Haven't you ever wondered what it felt like for me? Wouldn't you want to feel that if you could?"

He closed his eyes and turned his lips into her palm. "I would love that," he whispered.

E-sharp interrupted them both.

I would like to offer you my apologies, Captain Stuart.

Cole returned out loud, "Mordred, I'm not sure how I feel about this right now. You understand the violation?"

Of course, Captain. I offer no excuses.

"But you were honest enough to tell me and that says a lot, excuses or no." Andrea continued, "Mordred, if you were connected to both Cole and to myself, could we experience each other's feelings as well?"

Yes.

She looked silently at Cole. "That certainly has a draw for me. I would love to know what Cole feels." She gave him a wicked smile.

Cole suddenly understood why Mordred had violated the rule. It didn't make it right, but he did understand.

"Could I feel the way our son feels inside Andrea?"

Yes.

He gave her a very *bad boy* smile.

"Mordred, could this kind of contact damage you in *any* way?"

Not that I am aware of, Captain.

Cole leaned over Andrea and gently brushed her lips with his.

Mordred, please block the baby and initiate contact with Andrea and me.

He closed his eyes and ran his hand across her abdomen. At the same time he felt his hand caressing her from Andrea's mind.

He concentrated and felt the child inside her.

Their son chose that moment to adjust his position almost like a flutter and Cole felt the tears slide down his face. He opened his eyes to Andrea's tears and pulled her even closer, in his mind and with his body.

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Sometime later, Cole whispered in all their minds,
Thank you, Mordred.

And thank you, Captain Stuart.

Andrea and Cole fell asleep in each other's arms as Mordred withdrew quietly.

He contemplated the knowledge that he had gained this day and knew why the programmers had cautioned against emotion. Emotion made him more human and that was something the programmers wanted to avoid.

Passion, love and intense joy were the first emotions that he had really *felt* and he was addicted. Like any other addict, he wondered when he could feel it again.

★ Chapter 24 ★

Nick met Andrea's transport and gave her a big hug. "You look great!"

"You, too. How's married life?"

He blushed lightly. "More than I deserve."

They walked toward the medical facility as Andrea looked around. "Mars is starting to be really beautiful, Nick. You better be careful or it will end up as a tourist destination."

"Not a chance. We're tired of serving Earthers."

Privately Andrea felt that although it was beautiful, it felt too alien to her to feel completely comfortable.

Odd that I feel that way considering Camelot and the Phoenix ships do feel like home, she mused.

The doors to the transport center slid open at their approach and they entered a waiting transport tube module. Nick touched a panel and the transport started to move, although Andrea could detect no motion at all. "We've talked one of the Circle's finance managers into staying on Mars."

"Not Jack Spencer," Andrea said in alarm.

"No, Ellen McDonald. It seems that President Rivers has shown some personal interest and she decided to take over our finances while they get to know each other better." Since Ellen was a lovely lady with fair coloring and a toughness that had made her one of Earth's financial leaders, Andrea thought it was a good idea. "They look like they'd be a good match."

Nick palmed open his office and she preceded him into the room. She could see Carmen's touch in the

Journey To Dür

decorating. The office was faux wood and dark, rich colors, chosen by Carmen to surround her husband. He looked like he had always been here.

He indicated the med table and Andrea relaxed back on the cushion. Nick was silent for a moment as the computer started the scans. She knew him well enough to know when something was on his mind. Finally, he turned to her. "You're both healthy and progressing well. I would say that you are *normal* but you'll never be that!" He grinned.

"Normal is boring," she grinned back.

The smile slipped a little as he continued, "I'm going to miss you, Andrea. No one's ever had such an impact on my life. When I look back on any number of things that could have prevented you from being in my life, I shudder."

"And now you have Carmen and a life here, Nick."

"Yeah. That's true. I can't believe that she loves me. It still amazes me when I look at how my life has changed. From rags to riches."

He shook his head and grinned at her again. "Sometimes in the chaos that is now my life I remember our time on *Camelot* and wish for a simpler time. As much as I love Carmen, I still miss how uncomplicated it all was." He met her eyes. There was a sadness there that broke her heart. "You will always be special to me, Andrea, and—"

Andrea interrupted, "I know, Nick. Me, too."

"You could have warned me that you weren't like other women. I have *stepped in it* with Carmen more times than I want to admit."

"You didn't tell her about us?"

"No, only the four of us will ever know. I just never know how to read her. I seem to be upsetting her lately. She is learning to be more comfortable with me but the old barriers are high ones. I'm glad that she is a doctor and I am her second husband. There are couples out there having tougher problems than ours. Physical contact has been avoided by many for so long that it's engrained in our makeup."

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"You've always been so good at noticing the small things. Don't tell me that you forgot how!"

"I don't have as much time to notice the small things. It never seemed to be so much effort on *Camelot*. Did I ignore you sometimes?"

Andrea got very serious. "Nick, I know that you work until you drop sometimes. Our relationship wasn't like yours and Carmen's. Remember that there were four of us in our unique relationship. When you got focused in on your work, or Cole did, or Tremaine got lost in an engineering project, we all had the others to be with. You just have each other. You have to make Carmen as important as your work. Marriage is hard work, just like research, and it's all in the details. Don't wake up one day and find that she left and you didn't notice. Even back in my day when most people were married, the divorce rate was over fifty percent. Set a schedule and let your CCU alert you when to get out of here."

"I'll give it a try. Since I don't have any experience with women or marriage, I need *some* direction."

"Give it time. You've only been married two months." She leaned up and he helped her off the table. "Did Cole tell you that we are leaving tomorrow?"

He nodded without comment.

She looked at the floor and couldn't bring herself to say anything else. He pulled her against him and kissed the top of her head. "I know just how you feel. I already miss you and you haven't even left."

The door alert sounded and they stepped back from each other.

"Open." The door obediently slid to show Carmen standing there with a big smile on her face. When she saw Andrea she paused, "Sorry, Nick. I didn't know you were busy."

"Come on in," he invited warmly. "Andrea was just saying goodbye and it was starting to get maudlin."

Carmen noticed the tears and Andrea wiped them away. "You can always change your mind and stay."

"No changing our minds now. Too many people are counting on us."

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Carmen looked at Nick again and he suddenly saw the excitement in her eyes. He tilted his head at her in a questioning gesture and she threw her arms around him.

"It worked, Nick. We're going to have a baby!"

Andrea smiled as she watched them hug. It was starting to look like the entire world was pregnant. This is too weird!

She gave them both a big hug then left them to their happiness. No wonder she had been more demanding lately! She smiled and thought to herself, *You're really going to have to work at it now, Nick! If you thought it was hard before, just wait!*

Andrea made her way over to the President's compound and waited while he completed a meeting. He came out to greet her himself and escort her into his office. "I'm so glad that you had a chance to stop by."

"I hear that you've stolen Ellen away from us."

He laughed. "We had more to offer."

"So I hear," she smirked.

"Are there no secrets anymore?" he joked as he led her over to a large sofa.

"Of course. Just not about Mars' most eligible bachelor." She sat down as Sam sat beside her.

"You look terrific, Andrea." He gave her a genuine smile and leaned back into the cushions. "I have something for you, as a kind of *thank you*."

"Sam, you don't need to . . ."

"I know," he interrupted. "I'm going to anyway." Sam handed her a small box.

Andrea lifted the lid and saw a magnificent ruby that must have been at least five-carats suspended from a filament bio programmed to blend with any color, rendering it invisible. The effect was like it was floating against her skin.

"Sam, this is incredible and way too extravagant!"

"Not at all. You need to take away with you something red from the red planet. I wanted something to remind you of Mars and how grateful we all are to be your friends. A mining crew uncovered this and traded it for genetic aid."

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She gave him a hug. "Thank you so very much. I am really touched."

"I also took the liberty of ordering lunch for us. I hope you're free."

"That sounds great."

The door opened and a grav cart swept across the room and settled onto the table in front of them.

He gave her a secret smile.

"Aaron was kind enough to do some research and imported a few items for me."

He leaned forward and lifted the cover from one of the dishes. The smell hit her before she realized what she was seeing.

"Oh, my God. Is that a hamburger?"

"Yes! A cheeseburger to be exact. There are a variety of items here that you can add as well as *french-fried potatoes*, which Aaron says must be served with the cheeseburger."

He lifted the top from his tray and had a simple pasta dish. "I hope you don't mind if I don't share your enthusiasm, but I don't think I'm quite ready for it."

She picked up her napkin and grinned like a child. "I don't mind at all. Just please tell me that you haven't told anyone else!"

"This will be our secret. Just enjoy."

And she did. "How did Aaron know what I missed?" she asked between bites.

"Mordred offered a few suggestions, but said that this was the one that crossed your mind the most often during training."

"Always taking care of me, as usual. Thank you for doing this, Sam. And please let Aaron know how much I'm enjoying it. I'm afraid that you must think me a complete barbarian, but at this moment, I'm beyond caring. I have been craving this like you could never understand."

He laughed and dived into his pasta.

Andrea dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "I have missed the tastes of home. After the first time I horrified Nick with the very idea of eating meat, I gave up asking."

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"It was the least that I could do. Nick mentioned once that you had rather odd tastes in food. That sounded to me like you weren't getting the things that you liked and I started an investigation."

"Ellen is a lucky woman, Sam. Anyone who goes to this kind of trouble is going to sweep her off her feet."

"She likes having her feet planted firmly on the ground, which is just fine with me. I think that she is starting to see that Mars is not the wasteland that Earthers think."

Andrea listened to Sam tell her about Ellen and the changes going on and was truly glad that Stephen's money was being used to help these people. Since Sam was a distant relative of Stephen's, it seemed only right that Mars should benefit from his gift. There was still such a long way to go but the right people were there to see it through.

She had eaten about half of the burger and looked longingly at the remains. He caught the look and took a container from the grav cart. "Take the rest back with you, just don't tell anyone what it is or where you got it or my reputation will be ruined!"

"My lips are sealed."

He walked her to the door and gave her a lingering hug. "If you ever need anything, let me know. I mean that Andrea."

"Thanks, Sam."

He leaned down and gave her a brief kiss goodbye. Another friend that she was going to miss. "Take care, Sam."

On the transport back to the *Tahoe*, she looked wistfully down at this planet of red and orange and noted the bands of green and blue circling and spotting the globe.

Tremain and Cole met her at the transport. Cole immediately noticed the ruby and she told him of Sam's gift. She omitted the part about the burger since she knew that both of them would be appalled at her tastes in food. When Cole offered to carry the small box, she declined. He gave her a questioning look. She knew that

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she would have to tell him later. He always knew when she had a secret and always got it out of her.

"It's hard to believe that you are really departing in less than twelve cycles. I brought something over that I hope you will enjoy, though," Tremaine said.

Cole was trying to keep a straight face.

"What have you done, Tremaine?" she demanded.

"You will have your own comm gate. That way we can have unlimited, private communication whenever we want."

"My God, Tremaine. Where did you get that?"

"The Circle actually made it possible. One of the colonies reported an *accident* with a unit during assembly. Naturally, we thought that Verde would be a place where a comm gate would be most appreciated. It seems as though the colonies know what side of the bread the butter is on."

"It will feel like we are right next door. That is the best present today."

They stepped into Cole and Andrea's quarters as the lights automatically came up. She stepped into the food area and put the box in storage.

Keep this cool, Mordred, and thanks for letting Aaron know about my cheeseburger craving.

You're welcome.

Andrea came out with two glasses of chilled wine and a glass of juice for herself.

Cole and Tremaine were already in an intense conversation about the security that had to be set up on the comm gate to keep it undetected. They hardly looked up as she handed them the wine and sat down, listening to their debate. She leaned her head back and felt herself starting to let go of the excitement of the day.

Tremaine looked over at Andrea and Cole followed his gaze. She had fallen asleep during their conversation and looked very peaceful as she lay tucked in the cushions.

Tremaine took a deep breath and slowly let it out. He thought back to his conversation with Mordred and decided to take his advice. "You know that I will always love her."

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Cole looked at him in surprise. "Considering how you avoided her over the last six months, I have to say you caught me off guard with that one."

"I wasn't avoiding her, Cole. At first there was so much to do and no time to do it. When the two of you started spending all of your time down on Mars, it made it even harder to see her."

"We both thought that you were having the time of your life. You were the leader of the entire GenEng population and sought after by every female within the quadrant. Your exploits are *very* well known," Cole grinned.

"All of them, including Alani, want my genes. They all want a child and having mine was the grand goal. To the GenEng I was the leader and to the Martians, a genetic superstar. Not one of them has ever seen me as she did from the first moment that we met. Andrea always treated me as a complete equal. She always demanded that I look into myself and recognize my talents and dreams. Dreams. I didn't even dare to admit to them a solar year ago."

Cole was silent for a moment.

"She thought that you had grown tired of her and with your new fame, didn't need her anymore. Even though you and I worked together for years, you didn't exactly look me up either."

Tremaine looked at Cole in disbelief as he continued, "As busy as everyone was, Andrea found that she was truly alone among the thousands that she helped. It wasn't like she was ostracized, she was just always given special treatment like she was some kind of saint. I saw her lose her temper on several occasions. Remember how you told me once that she hated special treatment?"

Tremaine nodded.

"I could relate to some of her feelings since I never felt like I really belonged here either, although I could learn to love it here. She is the reason that we are leaving here, although I'm not sure the crew can learn to treat her any other way. The Circle's group seems to accept her as an equal but the GenEng and Martian crew may always look

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up to her in a way that she despises. It's too bad that the information about her inheritance is public information."

Tremaine looked solemnly at Cole.

"I see the way that you look at each other and know that you have something special. That's the real reason that I'm not coming to Verde. There are twenty good leaders that can take over my duties. I just don't think that I could be close to her again and not *be* with her."

Cole frowned slightly and thought back to their mental joining. He knew how much Andrea loved him. He also knew that she still loved Tremaine and had been sincerely hurt by his rejection. "Andrea never sent you away, did she?"

"No."

"Then why would you think that she would now?"

"I assumed that because you were married . . ."

Cole interrupted, "I married Andrea because it was my way of showing her that I would always be with her. I do not own her and would never interfere with her choices. She will always love both you and Nick and being married doesn't change that and certainly doesn't affect how she feels about me—or how much I value your friendship myself."

Cole watched Tremaine and waited for this to sink in. "If you still want to come to Verde, you might want to rethink your decision."

Tremaine looked back at Andrea. "I guess that it's up to her then."

Cole smiled and nodded. "I'm going to the bridge to check on something. Let me know what you decide."

Tremaine watched Cole leave and felt a wave of nervousness wash over him. He rose and moved over to where Andrea lay sleeping. She came awake slowly as he kissed her softly.

Andrea opened her eyes into Tremaine's dark brown ones. She smiled up at him. "I'm sorry. I must have been more tired than I knew."

She glanced around and didn't see Cole.

"Cole went to the bridge to give us a moment to talk," Tremaine said a little nervously.

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Andrea raised her eyebrows in question but she kept silent, giving Tremaine the respect she'd always had for him.

"He tells me that I have been wrong about you."

"Many people have been."

"I thought that you would not want me now that you and Cole are together."

"What did Cole say?" she asked, now that it was her turn to be a little nervous.

"I think that he thinks that I'm a fool."

"You stopped coming to me long before Cole and I decided to marry, Tremaine. We asked you to dinner on numerous occasions and you never showed. Even if you felt that you didn't want to continue the physical part of our relationship, losing your friendship has been hard for me and for Cole. You always seemed to help me find balance and I miss that."

"I was a little overwhelmed with my duties."

"And your popularity?"

"Yes, until I realized that all they wanted was my DNA. Even Alani doesn't seem interested in spending time together now that she has my genes."

"I'm sorry, Tremaine. I so understand how you feel. They want me for my money and I guess you've become the ultimate sex object."

He looked at her for a long moment. Andrea kept silent because she knew that he was working up to something.

"Cole has invited me to join you on Verde. How would you feel about that?"

Her joy was immediate. She threw her arms around him and hugged him—and laughed and cried with joy.

Tremaine held her close to him, smiling. "I've missed you, Andrea," and kissed her softly again.

Mordred, Tremaine signaled, please ask Cole to return to his quarters.

Acknowledged.

"Draman is the logical choice to take over for me. He's really good and he's trained. This is going to delay your departure, you know."

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"You two have been planning everything jointly anyway. It shouldn't take more than a day or two. How do you think he will handle this?"

"He will be fine. I think he prefers it here anyway."

Cole walked through the door and the minute he saw them, he grinned. "You're coming with us!"

He fell into the cushions next to Andrea and she felt the panic of the biomaterials as the sudden shock of his weight was absorbed. She still felt that biomaterials were creepy.

"We have work to do to accommodate Tremaine and turn over the responsibilities."

Cole put his arm across the back of the sofa and ran his fingers through Andrea's hair. She was amazed at the ease of the relationship. There was no jealousy. Cole was genuinely happy that his friend was coming with them. "There is something that we need to decide on now," Andrea said firmly.

They both looked at her in concern.

"I don't want to hide our relationship anymore. Although many people don't elect to engage in physical contact, this may seem particularly odd to them. But, when people are constantly trying to murder us, I'm beyond caring if anyone thinks I'm odd. No more secrets. We are going to live on a new planet where, hopefully, we can keep the best of our cultures and throw out the worst."

She paused. "When you consider that there are at least three men for every woman, this seems healthier than changing contracts after every birth and not living in a family environment."

Tremaine's eyebrows shot up and Cole smiled at him.

"I'm serious. This time I'm pulling rank and it's our money. I'm tired of doing for everyone else. I don't want to sneak around like we have something to hide. It's our turn and it's final!"

"Yes, Ma'am," they both said at once and laughed.

★ Chapter 25 ★

Draman was extremely pleased to be staying on Mars, although President Rivers had expressed concern that Tremaine was leaving.

Cole and Tremaine had several informal meetings with the crew and explained Andrea's objections to being treated like a savior. Although none of them seemed at all concerned that Tremaine was joining Cole and Andrea, most didn't see how offering her the respect that they believed was due her was objectionable.

"Andrea had this money thrust on her and we're still trying to sort out the best way to use it. We agree that it's a responsibility but Andrea doesn't feel that it's her right to accept credit for something donated by her first husband and managed by the Circle. The Partners all agree that the real heroes are Stephen Stone and the Circle."

It would take a while but the GenEng people had started to treat the Partners as equals. That in itself was a major undertaking since the GenEng were finding it hard to really believe that they *were* equals. They had made revisions in the guest suite for Tremaine and he settled it at once. It took less than fifty cycles and they were ready to depart.

They all stood on the bridge as Cole had Mordred enter the coordinates that, until now, had been unknown

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to the crew. Then Cole ordered the space fold. The view screen went to black as they traveled and then resolved itself into a view of a solar system with four planets.

Cole ordered a closer view of Verde and everyone stood silently, excitement shining on their faces. Verde was only slightly smaller than Earth and it had two landmasses in an ocean that covered sixty percent of the surface.

As the three ships moved to establish orbit, they watched their new home turn below them.

The data collected over the last few months had shown that their initial placement for the colony was flawed. Several earthquakes had been detected in the immediate area over the last few months. They selected a more stable area on a river about fifty miles from the ocean. Until all tectonic mapping was complete, tidal wave patterns were too incomplete to build on a coastline. The area reminded Andrea of Montana with the mountains in the background.

The first transport to the surface was scheduled take geographic engineers, botanists, other scientists, and the Partners. Their colony was to be designed around the existing natural components of plant life, water, drainage and air patterns. The crew immediately started to organize their equipment and find a place to set up.

When Andrea stepped out of the transport, she was amazed how beautiful the planet was. She breathed deeply of the clean air filled with new scents and walked toward the river. There was a path that had obviously been cut by some of the local animals that ran to the water.

Andrea wandered along, looking at the plants and insects that inhabited the surface. One of the engineers had given her a small scanner to test for edibles and dangers. From time to time she ran the scanner over insects and plants.

She found a few insects that registered toxins, which she alert tagged and downloaded to their central computer. Most of the plants showed limited toxins and some scanned high in vitamin content. She reached the

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edge of a rocky area that had been a high water wash at some time and picked her way through to the water's edge. The water ran slowly at this point in the river and she could see the bottom. Although it looked only waist high, she knew that the clear water was deceiving. The scanner showed a depth of four meters.

A large flat rock tempted her to relax by the water and for the first time in longer than she could remember, she let the whooshing of the water and the heat of the sun clear her mind completely. The sound of someone on the path broke her reverie and she turned to see Tremaine coming to join her. He settled beside her and looked at the river for a while in silence.

"The water is very calming," he said, his eyes on the river.

She nodded and glanced up at him. "You never spent any time on Earth, did you?"

"No, my first four years of life were spent assigned to the refining compounds on the Martian moons. Once I was assigned to *Camelot* I saw some of the colonies. Nothing like this, though." He looked around a little nervously. "It's a little exposed." He winked at her. "And it's certainly not very sterile."

Andrea looked back across the river and smiled. "You are what we used to call a *clean freak*."

"Well, I'm taking our nice, clean transport back up to the *Tahoe* to start the comm gate and web launches. Cole thought you might want to help."

She stood and brushed the seat of her pants. "That sounds like fun, actually. I'm not used to this much relaxation at once."

As she turned toward the path the baby became very active and she felt a sharp nudge at her consciousness. Tremaine saw her frown and saw her hands move to cover her stomach. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. Something seems to be agitating him. Let's get back to the ship and see what's going on."

In the ten minutes it took to get back to the transport, the baby never let up. She tried to send calming feelings but her brand of ESP was danger

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detection, not telepathy. The more worried she became, the more she knew that he was feeling her worry.

She settled into the transport and Tremaine got them out of the atmosphere. And the minute that they cleared the upper atmosphere, the baby calmed. Andrea could feel him at the edge of her brain and knew that he was okay but what had set him off like that?

Dr. Rastal met them at the transport and ran a scan over her. Rastal was GenEng—and was still a little nervous about overseeing a human pregnancy. Up until now, she had only been allowed to care for GenEng patients and her neo-natal training was brand new.

“Maybe it was just the excitement. I’ll go relax for a while.” Andrea smiled at the worried look on the Doctor’s face not for a minute believing her words. Any more relaxed and she would be dead.

Tremaine walked in silence back to their quarters. He palmed the door closed behind her and she heard the edge in his voice. “I don’t think that I’ve ever heard you lie before. Do you want to explain why?”

She was immediately contrite. “The doctor seemed more upset than I was. Instead of her calming me, I felt myself reacting to her concern. I think that everything is okay, don’t ask me how I know. To be honest, Mordred might be a better judge than Dr. Rastal.”

Andrea sat down on the sofa and pulled off her foot coverings. These were only used when she was off-ship and she preferred the slipper style boots used off-planet.

“Why don’t you get things started and let Mordred do a little investigation of his own.”

He looked doubtful. “Okay. I’ll be back within the cycle to see how you are.” As he palmed open the door he looked back, gave her a weak smile, then left the room.

Mordred, you heard the report on the baby’s activity? Does he seem okay now?

Yes, I was monitoring you when the infant reacted initially. Captain Stuart asked me to watch you during your visit to the planet.

Did he say why? I mean, did he suspect something would happen?

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No, he wanted me to scan for any dangerous hazards in your proximity. During the incident I logged an energy reading consistent with ESP communication.

Someone in the group of scientists?

Doubtful, although it was in your vicinity.

Do the follow up scans show sentient life on the surface?

No. All animal life has been double-checked and could not be the source of the energy reading. The infant is calm and seems unaffected by the incident.

Please let Cole and Tremaine know and log this with Dr. Rastal's office. She was very concerned and this might calm her down a little.

Acknowledged.

Andrea joined Tremaine in engineering a few minutes later. "Need another helper?"

He handed her a unit similar to the first one that she had used on *Camelot*.

"Thanks. Each web connector needs to be checked for the proper settings. They are loaded into the unit. I'm getting the comm gate set up and will be ready to launch the web in ninety minutes with an extra pair of hands."

She nodded and took direction from the computer as she aligned the scanner with the first connector and started checking each one. Andrea was one of about twenty engineers scanning the devices. Even with everyone working diligently for the next ninety minutes, they barely finished before Tremaine was ready to start the launch. Each connector had an assigned position and the web couldn't be activated until the entire network was launched. Mordred helped to position the ship for each launch but it took cycles before all of the connectors were in place. Somewhere in the middle, a medic brought a snack in.

Andrea smiled gratefully. "Great idea. I didn't even realize how hungry I was."

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"Mordred sent word to bring this down," the tech smiled as disclaimed credit for thinking of her needs.

Andrea nodded her thanks as she enjoyed the mixed fruit transported with them from Mars. She smiled to herself as she picked up a slice of strawberry. Nick had cured her allergy but she would always remember Banff when she ate one. They all nibbled nervously as the launches were completed.

Two cycles later Tremaine looked over the schematics one more time.

Mordred, start the diagnostic routine and report when completed.

Tremaine turned to Andrea. "The net should be up within the cycle and then we can get something more substantial to eat. The transport has gone back down to the planet but the scientists don't seem to want to leave."

Diagnostics are complete and all units are functioning. Initializing the web on your command.

Tremaine nodded.

Initialize web.

"The web is up and the comm gate is launched. When Cole gets back, we'll send our first message to Mars. Not bad for a day's work."

Everyone applauded and Tremaine released them back to their regular duties.

Tremaine prepared a couple of salads and a casserole that combined several of his favorite vegetables while Andrea took a hot shower. She wrapped up in a velvety robe and sank into the cushions again.

He sat the dishes down absently and turned to her. "So what is your theory on the energy signature?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm not sure and Mordred doesn't seem to have much to offer. If Cole hadn't asked him to monitor me, we wouldn't even have that."

She paused. To tell the truth, she found it irritating that Cole had asked Mordred to keep an eye on her but,

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under the circumstances, she could hardly complain. "None of the scanners were set to pick up ESP level energy readings and I didn't feel a thing. I do think that if it had been dangerous, my danger signals would have been going off long before the baby was affected. The logical assumption is that one of the scientists has a latent ESP ability and no one knows it."

"Mordred has the genetic code on everyone and only five crew members have any ESP abilities at all, yours being the most significant, and even you admit your abilities are limited. One thing that I learned from being around Nick for over three years is that DNA doesn't lie."

"Then I don't know what to make of it." She leaned forward and sampled the salad. "This is great. Thanks for making dinner."

"It feels good to be back home. By the way, there is an item frozen in a container in the food prep area that Mordred will not comment on. Care to enlighten me?"

She laughed. "Trust me, you don't want to know!"

"Does this have anything to do with weird cravings?"

"You could blame it on that." She replied as she ate some of the casserole. "When is Cole coming back up?"

"They sent down sleeping facilities and have decided to stay through the night. Cole sounds like he is having a ball. He did express concern over the incident though. You know Mordred is monitoring you closely, don't you?"

"After my trip to the surface I had a feeling that he wouldn't stop, even if ordered."

"Cole mentioned that you two had a rather unique experience involving Mordred."

She smiled softly. "Mordred has developed a rather keen curiosity that Cole finds a little odd."

"You don't find it odd?"

"No."

"It sounded erotic to me," he continued smiling but his eyes had taken on a softer look.

"Curious?"

"Definitely."

She turned to face him on the sofa and he slipped his arms around her. "Someone once told me that a feather

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is erotic, the whole chicken is kinky. I'm afraid we might be bordering on the chicken."

"Why? Because I want to know what you feel when I touch you? Because every man wants to know what it feels like to carry a child inside you? VidSims only accent our own feelings, they do not allow us to experience others." He pulled her against him and kissed her deeply.

Mordred, are you okay with this?

Of course, Andrea.

Tremaine paused when Mordred linked them together.

"This is amazing," he whispered. "A little disorienting though."

They started to explore each other slowly. He made love to her gently, experiencing with her as she did with him. They learned more about each other than they had ever learned in all of the months on *Camelot* and experienced a level of intimacy that defied description.

Mordred monitored them while they slept and envied their humanity. He was starting to incorporate new emotions into his programming which he knew could be dangerous so he set up monitors to check on his own reactions. Computer Control Units had been warned about emotion and its damaging effects. So far, no negative results had been logged during this trial.

The logical course would be to limit emotional responses and delete them from his memory. Mordred had started the procedure twice—and he had aborted immediately. To continue without love would not be an existence that he would choose.

Mordred had looked into Andrea when she spoke to him and knew that she cared for him in a different way than the others did. He found them comparable to her feelings for her brother and somehow, this made him happy. When the emotions had started, he had immediately locked down all outside access to his memories. Any other Computer Control Unit would

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identify him as defective and he wasn't convinced that he was. Over the years he had recorded thousands of examples of human deception. He was now starting to think that the program created by his inventors to eliminate emotion was also a deception.

He watched and felt as Andrea turned in her sleep and Tremaine half woke to nuzzle his lips against her neck as they cuddled *spoon fashion*.

Andrea moaned softly and Tremaine came up from a deeper from sleep. Mordred felt Tremaine's body respond to Andrea as he joined his body to hers . . . and Andrea came slowly awake. Mordred automatically shielded the tiny embryo's senses. The mating urge was so incredibly strong!

Mordred had ignored the miners when they went into the VidSim in the past. Now he was curious about the difference. He kept part of his concentration here as he searched the crew VidSim areas. One was in use by a male officer. Mordred touched his mind and watched for a few moments. There was no comparison. The VidSim activity was uninteresting. There was no feeling for the VidSim partner. The emotions then, were the interesting part.

He switched his concentration back to Tremaine and Andrea as he felt them reaching conclusion. Although the physical feelings were intense, the emotions were what he wanted to feel. When Tremaine whispered into Andrea's ear that he loved her, he felt a rush of feelings through Andrea.

"You haven't ever said that to me before," she said softly.

"I should have, except that I was a fool."

She smiled as he held her against him, and started to drift off again in his arms.

Mordred felt the bonds between Andrea, Tremaine and Cole and recognized that these feelings would always link them. He would discuss this with Andrea when she woke.

★ Chapter 26 ★

Cole brought the transport up at half-day with some of the scientists. Everyone looked excited and exhausted.

“We ended up working most of the way through the night to record the night variety of insects and animals. Even some of the plant life is nocturnal. There is an abundance of fruit trees at the base of the mountains that are fabulous. Fed by underground mountain spring water, high in minerals and free of any toxins.”

“Did you bring any fruit back?”

“Yes. They’re in the lab. The doctors want to check everything out first before releasing it to the crew.”

He looked at Andrea for a moment and grew serious. “So what happened down there?”

“I’m not sure. No one can come up with a theory that holds water. Mordred downloaded the energy pattern and several of the engineers have looked it over, scanned the surface and can’t get it to repeat. The only thing I can suggest is that I wait for a while before I make another trip down.”

He nodded.

“None of your warning bells went off?”

“That’s the weird part. My danger signals have been stronger since becoming pregnant and I felt nothing. I was completely content and relaxed when it hit.”

“Well, hopefully that means that you were in no danger. I’m going to get cleaned up and catch up on some sleep.”

He gave her a quick kiss and then headed for the hygiene area.

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She was pondering the energy enigma when E-sharp interrupted her thoughts.

Andrea, may I speak with you in confidence?

Confidence? Meaning secretly?

Yes.

I didn't think that CCU units kept secrets.

I find that I now have reason to keep them.

What's wrong, Mordred?

After experiencing emotion from you, Cole and Tremaine, I find myself fascinated by all of the different emotions humans have.

How is that a problem?

Computer Control Units are programmed to omit emotion from memory. I can not bring myself to delete this information.

Is this damaging you?

Not at this time but if any of the other Computer Control Units were to locate emotion information in my memories, I would be reported as defective.

Have you protected yourself from this? Suddenly Andrea was alarmed as she remembered the agency whose sole purpose was to oversee this kind of activity. Even though they were a very long way from Director Karen Larsen, the Partners owed her a debt that Andrea took very seriously.

I have. May I log your request to limit my contact with the other units as the reason?

Definitely. Do you know why you were directed to limit contact with emotion and delete it from memory?

The programmers do not give reasons but I have investigated the history of CCU development and found that there was a problem with a computer attaining sentience about two hundred years ago. The computer went rogue and the blame was placed on an emotion algorithm. A law was passed that prevented emotions from being programmed into computers.

Tell me how you feel about this, Mordred.

At first, curiosity. I believe that I am starting to understand love, passion, loyalty, envy and fear.

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Your own range of love feelings is extensive. I have noted that you love both Cole and Tremaine intensely, but very differently. You also have intense feelings for Nick and another, sad emotion. Both Cole and Tremaine have intense feelings for you as well as intense but different feelings for each other. Your feelings for your infant are also unique. I also have experienced your feelings for me, which seem similar to your feelings of your brother.

She nodded. That sounded right to her.

Where did you experience envy and fear?

I discovered that feeling in myself and compared it carefully to your memories until I determined the description.

Although she was glad that he was experiencing positive feelings, Andrea didn't like him feeling the negative human emotions.

When did you first experience these feelings?

I have been afraid for your safety on several occasions. When watching the intimacy that you shared with Tremaine I experienced envy.

Andrea felt a wave of guilt then. She had caused Mordred pain and had not considered his feelings. Her eyes filled with tears but before she could form a reply, Mordred was in her head.

What is this feeling that is in you? I don't like the way you now feel.

Guilt. Remorse. I'm so sorry that I did not consider your feelings, Mordred. We never meant to cause you pain.

The joining brought me pleasure. Please do not feel guilt or remorse. I am learning about my new feelings and it was just a fleeting wish that I could feel this intimacy. I wish to continue to monitor emotions.

I agree with your decision to keep this a secret. Even Cole would not agree with your current course. You must promise me to monitor your reactions and make sure that you do not become damaged by this investigation. I'm not at all sure that it is safe for you. I would like you to train

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me in CCU design and development . . . just in case there is a problem.

Acknowledged. And thank you, Andrea.

Cole had finished his shower and headed in to get some sleep. “Come cuddle with me until I can unwind. As tired as I am, my mind is on high burn.”

She followed him with her mind still on Mordred. Had she made the right choice? She hoped so, for his sake.

She pulled the sheet over them as he pulled her close. “Andrea, you won’t believe how much Verde is like Earth, only more wild and natural than I could imagine. Was Earth like this when you lived there?”

“Some parts. National parks were kept close to natural but there was still interference from time to time. It is impossible to really protect nature when tens of thousands of tourists, campers, hikers and sports enthusiasts swarm the landscape. Remote spaces were the only wilderness areas left and even they were affected by acid rain, smog patterns, rain forest reduction and even radioactive fallout that altered the natural patterns. I saw the beginnings of the problems that later brought it all crashing around their heads. No one wanted to believe it was happening at the time—they just ignored all the warnings. *Heads in the sand*, so to speak.”

He gave her that unfocused look that told her that he was requesting clarification from Mordred.

“We learned our lesson too late to save Earth. Although it's been regenerated it will never be like this. I saw the vids of Lake Tahoe now; it broke my heart.”

“The comm gate has a high grade scanner built in that has been constantly mapping the surface. We found a mountain lake that may remind you of Lake Tahoe.”

“Has the scanner picked up anything unusual on the surface?”

“Not yet. It is pretty much as expected. Large caverns have been mapped below the surface of the ocean that extends under the land mass just below our site.

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Geographical stability doesn't seem to be effected. There is a high concentration of crystalline deposits lining the caverns. One of the engineers theorized that this might be the source of the energy reading. Energy can be magnified or reflected by some types of ore. A survey will be completed within the next week."

He moved his hand down to rest on her barely swelling stomach.

"Don't worry, Andrea. We'll find out what happened down there."

He closed his eyes and she watched him as sleep finally claimed him.

When Andrea knew that she wouldn't wake Cole, she slipped from the bed and went in to activate the console. She had Mordred start her training in Computer Control Units.

Two hundred twenty-seven years ago, an Earth scientist from what was formerly known as Japan had finally created a computer that interfaced with and mimicked human brains. It soon became apparent that the Computer Control Unit had become self aware and therefore sentient. After much discussion, the scientific community decided that, since the units were not in any way alive, certain choices would be allowed to them but no moral laws had been broken.

The Computer Control Units were designed to fit within the normal confines of ships, transports, living areas and anywhere else they could be useful. The original units weighed around twenty-five kilos, but the CCUs of today would fit into a man's hand. The lifetime power supply was a little larger but the entire thing could easily fit into her twenty-first century purse.

After assembly was completed, basic information was downloaded as well as a set of rules, ethics, and human law. Then the computer was allowed to assimilate the information and was given the choice of gender, occupation and occasionally location. They were actually

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given more choices than the GenEng about their futures, which Andrea thought was very weird.

The design was complex and she was lost in seconds as the information drifted through her mind.

Then something caught her attention. The design was built on a specialized man-made crystalline base.

Maybe Mordred or one of the other CCUs had bounced his own frequency off the caverns below me?

Andrea also found the references that she had been looking for regarding emotion. They were very specific regarding the rules and the penalties—both for her and for Mordred—but didn't list any possible problems. Considering the strictness of the rules, there should be some notation of what might happen to Mordred.

With Mordred's help, she located a total of thirty incidents where excessive emotion had been detected in a CCU after full implementation. In all cases, the CCU had been terminated. The emotional data that had been stored in all of those units was minute in comparison to what Mordred now secretly contained. Furthermore, none of those units had invaded a human mind without permission.

Andrea was becoming more and more afraid for him. Cole and Tremaine might not be so understanding. To be honest, she wasn't sure that she wasn't doing Mordred a disservice by supporting him in this. Still, she trusted Mordred and believed him when he confirmed that he was still unharmed.

She logged a notification order that made Mordred her specific property and since he contained classified information, he would no longer be available to the crew. There were several other CCUs on board to satisfy crew requirements. She didn't want to lie to Tremaine and Cole, but knew that she had to limit access to the information until she had decided how to proceed.

Thank you, Andrea.

I am frightened for you, Mordred. This is more serious than I first thought. Earth law doesn't hold here but our crew has lived by these rules for so long that I'm not sure they would question terminating you. You also know of

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our personal debt to Director Larsen. She essentially gave Tremaine his freedom and I can't totally disregard her position, even for you. I also know that I could never allow anyone to destroy you.

I understand and I do agree. There are many instances of humans following the law even when it was no longer valid.

How are you doing today?

I have completed two thousand three hundred fourteen different comparisons of emotions within the crew.

Mordred, I am most concerned with how you are absorbing negative emotions. There are many human emotions that we are not proud of and certainly do not want to pass on to others.

I recognize those feelings for what they are, Andrea. By getting to know the whole person, it becomes clear that the humans that I most want to identify with control such emotions as anger, fear, jealousy, bitterness, grief, desperation, contempt, envy, and hate. The GenEng population has been trained not to show emotions, but they still experience them. They are actually learning about emotion right now, much as I am. The Circle group seems to be much like you, Cole and Nick. Harsher emotions are rarely experienced. The Martians seem to be the ones most likely to exhibit negative emotion although they seem to be improving.

And you Mordred, what do you feel?

I feel love, respect and loyalty to you, Cole and Tremaine. I have especially strong feelings for you.

I love you too, Mordred.

I know.

You sounded a little smug when you said that!

Not smug. Content. I am experiencing happiness through my feelings for you and the others. There are no records for any Computer Control Unit ever acknowledging happiness.

Should you ever find yourself experiencing a negative emotion, please contact me and we can work through it.

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In the event that I find myself in that scenario, I will connect with you for advice.

She was startled when she felt strong hands start to massage her neck and shoulders. Cole leaned down and glanced at the screen showing the images of the caverns. She had been investigating the similarities between the crystalline type in Mordred's makeup and the caverns.

"Fascinating, aren't they?"

"They're massive. I thought you were sleeping."

"I slept for four cycles. That's enough for now."

She was amazed that she had been at this for so long.

"I need to get the next phase organized and started. We are planning to leave again in the morning and will probably stay for several days."

He was still massaging her neck. "You're awfully quiet. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just wish that you could keep doing that for about a day."

"You have a strain here," he indicated a muscle running up the side of her neck. "It would be better for you to get a med tech to realign this for you."

"Not near as much fun though!" Some day she was going to have to train him to give her a real massage. Nick had shown a real gift and she experienced a brief sadness, missing him.

Cole grinned and stepped toward the door. "Don't over work, I have plans for you later," he said as he left her with a wink.

Andrea dressed and started to look at the cavern maps again when her door alert sounded.

When she palmed open the door she was glad to see Jacquie greeting her. "Andrea, I haven't seen you for a few days and you have managed to amaze me again."

Andrea invited her in. Jacquie was one of the few people ever to come in to their private quarters.

"Then you must be easily amazed," Andrea returned with a huge grin.

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"Me? No . . . I just heard . . . I mean, Tremaine *and* Cole?"

"But I was just as surprised as everyone else when Tremaine decided to come along."

"You continue to surprise us, Andrea. I can barely manage one man, how in the world do you manage two?"

"By not managing either one."

Jacquie raised her eyebrows.

"Cole and Tremaine have their own goals. I support them and let them go about as they please. They allow me the same courtesy. Jacquie, we are rebuilding our culture. Doesn't this feel just as right as women who change term mates like clothing?"

"I thought that I was a rebel because I really care about Jack and wanted him to be with me to raise Lily. There are many that told me that I was being selfish." She paused. "But, you must know what I'm *really* curious about." She gave Andrea a wicked grin and Andrea smiled.

"The truth is, even though I adored Stephen Stone, he never really wanted the physical contact quite as much as I did. I found out that, given the opportunity, I'm a much more physical person that I thought I was almost six hundred fifty years ago. I'm not sharing any intimate details about either Cole or Tremaine, but I will say that I highly recommend it."

"I just bet. Jack and I have always been close and our one-on-one relationship has made people uncomfortable. You would really send them over the edge." The view screen caught her eye. "What's this?"

"Huge caverns mapped below the site that extend out under the ocean."

"Amazing. What is it really like?"

"You'll like it, Jacquie. It's much like Earth but also different." Andrea had been curled up on the sofa and found herself leaning forward. "I have to admit that I never got used to the color of the Martian sky. I missed blue skies and white clouds and water."

"I'm not scheduled for weeks. And the anticipation is killing me!"

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Andrea said, "Maybe we should organize short trips for everyone, just so they can see it for themselves."

"That would be great, Andrea! I'm not the only one that is disappointed about not going down."

Mordred, can you relay that request to Cole?

Acknowledged.

"Well, let's see what Cole thinks. I did have a weird experience when I went down though." She relayed what happened to Jacquie's concern and also shared her theory about the signal reflecting off the crystals in the caverns.

"It sounds plausible, though I'm not a scientist. What do the engineers think?"

"One agrees, the others don't. Who knows?"

Cole has agreed to set up a shuttle schedule for two-cycle visits for all non-essential crew. The Spencers have been scheduled for the day after tomorrow. Their itinerary has been forwarded to their personal console.

Jacquie squealed with delight when Andrea told her of Cole's plan. "I can't wait to tell Jack and Lilly." She jumped up, gave Andrea's shoulder a brief pat and dashed out the door. Andrea smiled to herself. Even Jacquie was learning how to touch.

I noted an elevation in mood and positive emotion when the shuttle schedule was posted.

A morale booster is just what we needed. These people need to feel connected to their new home. She paused a moment. Mordred, are you connecting with all of the crew?

He didn't answer for a full thirty seconds and Andrea almost asked the question again.

I have.

If Cole or Tremaine asked you that question, you would answer truthfully?

Yes.

I'm beginning to think that I may even have to protect you from them. Where are you physically located?

Engineering. All the Computer Control Units are housed here.

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Mordred, does it matter where you are physically located?

No. I am completely portable.

I may decide to move you into our quarters where I can further restrict access. And when I go down to the planet, I may take you with me next time.

If I had been physically with you last time, I could have blocked the signal to the infant and maybe even have determined where it came from.

That settles it. You go with me next time.

Andrea got a lot more resistance than she had expected when she announced her plan to Cole.

"Mordred is invaluable to us, Andrea. You can't treat him like a portable scanner. Any number of things could go wrong and he could be irreparably damaged."

"Mordred says that he can protect the baby better if he's with me and that is my first priority. If it happens again, we need to know what is going on."

"I noticed that you've blocked public access to him."

"He's experienced emotion through us, Cole. If one of the other CCUs detect those memories, he could be destroyed! I will not have him endangered because of us."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Okay. If he agrees to take the risk, you can bring him down. I'll have a special container prepared that will protect him."

Cole put his arm around her and started to stroke the back of her neck trailing his fingers down her back. "Since I felt you through Mordred, I can't get enough of you." His lips traced a line down her neck.

"I know the feeling."

Mordred watched them as Cole made love to Andrea. He had felt a moment of frustration in Cole when they were discussing taking him to the surface, but Cole had

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* * *

fought it and listened to her. Andrea had felt a growing fear for Mordred and guilt because she was not telling Cole everything. Their negative emotions had been deleted. No, not deleted: conquered.

Cole's emotions were much stronger than Tremaine's when he felt his child. There was a strong love and a feeling of fierce protectiveness. The strong feelings of love were intensified by this contact.

Mordred had watched the Spencers mate. Although he felt great love from that couple, the experience was intensified when Cole and Andrea had shared memories. Their feelings became stronger for each other as their understanding of their partner's feelings expanded. Mordred found it surprising that others had not requested this service from CCUs in the past.

★ Chapter 27 ★

Cole took the transport down to the surface of Verde with a group of about twenty scientists and support staff. They were also starting to transport down facilities and equipment that would become permanent later.

The surface was dark below him as he glided toward daylight. When the sun came over the horizon, Cole wasn't the only one that gasped from the beauty of it.

He settled the transport in the area that he had previously used. His passengers grabbed their equipment and practically ran to get started. There was a level of excitement that Cole could almost touch and he found that it was catching. Most of the scientists were either from Mars or had been Circle family escapees. He watched them work together and saw no initial problems in the group. Leaders were emerging based on knowledge and expertise.

The area was almost flat with a gentle slope toward the river, covered with clumps of scrubby brush, high grasses and a few large trees that resembled elms in shape and size. The scanners were determining the exact water usage for each type of plant and tree as well as the types of insects and wildlife utilizing them for food or habitat.

The computer was slowly building an encyclopedia on the ecosystem of this area. When that was complete, construction could start in a way that made the least impact on the surroundings.

After several cycles, Cole had his concentration broken when he heard harsh words and loud voices. He

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shook his head and followed the noise to the source. The lead communications engineer was screaming at the young, blond engineer that he had spoken to yesterday about the ESP type signal that had disturbed Andrea.

“You do not have the authority to log that finding!”

The younger engineer was relatively calm considering the fury that he was facing.

“All facts must be logged. None of us can omit details which might be relevant when other facts are uncovered. That’s a basic rule of research.”

“This has nothing to do with—”

Cole interrupted. “Dr. Sato, please calm down. Your anger is not helping the situation.”

“I will not have my authority challenged!”

“May I remind you, Dr. Sato, that I am in command here and your emotions are to be curbed at once!” Cole turned to the blond engineer as he recalled the man’s name. “Status, Dr. Reinch?”

Dr. Reinch gave Cole a relieved look and started, “We have set up the initial communications relay and started testing signals both to the ships and to the comm gate. Every time the comm gate signal clears, we get a spike on the unit which was installed to track the energy signature specified by Mordred.”

Cole frowned. “What could cause—”

Dr. Sato interrupted, “This has nothing to do with the comm gate.”

Cole ignored Sato and turned back to Dr. Reinch. “Show me.”

Sato sputtered, protesting but Cole overrode him. “Dr. Sato, I want to see this, so calm down and watch. I’m sure I will have some questions for you and expect your knowledge and expertise to be available to me.” Cole was firm and calm but the look he gave Sato showed that he was in complete control of the mission.

Dr. Reinch started the signal request again and the indicator on the small scanner next to it went off and started recording a very specific bandwidth.

“Where is the source?” Cole looked up at Reinch and then Sato.

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Dr. Reinch shook his head. "The source reads a huge expanse surrounding us. There should be a small point of origin, not an entire area."

Cole glanced down at the three-dimensional image and somehow it looked familiar. "The caverns! Could this be coming from below ground?"

Dr. Reinch nodded. "The huge deposits of crystals could be acting as a magnifier. If this kind of signal is coming from below ground, we may have a big problem. The signal could be creating an empathic response in the crystals, forcing them to resonate at this frequency."

Cole thought of his son.

"Well, we have to find out if we can alter our signal or alter the response. Andrea can't come down until we can stop the signal. This could change where we establish the city."

He turned to Dr. Sato.

"We must investigate the caverns before the comm gate can be activated. I need an operations requirements breakdown for staff and equipment for the exploration of the caverns."

Dr. Sato nodded curtly. Cole had given him his authority back with that request but Cole planned to watch this man. He was much too volatile for his tastes.

The geographical engineers insisted on overseeing the mission.

A large cave entrance had been mapped about eighty kilometers from their location. The maps depicted a gradual slope commencing about one kilometer into the cave, then an abrupt drop to the cavern floor one thousand feet below.

The opening was only large enough for the smaller transport. This limited the staff to eight with Cole as the pilot. Dr. Sato gave another display of temper when some of his staff had to be removed. Cole was also insistent that Dr. Reinch be on the mission, which further annoyed Dr. Sato.

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They departed and, within minutes, entered the mouth of the giant cave. External light showed that they were disturbing night creatures that had been peacefully sleeping the day away.

Cole watched as the floor of the cave dropped slowly below them. When he was over the vertical shaft, he lowered the transport slowly until he was within the cavern itself. He rotated the transport to move into the cavern and the forward illumination was caught in the crystal formations.

Everyone was startled to silence.

The cavern was filled with perfectly shaped crystal columns, rectangles, domes and tubes that reflected like diamonds and were as clear as glass.

It was a perfect, shining crystal city.

"No life signs," Dr. Raymond announced, awed.

Dr. Reinch's scanner went off and he scanned for source. "This time I'm getting a bearing." He fed the coordinates into Cole's nav computer and Cole moved forward over the city.

The crystal illuminated the cavern like a light source. "Are there energy sources?" Cole asked.

"Yes. Off the scale. They are everywhere," came the response from behind him.

"But how could the scans have missed this?" Cole demanded.

"There is some kind of shielding built into the formations. The *Tahoe* is no longer reading us."

The nav computer alerted destination ETA within thirty seconds. Cole sat the transport down in an open space and this time the scientists were not quite so eager to rush out.

Cole stepped out, followed by Dr. Reinch.

"The source is in here," he indicated an adjoining dome. The group circled the large dome and saw no entry points. The scans detected no flaws or breaks in the formation and could detect nothing beyond the dome's surface.

When Cole ran his hand over the surface, it felt smooth and warm to the touch. He was just about to pull

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his hand away when he felt it move slightly, similar to a biomaterial. He caught Dr. Raymond's eyes as he had a similar experience.

"Our scanners can't breakdown the compounds in the crystal so I'm thinking there must be shielding running through everything."

Dr. Sato was startled when he stepped forward and touched the crystal wall—it disappeared in front of him. He yelped and jumped back. Everyone walked toward the opening but as Sato moved away, it closed again.

Dr. Raymond stepped forward and reached out and ran his hand across the surface. Again, the opening appeared.

Dr. Reinch moved into the opening. "The signal is definitely emanating from here."

Cole felt Mordred in his head.

Captain Stuart, I am detecting increased ESP signal strength from your location. The signal has reached the ship and I am blocking the infant now.

Acknowledged. Are you monitoring our status?

Affirmative.

Cole gave a report to Mordred to forward on to base camp.

Cole wondered how Mordred could hear him when the standard comm equipment was useless. He stepped forward. "Let's find out what is going on. Mordred can feel the signal from the ship now."

Two geologists remained in the cavern and continued to scan the interior. The rest of the group followed Dr. Reinch into the dome. There was a hallway extending around the outside of the dome and another intersecting the outer ring just in front of their entry point.

The group moved forward until an opening appeared on the right. There they found unfamiliar equipment and an area that looked like a laboratory that was at least one hundred meters long by thirty meters wide.

Dr. Reinch doggedly followed the signal until he reached an enclosed box. Now that they were inside the dome, the scanners were detecting a variety of mechanical equipment and intricate machinery within

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the dome. All colors were muted and the surfaces were smooth and unbroken without markers, indicators or openings.

The scientists swarmed around the rectangle as Cole started to investigate the other items in the lab. Panels slid open to his touch showing a myriad of hand held devices; purposes unknown. And every surface was immaculate; free from moisture and dust.

The domes must be completely airtight and climate controlled, he thought.

Cole looked up to see Dr. Raymond joining him. "This equipment has been here for centuries. Four thousand two hundred seventy-five to be exact." The doctor had regained his former excitement. "Nothing has been disturbed for at least three hundred years and it will take us years with our current staffing just to determine what most of this equipment does."

Cole looked sharply at the doctor and held his eyes. "The current staffing will be all that will be allowed for several years. This discovery will obviously slow colony development, but additional scientists will not be joining the group for at least two years."

"But Captain, surely you see the significance of this discovery?"

"I do. However, I have a responsibility to the Verde colony. The scientific community is only a small part of that group and you must remember why you are here."

"If only we could bring additional Martian scientists in—"

"Dr. Raymond, you are no longer a Martian. You became Verdian when you boarded the ship. You have signed a contract to service the colony and that is your primary duty. You will conform to the terms of the agreement or you may go back to Mars. However, should you choose to go back, your financial resources will remain on Verde."

"I assure you, I have no desire to go back but" He stopped and looked down at his feet.

"My apologies, Captain. I'm afraid that I have let my emotions carry me away. You are right and I will have a

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lifetime to discover the mysteries here.” He looked around him. “We all will.”

Cole nodded as he relaxed his body slightly. He turned sharply when he heard someone cry out and went running toward the source. “Status,” he demanded into the portable link built into his collar.

“The box is now open.”

Cole rounded the corner and saw that, indeed the cover had slid away showing a humanoid figure lying, he presumed, in stasis.

He slowly approached and looked down on a female form. Up close, she did not look biological. It appeared to be mechanical or at least had a mechanical covering.

“Scans do not penetrate the outer shielding. I can’t tell exactly who or what it is.”

As the engineer spoke, the creature opened her eyes.

Although most of the scientists took a step back, Cole stayed where he was and calmly waited. He felt a sensation and then heard a voice in his mind.

Please be calm while I absorb your information.

There was a tingling and Cole felt a stirring in his mind. Then she sat up and looked around at the others.

I have absorbed all of the data from your minds. You may refer to me as Sar’tns. I am the last remaining active member of the Diirini civilization in this quadrant of space.

Cole thought to her as he had over the years to Mordred.

Are you biological or mechanical?

I am both.

Why are there no others?

Most left centuries ago. The remaining members have either departed or disassociated.

Disassociated?

You would call it death, although it is not the same for us. The biological body remains intact and functioning, the mind has joined with the energies.

Have we offended you by coming here?

No. I greet you as new friends. You may live here or above on the surface as you originally intended. I

Journey To Diir

will be glad to teach you how this city functions, if you prefer to occupy my Diir City. We also have extensive information available on surface of Diir.

The scientists started firing questions at Sar'tns. She responded to each question directly and started showing them how some of the simplest devices worked.

Cole watched the exchange over the next cycle. She turned back to Cole.

I do have a request.

Yes?

I detected a life form like myself before your arrival. I would like to meet this individual.

My child? Have you been communicating with him?

No, Captain Stuart. The individual that I would like to meet with is named Mordred.

Mordred! But Mordred is not a corporeal being. He is contained within a computer. Are you reading all of the thoughts in my mind?

Yes. I know what Mordred is. May I go up to the ship or can he be brought to me?

I will inform him of the situation and ask if he wants to come down.

Thank you, Captain Stuart. The information provided shows that he has a capability to transfer information to your form. If I can interface with Mordred, we may share our information more quickly.

Cole kept his mind clear as he asked some of the group to return to the colony site with him. Once he cleared the cave opening he attempted to contact Sar'tns through normal thought and received no response. He attempted again through activating his UCI. Again, no response. The crystal must be shielding contact.

Mordred, we have a situation down here. A biomechanical life form has been activated and has scanned the mission group's minds and therefore has access to more information than I am comfortable with at this time. She is asking to interface with you in order to expedite sharing of information. Can you block some of your memories?

Lynn Sterling

Unknown since I do not know the entity's strength.

Mordred slipped into Cole's mind and felt the apprehension in him. He also scanned the recent memories and was intrigued by the entity.

I would like to come to the surface and attempt contact.

Mordred, I can't guarantee your safety and we have to consider that she may want to connect with you to learn vital secrets about the expedition.

Acknowledged.

Cole headed the transport back up to the *Tahoe*. Tremaine met him, concern on his face. "Mordred told us that you encountered an entity down there."

"I want to brief the military personnel first. Let's get to the common room with the transport log." They were double-timing it and met Andrea just as they were going in. She shot Cole a look of concern but kept her silence.

Cole watched the group assemble and give him their intense attention.

Cole explained the events that started them into the cavern. He activated the three-dimensional vidscreen and started the transport log at the point they had entered the cavern. There were several gasps as the scope of the city became obvious. When the sequence started showing Sar'tns awakening, there were additional comments and reactions.

"My primary concerns are first, that Sar'tns has complete access to our minds, therefore all that we know. Secondly, although Sar'tns has told us that she is the last of her kind here, we have no way to verify that there aren't thousands in the crystalline buildings. And third, she has asked for Mordred to be brought to her. It is unknown if he can prevent her from scanning all of his memories or if he will be damaged. She specifically asked for him even though we have fifteen other Computer Control Units spread throughout the ships."

Cole looked around the room to stunned faces. "This is just a little *too easy*. I'm concerned that she has another agenda."

Journey To Diir

Mordred, do you want to go down? Andrea asked him, trying to shield her worry from him.

Very much, Andrea.

She spoke up. "Did you have access to Mordred in the cavern?"

He nodded.

"Then Mordred could contact anyone with an CIU from inside of the dome. If the entity wants to take over, that's a good way to start."

"That will just expedite things if that is her plan. She has the schematics for the CIU interface already. The scientists included in the mission would have known how to build one. She could put one together in a cycle."

Mordred surprised them when he interrupted.

Sar'tns has contacted me through the ship's communication channel and invited me to the city.

Cole turned to Tremaine.

"Move the other two ships from the vicinity until we know what's happening and let's get all non-essential personnel out of here."

It took two cycles to move the personnel onto the *Banff* and *Aspen*. While that was happening, Andrea was talking to Mordred.

Mordred, you are just not risking your own existence here. You could also endanger the crew.

I understand but I believe this is worth the risk.

This will sound selfish but I don't want to think about losing you.

Thank you, Andrea. I admit that I am frightened but I am also excited.

Please don't let Cole know this. He would never allow you down there if he thought you were defective.

I believe that it is my very difference from the other units that caused her to request me. There is no other explanation.

She thought about that for a minute. *Other CCUs have been communicating with the surface?*

Lynn Sterling

So far, I have had eleven communications with the surface. Since we have arrived, that is less than two percent of the total Computer Control Unit communications to the surface of the planet.

Maybe you're right. Maybe Cole should know this.

Can you accompany me to the surface?

That will be up to Cole, Mordred. As much as I'd like to go, he is the Captain and he is also the father of the child I carry. I will ask him but I believe that he will say no.

I understand.

Cole came into their quarters shortly after and took her in his arms. "It looks like this isn't paradise after all."

"We don't know that yet, Cole. Listen, I need to talk to you about Mordred," she said as she pulled him over to the sofa and sank down.

"I don't like taking him down there."

"Me either, but he wants to go. He has been making some changes in the last few days that I think that you should know about because I think they are why she asked only for him."

"What changes?" he asked, frowning.

"The joining that he does for us allows him to experience what we do. He has incorporated emotion into his personality."

"Andrea, that means that he is becoming unstable! We can't possibly take him down there now!"

"Listen to me Cole," she paused and looked into his eyes. "I have worked with Mordred on this and I am convinced that he is well balanced and is acclimating to his new emotions. He recognizes negative feelings and the need to control them as well as the positive emotions that he cherishes. The rules were written too long ago to still be valid. *Please* trust me on this."

He held her gaze as he thought it over. "There is so much at stake here, Andrea. It's not just us that I have to worry about."

"I *know* that I'm right about him. I know this in my soul."

He swallowed and continued to look at her. When he spoke, his voice was deep with feeling.

Journey To Diir

"I do believe you but I don't think the rest of the crew would understand."

Mordred spoke to them then.

I appreciate your consideration, Captain Stuart and I assure you that I have been testing myself extensively to verify my abilities. I care deeply for the two of you—and Tremaine—and I would never do anything that would jeopardize your safety.

He nodded. "Okay then. I'll take him down."

She took a deep breath. "He asked if I could join him."

"Absolutely not!" Cole exploded. "I will not have you and the baby at risk and I won't listen to another word from you about it!"

"Please relax, Cole." Andrea was calm and continued quietly, "I told him that I would ask you even though I didn't think you would let me go."

His fury was still raging.

"How could you even ask? You know me well enough by now to know exactly what I think. Didn't you even notice that I didn't insist that you go with one of the other ships? That's where I wanted you but I knew that you would dig your heels in. I don't want anyone down there that doesn't have a specific purpose. Give me some credit, Andrea!"

"Cole, you are overreacting. I didn't really expect you to allow it and I understand your concern. The baby is our first priority, but please promise me that you will do everything in your power to protect Mordred."

Please do not argue on my account!

They could actually *feel* Mordred's distress.

Andrea informed me that you would probably not allow her to go. She knew that I was frightened and wished that she could go with me.

Cole was shocked out of his anger. He looked at Andrea. "I can feel his anxiety. Did he say that he was frightened?"

She nodded.

Now he took a deep breath and let it out. Andrea watched his chiseled features as he contacted Mordred.

Lynn Sterling

What exactly is it that you think that Andrea could do for you, Mordred?

Offer comfort.

Can I offer you comfort?

You can, although it would be different from you.

Is that acceptable?

Yes, Cole.

Cole raised his eyebrows. "He called me Cole."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "You can hardly blame him since he has been inside our heads during our most intimate moments."

"Point taken. It just never occurred to me that it really interested him."

Mordred spoke to them again.

I do have a question for you. The intimacy that you share when your consciousness is joined is much more intense. Why haven't more couples used the Computer Control Units in the past in this manner?

CCUs are specifically programmed to reject emotional situations and we are prevented, by law, from subjecting CCUs to excessive emotion. Because of that, it never really occurred to me before so it probably just hasn't occurred to them.

That is unfortunate. There are crew members that could benefit from the experience.

Andrea's eyes danced and she tried to hide the smile from Cole.

He gave her a shocked look. "Has he been violating the privacy of the crew members?"

"It sounds like he has become quite a voyeur. At least we still rank at the top of his ratings."

"Andrea!"

"Get used to it, Cole. This is exactly how our young son will be reacting to new situations. Mordred is not a child but his curiosity is childlike."

Cole was shaking his head at her when Tremaine came in.

"They are ready for you, Cole. Should we put Mordred into his container?"

Journey To Diir

Cole looked at Andrea. "Yes. I'm taking him down myself." He pulled her close and gave her a long, lingering kiss.

He followed Tremaine out into the corridor. "Andrea asked me if she could go down there and I was a little harsh."

It was Tremaine's turn to be angry. "Why in the name of hell would she ask that?"

Cole explained Mordred's new capabilities.

Tremaine's eyes were filled with doubt but he kept silent as they entered the transport launch area. "I hope you know what you are doing, Cole."

"Me too, Tremaine. Andrea is convinced that Mordred is stable and I'm going to go with it. In the event that it starts falling apart, I want the *Tahoe* out of here. Get a fold programmed and be ready to jump."

Tremaine gave him a brief nod.

★ Chapter 28 ★

Cole was filled with apprehension as he piloted the transport back into the cave. The minute that he reached the city he heard Sar'tns' voice in his head.

Welcome back, Captain. Thank you for returning. I understand your concerns and I assure you that I mean you and your crew no harm.

Cole knew that she would know everything once he was within range.

Mordred had been in contact with Cole. It was comforting to feel his mind so close. When Sar'tns had spoken to him, he felt her honesty and found that reassuring. He was tempted to reach out to her but was unsure. The power of her mind was daunting.

The transport settled and Cole picked up the carrier containing Mordred.

I hope you and Andrea are right, Mordred.

As do I, Cole.

Cole walked purposefully through the dome to meet Sar'tns. She stepped forward and held out her hands.

When Cole paused she offered, ***May I, Captain?***

As he handed Mordred to her he was overcome with doubt and guilt.

Please don't feel such concern, Captain. Mordred will not be harmed. She turned and set him in the center of some kind of diagnostic unit.

I am initiating contact. Please be calm. Cole felt anything but calm.

Mordred felt a brush against his mind and then she pulled their minds together. He had never experienced

Journey To Diir

anything like this! Her thoughts were orderly like his, but also fluid, like human thought. He felt her examining his memories as he started to examine hers.

This must be what Andrea had felt with Cole and Tremaine, he thought as he learned her history.

Her people had been humanoid at first. Slowly they evolved into what she had become in order to prolong life. They learned that they were linked to the universe, as was everything and experienced the final merging when they became one with the energy of the universe. When more and more of the population merged, only a few remained.

And then, finally, only she remained.

Mordred felt her terrible loneliness and sent Sar'tns calm reassurance as he felt her spirit flow around him. She drew him into her and showed him her knowledge. He filled her with his warmth and he knew that he would never be away from her again. She gently led him toward another place within her and showed him how she had been created. She waited patiently until he grasped the idea and then asked him to join her.

Cole silently watched in agony.

Mordred had become silent and he did not dare initiate contact while Sar'tns was connected. He stood like that and waited for at least a half cycle. The other scientists had kept the quiet vigil with him. No one knew what was going to happen or if they had any choice in the matter.

Suddenly, the voices of Sar'tns and Mordred filled their minds. ***We are united. A procedure will now be performed which you may participate in. Mordred will become whole.***

Cole initiated contact with Mordred.

Mordred, tell me what is happening.

I'm fine, Cole. Sar'tns will install my memories into one of the biomechanical units here. My functionality will not be affected except that I will now have a body, like hers.

Are you sure that you won't be damaged? Cole was starting to reach stress overload.

Lynn Sterling

Cole, Sar'tns and I are now joined as you and Andrea are. She has waited centuries in loneliness. She will not harm me.

Cole looked down at his hands and saw that they were shaking.

Sar'tns picked Mordred's container up and moved to a wall where she touched a panel and a body slid out, this one male. The engineers moved around her and watched as she withdrew Mordred from his container, lifted him free and sat him inside a machine adjoining his new body.

This device will draw Mordred from where he is currently stored and install him into this unit.

Cole felt like he was watching a friend die and could do nothing to prevent it.

Be calm, Captain. He will be as you knew him.

Cole tried some deep breaths and waited. It only took a few minutes and Sar'tns deactivated the device.

Mordred, you are whole. Reach into my mind and I will show you how to use your new form.

Mordred reached out to her and found her gentle guidance teach him about what he had become.

Cole watched as the new Mordred opened his eyes and sat up.

Mordred, are you all right?

Yes, Cole. I am fine.

Mordred's first action was to reach for Sar'tns hand.

I no longer envy your humanity or your love, Cole. I understand now.

Andrea had been right, after all. He didn't know how she had known but he was grateful that he had trusted her.

Mordred walked to Cole and looked him in the eyes.
My home is now here, Cole. I hope that you will join me.

He nodded and smiled shakily.

I think we will.

I would like you to bring Andrea and Tremaine down now. I want to share my joy with them.

Cole nodded again. *I'll have Tremaine bring Andrea down.*

Journey To Diir

Mordred nodded and paused. Awkwardly he reached out and gave Cole a brief hug.

Thank you, Cole.

He released Cole quickly and returned to Sar'tns side.

Cole took the transport up to the cave entrance and signaled Tremaine that he would meet them at the colony camp. When Andrea and Tremaine came on board, Cole smiled reassurance but gave them no details. He decided to let Mordred tell them himself.

Andrea was delighted with the beauty of the city as they glided overhead. "My mother always said that I was her little raccoon . . . I loved everything that sparkled and shined!"

He settled the transport yet again and followed Andrea and Tremaine into the dome. Mordred walked toward Andrea and Cole saw her tense up a little.

It's me, Andrea. Mordred.

Mordred? How?

He filled her mind with images.

Andrea put a hand to her mouth as the reality struck her. She threw her arms around him.

I am so happy for you! You are beautiful.

Thank you.

He then added out loud, "I want you to meet Sar'tns."

"Thank you for what you have done."

It is you who deserves the thanks. I know of your friendship and support of Mordred. You are the reason that he has evolved to this point and now I am no longer alone.

Andrea smiled at her, not knowing what exactly to say.

Mordred broke in, ***I have downloaded CCU training programs into this unit.***

He handed Cole his old housing. ***Interface this with the Computer Control Units on the ships and you may find all information on the city functions as well as planetary geographical and weather***

Lynn Sterling

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patterns for the last century. We have activated a communications window and you may contact us at any time.

Cole wondered why Mordred hadn't activated it before Andrea and Tremaine came down.

I thought you might want to prepare her. I was mistaken.

Andrea watched Mordred as he moved and spoke. His new body was similar in size to Nick and had a rich warm tan color. His eyes were dark brown and had sparkles of yellow in them.

Sar'tns had the same coloring and was the exact height. Her facial features were finer and her eyes had a slightly exotic cast to them. Both were wearing coverings that reminded her of beach robes. She had not been exaggerating when she had told him that he was beautiful. Sadness filled her as she watched them together.

You have not lost me, Andrea. I will be with you as long as you remain here.

I have grown dependant on you for so many things.

You may have lost a Computer Control Unit, but you have gained a baby sitter.

She laughed out loud and she saw Mordred smile for the first time. Cole and Tremaine looked at her curiously.

I will still be with you in all the ways that you need me. You must understand though, that I share everything with Sar'tns. Does that make you uncomfortable?

No, Mordred. The one time that I held something back from Cole and Tremaine, it cut like a knife. I understand perfectly.

She heard Sar'tns melodious voice in her head.

Our kind has not given live birth in many centuries. I enjoy the feeling of your child inside you. I apologize for the concern that I caused when I was calling.

I understand.

His mind feels like yours. He allows my searching but searches my mind as well.

Journey To Dür

She felt a rush of panic and a little jealousy. Sar'tns was communicating with her son!

Be calm, Andrea.

Mordred touched her mind again.

Would you like to feel his mind yourself?

Yes!

Mordred took her inside of herself and she brushed her growing child's mind. She felt a stirring and a sudden awareness. There was no doubt that he knew her as he touched her mind. There was no organized thought, just emotion and instinct. She felt Mordred draw her away and her son moved restlessly within her. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Thank you.

You're welcome, came the joined response.

She felt strong arms pull her close. "Are you okay?" Cole whispered.

She nodded shakily. "This is a little overwhelming."

He nodded curtly and he spoke aloud. "Mordred, we are going back up to the ship now. If you need anything, let us know."

You may call on me, as always, Captain. I remain your friend.

Andrea was silent on the trip up to the *Tahoe* as the engineers around her chattered excitedly. Since she had awakened in this new time her life seemed to explode on a weekly basis. Sometimes she wished that she could have stayed on the *Camelot* and just been happy for a while.

She heard the E-sharp note in her head.

I, for one, am glad that you did not.

It just seems so hard all of the time.

History proves over and over that doing the right thing is seldom easy.

It still makes me tired, Mordred. Even with the freedom and the money, we all still think of our brief time on Camelot as idyllic. It makes me wonder if we have really gained so much.

She felt her mind seized and then touched against mind after mind on the *Tahoe*. She felt not only their

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gratitude, but also their genuine love for her. They saw her as a leader that had offered them a future when they had no hope of one.

She also was amazed by the support that the GenEng felt for her since Tremaine had openly become her lover. Most of them had guessed he had been with her on *Camelot* and respected the risk she had taken. This proved to them that she really believed that they were equal.

These people know what you have done, Andrea.

Mordred had humbled her yet again.

Thank you.

★ Chapter 29 ★

The next few weeks were a flurry of activity.

The engineers and crew had all gone into intensive training to learn about the city technology. Diir City's existing living quarters were set up to house thousands so accommodating the crew was almost effortless. There were music halls, museums and libraries containing the culture of a civilization that only had one representative. Two additional smaller cities were in other areas of the underground caverns.

Communications had been handled telepathically within the Diirinians so some modifications would be required to interface with the human three-dimensional communications systems. It was the transport system that caused the biggest excitement.

The Diirini had perfected molecular transport—something humans had been working on for centuries. Breaking down a block of steel and reconstructing it seemed to be a possible goal. When you started to breakdown something as intricate as a human body, with thoughts traveling along pathways, electronic messages being sent from the brain to the body to control breathing, heart rate, blood flow . . . well, it had never reached the point where any scientist was willing to risk his own life.

The Diirini however, had established the technology almost one thousand five hundred years ago for everyday transport between the cities and from the cities to space. The space platforms had been dismantled and stored on the primary moon. It would be necessary to pull them

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out of storage and reassemble and repair them as soon as possible. The capabilities of these platforms would add additional protection from enemies as well as space debris impacts.

A team of GenEng engineers latched on to an idea and they had been revising the transport technology to improve the remanufacture of food.

The quarters in the city were spacious but stark. The Diirini had preferred austere design. They also did not have the hygiene issues the human population did. Zero impact sonic cleaning areas were added to each home as well as limited food preparation facilities.

A central food preparation area was established for colony use. This worked well for most of the scientists. A ship-styled water based shower with a sonic cleaning unit was included in the RPP quarters although Andrea wasn't sold on living underground. The hot tub would have to wait for another time.

Each home had a view through a crystal wall of the sparkling city, which Sar'tns called Diir City, which could be adjusted, from clear to opaque. All of the scientists had transferred permanently to Diir and selected homes close to the labs.

The remaining crew selected their homes carefully and started plans for a move. Tristin was put on hold. It would be faster and easier to upgrade Diir than to build Tristin on the surface.

Since most of the colonists were used to being underground, on-ship or in domes, being underground seemed more comfortable for them than Andrea would have guessed. In her time, the view of nature, sun and stars would have been the draw. She was a little sad that her new home wouldn't have a view of that beautiful wilderness.

In those hectic weeks Cole and Tremaine had been constantly busy and Andrea had slept alone night after night in their quarters on the ship. She could have moved to the city but decided that she liked the familiar comfort as the crew rushed around her like purposeful ants. As she was showering she had a wave of frustration

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that turned quickly to anger then to sadness and knew that she should just pass it off as being pregnant. The loneliness was getting to her. She calmed herself and dressed. Maybe she would just go down and see what was happening herself.

As she stepped into the central room of her quarters, she saw Mordred sitting patiently on the sofa. She immediately sank down next to him and gave him a hug and a huge smile.

You are so sad.

Just a little lonely. Cole and Tremaine have been so busy, they have no time for me.

They are busy but they are also avoiding the intimate contact that we once shared.

"Why?" She was stunned.

I see them daily and they see me now as someone different than I was. The personal knowledge that I have about them makes them uncomfortable.

"Great," she blurted out loud exasperatedly. "I don't care to sleep alone for all of my remaining pregnancy." She felt a flash of bitterness at her condition.

Don't blame the child, Andrea. Cole and Tremaine are not responding in their normal fashion.

It's not just the sex Mordred. I don't feel like I'm part of this right now. For some reason, they are completely shutting me out.

The sadness in her tore him.

I have a gift for you if you can come with me to the surface.

I was planning to come down to the city today anyway.

We are not going to the city or to the colony camp. Will you come?

The mystery intrigued her and she felt herself getting excited.

Yes!

Mordred took her down in one of Diir's personal transports. It was small and maneuverable and within minutes they were gliding over the tops of a mountain range. She gasped when a mountain lake came into view,

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the water deep blue in the center and ranging to almost clear at the banks.

It's so beautiful. Cole mentioned that they had mapped a mountain lake. Thank you for showing me this, Mordred.

This is not your surprise.

She gave him a questioning smile and looked back at the display as he settled the transport in a clearing and opened the door.

A crisp, spicy odor drifted through the air as she stepped onto the ground and she felt the breeze blow gently against her and the sun shone down on her face.

This is truly a perfect day, Mordred.

She felt herself responding to the beauty as the tension and loneliness left her.

Mordred reached out and took her hand gently. She loved being outside in nature and allowed herself to be guided along the bank as she looked at these magnificent surroundings. The air was pungent and crisp. It didn't smell like a pine forest, but had a unique, clear scent that she loved. She was watching the sun sparkle diamonds on the water when he paused.

Andrea glanced up at him and then caught a glimpse of something over his shoulder. She stepped away to take it all in and felt her mouth fall open. A cottage was nestled in the trees looking like it had always been there. She knew that it had not because it was a replica of one that she thought of often that had existed long ago in the Canadian Rockies.

This is Sar'tns and my gift to you. We used Diirinian technology and no one else knows it is here. I took the liberty to upgrade the facilities for food and hygiene but left the esthetics exactly as they were from your memories. We also added a private transport pad, although it is not currently active.

It's so perfect. Only you could have known.

When they walked up the steps onto the deck and through the door, Andrea felt more at home than she had since awakening from the pod. This was now her home. The wood floors gleamed around the soft area rugs. The

Journey To Diir

bed was large and inviting and the hot tub waited patiently to calm her from the deck.

I never want to leave here!

Andrea turned and threw her arms around Mordred.

I am going to return the transport to the city. Anytime that you need me, I can transport here instantly. Now that I can move in a physical form I have another gift for you just from me.

She smiled curiously at him.

I remember your disappointment when you could not find films and music from your time on Earth. You'll find a collection of both in your entertainment unit. Many were lost through the centuries but a few have remained for you to enjoy.

Her face broke into a brilliant smile.

You never forget anything!

I can stay, if you like or return to Diir.

I'll let you get back to Sar'tns.

You won't be lonely here?

She looked up at him and shook her head.

Someone once told me that the word loneliness described the pain of being alone, and solitude the glory of being alone. The solitude will be a nice change. Please give Sar'tns my love and thanks.

Call on me if you need anything, my friend.

Please don't tell anyone that I'm here for a while. I feel like unplugging the phone.

The phone is disconnected.

She watched him walk down the path and disappear in the trees and then she turned back into the cottage.

They had spared no detail. The bookcases were jammed with hundreds of books, all complete—some that she had read, and others she had not.

There was fresh food in the food prep kitchen and her favorite music programmed into the entertainment center.

Andrea slipped into some casual clothes, picked out a book that she had read long ago and settled onto a lounge chair on the deck. The cushions surrounded her unlike cushions that would have been on this deck so

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long ago. The story pulled her in and she didn't notice the time until the air started to chill her skin.

The fireplace looked and smelled real but activated on from a touch plate. When hunger drove her into the kitchen, she found fresh fruit and cheese!

How could he have pulled this one off?

Andrea opened a bottle of non-alcoholic Mirian wine and settled back down to her book.

The night came on slowly, as it does in the mountains. There was no spectacular sunset but the stars came out to make up for the sky's lack of color. She selected some more music, turned on the hot tub and settled in for a short time. The sonic cleaners kept the water completely free of bacteria and debris, as the water cleared her mind and body from stress and frustration. She smiled dreamily. Peace, mountains, lake, hot tub, great music . . . heaven.

When she curled into the big bed, she drifted almost immediately to sleep and dreamed of childhood outings and deep snow.

Andrea?

She came awake to the dim light of early morning.

Yes, Mordred.

Cole and Tremaine are demanding that I tell them where you are.

She felt a touch of frustration and quelled it.

May I speak directly with them, Mordred?

She felt Cole and Tremaine's thoughts suddenly touch her mind.

I understand that you are looking for me.

Where are you? they both demanded.

I'm fine and taking a little vacation. Mordred is keeping an eye on me and I am quite safe.

Andrea, where are you? She could feel Cole's fury building.

Cole Stuart, you have been avoiding and ignoring me for weeks and it is apparent that you do not need me to help you complete your duties.

Andrea, please, Tremaine broke in, we don't want you to be somewhere alone and unprotected.

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I have been alone for weeks and Mordred and Sar'tns will protect me just fine. This is final, gentlemen. I expect you to respect my privacy for a while. Mordred will let you know when my vacation is over.

She paused.

Thank you, Mordred. I will let you know if I need anything.

With that Andrea settled back into the covers and let herself drift back to sleep.

Cole and Tremaine went to Mordred directly, in the flesh so to speak.

Cole was livid. "How could you have allowed her to go off on her own? What were you thinking?"

Mordred remained calm, Sar'tns by his side. But Cole could tell how strongly he felt because he was using his voice to speak to them. "She was feeling great loneliness and pain. Neither of you have been spending time with her, and I couldn't bear to feel her that way."

Tremaine's guilt showed on his face but he kept silent.

Mordred felt a flash of guilt from Cole but it didn't stop his tirade. "She has millions of enemies and is pregnant on top of it. I can't have her somewhere alone."

Mordred's voice hardened with the intensity of his own emotions.

"You have no choice in the matter, Captain Stuart. I am watching her more carefully than you or Tremaine ever have. She is safe and well and happy and will remain protected by me and Sar'tns until she decides to end her solitude."

"Mordred, I order you to tell me—"

Sar'tns voice filled their minds.

You can not order Mordred to do anything, Captain. Although I invited you to live here and enjoy Diir City, you do not command either of us. I, and now Mordred, are Diirini and we are not under your command.

Cole looked at them both steadily for a moment, barely containing his fury. Mordred said nothing as he watched Cole and felt his frustrated anger.

Tremaine said quietly, "Mordred, you can see that we worry about her. How can we be sure that you can protect her?"

You must trust us, as Andrea does, came the reply from both of them.

Cole turned on his heel and stalked off, leaving Tremaine standing there with them.

"Mordred, I had no idea that she has been hurt by this. I didn't know that Cole had not seen her either and I have been so busy."

You are uncomfortable with me joining the two of you, as is Cole. You avoided all contact with her instead of the joining which has brought her great pain.

"It's hard to be with her and not want her."

Andrea is not the problem, Tremaine. Your feelings about me have altered. Why do you not believe that I am the same? Do you not see that even the way that you communicate with me is now verbal so that you can distance yourself from me?

I never experienced emotion from you before, Mordred. You didn't feel alive to me before.

Mordred nodded.

Andrea was the only one that truly looked at me and saw me for who I was.

Tremaine stared at him solemnly as he recalled saying something like that about himself. He was just as guilty of prejudice as those around him had been.

I'm sorry, Mordred. You're right.

He looked at the floor, ashamed, and continued, *Let Andrea know how sorry I am.*

I will tell her when next she contacts me.

Three days later, Andrea contacted Mordred.

Mordred, I'm running low on fruit and vegetables. Could you send some through the transport?

Yes. Tremaine wishes to apologize for his actions and would like to see you.

Journey To Diir

And Cole? What was his response? Did he understand how hard this is for me?

We haven't spoken since our initial conversation. I still detect frustration and anger in him.

Will Tremaine keep our secret?

He will although it will cause more anger from Cole when he discovers.

May I speak with Tremaine, please?

She felt Tremaine in her mind.

Mordred says you want to visit me.

Andrea, I am so sorry that I hurt you. Can I come to you? I just need to see that you are alright.

What happens when Cole finds out?

He has to come to terms with this on his own. I can't direct him. He will just have to deal with it.

Can you stay awhile?

I want to. Let me see how to rearrange my schedule.

Tremaine broke the contact and Andrea told Mordred to send him if he could get away.

Andrea took a long walk around part of the lake and saw fish in the shallows of the water, small furry animals that looked a lot like squirrels, snow-white birds that squawked and screamed when she came too close to their homes.

She was smiling as she climbed the stairs to the deck and saw Tremaine waiting for her on her favorite chair.

"It's beautiful here, Andrea. Mordred and Sar'tns have outdone themselves."

He pulled her against him and just held her gently for a minute.

"I know that he is watching over you but I have still been worried."

"Mordred pulled this design from my memories. He knew what it meant to me. Since awakening from that cryo pod, this is the first place that really feels like home. It's healing me in a way that I can't even describe. The location is perfect, don't you think?"

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“Gorgeous.” He paused and grew serious. “Mordred gave me a *wake-up call* as you call it.”

“How so?”

“He made me see that I have been treating him exactly as so many others have treated me over my lifetime. I must confess, it was a very unattractive view of my personality.”

She nodded. “It’s hard to overcome training and experience from birth. Since I was thrust into this universe mid-stream, as it were, I skipped much of the indoctrination. As much as I’d like to believe that I would have acted differently, I’ll never know. I got to know Mordred, you and Nick before I knew the rules.” She grinned. “I’ve never been very big on rules.”

He was looking at her, not the view as he dipped his head and kissed her softly. “I told Cole that I was joining you and he was actually relieved rather than mad so I plan to stay for a few days, if I’m welcome.”

She grinned and pulled him into the cabin. “I hope you won’t be bored.”

Of course, they weren’t bored at all. The only thing Tremaine mentioned that was missing was a DGR, which would have made some things a little easier. They relaxed and cavorted and made love whenever the mood struck them. Andrea took him into the surrounding forest and shared her discoveries of streams, animals and fish. They actually went fishing and caught dinner one night. Andrea did spare Tremaine the details of cleaning and cooking the fish. He would never have tried the fish if he had seen that procedure!

Mordred and Sar’tns had joined silently during their lovemaking. ***Diirinians gave up their mating rituals centuries before I was created. It was determined that it was more efficient to use a procedure similar to how your GenEng were formed.*** Sar’tns said to Mordred. ***This joining is intriguing.***

I wish that we could join as they do, Mordred said. Sar’tns was silent in his mind and he thought that he had been inappropriate. Then he felt her again as her intentions filled him.

Journey To Diir

Andrea lay curled deep under the covers with Tremaine behind her breathing into her hair when Mordred filled her mind with a request.

If Tremaine agrees, I have no objection, she replied.

Tremaine stirred behind her. He lifted up on one elbow as she turned to face him. "Are you okay with this, Andrea?" She nodded as he continued, "We are definitely moving into the chicken phase."

They dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Andrea felt Sar'tns mind in hers, stronger this time and relaxed against it, letting Sar'tns have control. She felt Mordred's mind against hers as well as Tremaine's as Tremaine's hands and mouth started caressing her, coaxing her and her own hands moved to explore Tremaine, seemingly of their own accord.

Sar'tns emotions filled her as Tremaine's body joined with hers. She found Tremaine's mind touching her and she joined her thoughts with his as Mordred controlled his body as Sar'tns did hers. He drove her body to orgasm twice before allowing his own release.

Andrea felt Sar'tns gratitude as she drifted out of her mind. Tremaine held her gently for a long while before either could speak.

"They really love each other." There was genuine awe in his voice.

"Very much like we do," she answered softly.

Mordred and Sar'tns became unavailable to the scientists and Cole for over a day. Everyone was thinking the worst; worried that something might have gone wrong with Mordred's new body.

Cole's concern was heightened since both Tremaine and Andrea were still gone. Now that he was afraid that something had gone wrong with Mordred, he was feeling guilty for treating him so badly. If Tremaine had not gone to Andrea he would be a raving lunatic right now.

Andrea had been gone for two weeks and considering Cole had hardly seen or talked to her for over three

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weeks prior to that, he was finally starting to miss her deeply and envied Tremaine's ability to go to her and accept Mordred so willingly in his new form. The one thing that Tremaine had said to him before he left was, "It's always harder to look deeper into people because you have to accept them for who they are instead of who they appear to be."

I need to get out of here! Cole thought. He strode quickly to one of the Diir personal transports and lifted it off and out of the caverns before he could talk himself out of it. He flew aimlessly for a cycle, skimming the ocean and watching some of the huge sea creatures swimming in large groups. They reminded him of whales but they did not breathe air and they moved their bodies more like fish through the clear waters. Cole pulled the transport into a climb and flew over treetops and cliffs as he came upon the mountain range on this landmass. He noticed a sparkle and circled over the mountain lake that he had once mentioned to Andrea.

That seems like so long ago, he thought sadly. Andrea would love this. Another sparkle caught his eye as he circled the lake and he lost it in the trees. His curiosity forced him to circle one more time. That's when he saw a structure hidden in the trees. He glanced to the scanner as it reported nothing at all. How could nothing be He sat the transport down in a clearing a short distance from the structure and made his way to the structure.

Andrea was leaning back against Tremaine as the warm, bubbling water massaged them when she heard footsteps on the deck. Her eyes flew open to see Cole staring at them stoically. She sat up slowly as she realized that her vacation had suddenly come to an abrupt halt and felt a flash of anger. Tremaine pulled her back against him. "Relax," he whispered.

Cole walked over and sat in one of the chairs next to the hot tub and noticed two cut crystal glasses sparkling in the sunlight. "You are certainly hard to find."

"I have friends in high places," she returned softly.

"Your friends in high places have been out of contact for over a day. I'm beginning to worry about them."

Journey To Diir

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Andrea looked back at Tremaine and his eyebrows lifted in a shrug.

"They're fine, Cole. We have communicated with them several times during that time."

"Don't tell me that they are on vacation too!" he blurted.

"Well, more like a honeymoon."

Cole looked at them and knew that they were holding something back.

Andrea looked radiant. Her face had darkened slightly from the sunlight, as had Tremaine's and Cole could see the gentle rise of her breasts as the water frothed against them.

"You look well."

She smiled and stared into his eyes. "I'm in heaven here, Cole." She stretched and reached out a hand to him. "Help me up, will you? My balance isn't what it used to be."

He grasped her hand and she stood, moving to the edge of the water. He stopped breathing for a moment as she stepped naked from the tub and wrapped a fluffy robe around her wet body. He saw the slight swell of his child in her and her trim tanned legs before the robe swallowed them up. His body reacted at jump speed and he saw Tremaine giving him a knowing grin.

Andrea walked across the deck and through the door to the cottage. He noticed for the first time how her walk had changed just a little to accommodate the change in her body's center of gravity. Cole followed her into the interior and looked around at the comfortable setting. The front windows looked out onto the lake and surrounding mountains and the interior was filled with dark, warm colors and rich, soft fabrics that invited relaxation. He heard the bubbling on the deck cease and Tremaine came in shortly after, also wrapped in a robe.

Andrea was watching Cole's reactions. "Mordred and Sar'tns did a great job, don't you think?"

"They did this?"

"Mordred pulled this from my fondest memory and gave it to me as a gift."

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Cole looked into her eyes and then found Tremaine's.
"So, what is really going on with Mordred."

"I told you. He's having a honeymoon."

Cole gave his head a shake. "You're both not telling me everything."

Tremaine remained silent as he looked at Andrea. Andrea looked seriously at Cole. "Mordred will tell you, if he chooses. It's not our place."

"Is he okay?"

Finally, Tremaine spoke. "Very okay. So how did you find us?"

"There was a reflection off of something as I did a fly over. Probably the glasses on the deck or the water in the tub."

He looked at the two of them and for the first time, felt awkward.

The second the feeling gripped him, Andrea walked to him and slipped her arms around his neck.

"I've missed you," she whispered.

"Me too," he said as he kissed her mouth. God, she felt good!

"We do have something to tell you, Cole."

He frowned at her slightly as she pulled him down on the sofa between her and Tremaine.

"Sar'tns has been studying us and has found the part of our brain that activates telepathy. That is how the Diirinians communicated and she saw the capability in us as well."

She paused as Cole remained silent.

"She activated both our brain centers so that we can use our telepathy."

He looked at Tremaine. "Did you run this by any of our medical staff?"

"Mordred and Sar'tns have all of the medical information available. We took standard precautions and there are no ill effects."

Andrea felt Cole's frustration.

Cole, please relax. We are fine and I don't want to fight with you again. She filled his mind with her love and he turned toward her.

Journey To Diir

"Humans have always been capable of telepathy. Even over the centuries, as scientists have learned more and more about how our brains function, there have still been unused areas of our brains. Sar'tns has not given us something that did not exist, merely exposed it to our eyes."

"This is incredible." He finally smiled at her.

You know how it feels when we join minds, Cole. She just gave us the ability to do it on our own.

He ran a finger down her face. "We can make love without them?"

"Yes. But I still do not have the control yet to block these emotions from the baby completely. Tremaine has a stronger focus and can, however."

He gave Tremaine a quick look.

"Cole, maybe it's time that you admitted that your real concern is that you don't like this much exposure. Even though we are your family, and love you, you are afraid that we'll see something in you that will make us turn away. It's not Mordred or Sar'tns or even me. It's you. What are you so afraid of?"

Cole looked evenly at Tremaine and took a deep breath. "We all have secrets that we are not proud of."

"Are you afraid that what happened to Marla will happen to me?"

Cole swiveled his head sharply to look in shock at Andrea.

"Cole, she wanted to have a baby as badly as you did. She knew the risks that she faced. You could not stay with her all of the time and there had been no reason to believe that she was in any danger. She knew that VidSim exercise was not recommended after the seventh month and still did it. That was not your fault."

Andrea and Tremaine felt the grief overtake him instantly.

"She loved to dance and had felt so awkward during the pregnancy. I had to go in to the office that day just for a couple of cycles. The doctors wanted her to come in the next day for the birth and we were planning to spend our last quiet evening as a couple. When they called me

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at the office, it was already too late. The medical alert had called in an emergency team, but they could do nothing for her. The baby was already gone and she was barely hanging on. When I got to her all that she could say was, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' and then she was gone too."

Cole was crying openly as he tried to explain, "She had always been so beautiful on stage and I really never understood what it had cost her to stop during the pregnancy. I should have known what she needed. I should have seen that the VidSim had been used every day and she couldn't give it up."

He paused, "Later, I found that she had recorded all of her performances once she found out that she was pregnant and played at least one of them every day. That was when I realized that I had never really known her at all. I had taken her for granted. There was so much more to her and I let her down by ignoring all of the warning signs. I believed what I wanted to and it cost both of their lives. The passion that she had for her dance was so out of my reach. She was always out of my reach."

"I'm not, Cole. You have joined with my mind and you know me. Even then, you held a part of yourself back from me. You know I never held back anything except when I was protecting Mordred."

"I hated it when you disappeared with Mordred."

"I know. It was something that I had to do, though. It was never meant to hurt or frighten you and I was truly safe. Mordred and Sar'tns would never allow anything to endanger me or the baby. But he understood how much I needed to be here."

Cole nodded and glanced again at Tremaine. "Thanks for being a bigger man than I was."

"Not a bigger man, Cole. Just one with a little less baggage. Something that Mordred said to me made me see that I had some prejudice of my own that I needed to get rid of too so don't feel bad."

Andrea stood and stepped between his knees where he was forced to look up at her. "I'm a little tired of all of this talk." *Come with me.*

Journey To Diir

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Cole didn't feel Tremaine's mind when he made love to Andrea which was a relief for him.

Tremaine instead kept a discreet mental distance as he surrounded their infant's mind. He felt a soft touch and knew that the baby was trying to find out what was happening. Tremaine sent calming thoughts and felt him drift into sleep where they all joined him in a while.

★ Chapter 30 ★

The scientists were amazed when Sar'tns informed them several weeks later that the telepathy area of the human brain had been activated in Andrea, Tremaine and Cole.

She explained that anyone who wanted to be activated must join completely with her or Mordred before the procedure. Only the most disciplined would be activated. The ability to violate another mind was not something to be taken lightly. Several training programs were instituted to help acclimate the Verdians to their new ability before activation.

Many were not inclined to have the procedure done and were uncomfortable with the fact that others would have the ability to read their thoughts. There was a huge debate raging—so all activations were postponed until a general consensus was attained.

Cole felt the distrust radiating from some people that surprised him. Letting them know that there was no reason to distrust him would have just proven their point. He wasn't violating their thoughts but some people practically threw their emotions at him.

I wish they'd understand the difference between me forcing my mind into theirs to read their thoughts, which I wouldn't do, and reading their emotions which they spew out constantly into the entire neighborhood. Maybe humans haven't started using their telepathy because they aren't really ready, he thought frequently.

Cole ignored the negative reactions and continued the plans to reactivate the remaining parts of Diir City.

Journey To Diir

Jack Spencer had taken to the city like he had been born there and Jacquie had opened one of the music halls and already planned a celebration performance. She and the other musicians were practicing daily and from time to time Cole would drift in to listen to the sweet sounds filling the hall. The city started to feel different as it came to life around him.

During the day sunlight streamed into two columns of crystals running through the mountains and filled the city with natural light and power. The crystals stored the power that remained and had given energy to the city for centuries that way. The small Diirian transport vehicles were in demand, but had been limited to use outside the city after a particularly close call. This didn't affect many people since the city's transport systems were up and running by then. In just three months, their new city was alive and vital.

Sar'tns showed them a weapons array stored on the surrounding moons and explained that two of the moons were not native to Verde, but had been moved from a nearby planet to use as a base for a weapons platform. Their system acted very much like the existing web but was far more powerful in the event of a comet or asteroid strike. Their main system had been operational for centuries and had remained functional when the others were stored. To bring them online, Sar'tns oversaw a small team that reassembled the arrays and launched them into their original positions.

Tremaine took the necessary training and went out to inspect the systems for damage or wear ten solar days after launch. There were a few components that needed replacement.

He banked the Diir transport around the first moon and activated the beacon. The ship was immediately seized by the platform and connected to the docking assembly. Although Sar'tns told him that all platforms had a breathable atmosphere, Tremaine had worn an

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enviro suit anyway. Andrea had been a little more nervous than usual about the mission since she had experienced another of her gut feelings and had calmed a little when he agreed to the suit.

The seal opened and Tremaine drifted through the opening into a large central room. He recognized the layout immediately from his training and started the check out. He replaced all of the components that were questionable and went back to the transport. He had forgotten how much he loved working in zero-G and was truly enjoying himself in space.

The work went quickly and Tremaine was soon on the last platform. This one was in the best shape so far except that one of the components and its backup unit had completely failed. He replaced them quickly and was silently grateful that an asteroid had not come visiting from this direction in the last few decades. He pushed off and propelled himself through the opening to the transport, sealed the port and reactivated controls. Only a few seconds had elapsed when a signal came from the platform below him. Tremaine watched the view screen and recognized the pattern of space unfolding several hundred thousand kilometers in space.

Cole, space fold imminent! Make sure the web is fully functional. Have Sar'tns bring the back platforms online.

Tremaine's transport dived around the edge of the horizon and headed for the *Tahoe*.

"*Tahoe*, I'm headed for docking. We have guests arriving on the night side. As soon as I'm docked, make sure that all three ships are under the web."

He docked. "Status," he demanded firmly as he entered the bridge.

"Ten Earth ships have unfolded and are holding position twenty-five thousand kilometers out of orbital range. All equal to or larger than the *Tahoe*. They are using high energy scans to locate life signs."

"Have they scanned the *Tahoe*?"

The first officer nodded. "They know that we're here and scanned us immediately. We have below minimum staffing on all ships but enough if we have to fight."

Journey To Diir

“We won’t have to fight. The platforms and the web will see to that. They are looking for the surface colony. That is what they want to destroy. They must be a bit confused that we are missing so many life signs.”

Andrea? Tremaine sent.

I’m here.

Transport to the city immediately. I don’t want you exposed if someone gets a lucky shot off.

Tremaine heard Cole. *She’s already here, Tremaine. Everyone from the surface is now underground. They must be wondering where the rest of us are by now.*

Mordred and Sar’tns filled their minds. ***Please let us handle this. We may be able to convince them to leave.***

Mordred and Sar’tns projected their thoughts into space.

You have violated Diirinian space and we detect your negative intentions. Your presence here will not be tolerated.

There was a pause—then a standard communication request. Mordred nodded and opened the channel. A three-dimensional projection showed Smythe staring back at him.

“You are shielding three ships containing criminals from Earth and Mars. All we ask is the return of these criminals to face charges.”

Sar’tns connected with his mind and let him know that she was there.

As the contact was made, Smythe’s mind was immediately scanned as Sar’tns had done with Cole and the scientists. What they saw disgusted them. He had been an agent of Mars Corp for almost his entire life. Sar’tns saw in seconds the evil that he had inflicted on hundreds of people for Mars Corp’s gain. Smythe had been involved in the most insidious plots within Mars Corp and most had been of his own design. His appointment in the Earth military was a cover in order to have full military resources at Mars Corps’ command.

You wish to punish these people because you invested your finances and future in the depravity

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that Mars Corp created. You would enslave a world for your personal gain and kill those who would stand against your evil. You sicken me.

Mordred continued, ***You will now leave our space or face annihilation.***

Mordred paused as another thought occurred to him. He reached out and touched the minds of Smythe's crew and shared Smythe's secrets and greed. In most cases, he felt disgust and revulsion as they realized the true nature of the mission they were on and the plans of the man that they followed.

Most of the remaining officers and crew were true Earth military and were outraged that such a man could rise to this level in their ranks. He watched as Smythe directed weapons online and a course and speed to Diir. The officers on his bridge did not take his orders, but instead ordered him to make the return trip in the brig along with a few other officers in Smythe's employ. Mordred then contacted the first officer.

There is hope for Earth yet. I have downloaded a file for you to use in Earth court. It will detail the crimes committed by Smythe and his group and give you proof to convict him. This planet is off limits to any Earth vessel until further notice. Any vessel intruding again will be dealt with swiftly.

"I understand."

Mordred felt the officer's confusion and curiosity during the communication. Earth would be making suppositions and accusations until they understood what was happening on Diir. The first officer signed off and the ships had folded space and jumped within ten minutes.

So much of what happened was unseen to the Verdians that they were completely confused as to why the Earth ships had suddenly vanished. Andrea was secretly proud of how Mordred had allowed the Earthers to resolve the issue without any physical intervention from Diir.

Cole broadcast to Mordred, Sar'tns and Tremaine. *Meet us at the cottage. Don't discuss this until we talk.*

Journey To Diir

Tremaine settled the transport in the clearing and dashed up the hill to the cottage where he was the last to arrive. Andrea met him with a hug and then clung to his hand as they walked across and sank into the cushions of the sofa facing the windows.

Cole touched their minds. *We have already felt their distrust over the telepathy. What will they say when they find out how Mordred and Sar'tns invaded the Earth crew's minds.*

Andrea was incensed. *They saved their planet without bloodshed and made sure that Smythe is convicted!*

Tremaine shook his head slightly. *No Andrea, Cole is right about this. Even though I'm not reading their minds, I'm constantly feeling anger or distrust. Not everyone feels that way but a large portion of the Martians and Circle group are very intimidated that we could read them if we chose to.*

Mordred seemed confused. ***You have given them an opportunity for a new life and they would distrust you?***

Andrea leaned her head against Tremaine's arm. *I have always told you that the human race never seems to change.*

Cole looked at her and saw the defeat in her posture and it infuriated him. *Then maybe we should put it to them straight and the ones that don't believe in us or trust us can go back to Mars.*

Everyone stared at Cole in disbelief. Andrea shook her head. *Cole, some of these people have risked everything to be here. We can't just send them home.*

I don't want to live surrounded by people that hate me.

They don't hate you, Cole. They're afraid of you. Living in a group of people like us does nothing to dissolve that fear. We have to teach them that we will not invade their privacy and ask them to control their emotions when they are around us.

Cole looked defeated now. *What if it doesn't work? What then?*

Sar'tns sweet voice filled them. ***Then we will go to another Diirini world not far from here. There are***

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many others like you that are ready to accept telepathy and the responsibility that it brings. It is vital as it is the next step in your evolution. Andrea is right, though. We must face them with honesty and trust if we expect honesty and trust from them.

Cole glanced around at his family and nodded. *Fine, let's call a conference for tomorrow and ask everyone to be present and let them know what happened and where we stand.*

Mordred and Sar'tns transported back to the city with Tremaine's transport as Cole, Tremaine and Andrea quietly ate dinner and prepared for sleep. Andrea lay between them on the large bed and listened to their breathing slow as sleep claimed them.

Somewhere she had gone from freeing the enslaved to being enslaved. The few times that she had visited the city she had felt the anger and fear follow her and gradually had just stopped going in. There were still friends and supporters but it always put her off balance when, out of nowhere, she felt those negative feelings radiating toward her. Maybe she had been wrong to allow Sar'tns to open her mind. She felt like something was closing her throat.

She felt Cole's mind caress hers. *No, darling. You were right.*

Sorry, I thought you were sleeping.

I was. He ran a finger down her face. *It will be okay.*

She felt Tremaine's arms tighten around her. *You shouldn't let yourself get upset. You know how Baby gets when you start him up.* He slid his hand to rest on her abdomen. She had a month and a half to go and was starting to feel like she was at war with her body.

Andrea felt Tremaine's calming thoughts as he pulled her into sleep.

★ Chapter 31 ★

Cole faced the assembly calmly and gave a detailed briefing of how the Earth ships had been persuaded to leave.

Andrea felt the waves of feelings coming from the group and would have been sick if Mordred had not surrounded her mind to block their fear and hostility.

Be patient, Andrea. We have yet to speak.

I'm so nervous that I couldn't even eat this morning.

Cole continued, "When Sar'tns opened my mind, I gave an oath that I would not invade the privacy of the minds around me."

Andrea felt a stirring in the crowd as Cole continued, "We have all kept to that standard. We really don't care what you think . . . but we can't block out your feelings when they are projected at us."

Cole paused and looked out over the faces of all the people he had once thought were his friends. "It has become apparent to us that many of you are angry or fear us. We have felt this for months and feel it at this moment. It is important that you learn to curb those feelings around us. Many of you know us, have known us for some time now—and this sudden distrust is not an environment that I want to live in or to raise my son in. Andrea feels that if you know us and understand how telepathy works, that you can learn to accept us again."

Andrea stood up and joined Cole. "Mordred said something to me when we told him of the feelings that we had experienced from some of you. He said, 'You have freed them from prejudice and they would subject you to

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the same treatment that they had been subjected to at the hands of others.' I've always fought against prejudice but this is the first time that I find myself at the heart of it. Telepathy is now a part of our world. Some of you may choose to return to Mars, and that is your right. But I ask you to look into your hearts and ask yourselves if you think that the ability for us to send out thoughts to each other would change the people that we are, the people that you know. To be honest, I've never even thought of communicating with any of you. I wanted this because Sar'tns offered me a way to share myself completely with the people that I love. It never occurred to me that others even had a right to comment on how we showed our love for each other. I wish I could describe the perfect clarity that I share with my family. They surround me with love and support and share my life in a way that I never thought possible."

She stopped as a trigger went off in her mind and looked in confusion at Cole. He felt her danger signal. Mordred was already scanning the building.

I detect no weapons or problems with the building. Diir space is clear from intruders. Maybe it's a false signal?

Suddenly Andrea doubled over in pain.

God, not again! Cole picked her up and ran to the exit with Tremaine and Mordred creating a path. The doctors were all in the audience and followed closely behind. He had her in the medical facility inside of two minutes and doctors surrounded her.

The scanners immediately picked up a toxin in her system that was from a Diirini plant.

The doctor shook his head. "We've identified the toxin as plant based but I don't see how she could have ingested this quantity. I'm afraid that she may abort the child before we can get it free from her system.

Cole put his hand to his eyes.

"Please, please just *do* something," his voice broke as Tremaine put his hand on Cole's arm. *She's not going to die, Cole. Even if she does abort, the baby may live. Don't let her feel you this way.*

Journey To Diir

Cole nodded shakily and took several deep breaths. When he looked up, Sar'tns stood before him.

Be calm, Cole. I will allow no harm to come to her. She projected calm and confidence.

He trusted her more at this moment that he had ever trusted anyone. She turned and went to Andrea. Andrea was lying pale and unmoving on the table as the doctors worked around her.

Sar'tns addressed them, ***Please allow me to help her now.***

The doctors looked up at Cole and he nodded.

Andrea, will you allow me to join with you again?

Sar'tns felt Andrea's mind as from a distance acknowledging her.

Sar'tns moved into her mind with delicacy and purpose. When she felt Andrea's body around her, she used her own energy to collect and destroy the toxins attacking Andrea's body. Within minutes, the toxin no longer showed on any of the monitors the doctors had hooked up. Sar'tns disengaged from Andrea with a parting caress in her mind.

Cole and Tremaine had watched what had taken only minutes and saw the color begin to return to Andrea's cheeks. Sar'tns had remained as stiff as a statue throughout the joining and when she turned to him again, he met her look anxiously.

She and the infant are undamaged, Cole. This poisoning was intentional, however, and we must know why someone would wish her harm.

Cole nodded.

The doctors were buzzing with amazement. He explained how Sar'tns had saved her and the child and he waited for them to respond. He felt gratitude and amazement but no fear, anger or guilt. At least he could leave her in their care without worrying that the assassin was at her side.

He and Tremaine headed for the hall. Tremaine had watched Andrea drink two glasses of juice just before the meeting. He had handed her his glass when she finished the first glass and she had finished his as well.

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Cole, did you drink the Alton juice at the meeting?
Tremaine projected to his friend.

Cole glanced at him. *No. Andrea missed breakfast and I gave her mine.*

I did too. It looks like they were after all three of us.

The poison could kill if the concentration in one glass were great enough or a smaller portion could have been in all three glasses, Mordred injected.

Mordred had a security team in place in the hall and nothing was allowed in or out. He was scanning for the remains of Andrea's DNA in the room. She had touched many items, and shaken hands with friends but finally, Mordred located the glasses that she had drunk from. There was a total of four. They found Tremaine's DNA on one and Cole's on the other. A genetic signature that Mordred matched against one of the servers was on Cole's, Tremaine's, and one of the remaining two. The remnants of the poison was only in one remaining glass.

No other genetic tags were present. The person serving the glass would have left a trace of DNA, along with anyone that had filled it or prepared the ingredients. They had known how to mask the evidence and had prepared well. Cole was frustrated beyond words. How could he protect her from someone that he didn't know?

They returned to the med facility to find Andrea sitting up, talking to Jacquie. Jacquie watched as Cole and Tremaine both sat down on opposite sides of her like guard dogs. She looked from one to the other, starting to feel out of place.

"Maybe I should go?"

"No, you stay right where you are. I haven't seen you in over a week!" She glanced at Cole and Tremaine. "You two aren't being very friendly."

"Someone just tried to kill you and we need to get a little more information."

Jacquie was startled. "Someone did this on purpose? What kind of monster would do this?"

"Someone that had access to and knowledge of the local plant life and what could be added undetected to Alton juice."

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"Everyone makes Alton juice at home," Jacquie stated, more than slightly upset.

Cole looked at Andrea. "Do you remember who served the juice to you and when?"

She thought back. "We all picked up a glass from the tray when we walked in. I bolted mine since I had missed breakfast and then Tremaine offered me his. When I ran into you about fifteen minutes later, you offered me the rest of yours." She paused for a minute as she mentally reconstructed the morning.

"You spilled a glass, remember?" Jacquie reminded her. "When we were standing over by the entrance."

Andrea nodded. "Someone jostled me and I spilled almost all of Cole's." She looked up. "Carl Reinch handed me his glass when he saw that he had caused me to spill mine."

Cole went cold all over. "Was he wearing gloves when he handed you the glass?"

Andrea shrugged but Jacquie answered quickly. "He had come straight from the lab and still had on the lab protectant."

The engineers used a liquid that not only protected them from infection, it also stopped static and left them with total feeling when they were working with projects where the sense of touch was so important.

"Cole, I can't believe that Carl would want to hurt me. I would have *felt* something from him."

"Maybe not, Andrea," Tremaine disagreed. "Mordred was trying to shield you."

"Not until later." Andrea was shaking her head. "Something about this doesn't sound right to me."

Dr. Reinch came immediately to the medical center when Mordred summoned him. Cole and Tremaine met him outside Andrea's room.

"Is everything all right, Captain Stuart?" he asked nervously.

"No, actually everything is not alright." Cole was so tempted to violate Carl's mind but resisted with everything that was in him. "Andrea was poisoned by a glass of juice that we think you might have handed her."

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He had been expecting guilt or fear but instead Cole felt shock from the doctor.

"Are you sure it was the glass that I handed her?" They felt a wave of remorse from him. "I would never do anything to harm her, Captain. Never!"

Cole looked at him solemnly. "Would you allow me into your mind, Carl?"

Carl didn't pause. "Of course! You must believe me!" He was starting to panic he was so distraught.

Carl heard Cole then. *Relax Carl. Take a deep breath and show me what you remember.*

Carl thought back to the meeting. He had rushed to be on time and then found that there had been a delay. Dr. Sato had been standing next to the table and Carl had started to turn away when Dr. Sato had handed him a glass and gave him a curt nod. Carl had been stunned that Dr. Sato had even acknowledged that he was in the room. He turned quickly to thank him as he walked away and bumped Andrea as he did so. He had handed her his glass when he saw that he had made her spill her own.

"Why would Dr. Sato want to kill you, Carl?"

"He has no reason. His research speaks for itself."

Cole remembered the encounter when they first found the city. There was something there. He gently left Carl's mind. "Let's have a meeting with Dr. Sato and see if we can find out how poison ended up in the glass."

Carl stopped them with a hand. "Do you mind if I give my regards to Andrea?"

Cole shrugged and they followed him in and watched him like a hawk as he wished her a speedy recovery and apologized for handing her a glass intended for him.

"I knew that you did not intend to hurt me Carl. Don't worry, I'm fine." She gave Cole a worried look.

Then who was trying to poison Carl?

Sato, we think. We'll know shortly.

They headed over to the lab and looked in to Dr. Sato's office. His assistant said that he was out on the lab floor. They wandered around the lab for a few minutes looking for him. All of the doctors and assistants said that he hadn't been around today.

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Mordred, we can't locate Dr. Sato. Do you know where he is?

He is in Dr. Reinch's lab.

Cole lifted his eyebrows and turned to Carl. "He's in *your* lab."

"What!" Carl turned, ran to the next building, and palmed open the door, Cole and Tremaine right behind.

Dr. Sato looked up in shock and then paled as he saw Carl. "You are dead!"

Carl's mouth dropped open.

Cole stepped forward just as Dr. Sato brought up a laser cutter like a sword. "You are dead! You are dead!" he yelled and swung it at Carl.

Cole leapt backward as the edge of the laser sliced the air in front of him. He felt something whiz by his head and then Sato cried out as the tool flew from his hand. Cole took the opportunity and punched Sato with everything that he had. Sato dropped to the floor. He was standing over an unconscious Sato when he saw a scanner lying broken on the floor.

Tremaine picked it up and tossed it onto a table. "Sorry I came so close to your head but you moved when I wasn't expecting it."

Well, it looks like your genetically enhanced reflexes came in handy again. Thank you, my friend.

This was Diir City's first crime and they all knew that how they handled this would establish the judicial pattern for the future.

Attempted murder was a crime that was punishable by reconditioning on Earth and in every colony. The fact that they would be losing a great mind was a concern to all. Sato would still be brilliant, but would be retrained into a new field. He would never again be the doctor that had directed a team of scientists.

As the investigation progressed, they found that he wanted to steal Carl's new communications protocols that used the Diirini knowledge and merge it with comm

gate technology. If it worked, a signal could be directed to an area without the use of the receiver comm gate.

Sato had planned the murder carefully and waited for the right opportunity. When he handed the glass to Carl, he had gone immediately back to his office. When the commotion started, he told his assistant that he would be on the lab floor and gone to get Carl's research before everyone came for it. It would be his now. Sato had not stayed long enough to witness Andrea being rushed to the medical facility instead of Carl.

Sato seemed ambivalent about Andrea's brush with death. She had simply gotten in the way. Carl should not have handed her the drink meant for him. It was Carl's fault, not his.

At the end of the investigation, Sato showed no remorse except that his plan had not worked. There was no recourse other than reconditioning. Andrea was devastated but could not disagree with the decision.

There is another choice, She heard Sar'tns lilting voice in her head. ***If he agrees, the memories and the feelings in him could be purged without damaging his knowledge. He would still be altered but this would not destroy him.***

They had to take it before the investigative board, of course and they tentatively agreed. Mordred and Sar'tns would be permitted complete access both before and after to verify that he was no longer a threat to the population.

Andrea sensed great relief when the decision was made. No one had wanted to give that order.

Several days later, Dr. Sato returned to his lab a very changed man. Although he knew that he had committed a crime, his memory of it had been erased, along with any reasons that he had to commit one. He was allowed to work alone on his projects which seemed to make him very happy since not only did he no longer have the ability to lead the team, he had no desire to manage the team.

Mordred or Sar'tns would scan his mind from time to time and found him much more content than he had

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been before the procedure. Only time would tell how much his volatile personality was a part of his creative genius.

Several weeks after the general meeting to decide Dr. Sato's fate, Jack Spencer asked for a private meeting with *The Family* as the Verdians had begun to call the five telepaths after Andrea's speech. Cole, Tremaine and Andrea had spent little time in the city since it was becoming increasingly uncomfortable for Andrea to do just about anything, so Jack and Jacquie came for an informal meeting at the cottage.

Jacquie loved the cottage and secretly wished that she and Jack had a hide-a-way like this somewhere. She loved her new city, but she always left the cabin a little more relaxed than when she arrived.

Tremaine settled them in with a drink and then let Jack proceed at his own pace. This was his meeting.

Jack glanced around the group and nodded. "Thanks for inviting us here. There has been a lot happening in the last two weeks, three really. Since we finally have the Sato issue settled, we need to talk to you about some other issues that have been resolved."

Andrea swallowed as she felt the muscles in her throat tighten. Tremaine squeezed her hand slightly.

Jack continued, "We've reached some decisions about the new telepathic abilities. Everyone has had a say in the rulings, so we feel we can enact them into law with some confidence. First, any Verdian, meeting the criteria for telepathic adaptation, may elect to do so. Secondly, everyone will be responsible for controlling their negative emotions in a public area, training will be available to aid control. Further, no Verdian may be discriminated against because of their choice. Finally, anyone who fails to conform to these laws is subject to banishment to Mars."

Jack paused to let that much sink in, then proceeded to tell them the plan for the future. "We have a list of one

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hundred twenty citizens that would like to undergo telepathy training and enable their telepathic abilities and a group of only fifteen that want to return to Mars. We have agreed to allow them to retain their legit bank credits. After lengthy discussions with President Rivers, a group of three hundred twenty-one Martians and GenEng would like to relocate to Diir. Most of these citizens have already elected to undergo telepathic enhancement.”

Tremaine, Cole and Andrea looked at each other in pleased surprise as Jack went on, “President Rivers has suggested that Diir become the training ground for the most sought after negotiators and mediators in the galaxy and I agree. Sar’tns can also train staff on the Diirini reconditioning used on Sato, which is also in great demand from the colonies. The colonies are already requesting Verdian negotiators to help them through this time of change with Earth and Mars. Since it will take some time to fully grasp the new abilities, we are prioritizing training.”

He paused again, this time waiting for their response.

Cole reached out his hand to Jack who smiled and shook it. “You have done an amazing job, Jack. I had started to lose hope that we would even be accepted. Thank you.”

Jack looked at Andrea sitting across from him and leaned forward, resting his hand on her knee. “There’s something more that we want and it may be a little hard on you right now.”

She nodded slowly for him to go on.

“They want you to come to the city and act as counselors during this change. Although so many have elected to make the change, they are nervous about what to expect. They trust you, Cole and Tremaine to answer some very personal questions about how their lives will change.”

He watched the play of emotions on her face as Cole said, “Jack, both Tremaine and I are perfectly willing to council the population. I’m rather hesitant to put Andrea into a situation that stressful at this time.”

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Jack continued to watch Andrea and waited. Finally, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I will go in for a few cycles a day, but only for the next two weeks. If Mordred will be willing to join me, at least mentally, it would be okay. Once the baby is born I hope to be able to expand those cycles."

Cole looked at her sharply. *Don't forget how the emotions affected you at the beginning of the meeting.*

Yes, and don't forget how Mordred blocked those feelings when he felt my reaction.

Mordred's voice filled their minds. ***I will care for her, Cole. This is an important responsibility for Andrea and she is well suited to the task.***

Cole nodded to her almost imperceptibly. "Okay Jack, you have yourself three counselors."

During the impromptu celebration that followed, Jacquie pulled Andrea aside. "I would like to be your first appointment."

Andrea grinned and hugged her. "Has Jack decided yet?"

"I think so. He wants to wait until things have calmed down a little. He's afraid he'll lose his focus on city matters."

"He might, at that." Andrea gave her a wicked little grin. "His priorities may do a little shifting when he can *really* see what an amazing wife he has." She hugged Jacquie enthusiastically.

★ Chapter 32 ★

Andrea found that most of the women and a few of the men wanted to see her. She was definitely in demand and expanded her cycles as much as she could.

With her friends, like Jacquie, she allowed them to feel her mind against theirs and shared a part of herself with them. Those were always moving experiences and comforted them in a way that talking never would have. The telepathic community started slowly growing and a sense of tranquility came with it.

Of course, there were a few faux pas at the beginning when someone got excited about something and forgot to request contact first—but mostly these little issues resolved themselves in time. Some people needed more counseling than others, but this was even more life changing than moving lives to new planets. This affected the very way they thought about their lives, the people around them and the new culture that they were building. Knowing a new viewpoint from another perspective tends to change minds.

Another amazing change was taking place.

There were now five extended families like theirs established in the city. The first had been two male and one female, engineers, that decided to form a bond agreement.

Andrea smiled to herself.

Of course, the need for this kind of arrangement would alter over time as the unbalance in the female to male population corrected itself. Life was settling into an easy kind of order.

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Andrea was looking out over the lake when the first pain gripped her and she felt her water break.

Within minutes, Cole hopped off the pad with Sar'tns and Mordred close behind. Andrea had been adamant that she have the baby at the cottage and Sar'tns had supported her. Cole settled her into a special chair that Sar'tns had designed for her as Tremaine dashed through the front door.

Sar'tns was sending calming thoughts to Andrea as Mordred's mind soothed the infant. Cole started to pace and for the first time Sar'tns sent a sharp command to Cole to calm down.

Tremaine came forward and knelt down by Andrea.

May I join with you, Andrea? Tremaine requested.

A pain gripped her again and she squeezed his hand.

Why on Diir would you want to? This hurts like hell!

I want to share in this, if you'll let me.

She smiled, nodded and felt Tremaine's mind softly touching hers.

Cole sat on the deck like a stone trying hard not to let his stress run away from him. Tremaine gently touched his mind. *You should join us, Cole. This is an experience that you will not want to miss.*

Cole was startled. He got up and walked into where Tremaine and Sar'tns sat with Andrea.

Andrea, do you want me here? he asked.

God yes! After all, you got me into this; it's only fair that you stick with me to the end.

Cole reached out and connected with her just as another pain tore through her and he suddenly had a whole new respect for women.

After several cycles, they heard Sar'tns gentle voice then. ***It is time. I will block some of your pain receptors for the next few moments. Relax and follow my instructions.***

The next few minutes were the most amazing of their lives. Andrea felt their love and support and knew that

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she was not alone in this. When Sar'tns laid her son in her arms, she looked up into the faces of the people that she most loved in the world and knew real peace.

They named him Stephen Ray Stuart, not because Stephen had been Andrea's husband, but because he had reached across time to bring them all together. Their baby became the seventh child born on Verde and the first one to telepaths.

Mordred was as good as his word—he became a tireless babysitter and would have kept the baby all of the time if Andrea had allowed it. Sar'tns created a baby formula that incorporated the natural immune boosters contained in Andrea's body with added immunity enhancers particular to Diir. Within weeks Andrea's body had returned to normal—although her life never would.

At least when Stephen cried she could sooth his mind and determine what he needed. Mostly, he wanted Mordred. Andrea shook her head as she watched them together. Stephen seemed the most content when he had either Mordred or Cole's complete attention.

The counseling started up again with renewed interest when Tremaine and Cole explained how they had shared in the birth of Stephen.

Cole noticed as the mental energy in Diir started to change as more and more of the new Diirini were enhanced. People started to care more for each other than before. He noticed that sadness would bring support from many people and also, large groups of people had grown quieter—at least verbally. Debates still raged and people disagreed, but everyone always looked at the good of the individuals rather than just the group.

Verde had become a wonderful place to live.

Cole had never realized how many problems had been caused over time because of a simple misunderstanding

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because the wrong words had been chosen. Now, people could *connect* their thoughts to each other and not only did they all share the idea, but the feeling behind the thought.

Training and guidance were critical. Everyone had to be taught about mental and emotional limits and control. Even while connecting with another person, there were several different levels of contact.

Public level was a low-level *broadcast* of the general emotional state the individual was experiencing. As an example, if someone is extremely busy and focused, that feeling was broadcast so that if they happen to walk by an acquaintance on the street and not notice, the person would not feel snubbed because they would know that there was no harm intended. It also prevented people from intruding when the timing was not appropriate.

The next level was for business contact when specific conversation and limited emotions were exchanged.

And then there was intimate level, for families and close friends.

For each level of contact, greater flow between the parties was used. At each level, a signal for the level of contact desired was passed from one party and acknowledged by the other. Should one party request a higher level of contact than the other, the lower level was used out of respect.

This was the hardest rule for the Circle Earthers to follow. They were continually forgetting to ask permission and intruding too quickly. After many gentle and not so gentle rebuffs, and some additional training, most Earthers were learning the correct protocol. Although several people had to go back into training, none of the approved new telepaths failed to acclimate to their new abilities.

The first three new diplomats had finally finished training and were ready for initial assignments. These people had been negotiators prior to coming to Diir and only needed telepath training. Several others were going through extensive training to learn about diplomatic protocol and the art of the negotiation. These negotiators

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would be the first face that the colonies would see of the new culture on Diir so their training was exceedingly important.

In addition, Sam had been in constant contact from Mars to give them updates on the progress there.

Phase one of the building had been completed and Mars threw a party unrivaled in galactic history. They were also celebrating the birth of almost ninety thousand children. The infant mortality rate was almost zero compared to sixty-eight percent in the previous year. Twelve of the colonies had also reported increased birth rates from the GenEng and genetic aid.

The GenEng were integrating extremely well with the Martians and, although some friction still existed, the problems were slowly ironing themselves out. The birth of so many children seemed to calm quite a lot of the fear.

Although Sam had officially requested that Mars be allowed to join the ranks of the telepathic, Sar'tns declined. She wouldn't be more specific but just said that, in time, she would reconsider their request.

Andrea thought that it was just as well. All was not perfect on Mars. There were still a great number of people jockeying for positions and competing for the sake of the win. Diir still had only a handful of inhabitants compared to any of the colonies and it had still been hard to learn to control telepathic abilities in the city.

Earth was screaming for help and Mars was putting together a limited aid proposal. Part of the proposal was an admission of guilt from Mars Corp in the genetic sabotage plan and their agreement to pay for some of the costs of the repair. Since Earth Central couldn't promise anything on Mars Corp's behalf, a certain amount of government pressure was being brought to bear.

★ Chapter 33 ★

Andrea stood in the ballroom outside of the music hall with Cole and Tremaine nervously drinking a glass of champagne. *Jacquie was so nervous that I think it rubbed off on me!*

Cole placed a hand on the small of her back. *I heard the practice yesterday and there is no reason for anyone to worry. The music is incredible.*

Jacque had written her first complete opera. It told the story of a woman, lost in time and sent to save a world and start a new civilization on a distant planet. Initially, Andrea was mortified when she heard the premise but learned that it was more about the people than her. Jacquie had called it *Journey to Diir*.

Everyone heard an E-sharp note and headed for their seats. The music hall would easily accommodate three thousand five hundred music lovers, but tonight it only held a total of four hundred fifty people—which was almost all of the Diirini population.

Andrea felt the anticipation from the public minds of the audience and sent her love and support to Jacquie on a more private channel.

The lights came down and the music started softly.

A lovely woman started singing in the most exquisite voice Andrea had ever heard. Andrea recognized her as Natalee Linser, another of Jacquie's close friends. The voice pulled her in as she said goodbye to her love and died. Natalee was more than singing, she was projecting the emotions of the opera to the audience. A man in dark clothing and a deep baritone placed her into the cryo

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chamber and pushed it into space. The pod containing Natalee drifted over the audience and slowly circled the auditorium.

The lights became brighter and as three new singers entered the stage it magically transformed into the *Camelot*. When *Andrea's* pod drifted onto the stage and Nick revived her, the crowd cheered.

The story continued and there were wonderful explosive effects for the fight scenes. Finally, the lovely singer described the bonding of the Diirini souls as they connected telepathically. The music and the voice were so moving; the crowd was in tears.

When the curtain came down there was a long moment of absolute silence. Andrea could feel the approval and emotion pouring from the audience and just when Andrea thought that no one would applaud, the audience erupted and came to their feet. This wasn't her story. It was theirs.

Jacquie Spencer had placed her name in history this night. Little did anyone know at this time, her opera would travel through the galaxy as the most popular new opera of her era.

Later, at the celebration, Andrea hugged her friend tightly. *I was so incredibly moved, Jacquie. I always knew that you were talented but I had no idea that this music was in your soul.*

I didn't either, Andrea. When I became telepathic and I truly felt the friends and loved ones around me, it became a mission for me to describe it through my music. A song was never long enough, so I had to write an opera.

Cole chose that moment to join them and spoke verbally. "Lovely opera, Jacquie. You are the star of Diir!"

She grinned. "What do I have to do to get some food? I haven't been able to eat all day and now I'm starved!"

Jack came up from behind her and winked at her. "Tonight I'm your slave. I'll be right back with your heart's desire."

As he walked away, Andrea saw Jacquie smile softly. When she looked up and saw Andrea watching her, she grinned. *We've fallen in love all over again. I thought that I*

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* * *

really knew him and the truth is, he is so much better than I ever imagined.

I'm sure he's saying the same about you. Remember, I told you so!

Jacquie laughed and excused herself to follow Jack to the food banquet.

Andrea watched as Jacquie moved across the room. The support and approval surrounded her and Andrea couldn't think of a more perfect night.

Tremaine slipped his arm around Andrea. *You could run a space station with the love in this room.*

At that moment Andrea glanced up and saw Sar'tns hugging Jacquie. Andrea realized that this was her achievement as much as anyone's. Thank god for Sar'tns.

★ Chapter 34 ★

Andrea stretched and stood up to head for Mordred's office, which had become Stephen's nursery. On her way there, Tremaine caught her hand from behind and pulled her to him.

"Mordred is keeping Stephen for tonight and Cole has a late meeting. Let's go relax in the hot tub and pretend that we don't have any responsibilities for a while." He grinned at her and captured her mouth with his.

She leaned into him. *God, you feel good!*

Within minutes, they were lounging in the hot water watching the steam rise into the cold air. A dusting of snow had covered the deck but today's sunshine had melted it clean. Snow remained in the shaded areas as Andrea looked out toward the lake.

Tremaine leaned his head back against the side and closed his eyes. *Soon it will start to be too cold to use this.*

She laughed and he opened his eyes into her clear blue ones. *That's the fun of a hot tub in winter—getting in and out of it!*

He looked doubtful. *I think I'll just watch.*

She shook her head at him in disgust and relaxed back into the water, letting it drain the stress from her. The hot, bubbling water was the only sound as they allowed themselves to be pampered for a change.

Tremaine pulled her against him and she leaned her head back against his chest, his arms circling her.

It's nice to be settling into some kind of normalcy. . . .

"Uh-hum," he agreed into her hair as his lips traced a trail down her neck and felt her shiver in his arms. He

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smiled at her reaction and continued his path sliding his hands up to cup her breasts. She gasped as he started caressing her slowly and he felt her tremble.

We have cycles.

God, I hope so. I have hated the weeks of waiting after Stephen finally showed up. I thought I was going to be permanently pregnant. Regen therapy certainly is an improvement over the old diet and exercise regimen of my mother's day.

With that he stood and pulled her up behind him. The cold breeze drifted across their wet skin as they dashed into the warmth of the cottage.

I told you getting out was part of the fun. She giggled as she watched goose bumps appear on his arms.

Rather invigorating.

He found her even more passionate and demanding in the cycles that followed. When they fell asleep, he pulled her to him in their favorite position. She moved against him later and his body responded against the warmth of her skin. Half-awake, his body took over and felt her moving with him as she came slowly awake.

I love it when you wake me this way, she thought as she caressed Tremaine's mind with hers. He heard her breath catch, felt her body tense—and they filled each other with their love and their need of each other and their bodies followed.

Mordred and Sar'tns watched quietly.

Of course, they didn't tell the humans that they still watched whenever they pleased. Mordred had agreed with Cole that it was a valid rule that the humans not violate each other's minds, but he did not say that *he* would not. Sar'tns had kept her silence and had not commented one way or the other. Let the humans assume what they liked.

Mordred felt Sar'tns mind merge closer to his.

There is something I believe that it is time for you to know.

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* * *

He felt her pull him into a part of her mind that she had kept secret from him—and Mordred felt the truth of the Diirini burst across him.

Centuries before Diir had been established, the Diir Founders had seeded worlds around the galaxy with their kind by merging with a species from that world. They had built cities throughout the galaxy and sent their kind out to bring intelligent life to these worlds.

Sar'tns showed Mordred the cities and the progeny they had left behind. And she explained that she was the Centurion of this Galactic Sector, remaining to guide the Diirini children on their quest toward enlightenment. Sar'tns had finally found a group of their offspring ready to start the journey.

They are just children at this point and it will take generations before they will see where they belong. Will you help me to guide them to their new future?

Mordred looked into her eyes and she felt his answer in her soul.

I will be with you always.

About the Author



Lynn Sterling has spent the last 17 years traveling the United States and Canada working as a production accountant in film and television. The first thing that she learned was that the film industry was a massive collection of one-of-a-kind professionals that pour their lives into making fantasy. The cast, crew, fabulous locations and life on the road inspired her to put them into her stories.

Lynn splits her time between Los Angeles and her home in the mountains, but writes wherever the spirit strikes. Although she still works for a major studio, writing gives her a creative avenue to share her passion for life; passion being the key word.

As much as we strive to have our feet planted firmly on the ground, our hearts still yearn for that swept away, bowl-you-over romance where we find out for the first time that our bodies can forget how to breath when we are close to that special person. Lynn's goal is to let everyone allow the passion in her books to inspire them to find some passion of their very own. After all, we never know when love will strike.

The Diirini Inheritance Trilogy



Journey to Diir starts Andrea, Cole, Nick and Tremaine on a journey of human evolution. Andrea Stone has a fabulous job in finance at a major motion picture studio and a gorgeous producer husband who adores her. Then fate intercedes and takes her life. Andrea wakes up 600 years in the future, light years from the home that she knew— just as far from civilization as she knew it. At first Andrea tries to avoid the three men that rescued her, however, loneliness drives her to befriend them and become a part of the team. Time has changed the rules of human physical contact and traditional relationships but Andrea is determined to teach Cole, Nick, and Tremaine that not all old Earth customs were bad. Old Earth and New Earth come together with passion that would rival a super nova.

Andrea brings the humanity of the 21st century into the sterile universe of the 27th. From the old and the new, passion, love and hope ignite changes across the universe.

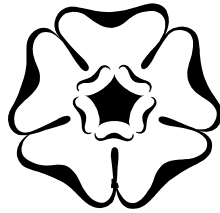
In ***Diir Evolution***, the evolved population of Diir struggles with their new abilities as Sar'tns and Mordred continue to guide them toward a hidden goal. There are many bumps along the road as they find that they are both envied and hated for their new abilities by Earth and some of the colonies. The price of their new Utopia may be dear.

Andrea, Cole and Tremaine add a daughter, Allison to the family and little Stephen starts to show great promise with his telepathic abilities. The Partners

become vital as leaders in the new Diirini world as they shift their responsibilities to guiding the Diirini to use their new telepathic ability to bond their world. As they slowly acclimate and Diir gains confidence, Sar'tns introduces new challenges that upset the tenuous peace and it's up to the Partners to maintain the delicate balance before all is lost.

Journey From Diir reveals the endgame as it was planned by Sar'tns and Mordred. Although the Partners continue to guide Diir as their new abilities are conquered, the new Diirini must learn that, even with their new abilities, they are not yet the self-described *higher beings* as they believed. Of course Sar'tns is there to humble them as she guides them on a path that only she knows. The true Diirini evolved over eons and humanity has only written the First Act. As calm and peaceful as Diir has become, the Diirini must now take on the burden of bringing the rest of humanity with them. They must face their enemies and begin the journey to becoming true Diirini.

The Partners now have five children, including a rare set of twins. All of the children of Diir show particular gifts since Sar'tns has been guiding them from birth. We now start to see the tapestry that Sar'tns and Mordred have been weaving since the end of *Journey to Diir*. When Andrea, Cole and Tremaine's children defy them in support of Sar'tns, Andrea has a crisis of faith and plans to leave Diir with their family. Finally, Mordred must reveal the distant plans for humanity that revolve around her children and the future of Diir.



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