



Children of Andromeda:
Lords of the Sea

By

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Dedication

For Rosemary down under---you were right. This is the 'real' me!

And for the fan who looked for me at the RT book signing just to tell me she loved Below. I hope you
enjoy this new tale of merfolk as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Chapter One

It was Mark who first noticed the blue glow coming from below. Cassia Pendell was lounging on the deck, more than half asleep and struggling with the exhaustion that seemed it would defy her will to stay awake. They'd headed out before daylight, though, and she was not only not used to being up and stirring about by five AM, she also wasn't used to diving.

As a first date, however, it was definitely unique. It had sounded like something that might be fun. As loathe as she was to admit it, though, she'd been impressed because it seemed like the sort of thing only the rich and famous might indulge in and it was that that had finally swayed her more than the belief that she'd actually enjoy it.

She'd met Mark on an internet dating/mating site. They'd been chatting for weeks before he'd suggested an actual meeting. She'd liked what she'd learned about him in the time they'd been internet dating, but she'd been leery. He was still a stranger. After all the horror stories she'd heard about women meeting psychopaths over the net, she'd been nervous as hell at the prospect of driving to a strange city to meet a man she really didn't know. When he'd suggested that they could go scuba diving with the diving club he belonged to she hadn't been a lot more enthusiastic, even though it removed the danger of being completely alone with him, mostly because she'd never done it before and she didn't like deep water. She hadn't wanted to tell him she was phobic about deep, natural bodies of water, though.

He was an amateur diving enthusiast. Exploring the ocean was his favorite pastime, something he did whenever he got the chance. If she couldn't dredge up some interest in it herself, she figured their relationship was doomed before it had really gotten started.

Truthfully, she'd almost called it off right then. She had absolutely no sense of adventure. She didn't like risks, and she especially didn't like taking them. She wasn't 'addicted' to the adrenaline rush of doing something wild and dangerous. She was allergic to it. She didn't like having the hell scared out of her, not when it entailed her taking part in it—watching from a safe distance was alright, but not participating. She preferred being comfortable and safe.

Deep down, she'd accepted right then that they were completely incompatible. She'd refused to acknowledge it, though. She'd convinced herself that it was time she put in the effort to lighten up and live a little—past time, actually. She was nearly thirty two, close enough to feel the chill, anyway. Even if it turned out to be something she hated, she needed to at least give it a try.

She hadn't exactly hated it. She *had* hated getting up so damned early, but then she wasn't the only one in the group that didn't seem to be at their best that early in the day, or the only one who'd spent the time while the boat was en route to the chosen diving site sleeping. Mark hadn't seemed to take that in bad part, which was a plus in his column.

The boat was big enough and the gulf waters calm enough she hadn't gotten motion sickness or overly frightened. She still didn't like it, but she hadn't *disliked* it.

Carl Smith, the man who'd founded the scuba diving club, had been patient in instructing her and had stressed safety, which she'd found soothed her uneasiness a great deal.

Despite the fact that she could tell Mark was anxious to strike out on his own, he'd also been patient and solicitous, which had earned him another mark in the good column. He'd 'forgotten' he was supposed to be baby-sitting her a couple of times and darted away, leaving her behind, and he'd also taken off into some dark, creepy places where she'd refused to follow a couple of times, but overall he'd been considerate.

She was still more inclined to think she was just getting used to the idea of deep water diving than actually beginning to like it, but she'd gotten over the first tremors of terror and was able to play off a token enthusiasm when everyone had settled in the boat to eat their lunch and discuss their experiences.

She thought that was mostly because she'd been certain it was over and they would be heading back after they'd eaten.

Mark had proposed they move on to another spot to dive, though—a minus in his column—and although everyone wasn't in total agreement, she was the only one who actually hadn't wanted to. Good manners had compelled her to join the group for a little while in the second dive, but she hadn't stayed down long and had returned to the boat long before the last of the divers had returned.

Mark had been the last.

Another minus in his column, especially when someone had pointed out that it was probably going to be dark before they made it back to the dock.

She suspected Mark thought it would be a good opportunity for a little romantic necking, that darkness would give him the chance to cuddle up, but she wasn't in the mood. She was exhausted. It was amazing how drained she felt from the little bit of actual swimming she'd done, but an inescapable fact, and beyond that she felt downright disgustingly sticky from both the water and the salt in the sea air. All she really wanted to do was bathe and collapse in the hotel room for a nice long nap.

She wasn't a sun worshipper, but she'd reached the point where she didn't think she could stand wearing the wet suit another moment. Peeling it off, she'd spread a thick towel on the deck, grabbed a life preserver to use as a pillow, and stretched out to pretend she was sunning when she actually only wanted to sleep.

Mark had obligingly slathered sun screen all over her, mostly, she thought, as an excuse to feel her up—not that she cared as long as it prevented her skin from turning lobster red. Since it had evolved into an erotic sort of massage, though, and had warmed her even as it relaxed her aching muscles, she gave him another plus in the good column.

Unfortunately, that made the scales more or less even since he'd accumulated almost as many minuses throughout the day as pluses. She was drowsing, debating whether or not she was interested in taking the next step and 'test driving' him that night when he suddenly sat back and stiffened.

"Hey! Look at that!"

Cassie didn't even lift her head, despite the excitement she heard in his voice. Whatever it was, she wasn't interested.

"Carl! Do you see that?" he persisted, coming to his feet.

As she heard the rest of the diving party moving in their direction, curiosity finally penetrated her stupor of exhaustion and Cassie lifted her head to look around. She couldn't see anything from her position and was tempted to dismiss it again until she realized that everyone was craning to look into the distance. It was the look on their faces that finally sent a shaft of alarm through her. Pushing herself up onto her knees, she followed the direction of their gazes, more than half expecting to see a ship flying a pirate flag.

She thought, at first, that the glaring sun had dazzled her and it was just a trick of the eyes. Blinking, she slowly got to her feet. The mirage didn't disappear, though. After staring at the thick bank of clouds rolling toward them, she swiveled her head and scanned the horizon all the way around. Her heart began to thud dully in her chest.

"What would cause that?" she asked of no one in particular. "Is it a storm?"

Several moments passed while first one and then another speculated as to the cause of the phenomenon and then it finally dawned on Cassie that no one was looking at the same thing she was. Everyone was staring at the water. Turning, she peered at the water again and realized that a huge patch of ocean was glowing a strange, eerie blue.

"What is *that*?" she gasped.

Something in her voice must have finally penetrated Mark's absorption. He glanced at her, his expression questioning. "I don't know. Never seen anything like it."

"You think, maybe, it's just ... like sunlight reflecting off the clouds?" Cassie speculated hopefully

Mark frowned at her and then lifted his head to glance around as she had. "Shit!" he exclaimed abruptly, drawing everyone's attention to the bank of clouds that had ringed them. "What the hell!"

For several moments everyone babbled excitedly. Abruptly, Carl plowed his way through the group and headed for the controls. "Everyone get everything tied down. NOW! Get your life vests on! We've got a freak storm rolling in!"

Cassie bent over and scooped up the life vest she'd been cuddling and began to struggle into it. She had no idea what else might need doing, but she wasn't going anywhere until she had that on. She was still struggling with figuring out which loops went with which straps when Carl began to cuss loud and long. "The damned radio's dead! I can't get a call in to the coast guard!"

That announcement made everyone freeze.

"What do you mean the radio's dead?" Ben, one of the group demanded, anger edging his voice. "Didn't you check it out?"

"Of course I checked it out!" Carl yelled angrily. "What do you take me for? It was working fine when we left!"

"Maybe we're just out of range?" Shelley, one of the women, suggested uneasily.

"It's not picking up anything but static! *Somebody* should be close enough to pick up a mayday!"

"Why do we need to send out a mayday?" Cassie asked, trying to keep the hysteria out of her voice.

She didn't think she succeeded very well. As low as she'd pitched her voice, mostly because she was too breathless with sudden fear to manage much more than a whisper, the question brought everyone's attention to her.

"Just in case," Mark muttered after a moment.

"In case of what?" Cassie demanded.

"The instruments have gone haywire," Carl announced, dragging everyone's attention to him.

"Electrical storm?" Jimmy, another diver, suggested.

Cassie was about to dispute that when she noticed a jagged streak of light threading through the clouds advancing on them. Her heart seemed to leap into her throat to strangle her as she turned slowly to survey the cloud bank and saw similar streaks forking down to the water all the way around them.

"Let's just get the hell out of here!" Mark yelled.

"And go where?" Ben demanded. "You heard him. The instruments aren't working."

"So? We get clear of the storm, they'll work, and probably the radio, too, and we can call for help," Jimmy yelled back at him, seconding Mark's motion.

"We don't have enough fuel to wander around the gulf!" Carl, the doomsayer, announced. "We'll be dead in the water if we aren't careful. And what if the radio still doesn't work? We don't have enough food or water on board for more than a day. Unless one of you has a really good idea of which direction to go, I say we drop anchor and try to ride this out. Any direction we take, we'll be heading into the storm."

"But it's coming right toward us! We're not going to avoid it."

"Exactly my point—there doesn't seem to be any possibility of avoiding it. I'd rather not take the chance of getting lost. If we stay put, when it passes over us, we should at least be able to get our bearings and then, even if the radio and the instruments still don't work, we'll have a better chance of making landfall."

"How far are we from land?" Cassie asked.

Instead of ignoring her as they had before, several of the divers glanced at her and then turned to look at Carl questioningly. He shrugged. "The last time I checked about two hundred and fifty nautical miles."

Cassie felt anger surge through her. She hadn't liked the idea of sailing so far out they couldn't see land in any direction to begin with, but now it seemed even more insane to her. She, at least, hadn't known the potential for disaster. They *had* known and they'd still struck off for deep water as if it hadn't occurred to any of them that they were land dwellers.

With an effort, she tamped her anger. Everyone was already on edge. Arguing wasn't going to help anything. Apparently everyone else arrived at the same conclusion. After glaring with angry accusation at one another for a few moments, everyone found a spot to settle and watch the clouds. After a while, although her nerves were still stretched tauter than a barbed wire fence, Cassie noticed something else strange about the glowing water and the bank of clouds.

"Is it just me, or does it seem to anyone else that the clouds aren't moving?" The strange light was becoming more and more pervasive, as well, and her skin was prickling, as if static electricity was rippling over her.

"I think she's right," Mark announced after studying the clouds for several minutes. "They don't look any closer to me either."

Carl shook his head. "I can't tell. It could just be a slow moving storm."

"It doesn't look like a storm, though," Cassie disputed. "I mean—I've never seen a storm when I was at sea. Maybe they look differently than they do on land, but—"

shouldn't they be dark? They're so white and fluffy they don't even look like storm clouds. The lightening looks weird, too. It's coming straight down."

"The sea," Mark said succinctly. "Water draws lightning."

Lovely! Why hadn't she thought about that? "Maybe it would be better to get inside?" she suggested uneasily.

Mark stared at her a long moment. A look passed between him and the others that she didn't like—at all. "If the lightning strikes get close, we will," he said finally.

Cassie studied his face and then the faces of the other divers. After a few moments it sank in that they preferred chancing the lightning to the possibility of being trapped inside if the boat sank.

An hour passed. Cassie was still on edge, but she discovered she couldn't maintain her fear. It was wearing her down. "This is so bizarre," she finally muttered. "I almost feel like time has stopped."

Linda, a woman who looked to be around thirty five, who should have had more sense than to consider going off on such a harebrained adventure, sent her a commiserating look. "It's the waiting."

Cassie shrugged. "Maybe, but I'm more inclined to think it's the 'nothing' that's happening. I guess my sense of depth perception could be off, but I don't think those clouds are moving any closer. I feel like I'm in a ... jar, or something."

The comment didn't pass unnoticed. The men exchanged that 'look' the one men always shared whenever they consider a woman had said something 'womanish'—which translated to farfetched and hysterical. Shelly and Linda, the only women in the group besides her, looked thoughtful, though.

"She's right," Linda finally seconded. "The clouds are ... boiling, but they don't look any closer—nor further away. Even if it's a slow moving storm it's been an hour and half. We *should* be able to discern some difference."

"So maybe it's just stalled," Carl said pointedly.

"Well, why is it that everything looks bluer? And why is it that I can feel my skin prickling if the storm isn't any closer?" Shelly put in.

Mark surged to his feet. "I'm going down to see if I can find out what's causing that glow."

"Don't be stupid!" Carl snapped. "What if the storm hits while you're down there?"

"I'll follow the anchor line!" Mark said angrily. "It's not going to take more than a few minutes to have a look. I'll come right back up."

"It's too risky," Carl pointed out.

"He's right, man," Ben and Jimmy agreed almost in the same breath.

"I'll spot you," David, the other man in the group, offered.

"You're both crazy!" Carl said angrily.

David shrugged. "Maybe, but this just sitting around is getting on my nerves. And I want to see what's causing the glow myself."

"What if it's like—gas?" Cassie asked, an edge of anger in her own voice. "I saw this special one time where they were speculating that the disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle were caused by a rise of methane gases that made the ships lose buoyancy. That's where we are, isn't it? In the Triangle?"

Mark gave her a look that she didn't like. "The boat isn't sinking," he said pointedly. "I think that blows that theory."

Carl shrugged. "We could be in the Triangle, but I don't believe in that crap."

The comment redirected Cassie's anger in his direction. "So how do you explain this weird phenomenon?"

"Yeah," Shelley agreed. "I mean, I've heard of freak storms, but this is seriously weirding me out!"

"All the more reason to check it out," Mark pointed out with a mixture of amusement and excitement. "Don't you think it would be cool as hell to be able to go back and explain the mystery?"

"No!" Cassie and Linda said almost in unison.

He gave them both a look that was a mixture of irritation and disgust. "Well, I do."

He reminded Cassie of a sullen little boy as he stalked off and began to put his gear on. Right up until that point, Cassie had given him a good many points for looks and intelligence. Not that he was even close to an Adonis, but he was above average in looks and built pretty good—now she knew why. It was from all the swimming. And he'd seemed to be pretty smart and to have a sense of humor that was somewhat compatible with her own.

Staring at him, she was pretty sure, now, this was going to prove to be a bust all the way around. The scales were way against him now. Even if they made it back to the dock without disaster overtaking them, she didn't think she wanted to go any further in pursuit of a relationship with him. She wasn't going to give him any points at all for brazen stupidity and, in her book, the threat of the storm was enough to cancel out any pluses he might have gotten for bravery. As improbable as it seemed that he could actually protect her if the storm struck, he should consider keeping her safe as top priority, not going off on an adventure in the teeth of death!

"Idiots!" Carl muttered as Mark and David went over the side and disappeared.

From the expressions of the other divers, it looked like most of them were in agreement. Jimmy looked a little torn, as if he wanted to join them but just couldn't get up the nerve.

Strike scuba diving enthusiasts, Cassie thought angrily—sky divers, mountain climbers, racing---If she met any other guys who 'loved' flirting with death she wasn't going to give them the time of day.

Too nervous to sit still any longer, Cassie got up to pace around the deck, staring at the clouds, glancing at her watch from time to time—which was how she finally realized time actually *had* stood still—as in, her watch had stopped. About fifteen minutes later, David emerged beside the boat.

"You've got to see this!" he announced in a voice edged with hysterical excitement. "There's a whole city below us—honest to god! I think we've found Atlantis!"

Chapter Two

David's excitement was contagious.

Cassie didn't catch it.

The others did, however. When Mark surfaced a few moments later and added his description of the ruins they'd found below, there was a mad scramble to get their gear on. Even Carl, the eldest of the group, whom Cassie had considered the most reliable and sensible up until then, looked like a child who'd been promised a treat and feared it would be snatched away. He looked on as, one by one, the other divers leapt over the side and disappeared. Finally, he caved and began to put his own gear on.

"Hey!" Cassie exclaimed. "You're not going down, too?"

He sent her a look that was sheepish and at the same time determined. "You said yourself the storm was stalled. I won't be gone long."

"You're going to leave me here by myself?" she demanded incredulously.

He glared at her. "You'll be fine. I'm just going down for a quick look. The instruments are shot. We can't even be sure of the location—there won't be any coming back later for a look."

Cassie was still trying to reason with him when he leapt out of the boat and disappeared. Fear stole over her as she stared down at the water in dismay, watching until he completely disappeared from sight. How long she stood staring down into the water, muttering curses under her breath, she had no idea, but when she finally realized it wasn't doing anything for her sense of desertion, she eased away from the side of the boat and looked around worriedly.

It seemed the strange blue haze had become notably more pronounced. Shivering, Cassie looked around uneasily and finally went to get her wet suit, pulling it on again. "Idiots!" she grumbled, unnerved at the sound of her own voice even though she'd thought it would comfort her, make her feel less alone.

What was she going to do if they didn't come back? She didn't know the first thing about driving a boat! Not that it had looked all that difficult. She thought she could figure it out, but she had far less confidence that she could find land.

When she'd managed to get her wet suit on, she paced, gnawing at a finger nail, stopping every few moments to peer over the side in the hopes that at least one of the divers would surface. The longer she paced, the darker it grew. She stopped to stare at the strange clouds. Were they getting closer? Or did it just seem like they were?

Finally, she grabbed her tanks and put them on, struggling to remember Carl's instructions about the gauges. She didn't realize she'd come to the decision to go after them until she found herself standing on the diving platform.

They'd had plenty of damned time to look, though, she thought angrily! Surely she could convince someone to come back up?

She wasn't convinced that she could and she had no real desire to go down, but she realized she was more afraid of being alone than going down. Finally, she leapt into the water, adjusted her mask, and dipped below the surface.

She couldn't see a sign of anyone, but that was hardly surprising since she couldn't see the bottom and they were undoubtedly *on* the bottom. After a moment, when it seemed terror was going to completely consume her, she finally decided she would use the anchor line as a guide. She would go down, look for the others and if she didn't see anybody, she was going to come right back up. She wasn't going to take a chance on getting lost. She couldn't lose the boat if she stayed within reach of the anchor chain.

Fear dogged her all the way down. She considered turning back several times, but each time she did the fear of being alone on the boat superseded her fear of the ocean. She kept glancing at her gauges, carefully monitoring the amount of air in her tanks. She not only had no desire to cut it close and wait until she had just enough air to get back, she wasn't *going* to cut it close!

She'd reached the point where the fear of going deeper had begun to swing the balance when she saw something below her, regular shapes—like manmade structures—and irregular shapes that looked vaguely like people. Pausing, she peered toward them. The water was hazy and dark besides, but she decided that the shapes she'd caught a glimpse of must be the others. Feeling a tingling of relief, and still reluctant to let go of the chain she'd been following, she propelled herself deeper, glancing at the figures every few moments.

She'd just decided that what she'd seen wasn't the other divers when it finally dawned on her that the trembling she'd been dimly aware of for sometime wasn't actually *her* trembling.

Well, part of it was. It wasn't *all* coming from inside of her, though. Part of it was from the water surrounding her. Pausing in consternation, she tried to think what might be causing it. Nothing came to mind, and she dismissed it after a moment, unable to focus on anything beyond the need to find someone, turning in a slow circle to see if she could catch a glimpse of any of the others.

Either they were a lot further away than she thought they should be, or the visibility was a lot poorer than it seemed.

She checked her gauges again, debating whether she actually wanted to move away from the only landmark she had.

She could see the closest figure pretty clearly, though. Shouldn't she be able to spot the anchor chain if she could see that far?

Distances were really deceptive under water, though. She'd already discovered that.

Maybe she'd just take a quick look? Maybe, if she went over to the figure she could see the others?

Glancing down in search of something else to use to mark her bearings, she thought she saw a faint shimmy in the formations below her. But maybe it was just the odd waffling of the current? Or maybe it was just her? She was shivering, from the chill of the water now, not just nerves.

She'd come this far. She should at least make a push to find one of the others before giving up and returning alone, she decided.

She did *not* want to be stuck on that boat alone if the storm hit!

Trying to calm herself so that she wouldn't be sucking up more oxygen than she could afford, she glanced down one last time, trying to imprint the image below her on her mind's eye, and finally let go of the anchor chain.

She was afraid to stare down as she swam toward the image, afraid she'd lose the advantage of that one point of reference. It took longer to reach it than she'd expected and the realization slowly dawned on her that she hadn't been mistaken. It *was* further away that it had seemed. As she neared it, though, she became more focused on the figure as she began to make out details she hadn't been able to before. She'd more than half suspected that it was nothing but a formation of rock that *appeared* to have been formed in the shape of a man.

It wasn't. It wasn't even in the shape of a man.

It was a sculpture of a merman.

Intrigued despite the fear inspired adrenaline still pumping through her, she swam closer. As she drew nearer, she discovered it wasn't just one sculpture. In the distance she could make out others. Awe began to supersede her fear.

David might have been stretching it to guess that they'd found Atlantis, but this was no illusion. It really was a sculpture, fashioned by the hand of man, not nature!

It was beautiful, she thought as she finally got close enough to see it really well!

It reminded her of Greek sculptures she'd seen in pictures and reproductions of those classic sculptures. She wasn't certain why it did unless it was because it so faithfully depicted a man—a merman—with such accuracy of detail.

It was life-sized, too—or maybe larger than life? As she reached it at last, she discovered the figure dwarfed her. If the sculptor had used an actual living man as a model, he'd been a big man, and beautifully formed! God! She hadn't seen a man built that impressive outside of bodybuilding magazines! His *back* was muscular! His arms, one of which was lifted to hold a lethal looking trident, were huge!

Surprise flickered through her as she allowed her gaze to follow the contours of his back down to the dolphin like tail. He had buttocks! Nice round ones! The fish part seemed to start around the tops of where his thighs would've been instead of at the waist as she would've expected.

That was odd! In every depiction she'd ever seen of merfolk, the upper torso was human and they were fish from the waist down.

It leapt into her mind to wonder what he looked like from the front.

Naughty, Cassie, she chided herself! But the thought had barely flashed through her mind when she pedaled forward to see if the statue was anatomically correct in every way.

Despite her suspicions, she was still startled when she discovered he *was* anatomically correct—sort of. The genitalia *definitely* didn't look Greek in origin. He might've been hung like a dolphin—she'd heard they were huge—but he definitely wasn't hung like any human male she'd ever seen and she damned sure hadn't ever seen a Greek statue with a dong like that!

Abruptly embarrassed at her focus, she jerked her head up and glanced around guilty. Unfortunately, she saw no sign of the other divers. Guilt gave way to consternation. She didn't know where they were, but she wasn't hanging around any longer! The urge to explore what looked to actually be the ruins of a city warred briefly with her chicken shit side, but the yellow streak won out. Almost with a sense of regret,

she returned her attention to the statue again, allowing herself to briefly examine the beautifully sculpted torso and face.

She shouldn't have been surprised to discover the face was as beautiful as the rest of the sculpture—angular and manly, but with features so classically perfect 'beautiful' came to mind before handsome did—but she was.

Greek, she thought again, definitely Greek, though how the sculpture had ended up in this area of the world was a mystery destined never to be resolved. Even the merman's long hair seemed to be arranged in a style reminiscent of the height of the Greek era of enlightenment.

What she wouldn't give to be able to lug this thing home and just admire it!

Even the stone that had been used to sculpt it was unusual, had an almost pink tinge to it that made it look like living flesh—except for the tail. That was a pale, grayish-bluish looking stone, very close to the same color as a dolphin and she thought it likely that was what the sculptor had used as a model—a dolphin.

Shrugging the thoughts off, she allowed her gaze to sweep over the statue one more time before she checked her gauges again, feeling real regret when she saw she'd been under as long as she dared stay.

She just wished she'd thought to bring a camera.

But then she'd been scared shitless. She hadn't had anything on her mind but finding the others.

A shudder rippled through the water around her, this time far harder than anything she'd felt before. Her mind registered 'quake' even as she was pushed by the force of it against the statue. Pain shot through her as her face plate connected with the stone. Panic followed the pain. Placing her hands on the sculpture, she shoved away from it, glancing at it to see if she'd damaged it when she'd been slammed against it.

Her heart leapt into her throat when she saw the eyes were open.

They'd been closed before, hadn't they?

She would've noticed, she realized, if they'd been open.

The eyes, unfocused for a split second, abruptly focused and looked directly at her.

Cassie screamed. It emerged as a bubbling gurgle around her mouth piece and a cloud of bubbles.

Too panicked to even think about the anchor chain she'd followed down let alone to look for it, Cassie backstroked the closest approximation she could manage to a leap backwards and then shot toward the surface of the ocean, swimming for all she was worth.

She hadn't gone far when something clamped around one of her ankles. She was so blind with panic it took her several heartbeats to realize she was no longer making any progress toward the surface of the water and several more before it dawned on her that she was tethered. The discovery when she glanced down to see what she was snagged on, however, that it was the merman she'd been admiring only succeeded in bringing her fight or flight instincts to the foreground. She was incapable of anything even approaching logical thought.

Whirling, she commenced to hammering on his head, shoulders, and arms, trying to kick him with her free leg at the same time. The drag of the water on her arms and

legs not only made her blows completely ineffectual, however, it drained her of any ability to even try to fight within moments.

The panic cost her more than that, although she was in no state of mind to realize right away. Her swift, ragged breaths ate up her oxygen far more quickly than would've been the case if she hadn't been panicked.

He released his grip on her ankle as the fight drained out of her. Shooting upwards with no more than a slight flick of his tail, he grabbed her around the waist with one arm. With his free hand, he grasped her mask and ripped it off, dropping it as soon as he'd removed it. Cassie grabbed for the mask frantically as she saw it drifting downward. She whirled to stare at him in wide eyed horror as the mask disappeared.

His expression was stern. There was a glint of curiosity in his eyes, as well, though Cassie was in no state to interpret that look at the moment. The harsh set of his features was enough to reinforce her certainty that her life was in danger—that and the fact that he'd pulled her mask off. More than half fearing he'd rip her mouth piece off next, she recommenced her struggles, this time shoving at him instead of swinging.

Ignoring her attempts to pry herself from his grip, he dove, carrying her through the water at a dizzying speed. Cassie's terror hit a new peak as she dragged on the mouth piece and discovered she'd run out of air. Her fight this time was much more ferocious but of far shorter duration. As her lungs began to burn with the need to pull air into them, her struggles became weaker and weaker until she finally hung limply in his grip. She still managed a half hearted attempt to fight him as he pulled her mouth piece from her mouth, but she didn't even have enough strength left to try to fight him when he caught the back of her head with his free hand, fastened his mouth over hers, forced her lips apart and breathed into her mouth. She sucked in the air he gave her, wondering dimly if it was the shortage of air that sent a dizzying rush through her. She didn't know or care at that moment, the only thing that mattered to her was breathing. She ceased struggling and wrapped her arms and legs tightly around him, fighting now to recapture his mouth each time he lifted his head.

She didn't have a thought to spare for anything beyond the precious breaths he gave her each time the panic of drowning swept over her again. She was dimly aware that they were moving deeper and deeper and that cold was creeping into the marrow of her bones, but there was only one focus in her life and that was getting air.

The darkness that had been steadily encroaching, growing deeper and more profound, began to lighten after a time. Cassie had no idea when that happened, only that she became aware that she wasn't surrounded by darkness anymore. The merman slowed, paused for a few moments, and then moved forward again.

A great heaviness settled over her. Her skin, what was exposed, prickled with a sensation that seemed vaguely familiar—like air. Her mind refused to accept it, however, when it didn't make sense to her.

She held her breath, refusing to give in to the desperate urge to breathe. Blindly, she sought the merman's mouth again. She saw a gleam in his eyes as his head descended obligingly toward hers. When his mouth fastened over hers this time, however, it was far more than a sharing of air. His mouth clung to hers in a way that transformed it from resuscitation to kiss. Heat wafted through her as her body acknowledged the sensual nature of the touch before her brain caught on. She became acutely conscious of the taste of him even before he thrust his tongue into her mouth and

raked it possessively over hers, exploring her mouth with a thoroughness that set her heart to hammering with something entirely different than fear.

She blinked up at him dizzily when he broke the contact and lifted his head to look down at her. Heat and amusement both gleamed in his pale blue eyes as he stared down at her. His hard mouth curled slowly into what was almost a smile.

Then he opened it and said something completely incomprehensible to her.

She blinked, thrown into more confusion.

Lifting his arms, he caught her legs and peeled them off. Gravity, unimpeded by the buoyancy of salt water, dragged her legs downward. The sensation finally penetrated, and she looked down to see a bright mosaic floor beneath her feet—which still hovered several inches above the surface. His hands settled on her waist as she loosened her death grip on his neck and she slid down his hard frame.

She was in a room, she realized blankly, wondering a little wildly if she'd died or was just hallucinating. How?

"Get your hands off of her, fishman!"

Mark's voice snagged her attention, and Cassie's head swiveled automatically in the direction of the sound. Carl, Ben, and David were struggling to hold him, she saw in dismay. A shaft of guilt went through her, and Cassie pushed the merman's hands from her and moved away from him before it even occurred to her that she had no reason to feel guilty.

She glanced back at the merman when she'd put some distance between them, still too stunned by all that had happened to take everything in.

He was standing, though--on two legs.

Taking care not to allow her gaze to linger on his genitals, she swept her gaze upwards to his face again, puzzled. The face was the same. She'd imprinted that pretty solidly in her mind. But where was the merman's tail?

Shaking her head to try to clear away her confusion, she retreated to the far side of the room where she saw that the diving crew was grouped. Mark snagged her as she reached him, wrapping his arms around her possessively and glaring at the merman—naked man—over the top of her head.

It didn't occur to her to try to break his grip, but she twisted around to look at the man again.

Whatever amusement had been on his face, or that she'd thought she'd seen, was gone. His expression was hard now, his gaze speculative as it moved over Mark.

Without another word—not that she'd understood what he'd said before—he turned on his heel, strode to a doorway that looked like nothing so much as a wavering mirror—and stepped through.

Cassie felt her jaw slide to half mast.

He paused on the other side. As she watched, his legs *merged*, became the fish tail she'd seen before. Without glancing back, he flicked the tailfins and vanished from sight.

Slowly becoming aware that Mark was still holding her in a bruising grip, Cassie began to struggle to free herself. Reluctantly, he eased his hold on her, but he didn't release her completely. She pushed at him until he let go, putting some distance between them before she stopped. "What's going on here?"

Mark frowned at her. "That's what I'd like to know. What the hell were you doing *kissing* that fish?"

* * * *

Raen moved to the video display when he reached the observation room. Jadin, who was already at the console studying the prisoners, glanced over at him and grinned. *What was that all about? I can not believe you, of all people, would deign to touch one of the primitives so intimately.*

Raen turned to look at his long time friend, studied him for a moment, and finally shrugged. *She is a land dweller. She needed air.*

Jadin eyed his friend skeptically but finally decided Raen's expression didn't welcome teasing. *They seem to have progressed quite a bit since I saw them last. How long do you suppose we were in stasis?*

Too long. I feel like hell. Do you know what brought us out?

You have not heard? Jadin asked in surprise, pleased to know he'd learned the news before his superior officer, a little puzzled, too, if it came to that. Raen wasn't just *his* superior officer, he was the head of the garrison. He should've been informed first, but then again he appeared to have been a little preoccupied with his prisoner, he thought wryly.

Raen frowned. *I assumed it was the breach in security, that they had tripped the alert when they came in. When I came around the woman was right in front of me and all the lights were on, the alarms blaring*

Jadin shrugged. *Maybe, but everyone is awakening, not just the sentinels.*

Raen dragged his attention from the woman with an effort and looked at Jadin, sensing he was bursting with excitement. *They have come?*

Jadin's face fell. *Damn it to hell! Who told you?*

Raen felt a smile tug at his lips. *No one. It was just a wild guess, he retorted dryly, based upon your comment that everyone is awakening. You are certain that is what it is?*

I heard it from Kadar. He said when he roused, the communications were open and they were trying to hail us.

Raen's expression turned wry. *And there were those who doubted the Mother world would send us succor in our hour of need!*

Jadin frowned. *You did not think they would? Why the hell did you agree to go into stasis if you did not think they would send help?*

Raen shrugged. *I am a sentinel. It is my duty to guard the citizens of Atlantis, not to question my superiors.*

Chapter Three

Cassie felt her color fluctuate madly at the accusation in Mark's voice. Guilt and resentment warred with embarrassment. "He's *not* a fish!" she said indignantly.

Mark's eyes narrowed. "Whatever the hell it is, *it ain't* a human," he said tightly.

Cassie had had time to wonder why her first impulse was to defend the merman. She didn't have time to analyze it, though, since Mark's next comment put her on the defensive. "I ran out of air. He was breathing for me. I'd have drowned if he hadn't."

"You wouldn't have nearly drowned if he hadn't grabbed you," Shelley pointed out.

Cassie turned to look at the woman huddled next to Linda against the wall.

"And that didn't look like he was breathing for you ... aside from the fact that he didn't *need* to once you got here."

Cassie turned a narrow eyed glare on Mark again, but she couldn't help the blush that rose to her cheeks. "I was still in a blind panic about not being able to breathe," she admitted reluctantly. "I didn't know he'd brought me to a place where I could breathe without his help."

She *had* realized it at about the same time it had dawned on her that he was kissing her, not breathing for her, but she saw no reason to admit that. Not that she felt like Mark had any right to question her in the first place! As far as she was concerned the *date* had ended the minute he'd abandoned her top side to go off exploring.

Glancing away from Mark, she saw the others were staring at her with varying degrees of accusation, and her temper erupted. "You needn't be looking at me so damned accusingly! I didn't get any of you into this mess! You got yourselves into it, and got me into it, too, I might add! I happen to be the only one here that isn't used to diving and I would very happily have stayed on the damned boat if all of you hadn't left me there by myself."

They had the grace to look away guiltily, but she was still angry that they behaved as if she was fraternizing with the enemy when she hadn't done anything but try to survive. Was it *her* fault the guy had taken advantage of her mindless panic? Why should she feel guilty that she'd actually enjoyed it?

Moving to the wall where the other women were seated, she put some distance between herself and the others and sat down. She still felt unaccountably weak from her ordeal and found herself struggling against the urge to burst into tears.

"What are we going to do now?" Shelley asked after a prolonged silence. "We can't stay here. We have to think of a way to get out."

"Hey!" Mark said nastily. "We're all open to suggestions! Unfortunately, none of us can breathe water like they do and they took the damned tanks."

Cassie looked up at him in surprise. Right up until he'd said that, she hadn't realized she'd been relieved of her tank, as well. Not that it mattered since the thing was empty, and she suspected theirs would've been close to empty, but she couldn't even remember when he'd taken it off of her. Truthfully, she'd been so mindless with terror

she couldn't remember much of anything from the moment she'd found the merman staring back at her when she'd pushed away from him.

Remembering the wave that had shoved her into him to begin with, though, brought her prior impressions back to mind. "Has anybody noticed the vibrations?" she asked uneasily.

Shelley gave her a look. "Yes, we've all noticed. Carl seems to think it might be the shocks of an underwater quake. That's why I want to get the hell out of here." She glanced around at the men. "One of the reasons, anyway."

Cassie frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think it's a quake."

Carl sent her an irritated look. "You a specialist?"

She glared at him at his tone. "It's been constant since I first noticed it," she said tightly. "Nothing I've ever heard about quakes seemed to point to the constant vibrations I've been feeling."

"She's got you there," Mark retorted. "Although I have to wonder how you noticed anything the way you were wrapped around that guy."

Cassie studied him for a long moment, wrestling with her temper. They were all scared and lashing out with their tempers and it wasn't helping matters at all. Nevertheless, she found his possessiveness too irritating to ignore. "Let's just get one thing straight right now, Mark Sanderson! Your possessive attitude has been duly noted and isn't appreciated! I do not belong to you. This was a date—a first date—and as far as I'm concerned it ended when you left me on that damned boat to go exploring, *knowing* we had a storm bearing down us! So I don't, definitely don't, feel like taking this shit from you about me being with that merman—like I ... enticed him or something!

"I thought he was a statue. I was looking at him and the next thing I knew he was looking back at me! I tried to get away, but he caught me—the same way you were all caught, I assume.

"Even if I *was* flirting with him—which I wasn't—it *still* wouldn't be any of your damned business!"

Mark reddened. "I guess this means 'every man for himself' then?"

"Oh, you really are an asshole!" Linda snapped. "I don't blame her for dumping you!"

"Up yours, Sanchez!" Mark snapped and stalked to the other side of the room.

"Fighting among ourselves isn't going to help anything," Carl put in. "We need to be constructive, people."

"Well, in the words of the asshole, we're all open to suggestions, great leader," David said testily. "I don't know how it went down for the rest of you, but I tangled with one of those things, and, as much as I hate to admit it, I don't think three of us could take *one* of them down. Then there's the little problem of no air. I could make it to the top, I think, but it would have to be a fast climb and we don't have anything on the boat for the bends."

Carl stared at him angrily for several moments and finally moved to settle against the wall like everyone else.

There were no furnishings in the room at all. After studying over that for a little while, Cassie finally decided that where ever they were the place wasn't a prison cell. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. She supposed it didn't actually make a hell of a lot of difference, but she felt better about it not being a prison cell until it

dawned on her that it was just one room and there was no place to relieve themselves if anybody had the need.

She wished she hadn't thought about it because the moment the 'suggestion' popped into her mind she noticed her bladder was beginning to get uncomfortable. "Do you think they'll keep us here long?" she asked no one in particular.

"I don't know why we're here at all," Shelly retorted. "How can we guess how long we'll be here when we don't know why?"

"Snooping," Jimmy said succinctly. "They're aliens and they caught us snooping around their ship and they're not going to let us go at all."

"Shit, Jimmy!" Carl snapped. "Don't start with that crap!"

"Well, what the hell do you think they are?" Jimmy demanded.

"This isn't a ship," Shelly said pointedly. "Look around. It's obviously a building."

"On the ocean floor?" David pointed out, his voice laced with skepticism.

"Don't tell me you agree with him," Linda demanded.

"They aren't human."

"Who says they aren't?" Cassie asked irritably. "Just because they don't look like any of the races we're familiar with doesn't mean they're not human."

"Oh! Come on, woman! You kiss that thing and now you think you know it's human?"

Cassie narrowed her eyes at Mark's comment. "Fine! Have it your way! I *kissed* him! He felt human, damn it! He tasted human! He kissed like a human—except better," she added nastily.

"Really?" Shelly asked, obviously intrigued. "They are ... gorgeous."

"She's lost her mind. They must be able to control minds or something," David growled savagely, pushing himself to his feet and stalking across the room to join Mark.

Shelley exchanged a long look with Cassie and finally shrugged. "I'm just saying"

"Just don't," Carl snapped. "We're in danger. Yes, I can see where you might think they look good—I'll concede that much—but they're *not* human and it would be really dangerous for you to think of them that way."

Linda stared at him speculatively for a moment. "You agree with Jimmy? You think they're aliens, too?"

He returned her look for a moment and finally shrugged irritably. "How the fuck would I know? All I do know is that they're not human ... Did anybody understand *anything* that thing said?"

"It sounded like Greek to me," David put in.

"Well, at least we can all agree on that," Carl said dryly. "It was Greek to me, too, but that ain't very helpful."

"Naw, man! I'm serious. It sounded like Greek."

That comment caught everyone's attention. "You can speak Greek?" Jimmy asked, obviously impressed.

David reddened. "I can't speak Greek, but I used to work for this Greek couple. They talked in their native tongue to each other all the time. What he said sounded a lot like that. I think it's Greek."

Carl rolled his eyes. "Well, even if it is, that isn't helpful worth a shit! We can't speak Greek."

Cassie thought that over. "Maybe Mark was right? Maybe this is Atlantis? I mean, the language—the architecture—doesn't it seem like it has a strong Greek influence?"

"The Atlanteans were Atlanteans, not Greek. It was just the ancient Greeks that wrote about Atlantis."

Cassie frowned. "So? This place still has a strong Greek influence. Doesn't that suggest they had contact with them sometime in the past?"

Carl shrugged. "Maybe ... but I still don't see anything helpful about that information, even if you're right."

"Maybe and maybe not, but it might mean they have some familiarity with other people that were around back then."

David frowned. "Unless there were people around that were speaking English, I doubt it would matter if they had."

"The Romans!" Cassie said pointedly. "They spoke Latin, and English is based on Latin, and so are the romance languages—like Spanish."

Everyone turned to look at Linda. She stared back at them blankly for a moment and then with irritation. "I don't speak Spanish."

Shelly gaped at her. "How can you *not* speak Spanish when your name's Sanchez?"

Linda glared at her. "Your last name's German. Do you speak German?"

"No, but"

"I rest my case."

* * * *

What language do you think they're speaking? It doesn't sound like anything I'm familiar with.

Raen shrugged. *Are you recording it?*

Jadin gave him an offended look. *Of course.*

Why not check to see if the computer has had any luck translating, then, instead of speculating?

Sending Raen an irritated glance, Jadin focused on the computer. *Translation? Still collating. Shall I play what I have decoded?* the computer responded.

Jadin threw a laughing glance at his friend when the computer translated the discussion about Raen's 'sharing air' with the female called Cassie. Raen, however, did not look amused.

The one called Mark seems to think she is his woman, Raen commented.

Jadin eyed Raen speculatively and finally shrugged. *She does not seem to agree.*

Raen's frown deepened. *I am not sure it was wise to leave them all together.*

Jadin tamped his amusement with an effort and shrugged off handedly. *It was the only room that was dry that we could pump air in to at such short notice. We will have to make other arrangements if we are to hold them long ... unless our people manage to raise the ship before they run out of air.*

Raen glanced at him sharply. *As far as we know they have done nothing more than wander into the city. Unless I find out otherwise, we will let them go long before air*

is an issue for them. Keep a close eye on them. I do not think they are stupid enough to try to leave, knowing how deep we are, but you never know with humans.

Jadin nodded, knowing it was an order, not a request. *You do not want to stay a while longer and observe?* he asked, all innocence. *Unless I miss my guess, the one called Cassie is starting to feel a little uncomfortably warm. I am thinking she will be coming out of that strange suit she is wearing before long.*

Raen sent him an amused glance. *In mixed company? I doubt it. If anything they seem more inhibited about their bodies than they used to be.*

Jadin turned to watch him as he moved to the doorway of the observation room. *Where are you going?* he asked curiously.

Raen paused and turned to frown at Jadin but finally shrugged off his irritation. *They said 'ancient' Greeks. I am going to see if I can figure out just how gods bedamned long we have been down here waiting for the Mother world to send help.*

He stopped by communications on the way out to speak with Kadar. *Did no one think to turn the gods bedamned alert off? The vibrations are rattling my brain.*

Kadar glanced at him in surprise. *It is off. I turned it off myself.*

Raen sent him a perturbed look. *What is the source of the tremors then?*

The mother ship is probing for us, Kadar responded with a shrug.

They have found us, Raen retorted dryly as he headed out the door. *I feel it in my bones.*

Kadar stared after him blankly a moment and then chuckled. *Aye, I am feeling it in my bones, too. It will rattle my teeth from my head if they keep it up much longer.*

Struggling to ignore the sonic waves pelting him now that he knew the source and purpose of them, Raen headed for the nearest egress from the ship. The more distance he put between himself and the woman, he discovered, the less tense he felt. That realization didn't particularly please him.

Then again, he was irritated with himself anyway. He didn't know where the impulse had come from to kiss the woman, but he figured as impulses went it was probably one of the stupidest that had ever hit him.

He'd had no use for humans before the cataclysm that had sent their city to the bottom of the sea and divided their people—with nearly half of them abandoning ship to take their chances on living among the primitives—he saw no reason to feel any differently now only because they appeared somewhat more advanced than they had been.

Very likely those who'd chosen to live among them had been butchered by the gods bedamned savages—Kira, Omar, and Le were no doubt long dead and gone. He'd accepted that likelihood and the certainty that he would never see them again as soon as he'd discovered his brothers and his woman were missing and knew what they'd done. He could not abandon his post and go after them, though. The city had been in chaos from the moment the meteor shower struck, the citizens terrified, running around in a blind panic with no notion of where to go or what to do to save themselves. It had taken all he and his men could do to round them up and herd them into the stasis chambers before their floating city sank.

He supposed they'd counted on that when they'd decided to betray him.

Truthfully, he wasn't certain he would have gone after them if he could have—his brothers, maybe—Kira—he wasn't at all sure.

He supposed he would have felt compelled to if it had been possible. He had bonded with Kira's other chosen, had learned to look upon them as if they were true brothers—not like his blood brother, but the ties had been strong.

Kira was another matter.

She'd long since killed the love he'd felt for her when they'd first joined. In truth, if it hadn't been for the fact that he'd decided she wasn't worth dying over, he thought he might have been more than a little tempted to strangle her.

The fury he'd felt when he'd discovered she'd aborted their child--*his* child—for no better reason than because she hadn't wanted to chance ruining her beautiful body rushed over him as if it had only been the day before that he'd discovered it.

For him, it had been little more than that—only a matter of days before the cataclysm when he'd gone into stasis. It didn't matter how long it had actually been. In his mind it was no more than that and it was still just as fresh and painful as if it had just happened.

She could've prevented the pregnancy if she hadn't wanted his child. There was no excuse for what she'd done—none. He knew it had been premeditated maliciousness on her part—all of it—getting pregnant to start with and then aborting it—all calculated to avenge herself against him for wrongs she'd imagined.

He'd been stupid enough when they'd first united to believe her possessiveness was a sign of her love for him. He'd been wrong. It was only a sign of possessiveness, a sense of ownership. She hadn't cared about him. She was incapable of caring about anyone but herself. She'd figured she owned him, though, and she'd watched him like a hawk, interpreting everything he did as a sign of faithlessness.

If he left their home because he couldn't stand to listen to her harping any longer and couldn't trust himself to keep his temper in check, he was fleeing to his mistress. If he was late in returning home because of his duties, he was with another woman. If he didn't want her because he was worn out from working twelve hours straight to earn enough credits to buy her the things she wanted, he had expended himself on some other woman.

He should have realized sooner that she wouldn't have been so quick to question his motives and morals if her own hadn't been questionable. By the time he'd realized that she was painting him with her own brush, though, doing what she constantly accused him of, she'd already lost the power to hurt him.

He hadn't loved her when she'd left. He wasn't even certain when he'd finally stopped loving her. He *was* certain of when he'd begun to hate her, though. That was when she'd informed him she'd aborted his child.

He shook his head, trying to shake the thoughts as he emerged from the ship at last and glanced around at the crumbling remains of what had once been a beautiful city. Slowly, it sank into his mind that it looked far worse than it had directly after the meteor had struck. All of the damage wasn't from that impact.

Time had done this.

Coldness swept over him as he moved through the ruins of the city and paused now and then to run a hand over the broken stones of a building, feeling the smoothed edges of the stones, rounded now when once the edges had been crisp and sharp. Hundreds of years, then, he realized, feeling stunned, disbelieving even though he knew it would have taken that for the ocean to smooth the stones.

Almost as soon as he made that connection, though, he noticed formations of coral had grown up around the perimeter of the ship.

A wave of nausea went through him as he stared at it, trying to convince himself that the ship had simply settled amongst the coral when it had sank.

For many moments, he simply stared at it. Finally, reluctantly, he moved toward the formations to study them.

He swallowed a little sickly once he had.

They had to have been in stasis closer to a thousand years—at the very least—not hundreds, he realized. They'd expected the possibility that it might be several hundred, but nothing like this.

His thoughts went to the woman he'd captured, or more specifically to the breathing unit she'd been wearing. It had been clumsy to his way of thinking, but the technology of creating such a thing, so that air breathers could move beneath sea

He shook his head, wondering what other technology the humans had mastered while they had been sleeping.

Lifting his head, he stared toward the surface of the sea. None of them had been carrying weapons. Knowing the human propensity for violence, however, he returned to his stasis unit to retrieve his trident. He'd dropped his weapon when he'd gone after the woman.

A flicker of annoyance went through him.

He hadn't simply 'dropped' it, he acknowledged reluctantly. He'd tossed it aside. He still wasn't entirely certain why.

He hadn't needed it to subdue her, of course—there hadn't been a moment of doubt that there would be any contest of strength or speed between them—but that was beside the point. A sentinel, captain of the guard or not, did not simply decide to disarm himself when faced with a potential threat. She could have been a decoy sent to lead him from his post—or into an ambush.

He'd tossed it aside because he'd seen she was terrified and he hadn't wanted to frighten her more by waving the weapon in her face.

Mayhap the years in stasis had slowed his wits? Or scrambled them, he wondered in self-disgust?

He'd been born a soldier, had trained for it his entire life. He was still a man, but he had never been prone to allow a woman to distract him from his duty, however delightfully formed, however pretty.

And she was that.

He did not think he'd been thinking of any of that when he'd gone after her, though—not how appealing she was physically.

He'd been thinking about the look in her wide eyes.

He shook his head, trying to shake the thoughts as he propelled himself upwards, climbing steadily until he broke the surface. Images kept flickering through his mind, however.

She'd clung to him, he knew, from fear of drowning, sought the air she desperately needed, not offered her mouth to him. He knew that with the logical side of his mind, but the other part of himself, the side governed by instincts, persisted in interpreting those moments in an entirely different way.

She'd tasted—sweet. It wasn't just surprise to discover that that had sent a jolt through him the first time he'd covered her mouth to give her air. He'd told himself it was, but he had never been one for self deception. He'd enjoyed the taste of her, the feel of her clinging tightly to him.

That was why he'd been in no great hurry to leave her with the others.

That was why he'd taken advantage of her panic and kissed her instead of letting her go at once when he'd reached the room where they'd gathered the other human intruders.

He could lie to himself till doomsday about the instant attraction he'd felt for her, but he knew better.

No one had been more vocal about their distaste for and distrust of the natives of this world than he. It was beyond ironic that the first female to stir him deeply since Kira hailed from that tribe of man.

And the worst of it was, he recognized it for what it was because he'd been there before.

Trouble, deep trouble.

It was not the sort of connection that one could slough off with a few frantic couplings. It went soul deep. It was a physical recognition of the compatibility of potential mates.

It was almost worse that she seemed to recognize it, as well.

She'd certainly responded as if she had.

It was just as well they'd be gone soon and he would have no chance to make a fool out of himself, otherwise he was afraid he wouldn't be able to resist the pull.

The first lungful of air he sucked in as he broke the surface of the sea choked him, dragging his mind from the woman with a vengeance. His throat and lungs burned. He coughed for several minutes, expelling the water in painful gasps, wondering if it had just been so long he'd 'forgotten' how to breathe air instead of siphoning it from the water, or if there was something wrong with the air.

When the spasms finally passed, he filled his lungs more cautiously, tasting the air, testing it.

It tickled his lungs, and he had to struggle to tamp another fit of coughing.

It *was* the air, he decided. His memory wasn't faulty. However long it had actually been, despite the fact that the last time he'd breathed air it had been tainted with the ash and smoke of his burning city, he remembered what it had been like before—clean and sweet.

He didn't know what might have happened to the atmosphere, but something sure as hell had. Dismissing it when he'd mastered the urge to cough every time he breathed, he pushed himself high in the water and surveyed the surface. A small boat bobbed in the water a short distance away, and he swam toward it. Dipping beneath the surface when he reached it, he swam down a short space and then shot upward again with enough force to clear the water. Shifting forms as he lifted above the water, he landed with his feet braced slightly apart for balance on the rocking deck and looked around. The design of the boat didn't impress him. It looked little different than the boats he'd seen humans build long ago. The only real difference he could see at a glance was that the materials used to make it were no longer natural, it was far less aesthetically pleasing, and looked less comfortable, as well.

Striding toward the ladder that led up to the command console, he examined everything carefully and was a little more impressed. They'd mastered long range communications utilizing airwaves, discovered more accurate navigational methods—electronic navigational means, at any rate.

When he'd finished examining the instruments and determined the propulsion method, he climbed down the ladder again and explored the remainder of the boat from bow to stern, searching for weapons and examining the personal items scattered about, and then climbed down the narrow ladder into the living area.

They didn't live on the boat. That much was almost immediately evident. From the remains of the food they'd eaten and the little he discovered in the cabin, he was almost certain they'd only occupied the vessel a matter of hours.

Which meant the boat was capable of a good bit of speed. It also meant they hadn't traveled far because he could see that, although the propulsion unit was capable of a good deal more speed than the forbearers of this type of vessel, it wasn't *that* fast.

They'd established their colony as far from the native barbarians as they could get and still have fairly quick access to any raw materials they might need from the land. From here, unless the continents had shifted drastically, they were hundreds of miles from land in any direction—a good deal more than from the known 'civilized' lands before the cataclysm.

He was certain the boat, regardless of its speed, didn't have the capability for that range.

The humans had undoubtedly crossed the ocean at some point and settled far closer than they'd been before, on the lands surrounding Atlantis.

Even without the evidence he'd already uncovered to suggest a very great deal of time had passed since the disaster, the fact that the humans had spread from shore to shore—moved in to settle *their* area of the globe—indicated a huge population growth.

They'd advanced both socially and technologically. There was nothing here, however, to make him think they'd closed the technological gap enough to represent a real threat to his people.

The question was, how would they feel, now, about sharing their world with the colonists of Atlantis? Would they be more receptive to aliens living among them? Or more hostile?

He frowned thoughtfully as he considered it and finally decided it seemed highly unlikely that they could possibly be more hostile.

Chapter Four

When Raen emerged from the cabin of the small boat, he climbed the ladder to the command console once more and surveyed his surroundings. The pulsing of the sonar was far less noticeable now, in the air, but he could feel the fine hairs on his body stirring in response to the electro-magnetic pulses from the mother ship.

It was far closer than he'd anticipated—cloaked.

That discovery surprised him even though he'd already determined that the humans lived close by now.

Maybe they were more of a threat than he'd surmised?

Why else would the rescue ship see the need to cloak?

The pulses he at least understood far better now that he'd reconnoitered the situation. The ship was firmly entrenched now, claimed over the intervening years by the sea. The rescue ship would not be able to raise the Atlantis until they'd freed it from its entrapment.

As he stood enjoying the feel of the air on his skin, allowing himself a few moments to relish the thought that Atlantis would be raised, that they would not have to abandon the home they'd spent generations building, movement beyond the cloaking clouds caught his eye. He peered at it for many moments, trying to discern exactly what it was he could see weaving in and out along the periphery of the dome the mother ship had erected. Finally, uneasy for some reason he couldn't entirely fathom or dismiss, he dove from the boat, shifting into his water form so that he could move a little closer to see better.

He could not breach the dome, of course, but it was no more than twenty feet thick. He could get close enough to see whatever it was beyond the dome.

His discovery brought him no comfort.

Beyond the dome, without doubt completely unconvinced that the cloak was a natural phenomenon, the crafts of man circled like angry bees, searching for a point of attack.

He'd guessed wrong, he realized grimly. Mankind was just as hostile as ever and far better equipped now to pit themselves against the aliens among them.

* * * *

"Is it just me, or does it feel like the building's moving?" Cassie asked, breaking the glum silence that had descended over the group when they'd finally tired of bickering among themselves.

Everyone had been slumped with a mixture of weariness and dejection. At her question, however, heads popped up and everyone focused on their own senses.

Shelley's eyes rounded with fear. "Do you think, maybe, the quakes have shaken the place loose and it's sliding into a crevice?"

Everyone stared at her with varying degrees of uneasiness and horror.

"You've been watching too many fucking movies!" Mark snapped angrily. "For godsake! None of us *saw* a crevice when we were exploring! Why the hell would you think we were sliding into one?"

Shelley glared at him. "He *is* an asshole. If I were you, Cassie, I wouldn't date him any more."

"Assuming we get out of here," Jimmy put in glumly. "And I'm beginning to think that's not very likely."

Linda chewed her lip. "Don't talk like that! I left my cats in my apartment. I didn't even think to board them. My neighbors don't even know I *have* cats—because it's against the rules to have pets in the apartments."

"They're not going to keep us," Cassie said with more confidence than she felt. "We didn't do anything. Obviously, these are intelligent, advanced people. They wouldn't just keep us imprisoned for no reason."

Jimmy studied her for several moments. "I don't suppose it's occurred to you that nobody in the world knows about this place? And that there must be a reason nobody knows about it?"

"Shut up, Jimmy!" Carl snapped. "There's no sense in scaring everybody when we don't know anything."

"Scaring you, you mean," Mark said.

"And you're not?" Carl retorted.

"What I'm not," Mark snarled, "is going to take this shit lying down! I say we wait by the door and the next time one of those things pokes his head in, we jump him. There's five of us. I don't care how strong they are, five of us should be able to overpower one of them."

Linda gave him a drop dead look. "There are eight of us, or don't we count?"

Mark gave her a condescending look. "I always suspected you were a feminist—or a lesbo. You think you girls can manage better than we can?"

Linda glared at him. "I like dick as much as the next woman, but I really prefer them to have balls attached," she said nastily. "I don't suppose it occurred to you, cave man, that main strength might not be the way to go?"

Carl lifted a hand to stop Mark when he surged forward. "Meaning?"

Linda jerked her head in Cassie's direction. "The dark haired hunk seemed pretty interested in Cassie. Maybe she could distract him when he comes back? I got the impression he wasn't just an ordinary grunt."

Cassie felt her face heat when everyone turned to stare at her. "You want me to ... flirt with him?" she asked, appalled.

"You didn't seem to mind before," Mark said tightly. "What's the matter? You feeling shy now?"

Cassie glared at him. "Stress really is the best way to bring out a person's true colors, isn't it?"

"Don't pay him any attention," Shelley said. "He had a good point, though. We can just wait around and hope they let us go, or we can try to make it happen. What do you say?"

Cassie blinked at her. "To what?"

"Coming on to the guy and distracting him so that the guys can jump him?"

Cassie felt a little nauseated actually. "That's ... that's so underhanded," she got out uncomfortably.

Linda looked offended. "So? It isn't underhanded that they're holding us against our will?"

"I'm sorry I offended you," Cassie said tightly. "But consider it this way—if you'd trespassed, however inadvertently, on a secure installation and been detained, would you be considering attacking them? Or would you be trying to reason with them?"

"It's not the same thing," Carl snapped.

"It *is* the same thing!" Cassie retorted.

"We can't reason with them," Jimmy pointed out. "We can't even *talk* to them!"

Cassie let out a huff of breath. "I know, but still I think we should at least wait until we have a better idea of their intentions. If they check us out, and I can't believe they wouldn't, they'll see we were just exploring and had no idea we were trespassing. Anyway, I don't think I could do it. In case it hasn't occurred to anybody, I'm not very good at flirting with men. If I was, I wouldn't have been cyber dating ... Besides, I wouldn't even know how to go about distracting him."

"Just smile at him," Linda said helpfully. "And when you see you have his attention, strip. That gets them every time."

Cassie stared at her in horrified fascination. "Just strip? You know this will work? He'd probably just laugh his ass off if I tried anything that blatant! Quite aside from the fact that there's no such thing as 'just stripping' off a damned wetsuit! It's worse than trying to get into or out of a damned girdle that's three sizes too small!"

Linda shrugged. "It always works in the movies. It's worth a try, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think!" Cassie said testily. "You do it if you're so keen on the idea."

Linda reddened. "I'm over thirty," she pointed out wryly. "*Nobody* is interested in anyone over thirty. I might as well be a hundred—or invisible!"

"Shelley should try it, then. She's the only one under thirty here," Cassie said tartly.

"You're over thirty?" Mark demanded. "You told me you were twenty seven!"

Linda sent her an 'I told you so' look. Cassie reddened. "And I suppose you didn't hedge, even a little?"

"How far did you hedge?"

She glared at him. "None of your damned business! What difference does it make now, anyway? Besides, you said you weren't interested in having children."

"*Now*," Mark said. "That doesn't mean I wouldn't ever be interested!"

"If that isn't just like a damned man!" Linda snorted. "They act like women can wait for fucking ever to produce! And then, when it's just about too late, they suddenly develop the burning need to procreate!"

"I *knew* you were a feminist!" Mark growled.

"Oh yeah?" Linda snapped, surging to her feet. "Just because I like my men with balls and you don't have any?"

Mark stared at her for several moments, violence in every line of his body, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides. Finally, he forced himself to relax and turned, stalking across the room as if he needed to put some distance between himself and

her. "What you need," he ground out when he'd planted his shoulders against the wall and folded his arms over his chest, "is to get laid, bitch."

Linda narrowed her eyes at him. Finally, she relaxed, as well, however. Settling again, she glared at him for several moments and then her lips twitched. "Actually, I do, but contrary to popular male myth, a man can not actually screw a woman's brains out. Even a very satisfactory lay will not lower my IQ or change the fact that you're a prick."

Silence reigned for about ten minutes. "Maybe we could practice?" Linda suggested finally.

Cassie turned to study her uneasily. "Practice what?"

Linda shrugged. "See which one of us would be best at playing *femme fatal*? It's not like we have anything better to do."

Cassie felt her jaw go slack with disbelief. "Practice?" she asked in a strangled voice.

Linda sighed. "It's damned hot and uncomfortable in this wetsuit anyway. I'm all in favor of ditching the thing."

"Yes, but I'm not wearing anything under mine!" Shelley said plaintively.

Linda slid a glance toward the men, noticed they were all alert now, like pointers.

"Ok, Shelley wins, hands down," she muttered, amusement lacing her voice.

Cassie studied her a moment and began to laugh.

David, Mark, and Carl reddened faintly and pretended interest in the mosaics on the floor.

Vaguely piqued that Mark had shown as much interest as the others, Cassie finally dismissed it. She'd thought before all of this started that she and Mark had a lot going for them as a couple. Except for his penchant for diving, they'd seemed to have a good bit in common and although there'd been no huge physical attraction, she hadn't really expected it. She'd coached herself, in point of fact, to accept that she wasn't going to find the 'ultimate', the perfect man for her. She was going to have to settle for Mr. OK if she wanted that particular slice of American pie—home and family.

Men weren't the only ones who ignored the limitations of procreation. She'd been so busy with life in general, always thinking there'd be time, later, to take that step, that she'd hit thirty before she realized it was right around the corner, just waiting to trip her up and ruin her 'future' plans. It was her own fault and no one else's. She should've taken the leap right out of high school or college like the women who actually listened to the call of nature to build their nests and fill it with babies.

She hadn't felt up to the challenge of balancing a career and family, though, and worse, she was a dreamer. She wanted love and happily ever after. She wanted to find her other half, to fall deeply, madly in love. She didn't want to find a decent, respectable, dependable man with her head and try to make it work, to *learn* to love him for his good qualities. She knew she could. Plenty of men and women did just that, settled for what they could get instead of what they wanted, and managed to be perfectly happy and content. She had a capacity for love and learning to love was probably better, and safer, in the end, but she'd wanted fireworks. She didn't care if everyone said that usually burned out. Obviously, it didn't always, and even if it did she still wanted *that*. Besides, she was of the opinion that love could start with fireworks and mellow to the more enduring sort of love. If you could start with nothing and make something, she certainly

didn't see any damned reason why you couldn't start with something powerful and make something enduring out of it.

Sort of like the jolt that had gone through her when the merman had kissed her.

Mindless panic or not, that one kiss, as brief as it had been, had been more electrifying than sticking her finger in a light socket.

If she could just find a man that had that effect on her, one she actually had a chance with

Nature was so damned perverse! Or maybe it was just her? Or maybe it had just been the fear? Why was it that, out of all the men she'd dated, not *one* had had that kind of effect on her?

Damn it!

* * * *

We have problems, Raen announced grimly when he rejoined Jadin in the observation room.

Jadin's good humor vanished as he studied Raen's face. *What kind of problems?* he asked uneasily.

The kind of problems we thought they represented, Raen retorted shortly, studying the prisoners. *The good news is we do not have to worry about them revealing our presence here*, he added dryly. *The humans already know.*

Jadin frowned. *You think they alerted them?*

Raen shook his head. *I am fairly certain they detected the approach of the mother ship. These people were focused on nothing more than amusing themselves. I think they only happened upon us by chance—More accurately, I suppose, they got caught up in the dome.*

What are we going to do with them? Let them go?

Raen shrugged. *Not before I have questioned them. The council will be convening before long. They will want answers—they will need answers before they can make a decision.*

This is sounding worse and worse.

It is about as 'worse' as it can get. We will have a war on our hands if we are not damned careful.

Jadin sent him a startled look. *You think they would do that? The humans, I mean?*

Raen studied his friend with grim amusement. *Does that seem out of character for them to you?*

No, Jadin responded slowly, *but their capabilities*

... Are a lot more of a threat than they were the last time we looked.

But ... if they are advanced enough now to present a problem, surely they are less aggressive?

Raen uttered a sardonic laugh. *Do not deceive yourself! They will never outgrow their aggression. It is too deeply ingrained. It is why they are so territorial.*

Jadin shrugged. *So are we. If we had not been we would not have settled so far from them. We would have welcomed the trade, instead of trying to discourage it.*

That is about to change. We are either going to have to arrive at some sort of agreement with them or find a new home.

The council ...?

... Does not know anything about the situation yet, or have any clue of what they will be up against. That is why I am going to question these outlanders—to discover if they will have any chance of negotiating with the humans.

Jadin frowned angrily. *I have lived here my entire life—Generations of my family have. This is just as much our home now as it is theirs!*

I am not sure they will agree, Raen responded tartly. *And therein lies the problem.* He shook his head when Jadin would've said more. *This is a problem for the politicians,* he said pointedly. *We are soldiers. The decision will not be ours. Prepare rooms for them. I want them separated before I start questioning them.*

Grim amusement filled Jadin's eyes at that. *Be careful with the woman.*

Raen felt his color heighten at the remark but resolutely ignored it. *Which woman?*

Jadin laughed. *I have known you too long, Raen det Kira, to fall for that!*

Raen's face hardened. *Ap Aquinox,* he corrected. *Kira rescinded on the eve of the disaster.*

Jadin's brows twitched together. He studied his friend speculatively. *It may anger you to hear it, but, to my mind, she did you a favor.*

Aye, Raen agreed, *but unwillingly. You may be certain her motives were not so unselfish. Not that it would have mattered in the end. I could have set her aside.*

Jadin studied him in surprise. *A woman has autonomy. The council would never have allowed you ... She refused to bear your offspring?* He responded in sudden understanding.

Raen grunted instead of verbalizing his disgust.

Jadin's eyes narrowed. *You are certain?*

She told me.

Which means exactly nothing. She would lie when the truth would have served her better. She would have said anything to wound ... especially if it was you. She was like that. You never seemed to see it, but it was not difficult for anyone else to see.

Tell me again why we are friends? Raen asked caustically.

Do you think you are the first male that has ever fallen for a beautiful female and been too blind to see her for what she really was? You were young. If a male can not be stupid in his youth, when is it allowed?

Raen gave him an irritated look. *Thank you. I feel so much better!*

Jadin studied Raen uncomfortably. *I do not suppose it matters now, but I have never felt comfortable not telling you. I did not—at first because I thought you would not believe me—and later because it could not be changed. You accepted her without questioning whether she could provide offspring or not. You could not have sought a set aside under those circumstances even if you had known. But she could not bear a child. Maybe that accounted for her mean spiritedness, some of it, anyway.*

Raen stared at his friend in shocked disbelief. *She lied to me? She said she had aborted the child.*

Jadin shrugged uncomfortably. *She could not have, because she could not conceive to begin with. It was my woman, Sedimay, who told me and she would know. Mayhap she only told you that to make the break easier for you?* he offered tentatively.

Raen shook his head. *Not Kira. She delighted in tormenting me. The gods only know what her motivation was, but kindness certainly was not it.*

You are bitter and who could blame you? But you do yourself no favor by believing the worst anymore than when you would believe nothing but the best.

It does not matter ... not now, Raen responded. *She set me aside, and she is long gone to her rest so I will never know, and I do not think it would matter to me anyway.*

It will matter to you if you are now dead set only to see the worst! Jadin argued.

It can not hurt that I have learned caution, Raen said dryly.

Jadin rolled his eyes but allowed the subject to drop.

You were going to caution me regarding the woman? Raen prompted after several moments, eyeing his friend with amusement.

Jadin gave Raen an irritated look. *Obviously, you have no need to be warned. You are armed with your bitterness now. I can see I have no reason at all to be concerned that you might lose your heart to the wrong female a second time.*

None, Raen agreed, smiling grimly. *You do not mean to tell, then?*

Jadin considered it thoughtfully and finally shrugged and grinned. *I was not worried you would be taken in. I only found it amusing. She has designs on seducing you to convince you to free her and her friends.*

Raen's eyes narrowed as he turned his head and focused on Cassie's image on the viewing screen. *Does she now?* he asked slowly, speculatively. His expression was unreadable when he looked at Jadin again. *Have the men prepare the rooms.*

What do you mean to do? Jadin asked uneasily.

Raen lifted his dark brows. *Let her.*

Chapter Five

Cassie had long since passed from uncomfortable to miserable. They'd been kept in the room for hours and she'd be willing to bet she wasn't the only one who had an aching bladder, although no one had complained. Beyond that, there was no where to sit but the floor, and beyond that the room was warm and stuffy and she was sticky from salt water. If not for the conversation they'd had only a little earlier, she would've peeled the wetsuit off to get more comfortable.

Now, if she did, they'd think she had decided to give seduction a try and she wasn't about to either give them that impression *or* to try it.

It wasn't that she was against the idea of tempting the merman. There was no getting around the fact that that brief kiss had just primed the pump, intrigued her enough that her heart sped up every time she thought about it or thought about the possibility of trying it again.

The idea was almost as scary as it was appealing, though.

She couldn't do it. She was tempted, far more than she wanted to let on. It was unnerving how much she wanted to cross the barrier between the known and unknown and discover if this stranger actually had had the effect on her she thought he'd had, but she'd never been the sort of woman who could just walk up to a guy and start something, and that was in situations that weren't nearly as fraught with the potential for embarrassment as this was.

The mermen returned without warning. One moment the strange door was clear, the next eight of them had stepped through it, all armed with those wicked looking tridents she'd seen the merman with.

Her rescuer was among them, was, in fact, the first to step through the door. Cassie's heart commenced to leaping against her chest wall the moment she saw him.

"Psst!"

Cassie turned and looked at Linda at the sound. Linda jerked her head a couple of times in their direction, waggling her eyebrows and gesturing with her eyeballs.

Cassie glared at her.

Linda gave her a look.

Cassie narrowed her eyes.

Linda's lips tightened.

"You do it if you're so convinced it'll work!" Cassie hissed in a low voice, coming to her feet.

It wasn't until she'd looked away from Linda that she discovered that the contingent of soldiers included five women and three men. Disconcerted, she glanced at Shelley and Linda questioningly as the three men advanced on them.

The men, she saw without surprise but with a good deal of irritation, were looking the merwomen over as if they'd been pole-axed. Without a whimper of protest, like lapdogs, the men allowed the merwomen to lead them off.

"Come."

Cassie jerked her head toward the merman in surprise when he spoke. "You speak English."

His hard mouth curled faintly. "I am wearing a translator."

Cassie blinked at him in surprise, her gaze flickering over him in search of the device. "Where?"

He tipped his head, flicking his long, black hair over his shoulder and allowing her to look at his ear. A jolt went through her when she saw his ear was pointed at the top, almost elf like. The discovery distracted her for several moments before she could focus on the device hooked over his ear.

It looked like nothing so much as the tiny ear piece cell phones, but obviously it wasn't. He hadn't spoken English before. Regardless, she was damned if she could figure out how the thing might work. His lips moved in sync to what was said and it was his voice saying the words in English.

Shaking the thoughts off when she saw everyone else had left, she moved away from the wall and toward the strange looking door, which she hadn't approached before because it unnerved her. She stopped when she reached it, lifting a hand to explore it.

A shiver went through her when she realized it was exactly what it looked like—a wall of water. How they could make it form a horizontal sheet, she couldn't imagine.

He moved up behind her, so close she could feel the brush of his skin. His hand settled on her lower arm between her elbow and wrist, his fingers curling around it. She'd felt the warmth of his nearness even before the light contact and a faint shiver went through her.

"Hold your breath."

She glanced up at him over her shoulder sharply.

A gleam of amusement entered his eyes. "Unless, of course, you would prefer I breathe for you?"

Heat surged into her cheeks at the reminder, her throat closing at the suggestion in sudden want. Her gaze automatically flickered to his mouth. With an effort, she dragged her gaze from his hard mouth, clearing her throat, trying to sort her chaotic thoughts. "It won't take long? I can't hold my breath long."

"Only a few moments," he promised as she dragged in several deep breaths, gathering her nerve to step through. *And I am here if you need help*, said an amused voice inside her head even as she stepped through and found herself surrounded by water.

Slipping past her, he drew her up close and propelled the two of them down a long corridor. Fear gripped her as they rushed along the darkened hallway, the fear that he'd lied, the fear that she wouldn't be able to hold her breath long enough. She clutched at him uneasily, digging her fingers into his flesh.

He dragged her through another doorway.

It was as well he was holding her. She stumbled as they went through, disoriented by the transition from water to air. The sound of dripping water assailed her. Glancing around, she saw it dripping from the ceiling and running along the walls, as if the room had only moments before been emptied of water.

"You'll be more comfortable here, I think."

Cassie looked at him as he spoke and realized that she was still standing in the circle of his arm. Feeling vaguely embarrassed, she moved away from him. There was a bed in the room and little else. She stared at the bed, wondering if it was as damp as the

rest of the room. She couldn't imagine that it wouldn't be. Obviously, the room had been flooded with water only a little while before he'd brought her to it.

"There are facilities there."

She glanced at him again and saw that he was pointing to a narrow doorway in the wall not far from the door they'd entered. This one didn't have the watery door, however—it had *no* door at all as far as she could see.

She hoped by facilities he meant toilet.

She wasn't going to ask him, though.

"How long are we going to have to stay here?" she asked when she saw him turn toward the door to leave.

"Until we have questioned you."

Cassie chewed her lip. "Couldn't you just do that now? I mean, I'd really like to get it over with and get home before dark."

"Too late."

She frowned at him in comprehension. "It's night?" she asked finally.

He nodded.

"How would you ...? Never mind. I'd still like to go home."

"In time," he responded implacably, moving toward the door.

"I didn't do anything."

He paused again, turning to study her. "You trespassed."

She blinked at him in surprise. "But ... there weren't any signs, no fences! How were we supposed to know we were trespassing?" she demanded indignantly.

He lifted his dark brows. "Do you live here?"

Cassie felt her face reddening. "No."

"Then you should have known."

"Wait!" she gasped when he reached the door.

Again, he paused. This time he looked impatient when he turned to look at her.

"What's your name?"

He tilted his head curiously. "What's yours?"

"Cassie. Cassia Pendell, actually."

"I am Raen."

"Rain?"

"Sentinel Raen ap Aquinox, Captain of the guard."

"Where am I?"

His gaze flickered over her face. "I thought you had guessed that already."

Cassie stared at him blankly while her mind scrambled around trying to gather the implications of that statement. He stepped through the door and disappeared from view just about the time her brain finished collating the information and arrived at the answer she discovered she didn't actually want.

They'd been listening, to everything. It was the only explanation.

Maybe they'd been watching, too?

She wondered if there were cameras and microphones in this room.

Turning away, she stared at the door to the 'facilities' yearningly for several moments and finally headed that way. She saw when she looked inside that it was a fully furnished bathroom. She hoped it was also fully functional.

Trying not to think about the possibility—the likelihood—that this room was wired like the other, she began struggling out of the wetsuit.

There was no damned door, but no guarantee of privacy if there had been. Using her wetsuit as a privacy tent, she relieved herself and then studied the shower. Very likely the only water she'd get out of it, if she got any at all, would be salt water, but she thought it was worth a try. She couldn't feel more sticky and uncomfortable than she did already.

It worked. To her surprise, hot water shot out of the showerhead. Wondering where it had come from and how they'd managed to pipe it in, she stripped her swim suit off and stood under the water until she felt clean. Raen was standing in the doorway, one shoulder propped against the door frame, studying her unabashedly when she stepped out of the shower dripping.

As his robe clad form materialized out of the steam, Cassie let out a shriek and jumped all over, frantically trying to cover herself.

His eyes gleamed. His lips quirked upward at one corner. He extended a hand, though, and she saw that he was holding something that didn't look like a towel but must be something for that purpose. Snatching it from his hand, she scrambled to cover herself with it.

"I thought you might need this."

She glared at him. "I thought I might have privacy!"

He shrugged. "You said you were ready to be questioned."

"Yes, but ...," Cassie broke off her indignant complaint, realizing belatedly that she wasn't making any points in her favor by being hostile. In point of fact, it also occurred to her, forcefully, that she'd just flubbed what might have been the perfect opportunity to offer sexual favors in return for leniency. *Not* that she'd considered trying such a thing for a moment, but the realization that she'd missed the opportunity left her feeling like she'd just missed her bus and was going to miss out on a really good job opportunity—as if she'd screwed up something she was going to regret. "Can I get dressed first?"

She noticed for the first time when she spoke, because it was the first she'd actually looked at him—that he was wearing clothes—sort of. It was like a long, flowing robe. He produced another, smaller version, for her that she also hadn't noticed he was holding—because both robes were white.

She took it, staring at the robe, though her mind wasn't on the robe at all, trying to decide if she actually had the nerve to even *attempt* to be the sexual aggressor. And if she could command herself to do something what sort of something should she try? She was still trying to get up the nerve when he pushed away from the doorframe and moved into the room beyond.

The moment he did both relief and disappointment filled her.

More than a little irritated with herself, she unfolded the robe and examined it, discovering that it was made to simply slip over her head. There were no fastenings at all. Shoving her arms into the loose sleeves, she dragged it over her head and allowed the hem to drop to her ankles.

She felt almost as naked after she'd put it on as she had before because she was naked underneath and acutely conscious of it. She stared at her swimsuit, debating, and finally simply grabbed up the bottom and shimmied into it.

She was halving it—unable to make up her mind whether she actually wanted to make overtures or not. She didn't feel quite as naked with the swimsuit bottom on, and still didn't feel entirely comfortable without the top.

Coward, she chided herself, examining the robe more because she was in no great hurry to leave the bathroom than because she had that much interest in it. The material was strange, she discovered, more paper-like, or maybe like plastic, than fabric, but soft for all that.

It was too long. Holding it up to keep from tripping, she went into the bedroom.

Raen gestured to a chair against the wall near the bed that she had barely noticed before.

She moved to it, settling cautiously until she discovered it wasn't, as she'd expected, wet. When she'd settled, she looked up at him questioningly. It disconcerted her to discover she had his full attention, that he was standing, his feet braced slightly apart, his hands clasped behind his back, barely three feet away. She had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze.

"Where are you from?"

Surprise flickered through her at the question. She wondered why he'd want to know that—what it had to do with the situation. "Georgia," she responded finally.

He studied her for a long moment and finally moved away, pacing a few steps before he turned to glance at her again. "And this is where?"

She stared at him blankly. "Uh ... just north of Florida."

"Which is ...?"

"East of where we are now."

His lips tightened.

"Why are you here?"

"Because you grabbed me before I could leave."

He paused in front of her again. Leaning down until they were almost nose to nose, he fixed her with a hard look. "Are you laboring under the misapprehension that this is some sort of game?"

Right up until she'd seen that expression on his face Cassie had only admired it with the sort of detachment one reserved for inanimate objects that were aesthetically pleasing, clinging, she supposed, to her first impression of 'the sculpture' she'd admired. *This*, however, was a living, breathing—dangerous looking man and the tone of voice he'd used only emphasized that fact. She gulped and shook her head slowly.

"Are you having difficulty understanding the translator?"

She felt her face heat. "No."

"Then why don't you tell me why you came here?"

"I was just looking for the others."

"The others? Your partners?"

Cassie's heart fluttered uncomfortably. That sounded like a leading question to her. "My ... uh ... companions," she corrected. "The people who were with me in the other room."

"You were looking for them? If they were your companions that would imply that you were with them, would it not?"

"They left me alone on the boat and I didn't know when they'd come back, and I was afraid the storm would hit before they did."

"You're saying they led you here?"

Cassie studied him doubtfully, wondering if it was just her imagination that his questions seemed to be designed to make her responses sound guilty. "Could I just explain what happened?"

He lifted his dark brows but bowed his head slightly and moved away. Deciding that must have been a 'yes', Cassie composed her thoughts and told him everything she could remember exactly as she remembered it happening. Hopefully, she thought, everyone would tell it the same way and then they'd see it was just a mistake. "I hadn't planned to leave the anchor chain, because I was afraid I might not find it again, but then I saw Well, I saw you. I thought it might be them, but I saw when I got closer that it was I thought you were a statue."

He turned and looked at her curiously.

"You weren't moving. I couldn't even see that you were breathing."

If he realized she was hinting at getting some answers of her own, he ignored it. Instead, he paced the room for several moments, obviously deep in thought, though she couldn't tell whether he was just reviewing what she'd said, searching for flaws, or if he was trying to think of other questions to ask.

Unnerved as she was now, Cassie was starting to get a crick in the neck from staring up at him and that distracted her, temporarily, from her anxiety about what else he might ask her. She hadn't imagined he was a big man when she'd first seen what she'd thought was a statue, she realized. He was big, and tall. She thought he must be half a head taller than Mark, and *he* had claimed to be six feet tall.

Maybe Mark had hedged a little on the height, like she'd hedged on her age?

Either way, Raen was still very tall, and broad shouldered. He looked good even in the robe, she thought---and manly. She would've thought the thing would detract from his masculinity. Odd how it didn't, but then she supposed there wasn't much that could, not with a man built like he was---and square jawed. There was no five o'clock shadow, despite the fact that his hair was as black as onyx. In fact, now that she thought about it, there hadn't been hair anywhere else on his body besides his head—including his pubic area.

That hadn't really surprised her when she'd thought he was a statute. Given that he wasn't, now she had to wonder.

Did he shave---everywhere? Or did he just not have hair?

He sent her a speculative look. "We do not have hair---at all."

Cassie stared at him blankly, feeling her jaw slowly slide to half mast. She *knew* she hadn't spoken aloud, but there was no way she was going to believe he'd just *guessed* what she was thinking, or that it was just a coincidence that he'd seemed to answer the questions in her mind. She felt her face heat up until sweat popped from her pores.

"You're ... telepathic?"

He cocked an eyebrow, obviously not familiar with the term.

"You read thoughts?"

He frowned. "We communicate with our minds."

Cassie pursed her lips, trying not to think about what she'd just been thinking about. It didn't help. Even though she managed not to formulate the words in her mind, she was keenly, uncomfortably aware that she'd been thinking about how good looking he was *before* she got to thinking about the hair---the lack of hair---everywhere. The

blood that had just begun to recede from her cheeks came back with a vengeance. “That is *so* unfair! You might at least have warned me!”

Several emotions flickered across his features in quick succession. Amusement seemed to dominate, however. “Why would I have done that? And how is it unfair?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “If you were reading my thoughts you know damned well why it was unfair!”

To her surprise, he chuckled.

The sound sent a quiver all the way through her, warming her insides.

She would rather have thought shiver—as in chill—but she couldn’t delude herself. “I don’t know why you bothered to question me if you could tell what I was thinking,” she said resentfully. “You must know I’m not hiding anything and that it was just an accident that we came here.” She thought that over. “It was the blue glow. Mark wanted to know what was causing it.”

His expression turned thoughtful. “You saw that before you came below?”

“We saw that, or at least Mark did, before I noticed the freak storm surrounding us.”

Nodding, he moved toward the door.

“Are we done now?” Cassie asked hopefully, pushing up from the chair.

“For now.”

She stared at the watery door when he’d left. After a few moments, she turned to look at the bed speculatively. Shrugging, she moved toward it and felt the surface. She shouldn’t have been surprised that it felt dry when the chair had, but she was. Whatever materials they used either dried very fast or shed water.

Maybe Jimmy had been right and they were aliens? The place looked like an ordinary building, an old one granted, but like a structure that might be found anywhere. Nothing in it, however, was the least bit ‘ordinary’—certainly not the inhabitants, she reflected, still smarting over the fact that she’d been drooling over him in her head and he’d caught every bit of it!

If she hadn’t known better, she would be wondering about her sanity.

Even if they *were* aliens, it still seemed bizarre that they could change forms at will and breathe water as easily as they could air.

And hear people’s thoughts.

Maybe that part actually made sense, in a weird sort of way. They’d have to be able to communicate under water, she supposed.

And what had he meant by saying they had *no* hair?

What was that growing out of his scalp if it wasn’t hair?

It looked like hair.

She struggled with it briefly, but decided she was just too tired to analyze any of it. Settling on the bed, she pulled the cover over herself, shifted around until she felt comfortable, and closed her eyes.

As soon as she did, she remembered that, when she’d asked him where she was, he’d seemed to imply that this was Atlantis. That didn’t make sense to her, though. She only had a vague idea about the legends. She’d heard bits and pieces of it, but she knew it was a very, very old story.

Which was harder to swallow? That this was Atlantis? Or that these merfolk were actually aliens?

That was a tough one. Neither one seemed believable or likely.

Actually, she decided, what she'd seen outside looked like it could be old enough to fit the story. But what about the people of Atlantis? The story had seemed to indicate that it had been destroyed. So they could breathe water and it hadn't mattered when it sank? Why would they have been living on the surface to begin with if they were merfolk?

And how could this enormous thing have been here all this time without anyone discovering it?

Even considering how huge the ocean was and the fact that very little of it had been explored it seemed unbelievable that this place could have been here all this time and no one had ever found it.

Unless the people who had just hadn't returned to tell the tale?

That thought sent a shiver through her.

Raen hadn't seemed threatening—unnerving, yes—especially when he'd been strolling around stark naked—but not threatening. Surely she would've felt 'vibes' if he actually meant them harm?

It wasn't until she was hovering on the brink of sleep that it clicked in her mind that these people had heard everything that had been discussed—everything, including Linda's suggestion that she try to seduce Raen and distract him to give them an edge.

And then they'd arrived, five women, and three men, and separated all of them.

Had they decided it seemed like a good suggestion? To seduce *them* and discover what they could about them?

Maybe, but that theory didn't seem to hold water, either. He hadn't *tried* to seduce her!

* * * *

What did the others have to say? Raen asked abruptly when he'd joined Jadin in the observation room again.

Jadin shrugged. *The other 'interrogators' haven't reported back yet,* he said wryly.

Raen moved to the split screens that displayed the other rooms and stood watching for a time before he moved to the one that displayed Cassie's room. *I did not understand the half of what she said,* he murmured finally.

The translator is malfunctioning?

Raen shook his head. *It can not translate beyond our knowledge. Much of what she spoke of is. The world has changed drastically while we were sleeping. She spoke of places I had never heard of and have no way of knowing even if they exist or not. She could have made it all up. She spoke of things they seem to use in their everyday life that I have no understanding of.*

It still seemed clear enough to me that they happened here by accident, Jadin said pointedly.

I am fairly certain they did, but that does not change the situation a great deal. Either way, we would have had to release them eventually. It is a relief that they were not sent here to do harm, but no more than that. They are still a problem that will have to be resolved. He fell silent, staring frowningly at the monitor for several moments. *When is the council to meet? Have you heard?*

They have decided to wait until our visitors can join us. They have freed the ship, by the way ... three levels have already been drained.

Raen nodded. We are rising. Any idea of when we will surface?

We have been down a long while and the ship He shrugged. They are bringing us up slowly to avoid problems. We should surface in a few hours. It will be good to walk in the light again, to breathe air.

Raen sent him a look. The air is not as clean and sweet as it once was, and I could not see the sun for the mother ship above us.

Jadin frowned. Just how long, by your reckoning, were we in stasis?

Far longer than anyone anticipated we would be.

That is not what I asked.

Raen studied his friend for a long moment. Do you want me to guess?

You have a fair notion, Jadin said tightly. They spoke of the ancient Greeks, he added, jerking his head toward the screens.

Our brethren broke The Atlantis free of the coral, Raen said tightly. We have been down here, to my thinking, nearly a thousand years, perhaps even more than that.

Jadin stared at him in disbelief. That is not even possible, is it? To stay in stasis so long?

Obviously, it is. We will not know these 'visitors' from our own world. Only the gods know how much it, and our people, changed in all this time. All I do know for certain is that this world has changed a very great deal and now we do not really belong anywhere.

Chapter Six

The bed dipped, rousing Cassie. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes, struggling to bring the face hovering above hers into focus. Raen, she discovered, was leaning over her, his hands planted on the bed beside her.

"I have brought food," he said when she'd blinked at him several times.

Still half asleep, feeling as if she'd only just closed her eyes, Cassie pushed herself upright with an effort and looked around as he straightened. A man and two women were just leaving, and she saw a table and two chairs had been set up in the open area of the room. Dishes and platters covered the table top.

She lay back down. "I'm not hungry. I'm tired."

The bed dipped again. Cassie cracked one eye and peered up at him. She couldn't tell anything about his expression, but he didn't seem to be angry.

"Eat. Then we will talk, and then you will be allowed to sleep."

"Didn't we talk enough already?"

He leaned closer.

Cassie felt her eyes crossing as he neared her.

"No, we did not. But I could always join you and then we can talk later."

Cassie arched her neck back to put a little distance between them so that she could focus her eyes. He looked deadly serious. In fact, there was something about the look in his eyes and the set of his jaw that gave her the distinct impression he would be all too happy for her to challenge him. Heat wafted through her, but so, too, did a weakness that was equal parts nerves and anticipation. She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "I'll get up."

"I thought you might," he retorted coolly, pushing away from the bed and straightening.

Cassie pushed her hair out of her eyes as she sat up again, noticing the lock was still damp. She couldn't have slept long, she realized, or her hair would've dried. She felt drunk when she got up and knew it was from fatigue. Heading to the bathroom instead of the table, she splashed water over her face to wake up and finally returned to the table.

She stared at him across it.

He stared back at her.

Obviously pulling the chair out wasn't a custom he was familiar with. She pulled her chair out and sat down. He settled across from her.

Ignoring him, she studied the food on the platters.

Surprise! Fish!

At least it looked as if it had been cooked. "Y'all cook your food?" she asked in surprise.

"No, we generally just swim out and bite the heads off and eat them that way," he retorted coolly.

Cassie stared at him wide eyed for several moments, trying to decide if he was serious or just being nasty. Frowning when she decided from the distinct glitter in his eyes that it was the latter—wondering what had put him in such a nasty mood—she looked down at her plate. “I don’t know anything about you.”

“You do not need to,” he retorted curtly.

She focused on cutting a piece of fish and moving it to her plate, irritated with herself that the comment had hurt her feelings. It was stupid! She was a prisoner. If he’d been friendly, and she wasn’t totally stupid, *that* would’ve made her suspicious. At least he was honest enough not to leave her in any doubt of what her situation was or how he felt about her.

She managed a shrug. “I don’t care to, either,” she said finally. “It was the others who were curious. I was only pointing out that you needn’t be insulted because I don’t. You live under water. It can’t be easy making fire.”

“Do you cook with fire?”

She didn’t look up at him that time. It was hard to tell, just from the tone, whether he was merely curious or if he was pointing out that fire was a primitive method of cooking at best and that they certainly weren’t primitive. She swallowed the bite she’d taken with an effort and chased it with water. The water tasted strange, almost flat. She decided it must be distilled—which would make sense, she supposed. “Electricity ... mostly the microwave.”

Her appetite didn’t improve as she ate. The food was flavorful enough but she wasn’t a big fan of fish anyway, and she was too tired to feel hungry. She’d been tired and desperate to take a nap *before* everything that had happened. She was more tired now and wondered if this was a sleep deprivation sort of tactic. Keep her awake until she couldn’t think straight and continue to question her until she tripped herself up?

She’d never honestly seen how that could work. She could hardly understand questions put to her when she was really tired, and it was harder still to formulate answers that made any sense.

If that was his plan, he was going to find out it didn’t work worth a shit on her.

She put her fork down when she’d eaten all she felt she could without puking. “I don’t know what you want,” she said tiredly. “Apologies? A fine? It’s not like I actually saw anything—except you. And to be perfectly honest, I wouldn’t even try to tell anyone because they’d just think I was crazy. No one was interested in anything but looking. *They* belong to a club and all they do is dive and swim around the bottom of the ocean and look at fish and coral and take pictures. I don’t even belong to the club, and I’d never done any diving before, and I frankly haven’t lost a damn thing at the bottom of the sea! I don’t know why they find it so fascinating, but it doesn’t do a thing for me. I don’t even *like* the ocean! I only came because my date invited me, and I thought it’d be rude not to give it a try.”

“The one called Mark?”

Cassie glanced up at him at that. “Yes, Mark.”

“He is your mate?”

Cassie gave him a ‘you must be insane’ look. “God no! Date. I said he was my date. I told you—I met him on the net.”

“What is the net?”

"The internet?" she asked in surprise. "Computers all over the world connected--which means people all over the world. I don't know how it works, if that's what you're asking."

"You meet males on this net?"

Cassie reddened. "Everybody does these days!" she retorted defensively.

"Females and males meet one another on this net to form unions?"

Cassie got up from the table, looked at the bed longingly for a moment, and finally moved to the only other piece of furniture the room boasted, an easy chair. Not that it was all that comfortable, but it was better than sitting across the table from him. "It's not like it's easy meeting people, you know! I work all the time. Everybody does, and if you don't meet someone at work that you like, or live next door to somebody, there aren't a lot of options. Clubbing hardly ever works out unless you're just looking to get laid."

He got up when she did, moving from the table to sit on the foot of the bed.

"What work do you do?"

Cassie sighed. She'd hoped he'd finished questioning her. "I'm a floor manager in a retail store—we sell women's undergarments."

He folded his arms over his chest. "Tell me more about this net. This is where your people meet?"

She frowned, uncertain of what he was looking for in answer. "You can do just about anything on the net now—shop, catch the news, meet people, find out movie times, buy books—buy just about anything—find people you've lost touch with—research just about anything, I guess. It's the information super highway."

He nodded and straightened. "Rest. You will be called upon to speak to the council."

"What do I have to talk them about?" Cassie asked in dismay.

"Whatever they wish to ask you."

Cassie glared at his back as he strode from the room. After a moment, she went to use the facilities and climbed into the bed again. As irritated as she was by the questioning and as anxious as she was about his announcement that she was going to have to talk to a 'council', she was still tired enough to begin drifting almost immediately.

Maybe, she thought, as underhanded as she'd thought Linda's suggestion was at the time, it wasn't as bad an idea as she had considered it then. Honesty sure as hell didn't seem to be making a lot of headway for her.

On the other hand, despite Linda's suggestion that he'd seemed interested in her, she sure couldn't tell that he was—if he was, he didn't seem the type to be swayed easily by 'feminine wiles'—and in either case seduction seemed unlikely to be any more helpful than talking to him had been.

* * * *

A young girl of no more than sixteen—in appearance, at least—met Raen at the door to Senior Science Officer Thaddeus ap Mercurios' temporary quarters. She bowed low in respect, gesturing gracefully with one hand for him to enter.

Raen stepped through the portal, returning her greeting with the slight nod that was all that was required of one of his rank and station to anyone of lesser rank or station.

“Greetings, Lord det Kira,” she said politely. “May I offer you a robe for your comfort?”

Again, Raen nodded. Though he colored faintly at the title in discomfort, he didn’t bother to correct her.

Moving to a storage unit, she removed a robe and offered it to him. “I will tell Lord Mercurios of your arrival.”

Donning the robe, Raen glanced around the vestibule—saw there was no seating for the comfort of guests, and merely assumed the stance he was most comfortable with, that of a sentinel on guard.

“Raen det Kira!” Lord Mercurios exclaimed with obvious pleasure as he entered the vestibule himself moments later.

Raen returned the elder’s smile as he bowed in respectful greeting, but he was discomfited. “Ap Aquinox, my lord,” he corrected.

The elder’s white, bushy brows rose, the smile fading from his face. “I beg pardon. I had not heard of your changed status.”

Raen smiled thinly. “We have all had far more important matters to concern ourselves with than personal matters.”

Lord Mercurios studied him a moment and finally nodded, gesturing toward the doorway he’d lately entered. “Nothing is more important than personal matters with the trouble we have had,” he disagreed. “Come and sit with me and tell me what you need of me.”

Raen sent him a questioning look, and the elder chuckled. “I do no flatter myself that the head of Atlantean security would pay me a social call in the midst of the chaos we find ourselves in. Later, when you have put us back together, young man, I *will* expect a social call,” he added, gesturing toward a lounge opposite the chair that he seated himself in as they reached the small room he was using to entertain guests. “You were always my favorite student. I can not speak for your sentiments, but I have always considered you the son I never had. You must indulge this old man with your company when you have time.”

Raen smiled faintly. “Gladly. You know my sentiments. Do not pretend that you do not.”

Mercurios chuckled. “I still like to hear it. Can I offer you refreshment?”

Raen couldn’t prevent a glance of interest, though he shook his head. “I have much to do and not a great deal of time.”

“You can spare the time to eat, surely? I do not want to insult you, but you do not look as if you have and it is unwise to ignore the needs of the body, especially considering the prolonged period of stasis we have lately emerged from.”

Raen nodded his concession, and Mercurios sent the serving girl to fetch refreshments for both of them.

“What is it you need?” Mercurios asked the moment the girl had departed.

Raen couldn’t forebear a smile at the elder’s eagerness. “Am I correct in interpreting your remark to mean you are aware that we were in stasis far longer than anyone anticipated?”

“Rumors are already circulating—Little surprise that! With the citizens awakening rumors of all sorts will be flying about, I am sure. Nothing Atlanteans find more entertaining, eh?”

Raen nodded grimly, feeling his good humor desert him as dread tightened in his gut. He was bound to be the center of a good deal of that gossip once it became general knowledge that he had been set aside, and that, moreover, his woman had added insult to injury by running off with his brothers.

It was understandable, he supposed. Theirs was a small community and although most of Atlantis' citizens led fulfilling lives, they also had a very great deal of free time upon their hands with nothing to do but to entertain themselves. And what was more entertaining than the real life drama of their neighbors?

He'd expected no less. His rank not only did not protect him from such things, it made him *more* of a target because he was more highly visible than most of the citizens of Atlantis.

He shifted uncomfortably. "No doubt," he agreed. "The exact length of time in stasis has not yet been determined. However, I can say positively that it was much longer than anyone expected and it has created a problem we had not anticipated. The natives have progressed a very great deal while we were sleeping. We need to know how much has changed and where we stand in the scheme of things—and we need to know this quickly.

"The council will expect a report when they convene with our brethren. They can not make an informed decision unless they are provided with all of the information available."

Mercurios looked a little doubtful. He frowned. "They will be convening in a matter of hours, my lord. I am not certain how much I could gather for you in that small window of time."

"There appears to be a possibility that you could gather a very great deal. We have detained a small party of natives. In questioning one, I have discovered an information source that would allow the compilation of a respectable report—assuming the information is true."

"A source? One? A library I might access?"

Raen frowned, trying to formulate his thoughts. "It was described to me as an 'information super highway'."

Mercurios stared at him blankly. "Go on," he said finally.

"Cassie called it a net. She described it as computers around the world connected and all sharing information."

Mercurios blinked several times. "Cassie?"

Raen reddened. "The Lady Cassia Pendell," he corrected himself uncomfortably. "One of the natives I mentioned."

Mercurios looked intrigued but resisted the urge to question him further, much to Raen's relief. "A net?" He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the arm of his chair. "Computers, humm. *Around* the world, did you say?" he exclaimed abruptly, sitting up in his chair. "Apollo's balls! The *natives* have computers?"

"Aye. She claimed as much. I would have doubted, but she could not know of them otherwise."

"Well! They were either far more intelligent than we gave them credit for or they have had a very great deal of time to advance!"

Raen nodded, containing his impatience with an effort, hoping Mercurios would not allow himself to be distracted and go off on a tangent.

"If they are connected, then they will certainly need a 'highway' to do so and if that is the case, then my department can assuredly find the route."

"You will need a translator," Raen cautioned him. "We have been working on the language of the natives we have detained. It is *not* a language we are familiar with. I am not certain any of the languages we know will be of use to us."

The serving girl arrived with a tray and settled it on the table between the two men, pouring each of them a glass of *fermente*.

"Thank you, Hara," Mercurios said absently. "You must go and fetch Malek, Barus, and Marcus. If they have not been awakened as yet, then see that they are—and tell them to hurry!"

"The labs?" he added, directing the last question to Raen.

Raen nodded, relieved that Mercurios had realized the urgency of the situation. "The lower levels have been flushed."

"Good! Very good!" Mercurios said enthusiastically, helping himself to a segment of fish from the tray.

Despite the emptiness that had been gnawing at Raen's gut, which he'd been refusing to acknowledge, he felt his stomach tighten in revolt as he reached to help himself to a portion of the food. He'd intended to dine with Cassie. He hadn't been able to then because he'd distressed her and ruined her appetite with his ill tempered remarks and the reminder was enough to spoil his appetite now.

He wasn't certain what had prompted him to speak so curtly to her. He'd been insulted by her assumption, though, far more than he should have been. She'd spoken nothing but the truth. She had no way of knowing anything about any of them, and he was in no position to enlighten her even if he'd wanted to. Her ignorance—the ignorance of *all* the natives was a matter of security. One did not tip one's hand to a potential enemy and give them *any* information that might later come back to haunt.

It had rankled, though, to see himself through her eyes, to allow her to believe they were nothing but backwards barbarians—which was obviously what she thought.

The irony of being considered backwards by a woman who hailed from a tribe he had once considered little more than animals was not lost on him.

They quite obviously weren't—not any more.

"Tell me what you have learned about these natives," Mercurios demanded, breaking into Raen's thoughts.

Raen swallowed the bite of food he'd taken and determinedly reached for another portion. "They are very intelligent, appear to be well educated, comfortably familiar with some fairly sophisticated electronics."

Mercurios nodded. "They have embraced higher thinking as the Greeks, then. This would explain the advancement—the pursuit of knowledge."

Raen shrugged. "I have not reached an understanding of their societal structure." He frowned thoughtfully. "There are eight of them. That is not a particularly large test group to study."

"And you have singled out the female—Cassie?—to study?"

In spite of all he could do, Raen felt his color fluctuate. He affected an off-handed shrug. "She seemed ... receptive."

Mercurios gave him a piercing look and then chuckled. "Receptive, eh? Well, you have never lacked appeal for the fair sex." He sighed gustily, either ignoring, or

oblivious to, Raen's scowl. "Would that I had been born a warrior! I might have a det to add to my own name! Females have far more interest in brawn and brain than merely brain!"

"I am no longer det myself," Raen said irritably.

Mercurios shook his head. "And it was a shameful disgrace she dealt you, setting you aside—completely underserved. You may be certain that you will catch another maiden's eye, however. I do not doubt it for a moment. You have an excellent pedigree beyond your exceptional good looks. When word gets around that you are unattached I am certain you will have a dozen offers and will be in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose."

The praise discomfited Raen. "Unlikely. My ability to breed will come into question, and no female wants a male unable to produce—even as a second or third, let alone a first. And I will not accept a union where I am not first."

"Pride goeth before a fall, young man," Mercurios said chidingly. "There is no shame in being a second or third—a chosen male still has far more status than one who remains unclaimed. I am far too old now to worry about such things, but I would not have quibbled, let me tell you, if the right female had offered to take me—even as a fourth!"

Raen eyed the older man speculatively but refused to be drawn in to a discussion of unions. He didn't believe for a moment that no female had cast her eye on Mercurios—he was still a handsome man and Atlantis' most brilliant scientist. More likely Mercurios had declined, possibly because he had not caught the eye of the female he most desired but certainly not because he had gotten *no* interest. "Atlantis is the poorer that you did not," he said mildly.

The old man snorted. "Indeed it is not. Do you think they did not collect? It is a hell of a thing when a man's sperm is of far more worth than the man himself! The indignity of it!"

Raen couldn't help but chuckle.

"Easy for you to laugh when you are allowed to deliver your own!" Mercurios muttered without heat.

"You should not complain. At least you know there is a splice of you running about. I can not even claim so much as that."

"But then she did not produce at all, did she?" Mercurios pointed out. "No one will lay the blame for that at your door when she had none for the others either, whatever you seem to think."

"If I was truly concerned about that," Raen said, rising to take his leave, "I would go to the geneticists and allow them to test me. I only said that that would be the gist of the rumors, not that I believed it."

"Why not do so, if it would stop the rumors?"

Raen shook his head but smiled faintly. "If I did that, then I might find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to decline—which always creates bad feelings no matter how graciously one does so—and I have no desire at present to tie myself to another female."

Mercurios saw him to the door. "I will send word to you the moment we crack this thing."

Raen nodded. Bowing respectfully to the elder, he discarded his robe by the door as was customary and left his old friend and teacher to see what information the other interrogators had managed to cull.

Chapter Seven

They'd gathered in the observation room. Raen had not allowed the level to be flushed because he didn't want the natives to know, yet, that the Atlantis was slowly rising. As long as they were convinced they were too deep to make an escape possible, there would be no need to confine them to less comfortable accommodations, thereby creating a potential for more problems.

So far they'd managed to hold them and interrogate them without having to resort to methods that could create enemies of people who didn't, at the moment, feel like enemies.

He knew there was nothing wrong with his logic. They might need allies among the humans.

He also knew that wasn't entirely his reason for taking care not to alienate them.

Sentinel Javik?

She stepped forward. *The one assigned to me is James 'Jimmy' Rider. He is convinced that we are aliens and resisted all attempts to seduce him. She grinned. I am fairly certain he thought that I had an ulterior motive—not to question him, but to somehow maim him. I believe he thinks I have teeth in my vagina.*

Several of the other sentinels chuckled but broke off when Raen sent them a quelling look.

Javik cleared her throat, conquering her own amusement. *He was far more interested in questioning me than talking, but when I asked him why he would think we were aliens he told me there had been many visits by peoples of other worlds to observe and test humans over the years. The descriptions he gave me of both the crafts and the species that had been spotted didn't match any known intelligent races with interstellar capabilities, but I suppose it is possible.*

Raen frowned. *You think he made it up?*

Javik considered it thoughtfully. *I think he believes it. He spoke as if there were a great many humans who believe it. He said that he belonged to a 'chat group' that shared information about these alien visitations and that many of the members were abductees who had been subjected to frightening experiments.*

Apparently there are also many reports of 'strange' happenings in this particular area of the sea that have been attributed to aliens, which is why he is convinced that we are, and also that we have been responsible for the disappearances over the years of many 'airplanes' and ships.

Raen studied her in grim faced silence when she'd finished speaking.

This is not good, is it, my lord?

That depends on how many of them believe and whether there is any truth to it. Make a notation to put the question to the commander of the mother ship. If there have been others here, they will know. I doubt it, but we will have to deal with the negative publicity regardless. It might be helpful to have knowledge of other visitors ... if in fact there have been others here.

A question, my lord? Sentinel Aureleous asked.

Raen nodded his permission to speak.

Aureleous frowned uncomfortably. *Is it possible the periodic systems flush might have caused the disasters this human spoke of?*

Raen sent him a hard look. *I do not think that would be something we would want to mention, do you?* he asked pointedly.

Aureleous flushed. *No, my lord! Certainly not.*

Because?

Because it might lead them to believe we have hostile intentions.

Exactly—when, in fact, we do not. Would you like to report now?

Aureleous saluted. *Yes, my lord! The woman, Linda Sanchez, was also resistant to seduction. However, I recalled that she had spurned the one name Mark and accused him of having 'no balls' so I resorted to more forceful persuasion, which she found to her liking. She also seemed far more interested in interrogating me, but I convinced her to talk about herself and she said that she was from a city with nearly half a million people that is located at the tip of a land mass she called Florida ... which sounded from her description to be the land on the eastern tip of the gulf.*

Half a million? In one city? Raen asked, startled. *You are certain that is what she said?*

Aureleous nodded. *Yes, my lord. I was stunned, but I am certain that was what she said. I asked if she had a man and she said she did not, that she lived in a city with almost half a million people and still had never found the right man for her.*

The information the others had gleaned was no better, Raen discovered. The picture that had begun to emerge was not a comforting one, and he wondered if the council would even believe the full scale of their problems. He was as certain as he could be that the crafts he had spotted were military in nature, fairly sophisticated, and determined upon war. It seemed doubtful that it would do any good to relocate the Atlantis, even supposing it could be repaired ... and the repairs would be a massive undertaking even if the mother ship had brought the wherewithal to so.

He assumed they had. Otherwise, there would have been no point in them making the trip at all, but even with everyone working on repairs it was liable to take weeks or months before the Atlantis was stable once more.

Very likely the mother ship could move them to a less hostile area, but there was no saying that would pacify the natives—likely it would not if they were bent upon attacking.

The council would have their hands full. He was no longer in any doubt at all about that.

He dismissed them when he'd heard all of the reports, sending them back to entertain their 'guests'.

He was less inclined to return to his own guest.

Regardless of her suspicions, he couldn't 'read' her mind. He'd caught 'whispers' several times when she had undoubtedly been focusing very hard on her thoughts, but she had no projection and he hadn't been near enough to catch more than bits and pieces. If he could have he might have a better understanding of how to handle her.

Then again, perhaps not.

As much as he hated to admit it, even to himself, he was attracted to her. That being the case, he was wary of getting close enough to get burned himself. That on top of a non-existent understanding of her people and their customs made it all the more difficult to breach her defenses. He'd set himself an impossible task he realized—to encourage her to trust him enough to open up about herself without a willingness to expose himself.

It rankled that she'd not only *not* attempted to seduce him, she'd managed, somehow, to throw up a defensive wall that he had no idea how to breach. It would have made his life far easier if she had initiated intimacy. One could not experience pleasures of the flesh without relaxing one's guard to begin with and the act itself relieved tension.

The *sharing* of one's physical self required a certain amount of trust.

He could have used those moments afterward, when she was totally relaxed and receptive, to forge a bond of trust at least strong enough to overcome some of her wariness. Not all, certainly, but he didn't need total capitulation. He didn't need to know her deepest, darkest secrets. He only needed for her to be comfortable enough to reveal the more public aspects of her life. He only needed for her to relax enough to allow him to lead her where he wanted her to go.

At this point, he was not certain, despite her response to him before and the glimpse he'd gotten of her inner thoughts that had led him to believe she did not find him unappealing, that *he* could seduce *her*—not without the aid of some drug to lower her defenses—like *fermente*. That, of course, would work to loosen her tongue, with far less risk to himself in getting entangled. On the other hand, she was bound to remember enough afterward that he would lose more ground than he'd gained.

He was uncomfortably aware that part of his reasons for not wanting to use that were purely personal, some of it pride and some the uneasy feeling that he might later regret it. He would still have been willing to ignore that reluctance, though, if not for the fact that there were solid political reasons for handling her, and all the others, with care.

They were ordinary citizens. He'd learned nothing to indicate otherwise—which was both a good thing and a disappointment in so far as leverage went—but they were still citizens and they would matter to the common man even if their leaders considered them of little or no importance.

If, when they were released, they had nothing more to complain about than the fact that they were detained by the Atlanteans—treated well, questioned, but not mistreated—it wasn't likely to cause much more than a ripple. If they emerged from the experience actively disliking their captors, distrusting them, it could cause serious repercussions. Whether they were important citizens or not, everyone would relate them, would expect the same 'treatment', would hate and distrust without any desire to learn more.

He couldn't risk that in his pursuit of information. The council of elders would not appreciate him making their task more difficult by his clumsiness.

Mayhap, he thought, it would be better to simply allow her to rest? There was the fact that her weariness would make her more vulnerable, but he was as loathe to take advantage of that as he was to use wine to breach her defenses and for the same reason—she would not remember it with fondness later.

His interrogators, as much as it irritated him to admit it, were making far more headway than he was. Of the eight they'd taken, Cassie and Jimmy were the only hold

outs—maybe for the same reason. Three of the other six, Mark, David, and Shelley, had succumbed with little more than token protest. Ben and Linda had been harder to coax, and Carl hardest of all, but in the end they'd still yielded to the lures he'd thrown in their path.

After further consideration, he decided to allow Cassie to rest for a few more hours before he tried again. Summoning a contingent of sentinels, he went out to scout the threat beyond the impenetrable field created by the mother ship. The Atlantis, he discovered when they emerged, was already beginning to surface—the tallest of the city's structures, at any rate. He viewed the progress with mixed feelings.

His sense of urgency increased. He was running out of time to complete his tasks before he was called upon to report his findings.

The time was rapidly approaching, as well, when he would be forced to release Cassie and the others.

The reluctance he felt at that realization appalled him. It was warning enough, if he'd managed to ignore everything before that, that he, at least, would be better off once he had. If he was reluctant now, the likelihood was that he would only become *more* reluctant, not less.

The discoveries he and his scouts made effectively pushed personal matters far from his mind. There had been a notable build up of military presence in the hours since he'd first observed them. The magnetic field created by the mother ship's propulsion units and the anti-gravity force of the tractor beam together created a dome approximately five hundred miles in radius that prevented the natives from coming any closer, but they circled the perimeter in a thick stream now, enormous floating, flat topped vessels bristling with artillery. Flying vessels lined the decks of these and there was an almost constant stream of these airborne vessels taking off, circling the dome and returning, apparently to refuel. The sky itself was thick with flying machines, also bristling with weapons, and below the surface of the water, amphibious ships also prowled the perimeter threateningly.

He was not particularly perturbed about the show of military might on one level. The mother ship, although not specifically designed for warfare, was not unarmed. In its time, the Atlantis had been the most technologically advanced vessel of its kind in the known universe, the pride of the people of Andromeda. Two hundred miles in circumference, it had not only carried the colonists and soldiers who'd first settled on this world, but the greatest minds, the latest in scientific research equipment, and the most advanced weaponry available to protect the pride of the Andromedans.

The mother ship that had arrived to help them was hundreds of years more advanced even than the Atlantis and almost five hundred miles in circumference. They didn't need an armada to protect their interests. Crippled as the Atlantis was, between the Atlantis and the mother ship, Andromeda Prime, they had more than enough fire power to protect themselves from an army ten times the size of the one circling them—enough to destroy the world itself.

Neither side would win if it came to that, however.

This was not a situation that could be resolved militarily or everyone would lose. The best way to prevent it from coming to that, he knew, was to make certain the politicians, who would be negotiating a peaceful solution, knew everything there was to know so that they couldn't be blindsided by the natives.

Deciding after a time that the military presence was more for show than anything else, and because they were also testing the strength of their opponents and trying to gather information, Raen summoned his scouts and returned to the Atlantis. Engineers had emerged from the ship when they returned and were in the process of assessing the damage to the city to determine which structures, if any, were still sound enough they might be candidates for renovation. From their cheerful demeanor, he assumed the news, thus far, had been fairly good.

Of course, he thought wryly, they might only be cheerful at the prospect of demolishing every thing and recreating the city. One never knew with engineers.

He was met upon his return with the news that the scientific community had accessed the data base. He proceeded immediately to the offices and discovered a whirlwind of activity. Mercurios, naturally enough, was at the eye of the storm, and so focused on his work that Raen had stood at his elbow, staring at the stream of data rolling across the video display for several minutes before the elder became aware of his presence.

He was frowning in displeasure at being interrupted when he glanced up at last, but the frown vanished with almost comical swiftness to be replaced by a look of triumphant glee. "We have done it as you can see!" he announced with the air of someone who'd performed magic.

"And have you discovered that it is, in fact, a source that we will find useful?"

"It is a *gold* mine!" Mercurios announced happily. "The accumulated knowledge of mankind is all here at our fingertips! It took us a bit of time to track the access, but there was no difficulty at all in breaking into the stream once we had discovered that. There are some security measures, but trifling—nothing but a bit of a nuisance.

"The language of our visitors seems to be commonly used among a high percentage of the population, even among many of whom it is not their native tongue. We have encountered, as you suspected, a number of languages not familiar to us, or that once were but that have evolved now. These, we have already pretty much translated. We are working on the others.

"I have broken the information down into categories and assigned groups to collect and analyze the data—economic, social, government, military, technology, etc."

He paused, frowning abruptly with displeasure. "The data does not seem to be coming in quite as rapidly as it did to begin with. This information highway seems to be somewhat unstable. The data flow has grown a little sluggish. And we are still working on getting into the military computers. Their security has been a little trickier to crack, but there is a surprising amount of data regarding weaponry to be found in data banks not regulated by the militia."

Raen nodded. "That is to be expected, but we will need a good overview of their capabilities and the types of weapons available to them." He considered for several moments. "Have your people prepare an overview of each area as quickly as possible and forward those to each of the council members for review and one to my quarters, as well. The focus, for now, should be on the tribe or tribes immediately surrounding us—disregard any that seem insignificant. We are more interested in the most powerful among them. And, of course, once the overviews are prepared, in depth studies should be commenced.

“No one is allowed to be distracted by purely scientific curiosity at the moment. Those studies can be conducted at a later time. Everyone’s energies must be focused on the immediate problem.”

Raen did not feel the sense of satisfaction he was certain he should feel when he’d left the science division to their research. As far as he could see he’d done his job, and well within the time restraints allotted to him by the situation. Atlantis was as secure as he could make it. There would be no leaks. He’d apprehended the intruders and secured them so that there would be no opportunity for them to pass on potentially dangerous information. He’d interrogated them and managed to extract information that would ensure the continued security of Atlantis. He’d taken scouts out to visually reconnoiter the opposition.

There was nothing undone.

He was certain he’d left nothing undone.

The group he’d detained was now superfluous. They had a means of obtaining far more information than any of the natives could supply.

The council would like to question them in person, though, he was certain. He would need to hold them until he had clearance from the council to release them, but he could not think of a single reason why the council would want to continue to hold them once they’d spoken to them.

Feeling an odd sense, despite his internal reasoning, that he was missing something, he left the science department and returned to the room where Cassie was sleeping. Once there, he wasn’t quite certain why he’d gone, however. He stood beside the bed studying her as she slept, debating whether or not he should awaken her and trying to decide, since he felt the impulse to awaken her, what he should say, or ask, if he did.

While he was debating the matter, her eyes fluttered and then slowly opened. She looked startled, as well she might, and then confused. A faint frown formed between her arched brows.

“What is it?” she whispered huskily, just the faintest thread of alarm in her voice as she pushed herself upright.

Knowing even before he did it that it was a mistake, Raen settled on the edge of the bed beside her, twisting slightly to face her. “Nothing you need be alarmed about.”

She looked more confused instead of less so. Lifting a hand, she speared her fingers through the thick shock of reddish brown hair falling over her face and raked it back. “You wanted to talk to me again?”

Talking wasn’t what he had on his mind, he realized abruptly as it settled solidly in his mind what it was that felt ‘unfinished’. “Not exactly,” he muttered, reaching to grasp her upper arms and hauling her halfway across his lap.

She sucked in a sharp breath of surprise, tipping her head back to meet his gaze. “Let us try this again, shall we?” he murmured as he dipped his head closer to hers, pausing when his mouth hovered just above her lips, waiting to see if she would meet him or retreat.

She hesitated for several heartbeats and then lifted her lips until they brushed his.

His heart fisted painfully in his chest, punching the air from his lungs in a rush as he felt her soft lips meld with his own. Doubt flickered in his mind, but he ignored it, covering her lips with his mouth and sucking lightly to seal the two of them together

mouth to mouth even as he traced the soft contours of her lips and thrust his tongue between them to invade the moist heat of her mouth. The rush that went through him then was intoxicating. It demolished any possibility of rational thought. Releasing his grip on her arms, he shifted one hand to press it between her shoulder blades and the other to cup the back of her head and hold her to him for his exploration.

The painful fistings of his heart eased and then it commenced to slamming nearly as painfully against his chest wall as she flooded his senses, as he explored the texture of her tongue and tested the limits of the small cavern of her mouth, stroked the silky inner walls, tasted her, breathed her. The tentative touch of her hands as they settled along the sides of his chest sent another, headier rush of pleasure through him. He drew her closer, held her more tightly. Blood flushed his skin, heated it until he felt fevered. Blood pulsed against his ear drums deafeningly, pounded in his skull, filled his cock until it felt as if it would explode.

A deep, unquenchable hunger welled inside him. The more he tasted and touched, the more he wanted. He slipped his arms around her, molding her more tightly against his body from chest to waist. His skin burned where her soft breasts flattened against his chest.

He couldn't get enough air into his lungs. Intent on absorbing the taste and feel of her mouth, he fought the burning need to fill them as long as he could before he broke away, gasping hoarsely to replenish the deficit of air in his lungs, to oxygenate his blood before he passed out.

He stared down at her face as he sucked in gasps of air. Slowly, her eyelids lifted and she stared back at him, and his entire body seemed to tighten at the look in her eyes.

Chapter Eight

"Sentinel ap Aquinox?"

The voice that intruded seemed to come from a great distance. Raen ignored it.

"My lord!"

Anger surged through him as he swiveled his head in the direction of the voice that time.

The young sentinel at the door took a step back at his expression. "I was sent to summon you to speak with High Councilor det Ophelia."

Raen wrestled with his temper and finally nodded. He studied Cassie for a long moment when he turned back to her, struggling with the urge to take up where he'd left off. With an effort, he eased his hold on her and finally released her. Without a word, he pushed himself upright and strode briskly from the room.

His temper was still raging when he reached the outer council chamber where he'd been directed. He paused outside the door, breathing deeply to try to regain a modicum of self control before he presented himself. It was as well he had, he thought wryly when he'd entered the room and saw not only High Councilor det Ophelia, but a stranger he knew immediately must be a visitor from the mother ship.

"Admiral Valora," Councilor det Ophelia announced when Raen entered. "This is Sentinel Raen det Kira, Captain of the guard, Chief of security and, of course, the High Command of our militia."

Raen dragged in a deep breath, grinding his teeth at the reference to his late union, wishing to the gods that he'd simply posted a bulletin announcing the fact that he'd been set aside. He was getting gods bedamned sick of having to explain it to every gods bedamned official he ran in to. Hoping the heat in his cheeks wasn't as noticeable as it felt, he nodded in respect to both the elder and the woman in command of Andromeda Prime. "Raen ap Aquinox," he corrected. "It is a pleasure to meet you Admiral Valora."

The Admiral flicked him a look that was a mixture of amusement, sympathy, and interest as she nodded in return.

Councilor det Ophelia reddened. "I beg pardon, Sentinel ap Aquinox. I had not been informed of your changed status."

Raen nodded again instead of telling the High Councilor that it was not his gods bedamned duty to inform him of the change in his personal status. He was offered a robe for his comfort and then a seat in the informal setting and for the first time in his life, he was actually relieved to have a robe to slip into.

Fortunately, his enthusiasm for Cassie had waned in the time it had taken him to reach the councilor's chambers but not altogether, and he hadn't particularly relished Admiral Valora's interest. Under the circumstances, her almost pointed appraisal was downright rude. She knew damned well he'd come in in that state and it had nothing to do with her and the polite thing to have done would've been to ignore it.

"The admiral has been telling me we have a situation on our hands," the Councilor began, his voice almost chiding.

Raen focused his attention on the councilor with an effort, tamping his irritation. "I have been keeping the council members apprised of the situation as I assess it," he reminded the councilor.

The councilor's lips tightened. "You did not communicate the gravity of the situation, however."

"It is not my place to be an alarmist, Councilor," Raen retorted with an edge to his voice, "but to inform as accurately as possible. I have done so."

"Which is exactly as he should have done," Admiral Valora said coolly. "And which is what I have done since I have access to information that he does not."

Raen sent her a questioning look.

"The natives have been in communication with the mother ship," Councilor det Ophelia informed Raen.

"They did, in fact, launch an attack. Fortunately for all concerned, we had our shields up and there was no real damage save for a bit of buffeting from the concussion of the explosions."

Raen studied her for a long moment. "And your response?"

She shrugged one elegant shoulder. "I did not respond in kind. We did not come to start a war."

"And you did not. They did by attacking."

"They *attempted* to provoke one," Admiral Valora said pointedly. "As we sustained no damage, we ignored it."

Raen settled back in his chair, studying her with far more respect than before. "They struck without warning?"

An expression midway between amusement and irritation flickered across her face. "Not precisely. There was a misunderstanding. They seemed to expect that we would instantly understand their demands. It took us a while to translate and before we had, they launched a brief attack. Once they saw that it was ineffectual, they withdrew. Fortunately, in the meanwhile, we managed to translate their warnings and were then able to respond.

"It seems the Atlantis is within territory that they claim as their own and they had been warning us off. When we neither responded nor departed, they took that as a challenge of their authority and attacked."

Raen's lips thinned. "They claim the sea as part of their territory?"

Admiral Valora shrugged. "Apparently—this part of it at any rate. I explained that we had only come to rescue the Atlantis. They responded by saying that anything within the territory of the United States of America *belonged* to the United States of America.

"I responded by telling them that the Atlantis belonged to the people of Andromeda."

Raen exchanged a look with Councilor det Ophelia. "The Atlantis belongs to the Atlanteans," he said grimly. "This colony has sovereignty and has since its inception."

The admiral gave him an assessing look. "Things change."

"Not this," Raen returned.

"I did not come to argue," Admiral Valora said coolly.

"Then do not," Raen retorted coldly.

Councilor det Ophelia hid a smile. "I believe this will be a matter to be resolved in council," he interjected. "We must deal with the situation with the natives first, however."

Admiral Valora turned to stare at the councilor coldly. "I was sent to retrieve the Atlantis."

His lips tightened. "You were sent to retrieve an artifact. As you can see, we are not! This is a well established colony and we *do* have sovereignty. You can inform High Command that we will challenge this in court if we must, but we will not simply allow them to send a ship to collect us."

The admiral rose, bowed curtly, and departed.

The councilor smiled thinly when she'd departed. "She liked your looks right up until the moment you challenged her authority," he said with amusement.

"I liked hers right up until the moment she spouted that arrogant tripe," Raen retorted tightly. "I take it this is not a rescue after all?" he added dryly.

Councilor det Ophelia made a rude sound and shoved himself to his feet. "Can I offer you refreshment?"

Raen managed a smile. "Only if it is something strong."

The councilor chuckled. "I could use something strong myself. They never received the distress probe we launched," he continued as he moved to a cabinet and removed a container and two glasses. "More accurately, I suppose, not in a timely manner. Apparently it malfunctioned and has been drifting toward Andromeda ever since. It was picked up only recently and the 'historical archives' department dispatched the Andromeda Prime to collect the Atlantis—not survivors. They seemed a bit put out when I first contacted the mother ship."

Raen closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his brows where a headache had begun to form. When he opened his eyes again, the councilor was holding out a glass of amber liquid. He took it and tipped it up for a draught, savoring the burn as the liquor followed down his throat and settled in the pit of his belly.

"I had begun to feel my age, I confess," the councilor said with wry humor as he settled in his seat again, "but not quite like the antiquity I apparently am."

"That all of us are," Raen pointed out. "And wolves at every door."

Councilor det Ophelia grunted. "I do not know which to worry about most."

Raen shrugged. "I am not particularly concerned about the natives except insofar as establishing decent relations with our neighbors—which, thankfully, is your job. They have advanced quite a bit, and I can not say with absolute certainty that we still surpass them technologically, but I am almost certain we do and that they have nothing to throw at us that would put us at a disadvantage if it comes to war. The Andromeda Prime is another matter."

Councilor det Ophelia waved a hand dismissively. "I do not care what misapprehension they were laboring under when they were sent out. This colony *does* have sovereignty by its charter and by the gods they will respect that! I do not give a gods be damned if it *has* been five thousand years since it was first established! In fact, that seems to be a point very much in our favor. We have been established here long enough, even if we weren't guaranteed sovereignty before, that our rights as independents should not even come into question.

“As far as that goes, I mean to push that point with these upstart savages! They claimed this area long after we did! It is ours by right!”

Raen choked on the swallow of liquor he'd just taken. “Five thousand?”

Councilor det Ophelia nodded, his expression bitter. “We were in stasis nearly a thousand years. We are fortunate the mother world had not fallen into ruin before the gods bedamned probe made its way there—and, for that matter, that they have more speed than our ancestors had when they came or we would still be at the bottom of the sea.” He shrugged. “Under the circumstances I can see why they were not expecting survivors—descendents of survivors, perhaps, but not us.”

Raen studied the liquid in his glass. It should not have been a shock to hear his suspicions confirmed, but he couldn't deny that it was. Anger surged inside of him that they'd pinned their hopes of rescue on a probe that had promptly malfunctioned, but he supposed he shouldn't have been surprised to learn that it had. The probe had not actually been designed as a distress buoy, but rather to announce their willingness to trade with the home world or other colonies on those rare occasions when they had need of something not easily obtainable and something to trade for it. Beyond that, the disaster had left them in chaos. It was a wonder they'd even thought of the probe at all and should not have been any great wonder that the rush to reprogram it had failed. “Do you think there are descendents of those who chose to abandon ship?”

Councilor det Ophelia smiled thinly. “I have seen the natives. They did not get their intelligence or their good looks from the *other* side! You may be sure they owe a very great deal to our excellent genetics!”

Raen couldn't help but grin at his arrogance, but he realized there must be some possibility of it. Atlantis had been a state of almost twenty thousand before the cataclysm. As far as they could determine, nearly half had left. If they'd survived they would almost certainly have had *some* impact on the gene pool—assuming of course that they *did* survive and that they were integrated into the human population.

Thankfully, he thought bitterly, Kira, according to Jadin, had not been capable of adding her part to the pool. He could not think her genes would've improved the stock a great deal.

It was a shock, though, to realize she and all the others had been gone so long, something he realized he didn't particularly want to dwell on—thankfully hadn't had the opportunity to dwell on since he'd woken. He'd had good friends among those who left, very likely even distant relatives.

One never knew for certain, of course, in many cases. The original settlers had numbered only ten thousand. It was enough to ensure a healthy gene pool and then some, but no one had wanted to take a chance on weakening the strain through inbreeding and they had certainly not wanted to breed with the ancient brethren of mankind—who were little more than animals even in *his* time. Everyone was tested at birth and their DNA tattooed on their arm in plain sight so that there was no chance of anyone forming even a casual sexual alliance with anyone too closely related.

Eventually, of course, they'd also had to instigate measures to limit population growth. The Atlantis was an enormous ship, but space was still finite. Polygamy had always been commonplace in their culture, but with the new laws to prevent overpopulation men were no longer allowed to take more than two females in union, or

breed more than one child off of each. Women, naturally enough, could take as many males in union as they liked—still could—though most never took more than two.

Kira, of course, had exercised her right to take as many as liked. He'd been inclined to think she'd done it to spite him, which was generally her motivation for whatever she did.

On the other hand, she'd been an insatiable bitch.

"It is best, I think, not to dwell on the past. We all lost someone," Councilor det Ophelia said quietly. "And at least we can have the hope that they lived long, prosperous lives—unlike those who died in the cataclysm."

Raen nodded, feeling his chest tighten at the reminder. The truth was they had no clear idea of who had died in the blast that tore through the city and who had escaped. There'd been no time to do anything but try to survive and for most of them, those he and his men had managed to divert, that had been retreating to the stasis units.

They were capable of surviving in the sea—far better than humans—but they'd evolved long before they'd conquered space into a species far more suited to land than the sea and the seas of this world were even harder on them than those of their world. If they had not chosen to cut themselves off from mankind as they had they could be more certain that those who'd fled in mindless terror had survived. Unfortunately, they had, and when the humans had begun to sail the seas and seek them out to trade with them, they'd moved their colony even further—on the other the side of the world from the 'undesirables' that fought, and killed, and fucked indiscriminately, and stank like pigs because they were too ignorant to understand that the filth they lived in was what fostered the diseases that killed them like flies.

There'd been ships at port, and others—the humans were *not* to be completely discouraged even then—not far from port when the meteor shower had struck. So many had fled to the ships, though, they'd only managed to capsize the smaller vessels. Some would undoubtedly have managed to make it safely aboard some of the ships, though. Others might have managed to make it to land, though that was stretching it considering how far they were from land in any direction.

He pushed the thoughts aside. They would never know now. There was no point in dwelling on it for, even if they had, they were long gone. As the councilor had pointed out, it was better to allow themselves to believe they'd lived and found some contentment with the lives they'd chosen.

"You have learned what you could from the natives, I presume?"

Raen felt his gut clench reflexively as if someone had feigned a punch at his belly. "Yes."

Councilor det Ophelia studied the liquid in his glass thoughtfully. "The council will still want to question them."

Raen nodded. That had already been established.

"They have no particular value to their people, I assume?"

Raen sent him a startled look.

Councilor det Ophelia returned his look with a keen one of his own. "I was only wondering if they would prove to be of value in the negotiations," he said almost chidingly.

Raen relaxed fractionally. "Doubtful," he said almost reluctantly.

"Still . . .," Councilor det Ophelia murmured thoughtfully.

Raen tensed again, waiting until the councilor had mulled his thoughts.

"I see no real reason to release them at once. Despite the data the science department has gathered, there is no substitute for actually having subjects to observe and we could learn a good bit more from interaction."

Raen cleared his throat, realizing the moment the idea 'popped' into his mind full blown that he had been toying with it in the back of his mind for some time. "They could be told that it is not possible to breach the field at this time, that they must remain as our guests until repairs are made on the Atlantis and it is stable enough to release."

Councilor det Ophelia smiled faintly. "An excellent notion! And I know I can count on you to see to it that they are treated as guests. It will give them the time to get to know us, as well, and perhaps dispel the notion that we are some sort of monsters from outer space.

"We have left the world we knew behind—or it has left us. We will not be able to eschew the company of our neighbors altogether as we did before ... and that may not be altogether a bad thing."

Taking that as a dismissal, Raen rose and took his leave. As much as he respected the elder, it was a relief to escape the man's probing looks.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or appalled that the humans were to stay, to be welcomed as guests.

The truth was, he supposed, that he was appalled *because* he was relieved.

Worse—glad.

He should not have kissed Cassie. He'd known before he did that it was a very bad idea. In the back of his mind, he supposed, he had convinced himself that it could not hurt to give in to the temptation to see if it affected him the same as it had before because she would be gone soon anyway.

The urge to return to her and finish what he'd started was so strong he felt almost ill. It was enough to make him turn the other way and leave the ship instead. He was a little startled to discover when he had that the Atlantis had risen. He stood on the hull for several moments, staring at the sea surrounding him in the dimness of early morning and looked back into his memories, remembering the times when he had stood in that very spot with the city at his back.

He was loath to turn from his contemplation of the sea, reluctant to look at the ruins of what had been a beautiful city before. He turned after a while anyway and surveyed the ugliness and felt the soul deep sickness of loss. Time and the sea had ravaged even the buildings untouched by the blast of the meteors. Hollowed out hulls and partial walls were all that stood now where once there'd been homes and shops and people. The sea had swept the soil from the surface of the vessel, swept away the gardens and green growing things. Beyond the inner ring where he stood, the channels were flooded with salt water instead of the sparkling, sweet fresh water that had once filled them and no fields lush with healthy crops of food spanned the outer rings. The arched bridges that had once spanned the channels were long gone, or broken and twisted beyond use.

No children played in the parks or dabbled in the waters of the channels. There were no parents chasing or scolding or laughing at their children's antics. No lovers strolled along the walks.

He shook his head, wondering when he'd grown so sentimental or if he'd always been a romantic fool. They were fortunate they had anything left—including their lives. What had been built once could be built again. Their ancestors had built it all and there'd been far fewer of them to divide the labor. It was disheartening to realize it could be years before it even began to look as it once had, but he was young. In his time, he would see it as it had once been—or better.

He saw as he walked along the edge of the channel that his fellow Atlanteans didn't seem to share his hollow sense of loss, the feeling that things would never be as they had once been. Architects and engineers and builders moved briskly among the ruins, studying the walls and floors. Labors were moving about the ruins, as well, some busy chipping away at the broken walls to finish the demolition, others gathering stones and stacking them into neat piles.

Obviously, he thought wryly, they had no idea that nothing had been settled.

He stopped when he reached the docks, studying the boat that belonged to their 'guests' thoughtfully. It was safe enough to leave it where it was even if they gave their guests the freedom to roam at will, he decided. They could not breach the field. It would have to be disengaged before anyone could move in or out and it might serve to convince them they weren't being lied to if they gave it a try.

They were not going to be pleased when they were told they would have to stay, for weeks at the least, possibly for more than a month.

He didn't think they could delay their departure any longer without arousing their suspicions.

Could he resist temptation for weeks, he wondered, when he could not avoid Cassie altogether?

He supposed, he thought with self-derision, that was going to depend on whether or not she decided to test his will to resist.

Chapter Nine

Cassie's entire being was in an uproar as she watched Raen stride from the room. Dazed by the sweltering heat and excitement churning through her, she sat staring blankly at the wavering wall of water beyond the room for some time before the sensations abated enough to allow room for thought.

"Wow," she whispered finally. "What was *that* all about?"

Acknowledging the kiss was enough to send a fresh wave of need through her. She sucked in a shaky breath and looked around the empty room a little vaguely. A shiver went through her, partly at the memory and partly from the absence of his warmth and she lay back down, wrapping her arms around herself. She didn't know what disturbed her more—the effect his kiss had had on her or the fact that she had no clue of why he'd done it.

She'd thought before that he'd kissed her as something of a joke or a tease, because she'd been clinging to him as if he was her only lifeline when she'd had no reason to at that point. Or maybe just because he was a man and she'd given him the opportunity. It had knocked her for a loop, but then she'd been a wreck from the ordeal of being captured and the terror of suffocation by drowning. She'd convinced herself it was more relief on her part than anything else that had sent that sensation of exhilaration through her.

That was afterward, though, she reminded herself, when he hadn't seemed to be all that affected by it himself or particularly interested in her.

Which brought her back to why he'd kissed her just now.

She sure as hell hadn't seen any indication that he'd been holding himself back any of the times he'd questioned her. Even when the steam had cleared and she'd discovered he was standing outside the shower watching her she hadn't noticed anything that pointed to a great attraction. Of course, she'd been so startled at the discovery she hadn't really been in any state of mind to notice much, but she was pretty sure she would still have noticed if he'd had a lascivious expression on his face.

It began to seem inescapable that he'd had some sort of ulterior motive for kissing her. Disappointment filled her when she arrived at that conclusion. She tried to dismiss it, tried to convince herself that he couldn't have kissed her with so much passion if he hadn't felt it. The problem was she realized she hadn't been in any condition to really judge *his* condition.

Maybe he'd just been as curious as she was to know if the kiss before had been a fluke or there really was a special spark between them, and maybe not. That theory, after all, was predicated on the premise that he had been as affected as she was the first time—and he hadn't actually appeared to be all that bowled over by it.

If he had been, wouldn't he have behaved warmer toward her?

Of course, this apparent security breach was obviously serious business as far as he was concerned and he was clearly a professional, but could he have been so completely cool about it?

The closest he'd come to any warmth had been cool courtesy while he was questioning her and he hadn't even been that when she'd asked him about the fish, a question he'd obviously taken as an insult.

She dragged in a deep breath, realizing her process of reasoning had not only cooled her blood, but chilled it.

She might as well dismiss any thoughts from her head that he'd kissed her simply because he found her attractive, she decided, as thoroughly depressed now as she had been giddy before. She closed her eyes, trying to seek sleep again but realized she wasn't the least bit sleepy.

She had no idea what time it was or whether it was day or night, but her body was telling her it had had enough rest. Throwing off the cover, she got up and went into the bathroom to take care a nature call and clean herself up the best she could considering she had nothing but water to do it with. God she missed her toiletries! She didn't even have a brush or a tooth brush, damn it! She did the best she could with her fingers, detangling her hair as the water rushed through it and scrubbing at her teeth with her index finger.

She had the choice of her swim suit and the wetsuit to put on, or her swimsuit and the robe she'd slept in, or no swimsuit and the robe.

Sighing irritably, she put on her swim suit and the robe. At least she didn't feel naked.

It occurred to her as she dressed that she hadn't considered there was no reason at all for Raen to have given her a lascivious look when he'd watched her in the shower. He was completely unconcerned about nudity. As far as she could tell, they all were. None of the guards that had come to take them away had been wearing a stitch of clothes, including the women.

It wasn't hard to figure out why. She couldn't imagine, even with the ability to somehow transform their lower body from legs to fish tail and back again, that swimming in clothing would be the least bit desirable, or comfortable, or practical. In their merform they wouldn't be able to wear anything but maybe a top or something like the robe, which meant the damned things would be alternately clinging to them and floating around them. Since they seemed to switch back and forth fairly regularly, wearing anything at all would mean going around in wet clothes most of the time—or a hell of a laundry.

Of course whatever material they'd used to make everything seemed unaffected by water in the way ordinary fabric or even plastic materials were.

Nevertheless, she was sure that was why they didn't seem to think anything about being naked.

Which meant, unlike her and her companions, they didn't get a thrill, or a shock, every time they saw a naked body.

She was inclined to think it was a pity to be so accustomed to nudity that they missed out on the thrill one could get at the glimpse of flesh one didn't ordinary get the chance to see. She felt downright breathless every time she saw Raen, and it took all she could do to concentrate on what he was saying instead of staring at him. Even when he was wearing the robe, which thankfully he had the last few times, it was clear that that was *all* he was wearing and it was almost as distracting.

She discovered when she left the bathroom that there was a door she hadn't even noticed in the far wall of the bedroom. She wouldn't have discovered it at all, she didn't think, if not for the fact that a young woman had just stepped through it carrying a tray.

That explained how they'd brought in the table, chairs, and the dinner the night before.

She hadn't actually given a thought to how they'd managed it, she realized, because she was so out of kilter about the whole situation she'd found herself in.

The woman didn't seem the least bit put out that she'd been 'caught' slipping through a 'secret' doorway. She smiled pleasantly at Cassie. The woman bowed when she'd placed the tray on the table. "I am Natara, Lady Cassia. I have brought food I hope that you will find more appealing to break your fast and a fresh robe for your use," she added, gesturing toward the bed where she'd lain the robe. "Is there anything else I can do to serve you?"

A list as long as her arm popped into Cassie's head, starting with showing her the way out, but she dismissed it. "I hope it isn't fish," she said somewhat ungraciously. "I don't think I can face fish this early in the morning."

Surprise flickered across the young woman's face, but then she smiled. "Pardon, lady. The food synthesizers are only just being brought online and we must make do for now with what is available—which, unfortunately isn't much."

She was so polite and pleasant Cassie not only found it impossible to be surly in return, but felt shamed that she'd been inclined to begin with.

"I suppose you've been instructed not to answer any questions?" she asked tentatively as she settled in the chair and examined the platter the woman uncovered.

Again a look of surprise flickered across the woman's face. She shrugged. "I am not allowed to answer questions of a secure nature, of course, but I will be happy to answer any other questions you might have."

"What is it?" Cassie asked suspiciously when she'd studied the food for several moments.

Suppressed laughter was dancing in the young woman's eyes when she looked up. "An Atlantean dish," she responded.

Cassie didn't know how to take the woman's obvious amusement until she took a tentative taste of the strange looking dish. The taste of fish was mild, but unmistakable. She swallowed with an effort.

"Pardon, lady, but we have nothing else just now."

The comment tamped Cassie's urge to complain or show her displeasure. "Why is it all you have right now?"

Natara seemed to consider it for a moment. "We have only just risen from stasis, and it was the great disaster that sent us into hibernation to begin with. It will take time and a lot of hard work to repair the damage and begin to produce the things we need again." She paused, seemed to debate whether to continue or not and finally decided to do so. "It is hard for us, as well. I myself have never eaten anything but synthesized flesh. Even though it tastes much the same, it is the thought that it was swimming around only a little while before that makes it difficult to swallow."

The comment made Cassie's stomach execute a sickening somersault. She swallowed with an effort. "You're saying your people only eat synthesized food?" she managed to ask when she'd chased the taste from her mouth with a few gulps of water.

"Synthesized flesh," Natara corrected, "...primarily."

"Please!" Cassie said, feeling another wave of nausea wash over her. "Can we just call it meat?"

The young woman looked distressed. "Pardon! I did not mean to spoil your meal. I thought the word meant the same."

"I suppose it does, but we prefer to refer to what we eat as meat."

Natara nodded. "I will make a note of this. This language is very confusing. There are so many words that seem to mean the same thing."

Cassie honestly hadn't ever thought about it. "*Close* to the same thing," she said finally. "You synthesize meat?"

Natara nodded. "As we did on the home world ... or rather our ancestors did on the home world. We require protein, but it is not acceptable—to us—to cultivate animals only for eating, so we developed a process to only grow the meat. It is better all the way around since we not only do not need to kill to eat, but we also do not have to tend beasts or provide a place for animals to graze. The colony may seem very large, but it is not large enough to grow everything for so many and still have room for both beasts and so many people."

"So many?" Cassie prompted since she hadn't actually seen more than a handful of merfolk.

Natara looked uncomfortable and more than a little distressed.

"I guess that's something that falls under the category of secure information?"

Natara seemed to wrestle with her thoughts. "Yes, but I could not say anyway. We do not actually know, yet, how many survived the cataclysm."

Cassie stared at the young woman. "The legends," she said finally. "I'm not that familiar with the story of Atlantis—this *is* the lost city of Atlantis?"

Natara looked even more distressed. "It is not ... a story to us, or a legend. And it did not happen to us long ago," she said finally. "Not to our minds, anyway. When the meteors struck and destroyed the anti-gravity drive, it was the most terrifying thing imaginable. We were rushed to the stasis units to protect us until help could come so we have been sleeping ever since, up until just a few days ago. To me, to all of us, one day our entire world was crashing around us and the next we woke. We are all still very shaken by it, still trying to cope with the loss of our city and so many friends and family members."

Dismay filled Cassie at that, and sympathy. She realized she'd jumped to conclusions about all of them without having any idea of what their lives were like. Maybe, she thought, Raen wasn't just naturally standoffish? Everybody dealt with things in their own way, and he obviously had a lot to deal with—they all did. Even if he hadn't lost love ones in the disaster—and she didn't know whether he had or not—it must have been horribly traumatic for everyone. She couldn't begin to imagine what living through such a thing might have been like.

"I am *so* sorry," she said sympathetically. "I had no idea."

Although she was familiar with the term stasis, it was mind boggling to think they'd not only mastered such a thing but had been 'frozen' for hundreds of years. She'd heard of people being frozen with cryogenics and stored in the hope that one day the technology would exist that would allow them to be awakened and cured of the disease that had killed them, but she'd always thought that was just crazy. Even if it worked,

wouldn't it be horrible to wake up years and years after everyone you knew was dead and gone? And she'd never believed it actually *would* work.

As curious as she was about it, though, she wasn't insensitive enough to give in to her curiosity.

She found she had difficulty even assimilating it. How hard must it be for them when they'd actually experienced it?

Natara nodded, obviously unable to speak for a moment. Finally, she mastered the emotionalism. "I am supposed to escort you to speak with council once you have broken your fast," she said, as if glad to redirect the conversation.

Which she probably was, but the new subject didn't make Cassie feel better. She lost the last of her appetite. Nodding, she got up, picked up the robe Natara had brought and went into the bathroom to change. It wasn't much privacy, but it was a little.

She saw when she emerged again that the watery doorway had vanished and wondered when it had. She'd grown so accustomed to it she hadn't actually glanced at the door since Raen had left earlier. Relief swept through her. She hadn't been looking forward to the ordeal of swimming without air tanks. That had almost been worse than the prospect of being brought before a council.

Almost.

"It seems so odd to have servants," Cassie said conversationally as they walked along the corridor.

Natara glanced at her in surprise. "All young Atlanteans are in service until they have reached a level of maturity and education to enter their chosen field. It is the way the young are taught to respect their elders and learn the discipline of good work habits. How do your people teach these things?"

Cassie was embarrassed to tell her their young *weren't* taught to respect their elders *or* a good work ethic. She pasted a false smile on her lips. "Oh, parents and teachers, you know," she lied. Unfortunately, neither the parents or the teachers had the time to teach such things, and even if they had, the entire social structure was a shambles. No two people seemed able to agree on what constituted discipline and where to draw the line between punishment and abuse. Between the new laws to protect children from idiots who didn't know when to stop and social taboos, children, who couldn't help the fact that they were born savages, remained savages because they weren't ever civilized—too many weren't anyway.

Disaster, she was afraid, lurked just around the corner. When the balance shifted and the uncivilized outnumbered the people who had been civilized all hell was going to break lose.

Maybe she was just a pessimist, but as a manager she wasn't feeling very hopeful. She could barely get employees trained before they were off to greener pastures and even the 'trained' employees were godawful. She spent most of her time trying to beat them off of their cell phones or trying to snap them out of the state of zombism they entered every five seconds. Mentally, she shook her head, wondering why it was young people looked like they had built in on/off switches and why they seemed to go into 'off' mode if they weren't talking.

The chamber Natara led her to looked like every other room she'd been in, virtually bare. Now she knew why though and as nervous as she was when she spotted the group of men and women seated on a platform at the front of the room, pity filled her.

She had no idea what their life had been like before, but they had nothing much now but bare walls and floors.

Nobody seemed to wear anything but the simple, white robes, but she could tell just from their stance that the handful of men and women ranged around the perimeter of the room were guards.

There was a sprinkling of people seated on hard benches facing the raised platform—Atlanteans she was sure—and she saw her companions were seated on a bench at the very front. Feeling a measure of relief, she joined them.

The atmosphere 'felt' like a courtroom. She supposed it was and that she wasn't the only one that felt that it was. Although the others glanced at her, no one said anything.

The silence was almost unnerving. Cassie had the urge to make some noise just to break the tense silence—by clearing her throat or shuffling her feet—and at the same time was fearful of inadvertently making a noise and drawing everyone's attention.

She sat stiffly, waiting for something to happen or someone to say something. After what seemed an agonizingly long time, a sound behind her caught her attention and she looked around in automatic response.

Her heart seemed to leap into her throat when she saw it was Raen and then thump uncomfortably. He didn't glance at her, or even in her general direction, and she looked away again, feeling snubbed for no reason she could fathom.

"High Sentinel Raen ap Aquinox," a man off to their left stood and announced when Raen had stopped in front of the council members.

He nodded.

They nodded back at him in acknowledgement.

An older man in the center of the group with long, flowing white hair—or whatever it was they considered it, Cassie amended, remembering Raen had said it wasn't actually hair—spoke after a moment. "You have come before us to report your findings?"

Again Raen nodded. "The natives were detained for trespass," he began, gesturing with one arm in their direction although he didn't actually look at them. "After questioning them and investigating to ascertain what I could as to the truth of their statements, I have concluded that it was inadvertent and there was no intent on their part either to cause harm or to pillage."

"They had no weapons?" an older woman sitting at one end of the platform asked.

"They were carrying none that could be construed as anything more than weapons for self-defense. Three of the males were carrying short blades. One was carrying a projectable spear."

"Harpoon," Ben spoke out. "It was just in case of sharks."

The elder in the center turned to stare him down. "You are not accustomed to our laws so I will overlook your outburst this once. You will be questioned and given the opportunity to explain yourself. You are not allowed to speak out unless a question is directed to you."

Ben reddened and then paled. He nodded stiffly, compressing his lips angrily. The men exchanged speaking glances.

Cassie hoped they were wrong because she could see they thought, or at least feared, that they were going to be judged without being allowed to explain themselves, or that the decision had already been made and anything they said would be discounted.

Even so, she discovered it was hard to remain tense and on edge. No one seemed in any great hurry to finish up and be done with the 'hearing'. Carl, she supposed because they'd somehow decided he was their leader, was called upon to recount their trip from start to finish. He didn't embellish it or leave anything out, but he seemed to be going to great effort to make them sound innocent. Cassie cringed inwardly, wondering if he realized that only made them sound guilty of something—which they weren't—but she didn't make any attempt to add to the discussion or interrupt, and she did her best not to give her feelings away by staring down at her hands in her lap.

She was almost surprised when the discussion finally ended and the council members, after exchanging looks, seemed to come to a decision.

She wondered if they'd been discussing the case with their telepathy and finally decided they must have been, which made her go cold all over since that reminded her that she *knew* they had the capability and she wondered if they'd been 'listening' to her thoughts.

Being around people that were telepathic wasn't something that was going to be easy getting used to.

Thankfully, the older man that seemed to be in charge said that he was satisfied and they were to be released. Unfortunately, just as Cassie was starting to feel really relieved, he followed up by telling them that they couldn't actually leave. She wasn't sure she believed the yarn he told about there being some kind of force field around them that prevented anyone from coming or going, but she was obliged to admit certain aspects were indisputable. The 'freak storm' and the shudders she'd felt herself to say nothing of the motion she'd felt since she'd been in the place.

Anger welled inside of her regardless. There didn't seem to be anyone to direct it at, which didn't help her feelings. They'd stumbled into this by mistake, so she couldn't blame Carl or any of the others.

"I'm going to get fired," she grumbled to no one in particular when the meeting was finally closed.

"We're probably *all* going to get canned," David agreed. "Damn it! There must be some way to get the hell out of here!"

Cassie wasn't surprised he shared her sentiments. What did surprise her was that the others, although obviously not entirely happy, didn't seem to be as upset as she and David were. Linda was downright philosophical about it. Jimmy looked almost excited, and everyone else seemed to fall somewhere between the two.

"At least we're going to be guests, not prisoners," Jimmy pointed out. "We can have a look around."

Cassie eyed him with disfavor. "Well, that's a hell of a compensation! I don't even have a damned toothbrush with me! And I don't want another job! I *liked* the one I had, besides which I hate job hunting! How are we going to explain getting fired when we go looking for work and have no reference? Tell me that! Oh—well I got caught in this force field thing and spent a few weeks in Atlantis and my old boss didn't believe me."

“We do deeply regret the inconvenience to you all, but there is nothing we can do.”

Cassie reddened uncomfortably as she whirled at the sound of the voice and discovered that it was the man who'd presided over the meeting. She felt like a worm. “I know. I'm sorry if I seem so ... unappreciative of your hospitality. It's not that I don't appreciate it. I'd just rather be home. I'd rather not be in this mess at all.”

He shrugged. “So would we all,” he retorted wryly. “We will do our best to make your stay as comfortable as possible.”

Could he possibly make her feel worse? “Thank you again for offering,” she said uncomfortably. After casting around in her mind for something nice to say, she added, “I'm sure I'll enjoy it. Natara was very sweet and helpful.”

He smiled faintly and, to her surprise, patted her on the cheek like she was a well-mannered little girl that he approved of. What was even more surprising was that it pleased her that he seemed to approve of her. “We will all try and then, perhaps, the time will pass pleasantly enough.”

She didn't file out with everyone else. She sat back down and propped her chin in her hand, trying to think what she could do to avert disaster. She wasn't going to be home to pay any of her bills, and she might even get evicted if she was away very long. She had a small savings account, but not much in it. It wasn't going to keep the wolves at bay if it took long to get another job.

She didn't waste a lot of time hoping that was a worse case scenario. It was a given. If she was out of work even a couple of days without calling, she was finished. And if she ‘disappeared’ and didn't pay her rent they were going to decide she'd skipped out, probably throw everything she owned onto the sidewalk.

She'd been staring at nothing in particular, enumerating and elaborating on the disaster she was facing, when she finally became aware that someone had come to stand beside her. He crouched down just about the time she did become aware of him, bringing his face within her view.

Raen's gaze flickered over her face. “Angry?”

Cassie stared back at him for a long moment and finally nodded. “At me.”

His dark brows rose questioningly.

She shrugged. “Everything that happens to us is a consequence of the choices we make,” she said and expelled a deep sigh. “If I'd just stayed home instead of deciding to meet Mark I'd still have a job and an apartment. I won't have a home to go back to, or a job. I'll get fired, and they'll throw away everything I own, or sell it for the rent money I'm not going to be there to pay.”

He studied her expression for a long moment. “But then we would not have met and you would have missed the opportunity to see the city of legends.”

Chapter Ten

Cassie wondered if he meant 'we' as in you and I or 'we' as in their group and the Atlanteans. The thought that he might mean the former made her heart do a little tap dance against her chest wall. Unfortunately, she wasn't certain that his expression supported that theory. She managed a smile. "There is that," she responded.

He rose, extending his hand. "It is not much to see, now, but I will show you around, if you like."

She placed her hand in his, not because she needed the help getting up, not because the response was automatic, but because the offer of contact was irresistible. His hand was warm and strong and well formed. It dwarfed hers as it closed around it. It was odd how such a simple thing could be so pleasurable. She was sorry when he let her hand go. Since he settled it lightly in the small of her back to guide her, though, she thought it was a fair exchange. It was still contact, and it made her a little breathless.

She was sorry he removed his hand once they'd left the council chambers and headed down a wide corridor. "This place is huge," she murmured as she stared down the long, long corridor, glancing around in search of the lights and discovering she couldn't actually see any fixtures. The ceiling itself seemed to glow with a soft white light.

"The Atlantis is approximately two hundred miles in circumference," he responded, nodding. "You have no ships this large?"

Cassie snapped a look upward at his face. "Ship?" she echoed.

He sent her an indecipherable look but nodded. "It is a ship."

Cassie glanced around again, trying to see it with the new information but it still looked like a huge building, not anything like she'd pictured a ship looking. "I thought it was a city," she said in confusion.

"It is. Our ancestors came here in it and when they decided to stay it became the floating city of Atlantis."

The comment sent a jolt through her, aroused vague suspicions that didn't quite form in her mind, maybe because she didn't really want to acknowledge what his comment suggested. And she still couldn't resist asking. "Came from where?"

"Andromeda."

Cassie stopped abruptly, feeling a little pale. She must have looked as pale as she felt. He reached out and closed his hand around her arm as if to steady her.

"Andromeda?" she echoed a little hoarsely. "You mean ... you don't mean" He couldn't mean the Andromedan system.

He nodded. "The Andromedan system."

She stared up at him as she had stared at the ship, trying to adjust her mind to her vision, to *see* what she thought she should be seeing instead of what her eyes were telling her she was seeing. He didn't change. Like the ship that still looked like a building to her, he still looked like the human she'd thought he was.

She'd kissed him, been held in his arms. How could he *not* be human and not feel any different?

It *had* felt different, though, she realized. She had never felt that way before when any other man—any *man*—had held her and kissed her. Was that because she'd sensed a difference even though she hadn't been aware of it? Or did it just not matter because it was a chemical attraction that defied the laws of nature? Or was it something about him *because* he wasn't human?

His hand tightened on her arm. "I thought you knew—or had at least guessed. Jimmy"

She felt weak and heavy and hot and then cold. "Jimmy's a UFO nut," she mumbled through lips that felt strangely numb and awkward. "No one pays him any attention," she added a little faintly.

He studied her face for a moment and moved closer, slipping an arm lightly around her and urging her to lean against him. She stiffened, but she really did feel peculiar. Relaxing after that instinctive flinch, she leaned against him, closing her eyes as she pressed her cheek to his chest. The moment she did, she felt enveloped by him. His warmth seemed to surround her, chasing the sudden chill. His scent invaded her, spreading a tingling warmth inside of her. The steady beat of his heart beneath her ear soothed her.

Falsely, she thought—told herself, but she still felt comforted as she leaned against him, felt the light stroke of his hand on her hair and along her back.

"Councilor det Ophelia told you the reason you could not leave was because of the force field created by the traction beam from the mother ship," he said gruffly.

Cassie dragged in a shaky breath. "It sounded like something out of a Star Quest episode—a movie," she muttered. "Not real. I guess I didn't really take it in. Or maybe I was too focused on what not getting home meant. I don't know. *All* of this has just been too much to take in or really accept.

"I think when he said ship, I just thought ship—a regular ship, like a big boat that sails in the water—not *space* ship. I've been trying to make everything fit in to what I *know*, what's real to me, and trying to ignore everything that didn't seem to fit, I guess."

She pushed away to look up at his face. She didn't know what she'd expected to see—some change—things she hadn't noticed that would've told her he was an alien if she'd just had her eyes open. All she saw, though, was the same face she'd thought was so handsome, creased now with a look of concern, something in his eyes—wariness maybe? "You're not like us," she said, dismayed, trying to *make* herself accept the unbelievable truth. Chaos reigned along the fringes of her mind, though, so many conflicting thoughts that she was only dimly aware of the general trend of them.

She watched his throat work as he swallowed, watched several different expressions flicker across his face before it hardened. After a moment even the anger vanished, though, or most of it. "What was it like to be kissed by an alien?" he ground out.

"It was"

"Different? Frightening? Disgusting?"

Cassie swallowed with an effort, but *that* hadn't changed just because she now knew, without a doubt, that he wasn't human like her—like she'd convinced herself he was. "None of the above, actually—except different."

His gaze flickered over her face. Some of the tension seemed to go out of him. His dark brows drew together. "Different in what way?" he asked cautiously.

"Not in a bad way," she said wryly, almost wishing now that it had been.

He searched her gaze and then his gaze settled on her lips. Her mouth went dry.

He lifted his head after a moment and glanced up and down the corridor, as if he'd just remembered where they were. He seemed to wrestle with himself and then, to her vast disappointment, he moved away from her. "Are you all right now?"

Cassie nodded, although she wasn't, not really. She still felt as if she'd been caught up in some sort of bizarre dream and the jury was still out as to whether it was a nightmare or a good dream.

It was a disturbing one. That was the only part she was really certain of.

"Do you feel up to a tour? Or would you rather return to your quarters?"

She was still shaken by the abrupt cave in of disbelief vs. belief. She almost felt as if she *needed* to lie down. The problem was she wasn't certain of whether he'd suggested it because *he* thought she might need to or because he wanted to pick up where they'd left off before, and unfortunately she wasn't sure if she wanted to or not.

Actually, she *was* certain she wanted to. She just wasn't certain she should give in to her wants and let reason and doubts go hang.

"I think I could use some fresh air."

He nodded, but his lips twisted wryly. "I can not say that it is all that 'fresh'."

He looked at her questioningly as he turned once more in the direction they'd been walking. She turned to follow him.

She'd begun to regret the decision before they finally reached a door and pushed through it. The tang of salt air pelted her instantly as she stepped through. She sucked in a deep breath of it. What had begun as a deep breath of pleasure, though, ended in a shocked intake of breath.

The false dusk of a storm surrounded them, but there was no storm. The thing that blocked the sunlight was terrifyingly massive and just as frightening in its nearness. She jolted to a halt, holding the breath she'd inhaled until her chest hurt.

She flinched all over as Raen's hand settled on her shoulder, as she felt him move up closely behind her.

"My god!" she breathed when she could breathe at all.

"There is no danger."

Cassie glanced up at him over her shoulder, unconvinced that there was no danger the thing hovering over them might fall and squash them as flat as a pancake. How it had become airborne to start with was a mystery to her. She swallowed with an effort. "No," she managed to say weakly, "we don't have anything this big--unless you're talking about states."

A gleam of amusement entered his eyes. "It is impressive. In its day, the Atlantis was, also, but compared to the Andromeda Prime, it looks like no more than a scout ship."

Impressive wasn't the word she would've used, but she couldn't think of an adjective adequate to the challenge—awesome didn't even come close. Horrific, maybe? The comment dragged her focus to the ship they were standing on, however, and she scanned the distance between them and the far horizon. From her viewpoint, it was hard

to see a vast difference between the two—in size, anyway. She'd have to take his word for it.

There was a tremendous difference between the two ships otherwise. Its size alone made the Atlantis look more like an island than a ship—or the 'continent' it had been described as in lore. She could easily see why it had been mistaken for one by the ancient people that had seen it, though they must have wondered why and how it had come to be such a perfect circle. There was a waterway, a perfectly symmetrical channel, in the near distance that formed a ring around the area where they stood, making it into a smaller island, and much further away, she saw what must be another such channel. Sprinkled sparingly over those distant strips of land between the channels were small structures that might have been cottages. They looked intact for the most part, but she knew the distance could make that impression deceptive and that it was unlikely they actually were. Nearer, on the island where they stood, that was certainly not the case. There were what appeared to be the hulls of fallen buildings and in many cases no more than jagged, partial walls and piles of rubble.

It looked like a war zone.

Looking at it, it was hard to imagine that it had ever been a city, beautiful or otherwise.

Almost as if he'd read her mind—which he might have—Raen stepped away from her. "This was once the commercial center of Atlantis. Time has almost finished what the meteor shower began. It was a place of great beauty then, though. We have never seen why a structure must be ugly to also be practical and our artisans take great pride in their work."

Cassie turned to look at him as he spoke, trying to imagine what it must feel like to awaken to a scene of such horrific destruction. The attempt failed. She supposed the victims of hurricanes, tornados, fire and flood—and war—could have, but she'd been far more fortunate than they. She'd never seen anything like this, had certainly not experienced it personally.

It occurred to her abruptly that seeing what was left of their home had to be stunning to the point where they hardly knew how to cope with it or what to do first.

Weeping would've been at the top of her list.

Remembering how upset Natara had been, seeing how carefully impassive Raen's expression was as he looked around, she felt like weeping *for* them. "I'm so sorry," she said, knowing the words were woefully inadequate even as she said them.

He glanced at her sharply, his gaze flickering over her face speculatively. Finally, he looked away again. "Thank you. It will take time, but we will rebuild. It will be as beautiful as it once was."

Cassie swallowed against the hard knot of sympathy in her throat, wishing there was something she could say or do to help, anything except an inadequate 'I'm sorry'. It occurred to her, though, that there was a way she *could* help. "We'll help. I know if everyone knew about this, they'd want to help."

Again, he looked at her sharply in surprise.

"Americans are generous, good hearted people. They're always willing to help their neighbors in times like this. People everywhere, really. There were people from all over the world that offered help when we had disasters in the U.S. They always help—do whatever they can—when they can when there's a disaster like this. Y'all have shelter,

but we could start a drive to collect food and clothes and personal items. And I'm sure there'd be plenty of people that would volunteer time to help with cleanup and rebuilding."

He studied her thoughtfully. "The governments, you mean?"

"Oh," Cassie responded uncomfortably. "I don't know. They're more focused on politics and policies and appearances. I meant the *people*." She considered it for several moments. "I don't know that much about politics or politicians, but I'd say you don't really want their help. They always have an ulterior motive and they want to stick their nose into your business if they help even a little bit."

"When I get home, though, I could contact some organizations that were formed just to help people out when they need it and newspapers. Once it got on the news everybody would know about the situation and there'd be all sorts of volunteers to help out."

His expression became sardonic. "Even when they learned we are not natives to this world?"

Cassie stared at him blankly while that sank in and then frowned as she thought it over. "Even so. I really think they would."

He sent her a look of disbelief.

It pricked at her that he didn't seem to believe her. People weren't saints, and there were probably just as many bad people in the world as good, maybe more, but there were certainly plenty of good people! It dawned on her after a moment, though, that it might not necessarily be doubt about the good intentions of people, but rather a reluctance for anyone to know. "They're going to know about it anyway. No way could something like that be kept a secret," she said, pointing upward at the Andromeda Prime above them. "The military is probably all over it even now. And the news people are never far behind them. Right now they're probably busy scaring the hell out of everyone and making them think we're on the verge of an attack." She smiled faintly as another thought occurred to her. "I'll just bet the military has their hands full chasing the rubber-neckers off."

Her amusement died after a moment. "Are your communications systems working? Or are they messed up like all of our electronics were?"

His eyes narrowed. "I am afraid that is not something I am at liberty to discuss."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Fine, don't discuss it. If you can, though, you should check out the news and see what they're saying. What you want is to have public opinion on your side. If ya'll are scaring the hell out of everybody, then nobody is going to be on your side—including the governments. The best thing to do would be to *secretly* contact a big news company and give them the story. They'll fall over themselves to broadcast it."

"What you *don't* want is for the government to be able to keep this a secret from the public, because then they can do whatever they want, without checking to see how anyone else feels about it, or even if they agree."

"If you don't want to have to defend yourself, you need to consider going public to make sure they know you aren't a threat to them."

He tipped his head curiously. "And you believe we are no threat?"

She frowned, trying to decide what he meant by the question. "Do you want to be?" she asked finally.

"We will defend ourselves—and we are very capable of doing so."

"Exactly! Anyone would. You need to make sure you aren't put in the position of *having* to."

"I am a soldier. What you speak of is a matter for politicians."

It was a complete rejection of her suggestions, she knew. She stared at him in consternation for a moment, wondering if it was possible to make him understand how important it could be to the Atlanteans that they establish good relations with Earth people as soon as they could. Even if they were dead set against accepting the charity of their neighbors, they still didn't want their neighbors to feel threatened unless they just wanted a war. "Then I'll talk to the guy that's the head of the council," she said stiffly. "Would that be the one to talk to? Or is he like our president and only important people can actually talk to him?"

He turned to study her with a look of perplexed amusement. "Why would you want to do that?"

Taken aback, she stared at him blankly. "Why wouldn't I?"

His lips tightened with irritation. "We are not humans—Mayhap it comforts you to think of us that way, but it does not change what we are. Even if you are right and your people would offer to help, why would you think we would need or want it? We have been an independent colony since it was first established—without even the help of our mother world during difficult times. Call it pride—but we want no interference, or help, in our affairs."

Cassie dragged in a shaky breath, trying to quell the hurt anger that swelled inside of her. She was only marginally successful. "Suit yourself," she said as flippantly as she could manage, turning on her heel and stalking back to the door to go inside. "I think I've had enough fresh air."

He followed her. People never seemed to grasp that when a person stalked off in anger it was because they wanted and needed to be alone. She wasn't terribly surprised that the *alien* didn't grasp that either.

"Now you are angry?" he asked coolly.

"You are so perceptive," she snapped. "And now that we've established that you're smart enough to figure it out, I'd like to establish that I don't want to talk about it and I don't want company—thank you!"

"I am going this way."

The childish urge struck her to make an about face and go in the other direction. She had to struggle to keep from doing so. She decided to be adult about the situation, however, and just ignore him and walk faster to out pace him. She discovered fairly quickly, though, that he had no intention of allowing her to put distance between them.

"I appreciate the sentiment"

"No, you don't. You don't even *believe* the sentiment and you wouldn't appreciate it even if you did believe it because you think you're so damned superior you couldn't possibly need help from any of us! And you don't want any help because you don't want anything to do with humans, at all. Atlantis sank here because you'd moved as far away from human civilization as you could get and still be on the same planet."

"That was long ago"

Cassie stopped abruptly and turned to face him, glaring at him through narrowed eyes. "Which doesn't mean a fucking thing since it *wasn't* long ago for you!" She poked him in the middle of his chest with one index finger. "The problem with a superiority

complex, Raen, is that it can make you seriously underestimate the person or persons you're dealing with!"

He stared down at her finger and then flicked a look at her face, his own anger flaring. "You do not know anything about me or my people, certainly not enough to pass judgment," he growled.

"And you know what? I don't want to either, because I've already seen and heard enough to convince me that I've learned all I want to."

He said nothing more for all of ten minutes after Cassie had turned and resumed her march toward her quarters.

"Your anger is unreasonable."

"People always say that when what they actually mean is that it's unreasonable not to see things their way. I guess you aliens aren't as different from us as you'd like to think!"

"I will escort you to your quarters, then, lady," he said tightly.

It was on the tip of her tongue to inform him she didn't need a damned escort when her 'quarters' were right down the same corridor they were presently following and, if he thought she was stupid enough she didn't see that for what it was—guard duty, regardless of what they'd said to the contrary, he was dead wrong. She decided to hold her tongue, however. She really *didn't* want to talk to him at the moment and the only way she could achieve that was to simply ignore his remarks.

He stopped her when they reached her quarters at long last by grasping her arm before she could stalk inside and leave him standing in the corridor. "I do not understand why you are so angry," he said, "but I beg pardon if I insulted you."

Cassie stared up at him for a long moment. "If you were as smart, and as perceptive, as you seem to think you are, you'd realize I was hurt not angry, but don't worry about it. I'll get over it. It's actually a good thing we had this conversation, I realize now. Forewarned is forearmed, after all."

Something flickered in his eyes. "I do not understand you."

"And you're never going to," Cassie said tiredly. "Not that it matters. Hopefully, I'll be leaving in a week or so and we can put all this behind us." She managed a brittle smile. "In the meanwhile, maybe we can muddle along and at least be civil. I'd actually appreciate it, though, if you'd assign someone else to keep an eye on me while I'm here. Natara's nice and I hardly noticed the leash, but if you feel like I should have a big, strapping guard, I'm actually partial to blonds if you have any."

Chapter Eleven

It was a crying shame there wasn't a fucking door on her quarters that she could slam in his arrogant face, Cassie thought angrily as she left him in the doorway, stalked across the room, and dropped into the chair. Curling her knees up, she twisted sideways in the chair and presented her back to the door, wishing she at least had the illusion of privacy.

She was as certain as she could be that she didn't have *real* privacy, that they were still being monitored, but she couldn't actually see the cameras—or whatever they used for surveillance—so she could *pretend* they weren't there. The open doors were another matter.

True, there weren't that many Atlanteans wandering about, at least not in this area, and she thought they were polite enough not to peer at her when they came by, but she still felt exposed and insecure not having a door to close and lock.

Raen stood outside her quarters for a few minutes after she'd left him and finally turned and left. She sighed dejectedly when she heard his footsteps fade down the corridor and finally dropped her head to rest it on her knees.

She'd meant it when she'd told him he'd done her a favor. He had. By making it clear how the Atlanteans in general felt about the natives of Earth, and how he in particular felt, he'd spared her from grief. She'd been deeply attracted to him, both on a physical level and a personal level. Even though she was obliged to admit to herself that she was also unnerved about the knowledge that he was an alien, she didn't think it would've been at all difficult to get past the differences—not for her. She would've wanted to try—*had* wanted to.

Fortunately, he'd made it clear that he was a lot more put off by her being alien than vice versa, which had also made it clear that, whether he was attracted to her or not, he wasn't hanging around her because he was actually interested. He was just watching her because it was his job, and probably still trying to wheedle whatever information out of her he could.

He was all Mr. Cool and collected business!

The urge to cry stung her eyes and nose, but she resolutely fought the urge down with the reflection that she couldn't give into the impulse with any expectation of privacy.

She was *such* a dolt! It was embarrassing to recall how flattered and breathless she had been when he'd offered to show her around!

What had she been thinking!

She hadn't *been* thinking, she realized glumly.

She heard footsteps along the corridor after a few minutes and her heart did a flip flop. She didn't turn around, but she strained to listen until the footsteps came even with her door and then continued onward without a pause. Slumping again when whoever it was had gone by, she uncurled and looked around the room for anything she might be able to use to cover the door. Finally, she got up and dragged a chair over to the doorway

to study the frame. As ancient as it was, the frame still fit very tightly to the wall, but she thought if she could find something thin enough, she could use it as a wedge.

Climbing down again, she prowled the room, looking for anything she might use for that purpose, even getting down on her hands and knees and examining under the bed. Finally, she went into the bathroom and searched it. She found a couple of rusted pins, one broken, that looked like they might originally have been intended as hair pins. It wasn't much, but she decided to give it a try.

Returning to the bedroom, she dragged the cover back and examined the bedding. Deciding to give up the sheet instead of the cover, she dragged everything off the bed and confiscated the sheet to use for a door curtain. It wasn't much, and it was aggravating as hell trying to work the pins into the tight crack between the doorframe and the wall, but she finally managed to pin the sheet in place.

She felt better immediately. At least now she didn't feel like everyone that walked by was staring at her in her 'cage'. Returning to the bed, she tossed the pillows back on top of the mattress, straightened the cover and climbed in, dragging the cover over her head. She was tired from the interminable council meeting, and the long, long walk outside and back.

And she was depressed.

Maybe she could just sleep until they let her go?

Then she could just pretend it had all been a bad dream.

* * * *

"That was well done," Jadin said flatly when Raen strode into the observation room.

Raen glared at him. "Shut up, Jadin," he snarled.

Jadin glanced at him in surprise but kept his peace as Raen moved to the viewing screen that showed Cassie's room and stared at it in grim faced silence for several moments before he turned to leave again.

"Claudius is blond," he said helpfully as Raen reached the door. "And he expressed an interest."

Raen halted abruptly and swiveled around to glare at his friend. With an effort, Jadin kept his expression bland. "Or Dione if you think that Claudius is too young to appeal to her. He is not attached ... as of yet."

Raen's eyes narrowed. "I will consider it," he responded coldly, turning again and leaving.

Jadin allowed himself a grin when Raen had left. "Oh, I know you will," he muttered to himself and chuckled.

* * * *

Cassie surprised herself by actually dozing off. She knew she hadn't slept long, though, when the clatter of dishes woke her.

"I have brought food, lady," Natara announced quietly when Cassie didn't acknowledge her presence.

"Thanks! Just leave it. I'll eat something later," Cassie muttered, rolling onto her other side and dismissing the girl.

"You are not ill?" Natara asked tentatively.

"No," Cassie retorted flatly. "I'm tired."

And she felt like a bitch when Natara left. Of course, that was taking a lot upon herself. She hadn't actually dragged the covers down to look at the girl. Just because she knew she'd snubbed Natara, it didn't necessarily follow that Natara knew it, or even that it bothered the girl if she did.

She discovered she couldn't go back to sleep after Natara had left, though.

Getting up, she looked the food over without a lot of interest and finally sat down and ate. She lived alone. She was used to eating alone. She didn't especially like to, though. It had been kind of nice to have Natara to chat with when she ate since there was no TV or stereo or radio to keep her company.

Despite the exercise she'd had earlier, she hadn't managed to work up much of an appetite—mostly because it was seafood again and she was already starting to hate seafood.

When she'd finished, she decided to test how much freedom she actually had and see if she could locate any of the others from the good ship *Clara Belle*. She wasn't afraid of getting lost, despite the enormity of the place and the fact that everything looked the same. She had the sheet/curtain to identify her quarters, and she thought the others were probably being housed fairly close by anyway.

She discovered she was right. She'd only gone about a quarter of a mile down the corridor when she heard their voices. Linda looked up when she paused in the doorway and smiled, waving her in.

She felt a little outdone when she realized all of them were there—as if it had been a prearranged meeting—and she was excluded. Then again, she was an outsider even among them, the only one not a member of their little diving club.

"I was just wondering if we should send out a search party for you," Linda said teasingly.

"I'm down the hall a ways. Is this an impromptu, or did I miss something?"

"We walked back together after the council meeting. I didn't realize you weren't with us until we were almost here."

"Oh," Cassie responded, relieved that she hadn't been snubbed and embarrassed that she'd jumped to the conclusion that she had been.

She was really feeling persecuted!

"Raen offered to show me around. We went out. The Atlantis has surfaced."

The announcement created a stir she hadn't anticipated.

"You're shitting me!" Jimmy exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "I wonder when they were planning on telling us?"

Cassie shrugged. "I don't think they actually have any plans to tell us anything, but they obviously weren't trying to keep it a secret either or I wouldn't have been allowed out. I know the way if y'all want to go out for a look around."

Everyone immediately got to their feet and surged toward the door. "It's just right down this corridor," she said, pointing out the direction, "but it's a long walk. This place is huge."

The men outstripped them fairly quickly. Cassie, Linda, and Shelly followed more slowly.

"So—what's the big guy like?" Shelly asked conversationally.

Cassie sent her a questioning look.

Shelly and Linda exchanged a knowing look that irritated her.

"Raen," Shelly clarified.

Cassie shrugged. "OK, I guess."

"I guess that means you're not going to share any of the juicy details," Linda said with wry amusement.

"There aren't any juicy details to share," Cassie said tartly. "We just went for a walk."

Shelly and Linda both looked surprised and then smug and then proceeded to rave about their guards—which they didn't seem to realize *were* guards. She tried to appear enthusiastic, but she couldn't help but feel uncomfortable, especially since she got the distinct impression that both women were more than a little fond of their 'watchdogs'.

"I'm glad you two seem to be enjoying your stay, at least," she said with an effort when they began to wind down.

"No, you're not. You're jealous," Shelly retorted, only half teasing.

Cassie smiled with an effort. "Ok, so I *am* a little envious, but we'll be leaving in a week or so. You really should be careful about becoming too attached."

Shelly and Linda exchanged another look, this time a more uncomfortable one. "But ... they live here," Linda pointed out. "It isn't like it would be all that hard to see them again—I mean, assuming Adan *wanted* to see me again."

Cassie tried not to look as unsettled as she felt. She didn't really know Linda or Shelly, after all. She'd spent the day with them, and then been confined with them, briefly, after they'd been captured, but that wasn't much of an acquaintance. It certainly wasn't enough to understand what made them tick. "As pretty and sweet as you are, he'd be dumb not to want to," she managed finally.

"But you don't think he will?" Linda asked flatly.

Cassie glanced at her in distress. "I didn't even meet him. How would I know?"

"You think you know something, though," Shelly said, anger threading her voice now.

Cassie sighed. "I just get the impression that they really don't like us—as a whole. You know?"

"Because you and Raen didn't click? Or because of something he said? Or someone else?"

Cassie bit her lip. "Look! Maybe I'm wrong—It's really easy *not* to think of them as being aliens, because they look so much like us But they are, which means *we're* aliens to them ... And I don't think they're having nearly as much trouble remembering we're aliens and not the same as them," she finished.

Shelly and Linda fell silent. Cassie felt guilty for spoiling their good mood, but she would've felt more guilty, she thought, if she'd just kept her mouth shut. She hated to think she might be contributing to them getting hurt just by saying nothing.

On the other hand, she didn't know, positively, that they were being played. Maybe it *was* her envy prompting her? Maybe the guys they'd been with actually liked them?

She was almost positive they'd been *ordered* to seduce them, but it didn't necessarily follow that they were completely cold blooded about it.

In any event, she thought glumly, it was probably a waste of breath to warn them. Forewarned wasn't actually forearmed when it came to emotions, regardless of what she'd said to Raen. Even knowing what she thought she did didn't change the way she

felt about him, and she was still distressed. Very likely, Shelly and Linda would be just as vulnerable to their emotions regardless of the warning.

Shelly and Linda had almost the same reaction when they emerged as she'd had, except they looked more stunned and frightened if possible. The men, she saw, if they'd been equally effected, had recovered enough to decide to do some exploring. Shelly and Linda seemed more inclined to retreat. She didn't really like walking around with that huge thing hovering above their heads herself, but when David and Jimmy came rushing back to inform them they'd found the *Clara Belle* docked only a short distance away, they all decided to walk down and have a look at it. Carl, Mark, and Ben were all aboard when they arrived, looking disgusted.

"I can't find anything wrong with it," Carl announced as her party joined the party on the boat, "but it isn't running."

"Whatever that thing is emitting," Mark muttered, pointing upward at the ship above them, "it's really fucked up the electronics."

Cassie settled on one of the benches, staring out at the clouds that still roiled in a circle around them. "They said we couldn't get through anyway."

Everyone else turned to study what they had been informed was the 'force field' surrounding them and cutting them off from the world.

"I see ships," Jimmy announced after a few minutes. "At least four—I think. Looks like aircraft carriers."

Everyone got up and moved to positions that would give them a better view.

"Jets, too," Shelly said in a small, frightened voice.

"My god!" David muttered. "We're surrounded by the US Navy, Air Force, and probably the fucking Marines, Army, Coast Guard, National Guard, and Homeland Security. We're never going to get out of here without getting shot!"

"Yeah," Jimmy agreed. "They'd drop a torpedo right in the middle of the *Clara Belle* even if we *could* get out."

"Well, this is just lovely!" Linda ground out angrily. "What the hell are we going to do?"

"Wave white sheets?" Shelly suggested uneasily.

"This is going to get really ugly," Carl muttered.

"*Going*?" Linda demanded. "It doesn't already look ugly to you?"

Carl turned to glare at her. "What do you expect me to do about it?"

She glared back at him for several moments and finally looked away. "Nothing. I'm not blaming you. I'm just saying it already looks really dangerous out there, and it isn't likely to get less dangerous."

"They're going to think *we're* aliens," Jimmy muttered. "Especially if they get a look at them between now and then."

"Maybe we could just sneak out when the aliens let us go?" Shelly suggested hopefully.

Carl gave her a look. "You don't honestly think we could slip past that ... armada out there? Because I can assure you that there's way the hell more of them out there than we can see. There probably isn't a square inch of water out there that doesn't have *something* sitting on it!"

"We'd be worse off trying it," Ben volunteered helpfully. "That would just *convince* them we were aliens. Or that we'd been brainwashed, or something, and were trying to spy for them."

"God! I wish I'd stayed home instead of deciding to come down and go diving!" Cassie muttered to no one in particular.

"Don't we all," Linda agreed. "Now we're stuck right in the middle of this, and I'm scared shitless, I don't mind telling you."

Mark sat down beside Cassie, glanced at her a couple of times and finally settled an arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry about getting you in to this," he said after a moment.

She glanced at him in surprise. She didn't try to pull away from him, though. It was actually kind of nice to have the illusion of protection. Instead, she settled more comfortably against him. "You didn't get me into this," she disputed. "I made the decision to come. Anyway, I don't think any of us would've left the dock if we'd had any clue what would happen," she added with wry amusement.

"I heard that!" David agreed.

None of them noticed Raen until he stopped on the dock beside the boat and even then Cassie wasn't certain how long he'd been standing there, watching them, before she finally glanced away from the threat in the distance and saw him. He was looking directly at her when she finally noticed him, though. A frisson of discomfort went through her. She tensed, struggled against the guilty urge to draw away from Mark, and finally conquered it.

"It does not work, now," he said finally, addressing Carl, who was still standing on the bridge of the boat. "The Andromeda Prime's drive interferes with electrical impulses. But it will work once the Andromeda pulls away."

"We'd already noticed," Mark responded in an unfriendly drawl, drawing Raen's gaze once more.

His expression was unreadable, but the long look that passed between the two men seemed fraught with challenge for all that. Finally, Raen transferred his attention to her and then looked away. "You are all invited as guests of the High Councilor this evening," he said coolly. "We will be celebrating the rise of Atlantis."

"Will this be formal? Or informal?" Mark asked snidely. "I only ask because I don't have a tux with me."

Cassie elbowed him in the ribs and sat up, putting a little distance between them.

"Don't be an ass!" Linda muttered.

A muscle worked in Raen's jaw. "Formal," he said finally. "You will be expected to be robed—but you can certainly come as you please." Bowing his head slightly, he turned and left.

"Invited to a party, my ass!" Mark muttered. "He came to make damned sure we didn't go any where."

"Being rude isn't helping anything," Cassie said pointedly.

Mark looked at her angrily. "Maybe not, but I don't like that guy."

"I think the feeling's mutual," Carl retorted as he dropped from the bridge onto the main deck. "God, I hope they've got something besides fish to eat!"

Everyone got up and followed him as he climbed off the boat and started back.

"That's just as rude as Mark's comment," Linda pointed out. "Does it look to you like they've got a lot to offer guests at the moment?"

"I feel like I'm in a cult," David muttered. "I feel stupid as hell in these damned robes!"

"You look stupid, too," Ben quipped.

"Well, you're purdy!" David shot back at him with an exaggerated leer, making a smacking noise at him.

Ben fluttered his eyes at David and minced a few steps, holding up the hem of his robe.

Everyone chuckled at their antics and began trying to contribute something silly that would help to dispel the gloom that had descended over them. Shelly and Linda linked arms and began to skip. Laughing, David and Ben joined them and skipped with them. After a moment, Carl, Jimmy, and Mark, looking a little uncomfortable, shrugged, linked arms with her and followed the first group, skipping.

"They'll think we've gone off the deep end," Cassie said, chuckling.

Carl grinned at her. "Maybe it'll make them uneasy enough to figure out a way to get us out of here quicker?"

"If you think that's a possibility," Cassie quipped and started singing, "We're off to see the Councilor"

Linda, then David, Ben, and Jimmy joined her. After a few moments, the others joined in and the entire party skipped and sang all the way to the door where they'd exited the ship, enjoying the strange looks the Atlanteans gave them as they danced past as much as the sense of connection the exercise in juvenile behavior gave them.

Cassie was more than a little breathless from trying to sing and skip at the same time by the time they got there, but she felt better than she had since they'd left the docks and sailed off into the 'bizarre zone'.

Their good spirits didn't last, unfortunately. Almost from the time they entered the ship and headed down the corridor to their quarters it began to leach away, but instead of parting and going their separate ways, by tacit agreement, they returned to Linda's quarters and spent the rest of the afternoon entertaining each other.

Maybe the silliness *had* been juvenile, Cassie reflected, but it seemed to have bonded them in a way they hadn't been before. They felt more comfortable with one another, relaxed enough to share life's most embarrassing moments, best and worst dates, greatest triumphs and biggest failures—in short, intimate details about themselves that strangers rarely shared, and in doing so they closed ranks and created a bond that was also a barrier between themselves and the Atlanteans.

Chapter Twelve

When servants arrived a couple of hours later to escort them to their quarters to prepare for the celebration, they all exchanged speaking glances, shrugged and followed them to their own quarters. They hadn't made any attempt to be quiet about their gathering, but Cassie still felt like the servants arriving together at Linda's quarters was telling—a strong indication that they were being closely monitored.

None of them argued with the suggestion that they prepare for the gathering either, although Cassie couldn't see a lot of point in it herself. There wasn't ten cents worth of difference between one robe and another—how would anyone know whether they'd gone to the trouble to bathe and change?

She did anyway, obliged to admit that she'd picked up a few streaks of dirt and stains while they'd been topside, and she'd certainly gotten in a work out when they'd skipped all the way back to the entrance to the ship. Who would've thought skipping would be such a work out?

When she'd bathed and changed, she ignored Natara's suggestion that she would escort Cassie to the gathering. Instead, she headed back to Linda's quarters and discovered everyone else had done the same, as if by prearranged agreement. When Shelly, the last to arrive, joined them, they left Linda's quarters and followed Natara.

The celebration, they discovered, was being held in the same auditorium as the council meeting had been earlier. Cassie wondered if it was because it was the only room large enough to hold so many or if it was the only room in a decent enough state for a party.

The benches had been rearranged along the outer walls and some in small groupings. A number of small tables had also been added. Dimly, beneath the murmur of voices, they could hear the strains of some sort of exotic music. As their group halted in the entrance to look around, they saw that servants were weaving in and out among the Atlanteans, carrying trays.

The room was crowded. A finger of uneasiness crawled along Cassie's spine as she saw how many Atlanteans were milling about. She wondered if this was all that was left of the populace or only a fraction of them. In either case, it was enough to make her feel very much an outsider.

Apparently it had the same effect on the others. They all exchanged uneasy glances and stayed by the door.

"There's a couple of unoccupied benches over there," Linda said after a moment, pointing.

Almost as one, they scurried toward the benches Linda had pointed out and settled in an uneasy cluster. A servant appeared a few moments after they'd settled, offering glasses filled with a purplish red liquid. Everyone took a glass and then just stared at it uneasily.

"You think it's safe to drink?" Shelly asked doubtfully. "I mean—it's alien stuff, isn't it?"

"Probably older than god, too," David put in.

"It smells like something alcoholic," Carl murmured speculatively. "Wine, maybe?"

"Marky should try it," Linda quipped with a snicker. "If he doesn't keel over in thirty minutes, the rest of us can try it."

"Ha, ha, very funny!" Mark responded.

Jimmy shrugged. "It looks like everybody else is drinking it," he said, tipping his head back and downing half the contents in one gulp while everybody gaped at him. He made a face when he swallowed, grasped his chest, and staggered a couple of steps, gasping hoarsely. Everyone stared at him in horror. He grinned after a moment. "Gotcha!"

"Asshole!" Cassie exclaimed in exasperation, but, like the others, she uttered a nervous chuckle.

Sliding a speculative glance at him, everyone else settled their glass without trying it. Cassie glanced around and laughed a little more easily when she saw, regardless of Linda's teasing suggestion, everyone had apparently decided to wait and see if Jimmy croaked before they tried the beverage.

Linda sent her a questioning look, then noticed no one else was drinking and laughed, too.

Two more servants appeared with trays laden with food. Everyone politely helped themselves from the trays and then just held it, unwilling to eat when they knew they'd want something to drink afterwards.

"Anyone got a watch?" Carl asked innocently.

Everyone burst out laughing, which drew the attention of all of the Atlanteans.

Everyone sobered instantly, exchanged glances, and then snickered at their private joke.

"Maybe they think it's bad manners to laugh in public?" Shelly speculated. "It's weird. They sure are quiet for people that are supposed to be celebrating."

Discomfort settled over Cassie. "Maybe they don't really feel that much like celebrating after what happened," she murmured.

"Yeah," David agreed. "This has more of the feel of a wake. Do you think we could cut out without creating some sort of 'incident'?"

"Thirty minutes is supposed to be long enough to be polite, isn't it?" Ben asked.

"That's *our* customs," Cassie said pointedly. "Who knows what theirs are."

Mark shrugged. "So we follow our customs. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd like something to eat before we go. It isn't like there's any place to stop and grab a bite."

"Good point," Carl and David agreed almost in unison.

A very good point, Cassie agreed wryly. She hadn't eaten much since they'd been taken, but then she'd had very little appetite. After the exercise earlier, it had returned with a vengeance and the discovery that the refreshments they'd been served actually tasted like beef only primed the pump. She took a cautious sip of her drink when she'd eaten the little square of what looked similar to a pizza roll. The beverage was sweet and definitely alcoholic in nature. As small a sip as she'd taken, it went right to her head.

"This has got a hell of a kick," Mark observed with obvious approval.

Jimmy, who was already working on his second glass, beamed at him drunkenly. "Sure does."

"You'd better eat something," Carl cautioned. "Otherwise we're liable to have to carry your skinny ass out of here."

Apparently they were being observed a lot more closely than they'd realized and it had been duly noted that they were determined to preserve a united front. They'd been clustered together in a tight little knot for about fifteen minutes and were just discussing whether they'd stayed long enough they could leave without insulting their hosts when Linda's sentinel, Adan, wandered up. She smiled up at him with a mixture of pleasure and uneasiness but kept her butt firmly planted on the bench. Within a few minutes, most of the other sentinels had wandered up to their group oh so casually and were struggling to make polite conversation.

Cassie shifted first in one direction and then the other as the Atlanteans joined them on the bench, and finally stood up when it grew too crowded for comfort. She glanced around as she did so and discovered Raen and the High Councilor bearing down on their little group. Apparently, although he'd seemed preoccupied with the female sentinel, Mark noticed their approach, too. He abandoned the woman and moved to stand beside Cassie as Raen and the High Councilor joined them, settling one hand possessively along her waist.

Raen's gaze flickered to the hand resting on her hip and then upward to her face before his gaze finally settled on Mark. Mark, who'd already downed two glasses of the alcoholic beverage, favored Raen with the 'good old boy' challenge, a slow grin calculated to be both insulting and provoking.

Cassie divided an uneasy glance between the two men, but then her attention was caught by the councilor. "Raen has been telling me that you had some suggestions of how we might handle this ... delicate situation we have found ourselves in ...?"

Cassie flicked a glance at Raen and then back at the councilor, keenly aware that Mark had stiffened. It took an effort to gather her wits, partially because of the drink she'd consumed, partly because of the antagonism she could sense between Mark and Raen, and partly because the question totally threw her. "He didn't seem to think much of my suggestions," she said finally.

The councilor smiled easily. "But then, he is a soldier, not a politician. I would like to hear your suggestions. Perhaps you would meet with me on the morrow?"

Cassie had lost all desire to try to work as a mediator. She didn't know why she'd suggested it to begin with.

Actually, she did know—it had been because of her empathy with their situation and because she'd felt so drawn to Raen. He'd made her feel the yawning chasm that loomed between herself and the Atlanteans, though, and she no longer felt either a connection to them in their plight or competent to advise them. "If you'd like," she responded a little stiltedly. "But I doubt you'll find any of my suggestions all that helpful."

The councilor's smile became a little strained. "Even so."

Cassie nodded in capitulation. "Then I'd be happy to, of course."

"Right now, though," Mark interjected, his hand tightening on her waist, "she's going to dance with me, aren't you? So, if you'll excuse us ...?"

It took an effort to keep from glancing at Mark in surprise, but Cassie thought she managed it well enough. "Dance?" she murmured in a low voice when they'd moved away from the others. "No one else is dancing."

Mark shrugged and grinned at her conspiratorially as he drew her into the circle of his arms. "So? Maybe they don't dance?"

The music that had been playing seemed designed more as background than for the pleasure of the listeners or for dancing. It was slow paced, though, and Cassie was willing enough—actually eager—for a distraction. She moved closer, allowing Mark to guide her in the steps of a slow dance.

"What was that about?" he asked, pulling her close enough they could talk quietly and at least hope they wouldn't be overheard.

Cassie felt her face redden with discomfort. "My bleeding heart," she responded uncomfortably. "I felt so sorry for them when I saw the state of destruction earlier. I guess I was thinking about September eleventh, the Tsunami that killed so many people, and then Katrina. You saw it. It's right up there with major disaster. I just wanted to try to be helpful—stupid, I guess."

Mark studied her a long moment and pulled her a little closer. "Misguided, maybe," he murmured, "but not stupid."

Cassie dropped her head to his shoulder, deciding she hadn't exactly been fair to Mark. So he'd acted like an asshole when they'd first been taken. Everybody had been scared.

She was *still* scared, except now she was just as afraid of what was going to happen once the Atlanteans released them as she was of the Atlanteans. If Homeland Security was involved, and she thought that was probably likely, then things could get really ugly for all of them. The horror stories she'd heard about them gave her the shivers.

She didn't think she could ever sufficiently regret the impulse that had inspired her to empathize with the Atlanteans. She had a bad feeling Homeland Security was going to make her *really* regret it, but since the councilor had asked her right in front of everybody she thought the possibility of the subject not coming up during questioning was unlikely now.

Linda joined them after a few minutes with Adan in tow. He looked uncomfortable as she tried to teach him the steps but grimly determined. Shelly dragged Jimmy out right behind them.

With the exception of Adan, none of the other Atlanteans were dancing.

"We still going to meet up at your place after the party?" Mark asked Linda when they'd moved closer together.

Linda looked undecided, vaguely disappointed, but finally nodded.

Carl tapped Mark on the back and cut in a few moments later and Cassie changed partners. "Aren't you important," Carl murmured as he drew her into his arms. "The High Councilor, no less, requesting a meeting."

"Maybe I should wait and just tell the whole gang at once so everybody can call me an idiot and chew me out," Cassie retorted.

He frowned but finally shrugged. "The chances are good that we're all going to catch hell for fraternizing with the 'enemy'," he responded dryly. "I've got a bad feeling about it."

"Me, too," Cassie said. "I think I could use another drink."

Carl chuckled. "I'm not sure that's a good idea—for any of us—but I could use one myself."

Releasing her, he glanced around for one of the servers and finally moved off in pursuit of one nearby who was headed in the opposite direction. Cassie had just had time to realize she'd been abandoned a lot further from their group than she liked when she felt someone move up close to her and looked up to discover it was Raen. Her heart, traitor that it was, instantly leapt and began to pound uncomfortably.

He nodded, his expression guarded. "Will you dance with me?"

Cassie was instantly conflicted. It would be downright rude to decline when she'd already danced with both Carl and Mark, and she was never comfortable about being rude, even when she felt it had been provoked, and that was certainly not the case now. She was suspicious of his motives, though, and wary of her own desire to yield to his request. Being around him at all wasn't a good idea, she knew. Dancing with him, allowing him to hold her close, was an even worse idea.

Her hesitation was just long enough to be pointed, unfortunately, which translated to rude, even though she hadn't wanted to be.

"Sorry, guy," David said, appearing abruptly at her elbow and grasping it possessively. "She already promised me this dance."

He drew her away before she had time to do more than glance at Raen apologetically. "What's going on?" Cassie asked quietly when he'd danced her far enough from Raen she thought he wouldn't overhear.

David grinned down at her. "Guerrilla warfare, I think. Don't tell me you haven't noticed the way they've been trying to separate all of us since we got here? I just figured if they had a reason for wanting to, we probably didn't want them to."

She had noticed, and it had made her uneasy. "This is a rescue then?" she asked, unable to resist grinning back at him.

"Hey! Don't tell me I don't have white knight written all over me!" he said, glancing down at his white robe pointedly.

Cassie chuckled. "You look more like a reject from the KKK."

He sent her a startled look and then burst out laughing since, although he was clearly more than half white from the lightness of his complexion, he was also, clearly, part black. "I hadn't thought about that. I knew there was a reason I hated these damned white robes. I thought it was because it made me feel like a choirboy, though."

"None of you look like choirboys, believe me," Cassie retorted.

He grinned at her suggestively. "Because we ain't?"

"Exactly my point. I *might* have believed those big, innocent looking green eyes of yours before the tales you told this afternoon, but certainly not now."

He shrugged, giving her a lopsided smile. "It's the Irish in me. What can I say?"

Cassie hadn't realized he was waltzing her determinedly back to the group until they met up with Carl. She took the glass he held out to her as David released her. "I think I'll make a foray for another glass of whatever-the-hell that is."

"I think we've stayed long enough to look sociable," Carl commented as he guided her back toward the benches they'd staked claim to and waited until she sat down between Jimmy and Ben. "I'm going to check with the others and see if they're ready to cut out."

Cassie was inclined to agree, especially since Raen obviously didn't mean to take her rejection earlier to heart. She was way too susceptible to him, and she knew it. She was afraid the only way she was going to be able to resist temptation was to avoid it.

Sipping her drink, she glanced around as casually as she could to see if she could spot him. Unfortunately, the moment she did, their gazes connected. Seeing intent in every line of his body as he started toward her, she drained her glass and surged to her feet abruptly. "You two coming?" she asked quickly, heading toward Carl and the others without waiting to see if either one of the two men were following.

Jimmy settled an arm heavily across her shoulders. "Sure thing, sweet thang!"

She staggered slightly under his weight and struggled to guide him in the right direction. "Jimmy's tanked," she announced as she reached the group. "We're heading back."

Jimmy grinned at everyone. Without another word, everyone turned to go. Carl, to Cassie's relief, moved up beside her and dragged Jimmy off of her. "You having problems, buddy? I'll give you a hand. You're about to flatten Cassie."

"I can walk zush fine by myself," Jimmy disputed.

"Actually, it's Cassie that's having a problem," Carl assured him in a loud whisper.

They'd managed to make it out the door before Raen caught up with them. Cassie had been so certain that he'd diverted when he saw her in retreat that it came as a complete shock to her when someone grasped her arm, and she looked up to discover that it was him. "We need to talk," he said implacably.

"So—talk," Mark answered for her as he moved away from the others, who'd stopped in the corridor to watch, and came to halt beside her, bristling at Raen.

Raen ignored him. "Privately," he said tightly.

Cassie glanced from Mark to Raen when he spoke again, unnerved by the hostility she felt emanating from both men and uncertain of what to do to prevent it from escalating. Unfortunately, the last drink she'd had hadn't left her brain fully functional. "I already told Councilor ... uh ... Councilor thingy I'd talk to him tomorrow."

Raen shook his head fractionally. "Alone."

Cassie frowned at him, suddenly certain he wanted to take up their earlier dispute, but as reckless as she was feeling, she didn't want to argue with him in front of the others, fearful it would bring everyone into the argument and things could get ugly.

Especially when Mark was already feeling antagonistic towards the Atlantean.

She glanced at the group waiting in the hallway and then up at Mark. "It's OK. Y'all go ahead. I'll catch up with you in a few minutes."

"You don't have to talk to him if you don't want to," Mark said stubbornly.

She smiled at Mark with an effort. "I know. I'll just be a minute. OK?"

Mark looked like he wanted to argue with her about it, but finally shrugged and rejoined the others. "If you aren't there pretty quick, we'll come looking for you," Carl said, giving Raen a challenging look before the party turned and headed down the corridor.

Cassie watched them until they'd moved some distance down the hall and then turned to look at Raen questioningly. She saw that he was watching the group, as well, his expression hard. He glanced down at her after a moment. "Not here," he said at the questioning look in her eyes, leading her back into the room they'd just left.

Surprised, feeling a mixture of both relief and disappointment, Cassie followed him without argument as he threaded his way through the room, deciding he must have intended for her to talk to the councilor after all. It wasn't until they'd passed through a door on the other side and she discovered they were in an entirely different corridor that it dawned on her that she might have been wrong.

"Where are we going?" she asked abruptly.

He glanced down at her. "There," he said, pointing down the corridor.

"I thought the councilor said he wanted to talk to me tomorrow?" Cassie said questioningly, thoroughly confused by now.

"He did," Raen responded, halting before a door that slid open as they stopped in front of it.

"Well then ...?" Cassie began as she followed him inside, breaking off when she discovered the room they'd entered was someone's quarters, not the meeting chamber she'd expected. She glanced at the door in consternation as it slid shut behind them and then up at Raen. "You said you wanted to talk," she said, realizing abruptly as he shifted closer until he was looming over her that he hadn't said anything about the councilor. She'd jumped to that conclusion herself. "I'm confused," she said finally.

His gaze flickered over her face. "Then we have that, at least, in common."

Chapter Thirteen

She was more than a little confused, Raen saw. He hadn't realized she'd had enough of the *fermente`* to impair her judgment, but he supposed he should have. She would never have agreed to come with him otherwise.

His own judgment was not to be relied upon if it came to that. He'd drank far more than he was accustomed to, than he'd intended to, as he'd watched her flirting with first one and then another of the native men. If his judgment hadn't been impaired, he would not have had to struggle with the urge to plant his fist in the middle of Mark's face. He would not have welcomed the possibility that Mark would lose his head and take a swing at him so that he could pound him into mush without running the risk of being imprisoned for provoking the fight.

He would not have interfered when she had chosen to go with Mark and the others.

It was the female's decision, and she had made hers.

He would not be staring down at her now feeling like a stupid oaf because none of the things he had rehearsed in his mind to say to her sounded nearly as clever, or as sound an argument to him now as it had when he had composed the thoughts.

It was allowable to flirt, encouraged even. It was allowable to display his prowess as a warrior, his cleverness, his strength.

It wasn't allowable to petition the female or pressure her in any way to choose him above the one she had already settled upon.

If she complained he would be disciplined, very likely confined until she and the others left, but he realized he didn't give a damn. If he did nothing, it would not matter anyway.

He would at least know if she had rejected him because she felt none of the things he did, or if it was because he was Andromedan.

"You said you wanted to talk," she prompted after a moment.

He lifted a hand and hooked her jaw in the crook of his thumb and forefinger to keep her from turning her face away as he lowered his head to hers. "I lied," he murmured a breath away from her lips, realizing only when he said it that he had, and not only to her. This, he thought as he covered her mouth with his own, was what he'd intended all along.

A jolt went through Cassie as she felt the brush of his lips against hers and then heat flooded her as his mouth settled possessively over hers. The vague floating sensation from the wine she'd drank intensified to swirling darkness as his tongue skated along her lips and delved inside her mouth. For a handful of frantic heartbeats, she was suspended by surprise and confusion and reluctance, caught by the certain knowledge that she was lost if she allowed him to kiss her as he had before.

The lure of pleasure was far stronger than her will to resist, however, and even as he invaded her senses with his touch and taste, she lost the battle, curling her fingers into his robe instead of thrusting away from him. As if he sensed that silent yielding, he

released his grip on her jaw and drew her closer, caging her with his arms. She uttered a sound of need, of surrender into his mouth as he kissed her more deeply, with more fervor, sucking lightly on her mouth as he stroked her tongue with his own. Weakness flowed through her in the wake of the heat that poured through her veins. She curled her fingers more tightly into his robe, clinging to fight the dizziness as well as the heaviness that settled over her, struggling to breathe when there didn't seem to be enough air in the world anymore.

And still regret filled her as he broke the contact, lifting his head to study her face. Panting for breath, she lifted her eyelids with an effort to stare up at his face. A shiver skated through her at the tumultuous fire she saw in his eyes, a quiver of anticipation, hopefulness.

He slipped his hands to her face, settling his palms along her cheeks. "Choose me, Cassie," he murmured huskily. "I can give you more."

Drugged by her burning need, utter confusion filled her as she stared up at him. More? Another shiver went through her. Licking her lips, she lifted them in supplication. Delight filled her with a roaring blaze as he seized upon her offering hungrily, greedily taking what she offered up and demanding more. The feel of his mouth on hers, the heat of it, gave rise to a desperate hunger of her own.

His hands moved her as he explored her mouth with far more possessiveness than before, coaxing her tongue into his mouth to suckle on it and sending jolt after jolt of heady pleasure through her. His hands alternately stroked along her back and pressed her closer as he moved restlessly against her. The chill of the air against her overheated body as he dragged her robe upwards created an eruption of pebbly skin along her bare body.

She shivered as he pulled away long enough to drag it over her head and toss it aside, and then he drew her tightly against him again, dispelling the chill with the heat of his body, his hands, his mouth. She slid her hands up his chest to loop her arms around his neck as he drew her close again, threading her fingers through his dark hair, stroking the silky mane with delight at the cool, sleekness of it against her palms and fingers.

He uttered a groan low in his chest. A shudder rippled through him. Lifting her off her feet, he moved to the bed in three quick strides and tumbled onto the mattress with her. Breaking away from her, he reached back to grasp his robe and hauled it off over his head, stripping it from his arms and flinging it aside. "Where?" he muttered hoarsely as he explored her face and throat with his mouth. "Tell me where to touch you to give you pleasure."

She was in no state of mind to formulate words and certainly not to give him directions. She'd lost the facility for speech or much above primal thought from the moment he kissed her. "Everywhere," she gasped dizzily, of far more mind to demand he enter her right then and dispense with any further foreplay.

She changed her mind when he wove his way downward and covered the tip of one breast with his mouth, surging upward to meet his caress when an electric current of pleasure sizzled along every nerve ending and drew her womb into a hard knot. She gasped, shuddering as he teased the turgid tip with his tongue and then sucked on it, clasping his head tightly to her one moment and stroking her hands over his head and along his broad shoulders and back feverishly the next. By the time he'd made his way over to her other breast, she was beyond reason. All she could think about was mounting the engorged flesh surging against her thigh instead of where she needed it. Struggling

with his weight until she managed to wrap her thighs around his waist, she groped between them in search of his cock.

She couldn't reach it, damn it all!

"Raen!" she gasped, planting her palm in the middle of his forehead and shoving him away from her breast. He surged upward, gasping, staring at her uncomprehendingly as she undulated against him in an effort to wiggle downward and impale herself on his shaft. He ground his teeth as she caught hold of his cock at last and stroked it and then guided it along her cleft.

Shifting upward abruptly as he felt the moist heat of her sex close around the head of his cock, he curled his hips to penetrate her. She fell back against the bed, groaning as she felt him surging against her, stretching her—turning her inside out as her flesh refused to yield to him.

"God!" she gasped, reaching between them to stretch her flesh for him, shuddering as she felt his cock slipping between her fingers as he delved her—too shallowly to give her any relief. They struggled against one another, heaving, pressing until sweat slickened their skin and they were slipping against one another one moment and clinging the next.

He stopped after a few moments, quivering all over with the effort of restraint. "I will hurt you if I do not stop," he gasped hoarsely.

"I will hurt you if you do," Cassie growled, her heart hammering so hard in her chest from frustrated need that she felt as if she would black out.

He heaved upward abruptly, disengaging their bodies and shoving himself downward. Before she could object, before she'd entirely grasped what he meant to do, he thrust her thighs wide and covered her sex with his mouth. A shockwave of intense sensation rolled over her as she felt the lathe of his tongue along her cleft and then connecting with her clit. She groaned, bucked against him. He caught her hips, holding her for his mouth as he lathed and suckled at her burning flesh until she was sobbing for breath and torn between the urge to make him stop and the equal demand of her body to yield to the explosive climax she felt building inside of her.

She almost wept when he did stop. Lifting away from her, he crawled over her body once more, aligned his shaft with her opening and curled his hips to penetrate her, pressing steadily against her until he'd breached the mouth of her sex. When he withdrew slightly and thrust again, she felt him sinking slowly deeper and deeper inside of her, felt the friction of his passage along her channel in waves of intense pleasure. "Mmm," she moaned, lifting her arms and legs and locking them around him to counter his thrusts until he'd filled her to capacity, stretched her almost to the point of pain.

Dropping her feet to the mattress as he withdrew, she met his next thrust, focused inwardly as she felt her body rising, tightening, preparing to take the leap into ecstasy. She gasped in a harsh breath and held it as she reached the precipice and teetered, struggling to hold it off just a few more moments to enjoy the pleasurable glide of his flesh along her channel. She lost her hold on it as he began to thrust faster, slamming into her in jolts that pushed her control beyond her reach, exploding in glorious waves of rapture as her climax hit her with such force that it dragged keen cries from her.

He shuddered as her body began to convulse and then surged into her faster until he found his own quaking release.

Gasping for breath, shuddering at the quakes that continued to rip through him, he leaned heavily against her, struggling to catch his breath and gather enough strength to move off of her. Finally, he heaved himself to one side and tipped onto the bed beside her.

That was certainly 'more', Cassie thought with an inward smile, more than she'd ever had. She'd thought for several panicked moments, in point of fact, that it was more than she could handle. Nearly comatose in the aftermath, she allowed herself to drift lazily while her heart and breath slowly calmed until she could breathe more easily.

She groaned as he groped her until his hand settled on her shoulder and he dragged her over to face him. Ignoring her protest, he pulled her against him and sought her mouth, kissing her briefly before he released her.

Sighing in repletion, Cassie rolled away again and was just trying to decide whether to get up and seek her own bed or stay where she was when she heard a voice, dimly, in the distance calling her name. A frown creased her brow. The moment the call came again, however, nearer, more distinctly, her brain shot into overdrive. She bolted upright.

"Oh ... my ... god!" she exclaimed, shooting out of the bed before Raen, who made a grab for her, could stop her.

The robe she dragged over her head wasn't hers, she discovered when the hem hit the floor and puddled around her. "Shit!" she exclaimed, dragging it off again and diving for the other robe. "I have to go!" she added after a moment's struggle with the robe, throwing an apologetic glance in Raen's direction even as she headed for the door. "Sorry!"

Thankfully, it opened as she rushed toward it, otherwise she would've flattened herself against it.

"Cassie!" Raen growled as she darted out the door.

She flicked a quick glance at him. "I have to go," she said again, frantically combing her wild hair with her fingers as she turned away and rushed down the corridor, trying to remember which door they'd entered the corridor from.

She'd completely forgotten that the celebration was still in full swing when she'd followed Raen out. She found the door and tumbled through it before she realized her mistake, drawing the gazes of around a dozen Atlanteans. Guilty color rushed into her cheeks. With an effort, praying her hair wasn't standing on end, Cassie nodded politely and headed for the other door where, she discovered, Mark, Carl, Ben, and David were standing—bellowing for her.

Feeling pretty much the same as she'd felt when she was a child that had wandered off when she shouldn't have, Cassie hurried toward them in the forlorn hope of heading off anything any more embarrassing.

She knew the moment they spied her and looked her over that she didn't pass muster. Mark bristled instantly, surging forward as if he had every intention of finding Raen and trying to knock him senseless. Fortunately, Carl and David had their wits about them and managed to capture him and escort him out before he could commit folly. Cassie's embarrassment deepened as she joined the men in the corridor, but her anger rose as they all gave her chiding looks. Glaring at them, she stalked past them and led the way back. Instead of heading for Linda's quarters, however, she ducked behind the sheet covering her own door and headed for the shower.

She could feel cum slowly sliding down her thighs and knew she didn't just *look* as if she was fresh fucked. She smelled of sex.

Contrary to all reason, an aftershock of pleasure went through her at the thought.

Dismissing it with an effort, refusing to look in the mirror to see just how bad she looked, she adjusted the shower and climbed in. Someone—Natara she had to suppose—had been thoughtful enough to provide her with soap and cloths, and she felt far more refreshed when she emerged from the shower a short time later than she'd felt before when she'd had nothing to bathe with but water.

The thoughtful someone had also provided a comb, and she raked the tangles from her wet hair when she'd dried off. Unfortunately, that was the extent of the little gifts. She could put her robe back on, or the swimming suit she'd left drying across the sink. Natara had taken the other robe with her when she'd dressed for the celebration.

She stared down at it but finally decided it didn't look as rumpled as she'd first thought.

The question was, did she feel up to joining everyone in Linda's quarters and facing the music now? Or would she rather wait until later?

She'd rather wait until never, she decided. It dawned on her abruptly, though, that Raen had looked downright furious when she'd leapt from the bed and dashed out.

Would he come looking for her, she wondered?

And, if he did, did she want to be found?

She decided she wasn't currently up to a confrontation with Raen and left her room.

As she'd expected, everyone knew what she'd been up to instead of 'talking' to Raen, and everyone eyed her with disapproval when she went in. Tamping her embarrassment and guilt, she glared at them. "Ok. Anybody here that didn't fuck their guard, raise your hand! Because I *know* you did, because they were sent in specifically to seduce you!"

Everybody exchanged vaguely guilty glances.

Jimmy raised his hand.

She ignored Jimmy. "Then you can stop looking at me like I just committed the crime of the century and you're all innocent!" she snapped.

"What did he want to talk to you about?" Jimmy piped up.

Linda uttered a snorting laugh and clapped a hand over her mouth when Cassie glared at both her and Jimmy. "I don't know," she said crossly, feeling a smile abruptly tug at her lips as she continued, "We didn't get around to that."

Carl frowned at her thoughtfully. "How do you know they were sent to seduce us?"

Cassie sighed, glanced around for a place to sit, and finally just settled on the floor since there was only the bed and one chair and both were occupied—Linda and Shelly sitting up in the bed with their backs against the wall, Mark sprawled length ways along the other end of the bed, and Carl in the chair. "They had knowledge they wouldn't have had if they weren't listening to us. And Linda and Shelly had been trying to talk me into trying to seduce Raen. Then eight guards came in—five females and three males—and separated us. I *deduced* it."

"They're listening to us?" Shelly gasped indignantly.

"Watching, too, I imagine," Cassie retorted irritably.

Shelly and Linda exchanged uncomfortable glances. The men looked uncomfortable for that matter—except for Mark.

He was probably ‘in’ to exhibitionism, Cassie thought irritably.

“We should have thought of that ourselves,” Carl said with disgust. “It’s not like they don’t have surveillance cameras everywhere these days.”

“Maybe I would’ve thought about it,” Linda said tartly, “except I’m not used to being spied on.”

“Yeah!” Shelly seconded her. “I hope to hell they enjoyed the show.”

“I’m sure they did,” Mark retorted.

Shelly grabbed a pillow and threw it at him. Catching it, he propped it beneath his head and smiled at her provokingly.

She glared at him for several moments and finally, apparently, decided to ignore him. “I guess this means we should just forget about the plans we were discussing earlier.”

Carl shrugged. “Guess so. It’s just as well. If they weren’t sure we couldn’t leave they would never have allowed us to roam around.”

“So we’re still basically prisoners even though that guy said they were satisfied and we could leave?”

Cassie studied Shelly sympathetically. “We didn’t magically become Atlanteans, and I don’t think they’ve ever liked or trusted humans. They’re not going to start now.”

Linda looked like she might cry for several moments but finally mastered the urge. She cleared her throat after a moment. “Do you think that means they really aren’t going to let us go?”

Cassie frowned. “I guess if they wanted to kill us they would’ve already. I don’t know why they’re keeping us, but they must have some reason. Maybe they think they’ll find out more about us by observing us. When they’ve learned all they want to, I guess they’ll let us go.”

“The old guy said they were trying to fix the Atlantis and when they had it fixed they’d let us go. You don’t think he was telling the truth?”

Cassie shrugged. “He’s a politician, Shelly. They *never* tell the truth.”

“I never thought I’d miss being alone,” Linda said presently, “but I do now. At least I had privacy and I only had to worry about burglars and serial rapists and that sort of thing.”

“I think we should try to stick together as much as possible,” David said. “No judgment on what happened tonight, Cassie. Like you said, we all fell for it, but I still think it would be best to try to avoid that kind of situation.”

“I didn’t fall for it,” Jimmy volunteered.

Everyone glanced at him irritably. “David’s right,” Carl agreed, “It isn’t much protection, but it’s about all we can offer each other. At least, if we stick together, we’ll know if anyone goes missing, and I don’t see making it easy for them. All in favor?”

Shelly was the first to raise her hand. Linda and Cassie and Jimmy held theirs up next. Ben and Mark exchanged a long look and finally lifted theirs, as well, though more reluctantly.

Carl nodded and pushed himself up from the chair. “I guess here is as good a place as any—unless you object, Linda?”

Linda shrugged. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

"We might as well make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Volunteers to get mattresses and bedding?"

"My room's next door," Shelly said.

"And mine on the opposite side," David added. "I think two extra mattresses are about all we're going to get in here. This is going to get cozy."

Carl shrugged. "We ought to take turns as look out anyway. Two to a bed and somebody will have to take the floor, or one bed can be a *really* cozy threesome. Cassie, Linda, and Shelly can grab the bedding and we can get the mattresses."

Cassie rose stiffly from the floor as Linda and Shelly slid off the bed and they headed down the corridor to start collecting what they could for comfort.

"I wish we at least had doors on the bathroom and the outer room. I know there wouldn't be any real privacy if they're watching, but it would feel like we had some anyway—besides not having them stare at us when they walk by like we're part of the freak show," Linda said when they'd returned and piled the bedding up.

The comment reminded Cassie that she'd caught Natara coming out of a hidden door. "Does your room have a hidden door?"

Linda stared at her blankly. "Not that I know of."

"I didn't know about the one in my room, either, until I saw Natara coming out of it. We should check."

They split up, each taking a wall, and moved along it carefully examining any cracks they found and finally began to move along the wall tapping on it and listening for a hollow ring. Cassie found the door, not surprisingly, in almost the same position as the one in her room.

"Does it swing in or out?" Carl asked when he discovered what they were doing.

"Neither. It slides into the wall."

"There'll be no blocking it then," he said in disgust. "Unless we can figure out how to jam it."

They decided to move the mattresses as far from the opening as they could and then took the chair and settled it so that it was more or less facing both the door to the corridor and the hidden door. Cassie had collected her 'curtain' and pins from the door of her room, and she and Linda covered the bathroom door with it.

"Nothing says prison like no privacy," Linda muttered glumly. "If I ever get back home, I'm never, ever going to complain about living alone again," she added.

Shelly nodded. "I'll bet my mom's worried sick. She was convinced as soon as I moved out to my own place I'd be murdered. I guess everybody thinks we were lost at sea."

Cassie stared at her, unnerved that she'd voiced that aloud when she knew *they* were listening. "Search and rescue would be out looking for us when we didn't get back as expected," she said pointedly. "I imagine they would've spotted the boat before the Atlanteans pulled it in. They will have figured out we're here."

The comment went right over Shelly's head. "I doubt that'll make her feel any better."

"Maybe not, but a *lot* of people will know we're here. They'll be expecting the Atlanteans to let us go, and, if they don't, they'll hold them accountable."

"I think we should all take a walk out to the boat first thing tomorrow," Carl interjected before Shelly could say anything else. "The walk and the fresh air are bound to be healthy for us," he added pointedly.

Cassie nodded but frowned. "I'm supposed to talk with the councilor tomorrow," she reminded him.

He shrugged. "He didn't mention a specific time, did he? You could do that after we get back."

She forced a bright smile, relieved that they meant to help coach her on what she should and shouldn't say. "That's actually a great idea," she said with forced enthusiasm. "It'll take our minds off our troubles. Maybe we could even take lunch and have a picnic?"

It felt strange bedding down in one room with so many people, but it was oddly comforting, too. Deep down, she knew they were probably no safer at all than they had been before. They were in the midst of beings they knew nothing about, and they had no weapons to defend themselves, but the primal sense that there was safety in numbers still made her feel more secure.

She hadn't allowed herself to dwell on what had happened between her and Raen, but the moment she lay down and tried to compose her mind for sleep the thoughts crept into her mind.

It would've been nice if she could've just taken it at face value, considered it no more than a 'heat of the moment' sort of thing that had been mutually gratifying even if it wasn't meaningful sex. Unfortunately, she couldn't delude herself that it had been either one. He'd meant to have sex with her when he'd separated her from the others, she decided. That was why he'd been so insistent that they needed to be alone.

She just wished she understood the way his mind worked well enough to figure out what his motives had been.

Chapter Fourteen

Raen stared at the ceiling after Cassie had gone, wrestling with his temper until the urge to go after her finally left him. He'd already fucked up royally, he thought in disgust. There was no sense in making matters worse by creating a scene and making more of a fool out of himself.

Horrendous disappointment settled in his gut in a knot, and wounded pride. It didn't comfort him one iota to try to blame his behavior on the *fermente`* he'd consumed. He'd still made a complete fool out of himself *and* flouted convention by trying to push her into choosing.

Not that he gave a gods bedamned if everyone looked down their noses at him!

Wryly, he finally admitted that he wouldn't have if he'd succeeded. It was going to be a little harder to take since he hadn't.

Anger welled inside of him again at that thought. She'd helped him make a fool out of himself, allowing him to think she had agreed to consider him when she'd only been interested in a casual coupling.

Not that he had anything against that ordinarily, but he couldn't pretend, even to himself, that it had been casual for him. If all he'd wanted was casual sex, he would've steered clear of Cassie.

He dropped an arm across his eyes after a time, hoping it would help to shut out the images that were plaguing him and making it impossible to think rationally. It didn't help. The moment he sealed himself inside his mind, it seemed to amplify the images, and he was so aroused by them he couldn't think of anything else.

Angry, aching with need, and discomfited by the unfamiliar emotions roiling inside of him, he sat up and moved to the edge of the bed after a little while. Should he just abandon the plan, he wondered in self-disgust, since it seemed doomed to failure anyway?

His gut answered that question, twisting in protest the moment it entered his mind. The problem, he decided, was that he wasn't accustomed to losing. From the time he'd left the academy of learning, he'd managed to get everything he'd gone after—which was why he was the youngest man who'd ever held the position he currently held.

It was also why he'd been set aside, he reminded himself wryly.

Kira had been notoriously fickle even when he'd first seen her and decided he wanted her. He should've known better than to set his sights on a woman like that, but he was an arrogant asshole, he supposed. And she'd been beautiful and desirable, more so, he thought wryly, because she'd seemed unattainable. She'd had plenty of lovers, but she hadn't chosen, and he'd been determined she *would* chose him. He'd finally won her by refusing to be her casual lover, a ploy he'd congratulated himself over at the time.

And then she'd 'gotten even' with him for being so difficult by choosing a second and third. *That* had rankled. As commonplace as it was, there were just as many who considered a single union satisfactory. It had not, in fact, occurred to him that she wouldn't be satisfied only with him—though he realized it should have given her history

of taking and discarding lovers. Although he'd come to appreciate his 'brothers', though, he'd still resented sharing Kira with them.

It occurred to him forcefully that he was probably hell bent on making as big a mistake as he'd already made, setting his sights on Cassie when she wasn't even Atlantean. Unfortunately, he didn't think he was going to be able to rely on the rational side of his brain any more this time than he had the last. He wanted. He'd tried to convince himself he didn't and he'd been doing a fair job of it right up until he'd seen the interest in the eyes of many of his fellow Atlanteans and watched the way the males of her tribe swarmed around her. The certainty that she was going to chose another without even considering him had made him feel sick to his stomach.

Unfortunately, it had also made him feel desperate and that had made him stupid.

It would've been better to have made her want him and withheld his favors until she decided she would have to chose him if she was to get him. It would have been better to have snagged her interest and performed the mating ritual of enticement, flirtation, and display.

Now he had nothing to work with beyond the possibility that he'd so dazzled her with his prowess as a lover that she would not be able to resist another taste—which would allow him to withhold and still ensnare her.

Unfortunately, he had a very bad feeling that he had not dazzled her. He might have been more convinced if she had not bolted from his bed directly afterward and rushed off.

He would at least have had another chance to impress her if she hadn't.

As it was, all he could think about now was that their coupling hadn't gone nearly as smoothly as he'd thought it would. It was bad enough that he had been nervous already, and then too aroused himself to think straight, but, added to that, he hadn't realized until he'd had her in his bed that he didn't have a fucking clue if the things that worked with Atlantean women would work as well with her. Just because they looked virtually the same didn't mean everything on their body was the same and that what gave an Atlantean female pleasure would please her.

It also disturbed him that he'd had so much difficulty mounting her—which was where things had gotten really awkward and he'd begun to feel as graceless and inept as an untried youth with his first woman. She was small, and he would've liked to think that it had only been that, but he had a bad feeling that she had not been as desirous as he was or she would've been wet enough for him that he wouldn't have had so much trouble.

Time wasn't on his side. He had a few weeks to either convince her to choose him, or convince himself he didn't want her to choose him, and he was fairly certain he wasn't going to manage either one.

He knew damned well he wasn't going to be able to court her if he couldn't separate her from the others. He was already at a disadvantage because he didn't know or understand their customs of courtship; he was, to all intents and purposes, her enemy and alien to her—which certainly didn't earn points in his favor; and he was anxious to the point of awkwardness.

Maybe, he thought irritably, his time with Kira, and being set aside, had demolished his self-confidence—it certainly hadn't done anything to boost his ego—but he was fairly certain that wasn't entirely the case. It was *her*. He couldn't keep his wits

about him when he was around her, and he was so wary of making a fool out of himself that he couldn't relax enough to try to impress her with his wit and charm.

In fact, charm completely deserted him every time he laid eyes on her and he felt as wooden as a block.

After a time, he pushed himself up from the bed and crossed the room to his computer, calling up the data Mercurios' department had been compiling. A better understanding of their mating rituals was bound to help him, he reasoned, even if it didn't help him to understand her better.

* * * *

Looking completely unruffled and unsurprised, the servants brought breakfast for all of them to Linda's room the following morning. Apparently, they—the Atlanteans—hadn't considered it viable to try to pretend they weren't monitoring their 'guests'.

Natara informed Cassie that High Councilor det Ophelia was expecting her as soon as she had eaten.

Cassie's heart sank. They'd effectively nixed the possibility that she could discuss the matter with the group privately beforehand and prepare for the questioning. It took an effort to smile and pretend she wasn't upset about it. "I guess you guys will have to go without me. If it doesn't take too long I'll meet you by the boat."

"We'll wait for you here," David said. "No point in going if we can't all go together, right?"

When they asked for food they could carry with them to picnic, the servants smiled and said they'd be happy to serve them where ever they preferred to eat.

"In that case," Carl said evenly. "We'll just eat when we get back. We wouldn't want to put y'all to any extra trouble on our account."

The servants looked unsettled about that. Natara forced a smile. "It would be no trouble at all."

"Thanks, but I insist," Carl repeated.

None of the servants seemed to know how to get around that. Finally, they simply bowed politely and left.

"They'll show up at the boat, sure as hell," David muttered.

Carl exchanged a speaking glance with him but managed an off handed shrug. "We'll just wait to go after the noon meal. Cassie's liable to be tied up a while anyway, and we don't want to leave her behind while we're out having fun."

Breakfast consisted of some fruit-like substances, a variety, although none of it was actually identifiable as fruit any of them were familiar with.

"How'd they get fruit? That's what I'd like to know," Jimmy muttered.

"They must have gotten the synthesizers working," Cassie said. "I wonder what kind of synthesized fruit this is? Anybody ever had anything like it?"

"Synthesizers?" Linda prompted.

"Natara told me they synthesized meat instead of keeping animals for food. I guess if they can do that they can synthesize anything. But I still wonder where the fruit came from. You think it's from their home world?"

"They *grow* meat?" David demanded, obviously revolted.

"I take it you aren't a vegetarian?" Cassie observed, amused. "We grow human skin and even organs now. I'm sure it's the same principle, just a different purpose. I actually like the idea. Just think what it would do for our environment if we did that

instead of keeping animals? To say nothing about it being a lot safer to eat—no E. coli problems or mad cow disease.”

“No avian flu either,” Linda added.

“No jobs for the people that make their living that way, either,” Carl said.

“True, but there’s no way to make progress if people can’t be more flexible. New jobs would be created. That’s the same as saying we shouldn’t go to electric cars because it would cost jobs in the oil industry. What we need is for our government to get up off their fat asses and make themselves useful for a change. If they’re so hot to control everything, they could be busy coming up with new jobs for people to make a living at and still protect everybody by shutting down the jobs that are ruining our environment,” Cassie pointed out.

“They control too damned much as it is,” Carl snapped. “I’m sure as hell not in favor of giving them any more control.”

“He’s got you there,” Linda said. “The whole country is going to rack and ruin since *that* man took office! It’s like living in a police state already—and the ‘you know who’ is like the Gestapo. Complain out loud and you’re liable to end up in the Prez’s private torture camp down south, never to be seen or heard from again.”

“Good point,” Cassie said wryly. “Well, maybe if they eased their stranglehold, *people* would be able to come up with the new jobs?”

“While they’re commuting between their second and third jobs, I guess?”

“Rich people could do it. They’re always looking for ways to get richer.”

“Except they guard their pennies as if it was their last cent.”

“OK. It’s hopeless,” Cassie agreed. “Since I can’t save the world, I guess I’ll go take a shower and see what I can do to help finish it off.”

“That’s the spirit!” Linda said with a sardonic chuckle. “We might not be good at much, but we’re great at fucking things up.”

* * * *

Despite Cassie’s efforts at flippancy, she had a knot of dread in her stomach about the size of a bowling ball when she arrived at the High Councilor’s private audience chamber.

It didn’t help to discover Raen waiting. He was standing stiffly at attention and she couldn’t decide if that meant he was there on guard duty, or if he was actually laying in wait for her.

She sent him an assessing glance, hoping to read something in his expression that would give her some clue of how to behave and what to say. His expression was carefully neutral, though. Deciding that neutral was better than angry, she smiled at him tentatively. “Sorry about last night.”

Something flickered in his eyes, but his expression only tightened. He looked as if he was wrestling for something to say, but the door opened before he’d formulated whatever it was on his mind.

Feeling both relieved and vaguely disappointed, Cassie returned the councilor’s greeting and entered at his invitation. Raen followed her inside.

Not that it made that much difference, she supposed. Obviously, he and the councilor had already discussed what she’d said or she wouldn’t be here now, so if she tried to say anything differently the councilor would know.

It still intensified her nervousness.

There was a woman already in the Councilor's office, she discovered. She looked to be around her age—maybe a few years older—and her bearing was definitely military even if not for the fact that the seamless, one piece suit she was wearing looked like a uniform.

She was going to have to learn, some day, how to curb her impulsiveness—assuming she got the chance. Given the way the 'Gestapo' worked these days, she was liable to find herself charged with high treason and buried in prison for the rest of her natural life if they found out what she'd done, and she had a bad feeling they were going to.

Councilor det Ophelia smiled at her. "This is Admiral Valora of the Andromeda Prime. Admiral, Lady Cassia Pendell."

Cassie reddened and shifted uncomfortably at the title but didn't bother trying to correct him. She'd noticed that was the way they referred to all of the Atlantean women and assumed it was their equivalent of Ms.

She felt an instant antipathy for the Admiral. She didn't know if it was because the woman seemed so haughty and arrogant, or if it was because the woman looked Raen over like he was a particularly choice piece of meat, or if it was just plain old envy because the woman was beautiful and had a flawless figure, but she didn't like her.

"I hope you won't mind that I invited the admiral to join us. She's been deeply involved in negotiations, and I felt it would be better for her to hear this first hand than to read a report."

Cassie felt the blood leave her face. Negotiations didn't sound good at all, although she supposed it was a hell of an improvement over *no* negotiations. She pasted a false smile on her face. "NO! I don't mind—although I'm not sure she'll find anything I have to say the least bit helpful."

"Could I offer refreshment?"

Cassie's smile was starting to feel wooden. "Thank you," she responded, wondering if he meant to offer her anything like she'd had the night before and if she dared drink it if he did. As nervous as she was, she couldn't actually *afford* to relax.

To her consternation, he offered her exactly the same thing everyone had been drinking the night before. She stared at the glass, feeling her mouth go desert dry and wondering if he'd be insulted if she asked for water instead. She finally took a microscopic sip as the councilor settled across from her.

Raen had taken up a position near the door. Unfortunately, he was facing her, not behind her back. She would've been keenly conscious of him anyway, she knew, but at least if he'd been behind her he wouldn't have been able to watch her expression.

"Raen was telling me you seemed to have a good deal of insight about the best way to handle this delicate situation we find ourselves in," the councilor prompted.

It took an effort not to glance at Raen. She curled her lips in the plastic smile again and forced a fake chuckle. "Oh! Everybody dabbles in politics," she said as carelessly as she could manage. "And, naturally, we all think we've got it figured out. Thing is, though, we don't get much of a say in anything."

Councilor det Ophelia frowned, glancing at the admiral, who hadn't done more than nod at the introduction and was studying her as if she'd just discovered someone had shit on the couch and left the stinky little memento for her to find.

"Still," Councilor det Ophelia continued after a moment, "you know your government far better than we do."

"Oh, I don't know about that. They can be damned secretive. All we know is what we read in the newspapers and hear on TV, and they've been caught lying so many times now it's hard to believe much of anything anymore."

Councilor det Ophelia frowned thoughtfully at the liquid in his glass. "You are reluctant to speak frankly, I see. May I ask why?"

She hadn't expected him to go right for the jugular. What was the world coming to when politicians were so blunt? She looked down at her own glass, thinking frantically and finally decided she just wasn't cut out for duplicity. "I was thinking with my heart, not my head," she said finally, embarrassed to admit it.

"But now you believe there is a conflict?"

"Isn't there?"

He was silent for several moments. "I wanted to speak to you because I had hoped to avert the possibility."

Cassie dragged in a shaky breath. Oh, that was low, and just like a politician! Now she had to try to figure out whether she was aiding and abetting the enemy, or willfully ignoring an opportunity to promote peace and help her fellow countrymen? "It's very doubtful that anything I could tell you would be the least bit helpful to you in this situation, but it could get me in serious trouble with my government."

"Only for speaking to us?" Admiral Valora asked abruptly.

Cassie narrowed her eyes at the woman. "*You* are a soldier, and he is a politician. I'd think you were both trained and experienced with dealing with treachery. I'm just an ordinary citizen, and I've got no experience with either. Regardless of the fact that I tend to be impulsive, I'm not stupid. When I saw what had happened here, I was just thinking about how terrible it was for everyone—thinking of all of you as if you were just like us. You're not, though. You're not friends or neighbors, and that means you could be enemies, may have already decided to be enemies. And that means that anything that I say or do that could be used against my own people would make me a traitor to them.

"I might not like my government—in fact, I don't—but I love my country. I'm not going to betray them to help you."

Admiral Valora smiled at her thinly. "You already did consort with the 'enemy', though, didn't you?"

Cassie felt the blood drain from her face. Not that the comment was exactly a news flash. She'd already figured out that her soft heart had led her to flap her lips very unwisely. "Well, we can't all be cold blooded bitches like you!" she snapped angrily. "I can't help being a soft hearted idiot. I can't undo what I already did, and it's for damned sure I'm probably going to pay for it, but I'm not going to add to it and make things worse!"

Councilor det Ophelia turned red-faced with fury. Even as coldness washed over Cassie, however, he rounded on the admiral. "That was not only uncalled for and stupid, it is completely untrue! You may be certain that I will report your attitude to your superiors, Admiral!"

He turned to Cassie. "Please disregard her remarks, I implore you! We are not enemies of your country. We have no *desire* to be enemies—only to promote peaceful relations. I didn't ask to you come to try to trick you into betraying your country. I

asked you to come because we have a poor understanding of your world and the politics of your country. Raen seemed to think that you might have a way to prevent this situation from escalating even more and, perhaps, getting completely out of hand because we don't understand who we're dealing with or how to negotiate peace.

"The presence of the Andromeda Prime seems to have been enough itself to provoke a military response. We had no facility for your language before we had learned it from your party, and that has put us at another disadvantage because it was interpreted as an unwillingness to negotiate rather than an inability to so. And now they are both challenging our right to be here because the Atlantis is within territorial waters they claim and also claiming the Atlantis because it is within that territory and threatening to attack if we attempt to move elsewhere."

Cassie reddened with embarrassment. "That sounds like our government alright."

Councilor det Ophelia studied her for a moment. "You do understand them."

Cassie gnawed on her inner lip. "Sort of," she conceded.

"Will you at least consider helping us?"

"Even if I tried, there's no saying it actually *would* help," she pointed out. "I'm just an ordinary citizen. I'm not trained in this area. I'd just be guessing."

He spread his hands palm upward in a gesture that was so familiar it was easy to see how she'd been able to think of them as 'just people' instead of the aliens they actually were. "We are only guessing ourselves and without the knowledge you have. And I will be frank with you—nothing that we have tried up to this point has seemed to appease them."

"That doesn't surprise me either."

"You will think about it?"

She couldn't help but feel that he was being completely sincere with her—but then he *was* a politician and she wasn't the best judge of people. She nodded, realizing even as she did so that she was not only leaning toward doing something she knew wasn't in her best interests, but that she was anxious because she knew, even if they didn't, that time wasn't something they had a lot of if they wanted to defuse the situation. She couldn't just mull it over and hope she could avoid committing herself and possibly winding up in prison, or worse, because of her involvement.

She was going to have to make a decision based on her conscience and take a stand.

Raen followed her out as he had followed her in. Instead of taking up a guard post outside the councilor's office, however, he followed her into the corridor. She stopped, turning to look at him questioningly.

He looked uncomfortable. "Will you walk with me?" he asked finally.

Cassie eyed him warily but managed a polite smile. "My friends are waiting."

He frowned, seemed to wrestle with himself and then spoke again. "They will not know that you are not still with High Councilor det Ophelia."

She studied her toes. "You aren't going to make this easy for me, are you?"

When she met his gaze again, she saw that he was studying her with a mixture of wariness, confusion, and discomfort. "I am not certain I understand."

Because he hadn't figured out, yet, that she was ripe for him, she thought wryly. And if she fell for him, she was going to be hurt. There weren't any 'maybes' about this situation, unfortunately. She couldn't just take the plunge and hope for the best, knowing

she at least had a fifty-fifty chance of coming out a winner. "Never mind," she said finally, shaking her head. "Where did you have in mind?"

He studied her for a long moment—almost as if it took a few moments to understand what she'd said—and then he smiled.

And when her brain began to function again and she managed to catch her breath, Cassie knew that she was lost.

"I wanted to show you something—in the city."

Still struggling to tame her wayward heart, Cassie nodded, turning a little blindly.

He caught her hand, drawing her in the opposite direction. "It's this way."

Cassie stared down at their entwined hands, too thoroughly confused to feel much of the embarrassment that rose in the periphery of her mind that she'd been so dazzled by his smile she'd been completely disoriented. "Everything looks the same," she mumbled.

She was almost sorry when he seemed to realize he was still holding her hand and released it, even though she'd begun to wonder if she was going to faint from the heart palpitations she was having. It didn't seem to take nearly as long to reach the exit as it had before, but then she'd been in something of a daze.

Her silence seemed to trouble him. He kept glancing at her, and she had a feeling he was trying to think of something to say.

Then again, maybe she was imagining it? He didn't strike her as the shy type.

"Did you like the gifts I sent you?" he asked finally as they left the ship.

Cassie glanced up at him in surprise. "Gifts?"

He frowned. "She did not give them to you?"

Cassie shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm confused."

His lips tightened. "I gave Natara scented soap and a comb to give to you. She promised that she would."

"*You* gave me those? I had no idea. She just left them—at least I thought she did. Thank you so much! It was such a thoughtful gift. I just feel awful that I didn't know."

He reddened faintly, looking both embarrassed and angry. She caught his arm, moving around to face him when he merely stopped instead of turning to look at her. "Are you angry with me?" she asked cautiously.

He met her gaze then. "No," he said shortly. "I am angry with myself. I had meant them as a peace offering, but you were so angry I had thought" He shrugged and then looked sheepish. "It is my own fault for being a coward. You were so angry, I thought that you would throw them at me if I tried to give them to you myself. I decided it would be better if Natara were to bring them to you."

Cassie bit her lip as she studied him, struggling to tamp her amusement that he'd decided to use a go between rather than test her temper again. It dawned on her after a moment, though, how much trouble he'd probably gone to to get them for her. She'd seen for herself that they had almost nothing. "And when I didn't acknowledge the gifts you decided I hadn't appreciated them?"

He shrugged but finally grinned. "At least I knew you had not thrown them away."

Cassie tried not to take that badly since she was pretty sure he hadn't intended to insult her.

He didn't seem to have any trouble reading her expression, though. He rolled his eyes heavenward and ground his teeth. "I did not mean that the way it sounded."

"Good," she managed, "because it sounded insulting."

"I am not very good with your language," he said tentatively when she said nothing else.

"You're using a translator."

"Was. I had thought that I no longer needed it," he said wryly.

Cassie pulled him to a halt again and lifted a hand to push the hair back from his ear. She was surprised to see he wasn't wearing the translator.

He gave her a look.

She shrugged, smiling faintly. "Just checking to make sure you weren't making up excuses." She shook her head in bemusement when it dawned on her that he'd *learned* English in a matter of days—and hardly even had an accent! "You are amazing! I can't believe you learned the language so quickly!"

He glanced at her uncomfortably. "I used the *sublimn*. It feeds the information directly into the brain and takes only a matter of minutes or hours to input, depending on the amount of information. Unfortunately, it feeds into short term memory. The knowledge has to be used to be retained by the long term memory."

Cassie absorbed that with surprise and finally chuckled. "Oh, I'd be a rich woman if I had that invention! Every kid would fight for one to crash for exams!"

He slid her a look of doubt and disapproval. "That would be dishonest."

"I wasn't serious," Cassie retorted, mildly irritated at the rebuke. "It would not only be dishonest, it could have disastrous consequences. Cheating is already a problem, but I don't blame the kids. It's the pressure put on them that makes them desperate to achieve ... some of them," she added conscientiously. "Some are just plain lazy."

Conversation between them lulled after that, but it was a more comfortable silence in spite of the fact that they couldn't seem to have a conversation without a dispute of some kind arising. She noticed immediately that he was leading her along what must have been a road at one time that wove between the shells of buildings that had been built in a long row. People were moving in and out of the buildings as before, busily cleaning and in some places beginning to repair. Other partial structures were being demolished and the materials apparently scavenged for use in those building deemed sound enough for repairs.

After a while they passed through that area, the area Cassie remembered Raen had pointed out as their commercial center. When Raen stopped at last, she saw they were standing before a small structure within sight of the channel. The building actually overlooked it.

It seemed to be a building of particular interest to Raen. He studied it over critically and finally stepped inside. Mystified, Cassie followed him.

Chapter Fifteen

"Take care!" Raen warned just before Cassie skidded on loose gravel on the floor. He caught her as she wobbled, steadying her. A frisson passed through her as she became aware of their proximity, of the weight of his hand at her waist. His gaze flickered over her face when she looked up at him, settled on her lips for a long moment, and then moved beyond her. She stepped away from him, carefully, and glanced around.

"This was the foyer."

Cassie glanced at him when he spoke. Returning her attention to the room they stood in, she tried to imagine what it might have looked like. There wasn't much to go on. The floor was intact, however, and she saw that it was a mosaic of stones. She couldn't make out the design for the rubble lying about, but the colors were pretty. She could also see the remains of the walls that had separated the foyer from the rest of the house. "It must have been a very nice house," she commented.

He nodded, his expression lightening. Settling a hand in the small of her back, he guided her into a room that had opened off the foyer. "The structure is still sound—what is left of it. Still, there is a good bit here to work with. This was the gathering room for entertaining guests."

"It's really big," Cassie murmured in surprise. "It didn't look this big from the outside."

"It was never grand, but I thought it was comfortable. It had four bedchambers."

When Cassie looked at him sharply, she saw that his head was tilted back and he was looking up at what must have once been a second floor. She saw as she followed his gaze that there were beams of some sort of material crisscrossing the area—not wood, certainly, or it would've rotted, nor iron either. That would've rusted in the time the Atlantis had been submerged. Undoubtedly it was some of the same material used in the building of the ship itself—which had weathered the passage of time as if there'd been no time wearing upon it.

Whatever it was, the US government would cream all over themselves to get their hands on it, she mused, realizing that they suspected there was a wealth of alien technology practically within their grasp. Which explained why they were so determined to claim the Atlantis.

She discovered that Raen was studying her when she emerged from her thoughts. His expression was hard to decipher, but she sensed an air almost of expectancy in him and perhaps a bit of tension, as well. Uncertain of what to make of it, she looked around again, trying to imagine what the place must have looked like before. She couldn't. It must be heart-breaking, she thought, deciding maybe that was what she'd sensed in him. She supposed men didn't think in those terms, but it would have to be disturbing on many levels regardless of whether their feelings toward their home was the same as a woman's or not. A lot of hard work went into building a house, and even more in making it into a home.

"You must hate seeing it like this," she commented finally, fairly certain he wouldn't take anything more sympathetic well. He'd looked at her before as if she was an oddity because she felt sorry for them for the loss of their city.

He shrugged. "It was not even hit. All of this is from time only, but there is a good deal to start with. It should not take as long to renovate as it took to build to begin with. There are three bedchambers for children."

Cassie sent him a startled look at that, feeling a wave of horror wash over her. It hadn't occurred to her that he might have had a family that he'd lost. She hadn't, in fact, considered that possibility with any of them. She realized now that the city couldn't possibly be all that was lost. As massive as the destruction was, lives would've been lost, too, probably a lot of lives.

She didn't know why she hadn't thought about it before. She considered herself an empathetic person, sensitive to others. Why hadn't she thought about the loss of lives a disaster of this magnitude would entail?

Because she'd been too caught up in her own woes?

Maybe, and maybe also because there was still a bizarre unreality about the whole situation she'd found herself in—finding herself in the Atlantis of legend. To her mind it was ancient—not many people even considered it ancient history. And the place looked ancient, even if the people didn't. It was hard grasping that the people living here had lived here when this had happened.

Mostly, though, she hadn't considered it because no one talked about those they'd lost. If she'd seen their grief, she couldn't have distanced herself from the tragedy of the situation, wouldn't have been thinking only in terms of broken buildings when the real tragedy was the broken lives these buildings represented.

She didn't think that meant they didn't feel it, though.

They weren't cold, unfeeling creatures.

They just didn't want to share it—not with each other, and certainly not with the outsiders. Natara was the only one she'd met who'd even come close to revealing the emotional trauma they must feel, and she was very young, less able, she supposed, to guard her emotions than the older Atlanteans.

"You want children?" she asked tentatively. "Or were you thinking about renovating it and selling it to a family?"

He flicked an assessing gaze over her. "I would like to have children." He looked up at the second floor again. "I had wanted four. We are—were only allowed two, but in my position I could petition for two more and easily obtain permission—especially now."

As relieved as she was when he didn't mention having had any, she was both surprised and amused that he'd decided how many he wanted to have when he didn't even have a wife—A little shocked, too. Not too many people set out to have that large a family anymore.

But then, he wasn't one of the 'people' she was familiar with, she reminded herself. "Does the lady you have in mind know you're planning for her to have four?" she asked with amusement.

An odd little half smile played about his lips as he studied her. "She does. I have told her."

Something about his expression made her heart flutter. She looked away after a moment. Uncomfortable, she moved to the window that looked out over the channel. "It's a beautiful view, but I'd think a mother would worry that her children would be drawn by the channel."

He moved to stand beside her. He was studying her curiously when she looked up at him. She shrugged. "I'd be worried about them drowning."

She'd no sooner gotten the comment out of her mouth than she realized what she'd said would only be a concern of someone just like her. The Atlanteans didn't have to worry about it. Her face still felt uncomfortably warm when she peered at him to gauge his reaction. To her surprise, he was smiling faintly.

Folding his arms over his chest, he leaned back against the edge of the window. Tilting his head to one side, he studied her, smiling faintly. "What do you think that I should do to keep them out of the water? Besides scolding them when I catch them?"

She thought he was teasing her, but she was too embarrassed about the slip to feel like being teased. "You know I forgot."

"I know." Unfolding his arms, he reached for hers, slipping his hands slowly downward along them until he'd clasped her forearms and drawing her just as slowly toward him. She didn't resist, though she looked at him questioningly. "I like the way you see the world, Lady Cassia."

She looked at him doubtfully, struggling against the breathlessness that had invaded her as she settled fully against him. Releasing his hold on her when she leaned against him, he looped his arms around her. "The little ones should certainly not be in the water—something might nibble on them. A fence, you think?"

Thoroughly bemused by this side of him, she glanced toward the canal again, trying to picture it. "A white picket," she agreed after a moment, "not so high it would destroy the view, but high enough a toddler would have difficulty getting over it."

"There were flowers there once," he said after a few moments. "My mother loved flowers. Apparently I did, too, when I was a little fellow. She said I was always trying to eat them and whenever she would catch me at it, I would try to stuff as many in my mouth as I could before she could reach me."

Cassie settled her cheek against his chest, smiling faintly at the image his words created in her mind. "You must have been a terror in the garden."

He chuckled, and she smiled again at the sound. "I was," he agreed ruefully. "When I outgrew trying to eat them, I began to see the garden as my own private battle ground. I would crawl through the beds, pretending I was evading enemy soldiers, and I would use the flowers for target practice ... and then my mother would use the green stems as switches on my backside."

"Did it teach you not to do it?"

"It taught me not to get caught," he said with a chuckle.

"Did you have brothers?"

He was silent for so long she knew his brother was one of the casualties. "One."

She wished she could take the question back. It had been thoughtless to ask, and she'd ruined the moment, bringing bad memories into his mind to crush the good ones. She pulled away after a moment, and he allowed his arms to drop to his sides. "I should get back."

He nodded, pushing away from the wall and guiding her out of the house again.

"I'm glad I came," she said when they'd reached the main part of the city once more.

His gaze flickered over her face. "I am glad you came, too."

* * * *

"We were beginning to think we'd have to send out a search party for you ... again," Mark muttered when Cassie reached Linda's quarters.

Cassie blushed but sent him an irritated glance for the reminder.

She sure as hell wasn't going to tell them Raen was the main reason she'd been gone so long ... again. "I'm starving," she said, trying to divert everyone's mind before they began to pelt her with questions she didn't feel like answering at the moment.

She'd parted company with Raen when they'd reached the council chambers again. It wasn't until then that she'd begun to wonder why he'd asked her to walk with him at all, let alone taken her to his home—or what was left of it.

It wasn't that she hadn't enjoyed it. The problem was, she'd enjoyed it way too much, and she'd seen a side of Raen that was way too appealing.

She sighed.

Every side of Raen was way too appealing.

Remembering the way he'd smiled at her when she'd agreed to walk with him thrilled her all the way down to her toes all over again. He was handsome when his face looked like it had been carved from stone. That smile If she'd been hit by a bolt of lightning, she couldn't have been more stunned.

"You're in a good mood," Linda observed suspiciously.

Cassie looked at her blankly, feeling guilty color creep up her neck.

Unfortunately, her mind was equally blank and a ready lie didn't instantly spring to her tongue. She'd been too bemused and addled by Raen to realize she needed to think up a believable lie if she didn't want to tell them truth. "I'm glad that's over with," she managed finally.

"That bad, huh?"

She shrugged. "There was an Admiral Valora there—snotty bitch."

"A female Admiral?" Mark asked in patent disbelief.

Cassie narrowed her eyes at him. "Just what's that supposed to mean?"

He glanced from Cassie to Linda and Shelly and finally shrugged. "I was just surprised. Admiral of what?"

Cassie pointed a finger heavenward. "That."

"You're shitting me!" Jimmy exclaimed in excitement. "You met the captain of the alien ship?"

"The councilor called her Admiral."

"You're sure of that?" Carl demanded.

Cassie turned to look at him in surprise. "I'm sure."

He shook his head at the question in her eyes. "Later."

His attitude made her uneasy, but she didn't push it. The servants arrived only a few moments behind her with lunch on trays and everyone was preoccupied with the food for a while. "I guess that cinches it," David muttered when the servants had left.

"What?" Ben asked absently.

"Cassie arrives and less than five minutes later the servants do?"

Ben stared at him blankly. "Oh. I figured as much. I'd already begun to suspect it before Cassie mentioned it."

"Right!" Jimmy said with a snort. "You wouldn't have been humping that ET if you'd known you were on candid camera. You think they're airing the clips on the net?"

Ben glared at him. "If all they got was a view of my hairy ass, I ain't worried about it."

Jimmy chortled. "Yeah, because the last woman that saw your hairy ass was your mother!"

Ben threw a food missile at him. "So when's the last time you got laid, dork!"

"The night before we left."

"Yeah, right!" He seemed to think it over and then his eyes widened. "You're not talking about that corn fed beauty I saw you with at the bar?"

Jimmy glared at him furiously, all signs of amusement vanished. "Don't talk about her like that. She's not fat, asshole. I like a woman with curves."

Ben snickered. "Me, too, but that one had a few more than I like on my women."

Jimmy shot up from his seat on the mattress, overturning his plate, and launched himself at Ben while everyone gaped at him in stunned disbelief. He'd punched Ben a half a dozen times before anyone recovered enough to drag him off.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Slater?" Carl demanded when he'd managed to separate the two men.

"You heard what that asshole said about Jennifer!"

"God, Jimmy! It's not like she's here."

"*I'm* here!" Jimmy snarled, stabbing a thumb at his thin chest. "And I told him not to talk about her like that."

"Alright, already!" Ben snapped. "I'm sorry. I was just kidding, man."

"Well it hurts her feelings, asshole, and I don't think it's funny!"

Carl eased his hold on Jimmy. "You alright now?"

Jimmy stared at him for a long moment. "Hell no! I'll meet y'all outside," he snapped and stalked from the room.

Still gripped in stunned silence, no one said anything for a time after Jimmy had left.

"Man! I ain't never seen Jimmy blow up like that!" David said finally. "I wonder what kind of burr that boy's got up his ass?"

"Maybe he just likes Jennifer," Linda said pointedly.

"I think it's sweet," Shelly put in.

Everyone turned to stare at her.

Shelly shrugged. "Not that he beat the shit out of Ben," she clarified. "I mean that he's so sweet on her he wants to defend her."

"He's just stressed out over this situation," Mark muttered. "We're all on edge."

Linda uttered an inelegant snort of disbelief. "Don't you believe it! Jimmy's having the time of his life! He's talked UFO's and aliens as long as I've known him and now he gets to sleep in a UFO and rub elbows with aliens. He's happy as a lark. *That* was about his girl."

Setting her dishes aside, she got up. "He's had time to cool down. I'm going to try to catch up to him."

Everyone else set the remains of their meal aside and followed her out.

As unsettled as Cassie was by the incident, and as guilty as she felt for feeling that way, she was relieved about it at the same time since it had effectively blocked everything else from everyone's mind. No one said anything else about the fight until Ben surged ahead of them, but the moment they decided he was out of earshot, they fell to discussing their amazement over it, mostly their surprise about Jimmy launching the attack at all, though Linda and Shelly were impressed and charmed by his 'white knight' attitude, and Carl and David by his speed and ferocity. They just couldn't get over skinny, easy going Jimmy turning in the blink of an eye from mild mannered 'Clark' to whirling dervish the next moment.

Cassie was as shocked as the rest of them, even though she hadn't known Jimmy nearly as long as they had, but she was more focused on her own thoughts. The interlude with Raen had distracted her from the meeting with the councilor but hadn't put it completely from her mind, and she worried one puzzle over a while and then the other.

She didn't know what to make of Raen's behavior, but, now that the fairy dust had settled, she was afraid to take it at face value. As handsome, powerfully built, and downright sexy as she'd thought the 'stone warrior' Raen was, there'd been an aura of danger about him—above and beyond the fact that he was alien and one couldn't *get* more dark and mysterious than a completely unknown entity—that had made her at least as wary and nervous as it had fascinated her. She hadn't realized that he could also be a charmer, but that side was more dangerous, she realized, than the other, because it made her *forget* the dangerous side she'd already seen and knew.

If he hadn't been who and what he was and there hadn't been a dangerous situation hanging over them, she would've thought his request to walk with her was only motivated by a desire for her company and an interest in getting to know her better.

As it was, she couldn't help but think it was the flip side of the sexual encounter they'd had, another attempt to seduce her—not physically but mentally.

He'd been probing her for potentially useful information since he'd captured her. Could she regard 'the walk' as nothing more than personal interest, all things considered?

As lowering a thought as it was, she didn't think so. She was more inclined to think that he'd decided to try a different tactic since the sex didn't seem to have broken down her barriers as well as he'd thought it would.

Unfortunately for her, her protective barrier was crumbling faster than she could put it back together. She had to constantly remind herself of the danger she was in because she *wanted* to throw reason and caution to the four winds and glory in her own downfall.

It helped, some, that she couldn't imagine a future for them—no more than she could imagine a future with Mark, although for completely different reasons. At least with Mark, the typical scenario played—the two of them in a house or apartment, fighting over bills and the division of home labor, passing each other in the morning on the way to work and again at night as they came in and flaked out on the couch in front of the TV—maybe that baby she wanted so badly—but probably not. Because Mark was a selfish prick, and she couldn't imagine him ever doing anything she wanted.

She couldn't picture coming home from work to Raen—she would've liked to have been able to, but she couldn't. She also couldn't see him in a business suit or workmen's clothes heading out with briefcase or lunchbox—mowing the lawn.

He belonged here, and she couldn't see herself fitting in here anymore than she could see him fitting into her life.

All of which was a moot point because she knew, deep down, that that was an issue that was never going to come up. Neither the charm he'd poured over her or the wild sex had turned her mind completely to mush. He'd made it pretty damned clear that he considered humans in general as inferior creatures.

Whatever he was up to, his motivations weren't anything she was familiar with. Mark, she understood. He was either bent on sex, period, or he wanted something more permanent like domestic sex slave and housekeeper/wife.

As much as it wounded her to accept it, she knew it was probable that Raen had only one motive—one goal. Like Councilor det Ophelia, he was trying to save Atlantis, and he was ruthless enough to use whatever means necessary.

It was ironic that both men had focused on such a useless pawn, but she'd apparently managed to convince them, somehow, that she wasn't as useless as she knew herself to be.

She still wanted to help them. As afraid of the consequences as she was now that she'd had time to consider it, it still felt like the right thing to do. How could it possibly be wrong, morally, if it prevented people from getting killed for no good reason? The government might think getting their hands on superior alien technology was reason enough, but she somehow doubted that her fellow Americans would feel the same way when their homes and families were being blasted out of existence while the people who'd started it were tucked safely away in a top secret hole in the ground somewhere.

The question was, could she trust her instincts? And if she could, could she help and still save her own ass? And if she couldn't, did she have the guts to risk it?

She'd always felt that she was a deeply empathetic person, but she'd never considered herself particularly brave—not a complete coward—but she was a self-preservationist. She was far more prone to the flight part of the 'fight or flight' instinct.

She emerged from her thoughts as something familiar caught her eye and looked up with a flicker of recognition at a building she'd seen earlier. She and Raen had passed it, she remembered, on their walk. As she continued, she kept glancing in that direction, wondering if she'd be able to see the house he'd taken her to.

She saw Raen before she recognized the structure. Her chest tightened instantly, as if a giant, invisible hand had fisted around it, squeezing her lungs and heart until they had to struggle to work. He was working on the house, she saw. He'd removed his robe but had tied it around his waist. Sweat glistened on his torso and arms from his labors.

The play of muscles on his body as he bent and lifted loose stones instantly conjured the image of him the night before as he'd strained over her and made everything inside of her go hot and moist and turned everything else to the consistency of jelly.

She was so mesmerized by the sight, she walked smack in to Mark, who was in front of her, nearly tripping both of them up.

Chapter Sixteen

"Damn it!" Mark yelled angrily. Catching himself with an effort, he whirled to see who'd slammed into him and nearly made him fall. Cassie had managed, just barely, to keep from falling, as well, but she'd been thrown off balance by Mark's efforts to regain his.

There was no way in hell to pretend it hadn't been her.

"Sorry," Cassie muttered, fighting the urge to look to see if Raen had caught her little 'mishap', "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

Linda and Shelly, who'd obviously noticed the show, erupted into schoolgirl giggles that immediately alerted everyone else to the reason for Cassie's inattention.

Mark might have forgiven her for bumping into him if not for that. The scowl he'd turned on her before he realized it was her had already dropped from his features when Linda and Shelly cut loose with snickers and giggles. His head automatically whipped around in search of the reason for their amusement and when he looked at Cassie again he was obviously irritated. "I don't know what you see in that ET," he muttered.

Linda and Shelly exchanged a look and burst out laughing again.

"Could we be a little serious here?" Carl said irritably.

"Sure!" Linda quipped. "Why not make it obvious we're out here to discuss things we don't want them to hear?"

He glared at her but relaxed after a moment. "Point taken. Anybody else feel like doing something to make us all look stupid?"

"Kiss my ass!" Cassie snapped. "I tripped!"

"It usually works better if you watch where you're going instead of staring at the scenery," David said dryly.

"Right!" Shelly put in. "And if that had been a woman over there, bared to the waist, you guys wouldn't have even glanced in that direction."

David grinned at her. "Bitch," he said without heat. "Why don't you do that and we'll see?"

"Oh, you wish!"

He gave her a 'strip' once over. "I wouldn't mind," he retorted with a grin.

"I don't think we should stop at the boat," Carl interrupted.

"I thought that was where we were headed?" Mark said, his irritation still evident in his voice.

Carl shrugged. "The rooms are bugged, the boat probably is, too."

"I've never seen a camera or a microphone," Cassie pointed out. "We don't know *what* they're using, but I doubt it's anything we're familiar with. The chances are they'd be able to see and hear us where ever we are."

Carl slowed and turned to look at her. "You might have mentioned that before."

"I don't *know*. I'm just saying"

"And you might be right, but I don't see an alternative."

"Exactly what do we have to discuss, anyway?" Ben asked as he dropped back to join them. "Cassie already went to talk to the head guy. It's not like we can give her any tips at this point."

"I'd like to know if she found out anything anyway," Carl responded.

"And do what with it?" Linda demanded. "Stand at the edge of Atlantis and try to yell the information over to the Navy?"

"I did a stint in the Navy," Carl retorted.

"So?"

"Morse code. Anybody else?"

"Me, too," David volunteered. "I don't know how much of the code I remember, though."

"Me and Jimmy were in the Air Force together," Mark said. "He might know Morse Code, but I don't."

"Ben?"

"Nope."

"No, you weren't in service? Or no you don't know the code?" Carl asked.

"Neither. No, to both. Boy Scouts, but I've forgotten it."

"I couldn't help but notice you didn't ask any of us if we were in the service," Shelly said irritably.

"Were you?"

Shelly and Linda exchanged a glance and then looked at Cassie. Cassie shrugged. "No."

Carl sent Shelly a look of disgust and kept walking.

They paused when they reached the boat. Jimmy was sprawled on one of the benches, glaring off into space. "Come on, Jimmy," Carl called to him. "We're going to walk down to that bridge and see if there's any fish in the channel."

Jimmy didn't look very enthused, but he clambered out of the boat and joined them.

Cassie's stomach was knotted tighter than a noose. She felt like she had one around her throat already. She didn't know why it hadn't occurred to her that the men might have been in service, but it hadn't. Now that she knew, it also occurred to her, forcefully, that every one of them had taken an oath and their training made them take that oath very, very seriously.

If they even suspected she was telling 'the enemy' anything, she was fucked.

And they didn't just suspect. She'd already admitted she'd said more than she probably should've.

If it had been Shelly, they would probably have just patted her on the head and told her not to worry about it.

She was so screwed!

By the time they stopped at the bridge, the tension inside of Cassie had wound its way down to her sphincter.

Carl fixed her with a stern look. "So—what did you tell them?"

She shrugged, wishing she hadn't been so unnerved that it had scrambled her brains. She could've used the time thinking up a really good story to cover her ass.

"Nothing."

Carl frowned, but it wasn't the frown that worried her. It was the suspicion in his eyes. "You were gone almost two hours and you didn't tell them anything?" he asked in patent disbelief.

Should she tell them she was with Raen half that time? Or would that sound worse?

She decided it would sound worse.

"He asked me about my conversation with Raen. I told him that it had just been talk, and I didn't know what I was talking about. And then he told me about the situation and asked me to help, and I told him I couldn't without getting in trouble."

"And that took almost two hours?" Mark demanded.

"When the hell did you get a watch?" Cassie snapped. "Because mine hasn't worked since we got here."

"It's a rough guess."

"I don't give a good god damned what kind of guess it is!" Cassie shot back at him. "I told you what was said."

"Don't get all defensive," David said calmly. "We're just asking."

"No, you aren't! You're fucking ganging up on me and interrogating!"

The men all exchanged looks that she didn't like at all. She saw when she looked around that Linda and Shelly were leaning on the bridge railing looking down at the water as if they had no idea what was going on.

Obviously, there wasn't going to be any support from that direction.

"What did you discuss with Raen, anyway?"

It was said mildly, but Cassie knew damned well they'd just decided to try a different tactic. Sucking in a deep breath, she forced herself to relax and pretend she didn't know that was what they were up to. "He took me for a walk. It was the first time I'd seen that," she said, gesturing toward the ruins. "I immediately thought about the Katrina disaster and 9-11, and I told him I could talk to people when we got back about disaster relief. And, if the news people did a story on it, they'd get a lot of volunteers to help."

"That's all you told him?"

Cassie pretended to think it over, but she wasn't about to tell him everything she'd said. It was way too incriminating. "I think I said something about being surprised the entire armed forces weren't here when I saw the ship up there."

She had the sinking feeling they didn't believe her.

"What are you thinking?" David asked Carl.

He shrugged dismissively, obviously mulling it over in his mind. "The only thing I can make of it," he said after a while, "is that they decided Cassie was sympathetic to them and they could use her to talk to the media and try to influence public opinion."

Cassie tried to look stunned, but she felt a cold sweat pop from her pores at just how closely he'd come to guessing what she'd suggested they do.

"Exactly what was it the guy told you when he was telling you about the situation?"

Cassie didn't have to think it over. She remembered the conversation very clearly. "He said they'd had a problem to start with because they didn't understand English and the military had taken it as a refusal to meet their demands. He also said the U.S. government was claiming this area as U.S. territory and ordering them out. Then,

when the big ship brought the Atlantis up the U.S. claimed the Atlantis as U.S. property because it was recovered in US territory.”

“It *is* U.S. territory,” Carl said grimly. “They extended the territorial waters in the gulf all the way to Mexico’s territorial waters a few years back.”

“And, due to a *complete* lack of foresight on their part, the Atlanteans let their ship sink right in the middle of it!” Linda said sarcastically.

Carl glared at her. “That doesn’t change a thing. Have you got any idea what it could mean to the military to get hold of this technology?”

“It’s called stealing!” Shelly snapped. “Don’t they have enough already to blow the whole fucking planet up ten times over?”

Feeling emboldened by Linda and Shelly’s contributions, Cassie decided it was safe to voice her opinion. “Wouldn’t it be like--grandfathered? I mean, Atlantis was here before the U.S. was even thought of. That would give them prior claim, wouldn’t it?”

“They were on the bottom of the ocean,” David pointed out. “Sunk. This would fall into wreckage recovery.”

“There’s people *living* on it, though!” Linda pointed out.

“Besides, the U.S. claims air space—everybody does. Wouldn’t the water over them be part of their space?” Cassie asked.

“It’s not our problem and it *ain’t* our decision!” Carl ground out. “The Commander in Chief”

“Is going to get us into another damned war!” Linda snapped. “*They*,” she pointed upward, “came to retrieve their property. That isn’t an act of aggression.”

“It could be construed as one,” Carl said tightly.

“You mean made to look like one, don’t you?” Linda said angrily.

Everybody fell silent, and Cassie discovered they’d broken into three camps. Jimmy and Ben were completely ignoring the discussion—neutral. Mark hadn’t said anything, but he was clearly behind David and Carl—aggression. And she, Linda, and Shelly had formed the voice of reason—fair play—or maybe just a healthy reluctance to get into a fight they probably couldn’t win.

“I don’t think they want to be enemies,” Cassie said finally. “Maybe the government won’t get us much as they want if they make friends instead, but we’d at least have the chance of bartering for some of the technology without getting into a war.”

“Maybe,” Mark agreed. “But like Carl said, it isn’t our business.”

“How can you say it isn’t any of our business?” Linda demanded. “Aren’t we going to get shot at, too? They’re on our doorstep. It isn’t like picking a fight half a world away!”

“That’s the problem, Linda! They *are* on our doorstep. That makes them more of a threat.”

“If they wanted to be a threat, I don’t think they’d have to get very close,” Cassie pointed out. “My god! *We* can shoot people from space! They could probably go *home* and shoot us!”

Carl scrubbed a hand over his face. “Alright. Let’s try to calm down and think. There really isn’t anything we can do regardless of how we, personally, feel about it. And we aren’t going to be doing ourselves any good by fighting among ourselves. When

we get back ... *if* we get back, everybody can voice their opinion to anybody they can get to listen. In the meantime, we need to focus on what we're going to do to stay alive."

Everyone exchanged uneasy glances. "I don't think the Atlanteans mean us any harm," Cassie said finally.

"I'm talking about friendly fire when and if they let us go," Carl said dryly.

"Oh!"

"*Friendly* fire!" Linda exclaimed.

"I don't think the first thing out of the zone is going to be examined really carefully before they open up on us. And I'm not sure the white flag idea Shelly put forth is going to get it."

Cassie frowned. "The Atlanteans have been communicating with the outside. Surely, they'll tell them they're sending us out?"

"And they may believe it and they might not," Carl retorted dryly. "My thought is that we should try to establish communications ourselves using Morse Code."

Cassie stared at him a moment, glanced at Linda and Shelly and finally returned her attention to him. "What makes you think they'll believe you? What if they just think it's the Atlanteans trying to fool them?"

"I'll give them something the Atlanteans couldn't possibly know about."

Cassie felt a sinking sensation in her belly even before she identified it as guilt.

"Uh ... What if they got on the net? Wouldn't the government consider that a possibility?"

Mark, David, and Carl all looked stunned and more than a little horrified.

Cassie decided she was glad she hadn't told them that she'd mentioned the net to Raen.

"Something personal, then," Carl said, "that could be looked up or checked out that wouldn't be accessible to the net."

"That doesn't leave much," Linda pointed out. "Even the information *we* can't get to would probably be easy for them to access considering the level of their technology. *Our* government goes through everything."

"We'll give them something—and then maybe some information about the Atlanteans they'd find helpful."

"*Spy*, you mean?" Shelly asked, horrified. "I'm not cut out for any cloak and dagger shit! And I'm not about to try!"

Carl gave her a look. "Whether you think you are or not, I can guarantee you the military isn't going to see it that way. As soon as we hit that side of the water, they'll detain us and we'll be debriefed. Before they're done they'll know things we didn't even know we'd noticed."

"Oh, that's just comforting as hell!" Linda snapped.

Cassie didn't say anything. She felt both sick and faint, and she was trying not to look guilty by doing either.

"I think I'd rather just stay here," Shelly put in, looking like she was about to cry.

"I don't think we'll have that option."

"I say we go back to considering the possibility of sneaking out. We didn't really consider that option," Ben said.

"There'll be subs," Carl pointed out.

"I think I could sneak past a sub," Ben retorted. "Make like a dolphin and swim away."

"Get real! We're over a hundred miles from the coast!" Mark snapped. "Besides, they've probably got frogmen in the water looking for a way in on the underside—or planting explosives."

"The media is probably just on the other side of the military," Cassie suggested tentatively. "If we could get to them, they'd smuggle us out just to get the story."

Everyone turned to stare at her blank faced. After a moment, when Cassie was really starting to get unnerved, they all turned to look at each other.

"Someone would have to volunteer to take the boat out as a decoy," Carl said slowly, "unless we could somehow rig it. And if we got caught, we'd look guilty as hell."

"I still like our odds a lot better," Jimmy said, joining them at last. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't like our proximity to Guantanamo Bay."

* * * *

Cassie was so scared she spent the next day just trying to get a grip and pretend she had nothing to be afraid of. Fortunately, everyone else was so unnerved they didn't seem to notice her condition.

By the second day she'd calmed down enough, though, to realize that she was already so deeply in trouble that it wasn't likely that she could get any worse off—or much worse. It *was* possible, though, that by helping the Atlanteans—if by doing so she helped them to get the military to stand down—it would help her, too.

The problem was, even though she'd decided, she still didn't want the others to know she'd deliberately helped. Inadvertent was one thing and they might try to help her by keeping their knowledge to themselves when questioned, but she didn't think she could trust that ex-servicemen would do so if they knew she'd willingly helped the Atlanteans. She wasn't nervy enough to take the chance, anyway.

She thought it also likely that the situation was going to worsen every day they delayed.

Finally, in desperation, she announced that she was going back to her quarters to bathe because she was tired of waiting her turn at the communal shower. To her relief, no one challenged her. In fact, Carl, David, and Shelly decided to do the same—which wasn't at all helpful.

Even though it diverted attention from her, since they followed her out, and she didn't know if any of the others might get the same idea, she abandoned her original plan—which was to go directly to the councilor's chamber—and returned to her quarters instead. After pacing for a while, chewing her fingernails off while she tried to think of some way to get the attention of whoever was watching without giving herself away to the others, she finally just stopped in the middle of the floor and started waving at the ceiling and mouthing the word 'Natara'.

She almost had heart failure when she turned at the sound of an approach and Raen stepped into the room. She'd thought she would get Natara to get word to the councilor that she would speak to him, but this, she realized, was far better—except she was almost sorry there wouldn't be any sort of delay.

Rushing to him, she placed her hands on his chest and rose up on her tiptoes to lean close to his ear. "I need you to take me to talk to the councilor. And I need for it to look as if you came to get me—not as if I asked you to come."

When she leaned away, she studied his face to see if he'd understood.

To her relief, he did.

Setting her slightly away from him, he caught her arm and led her outside. "The High Councilor has sent for you. He will appreciate your cooperation," he said as he led her out.

Linda peered from the door of her quarters just as Cassie looked back. "It's ok," she said. "The councilor wanted to talk to me again. I'll be back in just a little while."

She glanced up at Raen as she faced forward again. His expression was grim, but he didn't look at her. He surprised her when they turned off the corridor and into the waiting area off of the councilor's private audience chamber. Halting abruptly, he swung her around to face him. "What is this about?" he asked, his voice harsh.

Both his expression and his voice unnerved her. "I decided to talk to the councilor and see if I could help," she said a little breathlessly.

His lips tightened. "But you are afraid for the others to know."

"I don't really have time to explain," she said anxiously.

"Make time," he said grimly. "You are afraid. I want to know why."

"It's so complicated."

His face hardened. "I have a good understanding."

Abruptly, Cassie found herself fighting tears. "The things I told you before ..."

He studied her face for a moment and finally pulled her against his chest, wrapping his arms around her. "You are afraid they will tell and your people will consider it treachery."

Dropping her head against his chest, she nodded, sniffing back the urge to cry. "I know they will. They'll question us when we leave and whether the others really mean to tell or not, eventually they will."

He said nothing for a time, merely held her, stroking her hair. "You should not speak to the councilor again. I told him you had refused."

Cassie pulled away slightly, tipping her head back to look up at him in surprise. "You did? Why?"

His gaze flickered over her face. "Because you said it would cause you trouble with your people." He settled his palms on either side of her face. "Go back to your friends, now, and tell them you refused to talk the councilor. You have not said anything they can use against you."

Cassie stared at him, feeling the fear she'd thought would swallow her easing. "I want to help. I've thought about it."

"I want you to be safe. We do not need you to do this, Cassie."

She felt vaguely offended. "You don't think I can help."

He let out an irritated sigh. "I believe you could, but we will manage regardless. If you had not stumbled into the pull of the tractor beam, we would not have had your help in this, and we would still have managed. I am pleased that you want to help, but Councilor det Ophelia should not have asked it of you."

"But ... this could turn into a war," she said in dismay.

Raen shook his head slowly. "We will not make war on a people who can not defend themselves against us."

"They may not give you a choice!" Cassie exclaimed in dismay, more afraid at his certainty that they couldn't defend themselves against the Atlanteans than she had been before.

Chapter Seventeen

"There are always choices. It is only a matter of making the right one," Raen said.

Cassie studied him with a mixture of confusion, hurt, and anger. She hadn't realized until he'd refused her help how much she'd been counting on it solving *their* dilemma. Maybe he was right and the Atlanteans could avert disaster and, when they were released, it wouldn't be as bad as they'd feared.

And maybe it would be worse.

It was certain to be worse if the U.S. attacked them and discovered all of their military might had no effect at all. That would only make them *more* determined.

It was *their* problem, though, not the Atlanteans.

"Will you be safe with them?"

She nodded, tried for a smile of assurance, and failed. She cleared her throat. "I'm not afraid of them."

He frowned. "There is something more. What is it?"

Cassie shook head, managing a faint smile. "Nothing."

"It is not 'nothing' if you are afraid. You said that it was complicated. You have not told me everything," he said grimly, then frowned and looked around. "They will come to look for you if you do not go back. Go. Tonight when they are sleeping, come to me. I will wait for you here."

It was tempting. As accustomed as she was to carrying her own load and solving her own problems, she wasn't prepared for anything like this. Raen was. If anyone could help her, she knew it would be him. "I don't think I could manage it," she said finally. "Someone always stays awake to watch."

He smiled grimly. "Not always—in fact rarely. Your watchers are not accustomed to being sentinels. Wait until they are asleep and come to me," he repeated.

Cassie gave him a doubtful look. "I'll try," she said finally.

He held her when she would've pulled away, drawing her closer instead. She sucked in a sharp breath when his lips brushed hers but lifted to meet his kiss. Warmth flooded her as his lips melded with hers, pleasure on so many levels it was hard to grasp which was strongest—yearning, comfort, security—affection. She felt all of them, though, and she opened her mouth to him in welcome, eager to feel more. He stroked his tongue lightly over her parted lips, sank more fully against her as he delved inside. The pleasure intensified as his taste and scent burst upon her with the first stroke of his tongue along hers. She closed her mouth around his offering, sucking his tongue to pull more of his essence inside of her.

She was disappointed when he withdrew, releasing her lips and lifting his head to stare into her eyes. "Try very hard," he said huskily, a faint smile playing across his lips.

She swallowed her disappointment and found herself smiling back at him. Nodding, she stepped away and hurried back to Linda's quarters, hoping when she got there that no one would notice that she felt far less frightened and hopeless than she had.

* * * *

Cassie's heart was beating about a hundred miles an hour as she hurried down the hall. She had no idea what time it was—feared that Raen wouldn't be there to meet her. It seemed she'd lain awake for hours, waiting, trying to pretend to be asleep and then

She'd fallen asleep herself. When she'd awakened with a jolt sometime later, she discovered Mark, who was supposed to be watching, had fallen asleep.

Rolling off of the mattress, she'd stuffed her pillow beneath the cover in the hope that if anyone woke and glanced that way they'd think she was still there. Her heart was already in her throat as she tiptoed out and crept down the corridor until she thought she was far enough away she wouldn't be heard. Then she'd run on tiptoe the rest of the way to keep her bare feet from smacking against the hard surface of the flooring.

Raen caught her as she rounded the doorway, and she sucked in a sharp breath, tensing all over as her mind went wild with possibilities of threat. Releasing her when he saw she'd recognized him, he placed a finger lightly across her lips and then grasped her hand and led her through a maze of rooms and corridors until she was completely lost. She realized, though, even as they stepped through the door he'd led her to that he'd taken her to his quarters as he had before.

She looked up at him anxiously when he finally released his hold on her hand.

"I startled you. I am sorry," he murmured after he'd scanned her pale face.

She dragged in a shaky breath, still too shaken to feel more than a flicker of resentment at being scared shitless. "You almost gave me heart failure!"

He studied her for a moment and finally moved to the far wall. Curious, she watched as he touched a spot on the wall. A panel slid back, revealing a built in locker. Pulling two tumblers from one of the shelves, he picked up a decanter and poured a measure of liquid in each. Cassie saw when he turned toward her with the drinks that it was the same beverage that had been served at the celebration and wondered if it was their drink of choice or if it was just all that had survived the years.

She wasn't certain it was wine, but if it was, she thought wryly, it was so aged it would probably have brought a couple of million per bottle on the market.

On the other hand, she didn't know it *was* wine or even that it was that old. The only thing she did know about it was that it tasted better than anything of an alcoholic nature that she'd ever drank—and it had a more powerful kick. She took a cautious sip when he handed her one of the tumblers.

There was no place to sit besides a straight chair before a desk in one corner and the bed. Cassie debated briefly and sat on the edge of the bed. Her knees still felt horribly weak.

She thought she was probably even less suited to subterfuge than Shelly had claimed. She couldn't be cool about sneaking around in the dead of night, and it was for certain she didn't find anything thrilling about it. Worry teased at the back of her mind that somebody would wake up before she could get back and she'd look even more guilty than she would've earlier if she'd just stayed long enough to explain.

As guilty, anyway.

"I don't know how much you've discovered about us, but I expect this will sound more like paranoia than sound reasoning," she began when he'd pulled the straight chair up to face her and settled on it.

He tilted his head, waiting.

“Most of the guys served, so they have a better idea of how the military works than I do—*our* military, but I have some idea myself so I don’t have to rely completely on them to know how they think. We’ve been watching what we could see of the activity beyond the field and even though we can’t see much, we *can* see that there’s a huge build up of forces beyond it. There wouldn’t *be* anything like that if the situation wasn’t already deadly serious.”

He frowned, but he didn’t deny it.

Cassie took another small sip of her drink and struggled to collect her thoughts. “If the U.S. claims this territory—I didn’t actually realize they did because I don’t keep up with this sort of thing—but the councilor said—Anyway, the fact that the Andromeda encroached without first asking permission would be construed as a sign of aggression. Nobody’s allowed to enter our air space without permission and clearance. They would’ve hailed the ship immediately, advised them to leave, and if they didn’t respond immediately that would’ve been considered a sign of intent. They would’ve tried to shoot it down.”

“They fired on the Andromeda Prime,” he conceded, “according to Admiral Valora.”

Cassie’s stomach felt like it suddenly dropped. She felt a little ill, not just because she was afraid of what the response had been, but because it had happened—at all—and *they* hadn’t even been aware of it. She might have doubted his word except she knew, positively, that the fighter jets *would* have fired on the Andromeda given the situation. A cloying stickiness arose in her throat. She swallowed several times and finally cleared her throat. “Did she ... retaliate?”

Raen seemed to consider before he responded. “She said she did not,” he said finally.

It unnerved Cassie that he avoided her gaze. “And you’re certain she didn’t because they’re still there.”

He studied the remains of his drink frowningly, but she didn’t think it was because he was trying to decide if he wanted a refill or not. “She did not retaliate. They should have taken that as a sign that her mission was a peaceful one—even though it was some time afterward before they had accumulated enough data to make the necessary response. The language was not familiar even to us. It did not exist in our time before. It is not reasonable to expect others to simply *know* it.”

She could see his point. “Everybody on this planet knows they better damned well know English if they enter our air space and be ready and able to respond—We don’t speak anything else. It’s the legal language of our country, established at the time the country was formed. I know it doesn’t sound reasonable to you, but that’s the way it is. And there’s just as much chance they would’ve taken a lack of response as arrogance as there is that they would’ve considered it a demonstration of peaceful intentions—In fact, it’s *more* than likely they would’ve.

“I don’t know how everybody else feels, but our government assures us we’re the most powerful nation on Earth. That’s the way they think. They wouldn’t take a challenge well at all, and they would probably see it that way—as a challenge of superiority.”

Raen's face was hard when he looked at her again. "Regardless, we will not yield to their demands. They will have to accept that. We have accessed their data and examined their weaponry. They have nothing that can be used against us—nothing."

Cassie felt the blood drain from her face as it settled in her that the situation was far worse than she'd thought. Right up until he'd said that, she'd been more than half convinced that she was scaring herself for nothing, imagining nightmarish scenarios that weren't at all likely. "You broke into the military computers?" she asked in horror.

He nodded. "When we accessed the internet and downloaded the available data, we accessed that, as well." He shrugged. "It is unstable. Twice the data feed simply stopped, but in the end we got everything."

A knot of fear and misery welled in Cassie's chest, but she was beyond tears of any kind—of fear, or hysteria, or grief. "And I told you about it," she murmured, trying to grasp the full ramifications of what she'd done.

"We would have found it if you had said nothing at all," he said angrily. "Do not claim guilt that is not yours to claim!"

She looked at him. "Would you? How would you've known to look?" She looked around for a place to set her glass and finally simply covered her face with her free hand. "I should've just helped to begin with. There might've been a way to prevent all of this if you'd understood us better. I felt that I could trust you, that you weren't a threat to us. I should have trusted my instincts."

Rising from his chair, he crouched in front of her, took the glass from her hand, and set it aside. "You are frightening yourself for nothing. We would not harm you or your people. I told you we would not consider it. You say you trust that. You should not be afraid."

Cassie's chin wobbled and the tears she'd thought wouldn't come did, filling her eyes until she couldn't see him. "You don't understand *us*—not at all. Y'all crashed the internet—I've got no idea how much of a pull it would take to crash the entire net—but you can be sure *they* know what kind of power that would take! *And* breached military security when no *one* in this world could do that. They will be—insane—with the need to destroy you, looking for any weakness at all, watching for any opportunity to strike! And they won't give up until they've thrown everything they have at you—and then they'll *still* attack if they have to throw rocks!

"The very *moment* we leave here, they'll shoot us out of the water! And try to rush in and destroy the Atlantis and the Andromeda. They'll be poised for the opportunity!

"I guess we don't really have to worry about being dragged off and tortured for information," she wailed a little hysterically. "Or stuck in a prison for the rest of our lives!"

Settling on his knees, he pulled her into his arms. She resisted, briefly, but she needed comforting, and he was very good at it. The temptation to simply yield completely to the hysteria clawing at her was almost irresistible, but she refused it, struggling instead to find calm. It might have made her feel better, but she felt a much stronger need to search her mind for a solution.

He pushed her away after a moment and rose. Cassie tried not to take it too badly that he'd tired of offering comfort so quickly, but then she would've clung to him anyway, she suspected, until he peeled her loose. She discovered, though, that he was

only seeking more comfort for himself from the awkward position on the floor. He settled on the bed beside her, pulled her to him again, and lay back.

The urge to cry, thankfully, had eased. The sense of doom didn't, although she discovered she'd moved past fear and into the realm of disbelief because the enormity of the situation was just too much to assimilate. She didn't think she'd blown it all out of proportion. If anything, she thought she was having trouble grasping the full range of possibilities.

She couldn't imagine, for one moment, that the U.S. would back down just because they'd discovered their 'foe' was stronger than them. That they wouldn't see them as anything else seemed an absolute. It was human nature to fear anything unknown and see it as a threat.

If she'd been on the outside looking in—hadn't met the Atlanteans—she would be terrified right now, and she knew the citizens would be. All they would be able to see was the two staggeringly enormous alien crafts hovering threateningly in the distance, surrounded by the might of the U.S., and their ineffectual efforts at chasing them off. The whole world might be in an uproar for all she knew—probably was. Allies of the U.S.—even enemies of the U.S.—gathering to try to expel a threat greater than anything the world had ever known.

Even if the aliens did nothing at all the world powers could decimate the world trying to protect themselves from the threat. Atomic weapons might be the last resort, but they'd try that if everything else failed, considering it a do or die situation.

And when the dust settled, no one was going to be able to live on Earth any more, not even the Atlanteans—unless they had a higher tolerance for radiation than humans.

"We will not let it come to that," Raen said gruffly. "I give you my word we will not."

Cassie was too apathetic even to feel a great deal of surprise or resentment that he'd read her thoughts, although she'd all but forgotten that he had before.

"I can not read your thoughts," he said gently. "Not ordinarily. You do not have the projection of anyone accustomed to speaking with their mind. I can only 'hear' because you are so close now. It is like—whispers. If I hold you close and listen very carefully, then I can hear."

She considered that, and then considered putting some distance between them, and then realized it didn't particularly bother her that he could 'hear' her thoughts. It felt too good to lay against him and feel his warmth and his strength surrounding her. She could almost believe he was strong enough to protect her from anything—*could* believe it as long as she didn't allow herself to think about the 'anything' she might need protecting against.

"I should get back before they discover I left," she murmured after a while, but she didn't pull away. She didn't particularly want to go, and she no longer felt that there was much point in it. The chances seemed pretty remote that they were going to make it to the 'debriefing' Carl had spoken of. Some frustrated, trigger happy, jet jockey or ship gunner was going to blow them out the water the moment they were spotted. She was pretty sure they'd already passed well beyond the 'shoot first and ask questions later' stage.

He pulled away after a few moments and looked down at her, his expression troubled. "Your own people would not do that to you."

She smiled wryly. "If you say so. I have to tell you, though—they wouldn't have terms like 'friendly fire' and 'collateral damage' if it never happened." She reached up after a moment and smoothed the frown lines from his face with her finger tips. "I like you better when you smile," she said wistfully. "You're a little scary when you frown like that."

He smiled faintly. "You are not afraid of me. You were not from the beginning."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm pretty much a coward," she murmured, slipping her hand to the back of his neck and tugging him downward.

He yielded readily, lowering his head until his forehead rested against hers. "You should go back. You will be missed."

Her lips curled. "You should be quick, then."

He arched his head back to study her face. "There are some things that should be savored—not rushed," he said huskily, his eyes gleaming with both amusement and the heat of desire.

Cassie chuckled. "The first time was pretty frantic if I recall."

He swallowed audibly, the amusement in his eyes dimming. "I was—too eager. I failed to please you. I won't do that again."

"I'll be the judge of that," she disputed.

He dragged in a shuddering breath and released it slowly, as if he was trying to calm himself. "This is—unwise."

"If they wake up, they do. I'm not worried about it," she said, and realized she wasn't—not anymore.

He grimaced. "There is that, too."

She looked at him questioningly. "Too?"

He frowned. Lifting slightly away from her, he stroked a hand slowly down her body, setting off waves of heat even through the robe she wore as his hand moved over her from shoulder to thigh in a way that was both caress and exploration. He lifted his hand at the limit of his reach and brought it upward again, settling it over one breast and molding the fabric over it, watching as he did so as if to study the size and roundness of her breast. Her nipple hardened at his light touch, sending a rush of anticipation threading through her veins. "You want me as your lover?" he murmured.

Cassie studied his profile, trying to grasp the overtones in the question and failing. She couldn't entirely interpret his expression either. It flickered in her mind that there was some reluctance in him, but she couldn't make sense of it. He seemed to want her. She could feel his heat, hear the ragged quality of his accelerated breath, feel the faint tremor in his hand that seemed to imply eagerness. "Yes," she said finally.

He met her gaze then, and she saw hesitation in his eyes, but she also saw his eyes were dark with desire—and tumultuous with conflicting thoughts. He looked down at her body again, settling his hand at her waist, kneading the flesh there and making her belly tighten just from the proximity of his hand. She tried to ignore it, confused and disconcerted by his hesitancy. Distressed, as well.

After a moment, his gaze moved to her breasts and his hand followed, almost as if of its own accord. Her belly tightened again as he stroked her breasts through the fabric, moisture gathering in her sex. He let out a harsh breath, as if he'd been holding it. His expression was pained when he met her gaze again. Uttering a profanity that startled her in its vehemence, he swooped down to capture her mouth beneath his with a suddenness

and ferocity that shocked her. She tensed all over at the abrupt assault, but she had no time to throw up a defense. He covered her mouth and thrust his tongue inside before she could do more than flinch, and the moment he did a shock wave of need crashed through her in a dizzying tide. She struggled against it for a moment, then yielded to the tide she discovered she couldn't fight because she couldn't dredge up an ounce of 'want to'. The urgency of his mouth as it melded with hers awakened an answering hunger inside of her. One moment, she merely wanted, felt the warmth of rising need, and the next she was drowning in it, drunk and disoriented, thoroughly aroused and desperate.

His heated breath mingled with hers as their mouths clung hungrily. His taste filled her mouth and then her entire being, creating a drugging, chemical craving within her. The stroke of his hands all over her stirred more heat, but she was only vaguely aware of it. Her entire focus was on the feel of his mouth, the stroke of his tongue along hers.

Chapter Eighteen

A purring moan vibrated in her throat. Mindlessly, Cassie reached to touch him, needing to feel his flesh against her palms and fingertips. The silky feel of his hair caressed her palms as she looped her arms around his neck and stroked the back of his skull, trying to hold him more tightly to her, sucking at his tongue feverishly. He tensed, and then a shudder rippled through him. He dragged his mouth from hers after a moment, gasped hoarsely and wedged his face between her jaw and shoulder, sucking at the tender skin along her neck. "I am as certain as I can be that I will regret this," he muttered, more to himself than to her, she thought.

She could barely assimilate the words anyway. By the time her mind had begun to interpret the sounds and seek their meaning, he'd moved to her ear. Her flesh pebbled from her neck to her breasts as he covered the shell with his mouth and his heated breath assaulted the sensitive skin, her nipples tightening to such hard points it felt as if it had drawn up the skin from her groin upward. She shivered, of half a mind to evade, and half to stay as she was and luxuriate in the intense sensations that bordered on nearly unbearable.

Before she could make up her mind, he sought her lips again. She opened her mouth eagerly for his possession, anxious to taste him, to savor the feel of him inside her. Rolling toward him, she pressed her body as tightly against his as she could get, sucking at his tongue, stroking it with hers.

He tore his mouth from hers and sat up abruptly, dragging his robe off. He grabbed her as she pushed herself up shakily and began tugging at hers. Pulling on her robe until he'd managed to remove it, he tossed it aside and pushed her down again with the weight of his body, rolling half atop her. She lifted one leg away even as he rolled onto her and managed to keep him from pinning her to the bed. Wrapping her leg around him, she stroked his thighs with the sole of her foot, explored his muscular back with the palm of her hand as far as she could reach. His hand settled on her buttock and traced a path downward along her thigh and then back again as he sought the juncture and explored her cleft with his fingers.

"Gods, Cassie! You make me crazy," he murmured against her skin as he dragged his lips over her throat and the upper slope of her breasts, nibbled at the flesh with his lips, tasted her with his tongue. And all the while his hand roved her belly and then downward to the nest of hair at the juncture of her thighs and up again to cup and knead her breasts as if he couldn't make up his mind what part of her to explore first.

Good, she thought! He made her crazy, too. She didn't want to be crazy all alone. She loved the feel his body against hers, his weight, the feel of his skin against hers and beneath her palms. The only thing that could possibly feel better, she thought, was feeling him inside of her. Her belly clenched at the thought. Moisture flooded her channel and anticipation fired her blood.

She began to wiggle desperately against him to align her body with his, tugging at him, urging him to fill her. He arched against her in counter, bruising her thigh with the

force of his thrusts, but merely teasing her. She groped for the cock she could feel but not reach. "Raen," she gasped plaintively. "Come inside me."

He lifted his head and stared down at her uncomprehendingly, his eyes glazed with his own feverish need. Shifting after a moment, he aligned his body with hers and she felt the head of his cock slide along her cleft and burrow snugly against the mouth of her sex. She tensed all over, holding her breath in anticipation, holding herself in readiness for his thrust. He tensed, but instead of thrusting, he pulled back.

Indignation filled her as he leaned away, supporting himself on one arm. His hand settled heavily on her belly, and then she felt his fingers delving her cleft. A jolt went through her as he found her clit, then bypassed it to search for the mouth of her sex. Gasping for breath, she rotated her hips to end the search, groaning as his finger found her and slipped inside.

It wasn't what she'd wanted, but it felt good. She arched against him in demand, gritting her teeth as the glide of his finger only increased the itch to be filled instead of appeasing it. She felt his gaze and opened her eyes slowly to discover he was watching her face as he stroked her with his finger. After a moment, he slipped it out of her and stroked upward along her cleft until he found her clit again, circling it with the tip of his finger and then covering it with the pad of his finger and massaging it. Her eyes slid closed of their own accord as sensation jolted along her nerve endings.

She felt him lean toward her a split second before she felt his mouth cover one nipple and tug at it. A bolt of electricity seemed to travel all the through her from her nipple to her womb. The massage of his finger sent another from her clit upwards, and her belly clenched painfully. She gasped, uncertain for many moments if she could bear the twin spears of fire running through her. He didn't give her a choice. He teased her until she couldn't catch her breath anymore.

She was trembling all over when he finally ceased the torment and moved over her again. This time, he didn't merely tease, however. When he'd aligned his flesh with hers, he caught her hips and thrust hard. Her flesh protested the invasion and then yielded abruptly as the moisture of her arousal allowed his entry. She gasped with a mixture of pleasure and pain, panting for breath as he withdrew slightly and thrust again.

A low groan escaped her when he claimed her at last and she felt the quiver deep inside of her that promised relief. He shuddered, pausing for a moment to catch his breath before he began to probe her with slow, easy strokes that teased her almost as maddeningly as his caresses of before. Curling her hips until he was stroking her more deeply, stroking that place that craved his touch, she planted her heels firmly against the bed and tried to force him to increase his pace. Shudders went through him as he paused again and then, abruptly, he gave her what she wanted, needed—deep, hard thrusts, pounding into her at a nearly frenetic pace until her body suddenly seized and shattered with convulsions of ecstasy. Her mind seemed to fold in upon itself. She groaned as the first spasm of her climax hit her, groaned more sharply with the next, harder contraction and then uttered a series of keening cries as each successive wave hit her harder still. Dimly, she was aware of his panting breaths, the shudders quaking through him. She felt the hot fountain of his seed as he came inside of her, but distantly. She was too caught up in the throes of her own rapturous climax to think and then too weak in the aftermath to spare a thought for anything but catching her breath, too faint from the expenditure to do more than cling precariously to consciousness.

After wavering for a seemingly endless time between consciousness and unconsciousness, her senses began to expand beyond her again and she became aware that Raen was leaning heavily against her, felt the faint discomfort of stickiness from their exertions. With an effort, she lifted her arm and stroked her hand along his back. Tipping her head, she nuzzled her face against him in appreciation.

It was more than that, though, she realized, more than appreciation for the pleasure he'd given her, more than mere acceptance of his weight on her. A sense of belonging feathered along the edges of her mind, a sense of rightness.

And, god, it was so very, very wrong it was almost mind boggling!

Not that she was surprised to find herself falling for him—fallen, she mentally corrected. She had a lifelong history of making all the wrong choices in men or she wouldn't be the thirty something and single.

He roused slightly at her touch. "I am crushing you," he muttered.

Despite the depression her wayward thoughts had settled upon her, amusement wafted through her. "That's alright. I can breathe later," she murmured.

He tensed slightly, lifted away to study her face a moment, and then chuckled. Rolling away, he carried her with him, draping her limp form over his chest. She snuggled her face against his throat, utterly content in a way she could never recall being before.

Then again, she'd never been so completely satisfied—except the last time they'd been together.

He smoothed her hair and then stroked his hand idly along her back. "You should go," he said after a little while.

She grunted, reluctantly admitted that he was right, and finally heaved herself upward. "Must keep up appearances," she muttered wryly as she sat up and moved to the edge of the bed, looking around for her robe. "They'll never figure it out when I arrive looking like I've been thoroughly fucked and wreaking of sex."

He caught her arm just as she'd gathered enough strength in her trembling limbs to attempt to stand. She glanced back at him in surprise. His gaze flickered over her face. Slowly, his dark brows drew together in a frown that seemed equal parts confusion and anger. "You will come to me again?"

"As long as I'm here—when I can," she qualified. She looked around his quarters. "If I can find my way," she added wryly.

It was a bad idea, she knew, but she also knew her limitations. Even knowing it was going to end badly and she was going to regret it later—if she lived long enough—it was just too tempting to consider depriving herself.

He walked with her until she reached an area she was familiar with—fortunately. Otherwise, she would probably have wandered around lost for days.

Depression settled more heavily inside of her when she left him and headed back. She was screwed. She was going to spend her last days yearning for something she could never have. On the other hand, it was better to have something than nothing, she decided.

The first thing Cassie noticed when she reached the room was that everyone was still sleeping.

The second thing she noticed was that everyone wasn't there. Both David and Carl were missing.

She looked around in consternation, trying to decide if they'd just gotten up to go to the bathroom, or maybe decided to sneak off to fornicate like she had.

The bathroom, she realized almost immediately, was doubtful. She would've heard them in the bathroom, and they sure as hell wouldn't be in there together even if they'd both woke up for a piss call at the same time. One might have gone to find a another bathroom, but both?

Uneasiness settled in her belly. They might've gone off on an assignation like she had, or they might've discovered she was gone and went to look for her.

Surely, if that was the case, though, she would've run into them?

She had a bad feeling they were up to something that was just going to make matters worse.

The urge to run to Raen and tell him immediately washed over her. Directly behind that doubt flooded her. Just how screwed up in the head was she that she trusted Raen more than her own people?

She was emotionally involved with Raen—or at least emotional *over* him. How he felt about her remained to be seen—or tested. She couldn't really trust her judgment, she realized in dismay. She *wanted* him to be what her heart told her he was—a man she could love, trust, admire—depend upon.

If Raen was emotionally detached, though—and the part of her brain that could still reason told her he probably was—he could easily see that she wasn't, that she was putty in his hands, and he could manipulate her to do most anything. Maybe he'd been manipulating her all along, had set out to use the attraction she felt for him to turn her to his cause?

She knew, deep down, that she'd reasoned through everything she knew personally and had seen and had arrived at the correct conclusion in so far as the build up of military tension. But how much of what Raen and the councilor had told her could she trust? Any of it? Had she already betrayed her own people to enemies that would use everything she'd told them to destroy them?

She couldn't *make* herself believe that, and she still didn't know what to do. If she told Raen, she might get Carl and David killed.

So, what to do? Crawl under the covers and pretend she hadn't noticed they were gone?

The room was under surveillance. The Atlanteans must suspect something by now. If she went to Raen, she might at least save her own ass, but even the thought of informing on them made her sick to her stomach.

She settled on the mattress finally and covered her face with her hands, wishing she could just go to sleep and wake up *before* any of this had happened and make a different decision than the one she'd made. The thought made her heart squeeze in protest.

She would never have known Raen, then. She would've missed knowing what it felt like to be in his arms, missed his touch, his kisses. She would've missed feeling him inside of her.

She couldn't have missed what she'd never known, she told herself.

But she *had* missed it. She'd yearned for it—these feelings that were tearing her apart now.

God! She was so *sick* of being afraid!

She didn't pay any attention to the rustling sound of movement until she felt a presence beside her, felt the mattress dip. "What is it?" Linda asked in a whisper.

Cassie dropped her hands and lifted her face. "Carl and David are gone, and I'm afraid I know what they went to do," she whispered back.

Linda turned as white as a sheet. Her head whipped around as she surveyed the room to verify Cassie's remark. "They're going to get us all killed," she whispered hoarsely.

Cassie looked at her mournfully. "You know what the worst thing about it is?"

Linda stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"I'm more worried about Raen being mad with me for not telling him."

Linda's face went blank. After a moment, though, she grabbed Cassie's arm and urged her up. Cassie allowed herself to be led without resistance, but surprise flickered through her when Linda led her back to her own quarters. "What did you say?" she demanded once they'd left the others sleeping.

Cassie flinched at the question. "I know! Maybe I'm going through premature menopause?"

"Hormonal overload, more likely!" Linda retorted dryly. "I thought you were going to be the sensible one?"

"I tried!" Cassie wailed. "I don't know if I'm crazy about him or just plain crazy! I've been so scared and confused ever since we got here I don't know what to think about anything, or what to do! I can't trust anything—not what I see, not what I think, not what I feel! This place—shouldn't be here at all. None of these people should be here, and I can hardly take that in. Now it looks like we're looking at world annihilation by aliens, and I'm so crazy about one of them that I can't seem to stay away from him."

"I convinced myself they were good people, and our government was in the wrong. I was wrong, wasn't I? They're just playing with us—and I fell for it."

Linda's lips turned down. "I hope you don't think I can help. I've been divorced twice. Does that sound like a woman who has a clue about men? No! It sounds like an idiot who's ever hopeful she'll have better sense the next time around! I fell for Adan like a ton of bricks. I listened to you because I thought you had your wits about you and I *knew* I didn't. I thought he was just trying to use me."

Cassie looked at her apologetically. "I'm so sorry! I should've just minded my own business."

"I doubt I would've listened to you except I realized you were probably right," she said glumly. "He's so young and beautiful. What would he want with me? There had to be a catch."

Cassie stared at her for a long moment, realizing what she said made perfect sense. "You're right. You're absolutely right! I've been such an idiot! I knew as soon as he separated us that he was up to something, and I *still* fell for it the moment he decided to pay me some attention."

Linda gave her a look of commiseration. "We should stick to homegrown. You and I both know this would never work out, even if not for everything else."

"No. You're right. I couldn't picture it. They'd never fit in at home and neither one of us would fit in here ... not that that matters."

"No, it doesn't, because as soon as they catch those two gung-ho idiots, we're dead."

"Unless they realize we didn't have anything to do with it," Cassie said a little hopefully.

"You think they won't think our little walk outside yesterday was a chance to plan this?"

"Oh," Cassie muttered, "I'd forgotten about that. Good point." She looked around the room tiredly. They'd taken the mattress and the chair and moved them to Linda's room. Moving to one wall, she sat down and leaned back against it. "He'll think I wanted to have sex with him just to distract him—especially after we talked about just that when we first came—which, I think, is what gave him the idea to distract us with sex to begin with."

Linda looked her over. "You sneaked out last night for sex?"

Cassie shrugged.

Linda settled beside her. "I did that a few times when I was a teenager. Was it fun?"

"The sneaking? Or the sex?"

"The sneaking is half the excitement."

"Oh, it was exciting alright!" Cassie agreed. "But not the kind of thrill I go for. Anyway, I didn't sneak out *for* that. I went to talk—really!" she insisted at the look of disbelief on Linda's face, then frowned. "Maybe subconsciously I'd hoped for it, I suppose. Mostly I was hoping that there was a possibility that they'd help us if we helped them."

"You know, of course, if they even *offer* to torture me, I'm going to spill my guts, don't you?" Linda said conversationally.

Cassie studied her face. Linda had said it humorously, but they both knew she would. "I doubt it'll come to that, honestly. Everything's so stirred up now, I don't think we'll get out of here even if the Atlanteans decide to let us go." She sighed. "And even if they did, and we made it out, my confidence in our government and theirs managing to avert disaster is about non-existent. From what Raen said, the Atlanteans are basically ignoring them/us, and you know that's practically a goad. That toad in the White House has a Napoleon complex. He'll have everybody in the country scared shitless by now and *demanding* he do something. I expect he's got everything in the arsenal trained right on this one little spot by now and is busy plagiarizing the speech that actor made in the movie about an alien invasion.

"Nobody's going to stop to consider that if they wanted the planet, they could've wiped us out a long time ago and took it. And, my god! It might have been worth having way back when, but we've just about ruined it now."

Linda shrugged. "It's still better than Mars."

"Or any of the other planets in the system," Cassie agreed with a faint smile. "But if it's true that ship up there came from Andromeda—and I don't see any reason to question it since they obviously didn't come from here—then it seems to me there are plenty of places they could go."

"But they picked our planet, so it must have been the best choice in range."

"At the time. According to our own legends the Atlantean civilization was around thousands of years ago. That was pre-fucked up by a long shot."

"You've thought this over," Linda said musingly. "I haven't really spent much time thinking about anything except what I wished I'd done."

"I spent a lot of time by myself."

The approach of marching steps down the corridor distracted them. Cassie lifted her head to listen and realized it was at least a half a dozen people moving toward them and marching in step. She exchanged a fearful glance with Linda. They both stood up and turned to face the door.

Raen's face looked as if it was carved from stone as he stopped before the door. He said something to the first two soldiers in the group in his own tongue and they detached themselves from the group, approaching Linda and Cassie with their pikes held warningly. Cassie and Linda exchanged a wide-eyed, horrified glance, but neither of them moved. The group moved off while the two soldiers bound Cassie's and Linda's hands behind their backs and then urged them out of the room.

Cassie had more than half suspected that they'd be detained there while the guards rounded up the others. Instead, as soon as the soldiers marched them out of the room, they directed them down the corridor, past the room where the others were being similarly manacled. They walked for what seemed like an hour, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the ship. Finally, they turned on a bisecting corridor and walked for perhaps a half an hour. They came at last to a wide door and when it opened, Cassie saw yet another corridor, though this one was much more narrow than the others they'd traversed.

The place had prison written all over it, and Cassie felt her stomach knot for the first time with real fear. They halted by a narrow door, removed Cassie's manacles and pushed her inside. The door, when it slid shut, was solid without so much as a tiny window. She had no idea where they took Linda. After standing at the door uneasily for a few moments, she finally looked around the tiny room and then moved to the narrow cot.

She had to suppose they'd caught Carl and David and they'd been in the act of doing whatever it was they'd thought up—probably trying to send information to the navy using the Morse Code. She supposed she could understand why the Atlanteans would be furious about it, but Raen had claimed they weren't worried about the American military. Aside from being a betrayal of the hospitality extended to them, she couldn't see that it could make that much difference. It wasn't as if the American army could do much with any information they got.

She'd known they'd all be blamed, and she was still outraged at the injustice of it.

She had time to get over it and begin to feel scared again. She finally reached the point where her exhaustion from having almost no sleep the night before overcame her fear, though, and lay down on the cot and fell asleep.

She woke sometime later thoroughly disoriented. When she opened her eyes, she discovered that the noise that had awakened her was Raen entering her cell. His expression was no more welcoming than it had been earlier, and she felt her heart sink. "Get up," he commanded her.

Chapter Nineteen

Cassie was so drunk from so little sleep and being woken so abruptly, it was all she could do to comply. She staggered slightly when she stood up, and Raen grasped her arm to steady her. Without a word, he led her out of the cell and then out of the wide door that led into the area where the cells were contained.

She had no idea where he was taking her, but although she glanced at his hard profile a few times she discovered she couldn't get up the nerve to ask him. This man looked like the scary one who'd captured her that first day, not like the considerate lover who'd so thoroughly pleased her, not like the handsome, smiling man who'd asked her to walk with him.

He felt betrayed, she realized, and unfortunately she felt as if she had betrayed him because she hadn't told him when she'd guessed what Carl and David must be up to.

They didn't leave the same way she'd arrived, and she was too distressed to pay much attention, but it seemed they walked for every bit of an hour before Raen finally drew her to a halt before another door. She was dumbfounded when she discovered it was his quarters.

He didn't offer her a seat or a drink, and the tautness of his features didn't abate one whit, although she'd more than half hoped when he led her into his room that it would transpire that he'd only gone through the elaborate ruse to separate her from the others. She stood where he left her, studying him uneasily as he paced away from her and finally turned to study her with condemning eyes. Propping his shoulders against the wall, he folded his arms over his chest.

"They sent you to keep me occupied while they attempted to contact your people," he said flatly.

Cassie swallowed with an effort, but the statement jogged her brain into functioning. "I went because you told me to come to you after everyone was asleep," she reminded him.

"So, I gave you the opportunity and you took it?"

Cassie felt a surge of anger usurp her fear. "Y'all have been watching us and listening to us ever since we've been here. You know damned well I didn't! They were gone when I got back and you would have to know I didn't talk to anyone about it after we'd made the arrangement to meet."

"You are saying all of this was not planned on the day you and your friends walked out to talk where you could not be overheard?"

Cassie expelled an irritated sigh. "No! It was not planned—Not by me. Not by anyone else that I was aware of. The only thing we discussed was how to get out of here alive, and we didn't actually manage to come up with a plan for that!"

He tilted his head, narrowing his eyes on her thoughtfully. "You knew nothing about them signaling with light?"

Cassie felt her face heat guiltily. "Carl said he was in the Navy and knew Morse Code, but he didn't say" She broke off abruptly as she remembered the conversation.

"Did not say what?"

"We were trying to figure out a way to get out of this alive!" Cassie said angrily. "We're scared! We're all scared. Mostly we just argued. And then we talked about the likelihood that they'd shoot us out of the water the moment we tried to leave and Carl said he could communicate with them by Morse Code and convince them we were Americans so they wouldn't shoot us! I thought that was all he meant to do. And then we decided instead of trying to get through on the boat to figure out a way to get to the media instead so we could avoid the military altogether. I thought he'd dismissed that plan. I honestly didn't think about it anymore after we got to talking about trying to slip out and reach the media to avoid ending up in a military prison."

"And yet you knew the moment I questioned you what they'd gone to do. How is that?" he asked coldly.

"When I got back to the room and discovered they were gone I figured it out," she admitted.

"So you admit you knew at least that far in advance and you still said nothing. You didn't think to come to me with this information?"

"I *did* think about it! I couldn't betray them."

"But you could betray my trust in you?" He pushed away from the wall and approached her when she merely stared at him miserably. "You shared your body with me, right here, not an hour before you betrayed me. Are your loyalties with your people? Or just with yourself? They are certainly not with your lover!"

She lifted her chin to look him in the eyes. "I never said my loyalties were for sale. I told you and I told the councilor that I couldn't and wouldn't deliberately betray my people. I never would have told you anything to begin with if I'd realized—*believed* for one moment that it would be used against my countrymen. I came to you to help them ... and also to help the Atlantean people because I don't believe you mean us any harm.

"*You* said you didn't need or want my help. And I know for a fact that you have had us watched the entire time we've been here. I figured y'all knew better where Carl and David were and what they were doing than I did.

"And if you didn't, I *still* couldn't tell you, damn it!"

"I came to you because I trusted you to do the right thing—what was right for everyone! I did not *plan* to have sex with you, and I sure as hell didn't do it just to keep you occupied so Carl and David could sneak out! Because I didn't *know* they planned to!"

He studied her for a long moment and finally turned to pace the room. "I begin to understand you humans," he said curtly. "You are guided entirely by self-interest and greed. Data without observation of the subjects is not nearly as effective, although there is historical evidence that those traits are inherent in mankind as a whole—and aggression. All in all, despite your intelligence, you haven't really risen much above the animals. You are still guided more by your instincts than your intelligence and you are, by and large, vicious predators."

Cassie watched him as he paced, feeling her heart sink at his assessment, but that was nothing compared to his cold comment that they'd been nothing more than lab rats. She'd suspected something of the kind, and it still hurt. She was abruptly fiercely glad she hadn't been stupid enough to tell him she loved him, especially since she realized she

didn't love *him* at all. She didn't even know the man. She'd fallen in love with the man she thought he was, and she'd been totally blind to what he really was—alien to her.

He stopped when he reached the wall and propped against it again. "We caught them before they had finished communications, but you will no doubt be pleased to know that they did manage to inform your people that the Andromeda Prime is Admiral Valora's flagship and that there was very likely a fleet still in space—which, in point of fact, there is."

Cassie stared at him in absolute horror. "There's more?" she managed to ask hoarsely.

He eyed her assessingly. "The Atlantis is no more than a colony ship. We've always used population control—for obvious reasons here—but we understood the need for it long before our ancestors came here. Our home world was much like yours is now when our ancestors were sent out to colonize other worlds—over populated—and with much of its natural resources depleted or nearing depletion. The only way we could save it was to reduce the demands on it by reducing the population—which meant sending them elsewhere.

"Yes, there are more—many, many more on many worlds—some colonies far closer than Andromeda that we have traded with in the past."

Cassie's knees abruptly felt as weak as water. She had looked around a little hopefully for a place to sit before she fell when it dawned on her that she'd neither been invited nor told to sit and that she was a prisoner. With an effort, she locked her knees. She was too stunned to really focus her thoughts beyond the need to stay on her feet.

It was a blessing, really. Her personal tragedy should have paled by comparison to the imminent destruction of the planet, but it didn't. She didn't know if that was because she didn't actually believe they'd do it, or if she was just that self-centered, but she couldn't get far beyond the absolute misery of realizing she'd never meant anything at all to Raen. She couldn't even summon any anger that he'd used her. She was too busy kicking herself for allowing herself to be used—going out of her way to be used.

"The question is, what to do with you now?"

Cassie lifted her head to look at him, but she wasn't even in any state to feel a lot of fear anymore. She supposed it was shock and she would fall apart when it finally eased its grip on her, but at the moment she couldn't bring any order to her mind or feel much emotion.

Would there be another hearing, she wondered? Or would they just take them out and execute them?

It was odd how that was actually starting to sound better all the time. It sounded like something that would be quick and easy. Maybe they'd be nice and just 'surprise' them? March them out and not tell them where they were going and then 'bang' all over, all done.

It beat the hell out of being incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay, she was sure. Torture was such an ugly way to die, and it took so long.

And she had a really low threshold for pain.

They'd probably be better off than everybody else.

Especially the survivors—if there were any.

It seemed pretty doubtful any of their nasty little germs were going to come to the rescue like they had in that alien invasion flick. The Atlanteans had been around longer than the plague.

"Get in the bed."

Cassie emerged from her fog with a start. "What?"

Raen sent her a look of disgust. "Go to bed before you fall down."

She stared at him blankly. "Here?" she asked in disbelief.

His lips thinned. "You and your people will be kept apart until we decide what to do with you. You will stay here."

Cassie tried to make sense of that command and found she couldn't. "Why?" she asked finally.

"So that I can keep closer watch over you. So that you and your friends will not get another opportunity to think up mischief. Because, regardless of what you have done, I will not lock you in a cell. Go to bed."

"What about the others?" Cassie asked tentatively.

He studied her for a long moment. "They are with their lovers, also."

Cassie reddened. "You don't honestly think"

"No, I don't."

She glared at him. "You didn't let me finish."

"I did not say we were still lovers, or that we would be, or that I want to be. Only that we were."

There didn't seem to be a hell of a lot to say to that. She sniffed. "Well, as long as we have that straight," she muttered. "I need to use the bathroom."

He gestured toward the door.

She cried in the shower. It seemed safe enough to preserve her pride, and she couldn't help it anyway. She thought part of it might be relief that she wasn't going to have to stay in that awful cell. Part of it was because, no matter what decision she made, it always seemed to be the wrong one in retrospect. Most of it, though, was grief for her loss, which seemed excessive even to her when she had still been in a state of confusion as to exactly how she felt about Raen right until she'd realized it didn't matter *how* she felt anymore. She'd nipped any possibility of having her sentiments returned right in the bud.

Thankfully, Raen was occupied at his desk when she finally peered out of the bathroom because, despite all of her efforts, she hadn't been able to erase her red nose and red, puffy eyes with cold water. Keeping her face averted, she crossed to the bed and climbed in. Fortunately, she was so exhausted nothing could have kept her awake, not even the miserable thoughts rambling around in her mind.

* * * *

Raen was so furious all he could do for a while was to focus on fighting the urge to erupt into violence and smash something. The red cloud of rage didn't begin to dissipate from his mind, in fact, until he abruptly became aware that he was searching his mind for some outlet for it, something, or someone he could expend his rage on—preferably someone. He wasn't certain if it was the fact that it suddenly dawned on him that he was actually mentally flipping through the images of the males in Cassie's party, trying to decide which one he most wanted to break in half. Or the realization that the one he most wanted to get his hands on hadn't actually been involved, as far as he knew,

in the most recent event and that, moreover, unprovoked violence against prisoners already in custody was not only unheard of but punishable by demotion, fines, and imprisonment, or all of the above. It sobered him, however. It didn't completely eradicate the boiling fury. He still toyed, for a while, with the idea of provoking Mark into an act of aggression that would relieve him of the responsibility of having done so, but the thoughts brought his temper down to a more manageable level.

He wasn't entirely certain why his focus was on Mark to begin with except that there had been a connection between him and Cassie when they'd first come. Their behavior since seemed to indicate that whatever had been between them was over, but he wasn't as sure as he wanted to be that it was.

And he didn't particularly care for the fact that there'd ever been anything between them at all.

He didn't trust that there wasn't anything between them, he realized after a while.

He didn't trust Carl or David, either. All of the males seemed to have become protective of the females—in a general way—not specific that he could tell, not particular to any one female, but he'd noticed that Carl and David seemed to have more interest in Cassie than the other two females. Both men had focused on her at the celebration, he remembered. They were the two most reluctant to allow Cassie to leave with him, and it was them who'd come to look for her later.

She'd protected them. Knowing they were up to something, she'd tried to protect them from getting caught at it.

For several moments, his rage threatened to gain the upper hand again as his mind moved from those thoughts to the possibility that, regardless of what she'd said, she'd known about their plan beforehand and helped them by seeing to it that he was occupied.

It angered him that they'd outwitted him, he realized finally.

But that paled by comparison to the fury he had felt when it occurred to him that Cassie had helped them by playing on his feelings for her. *That* had made him feel like a complete fool.

The sense of betrayal swelled inside of him all over again, but he resolutely refused to acknowledge the hurt that accompanied it as having anything to do with the excessive rage.

It *was* all out of proportion, he knew, to what had happened. They'd been under surveillance the entire time. They hadn't succeeded in their plan, and it wouldn't have mattered if they *had* succeeded in passing the information. It would've been of no use to the outsiders. The crime was that they'd tried, successful or not.

He wanted to believe Cassie hadn't had anything to do with it. That was why he didn't. She'd sounded convincing, but he'd wanted to be convinced so badly that he knew he couldn't trust his judgment.

She'd looked so white and shaken when he'd interrogated her that he'd felt sick to his stomach, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to allow anyone else to handle the interrogation. Worse, he was no more certain afterwards than he had been before he started. He hadn't been able to see anything past the stricken look she'd given him, and he couldn't decide if she was scared because she was guilty, or if she was innocent and just frightened about being arrested and interrogated.

Despite his fury and his focus on trying to sort his thoughts and bring some order to them by eliminating the emotions from the equation that were demolishing his reasoning abilities, he was keenly aware of Cassie.

He'd found it insulting that she thought he would further compromise his professionalism by resuming their relationship as if nothing had happened, but his repudiation of that possibility had been purely personal.

He hadn't wanted her to take him as her lover to begin with, he thought angrily. He had wanted to convince her he was worthy of more than recreation.

He just hadn't been able to resist the temptation.

It seemed to him, though, that females who took a male as a lover rarely developed deeper feelings for them and usually moved on to another lover before very long—generally just about the time the male became comfortable with the relationship and began to think his place in her life was assured.

He'd wanted more from her than that, though. From the moment he'd finally stopped lying to himself that he was interested her, he'd also had to accept that it was far more than just the physical attraction. He'd had to. He'd no more than begun to toy with the idea of taking advantage of the physical attraction between them than he'd realized the notion left him feeling completely unsatisfied and worse, uneasy.

More accurately, he supposed, the idea of being her lover had been tremendously appealing, but he'd no sooner begun trying to seduce her than it occurred to him that such a position was too tenuous to make him feel easy in his mind. A union between them would hardly be written in stone. She could still set him aside—just as Kira had—but it was a commitment to form a life together and the bond of bearing and rearing children together, not merely a casual agreement to amuse one another until they grew bored enough to look around for someone new and interesting.

The fear that that was now a lost cause, he finally realized, was the root of the sick rage inside him that barely settled before boiling up inside of him all over again and threatening to erupt.

He was spoiling for a fight, he realized abruptly—with her. He'd given her every opportunity to reassure him that she cared too much about him and their budding relationship to consider betraying him and instead of doing so she'd assured him she had made her choice—and her choice was to remain loyal to *her* people.

He supposed it was unreasonable, given the situation, to expect her to cast her lot with him—*Him*, damn it to hell!—not his people, not her people, but him—when their relationship was so new and fragile, but he'd been so certain that she was on the verge of committing to a union between them that he felt completely deceived.

She'd ignored the broad hints he'd given her, of course, when he'd shown her his home and told her about his plans so that she'd know he was open to the idea if she decided to choose him, but he'd been sure that was nothing more than an encouragement to try harder. A female never liked to appear too easy to attain. A male could get the idea that she wasn't as worthy of his interest as he'd first thought if she was too easy to please—Kira had had him jumping through hoops until he'd been on the point of giving up entirely before she'd finally decided he was worthy of her.

And Cassie had not turned her nose up at his meager offering, despite the fact that the house was a disaster. He wouldn't, in fact, have shown it to her in that state if he'd felt like he had time to dress it up into something a little more presentable first. He

supposed it was a sign of his own desperation that he had, and maybe she'd sensed that, but she'd not only *not* condemned it out of hand, she'd offered suggestions to improve it to suit her and he'd taken that as encouragement of his suit.

He got up from his desk when she finally settled on the bed, and he realized she'd gone to sleep, deciding he'd spent enough time pretending he had any gods damned interest in the reports he'd been staring at on his display for the past hour.

He hadn't had any more sleep than she had, and he felt like he'd been through hell and back, but he was humiliated enough about the incident without making it obvious to everyone why it was that he wasn't at his post and was unavailable at the time it went down. He wasn't comfortable about lying about it. But he was a hell of a lot more comfortable lying than he was about admitting that he'd been preoccupied with trying to impress one of the conspirators in his bed at the time her cohorts were attempting to breach their security.

Jadin looked him over curiously when he arrived at the observation room, but he was wise enough not to attempt to presume upon their personal relationship to question him about his failure to respond promptly to the threat of a security breach. "Replay the security vids," he said curtly.

Nodding without comment, Jadin brought up the vids in question. "Starting at the point where Lady Cassia signaled that she wished to have a meeting."

Raen slid a speculative glance at Jadin, but he could see nothing in Jadin's expression to indicate that he attached any particular significance to that point in time. There was no audio, of course, once she left the rooms where they'd quartered their guests, since it wasn't their habit to intrude on the privacy of Atlantean citizens and they'd had to add audio to the rooms when they'd set up the surveillance devices. Even the vids set up for security about the city were sparse, intended only as a means of locating a citizen in an emergency situation.

And he knew where they were located, which was why he'd chosen the spot where he'd stopped to speak to Cassie. They were not completely out of range of being captured on the vids, but he had known the images would not be clear.

It was still clear enough to discomfit him. He'd completely dismissed the vids from his mind when he'd pulled her into his embrace to comfort her. Watching it now, he realized that, despite the poor quality of the vids, it was still patently obvious that his behavior toward her was that of a lover—not a soldier questioning a person of interest to the state whose status was in doubt.

He itched to command Jadin to speed the footage up but refused to yield to the impulse since he knew that would only make his discomfort more obvious.

"This is the point that I find most curious and interesting," Jadin said after a time, pointing his finger at the holographic display showing Cassie rising and slipping out of their quarters.

Raen cleared his throat uncomfortably. "For what reason?"

"Her behavior strongly suggests that she is sneaking *away* from her party, which would support her claim that she wasn't involved. But then she simply vanishes for nearly three hours without a trace. It seems to me that she either had to know exactly where all the vids were and how to avoid them, or she was meeting someone who did. Though *that*, of course, is very unlikely."

Chapter Twenty

Raen felt his face heat. "I am not certain what point you are trying to make," he said uncomfortably.

"It seems to indicate she knows far more about us than she admits to—and I also wonder where she was and what she was doing during that time."

Raen nodded without comment, squelching the urge to admit, to his friend at least, that he knew exactly where she was and what she was doing during her absence, and how she'd managed it. He would, of course, have to tell his superiors, but he had no desire, at all, for it to become common knowledge and food for gossip and, as fond as he was of Jadin, he was well aware that the man was far too fond of gossip to keep a juicy tidbit like that to himself. If nothing else, he'd let it slip when he was in his cups—because his tongue became loose on both ends when he'd had a few drinks.

He dismissed his discomfort the best he could and focused on studying her behavior carefully from the moment she first, supposedly, discovered the absence of Carl and David until he'd arrived to arrest them. He discovered, as he'd feared, that it was impossible for him to observe objectively. His command of the English language, in particular the idioms and slang commonly used among their particular group, was still a long way from a complete understanding, but the interpretation of 'crazy about him' seemed to be an indication of strong feelings. And the suggestion that she was admitting to caring about him was enough to throw him into turmoil all over again.

"I do not know about the males, but it seems to me that none of the females had any idea what was going on," Jadin commented.

Raen slid an assessing glance at his friend.

Jadin looked uncomfortable. "Pardon, my lord. You did not ask for my opinion."

"You have my permission to give it."

"I have gone over these several times myself. The female named Shelly slept through the entire incident—not necessarily an indication of innocence, but certainly of a lack of nervousness that might indicate guilt. Lady Cassia seemed genuinely surprised and distressed to discover their absence and Lady Linda, also."

Raen frowned, distrusting the urge to accept Jadin's explanation. "Lady Cassia's behavior might also be interpreted as surprise and dismay that they had not returned," he pointed out, "not that they had gone."

Jadin frowned. "I had not thought of that."

Irritation flared in Raen when Jadin agreed with him instead of maintaining his certainty of Cassie's innocence.

"It is still my impression," Jadin said after a moment, "that their behavior and conversation together lead me to feel that they were unaware of the plot and distressed by it."

"They were all aware, however, that they were being watched and their conversations monitored—which calls both their behavior and their conversation into question. It might have been rehearsed."

"I had not thought of that, either," Jadin admitted.

Raen ground his teeth, wondering why he had even bothered to ask Jadin for his opinion.

"On the other hand," Jadin offered, "I have not seen that any of them are actually very good at deceit. They all seem far too prone to react instantly, and generally emotionally, to every occurrence—not to allow themselves time to consider before they speak or act."

Raen nodded and told him to replay the vids again. After watching them several more times, he realized he was not only no closer to certainty than he had been to begin with, but he was no less affected every time he watched. He felt no more comfortable watching as he pulled Cassie into his arms and held her—In fact, he felt *less* comfortable because he found his mind wandering from the image to his own perception of those moments—and every time he heard her telling Lady Linda how she felt about him, it twisted in his guts all over again. It didn't matter how closely he studied Cassie's body language for a sign that it was stilted or unnatural, or how hard he listened to the inflections in her voice for some minute sign that she was playing to the vids, he was distracted *every* time by his reaction to them.

He had developed a blinding headache by the time he finally accepted that he wouldn't find what he was looking for—something that would dispel the doubts in his mind.

Abandoning that avenue as useless, he left the observation room, headed to his temporary office, and summoned Adan and Aureleous—the two sentinels he had originally assigned to observe Lady Linda and Lady Shelly. Neither man looked thrilled to have been summoned, but since a summons to his office generally meant disciplinary action, he couldn't fault them for appearing white faced and looking extremely ill at ease.

"I am releasing Lady Linda and Lady Shelly into your custody," he announced without preamble when they came to attention before his desk.

Neither man reacted beyond a questioning, sideways glance at each other. Both men saluted, but neither made any move to leave. Finally Adan, looking even more uneasy, spoke. "Permission to speak, my lord?"

Raen nodded.

"I am ... emotionally attached to the Lady Linda," he admitted uncomfortably. "I am not at all confident that I can perform my duties to your satisfaction."

"You would prefer that I release Lady Linda into Aureleous' hands and vice versa?" he asked irritably.

Dismay flickered across the faces of both men before they managed to resume the stony faced lack of expression required at attention. "I would not prefer that," Aureleous stated emphatically, breaking protocol. "...my lord," he added belatedly. "If you will give me permission to express my opinion, my lord," he added uncomfortably.

"A preference is not an opinion," Raen said coldly.

"No, my lord," Aureleous agreed promptly, turning red faced.

"I also do not recall that I *requested* that you take the ladies into your personal custody," Raen growled angrily.

Both men turned whiter and grew more rigid in their stance, saluting yet again.

"I am not convinced," Raen continued after a moment, "that they were not all involved in the attempt to breach our security. However, I do not believe at this point

that the ladies were. Regardless, I am of no mind to give them another opportunity and, rather than allow them the chance to hatch another plot—which would then require us to do something we would all find unpleasant—I have determined that it will be best to prevent them from doing so by separating the group. So long as you do not allow your personal feelings to lead you into doing anything stupid, you will be keeping the ladies safe.

“Take them to your personal quarters and keep them there. They are not allowed to leave without your escort—you will not let them out of your sight at any time they are outside of your quarters. And I *will* expect you to be at your posts when you are assigned duty.”

“My lord?” Adan asked.

Raen nodded.

“Are we still required to make daily reports regarding our impressions of the natives?”

“You are, and also to report anything that they might say that could be considered useful information. You are dismissed.”

When the two sentinels had left, Raen sat drumming his fingers on his desk for a time, struggling with the urge to return to his quarters to see how Cassie was faring. He still had to make a decision about the males, however, and, unfortunately, he would have to report to High Councilor det Ophelia and endure a very uncomfortable interview himself.

Carl and David’s guilt was unquestionable. Both men would have to be confined until High Councilor det Ophelia determined that it was time to release all of the natives. He had not thought it wise to interrogate the males himself, particularly not Mark since he could not be around the man without having to struggle with a desire to plant his fist in the man’s smirking face.

Deciding after a while that there was no point in putting off the report he had to make to det Ophelia, he rose and went to present himself for the ass chewing he fully expected.

* * * *

“Your pardon, Lady!” Natara exclaimed in dismay when Cassie jumped and shoved herself upright, looking around the room in alarm. “High Sentinel ap Aquinox expressly forbid me to disturb you if you were still sleeping, but he was concerned that you had not eaten.”

Drunk from being awakened so abruptly the moment Cassie realized there was no cause for alarm, she stared at the girl uncomprehendingly for several moments trying to gather her wits. “What time is it?” she asked finally.

“Mid-afternoon,” Natara responded. “But you did not break your fast this morning or have luncheon. High Sentinel did not think that you should wait to eat until the evening meal.”

Cassie lay back down, staring at the ceiling, but despite the lingering grogginess, she felt too alert to seek sleep again. “I’m not likely to expire from missing two meals,” she said sulkily.

“It is not acceptable to mistreat prisoners, however,” Natara said in a carefully neutral tone.

Cassie sat up again. "Well, at least we've dispensed with the polite lie that we're guests," she retorted tartly.

"You *were* guests," Natara responded. "You abused our trust and so you are no longer a guest."

Cassie reddened. Even the damned servants were playing judge and jury! "I didn't do a damned thing!" she snapped. "It was what I didn't do that got me into trouble."

Natara sent her a questioning look, but she didn't ask, and Cassie wasn't about to try to explain herself. She didn't *care* what the girl thought. Getting out of bed, she went into the bathroom. By the time she returned, Natara had left, having settled a tray on a small table beside the easy chair in the room and lain out a clean robe.

Cassie was glad to have the robe. The one she was wearing still carried Raen's scent from their lovemaking—correction, sexual encounter—the night before, and it was wreaking havoc with her fragile emotions. She wasn't particularly hungry, but she ate, partly because it gave her something to do besides stare at the four walls and dwell on her misery, and partly because she thought it might comfort her.

It didn't particularly, but she felt a little better.

She'd had time, while she was sleeping, to arrive at the conclusion that her current situation could be blamed completely on Carl and David. They'd had no right at all to make such a decision—that was going to affect everyone—without at least discussing it.

Of course, if they had, that would have put her in the position of having foreknowledge, but Raen seemed to think she had known about it anyway, and that didn't change the fact that she was in trouble because they'd gone behind everyone's back and gotten them all in trouble.

And for nothing as far as she could see. They didn't *know* anything except that there was an Admiral commanding the Andromeda Prime. It might be a good guess that she was leading a fleet, but that was still guessing, and she didn't see how the military would find it useful. Surely they would've thought about the possibility themselves already and used their satellites to check?

Raen had said there *was* a fleet—but after the fact.

She discovered she didn't especially want to dwell on that. It seemed to imply that Admiral Valora hadn't been entirely honest about her reasons for coming if she'd brought a fleet with her, and it gave rise to some very scary possibilities.

Blaming Carl and David didn't especially help. It gave her a target for her anger, but not one she could actually rail against, which deprived her of any avenue to vent.

There was nothing to do and no one to talk to to take her mind off of her predicament, so after she'd finished she returned to the bed to sit on it and stare at the walls and try not think.

Natara hadn't been particularly friendly when she'd come in to bring her food, but Cassie decided trying to engage her in conversation was better than nothing. "Raen told me the others had been put in the custody of their lovers," she said tentatively when Natara came in to collect the remains of her meal.

To her surprise, Natara reddened, but not with embarrassment. She flicked a gaze at Cassie that was clearly furious. "The sentinels assigned to them were *ordered* to seduce them to obtain information," she said angrily. "They are *not* lovers. There was *no* choosing!"

Cassie gaped at the girl in total surprise. In all the time she'd been around Natara she'd been exquisitely polite, even pleasant. She was at a loss to figure out what had brought about the abrupt change in her demeanor. She'd been snippy before, but not furiously angry.

This, Cassie realized abruptly, was personal. "What do you mean by choosing?" she asked curiously, recalling suddenly that Raen had used that term, too.

Natara sent her another angry glance, but her lips tightened as she slammed the dishes on the tray. "I had already decided that I would choose Adan when I reached the age where it was allowed," she burst out after a moment, obviously unable to contain her anger despite her efforts. "He can not be chosen by an outsider, even as a lover!

"Before, when I told him that I might consider choosing him in union, he was pleased that I might. But he has done nothing but mope about since *that* female discarded him and refused to have anything else to do with him! Even if she had had a right to choose one of our males, she *discarded* him! She can not just ... reclaim him at whim! He said that he had been ordered to take her, but I do not believe that for one moment! He is far too pleased about it!

"I have decided I will not choose him after all! He is not worthy of consideration! Not fit for any discerning female to choose to father her children! I will choose another, and he will deeply regret it because no one will consider him worthy of fathering their children when he is the discard of an outsider!"

Cassie sat gaping at the door for a good ten minutes after the girl had stalked out, too stunned by her outburst to make any sense of it at first. As her initial surprise wore off, she began to try to unravel it, however.

The conclusion she arrived at was so—alien a concept to her that she dismissed it at first. There didn't seem to be any other way to make sense of it, though.

As bizarre as it sounded, she realized the Atlantean women proposed to the men! And the men, obviously, *worked* to get the proposal. Even though she'd reasoned it through and was almost completely certain she understood what Natara had revealed about their mating practices, it was still hard to swallow when it was exactly the reverse of human customs.

It wasn't the reverse of typical mating behavior, though, she realized abruptly. With man as the only exception she could think of, the rule of nature was that the female chose the male she wanted to father her off-spring—and the males fought the other males to gain her attention—used every manner of courtship from dancing and preening to nest building.

Her stomach abruptly somersaulted as she recalled Raen taking her to see his home and then exactly what he had said when he had mentioned the choosing—"Choose me, Cassie. I can give you more."

Everything inside of her expanded with excitement and pure joy—and then deflated just as quickly. Even if she was right and not misinterpreting the things he'd said and done, he was so cold now there was no getting around the fact that he'd changed his mind.

Was it even possible that he'd cared and then had just stopped, she wondered? Could a person do that that abruptly? Just turn it completely off as if it had never happened at all?

He was angry with her, she knew, because he felt like she'd betrayed his trust. Was it just anger and maybe hurt? Was it anything she could patch up? And if she managed to do that, would it ever be the same?

Glumly, she had to admit that it couldn't be the same. People could get over the little things, forgive, forget even, but the big ones? Not likely, she decided. They might say they'd forgiven, but they really hadn't—not if they couldn't *also* forget it. Because as long as it remained in the mind, it hurt, and as long as it hurt, they distrusted and as long as they distrusted, they were going to hold something back to protect themselves.

She had ruined everything, she realized, fighting the urge to cry again, knowing no amount of tears were going to wash the grief away.

It was just as well, she thought dispiritedly. Hadn't she already concluded that it wouldn't work out?

Even supposing this stand-off between the Atlanteans and her own country was resolved amicably—which was a huge supposition and damned unlikely to end well—it was hopeless. Raen wasn't going to fit into her life, and she just didn't see herself fitting into his. What would she do with herself on Atlantis? Make babies—and then what? She wanted children. That was why she'd decided to make one last push to find a suitable husband before she got any older. But would she be satisfied with just that?

She'd seen the way of it with most women who opted to take the traditional role. They lost their identity. They became Dirk's wife, and Cassie's mother—the heart of the home and the center of her and her father's universe, but insignificant to everyone else, was even looked down upon by some people who considered it the same as saying she was a failure.

She shook her head. It didn't matter how she felt about it. It wasn't going to happen. Raen might have cared something about her before, might have at least *felt* that he could, but that was history now. He wasn't going to give her a chance now.

He'd been pretty damned brutal about not even wanting to be her lover anymore.

She frowned at that thought, realizing he hadn't seemed all that anxious to be her lover to start with. If he'd actually been interested in her, as she was trying to convince herself he had been, wouldn't he have been interested in being her lover?

* * * *

Raen had rehearsed what he was going to tell the councilor over and over in his mind since he'd realized the position he'd put himself in, and he still didn't know what he was going to say when he arrived at the councilor's chambers and was admitted. He bowed respectfully to Councilor det Ophelia and assumed a military stance before his desk since it was not a social call.

"I take it you have come to report on the debacle of last evening," de Ophelia said in an irritated growl.

Raen felt his color fluctuate but maintained an appearance of outward calm with an effort. "Aye, my lord. As far as I can ascertain, none of the females of the group were involved. They have been placed in preventive custody, regardless, but there is no indication they had any knowledge of the plot to breach our security.

"The files furnished to me on their backgrounds indicate no military training—in fact no training of any kind that would provide them with such skills, nothing to indicate an aptitude or inclination to formulate or execute a military exercise.

"Of the males, only Ben Moser has no military training whatsoever. Mark Sanderson and Jimmy Slater both received military training and served one tour of duty. David Monroe served two tours, and Carl Smith four.

"There is no question of guilt in the case of either David Monroe or Carl Smith, both of whom were caught in the act, and they will remain incarcerated until you are ready to release them to their people.

"The other males are still being questioned to determine the possibility of their complicity. Once that is established they will either be placed in preventive custody as the others have been, or incarcerated with the other two for the duration of their stay with us."

Councilor det Ophelia frowned when he'd finished. "If you are convinced the females were not involved, I am not certain I understand why you have placed them in preventive custody."

"I thought it best to insure that they would not be able to get into trouble, my lord. They feel far more secure when they are allowed to group, and consequently seem more inclined to act when they might not do so alone. They share ideas and encourage one another."

Councilor det Ophelia nodded. Still frowning, but more now as if in deep thought than anger, he idly straightened the paraphernalia atop his desk. "Have you ascertained where the Lady Cassia went when she disappeared last eve?"

In spite of all he could do, Raen felt his face heat. "She was with me, my lord."

The councilor's brows rose almost to his hair line. "Was this meeting of a ... uh ... social nature? Or did it in any way have to do with our situation? Or with the incident last eve?" he asked finally.

Only his years of military training prevented Raen from squirming under the councilor's gaze. "It began as a discussion of the situation, my lord, and ended on a social nature. Lady Cassia seemed to be in a good deal distress when I had spoken to her earlier, but she was fearful that the others would believe that she was being disloyal, and I sent her back before her absence could arouse suspicion with the others. At that time, I suggested that she wait until they were asleep and meet to talk when we could do so without her fear of being discovered or interrupted. She met me later per our arrangement."

The councilor drummed his fingers on his desk. "What was it that she was so distressed about?" he asked finally.

"She said that she—in fact all of the natives—were fearful that when they were released their military might fire upon them by mistake, particularly if things continued to escalate. She also informed me that she had considered your request and decided to help, but that she could not afford for the others to discover it. She was afraid it would be interpreted as treason and the others would inform on her under questioning."

"But you did not think to inform me that she had offered to help?" the councilor demanded angrily.

Raen's jaw tightened. "No, my lord, because I told her we did not need her help. She had already informed you that it could be interpreted as treason. I do not believe she would have been so fearful if there was not a good chance of it. We can not in good conscience ask it of her if by helping us she places her life at risk."

The councilor glared at him. "I would certainly not ask it of her if I believed that to be the case, but ensuring that we do not become enemies of her government would also insure that she would not be accused of treason. The act of advising us can not be treasonous unless we are at war—which we are not—yet—or it pertains to military matters—which she could not help us with—or she divulged government secrets, which I assume she has no knowledge of. She would only be helping us make gods bedamned peace, not war, Raen! What were you thinking?"

Raen ground his teeth together but resisted the urge to respond since he was fairly certain the question was rhetorical in nature anyway.

Pushing himself up from his desk, the councilor moved to his cabinet and poured himself a drink.

He didn't offer Raen one.

"Sit down, Raen!" he said testily when he returned to his desk again.

"I would just as soon stand, my lord."

"Well, you are getting on my nerves!"

Raen glanced around for a chair and settled in the one nearest to the desk.

"I am not going to ask why you did not bother to report this meeting between the two of you earlier," Councilor det Ophelia said dryly.

"It will be in my report, my lord," Raen responded coldly. "I had never intended to do otherwise."

"Unless it has some bearing on the case in question, I see no reason to include it in the report."

Raen shifted uncomfortably. "I am not entirely convinced it does not," he said reluctantly. "Lady Cassia freely admitted to me, under questioning, that, when she realized the men were missing, she had some suspicion of their intentions and that she decided not to report it to me.

"It had occurred to me that there was a possibility that she was a part of the plot, at least in the sense that she was sent to make certain that I was otherwise occupied at the time they slipped out. Her admission that she knew they were gone and suspected what they were up to seemed to give some weight to my suspicions."

Councilor det Ophelia settled back in his chair, studying Raen speculatively. "And yet you have placed her in preventive custody. With whom?"

Raen flushed. "She is with me."

The councilor nodded. "I thought as much," he said dryly.

Raen's lips tightened. "She betrayed my trust. I am not likely to make the same mistake twice."

The councilor looked amused. That irritated Raen far more than the fact that he'd questioned his reasoning. The irritation didn't dissipate as the silence between them lengthened and Raen's discomfort grew.

"There are so many decisions one must make in life," the councilor said musingly. "One can never really know which ones are the most important, or which we will come to regret.

"I blamed your mother for my son's death. I was grief stricken and unreasonable, but I did not realize it at the time—not for many years. By the time I finally accepted that he died because her life meant more to him than his own—hers and his sons—it was too late to try to make amends.

"You are very much like your father, but you owe a great deal to your mother, as well, and it is hard for me, now, to say which is the better part of you. I will say that I have never had cause to feel anything but pride in you—even though I can not claim to have had any hand in it.

"All that you have become, you have done yourself, and because you were fortunate in your parents—*both* of whom were of excellent stock, although I refused to ever admit it when your mother was alive.

"You can be gods bedamned stubborn, Raen, and arrogant and unyielding—that is what has gotten you where you are, but it is not always a good thing.

"I see that it has not occurred to you that you have not *earned* Lady Cassia's loyalty. *You* trusted because in your arrogance you assumed you had. Do not compound your mistake by refusing to forgive a trespass that only existed in your mind."

He studied the grim set of Raen's jaw for a moment and finally sighed. "I know what you are thinking—that I have no right to speak when I have withheld myself from your life all these years—and you are right. I do not.

"I kept my peace and said nothing to you when you accepted Kira, even though she was wrong for you and I knew it." He shook his head. "Bad blood, that one. But I knew if I told you that you would only throw it my face because of the harsh things I had said about your mother.

"In Kira's case, however, it was absolutely true. I signed the sterilization orders on her myself when she was evaluated at the time she reached adulthood. She was emotionally defective at a genetic level and although every effort was made to correct it, the results were not what we had hoped for. She could not be allowed to pass her defective genes to another generation."

Raen stared at his grandfather in absolute disbelief and fury. "You did not think I would want to know that she could never bear a child for me?"

"She knew. Did she tell you?"

"You knew. She would not have told me for fear I would refuse her."

"You would not have refused her if you had known!" the councilor snapped. "Do not try to tell me otherwise! You were determined to have her. You did not listen to your friends when they tried to dissuade you and you certainly would not have listened to me! You were young and hot headed and determined to make your decisions, and your own mistakes! My disapproval would only have made you more determined.

"I expect my approval of Lady Cassia will only make determined to do just the opposite. Nevertheless, I can not sit by, twice, and watch you make the wrong decision without making a push to help you make the right one. Regardless of what you may believe, I do not wish to see you miserable in your life, and I would like the chance to make up for my own poor choices. If she will have you, I may yet get the chance to dandle a grandson on my knee before I die!"

Raen surged to his feet. "If that is all, Councilor det Ophelia?" he asked tightly.

The councilor glared at him. "No, it is not all, Sentinel ap Aquinox! Bring the Lady Cassia to speak with me! Tomorrow morning—That is not a request, Sentinel!"

Chapter Twenty One

Raen was in such a fury when he left the councilor's office that he was at the door of his quarters before it even occurred to him that he had gone straight there. He stared at the door panel blankly for several moments and finally turned away. Intent upon going to the prison to learn the progress of the interrogations, he stopped again when he reached the intersection of the corridor as it occurred to him that it was unlikely much progress had been made in the few hours since he'd last checked.

Instead, he turned along the corridor that would take him to the city above. His anger sustained him until he left the ship proper and then seemed to desert him altogether once he was outside. For a time, he simply stood staring at the city, noting the progress that had been made toward reconstruction without really registering it. Finally, ignoring the weariness that had begun to weigh heavily upon him as soon as his anger had deserted him, he strode down the main thoroughfare until he reached his home.

He had not made a great deal of progress in restoring it. He'd had little free time since they'd awakened, and what little he had he had devoted almost entirely to his pursuit of Cassie.

Irritation flickered inside of him. After a few moments, he went inside and walked around, studying the building, trying to decide where to start—short of demolishing it and beginning fresh.

He didn't want to do that, though, and it had nothing to do with either a shortage of funds to do so—although that was certainly a consideration—or the sense of urgency he felt to complete it for the woman that was not likely, now, ever to live in it with him.

He'd grown up in the house. The little joy he'd known in his childhood dwelt here. The need to preserve it was too strong to ignore—however maudlin or sentimental anyone else might consider it.

He'd lost both of his parents and his younger brother in the span of no more than five years. He hadn't wanted to think about it then, and he didn't want to think about it now.

But he'd needed his grandfather's love and support in those years, and his grandfather had ignored him because of his mother.

How dare the old bastard try to intrude into his life now, he thought furiously!

He didn't *need* him now! And he gods bedamned sure didn't need his gods bedamned advice! He could fuck up his life with the best of them!

Too restless and agitated to even consider assessing the damage and planning repairs, he strode from the house and stood in the backyard for a time, trying to coax some of the memories from his childhood that he found soothing to his spirit. Instead, he remembered the day he'd brought Cassie and they'd looked out over this same view.

Releasing an irritated breath, he moved to the edge of the channel and settled on the hard rim—now bare of earth and the soft, lush grasses that had once covered it. He and his brother, he remembered abruptly, had often sat here, staring into the distance at

the sailing ships of the hopeful, determined traders who occasionally managed to find their way to the 'continent' of Atlantis.

And the brigands who'd thought to plunder the continent of its wealth as they plundered everything else in their path—raping, killing, stealing, destroying what they couldn't carry off.

His father had been High Sentinel then.

And his father had died protecting them from some of those same mindless brutes.

He'd been too young and terrified then to understand what was happening, but as he struggled to resurrect the memories, he realized he understood far better now. His father had allowed a trading ship—he believed—into port, a rare occurrence and a serious error in judgment—one spawned by his father's desire to buy something pretty for his mother. It hadn't been a trading ship, however, but only disguised as one.

His father had died protecting them, alright, but he'd died because of his arrogance, because of poor judgment, for trusting when he had no reason at all to trust the vicious brutes that sailed the seas in those days.

He shook the thought off with determination. It did no good at all to dwell on the past. It was not going to bring him any peace, and he needed that before he returned to his quarters to face Cassie.

He was reluctant to go at all.

His grandfather was right. He *was* like his father. He'd felt so gods bedamned superior to the natives it hadn't occurred to him for one moment that he couldn't play with fire and not get burnt. There had been no ignoring the physical attraction he'd felt toward Cassie right from the start, but he'd thought he could explore that interest and still remain aloof.

Because she was human, after all.

They couldn't be trusted. He knew better than most that they couldn't. He knew what they were capable of. He'd seen it. He'd never been able to get the images out of his mind, despite the physician's efforts to remove them. Much of it had been blocked, enough to keep him sane, but not all.

He got up when the false dusk of the Andromeda's shadow became true night and the urge to simply lay back and sleep where he was became so strong he knew he would if he didn't get up. The long walk back seemed almost too much of an effort when it had never bothered him before. He hadn't slept the night before, however, nor eaten in hours—he had no idea how many. He could barely remember what he'd eaten.

She was already curled up in bed when he entered his quarters at last. A covered tray waited on the table. He lifted the lid, examined the cold food with little interest, and finally set it aside and ate anyway.

He became aware as he ate that Cassie was not sleeping but merely lying with her eyes closed.

To avoid him, he wondered?

Very likely, he thought, considering how unpleasant he had been earlier.

Not that she hadn't deserved it!

Rising when he'd finished, he dragged his robe off, dimmed the illumination in the room, and went in to bathe. The hot water soothed some of the tension from his muscles and made him even more weary.

The moment he hit the bed, however, every sense came alive. His mind roused to full alertness and refused to shut down no matter how determinedly he held his eyes closed.

He rolled onto his side after a while and lay staring at Cassie's back, watching the faint movements of her breaths, wondering if she'd fallen asleep while he'd bathed.

She was too tense, he decided after a moment, to be sleeping.

The rigidity of her posture was a clear warning to keep his distance even if not for the fact that she was perched on the very edge of the bed, in danger of falling off with the slightest untoward movement.

He rolled onto his back again and dropped an arm across his eyes, wondering abruptly who was punishing who. It was gods bedamned obvious that he wasn't going to get one wink of sleep with her in his bed.

The delicate scent of her skin drifted over him, teasing him, and he found himself breathing deeply just to drag the elusive, tantalizing scent into his lungs. Releasing a huff of irritation when he realized what he was doing, he rolled away from her and presented his back, resolutely closing his mind and his eyes and determinedly reaching for the sleep he needed. If his cock would cooperate and go to sleep, he thought with disgust, then he might just manage it.

He was sprawled across her when he woke up. His body recognized the form beneath him a full minute before his brain did and reacted instantaneously. Fortunately for his dignity and her peace of mind, it was only the upper half of his body draped over her.

Tensing, he pushed himself up and looked down at her through sleep blurred eyes. Either she'd rolled into him in her sleep and he'd rolled over her, or he'd dragged her underneath himself and curled around her as if she was a pillow. He wasn't certain which, but he was certain he would've roused immediately if she'd tried to fight him off. That realization stirred another wave of desire, but he resolutely ignored it and rolled out of the bed.

By the time he emerged from the bathroom, Natara had appeared with the morning meal. Cassie had rolled onto her belly and dragged the pillow over her head. He planted his hands on his hips and studied her for a moment. "Councilor det Ophelia has requested that you meet with him this morning," he said, keeping his voice neutral with an effort.

She tensed and finally dragged the pillow off of her head and pushed herself up to look at him through heavy lidded eyes still dull with fatigue. "It's morning?" she asked vaguely.

"Bathe," he said gruffly. "It will help wake you."

She looked around a little blankly. Finally, she nodded and stumbled out of the bed and into the bathroom. A faint smile curled his lips as he watched her. He banished it as he glanced away and discovered Natara was watching him. "You brought her a fresh robe?"

Natara bowed her head respectfully and lifted a hand to indicate the robe she'd lain across his chair. Moving to the bed, she straightened the linens as Raen went to his locker and removed a fresh robe for himself.

"The outlanders will be going soon?" Natara asked quietly. "I will be glad to see the last of them."

Raen, who'd just straightened from donning his robe, jerked a look in her direction and then glanced toward the door of the bathroom. He frowned at the uncomfortable clenching in his chest at her comments. "You dislike them?" he asked neutrally.

Natara's lips tightened, but she shrugged. "They are always trouble."

"They are guests," Raen retorted pointedly.

Natara glanced at him, lifting her brows. "They are not prisoners? They have never behaved as guests should. They have no respect for our customs."

"They have no understanding of our customs."

"They would not respect them if they did. They are still little more than arrogant, violent, unkempt savages. They are just more clever now and use that cleverness to create chaos and disaster where ever they go!"

Raen's jaw tightened, his eyes narrowing. "Are they responsible for your poor manners and disrespectful attitude?"

Natara reddened and bowed her head. "I beg pardon, my lord," she said stiffly.

He studied her bowed head assessingly. "Lady Cassia mistreats you?"

"She is always surly and demanding," Natara said after a moment.

"And the others?"

She shrugged but didn't look up at him. "I have heard the other servers complain."

"Then they are also liars," Raen said tightly. "They have been monitored since they arrived. To my certain knowledge not one of them has ever mistreated any of you. Get out. I will not need you to serve my lady again."

Natara sent him a startled look but reddened angrily in the next moment. "*Lady?*" She sniffed in outrage. "I do not know why you would take their part when they have caused nothing but trouble since they have been here! You are just like the other males—sniffing after those—genetically defective *primitives*! They will not choose any of you! Primitive as they are, they will *still* choose their own males above any of you because they will not want to cross breed. And *we* will not choose any of you afterward for having no better discrimination than to lie with dogs!"

"*Get out!*" Raen roared with barely suppressed fury.

Natara's eyes widened, but she flounced to the door and departed.

Raen glared at the door for some moments after she'd disappeared, struggling to regain control of his temper. Finally, remembering Cassie and wondering how much she'd heard—realizing abruptly that he had no idea whether they'd been arguing in their own tongue or hers—he glanced toward the bathroom.

She was standing in the doorway studying him, but he couldn't tell by her expression whether she'd understood what had passed between him and Natara or not. She'd certainly had no trouble grasping the anger in their voices. Her face was pale and her eyes wide.

"Well! *Now* I'm awake," she finally said dryly.

Raen felt a flush of embarrassment mount his cheeks. He wasn't certain but what there was a germ of truth in at least some of Natara's complaints. He had never had nearly as much trouble controlling his temper in his life as he had of late. Either their tenuous hold on their emotions was infectious, or the strain of the situation was beginning to tell on everyone involved.

Shrugging off the urge to blame the natives—as Natara obviously did—for his own failings, he acknowledged that the lack of sleep was the most likely culprit. There'd been little enough time to seek his rest since this had begun, and his fixation on Cassie had disrupted his peace until he could scarcely rest when he had the opportunity. "She was ... distressed," he finally responded lamely.

Cassie lifted a brow at him, but since she could see he had his temper well in hand, she moved to the table. "She's jealous," she contradicted.

Raen looked at her in surprise but settled across from her. "Jealous?"

Cassie gave him a look. "Don't tell me that isn't an emotion that plagues Atlanteans. I won't believe you."

He frowned down at the food she uncovered. "Regardless of what one might feel, displays such as the one you obviously witnessed are unacceptable."

"Hers? Or yours?"

"Either," he responded uncomfortably. "I beg pardon, Lady Cassia," he added stiffly, "both for myself and Natara for making you uncomfortable."

"Apology accepted," Cassie said promptly, "but I somehow doubt she'll appreciate you apologizing for her. She's developed a dislike of us primitives."

"And why is that?" he asked, further embarrassed by her reference, which made it obvious she *had* understood everything, and trying to recall what he had said.

To his surprise, she smiled. "She had her eye on Adan, and *he* has his eye on Linda," she said with amusement.

"That is certainly deflating," he responded, smiling faintly now himself. "I was convinced it was me she had her eye on."

"Disappointed?"

He glanced up at her and grimaced. "Truthfully? No. She is very like ...," he paused abruptly, but continued smoothly after a moment, "someone I once knew—beautiful, deceptively sweet, but with the tongue of a viper and all of the fire and unpredictability of a rogue comet. A man would have no peace around such a one as she."

Cassie studied him speculatively. "I thought men liked fire in a woman?"

He sent her a look. "In bed," he said dryly. "Not at breakfast."

Cassie burst out laughing.

He stared at her a long moment and finally grinned.

They finished their meal in companionable silence, and then Cassie rose, took the clean robe Natara had brought, and went into the bathroom to change.

Councilor det Ophelia, Cassie noticed when they arrived at his office, looked as if he'd aged years since she'd last spoken with him. His expression lightened when he greeted her, however. "Lady Cassia! I am pleased to see you again!"

As nervous as she was, Cassie smiled back at him, feeling some of her tension ease at the welcome in his voice. "Will you walk with me?"

Cassie's chest tightened at the question. She sent Raen a quick glance, remembering with a stab of unhappiness when he'd asked her to walk with him and wishing sadly that life had a rewind button. Smiling with an effort, she nodded.

He moved around his desk and offered his arm. Surprise flickered through her, but she slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her from his offices. Raen trailed behind them, making her acutely conscious of his presence, but when she saw the

councilor was leading her into an area she'd never been before, her curiosity took precedence in her mind. After walking for perhaps twenty minutes, they stepped into a cubicle of a room that reminded her of an elevator. Expecting to feel herself rising, she wavered when the room moved horizontally instead. A hand settled on her waist, steadying her, and she glanced around to discover it was Raen. Flicking him a smile of appreciation, she looked away again.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

The councilor's smile was grim. "I wanted to show you something."

The room they were in paused after a few moments. Instead of the door opening, however, the room rose upward, again disorienting Cassie. This time when she felt Raen's hand settle on her to steady her, she placed her hand over his, clasping his fingers.

She'd intended the gesture as a show of appreciation for his courtesy, but she found that it comforted her. With reluctance, she released his hand when the room stopped again.

She knew the moment the doors opened and the councilor led her out that they were in the heart of the Atlantis, the control center. It had the look and feel of the bridge of a ship, even though she'd never been on one, and certainly not on the bridge of a space craft.

There were technicians at every console, but she hadn't a clue what their function was. The councilor led her into the center of the room. "Bring up the viewing screens," he said brusquely.

Almost instantly, light flooded the room from every direction. Cassie wavered, disoriented by the sudden movement all around her. She discovered as she did, though, that Raen had moved up behind her. His hand settled on her waist as her shoulders bumped against his chest. Fleeting, his nearness reassured her, but as her mind assimilated the images surrounding her, the feeling was overwhelmed by the shock that went through her.

"We are using your satellites to feed the images," the councilor told her.

Cassie didn't even glance at him. She was struggling to force her mind to accept that the images she was seeing were real, not something the filming industry had artistically devised. Slowly, she scanned the images within her view and then turned until she'd seen the full panoramic. She was on the point of stepping away from the two men and moving closer when the councilor asked for a closer view of the scene. Dizziness swept through her as the images blurred and then leapt out at her again.

She swallowed with an effort to gather some moisture into her mouth and throat. "My god!" she finally managed, her voice sounding strange even to her own ears.

"These are new," the councilor said, pointing.

There was a strange ringing in her ears, making it hard to hear him, but Cassie's gaze followed his gesture automatically. "The UK," she murmured, recognizing the flag. She didn't recognize half of the flags she saw. "Canada, Japan, France ... I don't know all of these flags, but each one represents a different country."

She looked at the councilor finally and saw that he was watching her. "Let me see ... Can they show us the mainland?"

Her hands tightened on Raen's as the image blurred again. She hadn't even realized she was holding his hands until she felt him give her a reassuring squeeze in

return. When the image cleared once more, she could see what looked like a view of the entire gulf from space. "Closer! I need to see!"

Images flashed, then darkened and flashed again. Each time the image flickered on the screens, the view was closer until, suddenly, she could see details she hadn't been able to see before. Releasing Raen, she clutched at the councilor's arm. "Oh god, oh god! You have to do something. They're evacuating!" she gasped, her voice quavering with the hysteria trying to claw its way up her throat.

The councilor placed his hand over hers. "Tell me how to stop it, child, and I will. I give you my word."

Cassie stared at him wordlessly, struggling to keep from bursting into tears. Her chin wobbled threateningly. Tears cloyed in her throat. She struggled for several moments, trying to form words. "I think it might be too late," she said in a choked voice.

He patted her hand. "It is not too late to try."

She nodded jerkily, trying to think as he led her back the way they'd come. She couldn't seem to make her mind focus on anything but the images that seemed to have been burned into her brain. As they stepped into the cubicle that had brought them, however, she glanced at Raen. His expression was grim and not at all welcoming, but she threw herself against him anyway, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face against his chest. After a brief hesitation, his arms came around her and then tightened.

Some of the tension went out of her when she felt acceptance in his embrace, if not welcome. She was of no mind to analyze it. She needed warmth. She felt cold all the way to her bones with fear. Right up until she'd seen what was going on with her own eyes, she'd deluded herself with the belief that she'd blown everything out of proportion, that it *had* to be purely imagination that a war was building around them. Even with all the talk, the things she *had* seen before, she hadn't fully accepted.

She *still* couldn't, but she was deep down scared.

She didn't let go of Raen until he peeled her loose. Embarrassed when she discovered the mover had stopped and the councilor was studying her, though not unkindly, she muttered an apology to Raen without looking at him and followed the councilor. He grasped her cold hand and looped it around his arm as he had before. "Perhaps you should rest for a bit?" he suggested.

Cassie looked up at him when he spoke, feeling the urge to rush back to Raen's quarters and hide in his bed—or under it. She shook her head finally, mopping at the tears on her cheeks she hadn't even noticed until that moment. "No. I'm alright," she said shakily.

He looked at her doubtfully. "You do not look well at all," he disputed.

She sniffed and straightened her spine. "I am."

He settled her in a chair when they'd returned to his office and moved across the room. When he returned, he was holding a glass of the wine they drank. She stared at it. "I don't drink," she said finally.

He gestured with it. "It will put some color back into your cheeks, at least."

Nodding jerkily, she took the glass and sipped at it. She wasn't of the opinion that alcohol ever solved a damned thing, but her mouth was as dry as the Sahara. Clasp the glass between both hands, she watched him as he moved around his desk

and settled heavily in his chair. "Tell me everything," she demanded the moment he settled. "Everything they've said to you, everything you've said to them."

Chapter Twenty Two

The councilor frowned, glanced at Raen, who'd taken up his usual position near the door and then, apparently coming to a decision, carefully recited the communications verbatim.

"What about the Admiral?" she asked when he'd finished. "Has she been talking to them?"

The councilor studied her uncomfortably. "As far as I know, no—not beyond the initial contact between them. But we have no jurisdiction over the Andromedans, my dear. *We* are Atlanteans, colonists here."

Cassie nodded, but the realization that the councilor had no control over what they said or did wasn't comforting. "Do you at least know their intentions?"

He settled back in his chair, studying her. "They are not the problem," he said finally.

"You're certain of that?"

Irritation flickered across his features. "I asked you to help us with *your* people," he said pointedly.

Cassie felt her own anger rise. "But *my* people might not be the only problem," she retorted. "If you don't know what their intentions are, and you don't know whether or not the admiral has been talking to them, then you don't know that she hasn't been antagonizing them. What if *they* are a threat to both us and to you?"

"I have told you—it is not our way to make war—especially not with a people who can not defend themselves against us," Raen spoke up.

Cassie turned to look at him. "Just because it isn't *your* way it doesn't necessarily follow that it isn't *theirs*. How can you possibly know? You haven't had any communications with them in hundreds of years! Anything and everything could've changed in that length of time," she said, returning her attention to the councilor.

The councilor shrugged. "For our people, it has only been a few generations. It is unlikely there would be much change."

The comment was another shock. She glanced quickly at Raen and then back at the councilor.

"Our life spans are ... somewhat longer than the average human life span."

Cassie tucked that information away for a better time to examine it. "Even so, our people have changed drastically from one generation to the next—there are all sorts of things that influence social changes—economics, certainly. Hungry people are angry people. Misery can do the same thing, or make them apathetic."

He settled back in his seat, studying over what she'd said and finally exchanged a glance with Raen. She saw Raen nod fractionally when she followed the look between the men.

Beginning to feel somewhat calmer, she dredged up the conclusions she'd come to before when she'd been struggling to try to untangle the problem. "If the governments aren't listening, you need to go to the people," she said finally. "They're not going to be

easy to convince—not after all this time and all the things they’ve been told, not when they’ve had time to get really scared with everything that’s going on.”

She studied the councilor for a moment. “They’ll be picturing you as monsters,” she said bluntly. “They need to see that you aren’t. I know how y’all feel about asking for help, or taking it if it’s offered. You could say that—that you’re accustomed to taking care of your own problems, prefer to. You’re not asking for help. You just want to be left in peace to recover the Atlantis, repair your homes, and get on with your lives. I know it must gall you to consider telling them things you’d rather not share, but I can’t think of anything else that would help.”

“You are right,” the councilor agreed after a few moments. “We are accustomed to our privacy. We do not like discussing our problems publicly. In this case, however, I attempted it ... as you suggested. I contacted the media. They refused to listen to me, called me a quack and a nut job,” he finished angrily.

Cassie stared at him in open mouthed dismay for a moment. Finally, she frowned thoughtfully. “How did you contact them?”

“Via the satellites.”

She mulled that over. “Then you’ll have to get their attention first. Would you be able to block all of the communications coming off the satellites—at one time, I mean?”

His brows rose. “If we did that, they would consider it an act of war. This is what we were accused of when we inadvertently crashed the net.”

“Oh! I’d forgotten about the net!” Cassie said more enthusiastically. “We don’t want to overlook that.”

The councilor studied her uneasily. “You do not believe this will ... distress them?”

“Oh, it’ll distress them alright,” Cassie said emphatically. “But if they’ve decided you’re just some prankster, there’s no way you can convince them otherwise without doing something nobody else could do—certainly not a nut job trying to *pretend* he’s from outer space. If you can do it, though, it would have everybody’s attention when you came on to speak. *Can* y’all do that?”

The councilor nodded at Raen. “Summon Mercurios. He will know if it can be done.”

“It’s a shame you don’t have pictures of what happened here,” Cassie said thoughtfully when Raen had left.

She saw when she glanced up at the councilor that his expression was pained. “Images?” he clarified after a moment. “Like the vids?”

Cassie nodded, uncomfortable with what she saw in his face.

“Quite possibly, we do. It is not something any of us would have wanted to see, but there are monitors that would have recorded”

“I could look at them,” she said after a moment. “I know none of you would want to, but it’s what we need to show people—*telling* them about the disaster just won’t be the same as seeing it. They have to feel it to understand—and they *will* understand once they’ve seen it. Once they realize that this is nothing more than a—recovery from a disaster, they won’t feel as if they’re being threatened.”

“I do not think you understand what it will do to Atlanteans to see those images. It will be like reliving those moments, and we are still struggling to come to terms with

the cataclysm. To you it may be ancient history. To us, it was only a short time ago that we fled for our lives to the stasis units.”

Cassie swallowed against the knot of commiseration that tightened in her throat. “Of course I can’t really grasp the full scope of your pain. Only the others who were there could really understand it. We’ve had our own share of disasters, though, and there are plenty of people out there who’ve lived through similar catastrophes, where they’ve lost their homes and families and friends, their jobs. *They* will understand when they see it and everyone who’s seen the aftermath will understand. You need that understanding.

“This is not something I’ve had any training or experience with. I just know this is the way the media does things and it works. We can put those images together with pictures of how it looks now and you can tell them what you just told me—about the fact that you’ve just awakened.

“You need to tell them at least something about the history of Atlantis—how long your people have been here—so they begin to think of you as neighbors. Y’all have been here almost as long as we have. That means you have as much right to be here as we do. And if they accept that, they’ll also realize that you’ve lived peacefully among us for all those years and not think of you as monsters from space that just suddenly arrived on their doorstep to take everything—because that’s what it looks like to them right now.

“You don’t have to tell them all of your personal business. I understand that you wouldn’t want to, but enough to make them see you only sent for help and that’s what the Andromeda is doing here—that they haven’t come to conquer the world.”

Cassie stopped babbling when she saw that he was actually listening to her and thinking it over. She felt a little ill at the thought that it might not work, but surely, even as fantastic as it was probably going to sound, it wasn’t going to be harder to swallow than that huge ship looming over them and nobody seemed to be having trouble believing that.

It would’ve been better, she knew, if people who put the news together for a living had done it, but they didn’t have much choice if the media wouldn’t listen to the councilor.

She was a nervous wreck from the sense of urgency drumming inside of her by the time Mercurios arrived. Unfortunately, either he hadn’t learned English, or they simply didn’t want her included in the discussion. She thought the latter might be the case and that it had to do with security, but it was nerve wracking not to know what was going on, to have to wait to find out when she was afraid things had heated up until every moment counted.

Balked of actually understanding what was going on, she watched their faces, trying to interpret the expressions that flitted across them as they discussed the problem. Finally, the man they’d called Mercurios bowed and left hurriedly.

Cassie looked at the councilor anxiously.

“He will see what he can come up with.”

She tried not to feel as if he was saying it was hopeless, but the sense of doom that settled in her belly was hard to ignore. “There’s not much time,” she said urgently. “I saw the people evacuating the coast. If they were fleeing only because they were scared, that’s bad. If they were ordered to evacuate, that’s really, really bad. It means they’re getting ready to attack.”

“They have already fired upon us—several times,” Raen said grimly.

Cassie turned to look at him. "But that just pissed them off more and made them more determined!" she exclaimed. "They've probably just ... been looking for weaknesses and if they haven't found any, they'll try throwing everything they have at you. And if that doesn't work, they'll start considering nuclear weapons."

She turned to look at the councilor again. "We have to do something *before* they launch an all out attack. They won't listen after that!"

"I understand that there is an urgency to do this," the councilor said tiredly. "But we can only do what we can do. Mercurios believes that it can be done, but it is something they must figure out how to do—not something they know. The orbits of the satellites present a problem that must be solved." He fell silent for a few moments, studying her. "You offered to view the images and help to put together the message we would send. Would you like to go with Sentinel ap Aquinox and do that? Or would you prefer to return to your quarters and rest? I can see this has distressed you a great deal. No one will think badly of you if you do not feel up to the task."

She didn't especially *want* to view the images he'd spoken of, but she didn't think she could rest. She thought she might just have a nervous break down if all she could do was wonder and worry about what was going on. The fear seized her, too, that they might be reluctant to show the worst, and she knew it had to be something shocking and horrifying if it was to have the desired effect. She nodded jerkily. "I can do it. I'm sure I can."

She wasn't at all sure she could, but she still had an advantage they didn't have. She could be more objective about it than they could, and she'd at least seen enough news reports to have a general working idea of how to go about it.

She hoped.

No one was going to expect it to look professional or care how amateurish it looked, she told herself as she accompanied Raen. He glanced at her several times as they strode down the corridor, but whatever his thoughts, he kept them to himself.

As worried as she was, though, and as tense as she was at the task she'd agreed to, after he'd glanced at her a couple of times, the memory of her behavior in the mover surfaced in her mind and when it did, so did embarrassment. "I'm sorry about while ago," she finally said uncomfortably.

He glanced at her questioningly.

She blushed faintly. "Grabbing you in the moving thingy," she clarified. "I wasn't thinking. I just needed ... I just needed to," she ended lamely.

He studied her for a long moment, but she didn't meet his gaze. "I did not mind," he said finally.

The room he led her to, although a great deal smaller than the one she'd decided must be the bridge of the ship, was still large and very similar. There were only two consoles in it, but viewing screens on all four sides as there had been on the bridge—she assumed for the same reason.

Raen set a chair near the door where they'd entered, indicating that she was to sit in it. He moved away then to the man standing at one of the consoles and spoke him in their tongue. Cassie studied them as they stood together, her attention caught by the way the stranger's gaze kept straying to her. It made her wonder, at first, if she was part of the discussion, but then Raen spoke sternly to him, and he didn't look at her again.

After a few minutes, Raen left the man and came to stand behind her. She glanced up at him questioningly, but although he returned her gaze, she couldn't read his expression and he said nothing, looking away after only a moment.

She returned her attention to the man at the console.

"Claudius is searching for the images. It will take a moment."

Cassie nodded. "That sounds Roman," she said thoughtfully, glancing up at Raen. "Is it?"

His lips tightened. "Possibly. I do not know the origins. You may ask him if you like."

She was a little surprised at the annoyance in his voice, but then it dawned on her that he was probably tense because of what they'd come to watch. Under the circumstances, her curiosity about the origins of the man's name probably didn't seem appropriate to him.

In retrospect, it didn't to her either. It was far too somber a situation for idle curiosity.

She wasn't prepared for just how somber it actually was, she discovered.

She had expected the sort of grainy stills typical of surveillance footage that would make it hard to see details, she supposed. She hadn't expected the crispness of the images, and she certainly hadn't expected it to be a video. The images that flashed onto the displays in front and on either side of her were as clear as if she were looking through a window. Like a window, there were blind spots where the people moving about disappeared for several moments before they came into view again, caught by another monitor.

Men, women, and children were going about their business—the setting perfectly ordinary except for the back drop of the city, which seemed oddly quaint and antiquated and at the same time almost futuristic, like an artist's rendition of what a future city might look like—nothing like any city she'd ever seen. The buildings were beautiful, seemed very Mediterranean in influence, particularly in the artistic details of elaborate columns and friezes on many of the buildings, but multi-storied, some of them as much as ten or perhaps fifteen stories high—not something one would find in an ancient city.

Cassie had hardly had time to take in the scene and note those things about it, however, when a ball of rock and fire that looked to be the size of a house appeared in the blink of an eye and smashed into the center of the city. She sucked in her breath as the thing abruptly filled the center view, clapping a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream.

In the space of seconds, the image was transformed from peaceful tranquility to utter chaos. Despite the lack of sound, she almost felt like she could hear the screams as people began to run in every direction, trying to escape the fire and explosion of debris from the buildings that shattered around them. Perhaps a half a dozen more fire balls of varying sizes rained down on the city as people ran in first one direction and then another. Bodies littered the streets. Crying children looked around in bewilderment for parents that had suddenly disappeared. Broken, bleeding men, women, and children staggered around in shock—looking for help, or someone they'd lost, or just too stunned to know what they were doing.

"They didn't have any warning," Cassie said in a hoarse, horrified whisper, feeling the urge to cry well up inside of her.

"No, we did not," Raen responded harshly. "Do you think this will satisfy them?"

Cassie whipped her head around to look up at him. She didn't know if it was just pain she saw in his face, or condemnation of her for wanting to see the images—*asking* to see them. She hadn't wanted to see this. She hadn't begun to imagine how horrific it had been.

"More?" he asked harshly. "It took several hours for the Atlantis to sink."

Cassie felt her chin wobble with imminent tears and looked away from him.

"Most of these people died. This was the center of the strike. Those not crushed by the falling buildings or the fireball, or burned to death, suffocated from the smoke and dust or bled to death from their wounds before we could give them any sort of medical attention. They were too far from the access ports to reach the stasis units, or cut off by the fires and the rubble.

"There would have been roughly ten thousand people in this area of the city at that time of day—which was at the peak of the work day.

"Those working in the fields on the outer ring also did not have time to reach safety within the ship—there would have been anywhere from two to five thousand working the fields in the middle and outer rings. It was harvest time and more people were in the fields than there would have been ordinarily. There were native crafts in the area, however, and some almost certainly made it to those ships. Others may have tried to swim to safety—and may have succeeded. We have no way of knowing.

"There would not have been enough stasis units to accommodate all—our population had grown considerably and no one thought of a need for them after we had settled here—but they were not filled to capacity, regardless. We estimated that nearly half of the population either perished on impact or abandoned the Atlantis and fled to safety elsewhere."

She was relieved when Claudius stopped the play of images and Raen ceased to pelt her with the grim statistics. Apparently, however, Claudius stopped because Raen had signaled for him to. The screens only darkened briefly as Raen crossed the room. He signaled the other man again and spoke to him in their language. This time, the images played slowly, froze for several moments when Raen lifted his hand, and then advanced slowly again.

Sniffing back the tears and wiping her eyes, Cassie watched him as he paced back and forth, staring hard at the screens. She'd begun to think he was looking for someone when he abruptly moved away.

"Volcano. We'd thought we were hit by a meteor shower. The rocks are volcanic," he said as he reached her and paused in front of her. "These images will serve our purpose?"

Cassie nodded and cleared her throat. "We'll need others showing what the city looks like now."

Nodding, he turned and spoke to the other man again. Cassie got to her feet shakily and moved to the door.

"I will escort you to our quarters," Raen said as he joined her.

Cassie didn't argue. She felt wrung out from watching the videos. It made her feel even worse that Raen and Claudius had had to watch them, because she knew that as horrific as she'd found them, it had to have been far more difficult for them to watch. It wasn't just their city, and their homes they'd watched being destroyed. It was their people they'd seen dying, perhaps even people they'd known.

She hoped they hadn't seen close friends or family members.

Raen paused when they reached an intersection, seemed to consider for a moment, and then turned toward the exit instead of continuing to his quarters. Cassie glanced at him curiously, but she didn't object.

She saw once they were outside that there were far more people working among the ruins than before. The piles of rubble had been diminished significantly and a couple of the buildings were already beginning to look more like new construction than derelicts. The narrow road they'd traversed before through the heart of the city was mostly cleared now, and she could see that it had been paved in stones—or whatever material it was that they used that appeared to be stones. The tantalizing scents of cooking food drifted on the air, mixed with the less appealing smells of dust and dying sea vegetation. The sounds of work was more pronounced, as well, and as they walked she spotted compact motorized pieces of equipment moving in and out and around the buildings that seemed to be the main focus of the workers' labors.

There were food venders on the streets, she discovered with surprise.

Raen led her to one and purchased food for both of them—some sort of crusty looking rolls that appeared to be filled with meat and vegetables. After glancing around, he led her to a spot where they could perch to eat and watch the activity—or rather she perched. Raen stood beside her, scanning the progress through narrowed eyes.

It dawned on Cassie as she watched them that there didn't seem to be any doubt in their minds what the outcome of the stand off would be—unless they simply didn't know what was going on outside the barrier, which she very much doubted. It was too small a community for them *not* to know.

It was oddly soothing to watch the Atlanteans going about the business of putting their lives in order. It diminished her own sense of anxiety despite the fact that she was as certain as she could be that the threat was a long way from being resolved.

She glanced at Raen several times, trying to gauge his mood and finally yielded to her curiosity. "I don't really know much about y'all," she began tentatively.

He glanced at her, his gaze flickering over her face speculatively. "No," he agreed finally.

That didn't sound promising. She wrestled with her questions for a moment and finally decided to take the plunge. If he didn't want to tell her, he wouldn't, but she wasn't going to learn anything if she didn't ask. "Why was it necessary for everyone to go into stasis?"

He frowned, but he didn't look at her.

"I mean, y'all can live in the sea, right?"

He finished his meat pie and brushed the crumbs from his hands. Propping one shoulder against the wall behind him, he studied her upturned face for several moments, as if he was trying to decide whether to appease her curiosity or not. "The answer to that would be 'no'."

Cassie frowned when he didn't elaborate. "But ... you breathe water. You ... change at will from ... uh ... into merpeople."

He eyed her with a mixture of amusement and obvious irritation. "We breathe air ... just like you do. And we don't change at will—not exactly."

She waited. When he said nothing else, her own irritation surfaced. "And you're not the least bit friendly," she muttered. "The only reason you were interested in us—any of us—was because you needed to know how to deal with us."

"We needed to know how much you had changed," he corrected, his voice harsh now. "We already knew enough about your species to know we did not want to 'get to know' you any better. Pound for pound, no other species on this planet can begin to compare to the human in sheer savagery."

That stung. Actually, it was more than a sting. The emotionalism that had threatened to overwhelm her completely while she'd watched the destruction of Atlantis had been calmed and soothed by the 'business as usual' attitude of the people surrounding them. She discovered to her dismay, though, that it was still so close to the surface it took no more than that one comment to have her fighting tears all over again. Sniffing against the sting in her nose, she got up, looked around for a place to dispose of the remains of her meal and finally returned to the vender.

The cups he'd given them to drink from weren't disposable. She handed hers back and watched as the vendor dropped it into a churning vat of sudsy water. He gave her a disapproving look when she tossed her half eaten meat pie in the refuse bin nearby. She sent him a sulky glare in return and headed back the way she'd come.

"You were not very hungry," Raen observed as he fell into step beside her. "Or did you just not care for the *mierster*?"

Cassie glared at the pavement in front of her. "I'm dieting," she gritted out.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him scan her form speculatively, but thankfully, for him, he apparently decided to keep his opinion to himself.

She didn't speak to him again until he'd escorted her to his quarters. She wouldn't have then except that her need to know overwhelmed her need to snub him. "Will you tell me what happens with the media?"

"It is unlikely they will be prepared to broadcast before tomorrow," he responded. "I will tell you what I know when I return this evening."

Cassie nodded and turned away, entering the room.

"I will be late," he added after a moment.

As *if* she cared!

"I will make certain you are served your evening meal at the usual time."

She curbed the urge to thank him, pretending an interest in the wall.

"We will be studying the images in an effort to account for those who are missing since it is unlikely that their remains will be recovered now."

She whirled to look at him then, but he'd already closed the door.

She should've thought of that, she realized. Someone would have to. The survivors would want to know what had happened to their loved ones.

No wonder he'd looked so grim and been so prickly. He was going to have to watch that horror show over and over—not just watch it, study it, study the faces of the dead and dying trying to identify them.

Feeling about as low and cold blooded as a snake, she looked around the room vacantly for several moments and finally settled in the easy chair, staring at nothing in particular and wishing for the boredom of the life she'd had before. She hadn't properly appreciated her own private little rut. There'd been times when she'd felt as if life was just passing her by while she was stuck in same boring routine, day after day.

And maybe it had been, but there was something to be said for the peace of mind that came with it, a *lot* to be said for the comfort of knowing what was going to happen next—nothing earth shattering, nothing that was going to tie her in knots, nothing that was going to make her feel like crying her eyes out at least once a day.

She dragged her feet up into the chair after a while, dropping her cheek to her knees. All she'd wanted was a little extra something in her life—a little companionship, a baby to fulfill her belated urge to 'nest'.

Maybe she should reconsider writing Mark off, she thought? He was good looking, reasonably successful, no more of an asshole than the last three guys she'd dated.

They certainly had a lot more in common now than they'd had before.

She realized she didn't particularly want to reconsider him, though, even if he was still interested in her, and she thought that was probably doubtful. Settling for what she could get didn't seem the least bit tempting anymore, even though she'd convinced herself before that she should just be practical and reasonable.

If the world didn't come to an end, maybe she should take another look at 'what is misery'? Maybe she should reconsider single parenthood and artificial insemination? She was pretty sure the nesting urge was the main thing that had been driving her to pick one—Mr. Close Enough—and try to make it work.

Why bother now, though, when she was pretty certain nobody was going to measure up to 'Mr. Wonderful but total in pain in the Ass'? Why settle for someone to fight with that she didn't even especially like if she couldn't fight with the one man she loved?

Chapter Twenty Three

Cassie was close to climbing the walls after spending three days in Raen's quarters with virtually no company besides her own thoughts.

She also felt the 'brutal savage' inside of her trying to claw its way to the surface.

Natara hadn't appeared with her meals after the morning she'd come out of the bathroom to find her and Raen arguing. A younger girl, who looked to be no more than thirteen and called herself Chandra, had taken her place, and, although she chattered in a friendly way, she was too immature to be much of a companion even if she'd lingered long enough to significantly break the monotony—which she didn't.

Besides, the girl's main interests seemed to be males, and pumping Cassie for the gory details of human history—in that order—the first of which bored her and the second of which both annoyed and insulted her.

As he'd promised, Raen arrived late—very late. Cassie had already given up pacing the floor and watching for him by the time he arrived and had gone to bed. She strongly suspected he'd planned it that way. She empathized with the gruesome task that had kept him, but she was still so pissed off about being left to worry and wonder about what was going on that she feigned sleep, partly to snub him and partly because she knew they were going to fight if she opened her mouth—because she *really* wanted to fight with him.

He'd lain awake for so long after he'd joined her in the bed that she'd finally reached the point where she couldn't hold on to her tension anymore and had begun to drift off. Just as she'd reached the edge of sleep, he'd rolled toward her. She'd tensed instantly, surfacing enough to wonder what was going through his mind.

Sex was running through hers, but before she could get too worked up about it, she realized that was an extremely remote possibility.

After hesitating for so long that she relaxed again, he'd reached for her, dragged her close, and curled around her.

And then he'd gone to sleep.

The bastard!

It had taken her a good long while to go to sleep herself after that but eventually she'd managed it.

He was gone when she woke up—gone all day.

Chandra had brought her the news with her supper that 'they had succeeded'.

"Succeeded?" Cassie asked breathlessly. "In breaking into communications? Broadcasting the message? Or did he say there'd been a change in the situation?"

Chandra shrugged with obvious disinterest. "I only know that the High Councilor sent word that I was to tell you they had succeeded."

"The High Councilor?" Cassie asked, beginning to feel really angry, and hurt for no reason that she could fathom.

"Yes, lady," Chandra replied. "His server came to me and said that I was to inform you that they had found a way and it was successful."

Not Raen, the High Councilor. And she *still* didn't know what the hell was going on!

"Thank you," she said stiffly. "Would you ask his server to tell him that I appreciate his consideration in letting me know?"

Chandra nodded. "You are also invited to join him tomorrow evening for dinner."

Thank you for remembering that little nugget of news, Cassie thought with more than a touch of exasperation. She tamped it with the realization that it would at least give her the opportunity to pump the councilor for news. Obviously, she wasn't going to get anything out of Raen.

She decided to give it a try, however, and alternately paced the room and flopped down to glare at the walls for what seemed like hours before she finally gave up on the possibility of a confrontation to vent her frustrations and went to bed. She hadn't been lying awake long when Raen came in. She decided instantly that he'd been watching her with the monitors and waiting until she gave up and went to bed. She didn't know if it was true or not, but his timing seemed to support that theory and that was good enough for her.

She lay listening to the sound of water running in the bathroom for what seemed to her enough time for two showers before he finally emerged. By the time he joined her in the bed, her blood was simmering just below the boiling point. She lay stiffly with her back to him, trying to decide if she most wanted to pummel him to a bloody pulp or cuss him for every low down sorry thing she could think of.

She was still trying to decide when he slipped an arm around her and dragged her, despite her resistance, against his body, curling around her as he had the night before. He either hadn't noticed her resistance or he didn't care. Just as she was on the point of informing him that she wasn't a fucking pillow and if he wanted something to prop on he could damned well use something besides her, a hot drop of moisture landed on the top of her head where he'd pillowed his cheek and burned its way through her skull and into her brain, dissolving her angry sense of injustice and misuse. Her heart instantly clenched painfully and then climbed into her throat to choke her.

Her senses, focused completely inward until that moment, expanded abruptly and focused on him as she heard him drag in a ragged breath.

Cold, heartless, unfeeling bitch that she was, she'd been so focused on her own misery and anxiety she'd completely closed her mind to the morbid task he'd spent two grueling days at. A dozen questions tumbled through her mind, but she firmly tamped the urge to give voice to any of them. He didn't want to talk about it. If he had, he would've.

She lay perfectly still for a long while, wracking her brain for any way at all to comfort him that he wouldn't instantly reject—probably with anger. Finally, more than half fearing he'd just turn away if she did anything at all, she struggled with his weight until she'd turned to face him, snuggled her face between his shoulder and neck and wrapped her arm around him.

He tensed, but he didn't turn away. After a while he tightened the arm he'd draped over her loosely, coiled one leg around hers, and relaxed. He was asleep long before she was.

She stirred when Raen disentangled himself from her with great care the following morning and got up. As groggy as she still was with sleep, the night before instantly surfaced, rousing her completely as he went into the bathroom. Contrary to her hopes, when he emerged a short while later he didn't even glance in her direction. Instead, his expression stony, he strode directly to the door and went out.

She didn't know what to make of that. Did he regret the weakness that had driven him to seek comfort in the closeness of a warm body the night before—even if hers was the only one available? Was he angry with himself, and possibly her, because of it? Or embarrassed?

Or had he sloughed it off as if it had never happened and gone back to ignoring her?

He would despise any sign of weakness, she finally decided, especially in himself. He would hate that she'd witnessed it.

He wasn't going to acknowledge it, which meant he wasn't likely to have softened toward her one iota. It was more likely to have had the opposite effect—like the little boy she'd been sweet on in grammar school right up until the moment she'd made a complete fool out of herself, and he'd laughed, and then she'd hated his guts thereafter.

Uttering a regretful sigh, trying to dismiss the depression that thought caused her, she struggled to find sleep again. There was no reason she could think of to get up, nothing to do with her time but sleep, eat, stare at the walls and gnaw her fingernails to the quick worrying about what was happening in the world outside.

She managed to find sleep again, might have been able to sleep the day away, except Chandra arrived promptly with her breakfast at her usual time and ruined that possibility of escape. The third interminable day after she'd spoken with the councilor was harder to bear than the first two. It shouldn't have been since she knew she was going to dine with the councilor that evening and find out what he knew—or had the hope of it—but that only seemed to make it harder.

Chandra came bearing a clean robe and the news that she was to escort her to the councilor's quarters. Even though Cassie had told herself she'd accepted that Raen was going to avoid her after what had happened the night before, she was still upset about it.

The prospect of talking to the councilor made it a little easier to bear, but not by much. She didn't know why she wanted to see Raen anyway, she chided herself irritably. If he wasn't pissing her off, he was busy making her miserable.

She almost thought she would've been better off if he'd left her in the damned jail cell. Being confined to his quarters was the next thing to solitary confinement anyway, except that she got to share his bed with him—*without* benefits. She'd been hurt and/or angry the entire time and if he'd stuck 'it' at her, she would've been tempted to whack it off and shove it up his ass, but she wouldn't have *minded* if he'd made some attempt to change her mind about it.

Freak, she thought uncharitably. If he'd been a red blooded *human* male, he would've at least been tempted to poke her even if he'd hated her guts.

She had a warm hole, damn it! Even if it was attached to a 'primitive savage' he hadn't seem to mind fucking her before. In fact, she knew damned well he'd enjoyed it as much as she had.

She might have initiated sex herself except for two minor little issues—one, she wasn't comfortable enough with him to do so, and two—she wasn't about to give him the chance to turn her down.

He'd love that!

She discovered when she arrived at the councilor's quarters that she wasn't the only guest—not by a long shot. Disconcerted to discover it appeared to be a party, Cassie braked to a halt as soon as Chandra ushered her inside and abandoned her. She was just wondering if she could figure out how to get the door open and leave when the councilor spied her at the door and cut off any possibility of escape. He was smiling as he reached her and took her hand in his. "Lady Cassia! It is a pleasure to have you join us."

Cassie smiled back at him a little uncertainly, warmed by his obviously genuine pleasure, but still uncomfortable with the idea of spending hours in the company of so many Atlanteans, all of whom seemed to be complete strangers to her—no surprise there since she'd only met a few. She saw as she studied him, though, that the tight lines around his eyes and mouth the last time she'd seen him seemed to have relaxed. "Chandra gave me your message the other day," she responded. "I hope she also conveyed my appreciation for your thoughtfulness."

He chuckled ruefully. "The girl is young. It is her first year of community service. I should have taken that into consideration ... but then I did not discover until later that Sentinel ap Aquinox had requested a replacement for Natara.

"I have to apologize for her behavior. I am afraid she is a little ... emotionally fragile. She has been referred for treatment. Given her history, she should never have been allowed to resume her duties until she had been treated for emotional trauma. Most of our citizens are coping reasonably well, under the circumstances, but there are always those who are more fragile, less resilient—no matter how careful our breeding practices."

Cassie nodded her understanding. "I thought that was it," she responded sympathetically. "Poor thing! I'm sorry to hear she's having such a bad time of it."

"She will be better once she is treated," he assured her. Tucking Cassie's hand in the crook of his arm, he led her away from the door.

"Now that our guest of honor has arrived," he announced to the room at large, "we may proceed to the dining hall."

Cassie felt her face turning scarlet as everyone in the room turned to stare at her at the announcement. Pasting a nervous smile on her face, she averted her gaze. She didn't know if everyone was as delighted as the councilor professed to be, but they seemed enthusiastic about the dinner, and she wondered how long she'd held up dinner.

To her surprise, instead of escorting her from the main room into an adjoining room, the councilor turned toward the door again. Mystified, Cassie allowed him to lead her out and down the corridor. The room they stepped in was bare—to the walls. It wasn't until everyone else had crowded in and the door shut that she realized it was a mover like the one she'd ridden in when she was taken to the bridge. This one, however, went straight up. When the door opened again, she saw that they'd reached the surface of the ship. They were inside one of the buildings. It had neither doors nor windows, for a salt laden breeze blew through it, but it had been thoroughly cleaned and a long T shaped table had been set up beneath temporary lights that were suspended high above them and twinkled like stars, casting a soft glow over the entire setting.

The councilor patted her hand as he reached the table. "This is all very tiring, I know, my dear, but celebrating each little triumph cheers everyone and helps to lift their spirits."

"What are we celebrating tonight?" Cassie asked teasingly as she took the chair he indicated and sat down.

The councilor chuckled as he settled beside her. "*You*, my lady," he said gallantly.

Cassie felt her face heat again. After wrestling with her embarrassment for a moment, she leaned closer. "Did I do something?" she whispered. "Or is this just because?"

His brows rose. "You did something grand," he whispered back.

Excitement surged inside of her. "It worked?"

"Let us just say it has calmed the waters considerably, and I have far more hope that this will end amicably than I did a few days ago."

Cassie wanted details. She wanted assurance that the hopefulness she felt soaring inside of her wasn't false hope, but the servers interrupted any possibility of pursuing the subject. When they'd placed plates and glasses in front of all of the guests, the councilor rose. "Rather than bore everyone with a very long speech and ruin the lighthearted mood, I will only delay your dinner a moment. But I did want you all to join me in thanking Lady Cassia—who has shown us the way to the path of peace we all cherish and given me a great deal of hope that we will find it."

"Hear! Hear!" a woman's voice down the table called out loudly, drawing everyone's attention, thankfully, from Cassie.

Cassie smiled when she saw that it was Linda.

Grinning back at her, Linda shrugged and lifted her glass. "To Cassie! The bravest of us all!"

Cassie couldn't help but chuckle at the tongue-in-cheek toast. The Atlanteans, although they looked puzzled by Linda's brash toast, lifted their glasses and murmured "Hear! Hear!" self-consciously.

Biting her lip to contain her amusement over the puzzled looks on the faces of the Atlanteans, Cassie glanced at the councilor. He was studying her with bemusement. He sat down again and leaned toward her. "I am not at all certain I completely grasp this custom, my dear," he murmured in a low voice.

Cassie chuckled. "I'm not sure I could explain it. In fact, I *am* sure I couldn't. It's just something we do ... uh ... at special occasions."

Linda stood up again. "Speech! Speech!" she demanded, grinning at Cassie wickedly.

"Shut up, Linda!" Cassie commanded, laughing at her.

"Perhaps we should move her closer so that she does not need to shout?" the councilor suggested, looking pained.

Cassie compressed her lips, struggled with her amusement for a moment and finally conquered it—most of it, turning her attention to her meal when she saw everyone else was eating. The food was excellent. She had no idea what it was, but the meat tasted like chicken. The thought brought another surge of amusement since that was often said about anything unidentifiable. "The broadcast worked?" she asked the councilor after a moment.

He grimaced. "I believe so," he murmured. "I am cautiously optimistic."

Cassie frowned at that. "Only cautiously optimistic?" she pursued.

He nodded. "You had been particularly distressed about the fact that everyone was fleeing the coast. We have observed that they are returning now. We have also noted that the number of ships has dwindled somewhat and there do not seem to be quite as many aero-planes buzzing about."

Relief washed through her. "That does sound promising," she observed, allowing herself to feel more hopeful.

"Your government has requested to 'come aboard' and offered assistance in repairs," he added after a moment.

Cassie's smile flat lined. She frowned, returning her attention to her food with less enthusiasm.

"You do not seem ... particularly pleased at that development," the councilor probed gently.

Cassie wrestled with her conscience and finally decided not to ignore it. "They want to snoop," she responded flatly. "It isn't necessarily a bad sign. They might just be looking for reassurance that your intentions are peaceful."

"It is not necessarily a good sign, either, though?"

"I'm afraid not. They might just be looking for an opportunity to check for weaknesses they could exploit. And, if they've offered to consider allowing you to stay here, you don't want to. They'll be trying to annex Atlantis to the U.S."

He lifted his brows at her but shrugged. "We would politely refuse. We will be moving the Atlantis to international waters when possible. We would not be here now but for the disaster—and if it had come a few weeks later, we would not be here at all. We grow much of what we need on the outer rings, but we are primarily farmers of the sea. That is where we get most of the raw materials we need, and we never stay until we have depleted the area. We would have been moving the Atlantis after harvest."

"I know you know what you're doing and don't need my advice, but I also know you don't really understand them or how their mind works. In the words of the Indians 'white man speak with forked tongue', unfortunately."

The councilor seemed to search his mind for the reference. "The Redmen?" he asked finally.

Cassie nodded. "They were here when the first white settlers arrived and were peaceful and friendly for the most part—at first. They quickly discovered, though, that they couldn't trust anything white people told them. Not quickly enough, I don't suppose, or they might not have ended up on reservations." She glanced at the councilor. "Just be very, very careful when you talk to them and examine everything they say for the possibility of a different meaning entirely," she advised him earnestly. "Sometimes they lie outright. Sometimes they twist the truth to suit themselves, and sometimes they just use the language to say one thing when they mean something else entirely—politicians. I assume that's who you'll be dealing with."

He nodded and reached over to pat her hand, smiling faintly. "They are not very different then, my dear, than politicians in the rest of the universe—myself excluded, of course."

Cassie chuckled at his little joke. “Oh, I’m convinced that you are a rare man, indeed,” she assured him. “A politician who actually has the best interests of his people at heart—instead of self-interest—and who does not abuse his power.”

He colored faintly but looked extremely pleased. “Thank you, my lady, but you must take care with the compliments. If I were not far too old for such nonsense I might get the idea that you were considering *choosing* me,” he said with a chuckle.

Cassie studied his face. Seeing that he was teasing, she favored him with an arch look. “It *is* tempting,” she teased him back. “You’re not too old to be very handsome, and very charming,” she added with perfect truth. He *was* still a handsome man, despite the fact that she gauged his age at around sixty. He must have been a real heart-stopper when he was young, she mused.

“My Ophelia seemed to think I would do,” he murmured, smiling nostalgically. “But I am as certain as I can be that, even in my youth, I was never half as handsome as my grandson.” He grimaced. “Not half the man, either.”

Cassie blinked at him in surprise. “Ophelia? What a *strange* sort of coincidence! She became Ophelia det Ophelia when you two married?”

The councilor stared at her blankly for a moment and finally smiled. “It does not translate, does it? I had not realized ... No, my dear. Your word ‘married’ is not entirely the same as our ‘union’. As I understand your culture, this a vow between a man and a woman to one another?”

Cassie nodded.

“In our culture, a union is specifically a commitment to bear young. Quite often, if one is fortunate, there is a good deal of affection—as you would say ‘love’—but that is not necessarily the case. It is more a recognition in the woman’s eyes that the male she has chosen is her genetic equal, or better, and will give her a child of excellent stock—and also a commitment to parent the off-spring of the union. It is very similar, I will admit, but not entirely same. The union is about the off-spring. And, naturally, if the male chosen feels he could do better for his off-spring, he will decline—graciously, of course. A male must always appreciate being chosen at all since it is a compliment.

“I, however, became Augustus det Ophelia ap Xandai when my lady chose me. This means—as closely as I can translate it—chosen of Ophelia, off-spring of Xandai—Xana and Daigon ... Or would that be daughter?” he mused. “No,” he finished after a moment. “Off-spring would be more accurate.”

“Oh,” Cassie responded flatly, trying not to think about all the days she’d spent wavering between happiness and despair over the fact that Raen had, apparently, lost all interest in being ‘chosen’ after getting her hopes up. So much for thinking he cared! He’d just been looking to breed her!

The fucking asshole!

“That’s ... what an interesting custom!” she managed to say with an appearance, she hoped, of pleased surprise. Casting around in her mind for something to say to change the subject, she remembered his comment about his grandson. “Who’s your grandson?” she asked brightly. “You’ll have to introduce me to him.”

He lifted his brows in surprise and then looked uncomfortable. “Raen ap Aquinox. I thought since you had been so much in his company ... But we are estranged. It is entirely my fault, of course, but I thought he might have mentioned”

Cassie decided she'd had enough of the 'chicken surprise'. Setting her fork down, she drained the glass of wine instead. "I thought it was just me he didn't talk to," she muttered. "Don't feel badly. He doesn't seem to *have* much in the way of conversational skills. I'm surprised he doesn't just grunt when spoken to."

The councilor, she saw when she glanced at him uncomfortably, was studying her with amusement now. "Since you are finished, perhaps you will allow me to introduce you to a young man—whom I believe is very good at conversation—and who has requested an introduction."

She didn't especially want to meet anyone. What she wanted to do was to retreat to Raen's quarters and lick her wounds. She smiled and nodded anyway, pushing away from the table and standing. The moment she did, the world spun around her.

Fortunately, the councilor offered his arm.

She shouldn't have gulped the wine, she realized, belatedly remembering the effect it had had on her before. It was odd, really, that it hardly even tasted like alcohol and packed such a wallop.

Despite the dizziness, Cassie recognized the 'young man' the councilor led her to immediately. She couldn't seem to remember his name, but she knew it was the same man that had controlled the console in the monitoring room. "Lady Cassia, this is Claudius ap Simsark."

Blond god, Cassie thought in bemusement when he smiled down at her—a little young, maybe, but beautiful. "And you are ... unattached?" she asked, beaming back at him.

He looked disconcerted for a moment, but then grinned, his beautiful aquamarine eyes gleaming with amusement. "Aye, lady."

The councilor chuckled. "Do not allow her to drink more of the *fermente*. It seems to have an ... uh ... unexpected affect upon the native metabolism. If you will excuse me, I will leave you two to become acquainted and attend my other guests before they begin to feel neglected."

"So ...," Cassie said when the councilor left. "Is Claudius Roman?"

He looked disconcerted. "I am Atlantean."

Cassie stared blankly at him a moment and finally grinned. "The name. I meant is the name Roman?"

He blushed.

Oh how adorable!

"This is possible. It was my grandsire's name"

Before he could finish what he'd been about to say, a squeal of glee interrupted him. Cassie whirled at the sound and met Linda as she swept her into an exuberant embrace and gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek. "I am so *proud* of what you did!" she exclaimed, grabbing Cassie's hands and dancing her in a giggling circle. Her enthusiasm was contagious and Cassie laughed with her.

"What did I do?"

Linda stared at her a moment and uttered a snorting giggle. "Just saved the world, woman!"

Chapter Twenty Four

Cassie reddened to the roots of her hair. "God! Linda! I thought you were serious! How much of that stuff have you had?"

Linda snickered. "Not as much as I'm going to. I'm celebrating tonight. We're *not* going to get blown to hell, because *you* had the guts to do something, and ...," she paused for effect, "I chose Adan, and he said yes!"

Cassie stared at her, feeling her smile slowly freeze on her face. Considering what the councilor had just told her the first thing that popped in her head as she divided a look between Linda and Adan was 'poor fool'. "That's ... that's so wonderful!" she managed to say with enough enthusiasm that Linda didn't seem to notice.

She looked at Adan and saw that he was smiling happily, too.

Poor fool, she thought. If he thought he was going to breed up 'excellent stock' on Linda, he was in for a shock. Linda was a mutt—A perfectly wonderful person, but she was American—ergo—mutt.

She was a mutt. Besides the Cherokee a couple of generations back, she represented the UK and half of Europe.

Remembering her manners, she gestured toward Claudius and introduced him to Linda.

Linda smiled at him brightly. "Everybody else is outside," she said, dividing a look between Claudius and Cassie. "Wanna come? We've got booze!"

Cassie sent Claudius a questioning look. He issued one of the quaint little bows they constantly bobbed at one another. "Thank you, yes."

"He is soooo cute," Linda murmured in a loud whisper as she looped her arm through Cassie's and led her across the room.

Cassie sent an agonized glance over her shoulder to see if Claudius had heard and saw that he had—He was grinning, anyway. She didn't know if it was because he was amused at Linda's antics or if he'd heard. If he'd heard, the six foot plus package of male brawn and beauty following in their wake with Adan didn't seem to take exception to being called 'cute'.

"You should tap that before you go," Linda continued after a moment.

"Linda!" Cassie gasped in horror, throwing Claudius an apologetic glance that time before in clicked in her mind what Linda had said. "What do you mean, go?"

"You haven't heard? Adan says the Atlantis is almost fixed—the thingy they needed to fix, and the Andromeda's going to cut them loose in a couple of days. They're trying to figure out how to get us home without running afoul of the military out there—I told Adan y'all would want to avoid 'debriefing' at all costs. Even if things aren't looking as nasty as they were, it's easy to see they're not ready to make friends, yet." She shrugged. "And just between you and me, I don't think they'll be as happy you helped the Atlanteans as the Atlanteans are."

Cassie blinked at her. "What do you mean, y'all?"

She shrugged. "I'm going to stay with Adan, of course."

"Oh." She studied Linda worriedly but decided to keep her mouth shut. Linda was a grown woman, old enough to fuck up her life without any help. "It's a good thing I got invited to this party," she added after a moment. "I wouldn't have known a damned thing that was going on."

The 'everyone' outside, Cassie discovered, included the entire crew of the *Clara Belle* and their 'keepers', except for Carl and David. Mark divided an assessing look between Cassie and Claudius when they arrived with Linda and Adan. "What happened to Romeo, Juliette?"

Cassie gave him an irritated look. She wasn't about to tell them she had no idea. She hadn't looked for Raen. She'd been too uncomfortable until she'd discovered Linda to look around at all, certain she wouldn't see anyone she knew.

"Play nice," Linda said. "We're together and about to be homeward bound. It's time to celebrate and have fun!"

Cassie glanced at Linda, realizing she hadn't confided in the others that she didn't intend to go back. She shrugged inwardly. If Linda didn't want to announce it she probably had a good reason.

Mark handed Cassie a glass of *fermente`*. "Sorry," he murmured. "Not my business, I guess."

Cassie met his gaze and glanced at the Atlantean woman beside him. "No," she responded as she met his gaze again. "It isn't."

"Aw, come on, Cass," Mark muttered. "Don't tell me you blame me"

Cassie smiled faintly. "I don't. The problem is, Mark, it just doesn't bother me, and it should. You know what I mean?"

She moved away from him after that, sipping at the *fermente`* as she wandered down to the channel. The lights from the party gleamed over the surface, making the water far darker beneath.

"He was your lover?"

Cassie glanced at Claudius in surprise at the question. She smiled faintly. "Nope. We didn't even actually get close."

His gaze flickered over her face. "I regret that we will not have time to know one another better before you must go," he said. "I like what I have seen ... very much."

Cassie smiled at him. "Oh! That was a fabulous line! You are such a charmer!"

He looked disconcerted and confused. "I am not certain I understand this idiom. Or is this slang?"

Cassie looked away uncomfortably. "What it was, was rude. You gave me a compliment and I implied you were being insincere instead of saying 'thank you'."

"I am sincere in my regret," he said, smiling faintly. "I did not say it to try to get in your pants."

As horrified as she was, Cassie burst out laughing. "You've been studying our slang, I see."

He grinned back her. "I got this right?"

"I believe you did."

"You are embarrassed at everyone's praise," he continued after a moment, "but what you did was a brave thing, knowing that you might be punished for it. And it was a good thing for your people. This is one reason I regret that I have not had the chance to know you."

Cassie shrugged uncomfortably. "It wasn't a great deed! It was a just a little thing."

"That no one else did," he said. "And because you did a little thing that no one else would, the council will be able to make peace between your people and mine."

She looked up at him, studying his face. "You really think they will?"

"Yes," he said, but frowned. "I wish that you would consider staying with us. I do not like to think that there is even a small chance that you would be punished."

Cassie's belly performed an uncomfortable little flip flop, but she resolutely ignored it. "Where would my claim to fame be, then?" she asked teasingly. "There's nothing brave about throwing a rock and then running to hide and swearing someone else did it."

His gaze was plainly appreciative. "There is brave and then there is ... unwise."

She chuckled. "Stoopid, you mean? I don't really believe I have anything to worry about—now. If they'd declared war, it would've been a different matter. Then, I could've been looking at serious trouble. As it is, they won't be happy. I'm hoping to avoid the unpleasantness of being questioned, though."

Linda and Adan joined them at the edge of the channel. Linda was giggly, which was almost annoying—or at least would have been if Cassie wasn't feeling particularly mellow herself. "Anybody in the mood for skinny dipping?" she called out.

Jimmy, who'd obviously already had enough to drink to remove all of his inhibitions, let out a rebel yell and raced for the water, dragging off his robe as he went. Cassie laughed as she caught a glimpse of skinny white ass disappearing beneath the water. Uttering a delighted shriek, Shelly was right behind him and hit the water almost on top of him.

"That's their drinking water!" Linda yelled. "No pissing!"

Their escorts, whether they were 'in' to the spirit of the thing or just wanted to drag Shelly and Jimmy out, pulled their robes off and dove in after them.

Linda gave Cassie a challenging look. "You in?"

"I'm not getting naked with a whole party going on right there!" Cassie snorted, gesturing toward the building behind them.

"Don't be a chicken shit!" Linda said, laughing as she pulled off her own robe. "They *all* do it!"

She screamed as she hit the water. "Oh my *god* it's cold!"

Cassie glanced at Claudius questioningly. His eyes were gleaming with suppressed laughter. Shrugging, he pulled his own robe off.

Feeling reckless, Cassie uttered a chuckle and snatched hers off, leaping toward the channel even as she tossed the robe away. She discovered Linda was right. The water felt like ice. It snatched her breath from her lungs as she went under. She strangled and came up coughing. "It's not fresh water!" she exclaimed accusingly. "It's salt water!"

"So?" Linda smacked the water with her hand, splattering Cassie in the face.

Blinking, Cassie splattered her back. Within a few moments they were both laughing like idiots and trying to drown each other. Claudius and Adan merely looked on, their expressions nearly an identical and equal mixture of amusement and confusion. When Cassie and Linda had mopped the water from their faces, they grinned at each other, looked at Adan and Claudius, and then exchanged a conspiratorial glance.

“Water war!” they shouted almost in unison and whirled to pelt Adan and Claudius, taking both men by surprise.

Claudius and Adan mopped the water from their faces, looked at each other, and then sent their attackers a look of intent. Uttering a shrieking laugh, Cassie whirled to flee as she saw the mermen curl their tails and realized they meant to slap the water with their tail fins. A veritable wall of water rolled over Cassie before she’d managed to put more than a few feet between them. She emerged a moment later with her hair in her eyes. Parting it, she peered around for Claudius just as he shot from the water in front of her. “Oh my god!” she exclaimed in dismay, sucking in a quick breath and covering her head when she saw him arching toward the water.

To her surprise, he clove the water with hardly a ripple.

A moment later a hand closed on her ankle, snatching her beneath the surface.

She pin wheeled her arms through the water, trying to claw her way back to the surface. Releasing his hold on her ankle, Claudius skimmed upwards along her body, caught her waist, and carried her to the surface. She emerged sputtering and pushed her hair from her eyes again.

Claudius chuckled at the indignant look she gave him. “Unfair!” she accused him without heat.

He shook his head slowly, his grin slowly fading. “Fair.”

She saw the intent in his eyes even as he tightened his hold on her, bringing her against him. For several heartbeats, she simply stared at him, still gasping for breath. Before she could actually make up her mind whether she wanted to kiss him or not, someone shouted something from the rim of the canal. Cassie glanced toward the furious voice instinctively, even though what he’d said was incomprehensible.

She blinked in surprise and not a little dismay when she saw it was Raen standing on the rim, his hands planted on his hips, his expression furious.

“Uh oh!” Linda muttered. “Somebody’s pissed!”

“Guess romping in the water’s a no-no,” Ben murmured.

Feeling perfectly blank with shock, Cassie glanced at Claudius as she felt his hold on her slacken. Looking almost as furious as Raen, he uttered a retort—*also* in their language.

“What’s going ...?” Cassie began. She broke off when Raen snatched his robe off and threw it down, her jaw sagging in stunned disbelief as he dove in.

Claudius pushed her away as Raen surfaced.

Cassie glanced from one man to the other and then at the other people in the water around her, trying to figure out what was going on. When she looked back, it was just in time to see Raen and Claudius slam into each other. Tangling in a wrestler’s hold, the two men dropped beneath the water.

“Holy shit!” Shelly squealed.

“Fight!” Jimmy exclaimed with excited glee.

Still stunned and confused and uncertain of what to do, Cassie glanced around the water. Just beneath the surface, she saw an almost florescent glow. She stared at the neon flash of red dumbfounded.

“Would you look at that!” Ben exclaimed. “They’ve turned red! Shit! I didn’t know they could do that. Did you know they could do that?”

Abruptly both men, still entangled, shot from the water and straight up into the air. Screaming, Cassie headed for the edge of the canal, swimming for all she was worth. Everyone else merely gaped at the two men as they flew upwards, broke apart, and arched toward the water again.

"Run!" Linda screamed as it dawned on her that both men were going to hit the water at high velocity.

The wave they created when they hit slammed Cassie against the side of the canal. She went under, briefly, and clawed her way upward again, reaching blindly for a hand hold on the edge to pull herself out. A hand curled around her wrist and pulled her clear of the water. Coughing and brushing at the water and hair in her face. She was stunned when she managed to clear her vision to see that it was the councilor.

He'd snatched her clear of the water as if she'd been no more than a child, she thought, struggling to grasp it.

Shaking her amazement off when she saw his attention was on the two men in the water, shivering, both at the cool air wafting over her wet skin and in reaction, Cassie turned to follow his gaze and saw the other skinny dippers were emerging from the water like half drowned rats, assisted by their keepers.

"What's going on?" Cassie whispered through chattering teeth, both mesmerized and horrified at the battle. They dove, disappeared beneath the water, and then shot upwards fifteen or twenty feet into the air, arched, and dove again. Almost like a ballet, each movement was so beautifully executed, so amazing, she felt a thrill of awe ripple through her every time they flung themselves into the air and yet there seemed no doubt at all that their intent was deadly. The angry, flashing red of their tails and fins as they thrashed beneath the water, spoke of fury as surely as the expressions on their faces.

It was completely incomprehensible. She'd rarely even seen any of the Atlanteans exchange a harsh word. They were exquisitely polite and courteous, not only to each other, but to everyone.

The councilor dragged his gaze from the two men and looked down at Cassie thoughtfully. Finally, he glanced around and moved to retrieve one of the discarded robes, handing it to her.

Cassie took it gratefully and pulled it on. She felt warmer instantly, but the shivering didn't stop.

"A challenge," the councilor answered finally. "Ordinarily, it is only for show for the female they are trying to impress, but *they* are in deadly earnest. Do not doubt that. They might well kill one another."

Cassie's eyes widened in horror. "Somebody needs to stop it!"

The councilor looked down at her in amusement. "Only you can stop it, Lady Cassia. They are warring over you."

Cassie jerked her gaze from the two men, staring at him in disbelief. "How?"

"Wait until you have caught the gaze of the man you have chosen, and then turn away."

Cassie swallowed with an effort, turning to look at the men. "What if it's neither?" she asked a little hoarsely.

"Then turn your face from both."

She looked up at the councilor helplessly. She didn't want to choose. She was leaving. Raen ... She didn't understand why he'd challenged Claudius. Every time she

thought she'd begun to understand what was going on, she discovered she was still all at sea.

She wanted to cover her eyes with her hands, to turn away. She couldn't. She felt as if she was rooted to the spot. Without making any conscious decision at all, without even an awareness that she was staring, she watched, and her gaze collided with Raen's. Her heart leapt into her throat and tried to choke her the moment she realized what she'd done.

Whirling abruptly, she fled.

She was dimly aware of staring faces, realized that the fight, or maybe their childish romping in the water before, had drawn the notice of everyone. She didn't look at them. A sense of panic had engulfed her the moment she realized what she'd done.

All she could think about was fleeing the scene. She couldn't even think of where to go.

She didn't know how to find her way back to Raen's quarters even if it had been a viable possibility, and she certainly couldn't flee *from* him and *to* his quarters!

Turning away from the building abruptly, she fled down the narrow, darkened street at the heart of the town, certain she could find the portal Raen had always brought her through when he'd taken her outside. Once she'd left the lighted area of the party, though, she was completely disoriented. The glow from the energy lighting the clouds in the distance became the only source of light. The Andromeda blocked out the light from the stars and moon—if there even was a moon.

It was more blind luck than design that brought her to the portal where Raen had brought her through before when he'd taken her to walk. Her eyes had adjusted to the gloom, but Atlantis had been undergoing a steady change since it had surfaced. Nothing looked familiar. She wasn't certain it would have if not for the scant light she had to guide her.

She was panting for breath as she burst through the doors and jogged down the corridor with no clear destination in mind, but she wasn't winded from the exertion so much as the adrenaline pumping through her. A vague plan to hide swarmed in her mind, instinct, not generated by real thought.

She'd nearly reached the first bisecting corridor when she heard the slapping of bare, jogging feet behind her against the floor above the pounding of her heart in her ears. She knew instantly that it was Raen, even though she'd been trying to convince herself that he wouldn't follow her or that he hadn't seen which way she'd run. The sound sent a fresh jolt of adrenaline through her, and she launched herself into a run again, darting down the bisecting corridor, as mindless with panic as she'd been before.

Consternation filled her as she reached another corridor, the abrupt realization that she'd never come this way before, had no idea where she was or where she was going. He was closer though, too close, and she darted away again.

He almost caught her as she darted around the corner. Uttering a sharp gasp, she slipped from his tenuous grasp. He was upon her, however, his stride far longer than hers. Within a few steps, he caught her, dragging her to a halt. Their momentum and brief scuffle for dominance sent them careening into the wall in gentle collision as he swung her to meet him face to face. Sucking in a harsh gasp, she grasped his upper arms, digging her fingers into his flesh to hold him at bay.

Words tumbled through her mind and clogged in her throat as she stared up at him in wide eyed dismay. His expression was hard, unnerving. His pale blue eyes held a

predatory gleam she'd never seen before. It flickered through her mind that the battle lust still gripped him, but it was more than that—the lust of the chase upon him, she saw, feeling uncertainty slither through her mind as he shifted his hold on her and she felt his hand settle on the base of her skull, his fingers threading through her hair. “Raen?” she gasped uneasily as it descended upon her abruptly that she didn't really know this man at all—this stranger—this alien being who'd delved her—mind, body, and soul—and shielded himself from her, steadfastly refusing to allow her more than a glimpse into his mind and heart.

Instead of answering, he drew her upward to meet the descent of his mouth.

A thrill that was part alarm and part exultation went through her as his mouth closed over hers in fevered demand, his tongue thrusting between her parted lips and raking along hers in a scalding conquest that brought every sense instantly to screaming attention and focused them on him—the overpowering mass and hardness of his body and straining muscles as he caged hers against the wall; the warmth and silkiness of his skin everywhere it touched hers; the taste, scent, and texture of his mouth and tongue on hers, inside of her; and beneath that the ferocity of his hunger that coaxed—no, commanded an equal response from her body that it instantly recognized and reacted to.

She had to make him stop, she thought as his taste burst upon her tongue and sent an explosion of mind drugging want through her. This wasn't going to work she told herself as she sucked in a harsh breath laden with his heated breath and felt it invade her lungs with his intoxicating scent and then thread its way through her blood in a scalding tide. It couldn't, she reminded herself as his essence poured through every part of her, making every nerve ending sing with anticipation.

But she couldn't summon the reasons why it couldn't or wouldn't work. Everything inside of her was screaming that it could, that she wanted him, and she didn't care about anything else.

Surrendering abruptly to the call of passion, she ceased every effort to hold herself away from him physically or mentally and clung instead. Looping her arms around his shoulders to pull herself more tightly to him, she kissed him back with feverish need, reveled in the demand and possessiveness inherent in his touch as he held her head for his kiss and explored her body with his free hand.

He'd either lost all awareness of where they were or he didn't care. Or perhaps it was a part of his primal need to stake his claim, but it became clear to her that he meant to at that very moment, had no intention of stopping with no more than a heated kiss. He shoved her robe upwards to her waist and explored her body briefly with his hand and then abruptly caught her buttocks in his hands and hoisted her upwards, bracing her between the wall and his body.

Briefly, her senses expanded, scanned for intruders around them and then she dismissed the possibility without a qualm, lifting her legs to wrap them around his waist and open her body to him. She didn't care, she realized with a touch of surprise. All that mattered in that moment was feeling his total possession, feeling his thick flesh enfolded within hers.

She gasped into his mouth as she felt his fingers exploring the slick folds of her sex, felt him insert one finger in her channel to test his welcome. The head of his cock replaced his finger only a moment later, pushing into her with steady, determined

pressure until her flesh began to yield to his possession. She made a sound of gladness in her throat as her moisture coated him and he slid deeper, spearing her firmly on his shaft.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he shifted her higher along the wall, bracing her for better leverage, conquering the depth of her in a series of hard thrusts that left her gasping, panting to catch her breath.

Groaning as if she was dying, she dropped her head to his shoulder and pressed her face against his throat as he stroked the walls of her sex with wild, desperate, heaving thrusts that felt so keenly exquisite it lifted a prickling rash along her skin all over, sent shivers of delight through her. Her throat tightened. Delicious tension invaded her with each thrust of his cock along her channel as it set off a new wave of pleasure. It grew, expanded rapidly until she felt her body quivering on the edge of release and then exploding with it. She sucked a patch of skin along his neck into her mouth to muffle her cries as she climaxed. He groaned, thrusting into her more frantically still as he came and his cock jerked with the spasms, pumping his hot seed inside of her.

They leaned together in the aftermath, gasping for breath.

"Why?" he gasped hoarsely. "You chose me as your lover. Why would you let him touch you? Why would offer yourself to him?"

With an effort, Cassie lifted her head from his shoulder to meet his tormented gaze. She hadn't, not consciously. She swallowed against a sudden tightness in her throat. "You said you didn't want me."

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "Gods!"

Easing his flesh from hers, he allowed her to slip down until her feet touched the floor. Her knees wobbled, threatened to buckle, but he scooped her into his arms before she could test their ability to hold her. Too weak to protest even if she was of a mind to, which she wasn't, she looped her arms around him and dropped her head to his shoulder as he strode rapidly down the corridor.

Chapter Twenty Five

They arrived so quickly at his quarters that Cassie knew immediately that he'd either been driving her toward his 'lair' all along, or she'd instinctively headed in that direction. She didn't know or care which. Nothing seemed to matter anymore beyond the fact that they had no more time to squabble over petty differences between them. They had hours, maybe a handful of days to share themselves with one another, to give and take whatever pleasure they could.

She didn't want to think about the inevitability of it, or what life would be like afterwards.

She realized as he settled her on her feet and tugged her robe off that he hadn't bothered to don his own. He'd undoubtedly broken off the battle, leapt from the water, and given chase almost the instant she'd turned to flee. Massive bruises darkened his ribs and belly from the force of the blows Claudius had dealt him with the powerful, swinging blows of his lower body, harder than any kick.

She traced them lightly with her fingertips and even so he winced, sucked in a harsh breath. Disconcerted, she jerked her hands back, flicking a distressed look at his face. He brushed aside the worry that leapt to her mind, though, dragging her close for a heated kiss and then releasing her only long enough to guide her to the bed and fall into it with her.

There was no hesitancy in his touch as there had been before, no flicker of doubts. He caressed her either with the surety of newfound knowledge of how and where to touch her body to give her the most pleasure, or simply a certainty that he would find it if he caressed her everywhere, or perhaps only in mindless pursuit of his own pleasure. She didn't know which, but it didn't matter. His diligence left no erogenous zone untapped, none wanting for attention. He kissed and stroked and nipped at her flesh until she was writhing feverishly beneath him, clutching at him and begging in mindless demand for relief, panting and gasping until she thought she would pass out from the lack of oxygen making its way into her blood stream.

He braced himself above her with his locked arms when he'd entered her, watching her face as he pumped his hips to glide his cock slowly back and forth along her channel. She lifted her hips to counter each thrust in wordless encouragement, gazing up at him through half closed lids, as enthralled by the desire contorting his handsome face into a tortured mask of pained pleasure as she was by the feel of him inside of her. She squeezed her eyes tightly closed when she reached the point where she felt the need to contain the escalating pleasure, to hold on to it, but it seemed that the moment she closed her eyes, she lost control completely. "Raen," she gasped on a note of urgency.

He shuddered at her hoarse plea, as if it had raked along his nerve endings. Dropping closer, he held still for a moment, kissing her deeply and then abruptly snatched his mouth from hers and began to pound into her in fierce, driving need to reach his peak, driving her before him. A keen, almost animalistic cry forced its way from her as the building tension inside of her shattered into a million exquisite shards when her

body erupted in rapture. Digging her fingers into his flesh, she rode the shockwaves of pleasure, uttering one gasping cry after another as they assaulted her until the ecstasy peaked and began its downward spiral toward oblivion.

She didn't even attempt to break her fall. She was too weak in the aftermath to want to try. Utter contentment filled her, a dim awareness and pleasure that he'd come within moments of her, uttering hoarse groans and choked grunts as his body convulsed with release. Sighing blissfully when he merely rolled onto his side with her without disengaging his body from hers, she snuggled gratefully against him and gave up the light of consciousness without protest.

He was gone when she woke, but she was far too content to dwell on it for any length of time. She drowsed lazily, smiling to herself as it flickered through her mind to wonder if they'd had an audience the night before when they'd coupled with such wild abandon in the corridor. No doubt the monitors had caught them even if no one had stumbled upon them, she thought with amusement.

Fuck it, she thought! It wasn't likely the Atlanteans could think less of the 'primitives' among them. No doubt they'd already been thoroughly shocked and disgusted by their childish, undisciplined, and undignified behavior at the party.

As much as she liked and respected their dignity, courtesy, and iron self-control, as strongly as it compelled her to struggle to emulate them to gain their approval, their disapproval of her humanity seemed to pull at the contrary side of her natural. It pricked at her pride, goading her into flaunting her primitive streak as a way of thumbing her nose at their disapproval—which was probably what had inspired the others to behave so wildly the night before. As carefully as she'd always exerted her own self-control, she felt stifled by the fear of a loss of control in a way she'd never felt before. There were times when she'd felt like getting in their cool faces and screaming. "No, we're not perfect! And we're *damned* proud of it!"

There was no doubt at all that careful modulation of fear, anger, sorrow, happiness, and passion would make the world turn more smoothly, but the need to break free of restraint, occasionally, was a psyche screaming for the need to unburden itself. *They* might never feel that need because they were different from mankind, but *she* felt it. Everyone she knew felt it. It wasn't *wrong* if it was part of who and what they were. It was just different.

Mankind had done horrible things in their past, she knew, continued to do terrible things that shamed her. She'd done things she was ashamed of. But they'd done just as many, or more, things she was proud of, accomplished much, continued to strive for betterment. She wasn't ashamed of who and what she was, despite their many failings, and she wasn't going to let *them* make her be ashamed.

She felt a mixture of amusement and irritation when Chandra came in with her breakfast. The girl was far more subdued than usual and kept flicking wide eyed glances at her as if she'd suddenly discovered herself in the cage with a wild, unpredictable animal. "I don't bite," she said in an amused voice.

Chandra smiled uneasily, but reddened. "I heard Sentinel Raen ap Aquinox *challenged*," she said in an awed whisper.

Cassie couldn't prevent a blush. Shifting uncomfortably, she focused on her food. She was *not* going to discuss it with anyone, and certainly not a kid!

"And then, Claudius ap Simsark issued a *counter* challenge!"

Cassie cleared her throat. "Yes, well, I think it might have been the *fermente`* talking," she said briskly.

Chandra's face puckered in a puzzled frown as she thought that over. "No one seems to think so. Sentinel Raen ap Aquinox had not had any, for he had only just arrived, and Sentinel Claudius ap Simsark would not have drank much, for he was on duty," she finally said thoughtfully. "In any case, it is always served on special occasions and has never seemed to contribute to this sort of behavior before. They are saying that there has not been such a display for two generations—at least. No one can even *recall* the last time. A few times, there have been males who seemed to be on the *verge* of challenge and display, which has stirred a great deal of excitement in everyone, but in the end it was resolved amicably enough and came to nothing.

"Everyone is saying that the wild behavior of the natives is contagious and *that* is the root of it—that it was clear from the start that it was not merely for show and that they struck each other with intent to harm."

Cassie gave the girl a disgusted look. "Why am I not surprised that even here everyone looks for someone else to blame? If it happened before, even if it *was* a long time ago, then it can't be blamed on us, can it?"

"You," Chandra corrected. "They are saying you teased your lovers, favoring one above the other and *that* is why they challenged."

Cassie glared at her indignantly. "I did no such ...," she broke off, abruptly recalling that she was talking to a very young girl who had no business hearing the details.

The nosy little bitch!

"Well! It's a free society, and I suppose they're entitled to their opinions ... even if it *is* a damned lie!"

The incident with Chandra left Cassie thoroughly irritated and put a severe damper on the residual pleasure she'd felt upon waking. Instead of slowly dissipating throughout the day, however, the anxieties Chandra managed to introduce with her artless curiosity slowly ate away at her confidence that Raen had dismissed whatever doubts and reservations he'd had before.

Maybe he'd had time to rethink the situation and regretted it? Maybe he'd had time to remind himself, now that the heat of the moment had passed, that she'd betrayed his trust?

When he came in at last, late, as he had since he'd been given the task of identifying the dead and missing, she sat up in bed and stared at him with a mixture of hope and doubt. He didn't seem to notice. The moment he entered the room, he dragged his robe off and discarded it, striding directly to the bed and falling upon her as if he was starved with need, despite the times they'd expended themselves upon each other the night before. The relief she felt seemed to amplify her reaction to his kisses and his touch, sending her spiraling out of control within moments. Or maybe it was that she felt almost a sense of desperation in the way he touched her?

In any case, it was no leisurely awakening of the senses to bring them all to maximum focus and feed their impressions to the core of her passions. He wedged his hips between her thighs and began striving to penetrate her body almost at once as if he could not sheathe himself inside of her fast enough. The restless, hungry movement of his mouth on hers, the almost bruising force of his hands as they kneaded her flesh, sent a

lava flow through her blood, soaked her passage with the creamy juices of desire and her flesh yielded to his ruthless quest with little more than a token protest of his girth.

The ride was as wild, perhaps wilder, than the night before. He seemed focused on some inner turmoil as he pummeled into her with a desperation that had them both drenched with the moisture of their labors, struggling for breath.

He came first, but the jerking spasms of his release triggered hers. Her entire body arched at the magnitude of the eruption, stilling the breath in her lungs and the beat of a heart for a split second, easing, and then freezing again as the next wave hit her until she was sobbing for breath, her heart slamming so hard against her chest it felt like it might burst.

Slipping his arms tightly around her the moment his body and hers ceased to shudder and quake with release, he rolled onto his back, carrying her with him. Sated, she lay plastered limply against his length. For a time, he lay as limply beneath her. After a while he seemed to gather himself, however. Looping one arm around her, he smoothed her hair with his other hand and then stroked her back in a soothing motion that completed her descent into unconsciousness.

He roused her later with far more purposeful caresses. She groaned a complaint at being awakened but soon forgot her objections as he carried her upwards to the heavenly plane of shattering ecstasy again. As they lay together in the aftermath, he held her tightly against him. "We are summoned to stand before the council tomorrow--today," he said after a time, his voice harsh. "I will not be here to escort you, for I have something I must do, but know that I will be there to stand beside you."

Dread descended over Cassie in a cold tide, but she was exhausted beyond the ability to retain consciousness even if the threat of death had been hanging over her. After lying wakeful within his arms for a time, she drifted to sleep again.

* * * *

Cassie didn't know if she was more unnerved by the grim faces of the council seated on the platform before them or the fact that the room was filled almost to capacity by Atlanteans who'd come to witness whatever it was that the hearing was about. Carl and David, looking little the worse for the time they'd spent confined beyond a pallor neither had had before, were seated at the far end of the bench from her and hadn't glanced in her direction more than once. Between them sat Mark, Ben, Jimmy, Shelly and their keepers. A stirring and the sound of approaching footsteps announced the arrival of Linda and Adan, which Cassie supposed had been the holdup to beginning the proceedings.

Her stomach tightening with anxiety, Cassie looked around forlornly for Raen. He'd told her he would be there. Just as Linda and Adan reached the aisle where the rest of them sat, Raen came through the doors in the back and strode purposely toward her. Her relief left her feeling weak all over.

The bench was full by the time he reached her. He glanced at the tightly packed bench and finally merely stood beside her. Cassie looked up at him and smiled. His harsh features eased.

"Be seated!"

The command came from one of the female council members. Raen's jaw tightened as he met her gaze. Instead of moving away, however, he knelt beside her at the end of the bench.

The woman glared at him but apparently decided not to push the issue.

High Councilor det Ophelia looked more grim than all the rest, Cassie noted, feeling even more uneasy. She slipped her hand into Raen's.

"We have reached a point in our dealings with the united earth forces," he began without preamble, "where it has become necessary to invite representatives into Atlantis to proceed with peaceful negotiations. Since we do not feel that it would further the proceedings to discover we have held natives here, for whatever reason, and since we also promised our guests that they would be released to return to their homes as soon as it was possible, we have summoned you sentinels who have had them in your care to escort them beyond our borders. There are to be no exceptions."

Raen's hand tightened on hers, and she glanced at him, trying to hold back the absolute misery that swept over her. She'd known it wouldn't work out, she told herself. She'd known, no matter what she wanted, it was destined not to be.

A stir on the bench beside her dragged her gaze from his and she saw Linda bound from her seat. "But—I want to stay!" she objected. "I asked to stay. I chose Adan and he said yes."

The same woman who'd given Raen such a nasty look, fixed Linda with a frozen stare, her lips curling with obvious distaste. "The native element is distasteful and disruptive," she responded coldly. "You are not an Atlantean and your 'wants' are of no more interest to us than your 'choosing' is acceptable. Adan has shown poor judgment in accepting, but that is beside the point. Since the inception of this colony, we have closely guarded our genetic strains, optimized them. Introducing your questionable, if no doubt colorful, lineage into our society is not something that will improve our gene pool, although I make no doubt Adan's would improve yours."

Turning red with both anger and embarrassment, Linda sat back down.

"The distasteful incident last evening," another councilwoman spoke up, "settled the matter as far as I am concerned. We can not have outsiders stirring our males to such barbaric displays!"

Cassie felt her face heat as everyone beside her, and no doubt behind her, turned to stare at her disapprovingly. Linda glared at her accusingly, as if it was entirely *her* fault that she wouldn't be allowed to stay. Despite her sense of injustice, guilt stung her.

"*She* is not responsible for my behavior!" Raen ground out.

"And I suppose the other sentinels were not responsible for *their* behavior?" another councilor spoke up. "They are a disruptive influence on our society. Even if not for the fact that having any one of them here is liable to upset the delicate balance we have achieved thus far in negotiating peaceful relations with our neighbors, even if we segregated their inferior off-spring to keep them from tainting our bloodlines, where would we draw the line? If one were to stay, another might claim a similar tie, and then another until there was no end to it."

"As paltry a thanks as it may seem for the selfless act of kindness bestowed upon us by one of your number," the high councilor spoke, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "the majority has ruled that you must all be expelled, and it is my duty to order this carried out. Sentinels, you will escort the natives, safely, to their own people."

Raen's hand was shaking faintly as he drew Cassie to her feet. To her surprise, instead of guiding her down the aisle, he pulled her to face him. She looked down at his hands when he did and saw that he was holding a pair of what appeared to be intricately

wrought silver wrist cuffs chased with gold, a smaller one nestled inside of the larger of the two.

Around them, she heard a rustling stir, as of people shifting in their seats, and the rise of murmuring voices as Raen lifted her right hand and fitted the smaller cuff around her wrist. He took the larger of the two and clamped it around his left. "I am your man, Lady Cassia Pendall, regardless of what words have or have not passed between us. I do not give a gods bedamned what any one else thinks or how they feel about it." He dragged his gaze from hers after a moment and glared at the council members. "I will do my duty to my people because I can not in good conscience do aught else in this time of strife, but when this is settled, you will gladly take a daughter of man to live here, or you will lose a son of Andromeda. For now, I will take her name as mine and pray that I have given her my child. It could not have a better mother."

"Or a better father," the high councilor agreed.

Even as the stupefied audience abruptly erupted into disorder, Adan dragged Linda from the bench and stumbled his way through a similar speech. Cassie was scarcely aware of the other sentinels who followed suit. She was staring down at the bracelet Raen had placed around her wrist, trying to see it through a blur of tears.

He tipped her chin up so that she was looking up at him, gazing at her face searchingly. "I could not wait any longer for you to choose me, lady. I was afraid you would not. Tell me if it is not what you want."

She found her chin was wobbling too hard from imminent tears to answer him. Instead, she pushed up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the lips. "It's what I want," she managed finally.

He grinned at her shakily, his gaze flickering over her face. "I was afraid you would say no." He pulled her into a brief embrace.

"Sentinels!" he said authoritatively when he had released her. "On the councils' orders, escort our guests!"

The sentinels came to attention. Cassie flicked a smile up at Raen and led the way as the rest of her party filed out and walked up the aisle, a sentinel marching beside each of them. Cassie didn't look at the other Atlanteans, the ones who watched. She didn't care what they thought, either. Raen had cared enough to break tradition and defy the council. Whatever happened next, she had that.

Instead of escorting them straight away to the surface as she'd expected, they were taken to a room where she saw their diving equipment had been stored. Carl and David went immediately to the tanks. "Empty!" Carl said in disgust, checking another.

"This one, too!" David said.

"This one has a couple of minutes—tops," Mark said in disgust.

"We have devised these for you," Raen said, holding out what looked to be little more than a slightly modified face mask.

Carl glared at them. "Thanks, but that isn't likely to do us much good. We need air if we're going to have a chance of getting out of here in one piece. We'll have to go *under* the net they've thrown over this place."

"This will draw the air from the water around you," Raen said.

Carl took it and examined it with frowning intensity. "It doesn't look like it'd work to me."

"Nevertheless, it has been tested," Raen said. "You will need the suits to protect your skin. We have the location of a ship owned by a media called CBN that is awaiting your arrival perhaps twenty miles beyond the military cordon. They are not allowed to come closer, and it would not be to your benefit if they did. They are far enough away that they will be able to pick you up without detection."

Everyone exchanged uneasy glances but hurried to put on the wetsuits.

Cassie's stomach was in knots as the Atlanteans led them from the room and then down into the belly of the ship. There was an access pool roughly the size of an Olympic swimming pool in the room they were led to. Five more sentinels were waiting for them when they arrived, all of them armed with tridents. The men in Cassie's group eyed the tridents uneasily.

"Expecting to get up close and personal?" Carl drawled when Raen and the sentinels who'd accompanied them took up tridents, as well.

Raen pointed his trident toward the far wall. When he did, three blue beams shot from the forks at the end and burned black spots on the far wall. "This one is set to stun only."

Any questions, Cassie thought in bemusement?

"You will not be able to communicate with us once we are submerged," Raen told them, "but we will be able to communicate with you when necessary. We will send scouts ahead to search for military divers, but you are to stay close together, within the parameters we set, so that we can protect you if necessary."

By the time he finished speaking everyone was white faced with anxiety and merely nodded.

"We will wait until the scouts arrive to move out. On my mark, dive!"

For several moments, Cassie's entire party merely gaped at him. As the Atlanteans leapt into the water, however, they pulled their masks on jerkily and followed suit.

Cassie held her breath as long as she could before she found the nerve to test the 'water breather' attached to her mask. The air she dragged into her lungs, to her amazement, was fresh and sweet—real air, not the bottled air she'd gotten from the tanks. She turned in the water to look at the diver next to her—Linda—and grinned, giving her a thumbs up. Linda's return smile was almost apologetic. *Sorry*, she mouthed.

Cassie smiled back at her and turned to look for Raen.

He moved toward her, encircling her waist with his hands.

She wished she hadn't had to wear the mask so that she could kiss him.

His lips curled upward. He looked away from her after a moment. *They are coming.*

Curious, Cassie turned to look in the same direction. In the distance, she could see dark shapes moving quickly toward them, dozens of dark shapes. Her heart thudded uncomfortably as it occurred to her to wonder if 'they are coming' meant trouble, and not the scouts she'd expected. In a moment, though, the dark shapes obtained form and definition.

Chapter Twenty Six

It was a school of dolphins, Cassie thought in amazement, heading straight for them. They didn't veer away. They continued to swim straight at the party at high speed and then finally 'braked' when they were almost upon them, hovering in the water in a ragged line in front of them. The Atlanteans moved toward them, stroking their heads like someone would stroke a pet. The dolphins bobbed their heads excitedly, rolling over and offering their bellies, and then flipping over again and nuzzling the Atlanteans. Two of Atlanteans, Cassie saw, were carrying something that looked like harnesses, and apparently were. They began to slip them over the heads of some of the dolphins and fasten them—eight in all. The remaining dolphins—about a dozen—hovered nearby for several moments more and then commenced to bobbing their heads and making the clicking and squealing noises peculiar to their kind, and then abruptly shot off.

Come. Raen's hand tightened on her waist as the word entered her mind. The others will scout ahead for us and tell us if there are any humans in the water. You must hold tight to the strap. He will carry you. It is too far for you to swim and you can not swim fast enough, in any case. We must move quickly to reach the ship at the appointed time.

Cassie nodded her understanding, but she was more than a little wary of grabbing the strap Raen had indicated. Sucking in a fortifying breath, she moved over the dolphin's back and gripped the strap tightly in both hands. She'd hardly done so when the dolphin shot forward. She let out a yelp then ducked her head as she felt the pull of the water against the mask from the speed they were moving. For a while she couldn't think of anything beyond hanging on, her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

I see you are enjoying this very much.

Raen's voice in her mind was amused. Cassie opened her eyes a fraction to peer around for him. She discovered he was swimming alongside her and the dolphin carrying her.

Ass, she mouthed at him.

He lifted his brows, but his lips curled upward at one corner. *I could not hear that.*

Cassie frowned. Ass, she thought, making it a shout in her mind.

He sent her a startled look, but then smiled. *You are getting better. I will make an Atlantean out of you yet.*

It was amazing how hard it was just to hold on. Cassie had reached the point where she felt as if her arms were going to drop off at the shoulder when the dolphin carrying her began to slow and finally almost to hover.

We will rest here for a few minutes while we are still within the protective shield of the Atlantis. We have almost caught up to the scouts.

Cassie nodded that she'd understood, though her heart sank at the announcement that they hadn't even cleared Atlantis yet. Uncurling her hands from the strap one at the

time, she flexed her fingers, trying to recover the circulation and then rubbed first one arm and then the other to soothe the ache.

Raen was studying her with concern when she glanced around for him again. She smiled at him reassuringly and made the thumbs up signal. He frowned faintly. *What does this mean?*

I'm good.

He moved closer.

I'm alright.

He frowned worriedly. *We must go perhaps twice more the distance we have come already.*

Cassie smiled at him reassuringly and nodded, giving him the thumbs up again since she couldn't do anything else. As loath as she was to make him worry more, though, she leaned her head tiredly against the dolphin's, glad to have a few minutes to rest.

The dolphins couldn't be pets, she mused, even if the Atlanteans had had dolphins as pets before the calamity, but the Atlanteans had obviously had some connection with them in the past and knew, just as they'd learned, that dolphins were amazingly intelligent animals.

Just as obviously, the Atlanteans could communicate with the dolphins and convey fairly complicated ideas.

They'd summoned the dolphins telepathically, she realized abruptly.

A hand settled on her back. *Ready, Cassie?*

Cassie lifted her head and tightened her grip on the strap and then nodded.

This time when the dolphin shot forward, Cassie tried shifting forward and back until she found a position that caused the least strain on her hands and arms, a position where the dolphin's body protected her the most from the drag of the water. More accustomed, she looked around instead of cowering on the dolphin's back with her eyes closed. To her right, and slightly in front of her, she saw the rest of her group, plastered to the backs of the dolphins. The sentinels swam on either side, scanning the water around them.

A sense of wonder filled her as she watched them. They were so beautiful and graceful! The sense almost of finding herself in the middle of a fairytale filled her, and she wondered abruptly about the fairytales and myths of mermaids. Had they been based on the Atlanteans? They must have, she realized, wondering why she'd never made the connection before.

She hadn't really thought of them as merfolk, though. She'd hardly seen them in that form since she'd arrived in Atlantis—not since they'd first been held for trespassing.

Not until Raen had challenged Claudius.

She turned her head to look for him on that thought. A smile curled her lips as she watched him. He was the most beautiful merman of all, she thought whimsically.

He turned just then to look at her and caught her mooning over him. He quirked an eyebrow questioningly. Embarrassed, she smiled sheepishly and was about to turn away when she saw a dark patch of movement in the distance.

Instantly alert, Raen's head snapped in that direction. The two sentinels in front of him, possibly alerted or summoned by Raen, abruptly dropped out of formation.

Cassie noticed it only peripherally, however. Her attention was still on the dark form moving toward them. Her heart stilled in her chest as her eyes finally focused on it.

It was a diver.

She'd no more than made that assessment than she had to correct it. The gear didn't look anything like the gear their diving group had used. It was a military diver on an underwater scooter.

And he wasn't alone.

She'd no sooner identified him as military than she discovered other dark shapes in the water around him, all moving toward them. The dolphin she was riding slowed and then hovered in place.

Her heart racing now, Cassie glanced quickly around and discovered that all of the dolphins had stopped and gathered in a tight cluster. The sentinels had ranged themselves around them, and beyond the sentinels, coming at them from two directions at once, were divers.

She'd barely registered that, her brain had scarcely had time to react by shooting adrenaline into her blood stream, when she saw what looked like a stream of water shooting toward her, and then another, and then what seemed like dozens. She stared at the strange things blankly, her mind trying to grasp what it was.

Oh god, she thought as her brain abruptly identified the missiles coming toward them! The divers were *shooting* at them!

The thought had barely formed in her mind when the sentinels—*did* something. She couldn't tell what they'd done, or how they'd done it, but it was as if huge ripples had abruptly formed in front of them washing outward, away from them—like a hand slapping the water and sending out rippling waves. The spears shot from the spear guns were caught up in the ripples and tumbled harmlessly away.

Directly behind the ripples, the sentinels pointed their tridents and blue-white bolts shot through the water. Two of the divers tumbled backwards off of the scooters. The submersibles traveled a few feet further and then began to drift toward the bottom of the sea. One blew up, exploding into a thousand pieces, the blast sending a shockwave through the water toward them. Cassie braced herself, expecting to feel the shockwave slamming into her or a piece of the submersible.

Again an invisible wall formed in front of them, moving outward to meet the wave of water and debris coming toward them. The two forces connected, then diminished, traveled onward.

Blood clouded the water. Several of the divers, apparently unconscious, were drifting toward the seabed far below them. At least two that Cassie could see had been hit by the flying debris from the exploding scooter. They writhed in the water—from pain—struggling to stem the flow of blood and maintain their positions in the water. Another volley of arrows were launched on them from the spear guns of the remaining men, who were far closer now.

The Atlanteans returned fire, countered the oncoming spears with the sound waves they'd been sending out. The advancing divers were knocked from their crafts and tumbled backwards in the water, spinning slowly, as if performing a backwards flip.

Scanning the water surrounding them anxiously, Cassie turned to look on the other side when she saw no more. Two of the sentinels were engaged in hand-to-hand combat with two of the military divers, but it took them no more than a few moments to

disarm the soldiers. A few moments later, the soldiers stilled their frenzied attempts to free themselves, glancing sharply at the Atlanteans that held them. Even from where she sat on the back of her dolphin, she could see their eyes widen with shocked surprise and knew the sentinels must have spoken to them telepathically.

For several minutes after the battle had ended, the sentinels held their positions, scanning the water around them for any sign that their might be more divers. The school of dolphins that had been designated as scouts appeared suddenly out of the gloom and swarmed the area, whipping around the cluster the sentinels had formed around them and then darting off to examine the unconscious divers.

Relaxing their stance, the sentinels moved away.

A sense of uneasiness settled in Cassie's belly. She didn't know where it came from or why she felt it. She thought it was probably no more than her fear that Raen might still, somehow, be hurt, maybe not even that. It might have been no more than the residual fear driven adrenaline rush dissipating.

Nevertheless, she watched him fearfully as he approached the soldiers, her stomach tightening a little more each time he reached one and grabbed him, hauling him upward to check him for injury and then summoning a dolphin to nudge him upward toward the surface.

Several of the men had drifted all the way to the sea floor and landed together. When Raen had scanned the area, he spied them and swam downward to examine them. As he settled, lifting one of the men, Cassie studied the other men, the possibility of a sneak attack blossoming in her mind. As she did so, her gaze was snagged by a slight movement from the man behind him. She stared at him harder, trying to decide if it was only the current shifting the unconscious form or she really had seen movement. Almost before she saw the glint of a blade in the man's hand terror squeezed her heart painfully.

"Raen!" she screamed, shoving away from the dolphin abruptly and knifing through the water as fast as she could manage.

He whirled toward her when she screamed, encountering the soldier, who'd undoubtedly been feigning unconsciousness and shot upward to attack even as Raen turned. The blade in the soldier's hand sliced into Raen's arm and then slid along his ribs, drawing blood, but he was no match for Raen—certainly not underwater. Before Cassie had managed to cover even half the distance that separated them, Raen had torn the knife from the diver's hand and subdued him.

Cassie was sobbing so hard by the time Raen reached her she could hardly see or breathe. Blinded by the tears, she'd still been struggling to reach him when he swam to meet her instead. She clutched at him frantically when he caught her by her shoulders, babbling hysterically into her face mask, trying to blink the tears away so she could see how badly hurt he was.

Cassie! Stop! I can not understand you!

Sniffing back her tears with an effort, Cassie focused on trying to *think* what she needed to know.

Hurt?

Like gods bedamned hell, but he did not cut deeply.

Cassie stared at him a moment and finally uttered a watery chuckle, surging toward him and wrapping her arms around him. He held her for a moment before he

pushed her away to study her face frowningly. *You called to me. I heard you call to me. If you had not, he would have stabbed me in the back.*

Cassie nodded, fighting another round with her tears. *The sneaking low down bastard!* she thought.

Abruptly Raen's frown vanished, and his lips curled upward in a faint smile. *I do not think you will ever cease to amaze and confound me Cassie Pendall.*

He carried her back to the dolphin then, waiting until she had gripped the strap again. Almost as soon as she'd settled, the dolphin surged forward again, gaining speed rapidly. Startled, Cassie twisted around to look back. The sentinels were quickly diminishing behind them and a fresh wave of panic washed over Cassie.

He'd sent them away? He wasn't coming with her?

She looked around her at the other riders, wondering if any of them understood what had happened. Linda, she saw, was looking around unhappily just as she was, but Cassie couldn't decide if she was unhappy because she didn't know, or because she did.

Half the sentinels, from what she could see, had stayed behind. Some of the scout dolphins circled them, darting ahead and disappearing for brief periods and then dashing back and circling them, only to dart away again.

Settling against the dolphin at last, wondering if the dolphins knew where to take them, Cassie focused on trying to convince herself she hadn't been abandoned. She wasn't having much luck with it. Perhaps thirty minutes had passed when she heard him in her mind again.

We had to get the injured men to the surface.

She twisted her head around until she saw him. Her throat closed with gratefulness. *Hurt?*

He shook his head. *It was not deep.*

She scanned him carefully for any signs of blood, but discovered she wasn't completely reassured when she didn't see any. He was moving so fast the water would be washing it away as quickly as it flowed to the surface.

I would not lie to you, Cassie. I am not hurt badly. There is no need for your concern ... although I am appreciative of it.

Cassie studied his face suspiciously and finally relaxed fractionally. She would've liked to argue the point. He might not have lied to her, but he had been known to be damned reticent with the truth. Trying to force her thoughts into words and project them to him, though, she'd discovered, was giving her a splitting headache.

Then again, it might have been all the crying.

She was going to have to make a mental note—crying while wearing a face mask was a definite no-no. Her whole face still felt sticky and miserably uncomfortable from her drying tears, and she couldn't do a damned thing about it. If she took the mask off, she'd never get the water out of it again.

She was relieved on many levels when the dolphins began to slow again, mostly because her arms felt like they were going to drop off. On one level, though, she wasn't relieved at all.

She'd had enough to keep her despair far in the back of her mind, but the moment the dolphins began to slow it surged to the forefront of her mind. Raen had led them to safety, and he was going to leave her.

And she was probably never going to see him again.

Her heart sank as the dolphin began to carry her upward, and she looked up toward the surface of the water above her and saw the hull of a ship. Instantly, the urge to cry swept over her again. She fought a round with it, and then another one and finally managed to beat it back. It wasn't going to do any good to blubber all over Raen. It was only going to make things harder for both of them.

As much as what he'd said and done at the council meeting had thrilled her, warmed her all the way to her toes, there wasn't going to be any way to get around the wall that separated them. The Atlanteans had made it clear they *loathed* humans. There was no way they'd ever let her go back, even if she wanted to—and she thought she would have if she could have just to be with Raen. She thought she would be willing to walk through fire to be with Raen.

It wasn't going to happen, though, and she just couldn't see Raen leaving his own people, whatever he'd said.

He was a soldier—and not just any soldier—the highest ranking among his people. What would he do if he had to give that up? Become a cop? Fat chance. He'd have to have an identity to do that. He'd be running from the immigration people. She couldn't imagine them *letting* him become a citizen.

He'd probably have a harder time trying to find acceptance in her country than she had in his.

It wasn't going to happen, she told herself. Best to straighten her spine and take it like a grownup, instead of whining and crying like a baby.

The dolphin slowed and began to tread water before they reached the surface.

Wait.

Cassie nodded, but Raen had already shot toward the surface. She held her breath, instantly afraid for him. He was gone long enough dread had gained a foothold in her belly before he returned. He helped her from the dolphin's back and pulled the harness off the animal. Cassie turned to pet the dolphin in appreciation, knowing the poor thing must be exhausted from carrying her weight so far. It looked at her in bright eyed interest, its permanent little dolphin smile making her smile back, even though she knew it wasn't a real smile. Bobbing its head excitedly, it curved its body in an arch and, with a flick of its tail, quickly vanished below them.

Raen's arm settled around her, pulling her snuggly against him as he kicked, sending them both shooting toward the surface. She pulled her mask off as her head broke the water. To her surprise, she saw the sun sinking on the far horizon. Dusk was already closing in around them.

Lifting a hand, she scrubbed it over her face, rubbing at the itchy marks the tight fitting mask had made in her skin.

"Hurry! Climb aboard before anybody catches sight of you!" a woman's voice called in an urgent whisper.

Cassie turned to see people milling about on the deck of the ship—at least a half a dozen people. Raen released his hold on her, and she shifted in the water to face him, simply staring into his eyes, unable to think of anything to say. The tears she'd beat back surged in to sting her eyes and nose again. "I'll miss you," she managed finally.

He lifted a hand to caress her face. "I will miss you." He swallowed hard. "Do not forsake me, lady. I will come for you. In time, I will come."

Cassie's chin wobbled in spite of every effort to still it. "How will you find me?" she asked, pretending he would, wanting to be convinced that he would try.

"I *will* find you."

Cassie nodded, unable to say anything else, and threw her arms around his neck. "I'll wait," she said around the tears clogging her throat. "I'll wait. No matter how long."

He tugged on her hair, dragging her head back for a kiss. It seared her, drowned her in regret even while she tried to imprint every moment of it in her mind, telling herself she'd never forget the way it felt. "Believe in me," he murmured when he broke the kiss.

Cassie nodded. "I do." She touched his face. "I love you."

He met her gaze for a long moment, his eyes clouding with uncertainty. She touched his lips with her fingers when he started to speak. The councilor had said they often felt 'affection'—what *they* called love—but she knew it had lost something in translation if he thought it was only affection. "Just think about what it means."

She pushed away from him then and swam toward the boat. She was the last to reach the ladder, the last to climb aboard. She turned to look for Raen hopefully when she'd reached the deck.

I do not have to think about it. I know I love you.

Shelly was wailing and snuffling loudly. Somehow it didn't seem too bad to stand like a block at the railing with tears streaming down her cheeks and dripping off her face after he'd slipped beneath the waves and vanished.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Cassie uttered a long suffering sigh and turned off the TV. Atlantis was on the news again. It wasn't as if they had anything new to say, but the media was absolutely fixated on Atlantis/Atlanteans. For months, *all* the news had been either directly or indirectly related to Atlantis. The 'alien confrontation' news was airing almost non-stop when she'd finally made it home. From sunup to sunset, just about the only thing on TV was news footage of the armed forces circling the two giant alien space crafts. There'd been views from every conceivable angle, interviews from everyone in the government—everyone in just about every government that had taken part in the 'united world forces' that had joined together to face the threat.

The Atlanteans, not surprisingly, weren't too keen on the media, but during the months of 'summit' meetings while peace was being negotiated—peace—when the Atlanteans had never wanted anything else and had been dumbfounded to find themselves in the middle of a possible war *only* because they were trying to repair their city/ship—the face of the grinning jackass from the White House had been flashing across the screen every five minutes with a clip of the Atlantean council members thrown in occasionally.

That clip—the only clip—was shown over and over and over.

“And here is the alien delegation coming out of the craft”

After the first month, they'd finally stopped referring to them as aliens and started calling them Atlanteans. Scientists had been called upon to analyze everything and speculate—because they couldn't get any real information out of the Atlanteans.

CBN, naturally, had scooped everybody. They'd managed to catch some footage of the sentinels besides getting to interview 'survivors' they'd rescued. She'd tried to be as nice and as patient as she could be, but it hadn't been easy. Fortunately, the news crew had respected their need to remain unknown and had blurred their faces and altered their voices. She strongly suspected it was either the possibility of a lawsuit, the possibility that the government and/or military might be after them if they knew exactly what had happened, or the possibility that someone else might swoop down on them and get another interview that had prompted their care in concealing their identities, but she didn't care. They'd done it, and she had managed to avoid anything more unpleasant than being battered by the news people—and, at that, only the CBN people. If they'd leaked the information, they would all have been hounded to death she was sure.

She'd gotten to watch her farewell to Raen until she'd wanted to scream.

She'd *had* to watch it when they had interviewed her—because they wanted her reaction for the cameras and, with the best will in the world, she hadn't been able to keep from being tearful.

With the exception of Carl, they hadn't managed to trick any of them into saying anything bad about the Atlanteans. Not that they'd had to trick Carl, but even the comments he *had* made had been far too mild to suit them. They'd tried *harder* to

uncover something nasty and scary about the Atlanteans and finally suggested the possibility that they were all brainwashed, or suffering from Stockholm Syndrome.

Linda had finally totally lost it and called them a bunch of assholes.

Without surprise, she discovered there was someone else living in her apartment when she got back, and someone else had her job—she'd been gone more than a month. The apartment manager hadn't disposed of all of her belongings, just most of them—the little things that cost a lot to accumulate, but didn't bring anything in resale. She'd managed to reacquire the little that was left, but by the time she'd paid everybody off she didn't have enough left in her savings to get another place.

Her mother hadn't been thrilled at having to make room for her.

She *really* hadn't been thrilled when she discovered Cassie's news.

"My *god*, Cassia Marie Pendall!" she exclaimed. "An unwed mother at thirty two! Have you lost your mind! What will the neighbors think?"

"Tell them I married an alien. I'm not unwed."

"If it isn't just like you to make a joke of it! I have to live here! I'll never be able to hold my head up again."

"Oh, for god's sake, mom! Tell them I got artificially inseminated if you think they'll like that better. I'm not staying long, anyway. I'll have enough saved up to move out again before I'm showing."

"You said that four months ago, Cassia. You already *are* showing."

"Ok, well the job isn't paying much," Cassie said placatingly. "And I have to pay the maternity fees. It'll take just a little longer than I thought it would. I've almost got enough put back." She studied her mother's disgruntled expression for a moment. "I could get it up faster if you'd just give me a little discount on the rent."

"How much of a discount?"

"Half?"

Her mother gave her a look. "I'll have to ask your father."

Cassie rolled her eyes when her mother left. As *if* they didn't both know she was the rent master! Her father would've let her stay for nothing.

Of course, he *was* retired and he and her mother didn't get much. She couldn't just leach off them when they had a limited income, but she was paying nearly as much as she'd paid when she'd had an entire apartment to herself, instead of her mother's converted sewing room. She almost couldn't *afford* to stay with them.

But beggars couldn't be choosers.

At least she hadn't had to pay first and last month's rent and a deposit.

She knew what her mother's game was. She'd emptied her nest. She wasn't about to make it look enticing enough to her chicks to make them want to move back.

As *if*! She'd tried her older brother and sister first. Mom had been at the bottom of the list, but then she hadn't managed to make it through more than a week at her brother's house. She'd stayed a grand total of three with her sister.

Sighing again, she pushed herself up off of the couch and went to her room to look at the baby clothes she'd been accumulating.

Maybe, she thought when she opened the closet and everything came tumbling out, she ought to consider cutting back on what she'd been spending on baby stuff? Shrugging, she dragged the bassinette to the middle of the floor and sat down to admire her treasures.

It was her first—was probably going to be her only. She wasn't going to stint.

Of course, it might help if she could find out the sex. Then she wouldn't have to be buying baby boy clothes *and* baby girl clothes.

She held up each piece and admired it before carefully folding it and placing it in the bassinette. She had worked her way through the boy clothes and started on the girl clothes when the doorbell rang.

"Get the door!" her father bellowed from the couch in the living room.

"You get the door!" her mother yelled back at him.

The doorbell rang again.

"Cassia! Get the door!" the two of them shouted in unison.

"Oh for god's sake!" Cassie growled, getting up from the floor and limping stiffly across the room. She'd managed to walk some of the stiffness off by the time she reached the living room. The doorbell rang again before she could get to the front door. "If it's one of those bible thumpers I'm going to tell him I'm an atheist!" Cassie yelled to her mother, knowing her mother would probably shit—She didn't worry about what God thought as long as she could fool the neighbors.

Grasping the door knob, she yanked the door open, prepared to tell whoever it was to get the hell off the porch and quit playing with the damned doorbell. She stared at the man standing on the other side of the door blankly.

He stared back at her, his expression guarded.

"Raen?" she finally gasped, a smile beginning somewhere in the region of her heart and blossoming all the way through her.

His gaze flickered over her face. "I said that I would come."

"Raen!" Cassie exclaimed joyfully and threw herself at him. Entwining her arms around his shoulders, she burrowed her face against neck, closing her eyes to savor the heaven of being in his arms again to the fullest. Without hesitation, the moment she slammed against him, his arms closed around her, as well, holding her tightly.

"I have missed you so, Cassie," he murmured gruffly against her hair.

From the vicinity of the kitchen, Cassie heard her mother. "Did you say it was raining? Dirk! Go put the car windows up!"

"I'm busy!" her father shouted back.

"Doing what?"

"Watching TV."

Cassie pulled away from Raen, smiling up at him. "Uh oh! That'll bring her out of the kitchen for certain! Come on. I want you to myself."

Grabbing his hand, she tugged him behind her. "Dad, this is my husband, Raen. We're going to my room."

He nodded and waved. "Are you trying to air condition the neighborhood? Shut the door! Were you raised in a barn?"

Raen looked startled and turned to look behind him.

"He's used to doors that close automatically," Cassie explained, rushing back to shut it. Racing around Raen again, she grabbed his hand and tugged, trying to hurry him to her room before her mother decided to come in and see what was going on. They barely made it. She'd just closed the door and locked it when her mother reached the living room.

Ignoring the quarreling, she turned and beamed at Raen and discovered he was staring down at the bassinette and the pile of clothes she hadn't finished folding. Dismay filled her. She'd forgotten about it in her rush to get Raen to herself. "Surprise!" she exclaimed when he looked up at her questioningly.

Rushing over to the bassinette, she quickly gathered the clothes off the floor, dumped them in, and pushed the baby bed out of the way. "Now! Where were we?"

A half smile played around his lips, but his expression was puzzled as he gathered her against his length again. Easing away after a moment, he looked down between them and finally brought one hand up to run it over her belly, carefully testing the roundness he found there.

"You said you'd be glad," she reminded him a little worriedly.

He lifted a hand and settled it along her cheek, studying her worried face. "And now you believe I am not?" he murmured, dipping his head to brush his lips along hers. "You do not feel my joy?"

Cassie's lips curled up. "Is *that* what that is?" she asked, bumping her pelvis against the interesting hardness she'd just discovered.

He covered her mouth then and told her things no words could say half so well. I missed you. I love you. I am hungry for you.

Joy and desire engulfed her instantly in a hazy, wonderful cloud as she felt the heat of his mouth and absorbed his essence into herself. She surged upward to meet him in glad welcome, physically, mentally, with heart and soul.

Dimly, just beyond the maelstrom swirling around and through her, she heard a sharp rap on her door and her mother's demanding voice.

"Cassia Marie Pendall! Do you have a man in there?"

Raen broke the kiss and lifted his head, staring down at her face in bemusement.

"Yes, ma'am," Cassie responded to her mother's demand absently. "My man."

"What are you doing in there with the door locked?"

"Guess," Cassie murmured, lifting her head and nuzzling his neck.

"Cassia Marie! Open the door this instant!"

Cassie released a long suffering sigh. Pulling away, she went to unlock the door, holding it to a small wedge when she'd opened it to peer out at her mother. "Yes?"

"You have a man in there?"

Cassie felt Raen move up behind her at the same moment her mother's head popped upward and her gaze riveted to something just behind her. "He's my husband," Cassie said defensively.

The comment drew her mother's attention. Her eyes narrowed. "I didn't see any papers."

Raen pried the door from her grip and opened it wider. He bowed his head respectfully. "I am Sentinel Raen det Cassia."

Her mother stared at him with a glazed look Cassie wasn't completely familiar with. After a moment, she blinked and returned her attention to Cassie. "You married a foreigner?"

Cassie snickered before she could stop herself. "Yes, ma'am," she admitted, trying to contain her amusement.

"Well," her mother said, looking him up and down and then leaning close. "He isn't an A-rab, is he?" she asked in a loud whisper, referring, Cassie knew, to the white robe.

"No, ma'am. He's an Atlantean."

Her mother gave her a sour look. "Well," her mother said grudgingly, "it's nice to meet you Mr. Uh ... Detsia. I'll just... uh ... set another plate for supper."

"We won't be out for a while, mom," Cassie warned her, closing the door and locking it again. She leaned back against the door when she'd locked it, smiling up into Raen's bemused face. Pushing away from the door after a moment, she grasped his robe and dragged it upwards. "Now, where were we?"

The bedsprings creaked, punctuating the rhythm, and the headboard, Cassie discovered, was loose, slamming against the wall in counterpoint. It was all very distracting and extremely annoying, but she managed to focus on the one thing that really mattered.

"I do not like this bed," Raen announced as they lay curled together afterward.

Cassie uttered an embarrassed chuckle. "Don't worry about it. Dad's almost as deaf as a post and usually keeps his hearing aid turned off, and mom isn't far behind him."

Raen stroked her arm. "When is our child to come?"

She tipped her head up to look at him. "February."

He frowned, and she could see he was mentally reviewing the calendar, or maybe just trying to figure out *their* calendar? "About four more months," she amended, "more or less."

He nodded, releasing a pent up breath that sounded irritated. "I should not be angry that it took so long, when I know how difficult the council can be—and the negotiations for peace took many weeks—but I can not help that I am. I have been ... worried that you would decide to set me aside for taking so long to redeem my promise."

Cassie traced a pattern on his chest with her fingertip. "I told you I'd wait, however long it took."

"But you did not believe that I would come," he said gently.

Sighing, she dropped her head to his shoulder. "How did you find me, anyway?"

He lifted her hand and kissed her palm before shifting his grip to the bracelet around her wrist. "The device contained here."

Cassie frowned. "You put a *tracking* device on me?" she asked, trying not to feel outraged. "I thought the bracelet was to bind us."

He grinned. "It is ... and more surely if it helps me to find you."

She sat up abruptly and stared down at him.

He lifted his dark brows at her.

A dozen questions flickered through her mind, but she dismissed them after a moment. "So much for romance," she muttered, disgruntled.

"You do not think this is romantic?" he asked curiously.

She thought it over and finally shrugged. "Actually, I guess it is."

He felt silent for several moments. "We are to rendezvous with the others tomorrow at dawn," he said tentatively.

Cassie tensed. She'd been dreading the moment when they got around to discussing what they would do next. "I love you. I don't want you ever to think I don't,

but I've been thinking a lot about what the council said since I realized I was pregnant," she said. "I don't want my baby to grow up where he'd be looked down on, maybe tormented by the other children because he's mine. It wouldn't be right to do that to any child. I don't want him to grow up without friends, feeling like an outsider."

His arms tightened around her. "I would not want that for our child, or for you. He will not be without friends, or be treated any differently than any other Atlantean, and nor will you. I will not tolerate it. I do not believe that will be the case, or I would not have come with the intention of taking you back, but if it should transpire that you are right, we will not stay."

She looked up at him worriedly, comforted by his assurance that he meant to be with her where ever they lived. "Promise?"

He smiled faintly. "I give you my word."

She wasn't certain she believed him—in fact, she was certain she *didn't* believe the Atlanteans were going to unbend at all, but she desperately wanted to be with Raen. "Who will we be meeting?" she asked after a moment.

"Adan has come for Linda and Aureleous for Shelly. Javik, Haya, Kelsa, Hara, and Milena have come to seek their males. The native males are amazingly fertile--for which I will be eternally grateful—and also for the three of my female sentinels who refused to abort their young. Despite all of Councilor det Ophelia's arguments—My grandsire's efforts--the council would likely not have reconsidered accepting you, Lady Linda, and Lady Shelly as Atlanteans except that they discovered they would have three off spring of humans regardless."

"Well," Cassie muttered irritably. "It's nice to know I'll be welcomed with open arms."

"You will be—mine. The councilors are elders. They do not accept change easily." He nudged her chin up so that she met his gaze. "In time, you will win their hearts, just as you captured mine."

The End.