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Bride Reborn

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# ***BRIDE REBORN***

**Solange Ayre**

### *Dedication*

To my good friend Jim, who has patiently listened to me talk about my stories and offered excellent suggestions.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## **Chapter One**

Christmas in July.

Snow Jarrett gasped in dismay. Red and gold tinsel dripped from the walls of her new residence—Room 342 at Harbor Views Nursing Home. A chubby lit-up Santa, his mouth fixed in an inane smile, blocked the window. Next to the blaring television, a two foot high Christmas tree blinked from gold to blue to pink.

“We call this the Christmas room,” the motherly aide said, maneuvering Snow’s wheelchair next to Bed Two. “Isn’t it cheerful?”

“Ho ho ho,” Snow answered, keeping a wary eye on the senior citizen across the room. Despite her red bathrobe and cotton-fluff hair, the woman in Bed One didn’t resemble Mrs. Claus as much as she did the Nutcracker.

“Let’s get you settled.” The aide nodded to her helper, a serene-faced black man, who drew back the bed covers and plumped the pillows.

“Nurse!” The old woman’s voice was surprisingly loud. “I need help!”

“Just a minute,” the female aide responded. Her helper lifted Snow out of the wheelchair and safely into bed. Snow sighed with relief.

“How old are you, honey?” the man asked. “Thirty?”

“Thirty-two,” she said, watching to make sure the female aide hung her catheter bag correctly.

The man shook his head. “Damn shame.”

She compressed her lips. She hated sympathy. Sympathy made her feel like crying. And she never cried, not if she could help it.

“Nurse! I need help!” The words erupted from the old woman every thirty seconds, like a dog that wouldn’t stop barking.

Finally the black man walked to her side. "What d'you need, Mrs. King?"

The woman pointed at Snow. "Who's that?"

"Your new roommate."

Snow turned her head to look at Mrs. King. Even that slight movement was an effort. "Hi there. I'm Snow Jarrett."

"What kind of a name is that?"

"I was born during a blizzard." *And I've been nothing but trouble ever since.*

"You're awfully young to be here." The old woman sounded disapproving, as though Snow were a kid sneaking into an R-rated movie.

"Sorry, I didn't know there were age restrictions on terminal illness." She compressed her lips, ashamed of her sarcasm. Nothing like starting off on the wrong foot with her roomie.

Lowering her voice, she asked the female aide, "Can you please pull the curtain between the beds?"

The aide returned a sympathetic look. "If I do, she'll say she can't breathe."

"Never mind." Snow sank back against the pillows.

*Primary progressive multiple sclerosis.* The disease that had seized control of her body five years ago wasn't going to let up. She'd never been lucky enough to enter remission.

*No complaining,* she reminded herself. Her body had gone to hell and her brain had white spots all over it, but at least she could still think straight.

"I'll need help to eat dinner." She forced the humiliating words out.

"We'll tell them up at the front desk." The motherly aide patted her shoulder. "Catch you later, sweetie." Both aides left the room.

Snow closed her eyes, trying to shut out the soap opera that held her roommate enthralled.

"I'll always love you, Amanda! I know you're going blind, but I'll always be here to take care of you!"

"Oh, Blake. I know you will. I adore you!"

Grimacing, Snow rewrote the lines in her head.

*I'll always love you, Snow! At least until I get tired of pushing your wheelchair around.*

*What about your wedding vows, Craig? In sickness and in health, remember?*

*I just can't do this anymore. I'm filing for divorce.*

She sure hoped reincarnation existed. Next time she was reborn, she'd put her order in early. A man who'd stay, no matter what difficulties arose. Kids, two or three of them. Maybe even four. A nice house in the 'burbs.

No use dwelling on that. She ought to think about dinner. Eating was the last pleasure left to her. She could no longer see well enough to read. A "battery-operated boyfriend" used to fulfill her desires, but six months ago she'd lost the hand and arm strength needed for a vibrator.

Strange how sexual arousal lingered, even when she could no longer satisfy it. Sometimes her dreams tormented her with images of a man's muscular body covering hers, his long cock thrusting into her, making her cry out with rapture...

Until she woke, covered with sweat, blinking back tears of frustration.

She sighed, trying not to think about sex. That part of her life was over.

Her eyes fluttered shut, the fatigue she'd been fighting for the last hour overtaking her. In spite of the noisy television she fell asleep, waking only when she heard a thump.

Her dinner tray was on her bedside table, two feet out of reach. She drew a dismayed breath, her heart sinking at the prospect of hunting for the call button.

The TV squawked, making Snow wince. A deep voice blared through the room, "People of Earth. I am Primus Taddus of the Black-Striped Pelt, a Council member of the colonization ship *Ecstasy of Generations*."

Had her roommate switched to a science fiction channel?

"Necessity has compelled us to seek your help," the voice continued. "In the fourth year of our seven-year journey, a short stay on a planetary satellite exposed us to an unknown virus. To our great sorrow, every one of our females perished."

Snow squinted at the screen, her bad eyesight barely able to make out the image of a broad-shouldered man with black hair, an odd mustache and...*pointed, furry ears?*

"We require wives. A review of the populated planets in your region revealed that Earth females are the closest genetically to our species. Thus we have decided to take one thousand human females with us."

"What a horrible program!" Mrs. King exclaimed, switching the channel. But every time she pressed the remote, the same face blinked onto the screen.

"We carefully chose fertile females under age forty, childless and not presently pair-bonded. Do not be concerned for your compatriots—they will have rich and rewarding lives in a far more enlightened society than your own.

"We regret the necessity for our actions and thank you most sincerely for your time and trouble."

As the man finished speaking, Snow lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Soft gurgles moved gently across the silent space. Oxygen? IV machines? Struggling from the clutches of sleep, Snow wrinkled her nose at the unmistakable odor of antiseptic. Was she in the hospital? Wait, hadn't she just entered Harbor Views Nursing Home?

"This one's beautiful." The masculine voice close to her bed sounded enthusiastic. "Don't you agree?"

"Lovely," another voice seconded. The rumbling deepness attracted her and the sincere approval in the man's tone sent a frisson of pleasure down her spine. "Still...this doesn't change my opinion, Delos. Big mistake."



Opening her eyes to slits, Snow glimpsed the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. His skin was a delicious creamy caramel while his eyes were an unusual golden brown. His long hair hung free, spilling over his shoulders and halfway down his chest. Despite his hair's silver shade, his face was youthful and unlined.

Emerging from the top of his head were pointed ears. She had to be dreaming. Or hallucinating.

Had she died? She'd thought angels would have wings, not furry cat ears. Gosh, maybe she'd gone to the other place.

No way. She could accept a demon with pointed ears...but not one who was breathtakingly handsome.

"Doing nothing would have been a mistake," the first voice spoke again. "Look, Ryus. Doesn't it make you feel better, seeing all these beautiful Earth females? We've got something to live for again. Our venture won't fail. And we'll have wives."

When Ryus replied, his voice went so low that Snow could barely make out his words. "*Had* a wife."

The first one – Delos? – huffed out a breath in exasperation. "We all did. But they're gone. We have to look to the future." His voice took on a caring note. "I could help you with that. Two days in Sick Bay undergoing memory diminishment treatment...you'd still remember Arooa but the pain would lessen."

"I will never forget Arooa!" Ryus' voice boomed across the white noise. Snow's eyes opened wide.

"Snow Jarrett—you're awake. That's good." The one named Delos drew near and gave her a warm smile. "I'm your doctor, Secundus Delos of the Tawny-Spotted Pelt. How are you feeling? Any pain?"

Strange. Her eyesight seemed to have improved radically. How was that possible? Her heart pounded faster with pleasure and excitement.

She saw the doctor clearly, a slender man whose brown hair contained variegated tawny spots. His handsome friend, Ryus, hung back by the door.

Their faces were odd... Small noses, rounded eyes. Whisker-like mustaches. And those catlike ears.

The memory returned like water breaking through a levee. *We require wives...*

"You're not...not human," Snow faltered.

The doctor spoke gravely. "Correct. We're from the planet Teril."

They were aliens. Overcome by trembling, she bit her lip.

Ryus stepped forward. "Don't be afraid." He was taller than the doctor, with powerful shoulders. Although he wore a gray tunic, the musculature of his broad chest was evident. He looked like a Greek statue come to life. Zeus without a beard. Frightened though she was, she couldn't look away.

Lifting a square from the end of her bed, he shook it out until it was blanket-sized and covered her with it. Although as thin as a sheet of printer paper, it immediately surrounded her with warmth. The kindly gesture eased some of her fear.

Ryus turned to Delos, glaring. "Tranquilizer?" His tone was accusing.

"In her system already," Delos said.

So an alien ship had come to Earth, made the broadcast and taken one thousand human women. Including her.

Her shoulders shook with sudden mirth.

"Still cold?" Ryus asked, frowning.

She could no longer contain hysterical laughter. "You brought *me* here to be someone's wife? Gosh, I always thought aliens with spaceships would be *intelligent*. Don't you know I'm too weak to walk? Or even feed myself?"

Delos quirked up an eyebrow. "Are you speaking of the autoimmune disease that was destroying your myelin?"

Snow's laughter stilled. If she wasn't any use to them, what would they do with her? "I'm in the last stages of multiple sclerosis."

He smiled. "Not anymore. You're cured."

\* \* \* \* \*

Arooa would have liked this Earth female. His wife had admired courage above all else.

Ryus tried to imagine being snatched from the home world, waking on a colonization ship under observation by two unfamiliar beings. A situation where his physical strength would be useless.

And yet this female had laughed at them.

Now her small face held a shocked expression. Her surprise and fright stirred him. Why was Del just standing there? Anyone could see the female needed comforting.

He drew closer then halted, the sweet scent of her body suddenly overpowering him. The Sick Bay orderlies bathed the Brides every three days. He smelled the soap they used, flavored with *hizzel* leaves. And a deeper scent as well, an enticing aroma that related to her personal essence.

Something about this female bypassed the thinking part of his brain, the part that never forgot about his dead wife. He wanted to gather the Earth woman into his arms, smooth her tumbled curls, whisper reassurance into her oddly rounded ears.

As he breathed in more of her attractive scent, an image assailed him. Snow on her knees, looking back at him with a smile. Waiting eagerly for him to mount her. Craving the deep plunge of his engorged organ.

Delos noticed his hesitation. "Was I right?" the doctor asked softly.

Ryus replied with an irritated growl. He was determined to resist the anti-erection patch Del had offered earlier that day. Why would he need such a thing? He wasn't going to let his organ's demands overcome his moral objections, like the rest of them had. He could control himself.

Stealing the Earth women was *wrong*.

He put his hand on Snow's shoulder, the only part of her body that wasn't covered. "Strive for calm, little one. No one will hurt you. Promise."

She snatched his hand and held it to her cheek. He drew a shocked breath, his groin tightening.

Tears welled in her large gray eyes. Her fingers trembled around his.

"I'm *cured*? I can't believe it! How—how did that happen?"

Ryus jerked his head toward Del. "His idea."

She stared at the doctor, whispering, "Thank you. *Thank you.*"

Ryus shifted uneasily. Not only had he been against stealing the Earth women, he'd argued in the all-ship meeting that if they *had* to do it, only healthy Brides should be brought aboard.

But Del's enthusiasm and assurances had carried the day. And he wasn't even a primus.

"It wasn't difficult." Delos smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle in his blue tunic. "We estimate our culture is two or three hundred years ahead of Earth's technology. I simply altered our cure for a similar disease to fit your human physiology."

"You can't imagine what this means to me." Her enchantingly husky voice deepened slightly. "It's an incredible gift."

"Not a gift," Ryus warned. "Payment expected."

She blinked up at him. "What—oh, you mean the wife part." She looked to Delos and back to him. "How bad could it be?"

Her gaze held him like a *patitou* caught in a snare. Sweat broke out on his forehead. What was it about her? If Del hadn't been in the room, he'd have sat on the side of her bed and stared into those lovely eyes, breathing in her wonderful scent. Listened to her speak, acquainting himself with her essence. Stroked her rounded breasts...*no*.

"You'll be fine," Delos reassured her. "No need to worry about marriage now. You have plenty of time. In fact, you're the first Bride I've awakened."

"Why me?"

"You need extra time to get stronger. Your disease is gone, but the muscular weakness remains. I've made improvements, but some of it will be up to you. That's where Ryus comes in."

Ryus tapped his right shoulder in agreement. Then realizing this human didn't understand the gesture's meaning, he said, "Physical therapist. I'll help you." He fought a rush of anticipation.

Her soft fingers squeezed his. "I look forward to working with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Snow lay with closed eyes, trying to make sense of everything the two Terilians had told her.

She ought to be angry at the mass kidnapping. She regretted the objections sure to come from the other women but she couldn't think about that now. She was *healthy*. She wasn't going to die at the nursing home. What an incredible second chance.

She would have a husband.

What were Terilian husbands like?

If the doctor and the physical therapist were representative of their kind, she had nothing to worry about. Perhaps even something to anticipate.

Shivering, she once again experienced the thrill that had zipped through her body when Ryus touched her. And how wonderful the two males had smelled. Delos' scent reminded her of chocolate but Ryus possessed the enticing aroma of fresh mint. She used to pick mint leaves in her mother's garden and bring them inside to serve with iced tea. The happy memory made her smile.

Ryus would be her physical therapist. Warmth flooded her as she thought of him helping her move her limbs and guiding her first attempts at walking.

A twinge of arousal had her hand moving to her mound. The motion was effortless. It was true – whatever the doctor had done had made her much stronger.

Would she be able to move her legs? Before she'd even completed the thought, she parted them. Exhilaration raced through her and she let out a whoop of triumph.

*Thank you, Dr. Delos.*

But it wasn't Delos who wouldn't leave her thoughts. It was Ryus.

How gentle he'd been when he covered her with the blanket. She couldn't clear his tantalizing image from her mind. And what fascinating eyes he had, so intelligent and alert...and yet sorrow lingered in his gaze.

Did he ever smile?

Would he ever smile at *her*?

She stroked her damp curls, wondering how Terilians made love. Would Ryus know how to tease her nipples until they peaked? How to rub her clit in a gentle yet stimulating way?

Moisture drenched her pussy as she slid a finger inside. She imagined Ryus in bed with her, kissing her neck, sucking her nipples.

What did he look like under that concealing tunic? How was his cock shaped? What positions did he prefer for sex?

Her hand moved faster, thrumming quickly and lightly over her clit. Her breathing quickened.

She pictured his extraordinary golden-brown eyes gazing down at her as he thrust deeply inside her body. His powerful cock filling her, pleasuring every nerve.

Weakly, her pelvis throbbed with a short, quick climax.

Okay, she'd had better.

But it felt darned wonderful after six weary months without one.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, Ryus joined Delos in the doctor's office after Second Meal. The doctor sat frowning at his computer interface.

"How is Snow today?" Ryus asked.

"Vital signs are excellent this morning. Also I'm pleased to say she masturbated after we left yesterday."

Ryus didn't understand why this plain statement of fact sent arousal surging through him. "Impressive." He strove for a detached tone. "Shows resilience."

Delos grinned. "Or it shows your pheromones were affecting her."

"You were there too," Ryus answered dryly.

"She was staring at you, not me."

"She was curious. Never seen Terilians before." If Delos was implying something more, Ryus didn't want to think about it.

Delos shoved an anti-erection patch across the desk. "Wear this today."

Remembering his nearly uncontrollable reaction when he'd met the Earth female the day before, Ryus slapped the patch on his bare shoulder without comment.

"Well, she's all yours. The equipment you ordered is in her cabin." Delos got up to leave. "Contact me with any problems."

Ryus stared at him. "Where are *you* going?"

"To check on Janis Stone."

Ryus pictured the beautiful female Delos had pointed out to him yesterday when he'd accompanied the doctor on his daily rounds among the Brides. He eyed his friend sympathetically. Del's comments verified what he'd suspected the day before.

"Fifty primuses aboard," Ryus warned him. "One's bound to claim her. Council member, probably."

"She's my patient. Nothing more."

Despite the disclaimer, the doctor was quivering with eagerness to leave. A mere two years and his deceased wife Bashia was the last thing on his mind.

Well, Bashia had certainly not been Arooa's equal. No other female was.  
Or ever would be.



## Chapter Two

Stretching, Snow basked in the heat of the overhead lamps like a cat enjoying the sunlight.

Dr. Delos had come by earlier. How kind he'd been, answering her many questions, helping her with breakfast. Still, she couldn't avoid a twinge of disappointment. The doctor had been her only visitor.

"Is Ryus busy today?" she'd asked finally.

Was there a knowing gleam in the doctor's eyes? "You'll see him soon."

Snow fingered the fabric of her tunic. Deep rose, as soft as satin, it made her feel attractive. Quite a contrast to the hospital gowns she'd lived in for the past few years.

The tunic was surprisingly sheer, revealing her nipples and the dark curls between her thighs. Dr. Delos had assured her it was customary apparel for Terilian females.

But perhaps he was part of a male conspiracy, the equivalent of naïve women being told by human men, *It's customary to wear thongs and pasties*.

She giggled at the thought. And stopped abruptly when the door slid open and Ryus walked in.

Her eyes widened. During the night, she'd decided he couldn't possibly be as handsome as she'd thought at first. But she'd been wrong. He was *more* attractive than she remembered. Arousal shivered through her, filling her pussy with warmth.

Why was she so excited by his presence? He wasn't even human!

The corners of his beautifully cut mouth lifted. At last, a smile.

"Happy today?" he asked.

"You bet. Any place would be better than—" she hesitated. She was fluent in the Terilian language, due to the computer chip Dr. Delos had installed, but she didn't seem to know a term for *nursing home*.

"You were in a perpetual-care hospital." She must have shown her surprise, for he added, "Saw your files."

"I expected to die there," Snow said. "So this is fine by me—I've always danced to a different drummer. But I'll bet the other women won't have the same reaction."

Unlike his silvery hair, his eyebrows were dark. They arched upward as he asked, "They will resist?"

"How the heck should I know? I can tell you one thing, they aren't going to be happy. How would you like to leave everything you'd ever known and your family—"

"We have," he interrupted. "All of us are colonists. We'll never return to our home world."

"But *you* left voluntarily," she shot back. "You weren't *kidnapped*."

He flinched and his brows drew together. Turning away, he opened a drawer built into the wall. She had time to study his muscular shoulders and wide back.

Why did she keep hoping he would come closer? She wanted to run her hands through his long hair, caress his shoulders, lick him...

*Lick him?* Where had that come from?

"Kidnapped," he said. "Ugly word."

"Ugly word—ugly crime."

He stalked toward her, long white cords dangling from his hands. Electrical wires? Had it all been a lie? Would she be tortured instead of wedded?

The wall monitor behind her chirped, drawing Ryus' attention. "What's wrong?" He sounded genuinely puzzled. "Pulse spiked."

She put her hand to her galloping heart. "What are those cords?"

"Electronic crutches." He frowned. "Did you think I would *hurt* you?"

"Well...I don't know you." She felt a little ashamed of her momentary terror. So far, he'd been nothing but kind.

"Yesterday. Made you a promise."

She remembered every word he'd said. "You promised no one would hurt me."

"Remember that." His deep voice vibrated with sincerity. Although she had no reason for trust, she believed him.

He came to the side of her bed and held up the cords. "Calibrated for your particular structure. Support your muscles, stimulate the nerves. Ready to walk?"

"Today?" Surely he was joking.

"Today," he answered firmly. "Straighten and part your legs." He picked up the bedcover, ready to whisk it away.

She hesitated, embarrassed by the way her tunic revealed her body. And she certainly didn't want him to see her legs. A big male like him probably wanted a statuesque Bride with long, slender legs.

"Now what's wrong?" He had every right to be impatient with her, but his voice was gentle.

"I'm...I'm not used to all this." Her cheeks heated as he pulled the cover away, exposing her weak, helpless legs.

"Here to help you." He laid one cord down and straightened the other.

How many physicians had poked and prodded her over the last five years? He was just like a doctor...with furry ears.

But it didn't do any good to tell herself that. No doctor had ever had such a wonderful scent, that subtle mint that made her want to explore every inch of his muscular body. Had she ever been so aware of a male's personal scent before?

The skirt of her tunic reached to her knees. He drew it back, raising it to just below her mound.

She noticed the hitch in his breath. Was he shocked by her figure? He must be wondering why his people had chosen a woman who was not only ill but overweight.

He laid the cord along her right leg, his fingers tickling her thighs. She shivered under his touch, a teasing ache stirring deep inside her.

The cord adhered to her inner thigh, although she felt no stickiness. A heady tingling ran up and down her muscles.

For the last three years, her legs had been like nearly inert blobs, as though they weren't even part of her. Now they felt alive again. What a fantastic sensation.

She gulped. Was it possibly true? Would she really be able to walk today?

He attached the other cord, his warm palms moving slowly down her thigh. Was this a medically necessary touch? Or a caress? Surely his breathing had quickened.

She gazed up at his face questioningly. Their eyes met. He jerked back as though her body had seared him. No doubt he was relieved to be done with her.

"Soon you'll be strong enough to attach the crutches yourself." He raked his hair back from his face. "Good thing. Trying to be professional, but...have to realize, we've been without mates for two years. Your loveliness is hard to withstand."

"My what?"

"Can't keep talking about it. Your scent alone...overwhelming." Frowning, he stepped back a few paces. "Bed!" he commanded. "Raise patient, one hundred twenty degree angle."

Slowly the bed tilted upward, bringing her to a sitting position.

Her scent overwhelmed him? As much as his scent enticed her?

"Shoes," he muttered. He found them in a drawer, flexible shoes resembling slippers. They were an exact match for her rose tunic. He drew them over her feet with infinite care, as though handling a fragile porcelain vase.

What would he be like in bed? Would he be solely concerned with his own pleasure? Or would he use that gentle touch to bring a lover to ecstasy? To bring *her* to ecstasy?

He reached for her. "Give me your hands."

She laid them in his palms. Hers looked like a child's, dwarfed by his. Gosh, he could crack open concrete with those big hands.

She sensed his strength as he helped her turn on the bed so that her legs dangled off the side. At Ryus' command, the bed lowered until her feet touched the floor.

"Good," he said. "Now stand."

Despite the warmth of the room, she shivered. "I-I don't think I can."

"Secondus Delos is an excellent doctor." He tightened his grip. "Says you're ready."

"But I haven't stood in three years!" Terror dried her mouth.

"Try. I'll help."

*Come on, girl! Don't be the "little engine that couldn't"*. In spite of the warm clasp of his hands, her arms shook.

Or worse yet, "the little engine that wouldn't even try".

Gritting her teeth, she shifted her weight to her feet. Electrical impulses chased each other up and down her legs, a sensation both strange and pleasurable. Ryus pulled gently and steadily on her arms, helping her rise.

She stood.

Her head swam and her legs trembled. But triumph exploded inside her like Fourth of July fireworks. "I did it!" she gasped.

"Knew you could." His pleased expression was the perfect counterpart to her own excitement. The eager light in his eyes thrilled her. Gosh, he looked so different when he smiled. Younger, less forbidding.

He stepped back, his long arms extended. "Come to me."

Did she remember how to walk? Once she'd been able to run and jump effortlessly. Could she ever regain those skills?

First one leg, then the other. That shift from foot to foot – that was the hard part. As complex as a dance step.

But she was doing it. She drew closer, closer...then something went wrong and she stumbled.

He caught her in his arms, steadying her against his broad chest. Delicious, solid muscle. His warm embrace felt oh-so good, as though she'd known him for years as a trusted friend.

He stepped back before she had time to revel in his closeness. "Doing great. And don't worry about falling. The crutches project a gravity field. You *can't* fall."

Reassured, she practiced walking around the small room, clinging to Ryus' arm.

Once she felt steadier, she broke the silence by asking, "How long have you been a physical therapist?"

"Since I was sixteen. Fourteen years."

He was only thirty years old? His commanding presence had made her think he was older.

"You were a teacher on Earth," he said. "Enjoy it?"

"I taught American History at Northcoast University. But what I really liked was research and writing." She sighed, thinking of her meticulously detailed nonfiction book, *Uncharted Lands: A History of the Western Reserve*. No book signings for her. By the time it had been published, she was housebound.

"Maybe that's why you were chosen, aside from your beauty," Ryus said. "The historians who were documenting our great colonization venture are dead. Council may ask you to continue their work."

She glowed inside at the idea of doing something useful again. Too much of her life on Earth had dragged by the last few years while she lay bored and helpless, praying only for death.

"I'll have to learn to read and write your language." She wondered how long it would take. She hoped the Terilians had a simple alphabet, like English, rather than thousands of characters, like Chinese.

The corners of his sensual mouth rose. "Already know it," he told her. "Brain chip gives you written language as well as speech."

She drew an excited breath. She hadn't been able to hold a book for the last eight months. "Oh, it'll be wonderful to read and study again!"

"Ship's computer contains most Terilian books of the Modern Era. Bring you a computer interface soon."

"When can I have it? Tomorrow? Today?"

He smiled, his golden eyes teasing her. "*Soon*," he repeated. "Concentrate on physical therapy first."

She kept walking. After a half hour, she felt exhausted yet exhilarated at the same time. And here she'd been ready to cock up her toes. Not by a long shot!

Ryus admired the female's persistence. Over the years, many of his clients had had to be coaxed to do their exercises, like youths who refused to study. Others started with good intentions but gave up quickly when they tired. Snow kept pushing herself.

She was not only beautiful and intelligent but brave as well.

Not that it mattered to him.

He thought of the desolate asteroid where they'd left their dead. A good portion of the males. All the young. All the wives. He'd considered staying with Arooa, slashing his throat with his claws in the Old Tradition. Only the thought of how angry she'd have been kept him from doing it.

Snow's hand trembled on his arm.

*Pay attention to your patient.* “Break,” he told her.

“I want to keep working.” She spoke through gritted teeth.

“Not asking.” He led her to the bed. She gave in and sat, panting with the effort she’d made. “Riharyazz wasn’t built in a day,” he quoted the old proverb.

“Where...is...that?” She wiped her forehead.

“Eastern hemisphere of Teril.” She was too exhausted to converse, so he kept talking. “Ancient city built in the tallest trees on the planet. *Big* trees. Trunk circumferences of over a mile. Branches twice as wide as this room.”

“I wish I could see it,” she said wistfully.

He lowered his hand to her shoulder. “Lie down. Time for a massage.”

She looked startled but pleased. “Oh! That’s very kind of you.”

“Therapy. Another way to stimulate your muscles.” He helped her lift her legs onto the bed, touched by the trusting look she gave him.

“Should I roll over?”

“Stay like that.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. It would have been easier to massage her legs without looking at the pretty nipples peeping coyly through her tunic.

On the other hand, massaging her sensuously curved buttocks would have reminded him of mating. Was there anything better than the heady aroma of an aroused female, quivering as she waited to be mounted?

Why wasn’t that patch working? He hadn’t expected Del’s medicine to be so ineffective.

Clearly the patch had been overcome by this Earth female’s incredibly powerful pheromones.

Her soft white thighs were proving to be a wickedly pleasurable temptation. For the last two years, his clients had been males with arm or leg strains from exercising or



mock-fighting. Massaging a female again was a pleasant contrast. A female smelled so much better, felt so much better. Her voice pleased his ears...

"Tell me more about Riharyazz," she said. "Have you been there?"

"Visited with my wife. The first time we married." He'd made his way down to her dimpled knee. She uttered a sound of pleasure as he worked the muscles.

*Like a female's passionate cry when a male enters her.*

"What do you mean, the first time you married?" she asked.

He frowned, trying to remember what he'd read about Earthian customs. "That's right, your people vow to stay together for life. Terilians don't. Couples without young participate every five years in the Spring Running. Choose another mate, or choose each other again. Arooa and I chose each other three times."

He massaged the pale flesh of her calves then moved down to her shapely ankles. Gently he removed her shoes. A mistake, for he immediately found himself captivated by her delicate pink toes.

The room was suddenly much too warm. Would she notice he was sweating? If she did, hopefully she would think it was due to his physical efforts rather than the arousal threatening to pull him under.

He had to think of a neutral topic. Nothing about marriage...or mating...

"What's the Spring Running?" she asked.

A sudden vision unfolded of Snow healthy enough to run, fleeing from him, dodging in between trees yet watching to make sure he didn't lose sight of her—the way females always did at the Running. And the glorious moment when he'd catch her, bury his face in her black curls and lick the tender back of her neck. She'd spread her legs, her labia swollen and slick, wanton and eager as he thrust into her from behind.

"Mating ritual." His organ rose, straining against his tights. "Talk about something else."

Her expression revealed surprise at his abrupt tone. "I've been wondering about the illness," she said. "Was it only the wives who became sick?"

The topic dampened his desire. He was able to massage her ankles and push the intrusive thoughts aside.

"Everyone was sick. Three hundred and four adult males died. Females and young most susceptible. Del has theories...ask him."

She drew in a shocked breath. "Young? You mean —"

"All offspring died." He and Arooa hadn't been able to have young but he'd been fond of Arooa's sister's offspring, particularly little Otirus. He closed his eyes, shutting out the image of the young male's mischievous face.

"It's a wonder you people were able to go on." Her voice trembled as though she actually understood what they'd endured. Who would have thought an Earth woman would have so much compassion for the people who had stolen her away?

He wanted to pull her close and thank her for her kindness. "Some of us...some of us wanted to die...with the others."

"I can imagine." She threaded her fingers together. "When my husband left me—at first I didn't know how I'd go on. My friends rallied around to help me through. It's hard to think what would have happened if all of us had lost spouses at the same time."

"Husband left you? Why?" Had the human suffered from a brain illness? Why would any male leave such an enticing female?

"I don't think he ever truly loved me." Her voice dropped low, but not so low that he couldn't hear the pain in it. "He turned to me after his long-time girlfriend broke up with him. I was always second best for him."

His heart overturned. What a thoughtless, dishonorable person the Earthian male must have been.

He laid her foot down. The urgent need to release his claws was overpowering. "Wish he was here. Needs a lesson in being a good husband." His claws shot forward,

pearly gray, two inches long, sharp enough to score metal. He craved a word of admiration on their length and lethal appearance.

She gasped. "What are those? *Claws*?" Her wide eyes and quivering chin revealed her fright.

She was from Earth. Naturally she didn't understand yet about the Weapons of Valor. He forced himself to retract them.

"You'll have claws too." He spoke in his most reassuring tone. "You're growing them as part of the Transition. You'll also gain an enhanced sense of smell, enhanced hearing and greater strength."

"I've noticed the enhanced sense of smell." She held her hands up in front of her face, looking at her feeble Earthian fingernails. "But *claws*? I'm not sure I want them."

"*Must* have claws." How could anyone reject this great gift? "Only criminals lack them."

"What happens to them?"

"Surgical removal. Partly punishment, partly so they can't hurt anyone."

A shudder passed through her. "There's so much to get used to here." She compressed her lips, then went on, "But it's worth it. Everything's worth it to get my strength and mobility back. It's like being reborn."

"Glad you feel that way." How he wished to be reborn, without the grief that was like a claw embedded in his heart.

The door chimed. A moment later an orderly entered with a tray. "Secondus Delos says I'm to stay and help the female eat Third Meal."

Snow raised herself on her elbows, her gaze devouring the handsome young male. Not surprising, since he was only the third Terilian she'd seen. Yet Ryus hated her interest.

The orderly's gaze lingered on Snow's breasts.

"Take good care of this female," Ryus said. "Don't do anything to frighten her." He added a quick growl for emphasis.

The orderly backed away, intimidated. "Yes, Primus." The bowls he carried clattered against the tray.

"More food?" Snow raised her brows. "I'll gain weight if I keep eating like this."

"Hope so." Ryus caught his breath. Her beauty would be incredibly enhanced by more padding on her breasts and hips.

She gave him a wondering look. "Men back home thought I was too heavy."

"Earthian culture showed many signs of serious dysfunction." He went to the door. "Nap after eating—customary following Third Meal."

"Wait! Will I see you later?"

The longing in her voice made his heart clench. "Tomorrow. Promise."

\* \* \* \* \*

Snow spent the next day eagerly awaiting Ryus' arrival. She had no doubt he would return. Somehow she felt certain that he always kept his word.

He entered her cabin after Fourth Meal, which had been a delicious spicy drink accompanied by crunchy sticks. After greeting her, Ryus held up a small electronic screen. "Del says, time to test your orgasmic strength."

"*What?* Why do you need to know that?"

"For the medical records," he replied evasively.

"You're going to test me with *that*?" Snow touched the edge of the square device. It didn't look like any vibrator she'd ever seen.

"Machine records the measurement. Also can provide electronic nerve stimulation by remote control—one method." He gave her an uneasy look. "Second method—autostimulation."

"Masturbation, you mean? While you *watch*?" She frowned at him. "No way! What are my other options?"

"Manual stimulation by a partner."

Now this was getting interesting. "By you?"

He hesitated. "If that's your preferred method."

"Are you saying you'll give me an orgasm and take no pleasure for yourself?"

"Just more physical therapy. Taking medication to control sexual urges."

Snow sat back, reflecting on his offer. She certainly didn't like the first two choices. Receiving an orgasm by remote control would make her feel like a puppet. And masturbation was a private matter.

Besides, how bad could it be, to have this incredibly sexy male touching her, caressing her, making her come?

"All right, manual stimulation it is," she said. As he pulled a stool next to the bed, she added, "Won't you lie down with me?"

He froze. "Is that a requirement?"

"If you want me to cooperate, that's part of the deal." She moved over on the bed, leaving him room to join her. "And take your clothes off."

His brows came together. "Why?"

She huffed with exasperation. "Because if we're going to do something sexual, we're both getting naked. Don't Terilians undress when they have sex?"

"Usually. Unless the need is urgent."

Urgent...now there was an enticing thought. She imagined him discarding his businesslike manner, coming to her and jerking aside her tunic with overwhelming desire. Her hips shifted restlessly.

Doubt flitted over his expression. Then resignation. Finally he made an adjustment to the machine he held and laid it on the stool.

Grasping his tunic, he lifted it over his head.

She would be the first Earth woman to see a Terilian naked. Anticipation rose in her, gale force.

His chest was gorgeous. Devoid of hair, it was broad and rippling with well-defined musculature. She wanted to run her palms over his skin, kiss his dark nipples, lick every inch of him.

"Turn around," she commanded.

He obeyed. His long hair was pulled back into a ponytail. There was something odd about his back...

"Move your hair aside," she said. With a brush of his hand, he shifted his ponytail to the front, revealing a three-inch swath of silver hair running down his back and into his tights. Or perhaps it was more like fur, since it looked soft and velvety. How would it feel if she stroked it?

"Do all of you have hair on your backs?" she asked.

"We all have pelts, yes."

Her gaze dropped to his muscular buttocks, barely concealed by his clinging gray tights. "Remove your tights too," she said, keeping her tone relentless.

"Unnecessary," he protested.

"If I'm going to marry here on the ship, I need to see what you males look like." After all, wasn't this crucial? What if their alien anatomy wasn't a good fit with human anatomy?

Surely they'd checked that out beforehand.

Ryus hooked his hands into the waistband of his tights. Suppose Terilians had pencil-thin penises? She gulped in dismay.

He pulled his tights down.

Jackpot!

His cock was beautiful. The perfect size, long enough to be exciting to view, thick enough that her small hand wouldn't quite close around it. The head was oddly shaped, more like a long cylinder than a human male's mushroom shape.

She wondered what his organ would look like erect. Did Terilian males even *get* erections, like humans? How would he respond if she cradled his cock in her palm, slowly stroked him from the head all the way to his heavy testicles?

She looked up into his golden eyes and found him watching her with amusement. "Curiosity satisfied?" he asked.

*Satisfied? I won't be satisfied until you're thrusting inside me.*

Shocked at the wanton thought, she looked away. *Manual stimulation* was what he'd promised to provide. Nothing more.

"Help me with my clothing." She raised her arms.

Carefully he pulled her tunic over her head. His hands brushed against her full breasts. She quivered and her nipples peaked instantly. How she longed for a firmer, deliberate touch.

His eyes lingered on her naked breasts. She sat back, shaken by the way his hungry gaze affected her.

He turned his head. "Forgive me," he muttered.

"Why do you say that?" After all, she was the one who'd chosen door number three.

"Trying to keep this impersonal."

"Don't." She patted the place beside her. "Come sit with me."

He eased onto the bed. This close, his scent flooded her senses. She caught her breath. After years of nothing but impersonal caregiving from nurses and aides, she was starved for a sexual touch. She couldn't wait for him to caress her.

Would he kiss her? She imagined the wet stroke of his tongue against hers, the feel of his hands pulling her close against his chest.

She wanted those hands on her breasts again.

They looked at each other for a long moment. His golden brown eyes were beautiful. Their elongated pupils had seemed strange at first, but she was already growing used to them.

Putting his hand on her upper thigh, he said, "Open your legs."

His light touch entranced her, made her want to lie back and do exactly as he'd said. But it wouldn't be enough. She had to be strong.

She forced herself to push his fingers aside. "I don't know what your females were like, but Earth women need romance. You want me to have an orgasm? Then act like a lover, not a scientist."

His brows drew down angrily. Then his expression shifted to consternation. "Not easy for me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" When he didn't answer, she went on, "I thought this whole kidnapping caper was because you Terilians need wives."

He met her gaze squarely. "Still feel married."

She fell silent, struck by his devotion. What human man loved his wife so deeply that he still felt married, two years after her death?

"Does that mean you're *not* going to marry an Earth woman?" The possibility troubled her.

He grimaced. "Told the Council they were immoral to steal you humans. Should I participate in something I believe is wrong?"

"Maybe not," she answered reluctantly. Her heart sank. Somehow she'd been thinking maybe he would marry *her*. "But it's moot now. We're here. So maybe you *should* participate."

He didn't reply but his expression showed his inner turmoil.

"Do you have any other options?" she asked.



“Wait until we get to the new planet. Might be a female there for me. Someone who’s lost her husband to death.” He hesitated. “Del says another year without mating will kill us. Our bodies need release. Only way is by mating. Males can’t climax through masturbation.”

The idea was shocking—a whole world of males who *couldn’t jack off*.

“So you don’t have a choice,” she said. “This goes beyond a moral principle. It’s life or death for you.”

“That’s what Del *says*. Think he’s wrong. Think I can handle it.”

A typical male, believing a doctor’s pronouncement didn’t apply to *him*. She wanted to yell at him, to demand he listen to what the doctor told him.

But there were some males who couldn’t be told a darn thing. Her ex-husband came to mind. Ryus was probably even more stubborn. She restrained herself from demanding, *Are you nuts?*

A softer approach was necessary. “Well,” she said lightly, “even if you don’t want to marry again, *I* certainly plan on it. So I’d appreciate it if you’d show me what to expect from a Terilian husband.” She instructed the bed to lower the back and settled herself into a comfortable position.

“All right.” He laced his fingers together and flexed them, his expression revealing some doubt. “We’ll start with your legs.”

Her legs? Well, maybe it helped if he told himself it was therapy. Remembering how wonderful his massage had felt yesterday, she had no objections.

Turning, he lay on his side facing her, his head near her feet. He rubbed her ankles, his strong fingers making small circles. “Ankles are two of the five hundred and forty-four pleasure points on the female body—at least for Terilians. Like it?”

Her breath expelled on a sigh. “*Very much.*” Two down, five hundred and forty-two more pleasure points to go. She couldn’t wait.

She'd never realized her ankles were erogenous zones. His stroking and rubbing swiftly built heat inside her.

Cradling her foot in one hand, he brought her toes to his mouth. "Tempted to do this earlier." He took her big toe into his mouth and sucked.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, taken by surprise. A throbbing ache built in her pussy as he laved and sucked her toes. His mouth was warm and demanding, his tongue slightly rough, like sand on the beach. When it teased between her toes, pleasure shuddered up and down her spine. She moaned.

Shifting on the bed, he licked her knee, his tongue caressing her as though he'd never tasted anything so delicious. She quivered, overwhelmed by sensation as his mouth explored her kneecap and his tongue darted into the crevice behind her knee.

"That feels wonderful," she gasped. Already her pussy was swollen and wet. Urgency built through every limb, centering in her pelvis.

His hand settled over her mound, his fingers brushing through her tight curls. "Yes, there," she pleaded, raising her legs and parting them.

She scented the hot, sweet aroma of her own arousal. Did he notice as well? He must have, for he hesitated a moment. His breathing grew labored as his fingers gently traced her nether lips.

She'd forgotten how wonderful it felt to have a masculine hand on her, big fingers caressing, drawing forth a delicious liquid heat.

"Very responsive," he said, a note of surprise in his voice.

"Why not?" The words emerged on a gasp. It was difficult to talk when his touch gave her such extreme pleasure.

"Because you're human, I'm Terilian." He ran his tongue over his lips.

"Even so, it seems like you know how to touch a woman."

He smiled. As if to prove the truth of her words, he stroked upward, his hand brushing against her clit. Sensation rushed through her. A cry of mingled satisfaction and anticipation broke from her throat, a wordless, primitive sound.

Had she shocked him? But his smile widened. He caressed her again, another long stroke ending with more wonderful titillation of her clit. She arched her hips, trying to reach increased contact, a deeper touch.

He picked up the pace. The pleasure intensified in great ragged jolts, oscillating out of control. She rubbed against his hand, moaning and panting. "Please, Ryus." Words tumbled from her. "More—yes—touch me! Yes! Like that! Oh, please, *more*."

"Like this?" The excitement in his voice drove her arousal higher. His finger slid inside her tight channel, eased by her wetness. She arched her back, holding her breath. An orgasm rippled through her.

Her eyes fluttered closed as she reveled in the quivers chasing each other through her pussy.

Sighing, he dropped onto his back.

She opened her eyes, looking at him with gratitude. His forehead was beaded with sweat. He raised his fingers to his face, inhaling her scent like a connoisseur noting the bouquet of a fine wine.

Her earlier question was answered—yes, Terilians got erections. Large ones, judging by Ryus. His cock lay dark and engorged against his flat stomach. She gazed hungrily at it, wondering what he would do if she stroked him.

Reaching out, she caressed the length of his cock, from its thick base all the way up to the cylindrical head. His smooth skin was hot beneath her palm.

He gasped. His face twisted, his expression agonized. For a moment she was afraid she'd hurt him.

He rose out of bed in one fluid motion. Snatching his tunic, he yanked it over his head.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Was there some taboo against females touching males? Why hadn't he warned her?

"Nothing's wrong." He pulled on his tights. "Del will talk to you about your readings."

"My *readings*! Is that all you care about?"

He stalked to the door, the screen-device in his hand, his face a stern mask.

Snow sank back on the bed, feeling like she'd just been with a one-night stand who was never going to call her.

## Chapter Three

Ryus didn't take the elevator to the fourteenth floor. Instead he worked off some of his turmoil by jumping from platform to platform. Sixteen jumps brought him from the Tenth Level—Sick Bay—to the Fourteenth—Agriculture. His favorite part of the ship.

He stood for several minutes breathing deeply, drinking in the aromas of plants and soil and fresh water. In the distance, giant sprinklers walked among the crops, watering the plants that were a major food source for everyone on the ship.

His lack of control dismayed him. A few minutes touching the Earth female and he'd been ready to mate with her. Ready? No, eager. *Desperate*. He'd craved her the way a drowning person craved air.

Sickened by his disloyalty to his wife, he headed for the park. He stopped long enough to pick a few flowering *ritilla*, then headed toward the cave he and Arooa had found, early in the voyage.

The *patitou* was asleep in her cage. As he drew near, she woke and began to run in circles. "Ryus!" she squeaked. "Ryus! Food? Play?"

He couldn't help smiling at the tiny furball's antics. He lifted the cage door and put Popo on his shoulder. She snuggled against his neck, her skinny tail tickling the side of his face. Stroking her round, velvety ears, he fed her a *ritilla*.

With Arooa, he'd always pretended to dislike the little creature. "It's useless," he'd scoff. "And it stinks."

"She's loving and affectionate." Arooa had always defended Popo. She'd had the tiny pet since she was three years old and wasn't about to leave Teril without her. Since pets weren't allowed on the *Ecstasy of Generations*, it had taken a hefty bribe to the purser to get Popo aboard and a long search until Arooa had found this hiding place.

He sank down on the cold floor of the cave, letting the *patitou* scurry up and down his arm.

Suddenly she stopped and looked up at him, her beady red eyes glittering. "Rooa?" she asked. "Rooa?"

He drew in a shaky breath. "Maybe next time." *Patitous* didn't understand about death.

Neither did he.

How could he have lain with another female and touched her the way he used to touch his wife? He'd enjoyed every second too. Satisfaction had filled him when Snow cried out with passion, when his hands brought her to climax.

And his own body had responded to her. In spite of Del's drugs, in spite of the fact that she was an alien, a primitive woman from Earth...

A beautiful, enticing woman from Earth. A female he wanted to take as his mate.

"Belmarra!"

"Yes, Primus Ryus." The computer's disembodied voice echoed through the cave.

"Run Arooa program."

A moment passed. Sweet agony swept through him. He closed his eyes.

"Ryus?" Arooa's own soft voice, replicated by the program.

"Miss you," he whispered.

"We'll be together again someday," the answer came. "In the land of the Great Fur-Mother."

He didn't believe in the Old Religion but it had comforted Arooa in her last hours. "Hard to go on without you," he said.

"You must."

All words she had spoken during her life. Oh, he knew very well it was just the computer program rearranging her sentences to craft replies. Yet he could almost believe she was there.

He should be strong enough not to need this.

He wasn't.

"Your little Popo is healthy."

"That's good. She's my favorite *little* creature." Her merry giggle. "And you're my favorite *big* creature, Ry."

"Glad I'm a creature," he said, as always.

"You're the handsomest creature on the ship. I'm surprised the other wives can keep their hands off you."

He remembered the look she used to give him. The look that said, *Take me in your arms. Thrust into me until I shriek with pleasure.* A signal for him to clasp her in his arms and jump to the bed.

"Working with a new patient now. May have to do things that...that I wouldn't do if you were still here."

Did her answer take a little longer than usual? "It's wonderful how you care about your patients. I love you for that."

He sighed. "Belmarra, close Arooa program." Nothing about it was satisfying. Not any longer. Just a voice lacking scent, lacking a warm body or a gentle touch.

Nothing was the same since he'd met Snow.

He would never open the Arooa program again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bad news often arrived with breakfast, in Snow's estimation. That's when doctors made their rounds. That's when they said things like, *primary progressive multiple sclerosis. Prognosis is not good.*

Doctor Delos was no exception. His expression betrayed that she wouldn't like what he had to say. Ryus, coming in behind him, looked somber as well. But then, he usually did.

Delos pulled up a stool beside the bed. "From the information I've uplinked from your planet, I understand that Earthian sexuality is somewhat different from Terilian sexuality. Human males can masturbate. They can also mate and ejaculate even when the female fails to climax." He raised his eyebrows as though the concept surprised him. "A Terilian male can ejaculate *only* when his mate has a powerful orgasm."

"That's interesting," Snow said, trying to speak politely, but her mind was whirling. What an incentive for a male to be a great lover.

Delos frowned.

Bad news ahead. She braced herself.

"Currently your orgasmic contractions aren't strong enough to make a Terilian male ejaculate," the doctor said.

"So what are you going to do? Open an airlock and push me out?"

Delos looked shocked. "That would kill you!"

"If I can't be a Bride, what use am I to you people?"

"You *will* be a Bride." Delos patted her knee. "It's just like the walking you've been doing. You need physical therapy to build your muscles...*all* your muscles." He looked at Ryus. "Will you help Snow? She requires more intensive therapy."

Ryus' honey golden eyes battled Delos' for a long moment. Then he turned to Snow. Although he said nothing, she felt as though he were examining every part of her—her face, her breasts, her legs—maybe even the thoughts in her head.

She gazed back at him imploringly. *Please. Won't you be the one to help me?*

At last he tapped his shoulder with one hand. She was relieved—he'd agreed.

Delos smiled with satisfaction. "In my professional opinion, we need to address the situation with a two-part solution. Part one, exercise of the vaginal muscles. Ry, you're familiar with several methods for that. Part two, orgasms. Snow, you must have several orgasms per day. Powerful ones, which means you need to practice delayed gratification."



Orgasms—sounded good. Powerful orgasms? *Great.*

“I thought you were a doctor, not a sex therapist,” she said, keeping her tone light.

He looked at her, puzzled. “How can the two be separated? Your physical health and sexual health are both part of your essence, connected on every level.”

Ryus opened the door. “Need some equipment,” he explained. “Back soon.”

When the door slid shut, Delos sighed. “That’s a relief. I was afraid he wouldn’t agree to keep working with you.”

She blinked, hurt at the idea that Ryus would reject her. Trying to keep her voice cool, she asked, “Is he your only physical therapist?”

“I have others on staff. But you’re good for him. I never thought he’d respond to a Bride. But he certainly responds to you.”

A thrilling assessment. Then she recalled how Ryus had left yesterday without a word. “Do you really think so?” she asked wistfully.

The doctor’s mouth quirked in a gentle smile. “I gave him a little test today. Now mind you, I’m certain we can rehabilitate you. But I told Ry this morning that I’d made a mistake, bringing you here.” With a chuckle, the doctor added, “He was furious—challenged me to a fight. I had to apologize profusely.”

Snow glowed, pleased to think Ryus cared that much about her. “Does he challenge people often?”

“Rarely. No one wants to fight him after what happened with Durin—he knows that.” He paused expectantly.

She played along. “Tell me what happened.”

“Durin used to be notorious for...bothering...other males’ wives. There were complaints, but his brother is on the Council, so no one took action.”

“Are they very important—the Council members?”

“The Council runs the ship. They hold the power of life and death over all of us.”

“So where does Ryus come in?” she asked.

"He challenged Durin. No one else dared to fight a big primus like Durin, with such important connections."

"What happened?"

"The Council declared the battle a draw before they killed each other." The doctor smiled. "But afterward, Durin changed his ways. He doesn't dare face Ry again."

The door beeped and a moment later Ryus entered, carrying a satchel. Snow's gaze lingered on his muscular form. Had he challenged Durin due to disinterested justice? Or had Durin hit on Ryus' wife?

Either way, she admired Ryus' bravery.

Delos rose. "I'm confident you'll do fine," he said, patting her shoulder.

Once the doctor was gone, Ryus gave her the crutches and watched while she attached them. She marveled at how much easier it was today to move and stretch her legs.

"Follow previous pattern," he told her, helping her out of bed. "Walking, then sexual therapy."

Something to look forward to. "I feel stronger today," she said, taking several steps.

"Del expects five percent improvement per day in nerve and muscle tone."

"I guess I've come to the right place." She inhaled deeply, his wonderful scent teasing and arousing her. Much though she was enjoying using her legs, she couldn't wait to lie down and experience his caresses again.

"So tell me about yesterday," she said. "Why did you get upset when I touched you? Are females forbidden to touch males? Tell me the rules."

He gave her a quick, startled glance. "Males enjoy being touched by their females. That was...personal reaction only. Didn't expect to become sexually aroused." He indicated the round, flat disk on the upper portion of his arm. "Anti-erection drug didn't work. Made Del increase the dosage today."

Her allure had overpowered the drug? Good to know.

"Not surprising," he went on. "Most males will think of mating when they look at you."

Now this was a topic she could get into. "Really? What features do Terilian males consider attractive?"

"Rounded hips and buttocks," he answered. "Yours are beautiful. Enticing beyond words. Your black hair is lovely too. Rare with our females. Curls are unknown. Very exotic."

She'd never expected to be a femme fatale. "Since you're on a bigger dose of medication today, maybe you can tell me about the Spring Running? I'm curious."

He hesitated. "People don't talk about it. Religious overtones. Sects have differing beliefs."

"How will I learn if you won't tell me?"

He looked into her face for a long moment. Judging her sincerity? She gazed back at him earnestly.

"All right," he said. "The Spring Running is always held outdoors. Park, jungle, forest. Females enter first, conceal themselves. Sometime later, the quartus and tertius-ranked males are admitted. Hunt for a female and mate. None of those ranks on this ship, though."

"Why not?"

"Only primuses and secunduses were accepted on this venture. Not easy to gain admission. Tests, evaluations, interviews needed to qualify. And high rank."

Snow nodded thoughtfully. So the *crème de la crème* of their society made up the colonization venture. And a huge number of them—some males, all the wives and children—had been lost to the illness. Such a terrible waste.

"For the upcoming Running, secundus males will be admitted first, then the primuses. A higher-ranked male can take a female away from a lower-ranked male."

Snow thought through all the ramifications of what he'd said. "So a desirable female might mate more than once?"

"Ordinarily couples are faithful. But at the Running...it's an in-between time. Females need to mate constantly until they're satisfied." He added after a moment, "Males too."

Just hearing him talk about it made arousal rush along every nerve.

She thought about mating with two or three different males in the space of an afternoon. While the idea had its exciting aspects, she decided she'd rather wait for Ryus. She couldn't imagine being so fascinated with another male's looks or scent.

After several treks up and down the room, her legs began to tremble. Ryus led her to the bed. "Ready for sexual therapy?"

She nodded eagerly. "Will you get undressed again?"

"If it really matters to you."

"You want me to get aroused, don't you? I like seeing your body."

He didn't answer, but she was able to read his expressions now. Surprisingly, he looked pleased.

While he took his clothes off, she tried to lift her tunic over her head. The struggle made her gasp for breath but she finally succeeded.

He went to the satchel he'd brought and opened it. He brought out the familiar screen-device that measured the strength of her orgasm, laying it on the bedside table.

"Have some things to help you do your vaginal exercises," he said. "Also some other items Terilians enjoy. Feeling adventurous?"

Leather and whips? Her palms grew damp. "Can I refuse if I don't like it?"

"Should know the answer to that already." He showed her the little tube he'd taken out of the satchel. "Start with this. I'll put a little on you, lick it off."

Quivering with anticipation, she lay back against the mattress. He joined her, shaking back his beautiful silver hair. He lay on his side facing her and looked into her eyes. The fiery eagerness in his gaze held her silent.

Opening the tube's cap, he wafted it under her nose. The luscious scent was reminiscent of strawberries.

He squeezed a dollop of it into his palm and rubbed his hands together. Then slowly he moved his palms over her shoulders. The cream heated his fingers to the temperature of a hot bath. She trembled with delight as he smoothed his palms over her shoulder blades, gently tracing bone beneath skin. His hands moved in unison, stroking her collarbone, then downward to caress the sensitive skin framing her breasts.

She held her breath, hoping he would move lower.

He added more cream to his palms, then grasped a breast in each hand. His palms slid against her sensitive flesh, the heat and pressure making her nipples pucker.

Pleasure tendriled down the length of her body, blooming in her pussy. He varied his touch, teasing her by barely brushing his fingertips against each nipple. She lifted her hips, wanting to sob with frustration. She needed more. A harder touch.

Lowering his head, he stroked her right nipple with the tip of his slightly rough tongue. Moisture flooded her pussy.

Sensation danced along her nerves as he licked all around her areola, the strokes of his tongue growing longer, more impassioned. His eyes shut as he moved to her other breast, sucking, licking.

He wanted her. His absorbed expression and his erect cock told her so.

He sucked hard on her left nipple, making her moan with delight. Why didn't he touch her pussy, the way he had yesterday? If she couldn't have his cock then she wanted his fingers stroking her, plunging inside her until she exploded into a powerful climax.

Sensing Snow was close to an orgasm, Ryus drew back.

She whimpered in frustration. "Why did you stop?"

"Del said delayed gratification," he reminded her.

The stormy look in her gray eyes made him think of thunderclouds over the lakelands of Teril. "He isn't here."

That made him smile. "Still have to follow his orders."

"He ordered orgasms," she protested.

He ran his palm over her stomach and down to the curly pelt over her mound, watching as she quivered under his touch. "If you climax too quickly and lightly, your chosen partner won't ejaculate. Trouble is, you're *too* responsive."

She sighed. "I think it's because I went so long without an orgasm after I became too ill to masturbate."

Had he heard correctly? "Your doctor on Earth didn't prescribe sex therapy?"

She looked surprised at the question. "On Earth, doctors rarely think about a patient's sexual health. Until I came aboard this ship, I hadn't had an orgasm for six months."

His pity deepened. Celibacy was difficult enough for males but for a sensual female like Snow, it must have been torture. Now he understood why she craved his caresses. Not because he was special to her. This was pure sexual hunger in a female who'd been starved of life-affirming intimacy.

"Need to exercise your vaginal muscles," he said.

"Will you use your fingers?" she asked eagerly.

"Not this time." Leaning over the side of the bed, he dug through his satchel and found a penile simulator with feedback remote.

Her pink tongue moved over her lips. What if she licked his organ with that quick, sensual motion? Blood rushed downward into his already erect penis, inflaming him further.

He clenched his free hand and released his claws slightly, hoping the pain biting into his palms would counteract his unwanted arousal.

He showed her the simulator. She brightened. "Is that a sex toy?"

"Medical instrument," he said repressively.

"Oh, really? And where could *that* possibly go?" Sarcasm filled her voice. "Let me guess. My armpit?"

He tried to keep his tone objective. "Fits in your vagina. You'll clench your muscles around it." He showed her the feedback remote. "Every time you press hard enough, this light will come on." He stroked her thigh. "Raise your legs and I'll insert it."

Excitement rushed through him. He was going to see her lovely vagina again, the glistening pink lips surrounded by her springy black pelt. The hot, wet tunnel that had contracted so enticingly around his finger the day before.

His engorged penis pushed against his tights. He wanted to mate with her, to feel her clenching around his organ. He glanced down at the simulator with frank envy.

"You'll insert it? That sounds painful." She shifted on the bed and raised her knees. "Maybe you should make sure I'm wet enough to accept it."

The scent of her sweet arousal short-circuited his brain. The simulator was lubricated but he didn't even think of telling her that. Instead he stroked her thighs, ending each caress by brushing his fingers along her labia. Her breathing grew rapid.

"I love it when you touch me," she whispered.

He ached to lavish each part of her lovely body with praise, murmur of the joy he felt when he was with her, tell her how much he cared for her...

*No. She's my patient. That's all.*

Wet enough? Her cream flowed at his touch. What would she do if he lowered his head and lapped it with his tongue?

Why couldn't he remain professional with this female?

Holding the simulator at the prescribed angle, he gently inserted the head.

"Mmmm, yes!" Her hips rose. "That's *nice*. Push it in deeper."

He inserted it halfway. Her joyful cry stimulated him even more. Would she cry out like that when he filled her with his penis? When he thrust into her while her tight tunnel surrounded his entire length?

"More," she pleaded. The scent of her arousal heightened. Throwing back her head, she moaned.

The rest of it slid in easily. She gasped. "Move it up and down."

"It's for *exercise*," he reminded her. "Make the light come on ten times."

"Then do I get a reward?"

He smiled at the way she bargained. "Agreed."

She nestled her hand into his. The trusting gesture flew straight to his heart. For a moment he was tempted to rub his cheek against hers and mark her with his scent.

But that was a caress between lovers.

She drew a breath. The light on the remote came on. Smiling, he held it up for her to see.

She expelled her breath. "I did it!"

"Well done. Nine more."

Her lovely face determined, she made the light flash five more times. He couldn't help imagining the glorious sensations if he replaced the simulator with his own organ. Would she be shocked if her therapist suggested mating with her? Or would she welcome his attentions?

He desperately needed to get away from her enthralling scent, to walk around the room and regain control.

But he also didn't want to release her hand.

"Four more," he told her.

"The trouble is, that exercise excites me," she confided.



He didn't need to hear that. He could tell by her scent, her flushed face and her swollen labia.

Aroused beyond endurance, he handed her the remote and left the bed. What a cruel trick of nature, that females could masturbate yet males could not. He needed release desperately.

He stalked around the cabin. He'd never had such a difficult assignment.

To hide his discomfort, he went to the satchel again and dug through it.

When he returned to her and stretched out on the bed, she beamed at him. "I did all ten."

"Excellent work." He tried to ignore the way her gaze was drawn to his organ.

How rude she was to stare at Ryus' impressive erection, Snow told herself. But she couldn't help it—it had been so long since she'd seen the glorious sight of a naked man.

*He's not a man. He's an alien.*

The self-correction did no good. She still wanted to gaze into his gorgeous eyes that sometimes seemed plain brown but often held enticing golden glints. She longed to snuggle against his broad chest and inhale his scent, listen to the rumble of his deep voice, feel his fingers gently parting her damp folds.

He opened his hand, revealing a flat, circular object. "Teaser," he said.

"What does it do?"

Instead of answering, he laid it over her left breast. To her surprise the thin disk that covered her areola was deliciously warm. After a moment it began to move against her breast, exerting a gentle pressure that felt like a sucking mouth.

He watched her, a hint of avidity in his expression. "Like that?"

"Yes!" she gasped. "But I'd rather have *your* mouth."

Startled pleasure lit his face. Lowering his head, he took her right nipple into his mouth.

The wonderful sensations were almost like having two males teasing her sensitive nipples. Excitement flowed directly to her pussy. Involuntarily her muscles clenched around the penile simulator, setting off the light again.

Taking the remote from her, he pressed it. Immediately the simulator began vibrating.

She moaned low in her throat. The delicious breast stimulation plus the deep throbbing within her pussy were incredibly exciting. She thrashed her head from side to side, eager for the climax that was building, building...

The sensations peaked. A racking orgasm surged through her. The pleasure crested and swelled and her pussy pulsed hard around the simulator. Wave after wave rippled through her uncontrollably.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the receding sensations of her climax. Okay, she had to admit he'd been right..."delayed gratification" had been well worth waiting for. And surely today's sensations had been much stronger than yesterday's.

The mattress shifted as he rose.

Disappointed, she tried offering a smile. Why couldn't he stay and cuddle for five lousy minutes?

Forgetting he was her physical therapist and not her lover put her heart at risk. The thought made her bite her lip. Who was she kidding? Her heart was already at risk.

He yanked his tunic over his head. Then quickly picking up the screen-device, he frowned at it.

"Will you tell me this time or make me worry until Dr. Delos arrives tomorrow?"

"Doing better. But still not strong enough."

She couldn't stop thinking about his beautiful, erect cock. "I'd have a better climax if we actually mated," she said, surprising herself with the bold statement. "Don't get me wrong, the touching's very nice—but it's just not the same as real intercourse."

His dark eyebrows drew down. "Unprofessional."

"Now you're worried about professional behavior? When you've aided and abetted a mass kidnapping?"

He snatched up his tights. With a final glare, he left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stalking into Delos' office, Ryus found the doctor dictating to Belmarra. After one look at him, Delos broke off in mid-sentence.

"Give Snow another therapist," Ryus demanded, banging down the screen-device on Del's desk. "Can't maintain my objectivity."

Instead of responding to these entirely valid concerns, Delos picked up the device. "Impressive gain since yesterday," he observed. "You must be doing something right."

"That's not the point."

"Did you walk her around the room? How did she do?"

"Fine." Ryus didn't even try to restrain his growl. "*That's not the point.*"

"Oh, I think it is." Delos gave him his usual imperturbable smile. "We're here for the good of our patients. No one knows better than me how hard it is to work with these beautiful Earthian females. I'm confident you'll manage."

Why was Del being so obtuse? Maybe he needed a little intimidation. Ryus leaned over the desk, releasing his claws. "Now listen to me—" he growled.

Delos folded his arms. Instead of backing away, as Ryus expected, he leaned in closer. "*You* listen to *me*. And you can put your claws away because I won't fight you no matter what insult you dream up. Snow needs to gain enough strength to be a Bride. That's all I care about—her welfare. Stop whining and *do your job*."

Ryus stared at him, astonished the doctor dared to speak this way to a male who outranked him.

"She asked me to *mate* with her." He waited for Del to reel back in shock.

“Great idea – go right ahead.” Delos turned to his computer screen. “Is that all? I’m extremely busy.”

“Are you serious?” Ryus demanded.

“Someone has to be the first.” Delos tapped his computer screen. If he was pretending to be absorbed in work, he was doing an excellent job of it. “Better for her to mate with you than to be thrown unprepared into the Spring Running. Even if it’s weeks away, she’ll still be weaker than the other females.”

“Can’t believe you’re condoning this!”

Delos turned and scrutinized his expression. In a somewhat kinder voice, he added, “Nothing about this situation is normal. I trust your judgment.”

“Don’t. All I can think about is her beauty, her voice, her scent...” He sounded like a lovesick fool. Why wouldn’t Del listen?

“Do your best. Report back after you’ve mated with her.” Delos returned to the computer screen, ignoring Ryus’ menacing growl.

\* \* \* \* \*

Snow wiped the sweat off her brow and kept moving. The electronic crutches gave her the confidence she needed to navigate the room unescorted. Maybe Ryus wouldn’t approve that she was exercising without him, but who cared what he thought?

An entire day had passed without his presence. What could he possibly be doing? Wasn’t he supposed to be there every day, providing therapy?

A male who considered it “unprofessional” to make love to her didn’t deserve to have his opinion taken into account. She’d show him. She’d get stronger every day. At the Spring Running, she’d mate with the handsomest male she could find. Maybe more than one. Ryus would curse himself, realizing how he’d missed out...

The door slid open. Snow flinched and nearly fell. The gravity field around the crutches steadied her.

Ryus strode into the room. His brows drew together in disapproval.

"Don't you believe in knocking?" she demanded.

"Belmarra told me what you were doing. Shouldn't exercise by yourself."

"Who's Belmarra and why is she spying on me?"

"Ship's computer. Watches all patients. Five doctors, one thousand patients—it's necessary."

"Then she can let you know if I need you. Right now, I don't." Turning her back on him, she slowly made her way toward the bed.

Uncomfortable beneath his intent gaze, she sat heavily on the bed. She suppressed a gasp for breath, not wanting to reveal her exhaustion.

He came closer, putting his hands on her shoulders. The heat of his palms penetrated down to her bones, making her feel soothed and protected. She wanted him in bed with her, pleasuring her with those clever, gentle fingers.

Judging by his fiery expression, he wanted the same thing.

Would he lick her breasts again, tease her nipples until they peaked? A pulse beat between her legs. She pressed her thighs together, trying not to breathe in his compelling scent.

She mustn't forget she was angry with him. "I told you to leave."

His growl rumbled through the room. "Bold speech, from a female to a primus." He released her shoulders.

Laughter surged from her throat. "If you expect deference from the women you've kidnapped, you're going to be disappointed."

Instead of looking angry, as she'd expected, Ryus' expression grew thoughtful. "Many adjustments ahead. More than the Council foresees."

Snow nodded. Were the Terilians really prepared to deal with a thousand pissed off Earthians? "Where are the women now?" she asked. "Are they all in cabins like mine?" Suddenly she longed to see a human face.

"Not yet." He held out his hands. "Come. We'll go to them."

## **Chapter Four**

Like hundreds of Sleeping Beauties, the women lay unconscious in narrow hospital beds. Clinging to Ryus' arm, Snow walked down row after row, peering into their serene faces. They were well tended—sweet-smelling, hair combed, colorful tunics fresh.

While all races from Earth were represented, the women had one thing in common. None of them was slender. Everywhere she looked, Snow saw voluptuous breasts and rounded hips.

"Selfish of us," Ryus commented. "From millions of eligible Earth females, we chose the most intelligent and beautiful. Earth's loss is our gain."

His words made her glow inside. Okay, she'd always known she was intelligent. She'd earned her doctorate in history before the age of twenty-eight. But no one had ever considered her beautiful. Until now.

Interspersed throughout the room, Terilian males walked among the women, adjusting feeding tubes, rubbing lotions, providing sponge baths.

"Are they all doctors?" Snow asked.

"When the Brides first arrived, a call went out for Sick Bay orderlies. Almost every male on board volunteered." Ryus' tone took on a note of amusement. "Even the primuses, who aren't used to manual labor."

"They all wanted to be near the Brides?"

"Every one of us was starving for the sight and scent of females."

A wave of sympathy rippled through her. How desolate it must have been for the survivors of the great illness, mourning their wives and young. Would the women around her understand the Terilians' plight? Would they forgive the crime?

Snow became aware of covert scrutiny from the nearest orderlies. One was a big male, somewhat older than Ryus, with golden hair and intent blue eyes. The other was slender, his long black hair caught up in a complex arrangement of braids and copper jewelry. They were both ridiculously handsome—or maybe she thought so because she was growing accustomed to the Terilian appearance. Their stiff mustaches, small noses and furry cat ears were inhuman, but attractive in their own way.

The slender male smiled at her. Flattered by the attention, Snow smiled back.

Ryus' growl made her flinch. "Get on with your work," he commanded the orderly, who quickly lowered his eyes and turned to his patient.

The golden-haired male was not so easily intimidated. Coming closer, he said, "Ry, introduce me to your charming companion." His gaze lingered on Snow's face.

"Snow Jarrett, behold Primus Hirdos of the Golden Pelt, Council member." Ryus' voice was deeply reluctant, as though he regretted making the introduction.

*The Council runs the ship*, Delos had told her. *They hold the power of life and death over all of us*. Worried, she looked up into Hirdos' eyes.

He smiled reassuringly. "Tell me, Snow Jarrett, is everyone treating you well?"

*Ryus has provided several wonderful orgasms*. Repressing a giggle, she answered demurely, "They've all been kind."

"Come, Snow—must keep walking," Ryus said, turning abruptly and propelling her away from Hirdos.

"Why did that black-haired male listen to you?" Snow asked as Ryus hurried her down the next row of women, away from the two orderlies. "Do you outrank him?"

"He's a primus like me—males don't wear jewelry unless they're primus-ranked. He could either back down or fight me. Chose not to fight."

She remembered Delos' story about the altercation between Ryus and Durin. It was hard to imagine Ryus in a battle, since he'd always been so gentle with her.

"Do males and females ever fight each other?" she asked.

Ryus' quick glance at her revealed his shock. "A male would never risk harming a female. The other males would kill him."

Thinking of a friend who'd been stalked and beaten by an ex-lover, Snow was glad to hear about Terilian justice.

"Sometimes mates mock-wrestle without claws," Ryus added. "Foreplay."

She pictured squirming away from his hands, being caught and licked while she struggled. He'd yank down his tights, then pin her arms above her head and thrust into her. Heat flashed through her pussy.

Without a word being said, somehow he sensed the lust surging through her. "Arousing?" he asked, dropping his voice. "Maybe when you're stronger, little one."

The steel-muscled arm under her hand trembled. Her excitement was affecting him. Thrilled at the thought, she longed to return to her cabin with him. Wasn't it time for more sexual therapy? Hadn't the doctor ordered "powerful orgasms"?

Ryus' hand hovered uncertainly by the drug disk on his arm. "Must speak to Del." He gestured toward the doctor, who was examining a woman across the room. "Back soon."

After he'd gone, Snow continued her slow walk among her fellow Earthians, compelled to examine their faces. The odds were millions to one that she'd find any of her single or divorced friends, but she kept searching.

What would the others think when they awoke? Would they mourn the relatives and friends left behind? Or would they bond together on the voyage, looking forward to conquering the new planet?

Which ones would become her friends?

"Small female!" The male who confronted her was larger even than Ryus. His rust-colored hair streamed to his waist. Leaning forward, he stared into her eyes. "How delicious your alien flesh smells. But why are you the only one awake?" He put his hand on her shoulder, fingering her silky tunic.



His touch was an invasion. Instinctively she jerked back. Her knees buckled with the sudden movement but the gravity field caught her before she fell.

The huge male looked down at her legs, scowling. "Why are you using crutches?" he demanded. "Are you sickly?"

Why should she fear him? She forced herself to stand her ground, even though his fierce questions were obviously meant to be intimidating.

"I *was* sick," she admitted. "Dr. Delos cured me."

"If you're cured, why are the crutches necessary? I argued against ill females being brought onto the ship." His contemptuous gaze swept over her. "A sickly weakling can't satisfy a Terilian male!" He took a step toward her, backing her against one of the beds. "What use are you?"

She looked around for Ryus. Unfortunately he was many yards away, speaking to the doctor, his back to her. She'd have to fight this battle herself.

Assuming the stern expression she'd used when a student became unruly, she said, "Where I come from, males are polite to women who are strangers. You should learn some manners from Earth."

The huge male's eyes opened wide with outrage. Snow braced herself for another rude remark.

Dr. Delos gestured at them. Ryus whirled around. In seconds he came bounding across the room. His speed astonished her. When he launched himself into the air and sailed over five rows of Brides, she gasped. So much raw power in that effortless leap, twice the height and distance of a human pole-vaulter.

Landing lightly on his feet behind her, Ryus laid his hands on her shoulders, his touch light but comforting. "What are you doing in Sick Bay, Durin?" he demanded.

*Durin*...so this was the one who had bothered other male's wives. The one who had fought Ryus.

Ignoring Ryus' question, Durin asked, "Why is this female awake while the others sleep?"

"Not your business," Ryus growled.

"The Brides are everyone's business." Durin gazed at Ryus' hands. "Is this one special to you?"

"She's my patient." Ryus' fingers tightened protectively against her skin.

"No wonder you have her concealed. Her feebleness is disgusting."

Snow winced at the insult. Was that how most of the Terilians would see her? A disgusting invalid who never should have been brought aboard? Her fingernails dug into her palms.

Hurrying closer, Dr. Delos was just in time to hear the comment. "There's no concealment. The Council is aware of this Bride's *temporary* infirmity." His tone was sharper than she'd ever heard it. "No one is admitted to Sick Bay except for orderlies and therapists. Durin, I must ask you to leave."

Bending forward until he was nose to nose with the doctor, Durin said, "And I must ask *you* to remember my rank when you address me, Secundus Delos."

Unmoving, the doctor glared at him. "I tended your wounds after your battle with Ryus. Don't make me regret saving your life."

Durin growled, unsheathing a set of terrifying, copper-hued claws. Even one of them looked like it could slice through steel – and there were ten on display.

Ryus released Snow and stepped forward to face Durin. "Another fight?" Ryus asked.

"No!" Snow and Delos spoke simultaneously. The doctor grasped Ryus' arm. "Therapist Ryus, your duty is to your patient."

Ryus ignored him, as did Durin. Tension throbbed through the room. Snow held her breath. Was an attack imminent?

Durin took a step back. "We'll see what my brother has to say."

She remembered that Durin's brother was a Council member. Damp with sudden perspiration, she wondered if she'd become a bone of contention between Durin and Ryus.

"Dung-picker," Ryus said as the door slid shut behind Durin. "Should have killed him when I had the chance."

His face stern, Delos tapped his shoulder in agreement.

Snow's knees trembled. Before she realized what he was going to do, Ryus swooped her into his arms, cradling her against his broad chest. The humming fear racing along her nerves dissipated. Closing her eyes, she relaxed and inhaled his minty scent.

"Take Snow back to her room," the doctor said. "And follow through on what we discussed earlier."

\* \* \* \* \*

Seething with rage, Ryus strode down the corridor, Snow nestled in his arms. His hatred of Durin, already strong, had intensified tenfold. He'd been tempted to match claws again with the other male, without the necessary formal challenge.

*Her feebleness is disgusting.* How dared Durin use such a word when speaking of Snow? A slash across the mouth would make him withdraw that insult...

Grimacing, Ryus came to an unexpected conclusion. He was brave enough to fight Durin but not brave enough to mate with Snow.

If there was one thing he despised, it was cowardice. He'd come to Snow's cabin an hour ago fully intending to mate with her. Yet instead of speaking the sweet words that came to mind in her company, he'd picked a fight with her. Then he'd taken her to Sick Bay so that he wouldn't have to lie down next to her, fondle her enticing breasts and mate with her.

What did he fear? His wife would never return. He'd known that for two years.

He recalled the horrifying thrill he'd experienced when Snow fondled him. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit to wanting that again.

Involuntarily, his arms tightened around her. Making a tiny noise of pleasure, she laid her palm against his chest, stroking his skin. Waves of delight crashed through him.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "Wasn't that my cabin we just passed? Or am I confused?"

"Going to my cabin. Thought you might like to see it."

"Oh! Yes, I would." The sweet curve of her lips and her eager eyes filled him with longing. He had to stop then, unable to resist nibbling the smooth length of her neck. She moaned and gripped his shoulders. Her scent pleaded with him to mate with her.

He had to keep walking. He forced himself to draw back, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it.

Blinking, he realized he was at the silver-etched door of his cabin. He jammed his palm against the scanner. The door opened. A few strides and a leap brought them to the high bed.

Snow gasped, her fingers digging into his shoulders. "You could have warned me!"

"Sorry. Easy to forget you don't know everything about us. Especially when you're so much like a Terilian female."

"I am?" Releasing him, she settled herself against the slightly elevated back of the bed. "Durin said I was disgusting."

He moved closer, stroking her black curls to reassure her. "Take no heed of him. Insult was directed at me, not you."

Her gaze held his. "Are you sure? I know you and the doctor are nice—but maybe the other Terilian males will reject me."

"Won't reject you." The idea of another male taking her was like the torture of a nerve-agonizer across his pelt. She was his. His alone. "They'll want to mate with you."

"Like you do?" Her eyes still meeting his, she gave a sinuous wiggle.

No longer able to resist her, he jerked down the top of her tunic. Her nipples were flushed and peaking, asking to be sucked. He feasted his eyes on them, drinking in their beauty.

She grabbed his hand and steered it to her breast. "Please, Ryus."

He lowered his head to her right breast, teasing it with his tongue while he rolled her left nipple between his fingers. Her breathing shortened as he worked both nipples. He bit down lightly, letting her feel his teeth against the hardened flesh. She cried out, her back arching.

"I want you so much," she whispered, parting her legs. The scent of her heightened arousal nearly drove him mad. His groin tightened, his organ lengthening, pushing against his tights, seeking out the pleasure only she could provide.

Who would have thought these Earth women would be so responsive to Terilian males? *She wants me. She wants me to mate with her.* Sweet balm for his long solitude. Two years alone...how had he endured?

First he had to ensure she was at the peak of arousal. Moving downward on the bed, he teased her navel with his tongue while he gently stroked the damp curls back from her clitoris. Her hips moved restlessly.

This close to the seat of her pleasure, her scent overwhelmed him. He ached to thrust into her, to fill her channel with his hard organ until she shrieked with excitement. He struggled to retain control, knowing the primary goal was her delight, not his own satisfaction.

Lowering his head, he licked slowly up her outer lips, thrilled when she trembled and cried out.

"Ryus!" He loved it when she spoke his name. "So good..." she sighed. "I never thought I'd have this again."

Neither had he.

He licked again, taking his time, noting the way her breathing quickened and her scent intensified.

Snow couldn't help it. She had to cry aloud, a jagged keening that was almost a sob, when Ryus' tongue penetrated her damp folds. He licked all around the entrance to her vagina, sometimes teasing lightly, sometimes swirling his tongue upward, flicking against her clit.

She couldn't hold her hips still. She lifted them, wordlessly asking for more. God, how she wanted more. And yet she wanted to remain like this, enjoying the incredible movements of his warm tongue while dangling on the edge of pleasure.

He raised his head. "Like it?"

He had to be teasing. He must know how thrilled she was by his skillful attentions to her pussy. Couldn't he tell by her moans and cries? By the way she was quivering? By her wanton thrusting against his mouth?

"I need more. Please!" she begged shamelessly.

"Ready to mate?" He moved upward on the bed, straddling her. His cock was engorged, ready to plunge inside her eager pussy.

She'd known him only a few days but it seemed like she'd been waiting forever to make love with him. Raising her hips, she whispered, "I want you inside me."

A soft chime filled the cabin. A feminine voice spoke. "Your pardon, Primus Ryus. The Council summons you and Earth female Snow Jarrett. Report to Level Four Council Chamber immediately."

Ryus froze. "Tell them five minutes, Belmarra."

Tempted to burst into tears of frustration and anger, she said, "Why didn't you say thirty minutes? We could have finished!"

He looked shocked. "A summons from the Council can't be ignored." His forehead creasing, he lifted her hand to his cheek. "We'll return to this later. Promise."

Mollified by the tender gesture, she cleaned herself with the towel he gave her. Once dressed, they took the elevator to Level Four.

Snow was glad of Ryus' powerful form beside her as they entered the Council Chamber. The Council members knelt on stools, lined up on one side of a long table. Durin stood to the left. She also recognized Hirdos, whom she'd met in Sick Bay.

The six males gazed at her, examining every inch of her from her shoes to the curls on top of her head. For a moment she wanted to quail away from their unabashed scrutiny.

The Terilians needed her and her fellow Earth women. They would die without mating. The thought made her lift her chin proudly and meet the Council's bold stares without fear.

The black-haired male closest to Durin retained his stern expression. He looked familiar – when had she seen him before? But the flickering smiles on other males' faces heartened her. Hirdos licked his lips.

She was the first female they'd been near in two years—or at least, the only one who was conscious.

Ryus took a step forward. "Why this summons?" he asked, his deep voice harsh and abrupt. "Interrupted a crucial therapy session."

*Therapy!* He'd been about to make love to her. Hadn't their relationship moved beyond therapist-patient?

The black-haired male said, "We're awaiting one more person, Ryus. Kindly restrain your impatience." His voice pricked her memory. He was the male who had appeared on Earth television to announce the mass kidnapping. *Primus Taddus of the Black-Striped Pelt.*

The door slid open, admitting Dr. Delos. With a swift look around, he assessed the situation then addressed the Council. "Good primuses, I hope this session will be short. I've just awakened the first fifty Brides. As you can imagine, my orderlies and I are extremely pressed for time."

Snow quivered with anticipation, thrilled to hear that other women were conscious. She turned toward Delos, about to bombard him with questions. But the Council members were already interrogating him. "Are the Earth females angry? Confused? Do they remember why they're here? When can we see them? How soon can we hold the Spring Running?"

Taddus and Durin exchanged frustrated looks. Snow realized what the doctor had done—successfully diverted the Council's attention from her to their future Brides.

With a crash of his fist on the table, Taddus brought silence to the room. "Let us not ignore our current business. Durin came to us, concerned by the weakness of Snow Jarrett, who stands before us today wearing crutches. Secundus Delos' own medical reports suggest that she is not yet strong enough to fulfill her duties as a Bride. Doctor, what can you add to this discussion?"

Delos took a step forward. "Snow's strength increases daily. Given time, she will be as strong as any other Earth female."

"But time is what we lack," Durin said. "Delos, wasn't it you who proved to the Council that we would die unless we mated? Our task now is to ensure the females are ready for the Spring Running. We can't let our purpose be diverted by this sickly one—*who never should have been brought aboard!*"

A chill ran down Snow's spine when one of the Council members touched his shoulder, indicating agreement with Durin.

Then Hirdos spoke. "You're too hasty, Durin. We all agreed that a percentage of the Earth females could have illnesses. Many of us believe that stealing the females was wrong but necessary. Curing them—giving them a better life—mitigates our guilt."

"Curing them, Hirdos," Durin exclaimed. "But Snow Jarrett is still sick!"

Ryus' menacing growl echoed through the room, which fell silent. "Snow *is* cured," he said. "Her weakness is a matter for therapy. She's getting it." He surveyed the Council, frowning. "Talking just wastes time."

"It's not so simple," Durin said. "I contend Snow Jarrett cannot be a Bride."



A Council member whose gray hair was striped with brown spoke up, his tone worried. "Impossible! If this female does not become a Bride, one of our males will be left unwed."

To Snow's horror, Durin gestured at Ryus. "*He* declared himself morally opposed to the theft of Earth females. Let him prove his sincerity by forgoing the Spring Running." His glance slid to Snow. "Since she is no use to us, she should disembark at Jahariz, the last stop before we reach our new home. That is the humane solution."

"That dismal swamp of a planet?" Ryus demanded. Fury seemed to roll off him in waves. "I'll challenge every one of you before I let that happen."

His support gave her a warm tingle of pleasure. Still, this had gone on long enough.

"I can't believe this discussion." Snow strode forward until she was mere inches from the Council's table. About to launch into a furiously indignant speech, she paused.

Her increased proximity was having an unmistakable effect on the Council members. Their entranced gazes were fixed on her body. Their nostrils flared as they drank in her scent. Hirdos, in a motion that seemed involuntary, reached his hand toward her.

Despite the tension in the room, a thrill coursed along her veins. On Earth, she'd been too ordinary to manipulate men through her feminine allure. Here she was beautiful. And this crisis was important enough to require the use of her new power.

"Good primuses," she said, imitating the way Dr. Delos had addressed them, "please don't reject me so unkindly. I'm happy to be here among you, growing healthier and stronger every day. Grant me the time to regain my full strength." She lowered her voice to a sensual purr. "I'm very eager to be a Bride." She reached her hand up, caressing her neck in a slow, seductive movement. If she'd stripped her clothes off and revealed her naked body, she couldn't have riveted their attention more thoroughly.

"I yearn for a husband's caress." *For Ryus' caress.* Her fingers moved through her hair, fluffing it, releasing its scent.

Durin was her enemy. Yet even he leaned forward, his chest rising and falling quickly.

Hirdos frowned at him. "How dare you propose sending this enticing female into exile? Are you heartless?"

Another male chimed in, "We should trust Delos' prognosis."

Two of them were on her side, thank goodness. She smiled warmly at the male who'd just spoken, gratified when he smiled back, gazing into her eyes.

"It is unseemly for the female to be present while we decide her fate," Taddus said. "You two—" A wave of his hand indicated Ryus and Delos. "Take her into the adjoining chamber."

"Durin is excused as well," Hirdos said. "He is not a Council member."

Taddus glared at him but Hirdos looked back impassively. Finally Taddus touched his shoulder in agreement.

Ryus took Snow's arm, leading her from the room. Delos and Durin followed.

The adjoining chamber was empty, except for six stools and a huge wall screen showing three-dimensional scenes of leafy vegetation waving in the breeze. Ryus took her to a stool then moved away, pacing restlessly around the room. Durin stood by the door, his gaze fixed on Ryus.

Snow's hands, flat on her thighs, curled into fists. How unfair, to kidnap her from Earth and then dump her on a swamp-planet. She'd have been better off dying in the nursing home.

The doctor drew up a stool beside her. Gesturing at the picture, he said in his kindly way, "The holograph shows Gazeem, our new planet."

He was trying to distract her during this anxious waiting. She knew that but turned obediently toward the screen.

A dense forest of ancient trees. Turquoise leaves rippled as though teased by the wind. Patches of sky shone rosy pink, glimmering through the thick white clouds. Then

beams of sun broke through and thousands of branches lifted simultaneously, a chorus praising the light.

Snow drew a delighted breath. “*That’s* where we’re headed? It’s so beautiful.” Then remembering why they were waiting, she added, “I hope I get there.”

Coming up behind her, Ryus said, “You will.” He put his hands on her shoulders. She sighed, relaxing under his warm, reassuring touch. “Don’t doubt it, little one.”

“Surely that’s for the Council to decide,” Durin said.

Ryus turned to look at Durin, eyes narrowing. If only he hadn’t betrayed to Durin how much he cared for Snow. He’d handed his enemy a control-pad for vengeance.

He should have been more cautious.

A futile thought. He remembered one of the proverbs of his Peltdom. “Love, like rotting meat, can never be concealed.”

Not that he *loved* Snow. He couldn’t let a woman of Earth hold the same place in his heart that Arooa had held.

Yet somehow Snow had found her own place.

As they waited, Snow plied Del with questions about the awakened brides. Ryus barely listened, more interested in watching Snow’s varied expressions as the doctor spoke. Was she more enticing when she frowned thoughtfully, her face revealing her keen intelligence? Or when she flashed her lovely smile?

One thing he knew for certain. As long as he was alive, Snow would never be ousted from the ship.

At last they were called back into the meeting room. Ryus scanned the Council members. Had they had come to a wise decision? Or would he have to challenge all of them? With difficulty, he kept his claws sheathed. Asher, somewhat undersized, would not want to fight. Hirdos had already shown himself to be Snow’s ally. But what of Taddus? Back on Teril, he had challenged and killed a member of the Brown-striped Pelt who had insulted his illustrious father. Taddus would be a worthy opponent.

Scenting Snow's apprehension, Ryus put his arm around her waist. A quiver ran through her body. Yet her expression was fearless as she looked each Council member in the eye. The lone human in the room, she faced those who would decide her fate without flinching. Couldn't the Council see that Snow was the type of female needed to forge a new life on Gazeem? What did physical strength matter compared to her shining courage?

Taddus looked at Ryus, his expression severe. "Primus Ryus of the Silver Pelt, you claim that Snow Jarrett is fit to be a Bride. You have even dared to challenge this Council. However, we have decided that dueling is not the way to solve this complex problem.

"Instead, we have settled on a procedure that will allow us to determine whether Snow may participate in the upcoming Spring Running. Ryus and Snow...today, while the Council observes you, you must mate."

## **Chapter Five**

In the room adjoining the Council Chamber, Snow glared at Ryus and Delos. The Terilian males wore identical puzzled expressions.

"How dare the Council suggest such a thing!" Snow exclaimed. "They're nothing but voyeurs!"

"Don't understand your objection," Ryus said. "Haven't you ever mated with others present?"

"Of course not!" Snow declared. "I'm being treated like a—" She groped for a word and found no Terilian equivalent for "prostitute". Was it possible that sex workers didn't exist in this culture? "Like a woman who is selling the use of her vagina for money."

Ryus' nostrils flared as though he smelled something disgusting. "Are there really such people on Earth?"

Delos sounded equally sickened as he said, "Indeed, the sale of sexual acts is considered a viable profession there. Snow, please do not speak of it again."

"So you find it shocking?" she asked. "I'm just as shocked by the idea of mating in public."

"Why?" Ryus said. "Many people find it amusing to mate while others watch. The ship has rooms on the Third Level for that very purpose." His voice rose in enthusiasm. "Some couples practice for days, perfecting a particularly engrossing technique, before they exhibit it to their friends." With a sigh, he added, "Talking about the past, of course."

Snow fell silent. When she'd first heard the Council's decision, she'd imagined they were treating her, an Earth woman, with disrespect. Surely they wanted to watch merely for the titillation value.

But maybe she had it all wrong. If this was a normal part of their culture, she was not being treated like a prostitute. Maybe the Council really wanted to judge her interaction with Ryus.

Delos' serious voice cut through her musing. "No one can force you to do this, Snow. But believe me, it'll be preferable to having Ryus duel every Council member. Strong as he is, he could be badly wounded, even killed."

Ryus threw an impatient look at the doctor. "Give us a moment alone, Del."

Delos rose immediately. "I'm going to Sick Bay. The Council can let me know if they need me."

As soon as the door shut behind him, Ryus came to her, taking her in his arms. "Don't listen to Del. Underestimates me."

Snow relaxed against him, breathing in his scent, comforted by the feel of his broad chest, his strong arms holding her. "I don't want you to fight. Maybe it would be better to do what they want."

He drew back, tilting her chin up with gentle fingers so he could look into her eyes. "Since the day we met, I've wanted to mate with you. Never thought I'd feel that way again. With you, it's *all* I think about." He cradled the side of her face in his warm palm. She trembled under his caressing touch. Surely he cared for her. Surely this was love, not therapy.

"I'm not certain..." She hated being indecisive. She wanted to have sex with Ryus. She'd wanted him from the instant she'd opened her eyes and looked at him, the day she awoke. When he held her like this, her nipples tightened and her pussy tingled.

But could she really mate with him while the entire Council watched?

Ryus' hands moved slowly down her back, ending with his palms on her buttocks. His strong hands massaged the plump mounds through her thin tunic. Instantly heat rushed through her pussy. She moaned, longing for more.

“Don’t do this out of fear or to keep me from dueling.” His voice went low. “But if you want me as much as I want you – if your body aches to mate with me – if you want to feel my hands and tongue and penis giving you pleasure – then consider doing what they ask.”

She’d rarely heard so many words from him at once. The conviction and caring in his voice pleased her more than if he’d written an ode in her honor.

Looking up into his eyes, the color of warm, dark honey, she saw a spark that took her breath away. She remembered how she’d felt on her first and last day in the nursing home. *Christmas in July*. She’d been frozen to her chilly white bed, barely able to move, sure she’d never be warm again.

Now the ice had thawed. Even better, she blazed with desire, a flame that would consume her if left unsatisfied.

“Little one...” His hands molded her buttocks, pressing her against him so that she felt the hot length of his hard cock. “Will you mate with me in front of the Council?”

She whispered, “Yes.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Snow lay against the elevated back of the round bed that had been brought into the meeting room, trying to calm herself with deep breaths. She still wore her pink tunic. Somehow appearing unclothed in front of the Council seemed more nerve-racking than mating in front of them.

Clearly Ryus suffered no such inhibitions. He yanked his gray tunic over his head, then loosened his silver hair from the band that held it back. With a shake of his powerful shoulders, his long hair spilled out over his naked chest.

Her gaze traveled from the rippling muscles of his torso to his corded neck and finally to his handsome face. His eyes studied her while his chest rose and fell rapidly. He wanted her more than any male had ever desired her before.

His desperate arousal heightened her own excitement.

Five males watched silently. "The mating test is for the Council alone," Hirdos had declared, calling for a vote. Only Taddus had voted for Durin to remain. And so Durin, in spite of his protests, had been ordered to vacate the room. Snow felt slightly more comfortable without his malign presence.

As Ryus came toward the bed, she reached her arms out, welcoming him.

Smiling at her eagerness, he tugged his tights down and stepped out of them. His swollen cock was thick and dark against his stomach. Her mouth went dry as she stared at it. It had been years since she'd felt a man's cock inside her, thrilling her with its delightful invasion.

Her pussy throbbed. Why didn't he hurry to the bed? She wanted his hands stroking her breasts, his hot mouth sliding over her skin. And most of all, she wanted his cock thrusting inside her pussy.

She already knew the incredible sensations his hands and mouth brought her. But now she hungered for more. She'd lain quietly under his caresses long enough. The next step was to share the joy with him, to show him the pleasure he'd receive in her bed.

One of the Council members whispered to another, "The Earth female is eager to mate with Ryus." Perhaps his words weren't meant for her, but her enhanced hearing revealed them.

The sudden distraction overwhelmed her. What was she thinking, to allow herself to be so wanton? What was she doing here, about to have sex with an alien while other aliens watched? Her thudding heart skipped a beat.

Ryus joined her on the bed, kneeling between her legs. Gazing into her eyes, he put his hands on her shoulders. His palms moved slowly down her arms.

"You're trembling," he said. The concern in his voice soothed her. "Remember what I told you, our first day together."

*No one will hurt you.*



Her heart pounded still, but now it was from anticipation. "I'm all right," she whispered. "Let's give them their show."

"This isn't for them." The corners of his mouth lifted. "This is for you and me." He leaned forward. Would he kiss her at last? Instead he rubbed his cheek against hers. The sweet intimacy of the gesture touched her. In return, she whispered his name.

His wonderful minty scent intensified, intoxicating her, mesmerizing her. The other males in the room seemed to fade away.

His palms closed around her breasts, letting her feel the powerful warmth of his hands through the sheer fabric. He massaged and pressed, forcing a moan from her. Her pussy responded with a flood of moisture.

His fingers moved to the metal clasps at the neckline of her tunic. He gave her a questioning look. She murmured, "Go ahead." Why had she left her tunic on, an annoying layer between her skin and his hands?

He flipped the clasps. Her tunic fell open, the silky fabric slithering downward. A collective sigh went up from the males in the room as her breasts were revealed, her nipples swollen and peaking from Ryus' touch.

"By the Great Fur-Mother," Hirdos whispered. "Snow Jarrett brings us a rich dowry of beauty." He was answered with murmurs of agreement.

So they thought she was beautiful? A mad impulse to display herself to them overtook her. She cupped her breasts in her hands, squeezing them together and lifting them toward Ryus. With a startled sound, somewhere between a growl and a groan, he bent swiftly, taking her left breast in his mouth. His roughened tongue laved the nipple again and again. Hot waves of pleasure shot down her body, pooling in her pussy.

Her breath came short and fast. He switched to her other breast, sucking until her nipple was flushed and hard.

From far away, Hirdos' voice came to her ears. "I'd give my entire fortune to be in Ry's place."

She told the bed to lower the back. Ryus stretched out beside her, on her right, his mouth still teasing her breasts while his hand roved over her thighs. She turned her head to the left. The Council members sat behind their table. Their eyes were bright, fixed on her without blinking. Hirdos leaned forward, his pale skin flushed. Taddus, his hand under his tunic, was stroking his cock.

They all envied Ryus. They all wanted to be in bed with her, about to mate with her. Their lustful glances added to her arousal.

How long had it been since a man had made love to her? And now here she was with Ryus, the Terilian she'd hungered for since her first sight of him.

Her hand closed around his thick shaft. He gasped when she slid her palm up its burning-hot length. She gloried in the softness of his skin and the steel-hard core underneath it.

He raised up on his elbows, chest shuddering. "Stop," he whispered, his tone desperate, "or we'll have to mate immediately."

In her entire life, she'd never heard more welcome words. "Yes, that's what I want."

His golden gaze brimmed with a mixture of lust and concern. "Sure?" he asked, even as he moved into position between her legs. His hair fell around them like a shining curtain, sealing them into their own world of silver.

She sensed the rabid eagerness humming through him, an eagerness that matched her own. His body was demanding that he plunge into her but he held back, wanting to make sure she was ready. How she admired the control he was keeping over himself—for her sake.

Someone on the Council said, "Watching this is torture." Difficult indeed, to watch without release. Of the males in the room, only Ryus would be lucky enough to climax...if her own orgasm was strong enough. She prayed it would be.

She parted her thighs, drawing her knees up. "I want you so much," she told him, longing plain in her voice. "Now."

Her swollen, naked pussy was exposed to every male in the room. She heard the collective gasp from the Council and Ryus' excited growl.

Nothing mattered except her urgent need for him.

"I'd like to lap the cream from those pretty lips," Hirdos said.

"If this one were mine, I'd give her orgasm after orgasm," Taddus declared. "We must hold the Running soon."

Holding his cock by the base, Ryus rubbed it up and down her slit. The teasing movement made her even wetter, easing his cock's entrance as it pushed against her opening. For just a moment, his heat and size frightened her. It had been so long... She panted as he pressed forward, his thick cock head stretching her.

He paused, giving her a chance to relish the thrills racing through her.

"Don't stop," she pleaded, digging her nails into his back.

He advanced a few inches then paused again. "All right?"

She responded by lifting her hips, taking more of his long shaft inside her. After a moment her tightness gave way.

And the pleasure began.

With a groan he plunged in deep, filling her with his hard length. She cried out, almost unable to bear the intense sensations.

He pulled back. Somehow that was even better. A sound of primitive satisfaction spilled from her throat. She wanted to tell him, "More—more!" but already he was thrusting into her again.

She began moving with him. Unbelievably her passion mounted. She choked out his name.

His mouth trembled. "Snow." Her name was so simple but he sounded as though he could barely force the word from his lips. His chest heaved. "My beautiful Snow." Lowering his head, he sucked her nipple into his hot mouth.

The Council watched, their faces revealing arousal and lust. Several were fondling their cocks...but only Ryus would mate today, she thought. Only Ryus would climax.

His lips pulled on her nipple while he thrust deep. Time seemed to stop as her pleasure expanded to fill the world. She threw her hips upward and held still. She convulsed around his thick cock. Sensation moved through her in flowing waves, so strong she almost fainted.

She'd never experienced a climax of such intensity. She squeezed her eyes shut, enjoying the ebbing arcs of satisfaction.

Ryus moved faster. Sweat beaded his forehead. Surely the wonderful orgasm still pulsing through her would detonate his climax. She squeezed her muscles around his throbbing cock, sensing how close he was...

A chime sounded. "Primus Ryus?" The soft voice of the computer.

Ryus stopped moving. "Busy, Belmarra! Go away!"

"Your pardon, Primus. Your orders were to alert you immediately to trouble on the Agricultural Level."

Ryus groaned. *Trouble on the Agricultural Level*. Years ago, he'd instructed Belmarra to use those words if Popo escaped.

The *patitou*, Arooa's beloved pet. The little animal had never wandered free. His heart overturned. She might come to harm without her protective cage.

He withdrew from Snow's sweet channel, knowing he'd never be able to climax with this on his mind. "Sorry," he whispered, touching her face.

Her eyes shone with tears. "You're the one who missed out, not me," she murmured. Her soft cheeks were still pink with sensual ardor.

The Council resembled males who had lived through a mass-duel. How difficult it must have been, watching him enjoy what was still denied to them. If only he could have finished.

He'd been so close.

Rising, he opened the drawer under the bed. Like all such drawers it held cleansing towels. He handed one to Snow. Silently they cleaned and dressed themselves.

Meanwhile the Council conferred in whispers. At last Hirdos spoke. "The test was inconclusive."

Ryus strode forward aggressively, hoping they recalled his threat to fight every one of them. "Test was *interrupted*. Not my fault."

Taddus raised dark brows. "No? Even though you and Arooa brought an illegal pet aboard in the first place?"

Aghast, Ryus stared at him. When had Taddus found out about Popo? Did they all know about the pet?

"The *patitou's* existence is immaterial," Hirdos said quickly. "Long ago the Council learned of it and decided to ignore its presence. Let's keep to the matter at hand. We have two choices—repeat the test or make our decision. Since we can't bear to undergo this temptation again, we've arrived at a decision."

Coming up behind him, Snow took his hand. *Don't worry*, he wanted to tell her. *I will never let them send you away*. He felt her fingers tremble but she faced the Council without flinching.

"Snow Jarrett," Hirdos continued, "taking into consideration Secondus Delos' assurances and our own observations today, we've decided you may participate in the Spring Running. Following the event, your new husband, whoever he may be, will be tested. If the mating was successful, the Council will take no further action. If not, when the ship makes planetfall, you will be left on Jahariz."

Snow's cold fingers clutched his. Well, it wasn't what they'd hoped for but at least they'd won a reprieve. In the time until the Spring Running, he would continue working with Snow. They would mate again and again, twice or perhaps three times per day, until her muscles were strong.

Anticipation rose in him. He squeezed her hand, pleased when she pressed back.

"Furthermore," Hirdos went on, "the Council has decided that with fifty Brides awake, we have a volatile situation on the *Ecstasy of Generations*." Pausing, he looked sternly at Ryus. "We cannot have males choosing Brides prior to the Spring Running. That would result in arguments. Duels. *Deaths*."

"All must be done in an orderly fashion. Therefore, we will require that every male aboard take oath not to mate until the Spring Running."

Beside him, Snow gasped. Ryus' heart sank. The half-completed mating had been brief ecstasy. Now he felt like a starving male who'd been given one bite and had the rest snatched away.

"Primus Ryus," Hirdos finished, his tone formal, "you may take your oath with the Council immediately." The Council members stood.

Escape was impossible. Releasing Snow's hand, Ryus crossed his arms over his chest, resting his palms on his upper arms.

Hirdos led the oath. "Unsheathe!" he called.

Ryus' claws shot out, ten tips piercing his flesh. A red bead welled up from each of the wounds.

Asher groaned. Perhaps his claws had sunk too deep. The coppery scent of blood filled the room.

Hirdos began, "By my claws, I swear —"

The other males spoke together. "*By my claws, I swear —*"

"Not to mate with any Bride until the Spring Running, on pain of the Council's most severe punishment —"

"Most severe punishment —" they echoed.

His tone dire, Hirdos concluded, "Gelding."

## Chapter Six

Ryus walked Snow back to her cabin, hating to leave her but knowing he must put distance between them quickly. He had to search for the lost *patitou*. That was his duty now.

The scent of her arousal lingered, forcing him to relive those ecstatic moments when he'd been inside her, giving her pleasure, striving for his own release. He fought his raging desire to back Snow against the wall, raise her tunic and finish their interrupted mating.

*By my claws, I swear...*

Silently he cursed the Council.

"Gelding," she said. "Does that mean what I think it does? If you broke your vow, the Council would actually remove your testicles?"

Grimly he touched his right shoulder. "Traditional punishment for certain grave offenses."

"That's barbaric! I thought you people were civilized!"

"How do your people punish criminals?" he asked.

"Confinement with other criminals. Loss of freedom to come and go as they please. They're penned together like—like animals." She gazed up at him curiously. "Strange—I can't think of a word for it."

"Our culture *has* no such place." He shuddered. "Most Terilians would rather lose their sexual function than their freedom."

"We Earthians have so much to learn about your society." She sighed. "What was all that about an illegal pet?"

He explained to her about the *patitou*. "Going to look for her. Hopefully if I call her she'll come to me."

Snow's expression brightened. "I'll tag along. I want to see the agricultural area."

"Not a good idea." Alone with her on the private Agricultural Level? Before long he'd be urging her down onto the fragrant grass and mounting her. No male could resist such temptation. His testicles tightened, drawing close against his body as he imagined the punishment that would follow.

"But I want to help," she said.

"Snow, you heard the oath." Agony twisted through his gut. "Have to avoid each other now."

"What do you mean?"

"My need for you is barely controllable. My body is screaming to complete our mating." He closed his eyes for a moment in pain. "Need to stay away from you."

"I can't see you at all?" The hurt in her voice broke his heart. "Until when?"

"Until the Spring Running." Could he endure her absence for so many days?

He would have to endure. He couldn't trust himself when he was close to her. Only by staying away from her could he avoid the Council's punishment.

They'd reached her cabin at last. Her back to the door, she looked up at him, her expression mutinous. "We can't even sit together—just to talk—like friends?"

"Not unless you want to see me gelded." Hands shaking, he leaned forward and rubbed his face against hers one last time, marking her with his scent. "Farewell, little one."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Ryus left, Snow went to Sick Bay. She found Dr. Delos in his office, speaking with the ship's computer. He broke off when he saw her and invited her to take a seat.



She perched on a stool, wishing she and Ryus could have consummated their mating. In spite of the incredibly beautiful orgasm he'd given her, she felt unfulfilled. He hadn't climaxed. The act was incomplete.

The slight soreness of her nipples made her recall how he'd sucked them while the Council watched. Her pussy clenched with longing. How could she bear Ryus' absence until the Spring Running?

"Hirdos contacted me a few moments ago," Delos said. "So the mating test was inconclusive."

She sighed with exasperation. "Everything seemed to be going well. If only we hadn't been interrupted, it would have been successful."

"I'm afraid your readings say otherwise." He frowned. "In my opinion, you were fortunate the test ended prematurely."

She fell silent, stunned by the certainty in his tone. Her own doctor had expected her to fail. Cold shivers ran down her back, dousing her desire. If she'd failed, she'd have had to leave the ship.

She'd have had to leave Ryus.

"I'll have another chance at the Spring Running," she said. "I've been doing the therapy – with Ryus and by myself. But what if it's not enough? Isn't there anything else I can do?"

The doctor studied her for a long moment. His professional gaze seemed to examine not only her face and limbs but her strength, courage and will.

"There *is* something else," she guessed. Her heart beat wildly. "Tell me."

"I'm not sure you can endure the procedure."

Lifting her chin, she met his troubled eyes. "Whatever it is, I'll do it."

At last he rose from his stool. "Come with me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Hoping the *patitou* would have returned to its familiar environment, Ryus went to the cave first. He crouched down by the empty cage, noting there was still food in her bowl. Arooa would have been distraught at the creature's escape. Popo had been her last link with her family on Teril.

Just as Popo was *his* last link with Arooa.

No doubt he'd been careless when he'd last fed the *patitou*. He must have left the cage door unlatched. His mind had been entirely on Snow while he forgot his obligations.

He circled the area around the cave three times, spreading out in a wider radius during each lap of the search. Checking in with Belmarra, she assured him that none of her cameras had caught the animal's image. "I can't see under the soil," she added. "On Teril, wild *patitous* live in dens."

"Know that." His response trailed off into a growl. The Agricultural Level went on for miles. If the *patitou* had burrowed underground, he'd never find her.

He walked for hours, scanning the soil, calling Popo's name. Once he was away from the acrid odor concentrated in the cave, he expected to pick up the animal's scent. But he couldn't trace her. She must have gone underground, yet he couldn't find any soil disturbed by digging.

The area was laced with canals that brought water for the walking sprinklers. Could Popo have drowned in a canal?

Despair weighed his shoulders down, slowed his steps. Maybe his activity was frightening her away. Forcing himself to relax, he sat under a tree, his back against the trunk. The glaring artificial sunlight hurt his eyes, so he closed them. If he stayed motionless, Popo would come to him. She would. She *must*.

Now that he was still, images of Snow flooded his mind. He wanted to see her again and yet he dreaded it. How could he be near her and yet keep his vow? If he continued to supervise her therapy, he'd have to do it through the ship's computer.

A mere touch of Snow's tempting, smooth skin and his body would surge with uncontrollable desire. But could he sit in her cabin, across the room perhaps? Just to talk with her would be blissful. He loved watching her changeable expressions when he spoke of Teril. The eager light in her eyes seduced him more thoroughly than her lovely breasts or her delightful, rounded buttocks that were made for a male's caress.

For *his* caress.

What a miracle that she trusted him, as though they were a mated couple and not two different species, one of whom had kidnapped the other.

A sick feeling crept into his gut. How had this Earth female become so important to him, so quickly? Hadn't he sworn to himself that even if he took another wife, she would never usurp Arooa's place in his heart?

Would it be better to choose *another* Bride at the Spring Running? Someone to use for bodily release, without falling into the snare of love? That way he could guard his wife's memory forever.

The sound of something brushing against leaves snapped his eyes open. He scented the air, straining to tease out Popo's scent. Then he saw what had made the noise—a flying *gotharz*, one of the warty insects that pollinated plants. Disappointed, he swore under his breath.

He had always been careful to set the cage's latch. Suppose someone else had opened the cage? Someone who wanted to interrupt Snow's test? Someone who wanted Snow to fail?

He called out to the computer. "Belmarra? Did Durin come to the Agricultural Level after he left the Council meeting?"

"I cannot answer questions about another primus' past whereabouts. Providing this information would violate Durin's right of privacy."

"Never mind. I'll ask him myself."

"Is that wise?"

Ignoring the computer's question, he leapt to his feet and stalked off to find his enemy.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I suppose Ryus is looking for Popo right now," the doctor said as he led Snow through the corridors of Sick Bay.

"So Hirdos told you about the pet's escape?" Snow looked up at him in surprise. "Ryus said Popo's presence on the ship is a secret."

Delos gave her his gentle smile. "Ryus' wife was a doctor. I worked with her for years. I know all about Popo."

"I hope Ryus finds her. He's awfully worried."

"I'm sure she'll come to no harm," the doctor said, his tone soothing. He punched a code into a control panel. A door slid open, revealing a small room containing a long, gleaming metal box. Tubes entered it at either end. "Look, Snow. You spent your first six weeks on the ship in this *Walzinia* chamber."

She stared at the frightening box in dismay. "I wasn't lying on a bed, like all the other Brides?"

"Your severe illness merited special treatment. And it worked. When I woke you, your strength was much improved."

Snow nodded. "I'm amazed I was able to walk right away."

"That was due to this chamber. When you lie inside it, you're bombarded by *vosin* rays, which create miniscule tears in your muscles. As the tears heal, your muscles strengthen."

"So if I get inside that ugly thing again, I'll keep improving?"

Dr. Delos touched his right shoulder. "At double the rate of ordinary physical therapy. But I warn you, the process will be painful. You were heavily sedated after you were taken from Earth. That's why you don't remember the agony of the chamber."

"But I still need crutches to walk! I think you took me out too soon."

Apparently Delos liked criticism of his medical judgment no more than any Earth doctor. His brows drew together. "I woke you when I did—earlier than the other Brides—because the level of sedatives in your blood was dangerously high. Your body has not yet expelled all the drugs. If you return to the chamber, you will have to endure the rays without sedation."

Snow hesitated, looking at the coffin-like object. Could she endure the pain? These Terilian males were tough—she'd seen enough of them to know that much. If Dr. Delos used the word *agony*, she could be sure he meant it.

But she needed to be strong enough to stay on the ship. Strong enough to mate with Ryus. Strong enough to be his wife.

"You think I didn't go through some horrific medical treatments on Earth?" She lifted her chin. "When can I start?"

## Chapter Seven

Ryus found Durin on the Exercise and Recreation Level, sparring with a tall secundus. Gazing into the fight-pen through one of the viewports, he watched the secundus leap at Durin, who spun out of reach then darted back instantly. With a lightning-quick under-slash, Durin scored “first cut” against his opponent. The secundus fell back, his chest blooming red from the dye on the sparring gloves.

Ryus had almost forgotten how fast Durin moved. The anticipation of battle rose in his blood. Involuntarily his claws shot out.

He banged his palm against the control panel. The door slid open. The game computer intoned, “Match interrupted.”

Durin and his secundus partner whirled around to see who had committed the breach of etiquette.

“Get out,” Ryus told the secundus, jerking his head toward the doorway.

“We haven’t finished,” the secundus protested. Ryus growled and raised one hand. His razor-sharp claws caught the light.

Losing his nerve, the secundus fled the fight-pen.

Durin stood his ground. “I suppose you’re angry that I brought my concerns about Snow Jarrett to the Council,” he said.

“Should have challenged me like a primus, not avenged yourself on Snow.”

“It’s not all about *you*, Ryus. I want the Spring Running to be successful—for everyone.”

Ryus advanced on him, hatred coursing through his veins. He could barely wait to smell the other male’s blood. “What did you do with Arooa’s *patitou*?”

“I had nothing to do with the pet’s escape.”

Furious at the lie, Ryus raised both arms in combat-ready position. "Take off your gloves."

"You're insane. If we injure each other, we'll miss the Spring Running. Is that truly what you want?"

A low growl broke from Ryus' throat. "*What did you do with Popo?*"

"I told you, nothing!"

A red haze filled Ryus' sight. Durin cared neither for the *patitou's* safety nor for Snow's fate. All he wanted was revenge. For that he deserved to be hurt, to be slashed and bloodied.

Yet honor required that he be given one more chance. "Will you swear by the Great Fur-Mother?"

"How dare you challenge my spoken truth!" Stripping off his sparring gloves, Durin flung them to the floor.

"Ready?" Ryus demanded.

His opponent lifted his upper lip, revealing his gleaming fangs. The message had been given—*I'm ready to fight*.

Rage dammed further words. In one smooth movement Ryus crouched and leapt. Durin sprang forward at the same moment. They grappled in midair, then dashed apart as they landed.

They'd both drawn blood. Durin's chest was marked. Ryus' shoulder bled from a deep wound. He didn't feel the pain of it yet. It made no difference anyway. He would punish his enemy.

They circled each other at a half crouch. Ryus knew his opponent expected a quick attack, so he waited. Durin leapt and Ryus dodged aside. Encountering no resistance, Durin hit the floor. Ryus whirled and followed him down.

They grappled again, rolling on the ground while Ryus desperately tried to pin his opponent. Remembering how long it had taken to defeat Durin in their previous

encounter, he redoubled his efforts. This had to be resolved quickly, because any minute now —

The door slid open. Two security seconduses rushed in, weapons drawn. “Desist immediately,” the white-haired one commanded, “or you’ll get a dose from this Mind-Bender.”

Ryus shuddered, having no desire to spend the next few days as a drooling idiot, singing to himself and picking imaginary insects out of his hair. Nevertheless he tried to bluff it out.

“Leave us!” he replied. “Primus business here.” Releasing Durin, he leapt to his feet.

“Security has no jurisdiction to interfere in a challenge,” Durin growled, rising as though every bone in his body hurt.

“This is *not* a legal, registered challenge,” the security secondus answered coldly. “Accompany us to Sick Bay — before we lose patience.”

Seeing no alternative, Ryus strode off toward Sick Bay, trying to look as though he had nothing to do with the security seconduses at his heels.

Beside him, Durin spoke unexpectedly. “I didn’t go to the Council to get revenge on you.”

Ryus gave him a quick, surprised glance. Could he trust the other male’s words? He had doubts...yet Durin’s voice radiated sincerity.

“Then why?” he demanded.

Durin hesitated, looking at the security seconduses. They dropped back a few paces.

Durin lowered his voice. “When we fought the first time...I understand why you challenged me back then. It’s true that I pursued other men’s wives. I did that because — because my own wife was unable to satisfy me.”



"Phauru?" He remembered her well, a sweet-faced female with orange-striped hair. "Was something wrong with her?"

"She had an illness similar to Snow Jarrett's. Secondus Galzin was treating her but none of the medications worked – she had an unusual genetic structure." Durin looked down, his face working. "You think these last two years have been a horror? All our females dead, no one to mate with? Imagine having a wife whose every word, every gesture, makes you want to mount her. Yet when you do, her weakness prevents –" His voice broke.

With this confession, much became clear. Durin's distasteful actions. His brother Taddus' refusal to chastise him.

"How long have you gone without mating?" Ryus asked. "Three years? Four?" Was Durin closer to death than the rest of them?

"Two years, the same as everyone else. After you and I battled, my brother decided my problem must be resolved. At his request, his wife mated with me."

Ryus sucked in his breath. "Kind of her," he managed to say.

Durin tapped his right shoulder. "Vervina was an admirable female... Anyway, after I met Snow Jarrett in Sick Bay, Taddus showed me her medical report. I couldn't bear the thought of a male choosing her at the Spring Running, then being unable to climax. Not after two years of this terrible celibacy. No one deserves that kind of torture."

"Snow will do fine." He believed that. He *had* to believe that.

"I suppose you mean to choose her at the Running." Durin looked at him expectantly.

Ryus didn't reply. He'd borne his sorrow for two years, the pain like a claw in his heart. Now with the added burden of his feelings for Snow, the claw was slashing his heart in two.

"Take this as a well-meant warning," Durin said. "Being married to a female who can't satisfy you is a fate I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy." With a short, unhumorous laugh, he added, "Not even you."

A thrill of dread crawled down Ryus' spine. "Won't matter if she's exiled to Jahariz."

"Despite what Hirdos thinks, I'm *not* heartless. It pains me to think of leaving the female behind. But what is best for the ship?" His voice vibrated with passion. "For all of us?"

Ryus answered sternly, "We can't do right by all of us unless we act morally toward each one of us."

Durin didn't reply but his expression turned thoughtful.

They'd reached Sick Bay. Extracting promises from them not to resume their duel, the security seconduses left. Durin strode off to another part of Sick Bay while Belmarra directed Ryus to a private cubicle.

He found Delos seated beside a still-sedated Janis Stone, holding her hand. Ryus gave his friend a skeptical look as the doctor jumped to his feet.

"Foolish to choose a female you won't be able to marry," Ryus commented.

Delos' eyebrows rose. "*That's* the sapphire calling the ocean blue. Why don't *you* let Snow go into exile and pick another Bride?"

"That better be a rhetorical question." Ryus gestured at his shoulder. "Feel like patching me up?"

With a last reluctant glance toward Janis, Delos led him to a healing room and tended the wound. "I suppose Durin gave you this? Who won?"

"Security interrupted us."

"Good."

"Good?" Ryus said, outraged.

"Haven't we lost enough shipmates already?" The doctor finished by handing him a vial. Ryus opened the stopper and sniffed. The agony of his wound faded.

"Secondus Delos?" Belmarra's voice echoed through the small room. "You asked for an alert when Snow's pain level reaches 5.9. That has just occurred."

"Acknowledged." Delos clapped Ryus on his unhurt shoulder. "You're free to go."

Alarmed, Ryus followed him from the room. "What are you doing to Snow?"

"She's in the *Walzinia* chamber."

Nausea snaked through his gut. "Unsedated?" Knowing where the chamber was kept, he bounded down the corridor, leaving Delos behind.

When the door opened he rushed into the room, staring down at her through the chamber's clear cover. Snow's hands were gripped together. Sweat beaded her forehead. Glistening tracks of tears on her flushed cheeks made his heart overturn.

The *vosin* rays activated. The chamber glowed blue, the color of death. Snow's white tunic abruptly turned into the deep cobalt that clothed a corpse.

*She's dead.* He stopped breathing. *I'll never hold her again. Never mate with her. Never be her husband.* Sorrow engulfed him, nearly pulling him under.

Her features twisted. She raised white-knuckled fists to cover her face.

Heart crashing against his chest, Ryus fumbled with the controls, unable to manage the sequence. Terror made his fingers clumsy and awkward. Cursing, he slowed his trembling hands and tried again.

At last he deactivated the chamber and threw the lid open.

Snow gazed up at him in shock as he scooped her out of the chamber, cradling her against his chest. He closed his eyes and buried his face in her fragrant curls, whispering thanks to the Great Fur-Mother that she was safe.

Delos came in, folding his arms over his chest, a disgusted expression on his face.

"What were you thinking?" Ryus demanded. "Snow was in *pain*." Fury surged through him. He badly wanted to hurt the doctor.

Snow pushed against his chest. "Put me down!" He set her on her feet. Letting go was difficult. He wanted to rush to his cabin with her, caress the shapely arms and legs that had endured long minutes of agony, keep her safe forever.

Her expression still creased with pain, she turned stiffly toward Delos. "Doctor, what happened? Did I get my full hour?"

"Forty-six minutes," Delos told her.

"I want the full hour!"

Determined not to let Snow return to the chamber, Ryus glared at the doctor. "She doesn't need this!" His right claws shot out, which relieved him only slightly. "The physical therapy —"

"Is not enough." Delos strode forward, standing nose-to-nose with him. "Sheathe your Mother-scratching claws. I don't understand why everyone's suddenly questioning my medical judgment today."

"I *forbid* this." Ryus gestured toward the chamber. "No patient should have to endure this kind of pain during therapy."

Snow's gray eyes flashed. "I asked for this treatment. I'm doing it for us." She put her hand on his arm. "I want to be strong enough to be your wife."

Torn, he gazed down at Snow's upturned face. Part of him yearned to embrace her, to tell her how much he wanted her, to assure her that he would mate with her at the Spring Running. To tell her he'd choose her as his wife...

*Wife.* Arooa had been his wife. His only wife.

They'd chosen each other three times. For Arooa's sake he'd braved his father's anger, his family's disapproval of his marriage to a female of the Gray-Striped Pelt.

When he didn't answer, Snow took a step back. "I'm assuming too much." Her lips had turned white. "I thought you cared for me but —"

The words rushed unbidden from his mouth. "The more I care for you, the more I feel disloyal to my wife."

He was horrified by the words as soon as they were spoken. Judging from the way the color drained from her face, the hurt he'd just inflicted on Snow was worse than the agony of the *Walzinia* chamber.

"I was always second-best with my husband," she said. "I will never go through that again." Her magnificent breasts lifted as she drew a deep breath. She'd never seemed more desirable. "I intend to be strong by the Spring Running. And I intend to have a husband who loves me. *Only me.*"

Before Ryus could form a reply, Delos stepped forward and took Snow's arm. "Come into the examining room. I need to check your vital signs. And don't worry – you *will* be strong," he assured her as he led her away. "At the Running, males will be fighting over you. You might even marry a Council member. Hirdos himself was talking about choosing you..." The doctor's cruelly cheerful voice trailed off as the door slid shut behind them.

Ryus realized anger was of no use. He'd brought this on himself. Nevertheless he gritted his teeth as he paced back and forth, waiting for them to return. He'd walk Snow back to her cabin. He'd apologize. He'd explain.

When the door finally reopened, Delos came in alone. The doctor regarded him in silence for a long moment.

"Where's Snow?" Ryus demanded.

"She returned to her cabin. And don't try to enter it. At her request, I changed the door admittance function to keep you out."

Ryus' heart plummeted. How could he talk to Snow if she refused to see him? "Thought we were friends," he accused the doctor.

"I *am* your friend." Delos strode closer. "And as your friend, let me tell you this. You were offered a second chance at happiness by a lovely, intelligent female. And what did you do? Drove her away with your stubborn inability to let go of the past."

"Can't help the way I feel." Fury and confusion spun together in his mind.

"Stop wallowing in grief." Delos put his hand on Ryus' arm. How did he dare? Didn't the doctor know how badly he wanted to slash something to pieces? "Ry, we can't build a new civilization if we're always looking backward. There's no point in going on with this venture without wives."

Gritting his teeth, Ryus pulled away. "Know that. But I left Teril *because* of Arooa. My Peltdom never accepted her."

Delos brushed that aside with a wave of his hand. "Most of us left for similar reasons. Teril was too structured, too hidebound. That's why this venture is worth our sweat and toil—even though our Terilian wives are gone." He fixed Ryus with a stern look. "Would Arooa want you to mourn her forever? Or would she want you to be happy?"

The doctor's words washed over him. He couldn't deny the truth. Arooa had always put him first.

Just as he'd put her first.

"Think about it," Delos concluded. "Think *hard*. In the meantime, come with me."

Ryus followed him down a corridor, figuring Del was about to assign some of the newly awakened Brides to him for treatment. While the females had received various forms of nerve and muscle stimulation during their medically induced comas, no doubt some of them would need physical therapy. Perhaps he could work with them in large groups and recruit some of the orderlies to help. While most of his shipmates would envy his chance to work with the Brides, it meant little to him. The only female he cared about was Snow.

He hoped Del would instruct him quickly. Snow's disappointed face lingered in his mind. His need to talk to her was rapidly growing desperate.

As they entered one of the research laboratories, a high-pitched voice squeaked, "Ryus! Ryus!"

Joyously he rushed to the cage and freed Popo. She ran up his arm and snuggled against his neck. Never before had he been so happy to breathe in her acrid odor, to feel her soft fur against his skin.

Turning, he asked, "Del, where did you find her?" Something about the doctor's smug expression revealed the truth. "You had her all along!"

He'd accused Durin of a deed he'd never committed. Grimacing, he realized he owed Durin an apology.

"I had to interrupt the mating test somehow," Delos said. "Snow needed more time."

The explanation quenched his anger. He couldn't say whether or not the mating would have failed. But if it had, Snow would already be sentenced to exile.

"Thanks." Delos' action had given Snow more time to build her strength. "But why didn't you tell me about Popo earlier? Know how many hours I spent looking for this little furball?" Popo climbed up his hair and nibbled on his ear. Wincing, he brought her down.

"Unbelievable as it may sound, I have other concerns aside from you and Snow. Including fifty newly awakened Brides who are frightened and upset."

"Feared Popo was hurt." Ryus adjusted the front of his tunic to make a carrying space for the little creature.

Delos raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Hurt? A *patitou* is perfectly safe on this ship. None of her natural enemies are aboard." With a dismissive wave of his hand, he added, "Get her out of my laboratory, will you? I can't stand the odor."

With one hand over Popo's quivering fur, Ryus left Sick Bay and used the jumps to reach the Agricultural Level. Soon the *patitou* was back in her cage, eating from her bowl contentedly. He couldn't help smiling as he watched.

Until she looked up at him, her beady eyes bright. "Rooa? Rooa?"

“Not coming back,” he muttered. Her gaze showed no comprehension. The *patitou* could not understand complex ideas.

Lifting her out of the cage again, he walked out of the cave and knelt in the grass.

Delos had spoken the truth. Arooa had always wanted him to be happy.

The first time he’d seen Snow, he’d been struck by how much Arooa would have liked her. He’d recalled how his wife had valued courage above all other virtues.

Today Snow had proved she had as much courage as any male he’d ever fought. He clenched his fists, trying to shut out the agony she’d faced in the *Walzinia* chamber.

She’d done that for him. *I want to be strong enough to be your wife.* Drawing a deep breath, he wondered, *Am I worthy of that kind of effort?*

He tried to imagine standing aside while another male mated with her, became her husband. The mere thought made his pulse hammer with rage.

Snow was right. She needed a male who would put her first. Not treat her as a pale replacement of his first wife. She was an alluring female who deserved the full attention of a loving, caring mate.

The *patitou* tickled his neck. He brought her down, cradling her in his palms.

A memory, however treasured, couldn’t provide companionship, couldn’t stand by his side when danger threatened, couldn’t build a new life with him on a new world.

With a heavy sigh, he gazed up at the metal-sheathed ceiling, painted violet to resemble the sky of Teril. He had to lock Arooa away in his memory. Not forget her – never that – but learn to live without her.

He’d made a start when he fell in love with Snow.

He set the *patitou* on the grass, close to a flowering *ritilla*. She lifted her snout, caught the scent and ran forward. When she settled in to nibble at the plant, he stood.

Closing his eyes, he whispered, “Farewell.”

He left the Agricultural Level without looking back.



## **Chapter Eight**

"Bride Snow?" Belmarra's low-pitched voice insinuated itself through Snow's cabin. "Primus Ryus is at your door again."

Snow gritted her teeth. "Please tell him I can't see him."

"This is the twentieth time in eleven days that he has tried to contact you."

"Really? I thought this was number nineteen."

Apparently sarcasm was beyond Belmarra's abilities, for she answered calmly, "Twenty. Would you like a complete listing of the attempted contacts?"

"No. New instructions. Do not let me know when Ryus tries to contact me." Each time it was a stronger temptation to hurry to the door, rush into his arms and lead him inside. "Just tell him I don't want to see him or talk to him."

"Instructions accepted."

"Good!" After all, she'd learned her lesson with her ex-husband, Craig. She'd never come first with him. He'd always regretted the breakup with his old girlfriend. Karin had been his ideal woman, he'd told Snow...repeatedly.

Maybe that's why their marriage hadn't been strong enough to endure when she'd become ill.

Any historian knew that history repeated itself. Only a fool fell into the trap of making the same mistake over and over.

She had enough to think about without worrying about her ridiculous infatuation with Ryus. All the Brides were awake now. Their liaison to the Terilians, Janis Stone, had convinced the Council to hold a huge wedding. Snow herself was on three committees to plan it, including one to document everything with detailed written descriptions.

She was thrilled to have the companionship of other Earth women and happy to be kept busy with the committee work. Hectic days were punctuated by nearly unbearable bouts of muscle stimulation in the *Walzinia* chamber. Each day she got through the session by promising herself she would never return to Sick Bay. But each day saw her returning for one more agonizing treatment.

Secondus Delos seemed pleased with her results. She no longer wore crutches. She walked, jumped and ran as though she'd never been ill. Every day she rose from her bed with ease, thankful to have escaped the nursing home.

All this kept her from dwelling too much on her failed relationship with Ryus. Sleep-cycles were the worst time, because during them, memories assailed her relentlessly. She imagined his hands caressing her nipples, gently stroking until they peaked. His body on top of hers...his hard cock pressed against her stomach...

She could suppress those thoughts but she couldn't prevent the dreams that tortured her. Every night she relived the mating test, feeling again the consuming joy when he first pushed inside her, the wonderful thrusts of his powerful cock. She usually woke with tears on her cheeks.

*He doesn't love you. Forget him. You'll find another mate.*

But she didn't want anyone else. Only Ryus.

\* \* \* \* \*

"All Brides report to the fourteenth floor. Follow the blinking corridor lights to the central elevators. All Brides..."

The Earth women flocked into the corridors. Snow swore under her breath as her cabin door swished shut behind her. The announcement had interrupted a glorious dream. Ryus kneeling between her parted thighs, giving her overwhelming pleasure with his warm, wet tongue...

Coming out of the cabin next to Snow's, Valida looked at her curiously. Over the last few days, they'd sat together at meals and quickly become friends.

"Your face is flushed," Valida said. "What's wrong?"

"I'd tell you but then I'd have to kill you," Snow teased, not wanting to admit to erotic dreams.

"Maybe we're being called for the Spring Running." The other woman's dusky cheeks darkened with a sudden blush. "I was having this incredible dream. I'm too embarrassed to talk about it." Her brown eyes apprehensive, she added, "I hope I'm ready for a Terilian husband."

Snow patted her friend's shoulder. "Don't be afraid. I'm sure you'll find someone nice."

When they reached the Agricultural Level, the Council awaited them. As soon as all the Brides were present, Council member Goldus rose.

"Beautiful Brides, welcome to one of the most important events of the Terilian people. You may have noticed yourself experiencing intense erotic longings recently. You're merely responding to our male pheromones and to your own desires to mate during today's Spring Running."

Looking toward the Council, Snow happened to catch Hirdos' eye. For a long moment their gazes locked. His intent expression told her that the doctor's words were true — Hirdos desired her.

Her breasts ached to be fondled by a male's big hands. Her nipples peaked as her desire mounted. She reached one hand inside her tunic and ran her fingertips over one stiffened peak, barely stifling a moan.

Hirdos' eyes widened.

Her pussy pulsed, heavy and hot with arousal. Soon she would be mating with a Terilian.

Would it be Ryus? She remembered the question he'd posed weeks ago. *Should I participate in something I believe is wrong?* Perhaps he wouldn't attend the Spring Running.

Her stomach dropped and some of her excitement died.

Surely he would be sensible and find a Bride, rather than risk death.

Goldus continued, "When the whistle sounds, run deep into the park and conceal yourselves. At the end of twenty minutes, the secundus-ranked males will search for you. Don't make it too easy for them, Brides! Part of the joy of the Spring Running is the challenge of finding you before mating."

Would Ryus try to find her? Or would he choose another?

Ryus mating with another Bride...a pang of agony worse than the *vosin* rays knifed through her.

"After another hour, the fifty primus-ranked males will be allowed into the park," Goldus said. "Be aware that primuses have first choice among females, so even if you've already mated with a secundus, you may still be fortunate enough to gain a primus husband."

A primus husband. Ryus?

Goldus concluded, "May the Great Fur-Mother bless us all today. Brides, good Running."

The whistle sounded. The crowd of women surged forward into the park.

"Run, ladies!" a woman shouted, far ahead. The Brides at the front of the crowd obeyed. Soon the whole group was running.

Snow fell into an easy jog. She looked for Valida but they'd become separated by the crowd. She hoped the Running would go well for her friend.

She thought briefly of the nursing home. Only a few weeks ago she'd been more helpless than a newborn baby, unable to feed herself. Now her legs were powerful. A boulder loomed in her path. Without thinking she leapt, clearing it effortlessly. Her heart skipped with joy.

Ryus had helped her achieve this new strength. Powerful enough to intimidate other males, he was simultaneously gentle and encouraging.

And a wonderful lover.

She ached with need. She'd never be happy until his palms caressed her thighs again, moving their way slowly upward. Shivering with arousal, she recalled his fingers stroking her curls.

She mustn't let sexual desire distract her from her plan.

Dr. Delos had let it slip that the Spring Running would be held in this area. Several days ago she'd come here alone, observing the long grass in the park, the acres of crops, the walking sprinklers and the canals from which they drew water.

She'd asked the doctor whether anyone swam in the canals. Shocked, he'd replied that no Terilian liked swimming.

But he'd assured her that the water in the canals was pure and fresh.

The crowd thinned out. Some women concealed themselves behind boulders or in trees. One woman climbed high then called out, "I see the Terilians!"

The secundus males were on their way.

Snow changed direction, running west toward the crops. Soon she found a canal. Five feet wide, six feet deep, the water inside was clear and sparkling. Seating herself on the edge, she hesitated for just a moment, then removed her tunic and shoes.

She slipped in, laughing with pleasure as the cool water flowed over her naked body, buoying her up. She'd always loved swimming. Holding her breath, she dunked her head under, then raised her face, shaking her wet curls back.

Her scent was concealed by the water. She didn't want a secundus mate. She wanted Ryus. *If* he wanted her as well.

The canal had a swift current, no doubt designed that way to keep the water from becoming stagnant. She let it carry her along.

A throaty sound made her stop. She held onto the edge of the canal, peering out through the tall, fernlike plants that lined each side of the waterway.

One of the Brides was already mating with a Terilian. He was a big fellow, almost as large as Ryus. Standing, he held the woman in his arms. Her legs were tight around his waist, her arms surrounding his neck. As he thrust into her, she threw her head back, letting her hair swing free. An incoherent sound of pleasure burst from her throat.

He bent his head, nibbling her neck. She cried out again and he groaned.

Despite the cool water, Snow's pussy pulsed with heat. Forcing herself to turn away, she resumed floating, letting her eyes drift shut.

After a few minutes she heard the sound of running feet.

A male with glossy black hair raced after a chubby red-haired woman. He was naked, his erect cock held against his body with a red cord. The woman looked back over her shoulder, laughing when he caught her hand.

"Lovely," he said, stroking the woman's face.

"Lovely? Me?" she asked. Her eager gaze moved swiftly over the handsome male's muscular form.

"Your face and body are beautiful but your scent is beyond compare." He pulled at her tunic, exposing her plump breasts. Staring at them, he fell silent.

Snow remembered the first time Ryus had looked at her naked breasts, her delighted response when he touched her. Her nipples always peaked immediately at the gentle touch of his questing tongue.

Her hand crept to her mound, stroking her wet curls. Ah, if only it were Ryus touching her.

The red-haired woman said uneasily, "I know they're too droopy."

"No!" Reverently, the male covered the woman's breasts with his palms. His hands moved, rubbing her until she cried out, "Oh, that feels so good!"

*God, I need Ryus.* Snow slid underwater again, taking out her frustration by frog-kicking her legs, propelling herself forward.

The hour between the admittance of the seconduses and the primuses seemed to take days. At last she peered out and spotted the dark-haired orderly she'd seen in Sick Bay. The jeweled band in his hair proclaimed his primus status. He lifted his face, his nostrils flaring. Had he scented her? She was relieved when he began running in the opposite direction.

*The primuses are here.* She quivered with excitement. Was Ryus searching for her?

Then she saw him in the distance, running side by side with another male, heading straight for her. As they drew closer, she realized the golden-haired male beside him was Hirdos.

They wore identical red cords around their erect penises. Hirdos' cock was even longer than Ryus' but not as thick.

She held onto the edge of the canal, gazing toward them. "I didn't think you'd find me so quickly," she called.

"Come out of the water." Ryus knelt at the side of the canal, pushing past tall fronds to offer his hands. "Belmarra told us where you were."

"Isn't that cheating?" She let him help her out of the canal. Water ran off her body in long, sparkling rivulets. The two males stared at her, eyes wide.

"Primus privilege," Hirdos said at last, licking his lips. "By the great Fur-Mother, I've never seen such beauty."

Ryus drew her close. "Torture, not being with you all those days. Want to apologize. Hate myself for hurting you."

"Don't hate yourself," she whispered, reveling in the feel of his broad chest. "I missed you." Her pussy pulsed. With two aroused males this close, her body yearned for release.

The longing was swiftly growing unbearable. She wanted to sink to the ground and part her legs. She needed Ryus' cock inside her, thrusting deep and fast.

"Won't ever forget Arooa. But I've accepted that she's gone." His voice dropped. "Mate with me. I swear you won't be sorry."

Hirdos took a step closer. "Not so fast, Ry." Reaching out, he caressed Snow's cheek. "I know you're fond of him. But if you mate with *me*, you'll be a Council member's wife."

"If I'm strong enough for a successful mating," Snow said.

He touched his right shoulder, looking away.

She knew which one she wanted. She opened her lips to speak.

Ryus' arms tightened around her. "Wait, Snow. Both of us desire you. To settle the dispute, Hirdos and I will fight."

"No! I don't want either of you to be hurt." She looked from him to Hirdos. "Isn't there any other way? Why can't I choose?"

The two males consulted by glance. "You can," Ryus said, his deep voice reluctant. "Tradition is, you let both of us pleasure you. Then you make your choice."

"Oh!" She licked her lips. "What exactly will you do to me?"

Hirdos' hot gaze swept over her body. "We'll both bring you to orgasm without intercourse. You'll make your choice then mate with the victor."

The smoldering arousal she'd felt since her dream burst into flames. She grinned. "What are we waiting for?"



## **Chapter Nine**

Snow lay on her back in the tall grass, luxuriating in the heat of the artificial lights beaming down from the false sky. As Ryus stretched out to her left, she grabbed his hand. "Are you all right with this?" she asked softly.

"It's our way. Barely suppressed anger creased his forehead. "Remember how I told you this is an in-between time? Once you're my wife, if another male touches you, I'll kill him."

"Don't assume she'll choose you," Hirdos said, lying on her right. "When Snow experiences the pleasure I give her, she'll choose me."

A growl was Ryus' only answer.

Hirdos brought his palm down the side of her body, starting with her chest and going slowly to her hip, making her shiver. "How strange it feels, caressing a wet female. Whatever made you immerse yourself in water?"

She breathed him in, deciding that his aroused scent reminded her of newly mown grass. "I figured the water would hide my scent from the secunduses. I wanted to wait for Ryus."

Ryus' golden eyes brightened at her words. "You need to be dry before anything else," he said. "Can't be healthy for you to be wet like this."

She giggled. How silly to think that being wet in this near-tropical heat would harm anyone. But when he and Hirdos began licking the water from her body, she stopped laughing and sighed with contentment.

The touch of their rough tongues was as relaxing as a massage, yet far more arousing. They worked in tandem, each of them licking the water from her arms then moving to her breasts. Her breathing quickened as both males sucked her nipples for long, enthralling moments.

Her nipples darkened and puckered under their sensual attention.

She needed fingers or a tongue in her pussy. Her hips jerked restlessly. She was so close to an orgasm. If only one of them would touch her clit, she'd go off like a Roman candle.

Instead they left her breasts, moving downward to her legs. Why weren't they licking the very wettest part of her — her gushing pussy?

"Patience, little one," Ryus murmured. "When you're dry, I'll pleasure you." His tongue swirled over her thighs, making her tremble with longing.

"We'll pleasure you," Hirdos corrected. He cradled her calf in his warm palm, alternately teasing with his lips and licking with his tongue. When the two males nuzzled her ankles and sucked her toes, her anticipation reached nearly unbearable heights. She shut her lips tightly, so tempted to beg them for an orgasm.

Hirdos stroked her cheek. "Delos told us about a new Earthian technique for sexual stimulation. *Kissing*. Will you kiss me, Snow?"

Hoping it would distract from her frenzied need, she turned on her side. She put her hand on Hirdos' shoulder and brought her lips to his. His mouth was unmoving under hers until she licked his upper lip. He flinched.

She drew away. "Relax," she murmured. "Open your mouth."

He obeyed and she kissed him again. For a moment it was as awkward as a first kiss in junior high. Then he seemed to catch the trick of it. His warm lips shifted under hers. She slid her tongue over his, withdrew, then did it again.

He groaned. She moved back, asking, "Did you like kissing?"

"By the Great Fur-Mother, it makes me want to mate!" He rolled onto his back, breathing hard.

"My turn," Ryus said, his insistent hands turning her to face him. More aggressive than Hirdos, he brought his lips to hers immediately. His mouth stroked hers, urging her lips to open. She parted them and slid her tongue against his. He surprised her

again by sucking it. Her pulse quickened. Had he received detailed instructions about the art of kissing from his friend Delos?

But then, Ryus always seemed to know what he was doing.

His hand on her breast, he teased her nipple with his thumb. His tongue thrust against hers in the rhythm of intercourse while his thumb circled her peaking nipple again and again. Her stomach clenched as her arousal built.

Behind her, Hirdos stroked her cleft with eager fingers. She trembled under the soft, exciting caress. Why was his touch so light? She wanted him to thrust his fingers inside her throbbing channel.

She loved Ryus, she had no doubt about that. So was it wrong to enjoy the carnal attentions of two males who desired her? The Spring Running had brought her to the highest peak of sexual readiness. All she wanted was to feel their hands on her, their lips moving over her, their long, hard cocks against her body.

This was not *her* idea. This was their tradition. And she planned to enjoy the hell out of it.

Absorbed in kissing Ryus, she couldn't see what Hirdos was doing. She felt him withdraw his hand. Then one finger returned, slick and wet. He slid the tip into her anus.

She gasped, feeling momentary hurt as he stretched her. Then excitement raced through her as he moved his finger in a slow circle.

Ryus' rumbling growl filled her ears. "We need to take turns. Otherwise, how can she choose between us?"

"You're right." Hirdos' voice filled with the brisk decision of one accustomed to command. "I'll go first."

Glowing, Ryus moved away. Snow wanted to say something reassuring. *Don't you know how much I love you?* But she didn't want to hurt Hirdos' feelings.

Her lips twitched. The entire Council had watched, unable to participate while Ryus attempted to mate with her. Now it was Ryus' turn to watch. Was this payback?

But when Hirdos sat up and took her hands, something sparked in his blue eyes.

She blurted out, "Why are you doing this? There are hundreds of healthy Earth women. As a primus, you have first choice."

"Your courage seduced me," he answered. "I used the *Walzinia* chamber once when I injured my thigh. I could never face that agony again. *You* entered the chamber twelve times to make yourself worthy of a Terilian mate." He squeezed her hands.

*To make myself strong enough for Ryus.*

"Get on with it," Ryus said, his tone ungracious. "Don't want to be late for our own weddings." He clamped his mouth shut. His jaw twitched.

Ignoring him, Hirdos said, "Snow, get on your hands and knees, as though we're about to mate." He gave her an intimate smile. Lowering his voice, he added, "I want to hear you cry out with pleasure."

She did as he requested. Her heavy breasts tingled, hanging free. Her pussy throbbed, aching to be filled.

Hirdos' palms molded onto her buttocks, caressing and parting them. A moan broke from her throat.

She glanced at Ryus, lying on his side a few feet away. His eyes shut as though he were in pain. His fists clenched. His cock, swollen and dark, strained against the cord.

He opened his eyes. He wasn't looking at her face but at what Hirdos was doing behind her. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

Hirdos' fingers spread her wide. Then his wet tongue swirled along her labia. She cried out, mindlessly trying to open her legs farther.

"Do it again!" she pleaded. Yes, this was what she wanted, what she ached for—a tongue pleasuring her, thrusting into her channel like a thick cock. She rocked back against him, begging wordlessly for more.

Her wild cries of delight were embarrassing but she couldn't stop herself as she rose to new heights of sensual pleasure. She gasped, pushing frantically against his tongue.

His fingers went to her labia, tracing them gently, while his tongue moved to her anus, swirling around and around, delighting nerves she'd never realized she had. His curled tongue pushed inside her puckered hole, too wet and soft to hurt. She felt as though she was rushing toward a climax, her nerves on fire.

Then his thumb fondled her swollen clit.

The sensations peaked and she exploded, her channel pulsing hard. She sobbed, her anus pulsing, her clit throbbing.

Lost in a fog of pleasure, she was barely able to stretch out onto her back. She gasped for breath, still feeling the tremors radiating through her pussy. Lying beside her, Hirdos licked her neck.

"Enough," Ryus growled.

Raising his head, Hirdos glared at him. Fearing a fight would break out, she gave Hirdos' cheek a quick caress. "Thank you," she murmured. "I've never been given such pleasure by any Earth man."

His angry look easing, he caught her hand and licked the palm. Moving away from her, he made an ironic gesture toward Ryus. *Go ahead – your turn.*

Snow relished their jealousy, their competitiveness. On Earth, she'd admired handsome, muscular men. But she'd never been desired by them. On this ship, two of the top males were ready to fight for the privilege of becoming her husband.

Ryus eased down beside her, taking her in his arms. She sighed happily, breathing in his minty scent. Being held by him was like coming home.

"Ready for more pleasure?" he asked.

Surprisingly, she was. Her pussy clenched at the rumble of his voice. The pleasure Hirdos had given her, exquisite though it had been, had left her only briefly satisfied. She wanted more.

"Touch me," she pleaded, aware of his hard cock pressing against her stomach. She ached to have him thrusting inside her pussy.

But he had to give her pleasure without mating. Well, she was ready for that.

He whispered, "Open your legs." When she moved her thighs apart, he began stroking her, the tips of his fingers playing lightly across her labia. She arched up against him, demanding a firmer touch.

He lowered his head, taking her earlobe in his teeth, nibbling it. She stretched her neck, sighing with ecstasy. His tongue teased her ear, swirling over the whorl, stroking the lobe. Meanwhile his hand touched her pussy gently, a caress that made her arch up under his fingers.

"Ryus – Ryus –" She wanted to beg but words had left her.

"Hush, Snow." He pressed the heel of his hand against her mound. Delight darted through her. Yes, the firmer touch was wonderful.

He spoke into her ear. "Want to give you more pleasure than you've ever had before."

*Yes, yes, yes.*

Burying his face in her neck, he bit her shoulder. Her blood leapt in response.

He stroked her labia again. She shuddered with lust, feeling his touch from her pussy all the way down to her toes. "More," she begged. If she couldn't have his cock right now, she wanted his fingers.

Taking her right nipple in his mouth, he sucked hard. At the same moment, he thrust two fingers into her hot, needy channel.

Nothing had ever felt so good.

He moved out and thrust again. She hadn't known pleasure could double in seconds.

She screamed as a powerful climax hit with the force of a lightning bolt. He thrust again and again. She thrashed her hips in rhythm with his movement. The waves of rolling ecstasy seemed to last forever. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

She went limp. She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and tell him how much she loved him. Drowsy with pleasure, she was too drained to speak.

Ryus kissed her lips, murmuring her name.

Her lids fluttered open. She gazed into his eyes. The glints of gold made her think of the sun. The glow of his eyes would surely warm her throughout her life.

"Snow, it's time to make your choice," Hirdos said.

She blinked. She'd forgotten he was there.

Releasing her, Ryus leapt to his feet, then offered his hand. She rose, facing the two gorgeous males who had just given her supremely powerful orgasms.

"Snow," Hirdos said, "if you choose me, I'll make you happy. You'll be a Council member's wife, the highest position a female can attain. My wealth will buy you all the jewelry and clothing that females delight in." He touched her face. "And now you know that I can give you pleasure as well."

"Thank you, Hirdos," she said politely. "Your offer is tempting." She turned to Ryus.

Planting his feet, he raised her chin and looked into her eyes. "Little one, I promise you this. If our mating is unsuccessful, I'll give you more time."

"You can't! The Council said —"

"If you're exiled, I'll stay with you on Jahariz."

Snow gasped, not sure she'd heard correctly. He'd give up the great venture? Go to the planet he'd described as a dismal swamp, for *her* sake?

Judging from Hirdos' poleaxed expression, Ryus had shocked him too.

Her eyes filled with tears. "Do you...can you really mean it?"

His hand flew to his right shoulder.

Gulping, she turned a questioning glance to Hirdos.

Pain filled his eyes. "I can't offer the same. As a Council member, my duty is to *Ecstasy of Generations*."

At least he'd given her a graceful way to make her choice more palatable for him. Not that there'd ever been any question in her mind.

"Hirdos?" Her throat clogged at his disappointed expression. He'd already guessed that he'd lost. "I'm sorry. Ryus is my choice."

She looked away from him. Ryus met her gaze. His eyes blazed with the light of an exploding sun.

Hirdos squared his shoulders. Gracious in defeat, he said, "I wish you both the blessings of the Great Fur-Mother." With a sad smile, he added, "And now I had better go find a Bride." Quickly he turned away, then broke into a fast lope.

"Good running," Ryus called after him. Putting his hands on Snow's shoulders, he smiled. "Now, my beautiful Snow – shall we mate?"

Goldus' words flitted through her mind. *Don't make it too easy for them, Brides!*

Grinning, she said, "If you can catch me!" She leapt away and ran, as fast as an Earthian vixen with a hunting pack after her.

Glancing behind, she saw that it took him a moment to start after her. Perhaps he hadn't believed she would flee. She lengthened her strides. She'd never been able to run so fast on Earth, not even at her peak physical strength in her early twenties.

In a few moments she heard Ryus pounding after her. Fast though she was now, she was no match for his long legs and superior strength. Catching her around the waist, he rolled to the ground, holding her on top of him.



She tried to pull away, laughing with sheer excitement. Turning, he pinned her facedown, his muscular thighs holding her while he untied the cord that held his cock. She struggled halfheartedly, knowing that was her duty as a female during the Spring Running. But what she really wanted was to mate as soon as possible.

"Love you, Snow," he said.

She stilled abruptly. He'd ever said those words before.

"Tell me you love me," he demanded. He moved off her. She raised her hips in the mating position. A moment later, she felt his hot length pressing against her entrance.

"I'll tell you after we've mated," she said. Why did she want to tease him? Perhaps because he was being foolish. Didn't he know how much she loved him? Hadn't she chosen him over a Council member?

"Tell me. Tell me *now*." He thrust inside her, the hard plunge of his cock leaving her breathless. Pleasure overtook her immediately. A climax rippled through her. She couldn't speak, could only moan with utter satisfaction.

"Love you, Snow. Love you." His thrusts quickened. "My beautiful one. Tell me. Say you love me." His voice sounded desperate.

His minty scent intensified. His ragged breathing filled her ears. The pleasure he'd given her earlier was a flickering candle compared to the raging fire of this mating.

Her pussy gushed around his driving rod. A second climax built on the heels of the first. As it reached a crescendo, she cried out, "Ryus, I love you!" Her inner muscles squeezed his powerful cock.

Ryus gripped her hips. Her sweet vagina clung around his penis as though molded to fit him.

Then the pressure suddenly increased. The tight grip of her inner muscles fueled his climax. His seed, dammed for so long, shot forth. He roared with astounded delight.

He was caught in a storm of lust, barely aware of Snow pushing back against him, ensnared in her own joy. His head whirled. How could pleasure last this long? He never wanted to stop thrusting into her.

He spurted into her again and again. Mindless with ecstasy, out of control, he rocked into her. He groaned with each long thrust.

Her vagina responded, squeezing and milking him. He reached around, rubbing his thumb against her swollen clitoris. She screamed and he felt another orgasm ripple through her.

At last his climax ebbed. Exhausted he rolled onto his side, bringing Snow down with him, still joined.

When he recovered he would mate with her again. Enticing positions flickered through his mind. He could hardly wait to take her. His penis stirred at the thought of possessing her, proving once more that she belonged to him.

He licked the back of her neck. She shivered in response.

"We mated!" Her voice rang out exultantly. "Now I don't have to be exiled!"

He tightened his grip. "My own little one," he whispered.

His left hand was on her waist. Her hand stole under his, nestling there—just as this lovely, courageous Earth woman would nestle in his heart forever.

With the last of his strength, he breathed into her ear, "I love you...my beautiful, beautiful wife."

## About the Author

Solange Ayre, galaxy-hopping investigative journalist, also serves as a policy advisor to the United Conglomeration of Planetary Jurisdictions. She makes her home on Ayriana, her private island-republic in the West Caribbean region of Earth.

After a whirlwind childhood living in the capitals of Europe, Solange married St. Georges Ayre, one of the wealthiest men in the world. The crystal palace he bought her on Ayriana is the primary tourist attraction in the area – at least, for those who can find it. St. George's mysterious assassination is still mourned by his grieving widow.

Directly descended from King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Solange graciously supports the democratic government of France and relinquishes her claim to the throne. Under no circumstances will she answer to the title "Your Highness."

In her spare time, Solange enjoys breeding and showing her prize-winning miniature dragons as well as researching and writing erotic romance.

Solange welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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