



Chaos Forged

By

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Cover art by Eliza Black, 2008
ISBN 978-1-60394-144-0
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

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Chapter One

"Houston, this is Dr. Danielle Stevens aboard the ISS Pegasus. Do you read?" She paused, listening intently for several moments and then repeated the transmission. Nothing but dead air greeted her each time she switched from send to receive.

That was all any of the ten-member crew aboard the international space station had heard for weeks now. Dead air.

The news reports they'd picked up before had been frightening—the reported death tolls from the pandemic staggering, but the news had grown steadily worse as panic gripped the world and violence escalated.

Then—nothing.

The silence was more frightening than everything that had gone before.

Releasing a pent up breath, Danielle propped her arm on the console and her head on her palm, closing her eyes. They burned, feeling grainy from the little sleep she'd had ... not that she was by any means alone. No one was sleeping. Everyone was wrestling with the big question.

What do we do now? Wait here to die? Go home and die with everyone else?

Swallowing past the painful knot that rose to wedge in her throat, Danielle lifted her head. It was too late, she thought, for the last option.

No one wanted to admit it. *She* didn't want to accept it, but there was no getting around the fact that, the more time that passed, the less likely it was that anyone at all was left.

Impossible. Unacceptable. Unbelievable. And yet, what else was there to think when they couldn't raise anyone at all?

"Any luck?"

Danielle swiveled her seat and stared at her friend, Dr. Lindsey Peterson, watching the faint hope in the other woman's eyes die.

She swallowed with an effort, shaking her head. "I've only been trying for about an hour, though. With the delay ... and there could be interference."

They both knew she was grasping at straws.

Unable to bear the desolation that flickered through Lindsey's eyes, Danielle swiveled around to face the console again. "Houston, this is Dr. Danielle Stevens ..."

"Give it a rest! You're using up battery power we can't afford to waste."

Danielle twisted to look at the doorway to the com room again. Clancy Morton stood next to Lindsey now, scowling at her. Danielle's lips tightened. "What the fuck are we going to use it for?" she snapped.

Clancy's scowl deepened. "Watch your mouth, *Doctor* Stevens," he growled. "I'm still the head of this mission."

"What mission, for Christ's sake?" Danielle demanded. "They're all dead! What the hell are we doing up here?"

"We're doing our jobs!" Clancy snapped. "Some of us, anyway!"

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Danielle shouted at him as he whirled and

stalked off. She transferred her attention to Lindsey when he didn't respond. "What the hell did he mean by that?"

Lindsey shook her head. "Raging at each other isn't going to change anything."

Danielle swallowed her fear, anger, and grief with an effort. "It makes me feel better," she muttered, looking away.

"Does it?"

Danielle dragged in a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly. "No," she admitted reluctantly.

Lindsey was silent so long she thought the other woman had left. "Do you really think they're all dead?"

"I don't know." She did, she just couldn't bring herself to repeat it. She wouldn't have said it all if Clancy hadn't made her so furious. It was almost as if, as long as she didn't say it, accept it, it might not be true.

"As long as we don't know there's still hope, right?"

Defiantly leaving the com open, Danielle thrust herself away from the console and shoved herself to her feet. "Hope?" She shook her head at Lindsey. "The very last communication we had was from Robert Rawlins. He said not to come home until we got an all clear because the pandemic was completely out of control. Don't you think somebody would have contacted us in this length of time if there was anybody down there who could?"

"They could've closed down mission control. He said they'd been trying to get everyone into quarantine to slow the spread."

Danielle had thought of that. It was what she hoped herself. They'd been ordered to stay put, told the seriousness of the situation. If the virus was spreading, and killing, as fast as Robert had indicated.... "Robert seemed to think the kill rate was in our favor, that the virus was killing off its hosts so fast it was slowing the spread. If it didn't go airborne ..."

Lindsey managed a tremulous smile. "That's probably it. They shut everything down and quarantined people in their homes to stop the spread. The kill rate was only about sixty percent when he gave us the first report, right?"

Danielle shrugged. He'd actually said they *thought* the kill rate was around sixty percent. The last report had it at closer to eighty percent and the plain truth was that, once it began spreading like wildfire, nobody knew what the hell was going on.

"Well ... a lot more people are sick than well. I imagine they have their hands full. We just need to keep trying until we reach somebody. Had you thought about trying another bandwidth?"

Guilt made Danielle's cheeks redden. "I toyed with it a little," she lied, avoiding Lindsey's gaze. The fact was, she'd tried every channel when they'd lost contact with Houston and when she hadn't been able to pick up any of the other stations, she'd begun frantically scanning the airwaves for anything at all. She'd picked up a few transmissions—all bad, all indicating a global pandemic, panic, riots—marshal law when the violence escalated to such proportions that the military had to be called in to try to restore order and then she'd lost even those. All was quiet on planet Earth. There hadn't been so much as a radio or TV station broadcasting anything but static, or prerecorded shows on a loop, for over a week.

It was almost as if someone had set off a viral bomb.

There hadn't been any indications, though, that it was viral warfare.

That didn't preclude the possibility, unfortunately. It just meant that things had gotten so bad so fast that there hadn't been time to investigate. They hadn't had time for anything but trying to fight it and burying the dead—not to contain it, not to find a treatment or a cure. Hospitals and clinics had filled up and overflowed so fast, they couldn't begin to keep up with demand and frantic calls for volunteers to help with the sick had gone largely unanswered because the same thing was happening everywhere at once. No one had enough personnel to handle the problem or enough volunteers or enough medical supplies or enough places to put the sick. The virus had traveled through every transit system as if they were the arteries of a single, living organism. Major cities all over the globe were already fighting for their lives before the realization hit home that it wasn't an isolated epidemic and by that time it had trickled through the smaller veins and infected almost every population center. Anyone that traveled anywhere was a potential victim—and a carrier.

The abrupt surge of static from the microphone made Danielle and Lindsey both nearly jump out of their skin. Both women whipped their heads toward the microphone, holding their breath. "ISS Pegasus, this is Lymra Sabin Au-tere of the Galactic Federation flagship Mertosin."

Danielle felt her jaw sag. She whipped her head toward Lindsey again. They stared at one another blankly in shock for an endless moment.

"Dr. Danielle Stevens, this is Lymra Sabin Au-tere ..."

Danielle and Lindsey both let out a scream of hysterical joy, launching themselves at each other and bouncing up and down.

"Do you read? Dr. Danielle Stevens of the ISS ..."

Danielle broke from Lindsey's frantic embrace. "I have to talk to him. Run! Get the others!"

Her hand was shaking so badly when she flopped into her chair and grabbed the microphone that she nearly dropped it. "This Dr. Danielle Stevens of the ISS Pegasus speaking," she said in a voice quavering with excitement.

"This is Lymra Sabin Au-tere of the Galactic Federation vessel Mertosin ..."

Danielle's mind went abruptly blank. "*Who?*"

"Danielle!" Lindsey called from down the corridor. "Come here!"

"I'm trying to talk to this ... person!" Danielle yelled back at her impatiently.

"Don't!"

Danielle swiveled around in her chair, frowning. "What?"

When no one responded, Danielle debated with herself a moment and finally got up, moving to the doorway. She could hear a rumble of voices coming from the main cabin area. After glancing at the com again, she finally stepped into the corridor.

"We have communications!" she called.

"Get in here!" Clancy bellowed.

Danielle's lips tightened but after glancing at the com again, she jogged down the corridor to see what was happening, skidding to a halt when she reached the main cabin and discovered that the entire crew was bunched around the viewing ports on either side, gaping at something outside. A wave of cold crested over her. Uncertain she could handle more bad news, Danielle moved slowly toward the nearest group and glanced outside.

A silvery gray object filled the entire view port, blocking out any view of space that would ordinarily have been visible. Danielle stared at it uncomprehendingly. Of their own accord, her eyes moved, recording, tracing the smooth surface of the gigantic sphere from top to bottom and end to end, noting view ports, lights—strange markings along the side of the vehicle—the space craft.

Feeling perfectly blank, she dragged her gaze from it after a moment, glanced at Lindsey, Clancy, Bud, Joyce, and Richard and finally turned to look across the room at the other group. There was another ship like the first hovering on that side of the space station.

Clancy finally turned away from the port, staring at Danielle, or rather through her for several moments before his gaze finally focused on her. “You’ve had communications?”

It took Danielle several tries to find her voice. “Yes,” she managed to say a little hoarsely. “I couldn’t ... he has an unfamiliar accent. It *sounded* like he said something about Galactic Federation.”

Their conversation seemed to snap everyone out of their shock. They all started trying to talk at once.

“It’s them. It has to be them! Who else would it be?”

“Houston?”

“Give me a fucking break! We haven’t heard from Houston in weeks. She said an accent!”

“What kind of accent?”

“Will you all shut up!” Clancy roared abruptly, sweeping a glare around the room. “I’m trying to think, goddamn it!”

“I left him on the com,” Danielle said uneasily. “What do you want me to do?”

Clancy’s lips tightened. Finally, he motioned her down the corridor and followed her. “Let’s try to find out who they are and what they’re doing here.”

Danielle swallowed a little convulsively, nodded jerkily, and preceded Clancy to the com room. When she’d collapsed weakly in her seat, she took a moment to try to collect herself. Striving to steady her madly pounding pulse, she closed her eyes and took deep, even breaths until she felt a little more calm. “This is Dr. Stevens. I apologize for breaking communications. Is that ... are you aboard one of the vessels currently alongside the ISS Pegasus?”

There was a lengthy delay. Finally, the same deep male voice that had spoken before answered her. “Yes. I must apologize, as well. There is a delay in the translator.”

Danielle slid a wide-eyed look at Clancy. She saw immediately, though, that Clancy wasn’t going to be any help at all. Depressing the link again, Danielle spoke into the microphone. “What are your origins?”

“The Kirsian Galaxy,” Sabin responded after another lengthy pause.

“That’s bullshit!” Clancy snapped, uttering a bark of laughter that held no humor.

Danielle sent him another wide-eyed look. “Have you lost your mind? For god’s sake, Clancy! What if they’d heard you?”

“I don’t give a flying fuck! Kirsian Galaxy? Where the fuck is that? He’s trying to say they’re ... aliens?”

Danielle stared at him. “You think they aren’t? Just who, on Earth, do you think would have ships like that? Did you see the size of them?”

Clancy ran a shaking hand over his face, glanced around the room, and finally dropped heavily into the only other chair in the room.

After studying him for several moments, waiting to see if he meant to give her any input, Danielle returned her attention to the console. "What is the purpose ...? What are your intentions, Lymra Sabin?"

"The people of the Galactic Federation send greetings," Sabin said formally. "We have come to offer aid."

"I'll ... uh ... I'll have to speak with my superior and convey your message."

The pause was longer that time. "Permission to board?"

Danielle stared at the console as if she could see through it to the being on the other end. "Clancy? A little help here. He wants to come on board."

"We understand that the situation is dire. If it will help to work things out more quickly ...?" Sabin said, almost as if he knew the chaos he'd thrown them into.

And maybe he did? What must their puny space station look like to beings capable of building ships like those surrounding them?

Clancy frowned, obviously considering it. "Tell him permission is granted."

Danielle felt her jaw slide to half cock. "Clancy! We don't know anything about these beings—nothing! Don't you think we should discuss this among the crew ...?"

Clancy glared at her. "I'm in charge. And just how the hell do you think we could stop them from coming aboard? We need to try to present a front of friendliness until we can figure out what's going on!"

Danielle was almost as surprised that what he'd said made sense as she was that it hadn't occurred to her.

She turned to the com again. "You have permission to board. You may dock with the starboard bay."

"That will not be necessary. I will transport to the large central area of the station."

Danielle turned to Clancy again. They stared at one another. "The rec room!" they both said at almost the same instant, leaping up and rushing from the com room.

Danielle saw when they reached the room that a blur of light had appeared in the center of the room. Drawn by her and Clancy's entrance, the rest of the crew turned from the view ports, staring as the blur rapidly became more solid and finally vanished altogether, leaving a man—or at least a being of humanoid proportions—standing where the light had been only moments before.

Frozen, no one moved. Danielle didn't think she even breathed.

His suit looked like nothing she'd ever seen, almost more like some sort of armor than a space suit, and appeared to fit him almost like a second skin. As she stared, he reached up and removed the helmet that completed his suit. Her heart slammed into her rib cage as the head slowly emerged ... skin tones much like theirs, a square jaw and chin, a firm mouth. Long, inky black hair fell around his shoulders.

He's human, she thought blankly, feeling lightheaded as she stared at the man's face.

* * * *

Lymra Sabin Au-tere experienced an internal fluctuation of unknown origins as he materialized within the human habitat that spawned a flicker of unaccustomed surprise in him. His heartbeat accelerated to 2.5 beats more per parsec than normal. That

circumstance disconcerted him, heaping another indignity upon the first, produced a veritable flood of unaccountable emotion, and succeeded in thoroughly disorienting him for a handful of parsecs.

He dragged in a deep, calming breath and took a moment to examine the situation, deciding he could allow himself that since there was clearly no imminent threat of personal injury.

No doubt the lack of true gravity accounted for the surprise, he decided, which understandably produced the slightly accelerated pulse, and yet he wasn't completely satisfied with that explanation, as logical as it seemed. After all, he'd expected it—should have. He'd carefully scanned the habitat and adjusted his suit's parameters accordingly before he'd even stepped onto the transport. His body shouldn't have been sensitive enough to detect the slight variation in gravity and pressure that his suit hadn't been able to account for. It was miniscule.

On the other hand, mentally prepared didn't necessarily mean physically prepared, he reminded himself. Undoubtedly, he'd miscalculated. His body had felt the difference even though he hadn't expected that it would.

It bothered him that he'd miscalculated even to such a minor extent and, perhaps, that accounted for the uncomfortable fluctuation of emotion?

He realized after a moment that the reason he hadn't been able to accept his first theory was because he was aware that the leap in his pulse had coincided with his first clear view of the inhabitants of the habitat, not his arrival. He'd simply tried to dismiss that unpalatable truth and now realized he shouldn't have.

A certain amount of wariness was not only completely logical and understandable, but desirable under the circumstances since it raised his level of alertness.

As much as he'd learned about this species, he was conscious of the fact that their knowledge of the species barely broke the surface. There was sufficient data, however, to make it clear that humans were an extremely dangerous species, completely unpredictable and erratic in behavior except for one particular trait.

Their sense of self-preservation seemed to be the only instinct that had survived evolution virtually unchanged and undiminished—completely contrary to logic—despite the many incarnations they had manifested in their rise from beast to sentient beings. The advances in their civilization and technology should have at least tempered that vicious streak, and yet it hadn't that anyone had been able to determine. They still viewed any creature that was different with suspicion and distrust and the slightest move might be, and usually was, interpreted as a threat—and they were extremely violent in the face of treat.

Lymra Sabin Au-tere didn't particularly care for the fact that his reaction upon entering the habitat of the humans was so unrestrained as to elevate his pulse and produce so many uncomfortable emotions, but he decided he was pleased with the evidence that his own species, and he in particular, hadn't completely lost their own instincts for self-preservation.

When one could not discount such a thing, he thought wryly, it was always best to look upon it in a positive light and consider the benefits of it.

The discomfort would abate when his senses detected a decrease in the hostility around him, he was certain.

Experiencing heretofore unsuspected latent traits within his own species should prove to be interesting—even though he was obliged to admit that he didn't find it particularly pleasant.

Moments passed, though, and he could detect no appreciable decline in the level of emotion around him. Finally, it occurred to him that, whereas he could see them perfectly well, they could not see him—not beyond the obvious to determine that he was humanoid as they were. He'd been chosen because he was one of the highest ranking of the mahns aboard the federation vessel. They more closely resembled the Earth species than any of the others. It seemed logical that that would most likely be met with the least resistance.

Not surprisingly since the mahns were responsible for the genetic traits they had in common, but then that wasn't anything it was safe for either the humans or the grundts to know.

The situation had been thoroughly analyzed before they'd arrived at that decision and, based on what was known about the humans, it had been determined that knowledge of the mahns tampering with their evolution was not likely to instill trust.

And earning their trust seemed critical to their plan.

Lifting his hands slowly, he disengaged the locking mechanism that attached his helm to his suit and just as slowly removed it so as not to startle them. When he'd pulled it free and tucked it in the crook of one arm, he studied their reaction carefully.

More specifically, he found his gaze zeroing in on the female who'd caught his attention the moment he became aware of his surroundings, but he could think of no reason to choose any one above the others. He needed to know how all of them responded. He saw no logical reason to resist beginning with her.

And yet the moment he met her gaze he felt that strange fluctuation again. It was more pronounced than before, impossible to deny.

Not that he would have attempted to. That wasn't even logical. Ignoring a fact did not make it vanish. It only made it impossible to pinpoint the cause of it.

As it happened, he did not have to search hard to find the explanation. This time when his pulse rate leapt upward, it was followed almost instantly with sensations that could only be interpreted as desire. Heat pooled in his groin area and his genitals reacted to the visual stimulus—or perhaps it was a chemical reaction? His testicles tightened and enough blood surged into his penis to produce the beginnings of an erection.

Disconcerted—annoyed both with his reaction and the fact that it disconcerted him—he frowned and very deliberately glanced away from the female to study the others.

He could not determine from their expressions, he discovered, any lessening in the hostility he'd sensed before. In point of fact, the males seemed somewhat more hostile and both suspicion and disbelief were evident.

Clicking his heels together, he executed a respectful bow that was little more than a nod of his head and then followed with the military salute of the federation, crossing his left arm over his chest and striking his right pec with his fist. "I am Lymra Sabin Au-tere of the Galactic Federation."

The man standing directly in front of him narrowed his eyes. He nodded but didn't return the salute. "What Galaxy?"

"We hail from the Kirsian Galaxy."

"I'm not familiar with that Galaxy."

A twinge of amusement flickered through Sabin, but he was careful to keep it to himself. It was abundantly clear, even if his own species had not been more than a little familiar with humans, that they had no capability for intergalactic flight. Instead, he pondered for a moment and finally shook his head. "I can not reference the name you have for our Galaxy ... if, indeed, you have one. Suffice to say, it is not your galaxy."

The man's lips thinned. Clearly, he wasn't appeased in the least at the little joke—but then he didn't strike Sabin as a being who had much of a sense of humor.

Reminding himself that the situation was not one where humor was appropriate, Sabin tamped the urge to smile. Very likely it would be interpreted as threatening in some way, he decided sardonically.

"So ... you've led a military operation to our doorstep to help us in our hour of need?" the man asked coldly.

This time the slight jump in his pulse was clearly a warning that he had misstepped, Sabin decided. "I am merely a Lymra," he responded with cool, but determined, politeness, considered for a moment what would be an appropriate analogy and added, "this would be similar to the rank of a major in your military. I have not led the expedition and our purpose here is not military in nature. I was merely chosen to represent the federation for the simple reason that my species is similar to your own and might make the meeting more ... comfortable. The fleet was on routine patrol on the outer rim of our own territory when the distress signal was picked up and, as we have an extensive medical staff and supplies, the decision was made to offer such aid as we are able."

Again the man's lips tightened. "What aid do you think you can offer us? Obviously, this can't be a virus familiar to you. It seems clear to me, given your assertion that you're from a distant galaxy and not even the same species, that the odds would be astronomical that you could do anything at all."

Sabin nodded, acknowledging the logic of the man's conclusion. "We can not know that until we have had adequate time to study the situation. You are the leader?"

The man, whom Sabin judged to be of median maturity—certainly not young and possibly what might be considered elderly among his own people—drew himself up. Sabin decided the posture was not threatening as much as an effort to make himself appear larger and possibly more important. "I'm the leader of this expedition."

The statement more than his demeanor surprised Sabin and led him to speak incautiously, an action so uncharacteristic for him that the notion assailed him that he was far more disoriented by his situation than he'd realized. He lifted his brows. "This is an expedition? Is this habitat not in permanent orbit around the planet?"

The woman spoke for the first time and Sabin instantly recognized her as the owner of the voice he'd heard aboard the Mertosin.

He was less pleased about his reaction to her than he had been the first time and that had not pleased him at all.

In point of fact, he thought for a moment that his translator had broken. When he looked at her, his mind went perfectly blank. It wasn't until the translator repeated that he realized that it was his mind that had malfunctioned rather than the equipment.

"It is in permanent orbit. Its purpose is scientific research, however, and the crews who man it change out every six months or so ... depending on the expedition, of

course.” She smiled at him in a way that threw his system into chaos once more when he’d barely regained his equilibrium. “I’m Dr. Danielle Stevens. We spoke before.”

He nodded. “I am Lymra Sabin Au-tere,” he responded automatically and completely illogically, realizing the moment he said it how totally unnecessary it was to introduce himself again.

She responded with a soft sound that made his belly clench in response. Her eyelids slid downward, hiding her eyes with the sweep of her long, black lashes, and she looked away, her cheeks growing briefly warmer in color.

It seemed important to understand her reaction and most particularly the sound she’d made.

Laughter, he realized after a search of the data he’d accumulated, realizing with a jolt of bemusement that the behavior she’d displayed was generally accepted to be flirtatious in nature.

He realized after a moment that the little man who’d spoken so coldly to him before had extended his right hand. He stared at the hand and then met the man’s gaze curiously. “It’s a gesture of friendship,” the man said uncomfortably. “I’m Dr. Clancy Morton.”

Reluctance slithered through Sabin. Briefly, he debated whether to reciprocate or not. As repellent as he considered the notion of actually touching an alien being—particularly when it was considered unpardonably rude among his own people—he finally extended his own hand. The contact was worse than he’d expected. He felt his belly lurch as the man grasped his hand firmly and gave it a shake.

He was frowning when he released Sabin’s hand. “A limp handshake doesn’t give the impression you want to convey,” he said in a lecturing tone that annoyed Sabin.

He merely nodded, however.

Dismay filled him when he discovered the female known as Danielle was holding out her hand, as well. He wasn’t particularly pleased to discover his reaction to taking her hand was entirely different than the reaction he’d experienced before, though no less disconcerting. His pulse leapt again and the warmth of before flooded back into his groin.

Her hand was soft and warm.

She winced when he squeezed it firmly as he’d been instructed. “Not quite that firmly,” she said in the same melodious voice that had wreaked havoc with his senses before, a faint hitch of amusement in her voice as if she was struggling to contain the urge to laugh as she had before.

In all honesty, he’d begun to feel vaguely ill by the time he’d made the rounds and shook the hand of each and been offered their title and the name by which they were known, and he began to wonder if they had passed some dread disease to him by the contact. Instructing the computer to run a medical scan, he settled in the seat offered to him and set his helm on his lap not only because he was aware of the potential for contamination but also because he was uncomfortably aware that he was still in a completely incomprehensible half-aroused state.

Firmly pushing the urge to examine that strange circumstance to the back of his mind, he focused with an effort on his mission. “We have determined that the situation is dire and the sooner we can address the issues, the more likely that we will be met with success.”

Everyone sobered immediately. Clancy frowned. "That presents a problem of a ... delicate political nature. We can't authorize a landing. The question would have to be presented to our leaders and we haven't been able to communicate with them."

Sabin frowned himself, trying to ignore the irritation that swept through him. Their people were dying ... or perhaps dead even now. Logic should rule and reason dictated action, not posturing and political discussions. "I understand and we certainly have no desire to do anything that might be construed as a threat. However, we can do nothing from here. We must land to collect specimens and determine the cause of the illness before we can have any hope of developing a treatment."

Everyone looked around uncomfortably and, after a moment, Sabin stood decisively. "I will leave you to discuss this among yourselves and decide."

Moving to the spot where he had transported aboard, he signaled that he was ready to return. Typically, when he transported, he focused on nothing in particular since it could be disorienting to focus on an object that was no longer there when he materialized in another location entirely. He found, though, that his gaze seemed to move of its own volition to the female who had so thoroughly rattled him.

* * * *

"What did you think of him?" Clancy asked no one in particular the moment the alien disappeared.

"You mean aside from the fact that he was alien and completely cold and emotionless over the entire thing?" Captain Nick LaRoche asked sharply. "I wouldn't trust them any further than I could throw them. I don't know why they're here ... unless it's to benefit from our misfortune, but I don't believe for one minute that they give a shit one way or another whether we all croak."

Danielle frowned, irritated with herself for the skip in her pulse when she glanced at Nick. It baffled her that she persisted in having that sort of reaction to being near him when there'd never been anything between them but sex—however, great the sex—and that had been so brief, and so long ago that she wondered about her reaction, especially under the circumstances. "He didn't strike me as cold. Just ... wary, maybe, which would be completely understandable."

"He wasn't too keen on the idea of shaking hands. That's the closest he came to actually showing any emotion at all that I could see," Su-lynn pointed out dryly.

Lindsey sent her an indignant look. "Who could blame him for that when, as far we know, everybody on Earth is infected? Obviously, it isn't his people's custom. It isn't the custom in your native country either! Did you think about that?"

"I'm just saying I was disturbed by the fact that he clearly found it extremely distasteful, but he did it because he was trying to convey friendliness. It seems to indicate a great desire to win our trust and that makes me wonder why," Su-lynn countered.

Andre` shrugged. "They have no need. They cannot for a moment believe that we have it within our power to stop them ... whatever they have in mind. The comment about having intercepted a distress transmission was telling. They have been monitoring us for some time, no doubt. It seems very unlikely that we have many secrets."

Danielle shot to her feet, impatiently. "This discussion is moot. We don't have a choice of whether to trust them or not, and we all know it! They didn't have to stop and ask permission. I think we should accept that as an olive branch and go from there."

“As much as I’d like to disagree with her,” Bud drawled, “she’s right. It isn’t a question of whether we believe them or trust them. We can’t stop them. I think we need to make the effort to pretend we’re in charge here, pretend we trust them, and hope for the best ... because we sure as fuck aren’t going to stop them from doing whatever the hell they want to.”

Danielle felt the fear she’d been keeping firmly at bay quiver along her skin. “So what do we do? We can’t contact anybody and that means if we ‘invite’ them down to the surface and, if there’s anybody left at the controls, they’ll probably be attacked ... in which case, they’re liable to turn on us. It isn’t as if we have any clout with the president anyway.”

Everyone exchanged uneasy glances.

Clancy commenced to pulling at his lower lip thoughtfully, a habit Danielle had always found annoying and vaguely repulsive. Finally, he stopped, however. “We’ll have to lead them in,” he said decisively. “We’re near the point of having no choice but to return anyway—supplies are running out. I think what we’ll have to do is to broadcast our intentions as long as possible and just hope that, if there is anyone down there still manning the defense system, that they don’t blast us all to smithereens.”

He got up with obvious effort, looking far older than his sixty-five years. “I’d almost welcome it,” he muttered. “I’m not sure I want to see what hell has wrought.”

Chapter Two

It fell to Danielle to contact the alien fleet. Feeling butterflies in her belly, which weren't entirely due to the fear and hope at war within her, she sat down at the console and hailed the Mertosin.

"This is Dr. Danielle Stevens aboard the ISS Pegasus hailing Lymra Au-tere on the Mertosin."

Sabin felt his pulse leap with satisfaction when he heard the hail. Stepping forward, he spoke into the com unit. "This is Lymra Sabin," he corrected her. "Or you may address me merely as Sabin. Have you arrived at a decision, Dr. Danielle?"

"Danielle's fine ... or Danny, if that seems easier to say," Danielle responded, feeling the butterflies in her stomach riot at the sound of his deep voice. "We're having problems communicating with ground control. It would be best, we've concluded, to lead a small party in and introduce you to our superiors. We're prepping the shuttle now. We should be ready to launch within the hour."

There was a significant delay in his response and Danielle tried to decide whether he'd tumbled to the fact that they didn't particularly trust the alien forces or if he was having trouble understanding the time line she'd quoted. "This would be approximately 72 parsecs," he finally responded thoughtfully. "Yes. We will prepare a ship to accompany you to the surface."

He paused again. "You should be aware that the federation represents a number of species from many solar systems. I will be a part of the descent team, but the mahns are the only species that closely resemble your own. It is hoped that you will not be unduly alarmed by the appearance of the others, although we are aware that it must be ... something of a shock to your species."

"Understood," Danielle responded. "I'll make certain to convey the message to the others."

When she'd closed the com, she swiveled her chair to look at the others, crowded near the door, questioningly.

"I guess that means we should brace ourselves not to scream or faint," Captain LaRoche observed dryly. Pushing away from the doorframe, he plowed past the others. "Let's get a move on. We've only got an hour to prep ... and we won't be coming back."

Danielle tried to ignore the ominous undertones as she followed the rest of the crew out of the communications room and headed for the quarters she shared with the other women on the crew. None of them had brought many personal items since the payload restrictions discouraged it, but none of them wanted to leave those few items behind. Taking her duffle, she emptied her locker, pausing for several moments to study the photo of her family. Depression settled over her like a heavy cloak. She'd done her best not to think about them. It was too hard to hold herself together if she allowed herself that luxury, but she discovered that now that they were about to return to Earth it was impossible not to consider the unlikelihood that any of them were still alive.

An unswallowable knot of emotion formed in her throat. Entwined with the grief

was guilt. Almost seven months. She'd been so excited at the opportunity to join the crew aboard the Pegasus when she'd left she'd hardly given a thought to the possibility that she might never see them again.

Mostly, she realized, because it was her own demise that seemed most likely if anything occurred to prevent it, and she'd known she wouldn't be the one left behind to grieve.

Scientist or not, it suddenly seemed so incredibly selfish that she wondered how she could've done such a thing. How could she have set aside the only thing in her life that was *really* important for the pursuit of knowledge?

If she hadn't left them, she would've shared their fate.

She *should* have shared it!

Clancy was right. If there was any mercy, they wouldn't make it back to Earth and they'd never have to know which of their loved ones had survived and who hadn't.

* * * *

Lymra Sabin turned to the Mra Kubo Kan and saluted. "We have been invited to send a party to the surface."

Mra Kubo Kan nodded absently, studying the viewer through narrowed eyes. "They do not trust, though."

Because despite their physical similarity to the mahns, the humans were far more like the grundts in temperament, Sabin thought privately—violent, emotionally unstable, deceptive, and aggressive—although he certainly wasn't foolish enough to voice his thoughts aloud—especially when this particular grundt seemed almost to consider his defects with something akin to pride.

His people had finally concluded that the experiment with the inhabitants of Earth was a failure—as had their other attempts to manipulate a species to make them compatible with their own. They should have accepted the inevitability of their fate long ago, he thought in disgust.

But some things simply could not be accepted, regardless of the lack of logic in hope, and the demise of one's species was one of those things.

He did not particularly regret it himself. They had devised a reasonable solution even if it was not the most desirable. In point of fact, he thought it was far more desirable than the alternative. He didn't entirely understand the reasoning of the progenitors who'd considered cloning as the solution to the decimation of their gene pool undesirable. Even if they had managed to genetically manipulate another species sufficiently to make them biologically compatible in every way, they would *still* be breeding outside their own species and risking the loss of far too much in his opinion.

Cloning ensured that they could not only keep their bloodlines in tact, but it also provided the possibility of retraining the most desirable traits of their progenitors and, contrary to the fears of the devisors, he could not see that anything at all had been lost to them in the generations since they had implemented their cloning facilities. He was sabin—seventh generation. Physically, he knew himself to be an excellent specimen—as near perfection as was mahnly possible. He was without mental or physical defect of any kind, strong, had an excellent immune system that not only made him resistant to disease but also insured a swift recovery to injury or illness, and his intelligence was of the highest order. And, despite his recent emotional upheaval, not inclined toward the erratic emotionalism of so many species.

The same could be said for the remainder of his clone batch. Not one of the three had defect of any kind and even if worse came to worse and he was destroyed, any of them would be able to safely pass on their progenitor's genetic imprint for another generation.

He frowned at that thought.

He didn't particularly care for the fact that the grundts had insisted upon bringing his entire batch. He knew why they had—they thought it insured cooperation, that the mahns could not afford to risk all four of the clones of one progenitor. If they all died, then their line died, and with so few of their kind left they were careful to preserve what they could. And his particular progenitor was very important to them both as a scientist and a leader else they would not have cloned four of a kind, when they rarely cloned more than two for the sake of safety.

He could only hope that their leaders had taken appropriate steps to preserve his particular genetic line. Their plot was extremely risky. The odds were, since he and his batch were so critical to the resistance, that they would all be lost in the attempt to free themselves from the yolk of their oppressors.

"I do not like it," Mra Kubo Kan said abruptly, bringing Sabin from his reverie with a jolt.

He lifted his brows questioningly at his leader, inviting him to elaborate.

Kubo Kan glared at him. "They thought you were cold and not at all friendly. You were to befriend them."

Sabin stared at him for a long moment, completely baffled by the accusation. "I am mahn," he said finally. "It is not at all logical to have expected that I would be 'friendly.' Beyond representing the logic of accepting our aid, I have no understanding of what would constitute 'friendly' to these beings."

Kubo Kan pressed his lipless mouth together in an expression of displeasure. "You have studied them extensively!"

Sabin nodded. "The available data, yes."

"No wonder they thought you cold!" Kubo Kan growled. "You mahns are as emotionless as machines. You might as well *be* machines!"

Sabin grasped that Kubo Kan had meant to be insulting. He just wasn't certain why the creature thought he should be insulted by what was not only clearly a fact, but something his people prided themselves on. "Emotion clouds judgment and make it difficult or impossible to reason," he responded coolly. "We mahns have cultivated the ability to remain in full possession of our faculties regardless of provocation. It is a disgrace to behave any other way. In any case, it is not at all logical to grow angry because we are what we are any more than it would be logical to grow angry that the mirpods cannot laugh at your jokes."

Kubo Kan glared at him. "But that's my point, gods damn it! You'll have to try harder! They aren't going to tell you where their stockpile of weaponry is if they don't trust you. We need to disarm them, gods damn it! They are just mean-spirited enough to irradiate the entire fucking planet just to spite us!"

And Kubo Kan would certainly have no trouble grasping that bit of insanity, Sabin thought wryly. "I do not believe they are unstable enough to consider such a possibility," he offered instead of voicing his opinion of the grundts.

"How the fuck would you know?" Kubo Kan bellowed. "I understand them

better than you do!”

Sabin merely shrugged. He'd never entirely understood why it was that Kubo Kan grew more and more angry whenever anyone tried to reason with him, but he supposed that only supported Kubo Kan's assertion that he didn't understand the humans.

In all honesty, he supposed he didn't since they were as prone to illogical fits of emotionalism as the grundts—and he certainly didn't understand the grundts. He found it singularly disconcerting and confusing, in point of fact, that such violent, irrational creatures had managed to overthrow the governments of so many worlds and subjugate them.

Dismissed, he left the bridge to oversee preparations for departure. This only entailed a selection of the crew to take, however. Since they'd been prepared to launch before they'd even entered the solar system, he found his mind wandering.

His reaction to the human woman disturbed him, as little as he wanted to acknowledge it. It wasn't as if desire was completely alien to him. He had felt it several times in the past on occasions when his duties required interaction with females of his own kind.

It was a biological mystery. It had been generations since it was even possible for his people to procreate naturally. Like the humans, they had once procreated without any discrimination and raped their planet of its natural resources both because they had multiplied until there were too many for their eco-system to support and because they were more focused on their own desires for comfort than the needs of their environment. The end result had been disastrous—just as it had for the humans. They had destabilized their world until it had become hostile and, once it had, balance had been slowly regained—balance minus most of the species that had led to the imbalance to begin with—the mahns.

They had come close to extinction—too close. If not for their technology, it wouldn't have been a near miss. It would've been a direct hit because there were so few of them left after the dust settled that they knew their species was doomed. To try to procreate with so few would only ensure their extinction and so they'd used their technology to keep their species alive, cloning the survivors instead of simply allowing them to complete the destruction of their kind.

The mystery was that they retained their animal urge to procreate when logic prohibited it—felt desire they could not safely indulge.

It was far more of a mystery to him that he had felt it toward the human female. Genetically, he was aware that their species was, quite possibly, compatible with his own—at least physically—but he still felt that his revulsion at the touch of the others should have been universal. He should have had the same reaction to the female. She was still not of *his* species, regardless of the similarities between them.

It defied logic, but perhaps he'd been correct in theorizing some sort of chemical reaction to the similarity in their chemical and genetic make-up?

Why then had the reaction only occurred with Danielle? There were other females among them. If his theory was correct, shouldn't he have had a similar reaction to the other females?

He pondered it, but discovered he couldn't recall previous reactions to females of his own species with any clarity. He supposed that wasn't surprising given his disquiet over such a damning flaw. It was certainly socially unacceptable. He'd been far too

focused on trying to control it make note of it, and it wasn't something he felt comfortable discussing with his advisors so he had nothing to reinforce the dim memories.

Perhaps he'd been wrong in his assessment of himself? Perhaps he *was* flawed?

That was an alarming thought.

Mayhap he should discuss it with his batch and see if they were similarly flawed? Was it a wide-spread anomaly? Was it something that could, potentially, threaten the mahn as a people?

He would have to discuss it with his batch, he decided, at the earliest opportunity. If some undesirable traits had somehow been propagated in their species, it could be disastrous for them. Very few of the original progenitors still lived. If they had to go back to them for untainted specimens ...

When he emerged from his unpleasant thoughts, Sabin discovered that his entire batch had been dispatched to take part in the exercise. He stared at Sabin-Du blankly for several moments, trying to collect his thoughts. "Why are you here?"

"We were ordered to present ourselves. Mra Kubo Kan thought it best if the majority of the party resembled the humans. Otherwise the party may be met with hostility."

Sabin's lips tightened. Shaking his head, he moved to a com unit. "With all respect, Mra Kubo Kan, this will not do."

"Why the fuck not?" Kubo Kan growled furiously. "You think they might slaughter your entire batch?"

He thought exactly that. "The humans have a very strong taboo against cloning," he said patiently.

"If they are advanced enough to clone it doesn't make any damned sense that they'd have a taboo against it."

"They are not logical," Sabin reminded him. "They are likely to react with a good deal of hostility."

"You don't think they're more likely to react with hostility toward the other species?"

Inwardly, Sabin shrugged. "I have taken the opportunity to warn them that they must expect different species. And I have made a list of those I believe least likely to provoke their natural aggression toward other species. The grundts should not be included," he added, studying the contingent of grundt soldiers that had been dispatched for the mission.

"Why the fuck not?"

"They ... *you* bear too strong a resemblance to creatures of this world known as reptiles ... which humans are particularly distrustful of."

When Kubo Kan's only reaction to that was to glare at him furiously, he decided diplomacy was in order. "Perhaps two, then, but I feel certain that it would be a mistake to allow more. The humans will feel overwhelmed and they will react badly to that. I cannot be expected to win their trust or their friendship when the presence of the grundts makes it impossible for them to set aside their distrust of other beings."

"It seems to me that their presence would only reinforce a sense of kinship with you, but, so be it. Bork and Tande can accompany the party. Take one of your batch, as well. Tell them you are of the same egg. I am certain they have such things. There's no

reason for them to know you are not natural clones ... unless they have an aversion to naturally occurring clones, as well?"

Reluctantly, Sabin admitted that the data did not indicate such a thing. He wouldn't have been as reluctant if not for the fact that there was no way to pass the youngest of the batch as a freak of birth—a birth mate. He was seven years Tra's senior, though, and thought that would be obvious even to a people not familiar with their life cycle. Next to him, though, On was the most experienced and, as such, of more importance.

He did not dare disobey a direct order, however, and merely nodded. With On, they were four. He chose two draes—both female—to round out the party, primarily because he thought it would create a balance more to the humans' liking. One of the grundts was female, but they were as ugly as the males and it seemed doubtful the humans would realize it was female. The draes were far more human-like than any of the other representative species despite their coloring—a rather unappealing gray-blue—and they were deceptively weak-looking creatures. That trait was extremely deceptive for, despite their tall, willowy forms and spindly arms and legs, they were strong enough to lift twice their own mass—the females. The males could lift far more.

Having finished his selection, they boarded the craft they would use for the landing. He glanced significantly at On once he'd settled in the co-pilot's seat beside him. On merely shrugged since there was no way that they could communicate verbally without the risk of being overheard and they could not actually converse telepathically. They could convey impressions, but that was pretty much the limit of their ability to communicate mind-to-mind.

Frowning, Sabin focused on the check list. When they had ascertained that all systems were in working order, he signaled that they were prepared to launch, waited until the bay door was opened, and shot from the hanger and into space. The tiny vessel the humans had referred to as a shuttle was just detaching itself from the Pegasus when he'd circumnavigated the Mertosin and come within view of the human habitat.

On lifted his brows. "An interesting design."

Sabin studied it. "They will never master space if they cannot think beyond aerodynamics."

On glanced at him. "They are unlikely to master it, now, regardless."

"A very great pity for them," Sabin murmured.

"They do not deserve pity. They deserve contempt," the grundt, Bork, observed from behind them.

On and Sabin exchanged a speaking glance.

"True," On agreed easily. "They were born to be subjugated. The pity is that they did not know it."

* * * *

The system's check occupied everyone until they'd detached the shuttle from the Pegasus, but even as Captain LaRoche turned the shuttle and fired the engines, Danielle's thoughts turned inward again. A breathless sort of anticipation had gripped her as soon as she felt the shudder of the engines and faced the blue globe in the forward viewer. Despite all reason, she felt hope surge to life at the prospect of going home, felt that thrill that was like nothing else.

She struggled with it, knowing that the more hope she allowed herself the more

crushing the blow if things were as bad as they thought, and it seemed impossible that they could've been mistaken in any way. They were gone, she told herself fiercely—family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances. She had to accept that it was a possibility if not a probability. Her mother wouldn't be there to greet her, nor her sister or brother, niece and nephews. Her ex-husband wouldn't be standing on the tarmac with Cary and Kyle, waving madly and leaping with excitement to see her after so long an absence.

The lump that had formed in her throat before when she'd studied the family photo gathered again, hardened. She fought to will it away. Grieving when she didn't know, not for certain, that they were lost was stupid—counterproductive. What if they were alive but needed her? What use would she be to them if she allowed herself to fall apart?

She had to consider that they might be alive, had to think and act, not weep and wring her hands.

"They're coming alongside of us now," Captain LaRoche announced abruptly. "Danny! Get on the radio!"

Nodding jerkily, Danielle unlocked her seat and swiveled it to face the console. "This is Dr. Danielle Stevens aboard the shuttle, Amerigo, addressing the craft to our starboard. Respond please."

"Lymra Sabin Au-tere aboard the starboard craft."

Relief flickered through Danielle ... and something else she didn't particularly want to acknowledge. It was absurd, she knew, and yet there was some comfort in knowing they would at least have the company of a familiar face. "Greetings, Lymra Sabin. Please drop behind and take our wake. We haven't hailed ground control. We wouldn't want you to have an ... unpleasant greeting."

"Acknowledged. Taking your wake."

Although she switched at once to attempting to contact the ground and continued until they reached radio blackout there was no response. She began trying again when they emerged, still with no response. When she finally gave up and adjusted her seat and harness for touchdown, her thoughts shifted to the visitors.

She didn't doubt that they'd monitored her calls and knew they'd had no response. It didn't comfort her to realize the aliens had to know there would be no resistance, whatever their motives in coming.

How much did it matter, though, even if their motives weren't to help, but to attack, if there was no one to be conquered?

She shoved that wayward thought aside forcefully. She was letting fear cloud her judgment. The lack of communications was a matter of serious concern, but not necessarily an indication that disaster was as widespread as it seemed. It was incomprehensible that a disease, pandemic or not, could have wiped out everyone.

It seemed just as indisputable that the death toll had been astronomical. The reports they'd had before they'd lost contact had made that clear. The civilization they'd built had worked against them, not only making the global pandemic possible to start with but making the virus nearly impossible to isolate and contain, to treat and cure.

If the aliens had actually come to help, would they be able to?

And why would they care?

Could they really trust purely altruistic motives of these beings from other worlds?

An image of Sabin rose in her mind. The first impression that he was human hadn't lasted more than a handful of seconds. As human-like as every feature seemed at a glance, there was an equally strong impression of the exotic about him. Beyond the very noticeable ears—which were pointed—there were less notable differences that had made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle with uneasiness.

Physically, there was no dismissing the fact that he was a beautiful specimen, but maybe that was part of the problem in accepting him as human? Maybe he was just too perfect?

And virtually emotionless.

She thought that bothered her most. She was accustomed to professionalism that required coolheaded analysis of any given situation, and it wasn't even reasonable to expect an alien being to be greatly distressed over the dire situation of a race, or species, not their own. And yet, that cool, assessing detachment precluded real concern, didn't it?

She hadn't wanted to voice her doubts, not from any fear of alarming everyone else, but because she'd been afraid of losing what might be their only chance to save whoever was left on Earth—losing what might be *their* only chance.

They were safe enough from the disease on the space station, but they couldn't survive there indefinitely.

She wondered abruptly about the colonists on the moon and Mars. Their situation hadn't been as dire. They were both safe from the disease and, at least theoretically, self-sufficient. But if things were as bad on Earth as it seemed, there would be no supply ships heading their way in the foreseeable future, no ships to bring them home.

Would the aliens of the federation collect them and return them to Earth? Or were they better off where they were?

Thoughts of her own family crept into her mind despite every effort to shield herself from them. Had her ex taken the twins to a hospital? Or had they been quarantined at his place? Or had he taken them to her mother?

It was almost worse that she didn't even know where to look for them. The situation Rawlins had described when he'd told them not to return seemed to indicate total chaos, a breakdown in nearly every area. Considering the scale of the disaster, the hospitals would've been overflowing. Where, then, would they have taken the sick?

The jolting of the shuttle and alteration in pressure and sound, which indicated imminent landing, distracted her from the thoughts. Speculation ceased and cold fear took its place, making it impossible to connect the random thoughts that flitted through her mind. The moment the shuttle stopped moving, the entire crew scrambled out of their seats and began to jostle one another to get off the shuttle, making it clear that, regardless of their façade of calm, they were in no better state than she was. The clumsy space suits didn't help matters, but then they'd opted to wear them for the protection they represented.

Danielle wondered abruptly if her air tanks contained enough air for her to reach her ex's apartment but with everyone struggling to get out, she couldn't check. She couldn't seem to focus enough to calculate how much she'd need.

By the time they'd managed to get the gangplank down and deplaned, it occurred to her that they couldn't simply charge off to search for their families. She struggled with that thought, but there was no dismissing it no matter how badly she wanted to.

Fortunately, some semblance of reason had returned to most of the others, as well,

brought on by the stark reality that hit them as they reached the tarmac.

It was complete deserted without a sign of life. Stunned by that, everyone simply halted when they reached the ground, surveying the landing strip and the area around it—abandoned buildings, abandoned vehicles, trash blowing lazily in the wind.

Collecting herself after some moments, Danielle looked around for the alien craft and discovered it had landed on the other side of the strip. The aliens had debarked and were standing in a loose group near the gangplank.

Still fighting the urge to tear off in search of her family, Danielle headed toward them. Either the others were of a similar frame of mind, or they were simply in too much shock to manage anything more than following the herd. They fell into step around her.

“What now?” Lindsey asked shakily. “There’s no one here.”

“I guess they don’t have to worry about permission to land,” LaRoche said tightly.

“But who’ll be in charge of the rescue and relief efforts?”

Everyone glanced at Clancy when he spoke, but no one had any answers.

“There must be shelters set up in the city,” Danielle said shakily, her doubts threading her voice. “I guess the first thing we need to do is to find transportation.”

“I need to find my husband and children,” Lindsey said, a note of hysteria in her voice.

“The shelters would be the most likely place to find family, don’t you think?”

Danielle offered hopefully. “I mean ... Rawlins said they were trying to quarantine, but with so many people sick ...”

They had another jolt when they reached the alien enclave. Despite the fact that Sabin had warned them that his people most closely resembled humans, Danielle found she still wasn’t prepared for the others.

It also came as a jolt to come face to face with an exact replica of Sabin. In point of fact, she walked right up to him and addressed him as Sabin. He bowed slightly. “I am On. He is Sabin.”

Stunned, she followed the direction he’d indicated and saw Sabin coming down the gangplank. Sabin studied her expression for a moment when he’d reached her and then glanced at the others. “My ... twin, On. Bork and Tande are grundts of the Mael system and the draes, Ci and Sha are sisters from the Kareon system.” He paused, looking around as if he had only just then noticed that they were completely alone on the air strip. “Shall we gather our equipment? Or will it be best to meet with your leaders first and discuss a plan of action?”

Danielle glanced uncomfortably at Nick and then Clancy.

“You should collect your equipment for preliminary studies,” Clancy said decisively. “That way we won’t need to come back for it.”

“I’ll see what I can do about some transportation. Danny—you want to give me a hand?” LaRoche asked.

A little surprised that he’d asked her, Danielle nodded and followed Nick as he headed off toward one of the hangers that edged the field. She didn’t know how it was that her determination to behave as if he didn’t exist had resulted in the two of them acting like they were virtually strangers when she’d discovered that Nick had been assigned, as luck would have it, as their shuttle pilot, but that had certainly been the case. It had made things between them far more comfortable than it might have been

otherwise, though, and she'd learned to appreciate it. Although, truth be told, she'd begun to doubt it *was* pretense on his part. He'd been so damned convincing that she'd begun to wonder if he even recalled their brief liaison.

"This looks bad—worse than I'd expected," he muttered when they'd put some distance between themselves and the others.

Danielle threw an uncomfortable glance behind them, feeling her pulse leap when she discovered that one of the aliens Sabin had called *grundts* was watching them. He wasn't the only one. Either Sabin or On—she wasn't certain which—had paused at the door of the craft to study them, as well. "In what way?" she asked finally.

He gestured broadly with his arms. "Take your pick—every fucking way."

"I'm not sure it's really safe to talk freely. They seem to have our frequency and they're not having any trouble translating."

LaRoche nodded and said nothing else. When they neared the shuttle, he gestured toward it. "I just remembered something I need to get"

Danielle glanced at him. "I should get my duffle as long as we're here. No telling when we'll be back."

"Great minds think alike. That's what I was thinking."

He headed toward the cargo bay as soon as they'd entered the shuttle. When he'd sealed the airlock behind them, he removed his helmet and turned off his radio. Danielle followed suit, curious, feeling her stomach knot more tightly with every passing moment.

She didn't make the mistake of thinking there was anything personal in his sudden interest in getting her alone, but there was no getting around the fact that, inappropriate to the situation or not, it heightened her jitters.

"I'm thinking Trojan horse," LaRoche said grimly. "This just damned sure doesn't feel right to me."

Danielle felt a little lightheaded with the fear that washed over her. "Alright, say I agree. What can we do about it?"

LaRoche shook his head. "I don't know that there's a fucking thing we can do—or was from the moment they showed up. I'm just saying I don't trust them worth a fuck and we need to keep our heads on straight and watch our backs. As bad as things look here, it's going to be ten times worse when we get to the city. You know that, don't you?"

Danielle held on to her emotions with an effort. "We don't know that! I'm sure it's bad"

Nick felt his churning emotions slip precariously closer to a loss of control. Despite the fears never far from his mind since disaster had struck, he'd drawn some comfort from the fact that he was with Danielle, convinced himself that somehow, someday, he was going to get them through this.

Not that she'd been willing to give him the time of day!

She'd been wary of him—not surprising considering he'd behaved like a complete asshole—but he'd convinced himself that, eventually, she'd come around. It was just going to take more patience than he was used to to coax her back. The spark was still there. As hard as she worked to hide it, he'd seen she was no more immune to him than he was her—and, as long as that was still there, he knew he still had a chance to make it up to her, to convince her he was worth one more chance.

The aliens were a threat he hadn't counted on—in more ways than one.

In his gut, he knew it wasn't just personal, but it was damned hard to see past the rage that had been building to a slow boil from the moment that cold-blooded bastard had appeared on the space station.

He'd never felt that particular kind of threat—that he might be facing insurmountable competition for the woman he wanted.

Mostly, he supposed, because he'd never met a woman before Danny that he actually gave a damn whether she turned him down or not. There were plenty of women to go around. If a woman he liked didn't return his interest, it might prick his ego a little, but it never bothered him past the next woman that caught his eye.

It never had before, at any rate.

It had come as the most unpleasant jolt of his life to watch the instantaneous and completely mutual attraction between the alien and Danielle. Unfortunately, there'd been no ignoring it or dismissing it when both of them had lapsed into a state of catatonia the moment they locked gazes.

There hadn't been many times in his life that he'd felt quite as helpless as he did at the moment, and, unfortunately, the fear and rage warring within him that he was going to lose Danny didn't do a damned thing for his patience or his ability to think straight.

He gripped her arms and gave her a little shake. "Damn it, Danny! Get your head out of your ass. I had people down here, too! We all lost people—family, friends. If we fall apart, we're going to be next! I feel it in my gut! These aliens didn't come to help. They came to take what was left. Hell! For all we know they could've *done* this! Doesn't it strike you as damned odd that they didn't think it necessary to wear any fucking protection?"

Chapter Three

Danielle stared at Nick in dismay, but the violent shake he'd given her was enough to redirect her mind and help her regain control of her emotions. "I didn't even notice"

"No one else seemed to," Nick said grimly.

Danielle considered it. "They're clearly worlds more advanced than we are. Maybe they already ran some tests and discovered the threat was past? They aren't even the same species—any of them. Maybe they ascertained that the virus wouldn't have any effect on them?"

"And maybe they knew goddamned good and well it wouldn't because they invented the fucking thing!"

Danielle shook her head. "Maybe ... but why the ruse? They're advanced enough they couldn't have been worried about resistance."

Nick felt vaguely ill as the hope that he could at least reason with Danielle and make her think twice about the aliens died. "I don't know. I don't have any answers, just instincts—and they're telling me that something's rotten here."

"I still don't see that we have any choice but to go along with them, even if we do suspect they're up to something."

"We don't ... not that I can see."

Danielle frowned thoughtfully. "You're suggesting we ditch them as soon as we can and strike off on our own to find the survivors?"

Relieved that she actually seemed to be taking his warning to heart, Nick relaxed fractionally. "Not a bad plan, actually. Although ... it might be best to wait things out and see if we can figure out what they're up to first. Once we take off there isn't going to be much chance of finding out anything and the more we know, the better off we'll be."

Nodding agreement, Danielle lifted her helmet again. "We need to go, then, if you don't want to arouse suspicions. They'll wonder about us being in here so long."

"Not necessarily. Maybe they'll suspect hanky panky."

Danielle sent him a look. "You think they'd think we're that damned shallow?"

"You never know."

"Is that why you picked me instead of any of the others? Because you thought it might throw them off?"

He flicked a speculative glance at her and shrugged with as much nonchalance as he could muster. "It occurred to me. The males in that bunch seemed particularly interested in you."

Danielle sent him a look of surprise then shuddered. "I hope to hell you're not including that ... reptilian looking thing Sabin referred to as a grundt."

"Especially him."

"That's not funny, LaRoche!" Danielle said tightly.

He gave her an assessing look. "I notice you didn't object to the idea that the beautiful twins might be interested."

"At least they look human," Danielle said irritably.

"Except they aren't," Nick reminded her grimly.

Danielle gasped in surprise. "You don't seriously think ...! My god, LaRoche! My *children* were down here! If you think I have anything, at all, on my mind besides finding them you're dead wrong!"

"I'm just trying to warn you to watch yourself! You might not have noticed them, but *they* noticed you."

They were in such a rush to leave the shuttle again before they could arouse suspicions in the aliens that they almost forgot to grab the damned duffle bags they'd used as an excuse. Nick gathered up the duffle bags of the rest of the crew for good measure, tossing them to her one at the time from the doorway when she'd reached the ground.

When they'd lined the bags up, they headed for the hanger Nick had indicated before. "I thought I saw a bus ... ah! This should do it if it's gassed up and we can find the keys."

Fortunately, the keys were still in the ignition.

Because the driver was still in the seat, or at least the skeletal remains.

Danielle screamed when she saw it.

"Jesus Christ!" Nick ground out. "You nearly gave me a heart attack, Danny! Don't do that!"

Danielle pressed a hand to her heart, trying to physically restrain the surging organ. "Sorry," she said breathlessly. "It startled me."

Nick looked her over critically. "You think you can give me a hand removing it?"

Danielle nodded jerkily, but her stomach churned as they pulled the body from the seat and it began to fall apart. The remainder of their crew and half the alien crew, no doubt alerted by her scream, arrived as they stepped from the bus with the body. Lindsey promptly yielded to hysterics and began clawing at the closure of her helmet, trying to tear it off. Danielle dropped her end of the body unceremoniously and rushed to her friend, trying to prevent her from exposing herself.

"It is safe. There is no danger—here."

Danielle glanced sharply at Sabin when he spoke. "You're certain?"

"I would be wearing my own helmet if I was not. We scanned the area when we landed."

Taking his word for it, Danielle ceased fighting Lindsey and helped her remove the helmet. She had to leap away almost the moment she pulled it loose to avoid being spattered with the contents of Lindsey's stomach. She almost lost it herself when Lindsey puked, but managed to beat the urge back and swallow the burning bile.

"We will check to see if there are ... others," Sabin volunteered.

Danielle nodded, although she wasn't certain if he'd spoken to her or the others. Regardless, she didn't think she could handle another such discovery at the moment and Lindsey, as soon as she'd finished being sick, began to weep, claiming her full attention. By the time Lindsey had managed to collect herself, they discovered that most of their group had already gotten on the bus. She helped Lindsey up the stairs and into the first empty seat they came to.

Lindsey caught her hand as she started to move away. "I ... don't think ... I'm

not sure I can handle this.”

Danielle swallowed with an effort. “You can. You have to, Lindsey,” she said bracingly. “We all have to.”

Lindsey looked a little hurt at her brusqueness, but she seemed to collect herself. Guilt shrouded Danielle as she made her way to the back of the bus. She should’ve been more sympathetic to Lindsey’s plight, she knew, but she just couldn’t summon the strength for it. She was still shaky herself from their discovery of the body and the portents it boded.

Dropping on the bench at the very back of the bus, Danielle removed her own helmet and then shifted over to the window seat, staring at nothing in particular, her entire being focused inwardly.

The tank, Nick discovered, was only a quarter full. When he’d finally managed to get the bus started, he headed for a fuel pump near the hanger. Danielle got up and headed out of the bus in search of fresh air when he got off to pump the fuel. Even the fumes from the fuel, she discovered, were an improvement over the air both inside and outside of the bus, for either the odor of decay clung to her suit, or the light breeze was carrying it.

She was afraid it was on the wind.

“Sorry.”

Danielle glanced at Nick, lifting her brows questioningly, feeling too drained to make the effort to talk.

He shrugged. “I would’ve handled it myself if I’d thought I could.”

It took her a moment to realize he was talking about removing the body. “Don’t be. There’s no reason why you should’ve had to handle it alone. I’m perfectly capable of helping.” And she had a horrible feeling that the bus driver would only be the first of many—not that they’d properly disposed of the poor man. “Do you think that’s all we’ll be doing?”

“I think we should try not to get ahead of ourselves.”

She smiled at him wanly. “You mean just don’t think at all?”

He shrugged. “If you can manage that—yes.”

“Good idea,” Danielle said, feeling her chin wobble faintly. “I think I’m going to try to follow your advice.”

“We can get through this, Danny—if we stick together.”

Danielle stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. Just as it dawned on her to wonder if he meant ‘we’ as in the humans that were left or ‘we’ as in the two of them, someone opened one of the windows of the bus. The moment stretched as the sound of other windows being opened intruded and Danielle felt a flicker of relief when it occurred to her that the interruption had prevented her from answering.

The suspicion that he might have meant the two of them made her extremely uncomfortable, but his behavior since their arrival made it difficult to completely dismiss the notion that that was what he’d meant.

It wasn’t as if she disliked Nick—unfortunately. Their brief interlude had convinced her, though, that Nick LaRoche’s main interest, beyond flying, seemed to be to see just how many women he could screw from the cradle to the grave, and her main interest had been to avoid emotional tangles likely to lead only to heartache. It had been a narrow miss—for her, anyway. She was perfectly willing to remain on friendly terms

with him, willing to stand by him if he was right about the motives of their alien 'friends.' Professionally, he was a good man to have at one's side in any difficult situation. Career-wise, he had one of the scariest backgrounds of any man she knew. But if he had pairing up on his mind, well, that wasn't going to happen.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice—I'm an idiot that deserves misery!

When she turned to put some distance between them, she nearly ran full force into Sabin.

She fell back a step, glancing up at the man she'd nearly run into as she rounded the end of the bus in surprise.

She realized the moment she looked up at him that she was wrong. It wasn't Sabin. It was On. Sabin stood behind him.

As nearly identical as they were, there were slight differences that were noticeable when they stood side by side. Oddly enough, even though she couldn't pinpoint them, she realized there was something about Sabin's face that made him seem more mature—older—as in years, not the matter of minutes or possibly hours there would be between the birth of twins. Sabin certainly wouldn't be flattered by that, she was sure, even though, at a guess, she couldn't believe that he was much more than thirty. If they were twins, though, and she saw no reason to doubt it, that wasn't possible. She decided it must be experiences that had written the maturity on Sabin's face that made him appear at least a couple of years older.

It flickered through her mind to wonder what sort of life Sabin had led.

"You're On," she said. "You must be the younger twin."

His eyes widened slightly. Instead of answering, he glanced behind him at Sabin.

Sabin studied her assessingly for a moment. "You are very observant. Pain leaves its mark. I was injured in the course of my duties."

Danielle felt her face redden at her thoughtless remark. "I'm sorry."

He tilted his head curiously. "Why?"

She blinked at him, jolted by the question. It made her excruciatingly uncomfortable when she realized she'd merely mouthed the correct platitude as one did a hundred times a day, automatically, because it was the polite thing to do, not because one gave it any thought or truly felt anything. She *was* sorry to hear that he'd had an injury bad enough for the pain to leave its mark, though, and equally regretful that she'd inadvertently insulted him. "If you were insulted ..."

"I was not."

Disconcerted, Danielle merely nodded and moved around them.

She didn't want to get back on the bus. Instead, she stopped beside Joyce, who was leaning against the side of the bus, staring into space trance-like. "You alright?"

Joyce blinked. Slowly, she turned to look at Danielle. "No. I don't think I'll ever be alright again."

There didn't seem to be anything to say to that. Danielle struggled with it for a few moments but her own emotions were too raw, her own outlook too stark, for her to be able to think of anything to say that might ease any of the pain for either of them. "Maybe we'll discover it isn't as bad as it seems right now," she said after several minutes had passed.

Joyce cleared her throat. "We all want to believe that and we all know it's a lie." She swallowed convulsively. "I can smell the dead from here."

Danielle had thought the same. She'd tried to convince herself that it was the body they'd pulled from the bus and that it was only her imagination that made it seem the air was ripe with the many smells of decay. And yet Joyce had only to voice her own fears to convince her. She doubted that was any more rational than her fears. Joyce had no way of knowing more than she did.

All the same, she found that her attempts at denial no longer comforted her at all.

Beyond forcing themselves to face a truth none of them wanted to accept, was there really any point in going? What could they accomplish by doing so? Surely there couldn't be survivors living among so many dead? Wouldn't they have fled the city when it reached a point where they could see that the possibility of getting medical help was almost nonexistent? Wouldn't they have reached a point where they realized the threat of infection outweighed the possibility of medical help?

Pushing away from the bus, she looked around for Dr. Morton. When she discovered that he and Andre` and Bud had returned to the corpse to douse it with fuel and burn it, she hesitated. The whiff of burning hair and flesh decided her, however. If she could see, and smell the cremation from where she stood there was no point in keeping her distance only for the hope of comfort.

Very likely it was something she'd have to grow accustomed to. The dead would have to be disposed of or other diseases would create a new plague—might already have done so.

"We should decontaminate the suits."

Clancy and the others glanced at her and exchanged a look.

"I'm not sure there's any point in it," Andre` muttered.

She studied their faces in dismay. "We're alive. That's the point—trying to stay alive."

Clancy looked at her with red-rimmed eyes. "And the point of that?"

Danielle bit her lip but anger surged through her. "Because some of us *want* to live! Because there's bound to be survivors out there who'll need help! Because I, for one, think our race is worth saving, damn it! We can't just ... give up!"

Bud nodded jerkily. "You're right. Nobody's thinking very clearly right now, Danny."

"I know that, but we'll have to grieve later ... when we're sure someone else isn't suffering because we're too wrapped up in our losses to help them. My sons are out there—my mother, all of my family. I'm not going to rest until I know whether they're alive or not."

Clancy straightened, pulling himself together with obvious effort. "Of course there'll be survivors. No doubt scattered, though."

A modicum of relief flowed through her. "That's what I was thinking. We know they would've set up emergency medical treatment within the city during the height of the outbreak, but don't you think, when they were overwhelmed, when they saw that the quarantine wasn't working, that they would've begun to evacuate?"

Clancy frowned, but thoughtfully now. "It's hard to say. There would've been widespread panic ... people trying to flee. They would've brought the military in to try to keep order and contain the infected and those exposed and possibly infected.

"The horrible truth is that pretty much everything they would've done to begin with probably only succeeded in spreading the infection. If people had obeyed the order

to stay inside ... but then, I'm not certain that they ever discovered whether it was airborne or spread through contact."

He stared down at the burning corpse for several moments and finally gestured for the group to return to the bus.

"We might be better off to find a plane or a helicopter to view the damage first and try to locate whatever centers are possibly still in operation," Clancy said thoughtfully as they reached the rest of the group.

"That still means a bus ride," Nick replied. "I take it we're not going in to the city?"

"As Danielle pointed out, that probably isn't the best idea we could've come up with—although I know everyone is anxious to search for their families."

"The craft that we arrived in will accommodate everyone," Sabin offered.

Nick eyed him assessingly. "Not a very good idea."

Sabin lifted his black brows questioningly. "Why is that?"

"It's not American. They'll be patrolling our airspace."

Sabin glanced at the grundt, Bork, but he was polite enough not to point out that they hadn't been challenged before.

"We'll take the bus to the closest airport," Nick added after a moment. "Find a place to set up and then locate a chopper ... unless anyone has objections?"

Danielle was relieved at the suggestion—more than she should have been. She knew it was only delaying the inevitable, but she felt like she needed to pace the shocks she knew were coming or she was going to cave in and become nothing more than a blubbering mass of jelly.

The trip to the airport Nick had mentioned was almost more than she could handle. The freeway was clogged with abandoned vehicles and those weren't the worst. The vehicles that weren't abandoned contained bodies and the roadsides were littered with people who'd tried to flee the plague, as well. Carrion feeders, both of the winged variety and the four-legged, were feeding upon the corpses. Andre` and Bud pulled their service revolvers and shot at the buzzards, wild dogs, and opossums, killing about a dozen between them and sending twice that many into at least temporary flight before they ran out of ammunition.

Danielle empathized with their feelings even while, on another level, it alarmed her to see them waste their ammunition. It bothered her just as much to see the scavengers tearing at the bodies, but it was an exercise in futility. It wasn't even effective enough to make any of them feel any less helpless or hopelessly overwhelmed.

As they drew closer to the fringes of the city, they saw worse—burned-out buildings and cars, piles of rubble and pits in the pavement and roadsides that gave the area the appearance of a war zone.

Clearly, as Clancy had suggested, the authorities had set up roadblocks to try to contain the panicked populace. Just as clearly, it had been as ineffective as every other measure they'd taken to try to contain the spread of the deadly disease.

The hotel they stopped at seemed to be deserted—barren of either living or dead. It was difficult to determine that by the smell. The closer they'd come to the city the harder it was to breathe. Feeling more than a little nauseated, Danielle climbed from the bus with a mixture of relief and trepidation and entered the lobby of the hotel. It was nearing dusk by the time they arrived and the gloomy interior was hardly welcoming. It

chilled her in an indescribable way to find herself standing in such a familiar place and seeing it in such a completely unfamiliar light. They discovered with some relief that the power still worked, however. When he'd turned on the lights, Nick strode to the desk and, after studying the machine used to make the security cards for several moments, gave up on it and searched until he found master keys.

Lindsey, who'd kept her distance after the incident on the field, sidled up to Danielle as the group made their way down the hall in search of rooms. "Can I ...? Do you mind if we share?"

Danielle glanced at her tiredly and she blushed.

"I just ... don't want to be alone."

"Sure," Danielle responded, feeling a twinge of shame and guilt for being so short with her before. "It would make me feel better, too."

Sabin, who'd produced some sort of scanning devices from their equipment carries when the group had gotten off the bus, glanced at Danielle when she spoke. The movement caught Danielle's attention, but she didn't acknowledge that she'd noticed his interest in the conversation.

It made her more uncomfortable. She couldn't help but wonder what the aliens thought about them and if every word they spoke was being analyzed so that they could get a better grasp of the beings they'd come to help. She supposed that would almost be an instinctual reaction—know the enemy—and yet it reminded her of her conversation with Nick.

If they were searching for weaknesses, however, they'd had plenty of time by now to see that her and her crew were just about as vulnerable as it was possible to be and still be functioning. Despite every effort to carry on, they were all more like zombies than living, thinking creatures, because they were having trouble managing the simplest of tasks.

The entire group paused in the corridor as Nick opened the first door. Sabin stepped past him and scanned the room. When he returned, he met her gaze. "This room is ... clean."

Danielle glanced around but since no one seemed to object, she nudged Lindsey toward the room. "Will you be alright for a little bit? I think we could use something to eat. I thought I'd see if I could find the kitchen and look for something."

The comment seemed to rouse everyone out of their near catatonic state. "Good idea," Nick said. "I think we could all use something."

"I will escort her," Sabin said.

Nick's lips tightened.

Uneasiness flickered through Danielle both at the instant aggressiveness evident in Nick's demeanor and the prospect of being alone with Sabin—any of the aliens.

"Thanks," she said, trying to head off any more overt display of distrust. "Do you want to come with us, Lindsey? Or will you be alright here until we get back?"

Lindsey sent Sabin a wide-eyed look of pure horror. "I'll wait in the room," she said, scurrying inside and nearly slamming the door in their faces. The sound of the locks being shot home were loud in the near-deafening silence she left behind.

Feeling her face heat, Danielle turned away and headed back toward the lobby. She heard a tread behind her, surprisingly light for a man as muscular as Sabin, and glanced up at him as he came along beside her. After a few moments, she heard the rest

of the group move down the corridor to the next room.

"This is ... a very difficult situation for you."

Danielle glanced at him again, uncertain of where the conversation might be leading or if it was a question or an observation. "For all of us, yes."

He said nothing more until Danielle paused in the lobby and looked around.

"The indications are that we are too late to offer much in the way of aid to your people. I deeply regret that this seems to be case."

Danielle's throat closed, although she told herself angrily that he didn't *feel* any damned thing at all. The wonder of it was that he wasn't gloating about it. She turned to face him, feeling her anger waver at the discovery that he was standing closer than she'd thought and he was far taller than she'd realized—intimidatingly so. "Do you? Why?"

Something flickered in his eyes, an acknowledgement, she thought, of the comment he'd made to her when she'd offered sympathies for his injury. "Any being of conscience must be disturbed to see the destruction of an entire species."

Danielle felt the color leave her face at the stark assessment. Her mind went chaotic with possibilities, the predominant one being a suspicion that he knew exactly what he was talking about and questions as to how he might have acquired the knowledge. "There will be survivors. There are always people who are resistant, people who are naturally immune, and people whose immune systems can surmount such a viral attack. Just because they've left the infected areas doesn't mean everyone's dead.

"And you can spare me platitudes of sympathy. You don't feel any regret. You don't care. As far as I can see you don't feel anything at all! How would you have any idea how I feel? How many of us feels?"

His expression tightened ever so subtly, enough to make it clear that he was certainly capable of feeling anger, although she wasn't so sure she would've noticed if she hadn't been looking straight at him. His voice, when he spoke, was as cool and even as ever.

"Granted. I am not you so I cannot know how you feel. I have not even experienced such a thing first hand to know how I would feel in such a situation. However, my own species came close to extinction when our world was destabilized. I do understand some of what you must feel because of that and also because this thing that has happened here will effect any survivors for many generations into the future ... if there are survivors and there are future generations."

The tale knocked the wind from her, jerked her reviving anger right out from under her. Her emotions teetered for several moments between empathy, disbelief, an odd feeling of kinship, and a completely irrational surge of hopefulness, as if the fact that his people had survived somehow meant that her own would.

"This is ... is that true?"

His dark brows rose. "What purpose might it serve me to lie?"

Danielle looked away from him, shifting away from him at the same time in an effort to subtly put a more comfortable distance between them. He unnerved her in an indescribable way. She thought it was purely a primal level of fear because she sensed that he was different from her even while his appearance seemed to belie that.

Or maybe it was simply that, despite all reason, she felt drawn to him and sensed the danger of that?

She noticed he didn't deny that it was a lie. He simply asked why she thought he

would and, as it happened, a perfectly logical reason for such a lie sprang very easily into her mind. He was clearly very intelligent, certainly smart enough to understand human nature if he'd been studying them. He must know that such an admission would create a sense of kinship. The question was, why would he want to do that? To get her to let down her guard?

Wryly, she admitted she had little defense for him to infiltrate. He'd noted it himself.

Spying a glimpse of a sign that seemed to point toward a restaurant or at least some sort of eatery, she stepped away from him to see the sign better. "And yet your people coped?"

"As you said yourself, one must. The alternative is to accept death and wait for it to come for you."

Resisting the urge to glance at him, Danielle led the way down the corridor she'd discovered that did lead to a hotel restaurant. Her mind was on a search for his reference, however. It wasn't a long search. She recalled almost at once that she'd said something to that effect to Lindsey and then to Dr. Morton and the others. What she couldn't recall was an awareness that Sabin might have been close enough to overhear.

It disturbed her that she didn't. That could only mean that she was too emotionally involved at the time to be as wary of what she was saying as she should've been. It didn't relieve her much to realize that she hadn't actually said anything, she didn't think, that might come back to haunt, because she knew it was purely dumb luck that she hadn't.

"Historically speaking, it's happened here before," she said after a moment, "although it was before written history—very early in our evolution. From what our scientists have been able to discover, the last ice age very nearly wiped out our species."

Sabin nodded. "It was something similar that almost destroyed my world ... except not ancient history at all. We had reached a stage in development very like what you have achieved here ... possibly somewhat more advanced, only to discover that there are some things that even the most sophisticated technology cannot overcome."

She smiled at him a little absently as they reached the door to the restaurant only to find it locked. "But your species made a comeback."

When he didn't respond, she glanced at him. He was studying the door. "As you say. The door will not open?"

Danielle smiled wryly. "It's locked. I should have thought about that, although ... I doubt the master key for the hotel would work on this anyway. Restaurants like this usually aren't actually owned by the hotel."

He bowed politely. "If you will allow me?"

Danielle looked at him in surprise but moved out of the way. He stroked a long fingered hand along the wooden frame. "What is this material?"

"Wood ... from plants. It looks like oak, though. It's probably as hard as ..."

She stopped abruptly, sucking in a sharp breath when he slammed his fist into the edge of the board. The board splintered. He examined his knuckles for a moment and then pulled the splintered wood away to reveal the locking mechanism. Grasping the handle she'd been tugging on, he pulled the door open. "Now it is not locked."

She stared at him, the door, and then the broken molding. Finally, when it dawned on her that he was waiting for her to enter, she did so, but she was still in a state

of shock. Without considering it, she reached for his hand, lifting it to examine his knuckles.

He didn't resist and yet she felt his reluctance and wondered at it. Was contact in general distasteful for him? Or only if it was contact with humans?

His hand was long and slender just as his fingers were. They looked like the hands of an artist not a bruiser and yet she could see he'd done very little damage to it. The skin was barked and bleeding, but barely, and the bones seemed completely intact.

"There were no tools," he said coolly as he retrieved his hand.

Danielle shook her head at him but felt a smile curl her lips.

He studied the curve of her lips. "This amuses you?"

She realized she didn't really know why she'd smiled. "No. I'm just relieved you didn't break your hand."

He seemed to dismiss the subject, lifting his head to look around. "I would not have done it if there was a possibility of it."

"How did you know there wasn't?" she asked curiously.

"I calculated the density of the material and the amount of force it would take to shatter it."

"Just like that?"

He sent her a look of surprise. "Yes," he said dismissively.

He was so serious it was almost tempting to tease him. She quelled the urge even though, under other circumstances—those being if he was human—she would've considered it a harmless enough distraction and a welcome one. He wasn't human, though, and there was no predicting how he might receive teasing or if he would understand.

Of course the likelihood that he wouldn't was the main lure, an opportunity to amuse herself at his expense without him even being aware that she was. It wasn't an urge to 'lure him out of his shell,' she assured herself, but it was a rather childish and potentially dangerous urge—like teasing an alligator with bait just to watch him snap at it.

Dismissing it, she turned to survey the restaurant herself, spied the door she knew must lead to the kitchen and headed toward it. It wasn't locked, which relieved Sabin of the necessity of using his fist as a hammer again.

Almost the most peculiar part of that was the fact that there hadn't been a sign of suppressed violence in the action. He'd simply assessed the situation, made his calculations—in his head—and acted on them.

Danielle had never considered herself to be contrary, and yet the very fact that he was so completely cool and self-contained teased a side of her that she'd never been aware of—the urge to provoke a reaction out of him.

Very likely, it couldn't be done, she thought wryly, even if she was to give in to such a childish impulse. He wasn't human. She couldn't expect him to behave or react like one.

"Does it seem ... odd to you that your people are so much like ours?" she asked curiously as they entered the kitchen and she looked around for the light switch.

"No."

She turned to look at him as the lights flickered on and found him staring curiously at the lights. "Fluorescents. They always flicker like that."

He was curious about the light but not about the seemingly astronomical odds of two species on two different sides of the universe evolving so similarly?

Chapter Four

Sabin wondered if he had miscalculated the level of intelligence of humans or if it was only that he had overestimated his ability to deceive and to manipulate. The latter seemed the most logical conclusion.

There was no reason why they should be when decisions were based solely on logic and the good of the many, and yet it annoyed him that he could not seem to prepare himself for the questions Danny threw out at him.

It was the disorderliness of her thought processes, he mused. His own were ordered, following a logical course.

And perhaps hers were somewhat orderly, as well, he decided after a few moments' consideration. Perhaps it was only that he was not made privy to the process that she seemed to jump about so erratically? Upon reflection he could see how she might progress from observing his actions, examining his injury, and concluding that they were different to the question of how they had come to be so similar.

He should have been prepared for the question, he decided with a touch of disgust. The fault was not hers, but his. He had arrived at the erroneous conclusion that they allowed emotion to rule them, lowering their ability to utilize their intelligence to the fullest.

It disturbed him to realize that he had miscalculated, particularly since he could not dismiss the fact that this female in particular had a remarkable effect upon him that manifested itself in both a physical and mental reaction. He wasn't accustomed to being touched. He wasn't certain of whether he disliked it excessively or liked it, but he was certain that it significantly increased the imbalance he experienced around her, interfering with his ability to behave and think rationally.

Danielle's uneasiness, which was never far away whenever she was around Sabin, resurrected itself. She didn't suppose it was unbelievable that they'd both evolved to be humanoid in appearance. That particular circumstance seemed to be a necessary step for beings to advance technologically. There were many intelligent species even on Earth that used tools and seemed intelligent enough to learn, that had complex relationships and even 'societies,' but their forms limited their ability to advance as humans had.

The humanoid species that had come with him, though, made it clear that, beyond certain specific mechanical needs, a species could vary drastically from there in physical appearance.

She had to consider, though, that Sabin knew of many sentient beings, had interacted with them, whereas this was a completely new experience for her. Maybe he'd seen enough to cease feeling any amazement in a new discovery even if that new discovery was closer to his own than he'd seen before?

The explanation seemed reasonable, and yet she found that she was still uneasy and dissatisfied with his reaction to her question.

The walk-in freezer, she discovered, was well stocked. Planting a stool in front of the door to hold it open, she went inside to investigate. Sabin followed her after a few

moments. She glanced at him as his shadow fell over her and discovered he'd turned to examine the door. "This door can be opened from the inside," he said finally.

"Yes, but I don't like small spaces," Danielle responded absently, "especially if they're the sort of places that make me feel trapped."

"The ISS Pegasus was small."

"Not like this."

"How did it differ?"

Danielle considered it while she searched the shelves for something that appealed and also wouldn't take much effort. "It was designed to support life, had a number of emergency exits, and I had a purpose for being there. I didn't feel trapped and as long as all systems were working properly, I knew I was safe."

"It is not because you do not trust me, then?"

She sent him a sharp look. "I was claustrophobic before you arrived," she said dryly. "Actually, I don't suppose it could be strictly categorized as claustrophobia. Small spaces don't particularly bother me unless there is also an element of real threat. The freezer has a safety feature to prevent anyone from being trapped, but safety features have been known to fail, the temperature inside is cool enough to be a threat and there's also the oxygen factor. I just prefer not to take unnecessary risks."

"You felt safe in the habitat?" Sabin asked doubtfully.

The question surprised a chuckle out of her, although on another level she found it mildly insulting since she knew it reflected his opinion of their technology, which obviously wasn't very high. "Relatively. Not really at first, but we were there for months. You can't sustain high alert forever—humans can't anyway. I was extremely nervous in the beginning, nearly jumping out of my skin any time any kind of unexpected noise caught my attention, but after a while, when none of the things that startled me turned out to be anything threatening, I stopped being so jumpy.

"As clumsy and no doubt crude as you considered the station, it still represents an achievement for us and every effort was made to make it as safe and comfortable as possible.

"That isn't to say that I actually *liked* it, but it was necessary for the research we were doing."

Her attention had been caught by a box filled with steaks. She wavered guiltily for several moments but finally decided there was no real reason why they shouldn't help themselves. If it was stealing, it was taking from the dead who no longer had any use for the sustenance or the money. Instead of trying to remove enough for all of them, she took the box from the shelf and turned with it. Sabin promptly took it from her and returned to the kitchen. Shrugging, she loaded her arms with baking potatoes and followed him.

The prospect of a real meal lifted her spirits. She hadn't realized how empty she was. Moreover, they'd been in space for months and hadn't had any 'real' food since they'd left. When she'd dumped the potatoes in the sink, she counted them and went back for a few more. She'd already grabbed the fixings for salads before it occurred to her that the food might not be suitable or desirable for the aliens among them.

She glanced at Sabin self-consciously. "I just realized that I've no idea whether this food would be edible to any of you. I don't even know about your customs or tastes. What do you think?"

"We brought food. If it doesn't appeal to any, they can go out to the vehicle and retrieve some of the rations."

Nodding, Danielle set about scrubbing the potatoes in the sink, pierced the skins and tossed them into the microwave. The range was commercial and it took her a few minutes to figure out how to get the grill going. Once it was heating, she searched for seasonings, removed the steaks from their shrink wrap and lined them up to season them.

Sabin, she discovered, had found a perch to watch, propping his hip against the counter and folding his arms over his chest.

He watched her so intently that it occurred to her to wonder if he'd come purely for the purpose of watching her to make certain she didn't try to poison him and his crew.

"Captain LaRoche is your life mate?"

Startled by the abrupt question, Danielle, in the process of chopping vegetables for salads, whirled to look at him, nicking her finger with the knife. The question surprised a bark of disbelieving laughter from her. "No! Whatever gave you that idea?"

His lifted his brows and then frowned thoughtfully. "He is your lover?"

Danielle felt her face heat. She returned her attention to the salad she was cutting. "It isn't considered polite to ask that sort of question, but, no. He was at one time, briefly, but we're merely friends and colleagues now."

"He does not seem to think so."

Danielle didn't look at him that time. As long as he'd stayed with impersonal questions, she'd been comfortable enough answering—even welcomed the conversation since it was a distraction from the dark things fluttering in her mind. She didn't want to encourage him to probe more, but she found she couldn't resist. "What makes you think that?"

Sabin shrugged. "I have noticed there is an air of ... territorialism when I speak to you."

She'd thought she detected it, too. It struck her as odd, though, that Sabin would have picked up on it when she wasn't even completely sure herself that she'd correctly interpreted his behavior. It indicated that Sabin was a lot more like humans than he'd led them to believe. He couldn't understand the emotion or Nick's motives, surely, if it wasn't something he was familiar with feeling?

She shrugged. "Maybe. I'm not sure it has to do with me in particular, though, even if you're right. It's natural to be wary of strangers from strange lands bearing gifts."

"Then his reaction would be the same if I spoke with any of the other females, yes? And yet he did not seem to notice when I did."

Danielle felt an odd little twinge when he said that, but discovered it wasn't anything she wanted to examine too closely.

Before she could think of a response, she heard someone enter the restaurant and stride briskly toward the kitchen. Nick pushed through the door. His gaze instantly moved to her and then to Sabin. "Any luck?"

"The walk-in was well stocked," Danielle responded easily, ignoring the sardonic look Sabin sent her. "I picked steaks."

The hard look of suspicion faded from Nick's face. He crossed the kitchen to examine them. "You're a woman after my own heart, Danny Stevens!" he said with an approving grin. "God! It's been forever since I had a decent steak!"

Danielle couldn't help but smile back. "Hopefully it'll boost everyone's morale

to get a real meal.”

“We could use it,” he responded with a grimace. “Need any help?”

Danielle flicked a glance at Sabin. “Maybe you could let everyone know what’s on the menu and find out how they like their steaks? Not that I’m going to guarantee that I can get them cooked to order, but I’ll give it a try.”

“Why don’t I handle cooking the steaks, then? Sabin can take orders.”

Dismay flickered through Danielle. It was a direct challenge however mundane it seemed. Sabin, she discovered, was studying Nick, a faint smile hovering about his lips which might be interpreted as anything from amusement about Nick’s none too subtle attempt to oust him to a courteous reception of the order. “I believe this refers to the custom of cooking the flesh thoroughly or leaving it mostly raw?”

Nick flicked him a mildly irritated glance as he began tossing the steaks on the grill. “Not exactly a custom. It’s a matter of personal taste.”

“Why not simply divide the steaks and cook some to each preference? It will be useless to question either the grundts or the draes. They are not familiar with this type of flesh and neither are On or I. You do not know the preferences of your crewmates?”

Danielle gaped at him, wondering if it seemed to Nick that Sabin had issued a counterchallenge or if it was just her imagination. From the look that crossed Nick’s features, she guessed the former. She was tempted to volunteer to go herself, but decided she didn’t really want to leave Nick and Sabin alone. “Sabin can help me get the plates. I’m sure they should be washed before we use them.”

Without waiting for either man to comment, she headed to the sink and turned the faucet to begin filling it with hot water. The soap, she was sure, would be sufficient to kill most any germs that might linger, but she searched for bleach and added a little to the water for good measure. She discovered when she turned to get the plates that Sabin had already brought a stack. He leaned down to set them in the water.

“It’s hot!”

The caution came too late. He’d already shoved his hands into the water. It seemed unnecessary, though. The temperature of the water didn’t seem to bother him. It was hot enough to scald her, though, she quickly discovered.

She flicked a wide-eyed look at him when she did.

He frowned. “I am mahn, not human.”

There was just a hint of irritation in his voice.

Danielle left him to sterilize the plates and gathered up eating utensils and glasses, rinsing as he washed. The others, either drawn by the smells or their empty stomachs or merely because they’d been promised food, began to wander in by ones and twos as they began to assemble the plates and the dilemma of how well to cook the steaks was resolved. Danielle had already picked up her own plate when she realized Lindsey was the only one that hadn’t come. After debating briefly, she decided to leave their plates on one of the tables and see if she could coax Lindsey out of the room.

Lindsey seemed reluctant even to open the door for her. Danielle was beginning to think she was going to have to go back and get help when she finally heard the locks being turned. Lindsey opened the door little more than a crack and peered around the hallway.

“We fixed a meal. Come on and see if you can eat something.”

Lindsey stared at her blankly, as if she’d never heard the words. “I’m not

hungry,” she said finally.

“You should try to eat anyway.”

Lindsey shook her head.

She spent nearly ten minutes trying to coax her out of the room and finally gave up. “I’ll bring yours when I come back, ok?”

Instead of responding, Lindsey shut the door and locked it again.

Worry descended over Danielle as she returned to the restaurant. Everyone handled their emotions differently, but she didn’t think Lindsey was handling hers at all well.

Resolving to discuss Lindsey’s mental health with Su-lynn, she did her best to put it from her mind and enjoy the meal she’d helped prepare. The others, she discovered, seemed considerably cheered and revived by the food. Although for the most part their behavior was still strained, they were at least making an effort to relax and behave more normally.

She found that the hot food had a similar beneficial effect on her. The hard knot of anxiety in her belly eased somewhat, making it possible to do justice to the meal without feeling as if she was going to throw up the moment she finished. For the most part, the group had segregated themselves. Her crewmembers had taken two tables close together. The crew from the Mertosin, with the exception of Sabin, On, and Bork, had settled together at a table at a little distance from the Earth people.

“This is very strange in taste and texture,” Bork commented when they’d finished eating, “but interesting. What sort of animal does this flesh come from?”

Danielle discovered when she looked up that Bork was looking directly at her. Clancy began an explanation, however, before she could respond. Bork looked mildly annoyed, which made her wonder if Nick had been right about the possibility of him being interested in her on a personal level—shudder! Relieved that Clancy had distracted him, she returned her attention her meal.

When she’d eaten all she could hold, she glanced at Nick and smiled. “It was very good.”

Nick grinned at her and shrugged. “I just burned it. You seasoned it.”

Her smile widened. “It was good because you didn’t burn it. I’m not sure I could’ve managed to cook so many and get them just right.”

“Careful. You’ll give me a big head.”

“He couldn’t handle it getting any bigger,” Bud tossed at him. “He wouldn’t be able to carry it around.”

“Bite me,” Nick said good-naturedly, flicking him a bird.

“Sorry, man. I don’t swing that way.”

“That ain’t what I heard,” Nick said provokingly.

“You need to clean your ears more often.”

“We talking tongue bath here? ‘Cause I wouldn’t mind one of those if I could convince Danielle here to offer.”

“Not for a steak dinner,” Danielle said tartly. “Particularly when, as you pointed out, I did half the work.”

“So, I’ll volunteer to do all the work if I can interest you.”

“Well, you can’t, so give it up!”

“How ‘bout you, Joyce?”

"Fuck you, LaRoche," Joyce said without heat.

"Now we're talking!"

She gave him a look. "In your dreams."

Nick sent her a smoldering look. "You always are."

She studied him a moment, obviously trying to decide whether to take the bait or not. "So what's my role?"

A slow, triumphant grin curled Nick's lips. "Angel of mercy."

Joyce uttered a snort of amusement. "Angling for pity sex, LaRoche?"

He spread his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'll take it anyway I can get it. It's all good."

"I don't know whether to take you up on it—just to watch you try to squirm out of it—or throw something at you!"

Nick chuckled. "I don't know which I'd like better—depends on what you're thinking about throwing my way."

"I give up!" Joyce exclaimed. "You win."

"You will?"

She shook her head at him. "Nope. I'm not interested in doing anything but *sleeping* in a bed I don't have to be strapped to. Nice try, though."

"You don't know what you're missing."

She sent him a thoughtful look. "For the sake of your ego, I'm going to let that slide."

"Uh oh. Somebody gave me a bad report card."

"Don't look at me!" Danielle said tartly when Nick bent a speculative look on her. It irritated her the moment the words were out, because it was much as an admission. On the other hand, she doubted their brief affair was much of a secret.

Dismissing her pique, she slid a glance at the visitors, wondering what they made of the exchange. They looked puzzled—even Sabin who'd seemed to know the most about them—not surprising, but it still amused her.

She didn't doubt that they all had a fair idea of the subject of the conversation, but she also doubted that they'd really grasped that it was nothing more than joking around. Joyce and Su-lynn were life-partners and neither woman, as far as she knew, ever went the other way.

For that matter, she could see Su-lynn hadn't particularly enjoyed the exchange, even though she hadn't said anything. She was inclined to be just a tad possessive.

And maybe that was why Joyce had enjoyed it so much—because she was teasing Su-lynn, not Nick?

She hoped it didn't develop into a fight once they got to their room. Nick, naturally, wouldn't consider that or, if he did, he wouldn't care. He rarely gave a thought to anyone other than himself.

When the party began to break up, Su-lynn and Joyce offered to handle cleanup. Danielle got up and followed Su-lynn into the kitchen to warm Lindsey's food since it gave her an opportunity to talk without making her anxieties about Lindsey public.

"How's Lindsey doing?"

Relieved as she was that Su-lynn had given her the opening she needed, Danielle still found herself struggling with her impressions. "I don't honestly know. Not well."

Su-lynn studied her. "You think she's going to have a break?"

"It would be more accurate to say I'm afraid she might. She's not herself."

Su-lynn was thoughtful for a moment. "If you'll come with me to my room, I'll get her a sedative for tonight."

When they left the kitchen, they saw that most of the others had cleared out. Su-lynn went to speak to Joyce, who'd found a clean up cart and was collecting the dishes. Sabin approached her.

"There is a problem?"

Danielle shook her head. She'd been reluctant to discuss the possibility that at least one of their group might be headed for a psychotic break with anyone else in their group. She sure as hell wasn't going to discuss it with one of the visitors. It might transpire that it wasn't anything that could be kept quiet, but until and unless it did, she wasn't going to volunteer anything. "Lindsey's upset. Su-lynn's going to get me a sedative for her to help her rest. I'm sure she'll be fine."

His gaze was too knowing for her comfort. He merely nodded, though, and left the room. Su-lynn joined her a few moments later and headed out at a brisk walk. "I don't like the idea of leaving Joyce alone."

Danielle could see her point. "I appreciate this."

Su-lynn shook her head. "No problem. It's my job, and I'm worried about her, too. I just feel a little uneasy about leaving Joyce or I'd take the time to try to evaluate her now."

"A good night's rest might be enough to steady her."

Su-lynn shook her head. "I don't know. We haven't seen the worst by any stretch of the imagination."

She didn't elaborate. She didn't have to. And Danielle knew she was right. If Lindsey was already showing signs of cracking under the strain, it wasn't likely to get better. They couldn't leave her to protect her from having to deal with the situation. Not only did they need to stay together, but they all knew that all of them together weren't up to what they were going to be called upon to handle.

Lindsey didn't open the door when they got back. They beat on the panel and called her until it brought Bud, Nick, and Bork into the corridor. Sabin and On joined them as Bud and Nick began battering at the door with their shoulders, trying to break it down.

A horrible thought flitted through Danielle's mind as the men beat on the door. She tried to banish it but couldn't push it from her mind once it had formed. Instead, certainty began to take hold of her when Lindsey neither came to the door or answered.

Sabin and On moved to the door when Bud and Nick drew back to catch their breath, one on either side. Instead of battering at it with their shoulders, however, they each lifted a hand and slid it along the door panel. She heard the dull thud of something hitting the carpet and the distinct chink of metal scraping against metal and then the door fell inward. They caught the edges that appeared as the door fell back into the room. Sabin shifted his grip to each side and moved the door out of the way.

As stunned and confused as Danielle was, she was too concerned about Lindsey to try to understand what had happened at the moment. Su-lynn surged into the opening as soon as Sabin had cleared the way. She rushed into the room behind the other woman.

The bathroom door was standing open. Su-lynn had dashed inside and dropped to her knees.

Lindsey was lying in a tub filled with blood, her face as white as paper. The sight brought Danielle to a jarring halt.

"Get my medical satchel! She's cut her wrists!"

Everything happened in a nightmarish swirl of impressions after that. Time seemed to flow jerkily, slowing to a halt, inching forward, shifting to fast forward and then jerking to a halt again. There was a brief scuffle while all the people crowding the corridor and the entrance to the room began to struggle to move in different directions. On and Sabin pushed past her. Sabin grasped Lindsey's head and shoulders. On grabbed her feet and the two men lifted her from the tub. Danielle fought her way past the others and ran down the hall as fast as she could. Nick was on her heels. She couldn't figure out why until she tried to rush into the room and discovered the automatic lock had caught. Nick pushed her aside and unlocked it. They both charged inside, looked around frantically, and finally spied the satchel. Nick beat her to it, snatched it up, and raced back down the corridor.

Feeling helpless, useless, Danielle followed him, forcing her way into the room again when they reached it.

Su-lynn was covering Lindsey's pale face with a sheet when she reached the foot of the bed. Danielle stared at the sheet in disbelief for several moments before she looked at Su-lynn. "It can't be too late. It can't be."

Someone led her to a chair and pushed on her gently until her knees buckled and she plopped into it. Sabin crouched in front of her. After studying her face a moment, he caught her wrist, pressing his fingers along the pulse point. Danielle stared at him blankly for a moment and finally began trying to thrust him away. "I'm fine! Lindsey's the one who needs help!"

Su-lynn gestured for everyone to leave and moved to her, taking Sabin's place as he straightened. "Put your head between your knees, Danny. You look like you're going to pass out."

Danielle yielded when Su-lynn wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and urged her forward, pressing her forehead to her knees. "I'm alright. Lindsey ...?"

She heard Su-lynn swallow. "We were too late to help, Danny."

Danielle felt her throat tighten painfully with the urge to cry. "I was too late," she contradicted, lifting her head to look at Su-lynn. "She didn't want to be left alone."

"Don't beat yourself up over this, Danny!" Su-lynn said bracingly. "There was no way you could've anticipated she would do something like this."

"But I should've! I *knew* she was upset! I *knew* she didn't want to be alone!"

"We're *all* upset!" Su-lynn said sharply. "You did everything right. We all needed something to eat. You told me about your concerns. You aren't a psychologist! If anyone should've noticed and done something to prevent it, it was me!"

"She was my friend! And I let her down. I wasn't there when she needed me!"

Su-lynn studied her face a moment and helped her up. "Come on. We'll find you another room. You can't stay here."

A shudder raked through Danielle, but she didn't argue. She discovered when Su-lynn had helped her up that most of the group still lingered in the corridor outside the room.

"Would you like to share a room with me and Joyce?"

"There's another room on this hall," Nick volunteered.

Su-lynn shook her head at him. Danielle had calmed down enough by that time to realize what the look meant that the two of them exchanged. She straightened away from Su-lynn. "I'm fine. I'd actually prefer to be alone."

"I don't think you should be alone," Su-lynn said, trying to keep her voice reassuring.

Danielle met her gaze. "I need to be alone right now. If it'll make you feel better, I won't use the security locks. I just ... can't handle having to deal with sympathy right now. I'm not going to do anything stupid. "

She felt guilty—more guilty—the moment the words were out. She hadn't meant to imply that Lindsey had, and yet it seemed to hang between them.

"Good!" Su-lynn said bracingly. "I have a sedative if you think you'll need it."

She nodded instead of refusing it outright. "Thanks. I think I'll take a shower first."

"I'll stay with her," Nick volunteered when he'd opened the door for her.

"No!" Danielle said, more sharply than she'd intended. "I'm sorry. I appreciate the offer, but I really don't want to be with anyone right now."

They left her with obvious reluctance. After standing in the middle of the room for some moments, Danielle finally moved to one of the beds and flopped down on the edge, covering her face with her hands. She tried to summon tears. She felt like she needed to, that if she could just let go for a few minutes she wouldn't feel like she was going to fracture into a million pieces.

Discovering she was too numb to cry, she got up and headed toward the bathroom. A knock on the door halted her as she reached it and she turned to open the door. Nick was on the other side holding her duffle bag. "You should've asked who it was before you opened it," he said tightly.

"I didn't want anybody beating the door down. Thanks, Nick."

He crowded the door when she took the bag and tried to shut it. "Let me come in."

She glared at him. "Don't, Nick! I can't handle this right now." He didn't move. She gritted her teeth. "Damn it, Nick! Just don't! I really, really can't deal with anything right now."

"Which is why you shouldn't be alone!"

"It's *why* I want to be alone! *Go* away, god damn it!"

Sabin opened the door to the room next to hers and glanced at the two of them.

Nick scowled at him, then turned to glare at her. "I see how it is! Fine! Fuck it!"

"Oh for god's sake, Nick!" Danielle said angrily. He'd turned and stalked down the corridor, however, throwing a furious glare at Sabin as he passed.

Shaking her head, Danielle stepped back and closed her door. She supposed she should've thanked Sabin for interrupting, but she didn't feel particularly grateful that he had, even though it had spared her from having to get *really* ugly.

Her shoulders slumped when she'd closed the door behind her. For several moments, she merely leaned against it, staring angrily at the bag she held. Finally, she dropped it to the floor and began to strip off her suit. She'd been wearing it so long it felt as if it had grown to her. Despite the one piece 'johns' she had on under the suit, it had chafed her skin. She felt so light when she'd removed it, she felt almost as if she'd dropped G's as she headed into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

The tears she'd been trying to shed finally erupted when she'd climbed in. Sitting on the floor of the shoulder, she gave herself up to the release.

Despite everything Su-lynn had said, she couldn't shake the guilt that swamped her. It made sense, and yet she knew Lindsey had given her clues. She'd just been too wrapped up in her own emotions to allow it to really register beyond an additional anxiety and there were so many other things tying her in knots she'd tried to ignore the nagging doubts. It seemed ... obscene that she'd been going about life as if she had no worries, had relaxed and even enjoyed the meal and the banter afterward, all while Lindsey was dying.

She should've felt Lindsey's distress more keenly. She shouldn't have been so wrapped up in her own concerns.

She'd willfully ignored Lindsey's needs because she just hadn't felt like she could cope with more than she already had, she realized, and that was why she felt so guilty.

She felt drained and sluggish when she finally got out of the shower. She didn't feel any better. She felt dehydrated. When she'd dried off, she sprawled naked on the top of the cover on one of the beds, trying to keep her mind drifting, to prevent it from settling on any thoughts that might cause her more distress.

She'd almost managed to drift off when images of her boys swam within her mind's eye, of them the last time she'd seen them in the flesh, touched them. They'd been so excited about her mission, but she thought they'd been even more excited at the prospect of spending so much time with their father. Ordinarily, if she was gone for any length of time, she left them with her mother. Rick was too busy with his own life to want to play dad more than a weekend here and there and, at eight, the twins had been hungry for male attention.

Her throat closed.

She pushed herself up from the bed, struggling to run from the thoughts and questions she couldn't bring herself to face.

Lindsey hadn't been able to face them either.

Shaking the thought off, she glanced at the clock and then wondered if it was right. She must have dozed for a while, she decided—or the clock was wrong. It showed 3:00 AM. Shivering in the chill from the air conditioning, she grabbed her duffle and found the clothing she'd brought with her. She only had a few things—a couple of changes of underclothes and a couple of flight suits—no civilian clothing. When she'd dressed, she moved to the window and pushed the drape aside, staring out toward the city.

Her heart skipped several beats when she saw lights and then it dawned on her that it was probably automated street lights, possibly even automated signs or billboards and no doubt there were places where the lights had simply been left on. Even knowing that, she felt a momentary lift of her heart, a split second of imagining that nothing had changed. Memories flooded her mind of traversing those city streets, by car and on foot, mostly the mundane sort of memories, even annoying ones where she'd been caught in traffic, and she felt a pang of nostalgia she would never have imagined feeling.

She fought the crushing sense of loss that followed on the heels of her imaginings when she couldn't sustain it, when her mind flooded with the images of the horrible things they'd seen since they'd landed.

Letting go of the drapes, she moved away from the window, crossed the room to

the bed and stared at the sleeping pill Su-lynn had given her. The temptation to take it and find blissful peace in unconsciousness warred with a sense that it was a weakness she couldn't allow herself. Escape might begin to seem more desirable than the struggle.

Getting up abruptly, she crossed the room to the door. She was on her way out when she realized the door would lock behind her. Grabbing the first thing that came to hand, she blocked the door from closing and padded barefoot down the corridor.

She had no particular destination in mind even when she reached the lobby, but the darkness outside the hotel, the absence of any activity, halted her. After staring out for a few minutes, she turned and searched for the elevator. When the cubicle arrived, she punched the topmost floor and rode up. It was as unnervingly quiet as the rest of the building, but her focus was on finding the roof access.

The stairwell wasn't locked. The door closed behind her as she stepped onto the landing, echoing eerily.

Dismissing the shiver of uneasiness that wafted through her, she took the stairs up to the roof and stepped outside. The first thing she noticed was that the breeze didn't carry the smell of rotting corpses and relief filled her. She'd hoped to escape reality for a handful of moments.

She stood where she was for a moment, gazing up at the sky. The solar sails on the space station where she'd spent the last seven months of her life made the Pegasus visible in the sky. It gleamed brighter than any of the stars.

The black backdrop was new, however. The ships of the visitors were so enormous they blocked the view of stars she should've seen, creating what almost appeared to be a black hole with the Pegasus a bright speck at its center.

Chapter Five

Danielle stared up at the sky for several moments and finally turned her gaze toward the city in the distance. The near constant breeze from the air stirring around the vast expanse of runways and parking lots chilled her, and yet she was grateful for it.

Pushing her hair out of her face, she began walking toward the low parapet wall, feeling her stomach go weightless the closer she got to the edge. She stopped well away from the edge, however, staring at the lights of the city, listening for familiar sounds she knew she wouldn't hear.

Instead, she heard the crunch of gravel beneath feet as someone approached her.

Her heart thudding in her chest, she glanced behind her.

She didn't find it particularly comforting when she recognized Sabin.

He stopped beside her, staring at the city as she had been a few moments before. After studying him for a long moment, she decided to ignore him. She sat down, folding her legs, ignoring the hard little pebbles of the roof that bit into her backside. Sabin glanced down at her and sat down, as well.

"I didn't come up here to throw myself off, you know."

"I did not think you did."

She would've been more mollified if she'd actually believed him. "So ... why did you follow me?" she asked ungraciously.

He studied her face for a moment. "I will leave if you still prefer to be alone."

Danielle considered it and finally decided she didn't. She'd wept, expelled all the grief she could in that way—at least for now—and she realized she hadn't come up on the roof to be alone. She could've had solitude in her room. She'd come seeking a connection to life, hoping to see something that would make it possible to tell herself this was just a nightmare and she would wake from it.

"I was thinking about all the times I was rushing from one place to another and how frustrating it was that there were so many people in the way. I thought of all the times I got caught up in traffic jams and was so pissed off I cursed and ranted about it. And I thought of every time I tried to rush down the sidewalk or through a crowded shopping mall and had to dodge and weave because there were people in front of me who weren't in any hurry at all.

"It was a nightmare at Christmas, because then there were all the city people and people who'd come in from the surrounding areas to shop for gifts, or go to parties and there was ... almost a frantic vibration in the air, a desperate sort of pursuit of the spirit of the season, determination to enjoy it to the fullest."

Sabin said nothing. She hadn't actually expected him to, but then he surprised her. "I find I can not imagine it. This ... Christmas, it is a reference to a holy day, yes?"

Danielle glanced at him in surprise, then frowned. "Yes, it is, but not everyone observed or celebrated it because of its religious significance. We didn't in my family. To us it had everything to do with family. It was a time we all gathered together to celebrate our love for one another. It was the one time we felt free to be decadently

extravagant—with food, and gifts, and affection, and our time. All year we worked hard and barely got to see anyone, so we all made a special effort to set aside that time for each other. The gifts and feasting were just another way of celebrating being together, to have fun and act as carefree as children.”

She felt her voice hitch at the reference to children. Closing her eyes, she struggled with the images of her boys racing around the living room with their new toys and screaming like banshees in their excitement. She didn't know if it was harder to remember the happy times, or the times she'd scolded them or punished them.

She knew she'd rarely, if ever, scolded or punished them that they didn't richly deserve it and need it, because parental guidance was as necessary to a child as any other part of nurturing, and yet at that moment she wished she could take it all back. Every harsh word haunted her now.

“I'm so ... angry with Lindsey,” she said abruptly, surging to her feet and pacing away from him. “How could she do that? She had children. She doesn't even know if they're still out there, *needing* her! She abandoned them! I never would've believed she would do something like that!”

“She could not face the possibility that they were dead.”

Danielle whirled on him angrily. “That's no excuse, damn it! If she knew, I could understand it. She didn't know!”

Sabin studied her for a moment, struggling with urges he wasn't accustomed to, trying to decide if the temptation to touch her had arisen from logic or latent emotions he had not been aware of before. *They* offered touch, he knew, as comfort, but he wasn't certain what circumstances made it acceptable or even what kind of touch would be appropriate and lead to the desired effect of forming a bond of trust. The wrong one, he knew, could be disastrous, could have the opposite effect. Finally, conceding that he didn't understand their customs well enough to offer anything at all, he lifted his head to stare at the skyline of the city. “You should try to rest. Tomorrow, we will begin a search for survivors.”

She stared at his profile angrily, certain that he was pointing out that she didn't know that her own children were alive, but she found she couldn't voice her fears aloud even in an angry tirade against the possibility. It was almost as if, if she did, she was admitting the possibility that they weren't. Finally, feeling weary, defeated, she turned and headed back toward the door that led from the roof. He followed her, his long stride allowing him to easily keep pace with her rush.

Neither of them said anything as they took the elevator down to the ground floor once more. “I don't know why you came to find me,” Danielle said when he'd escorted her to her door, “but thank you.”

He frowned slightly. “I did not think you should be alone.”

A flicker of irritation went through her. “So you *did* think I might throw myself off?”

He made the slight bow. “As you say.”

Danielle didn't know whether to be amused or angry at the admission. “You said before that you didn't think I would.”

“I have not said, now, that I believed that you would. I merely declined to argue the matter.”

Danielle studied him curiously. “I can't quite figure you out.”

He lifted his black brows. "This should not be a source of surprise to you. You and I are not the same, regardless of my appearance."

"How different could we be when our races look so much alike?"

"Vastly."

Danielle felt a faint smile curl her lips. "Now you've made me really curious."

He looked at her strangely. "And you have made me curiously uneasy."

His comment dragged a chuckle from her, mostly because she could see she really had. "I have faith you'll figure it out after you think about it a while."

Sabin stared at the door frowningly for several moments after she'd closed it behind her. Finally, he turned and moved to his own door and went in. On spoke to him from the darkness. "She did not destroy herself?"

"I am not convinced that was ever her purpose," Sabin said, dragging his uniform off and folding it carefully before he settled it on the dresser and headed for his bed.

"What do you think her purpose was?"

Sabin shrugged. "I cannot be expected to fathom that when she cannot understand herself." He considered it. "Escape, I think."

On ruminated over that for some time. "From us?"

"The thoughts that torture her. She is suspicious of us, but uncertain—too uncertain to consider fleeing." He propped his hands behind his head when he'd settled, staring at the ceiling. "She said something ... disturbing." Everything about her was disturbing, he thought wryly.

"In what way?"

"I am not certain. Possibly in a way that might threaten our plans."

On sat up. "How so?"

Sabin shook his head. "I am still trying to grasp the meaning beneath. That is the difficult thing about these beings. There are so often layers of meanings beneath the things that they say—at least with the more intelligent ones."

"Tell me. I will work on the puzzle, as well."

Sabin found he was reluctant to do so, which was why he did.

On pondered the conversation for several moments. "This will sound strange ..."

"More strange than what she appeared to mean?" Sabin asked dryly.

"It sounds very like the conversation between the one called LaRoche and the females, most particularly the one called Joyce. I am almost one hundred percent certain that the entire conversation was what has been described as a part of their mating rituals referred to as flirtation and that it had sexual undertones."

Sabin frowned. "I am almost one hundred percent certain that the conversation was *not* flirtation, although it certainly sounded sexual in nature. I found it almost as confusing as this. The female, Joyce, has no interest in males. I will not claim to be an expert in their nature, but the way she behaves around the female called Su-lynn seems to indicate an intimacy beyond friendship."

"I confess, I found that confusing, as well. Unless ... perhaps the male, LaRoche, had no idea that the female, Joyce, has no interest in males?"

Sabin released a gusty breath of irritation. "I am certain he does, although, it is possible that he thought he might convince her. Illogical, but possible, particularly when these creatures are not ruled by logic but rather their hormones and the rampant emotions they create. I am not certain there is a correlation at all between the two conversations,

but I am willing to concede that you could be correct.” He fell silent for several moments, trying to decide whether to admit his reaction to the conversation and her demeanor toward him and finally decided it might be relevant. “I *felt* that she might be flirting—perhaps unconsciously. Given their circumstances, Danny’s anxieties in particular, and the fact that they not only know we are not human, but feel it on a primal level, as well, it seems unlikely that she would consciously decide to seek any sort of physical alliance with any one of us.

“I suppose it might be possible that their situation has produced an unconscious increase in their need to procreate. LaRoche’s behavior would certainly indicate that, which would also explain the aggression he displays so obviously and frequently. It is a natural inclination not only to impregnate the females within his sphere, but also to guard them against other males—particularly the males of other species—to preserve their gene pool.”

“You believe the human female has some sexual interest in you?” On asked neutrally, uncomfortable with the sudden feeling, almost of anger or perhaps resentment, he felt toward his elder batch-mate and mentor.

Sabin felt his heart accelerate slightly. He frowned. It happened far too often when he was near the alien female and it disturbed him immensely, particularly since now it seemed that being in her proximity wasn’t even necessary to produce the effect and mention of her was enough to make his pulse grow erratic. “There is not enough data to support such a theory and I do not care to guess, particularly in these circumstances when it is possible the comment might as easily be interpreted to mean that her suspicions have been aroused and she will study me more intently because of her curiosity.

“That is the source of my uneasiness. We do not have a great deal of time to play with here if we are to have any hope of success in our endeavor.”

On was as well aware of that as Sabin. It irritated him that Sabin apparently felt the need to remind him, but it occurred to him after a moment that Sabin had merely been voicing his thoughts aloud, perhaps in an effort to direct his mind to the need to stay focused. That implied that Sabin had some anxiety that he might lose focus, which seemed absurd, but, perhaps because he had found the female, Danielle, distracting himself, it occurred to him that Sabin might also find her distracting. “From what I have ascertained from the data and observed thus far in their behavioral patterns, I think you must consider her interest in a positive light. I feel confident that anxiety would be misplaced. We have accumulated a great deal of information through studies of their species over generations. They do not have that advantage. Clearly, they are intelligent, but their intellect is not sufficient to overcome that lack and come to a better understanding of us than we have of them in the short time they will be allowed to observe us.

“I agreed with your assessment that they were at least reasonable enough to see the merits in allying themselves with us once we had had time to establish some trust, but I’m no longer certain that we can achieve that without nurturing the sense of kinship our similarities have already produced. I do not believe they are likely to consider allying with us if they do not feel friendly toward us. I think we must consider attempting to emulate their behavior in order to strengthen their perception that we are much as they are. You may find it necessary to engage in sexual intercourse with the female to achieve

that.”

Sabin’s heart sped up uncomfortably fast that time. He would’ve been more comforted if he could’ve convinced himself it was from revulsion at the idea. Unfortunately, the immediate reaction of his body precluded that self-deception. “I see no reason to consider that a necessary or desirable step. In point of fact, it has so much potential for disaster I would not be willing to enumerate all of them without a great deal of thought on the subject. What immediately comes to mind, however, is the possible consequences to us. We have no idea how such an experience might affect our psyche given the deep social stigma in our own culture to any sort of physical intercourse.”

Considering the touch of her hand in his had elevated his blood pressure and heart rate considerably, he wasn’t even certain he could survive what seemed likely to be an explosive reaction to more contact than that, although he had absolutely no desire to discuss the effect it had had upon him. It was shameful enough to be aware of it himself without proclaiming it publicly.

Not that he thought it would go further than On, even though, given their laws and customs, he would ordinarily report such a thing to their superiors since it was indicative of defect. Self-preservation and his own pride, however, would most likely discourage him from reporting it.

Most likely. That depended, of course, on whether his sense of honor outweighed his sense of shame by association. To all intents and purposes, they were the same. Their experiences had certainly affected their personalities and created individuality, but the council would not be interested in anything beyond the indication of a possible genetic defect and it was possible On would feel the same.

“Perhaps you are right. It may not be necessary. I am only pointing out that it is possible and a point we must consider may become essential to forwarding our efforts. They are very sociable creatures and studies show that they find closeness not only comforting but necessary to their mental health. Beyond that, touch is their way of bonding and forming relationships. You have seen this for yourself, surely?”

Sabin digested that for several moments, wondering if it was as it seemed to him encouragement from On to disregard their own practices in order to secure the cooperation they sought. “I have observed it,” he said cautiously.

“Perhaps you would feel more comfortable pursuing friendship with the males? I have seen nothing to indicate that any of them are inclined toward sexual interest in the other males and the question would not arise. I have considered the risks involved in sexual intercourse and I am willing to make whatever sacrifice is necessary for the good of all. If the affect is adverse, I am of lesser importance than you. I could be destroyed without unduly endangering the continuation our progenitor’s line if it transpires that it affects my mental stability or if I should contract some disease from the humans. But I consider that unlikely, given their careful selection process in choosing healthy specimens to participate in any sort of missions off-world.

“I interacted more with the first captives we collected from their outer bases than you did. It will be easier for me to emulate the sort of behavior they are accustomed to and final acceptable. I was fortunate enough to be accepted to the degree that I was allowed to listen to the males of the two groups discussing their experiences. Clearly the research done on them and the conclusions drawn from it were correct. Procreation is not the only consideration in regards to sexual intercourse. Very often they engage in it

merely for recreation, or as an exchange of favors. I am reasonably confident that I understand their practices well enough to participate without the risk of creating more problems than solutions.”

“You are ... intrigued by the thought of physical contact?” Sabin asked carefully, fully expecting On to deny it.

On did not respond for long enough that Sabin knew he was considering his answer carefully. “On a scientific level, yes. I am formulating the theory that it may well be as natural to us as it is to them, given my reactions to the female, Danielle. I experienced something similar with a couple of the females of the first group, not nearly as pronounced, but enough that I begin to believe I can recognize it for what it is—a desire for physical contact.”

“It is only the latent, primal need to procreate,” Sabin argued. “Something intelligent, civilized beings can, and should, ignore given that it is not necessary or desirable for our own species. We have advanced beyond the need for our animal instincts for survival or propagation. Those instincts were necessary in early evolution. They no longer are.”

“This is what we were educated to believe and yet I begin to feel that something was lost to us that we should not have been so eager to give up,” On countered. “If we had not subdued our instincts more of our people might have been able to survive the disaster on our world. Moreover, it led us to expect other sentient beings to be guided by their intellect rather than emotions, and it cannot be argued that that failed us when the grundts came to conquer our world.”

“We were few by then and could not afford to lose more. Our progenitors did the only reasonable thing they could do. They yielded to a great force,” Sabin said coolly.

“And we are fewer now because of it.”

That was inarguable. It also made a strong point in that they must now do all within their power to succeed since they had allied themselves against the grundts or they could be facing complete annihilation. The thought of handing over his objective, Danielle, didn’t appeal to him, however. “I will not ask of you to do what I am not willing to do,” Sabin said. “If I deem it necessary to advance our cause, I will do it.”

On discovered that he was not completely satisfied with Sabin’s insistence on pursuing Danielle instead of exchanging targets. He felt that his own personality and temperament made him the most desirable candidate for success, but he finally concluded that it was counterproductive to pursue it further. Sabin would come to realize that, although he had many admirable traits, an ability to adjust quickly and smoothly was not one of them. Clearly, he did not want to admit, even to himself, that he found the female attractive in a purely primal way. It seemed just as obvious that he found his reaction to her disconcerting if not downright alarming. He would not be able to yield to his instincts when and if the time came. He would be frozen in indecision, On felt certain, and that could create just the problems that worried them both—it could create distrust and perhaps even animosity.

Perhaps then he would be willing to yield his position—and perhaps not—but *he* knew that it was very likely Sabin would have to whether he wanted to or not. Sabin certainly did not have the skills or understanding of the humans to recover the ground such a thing would cost him.

* * * *

"Their defenses are down. We have not observed any aerial fighters or ground forces at all in the time we have been here. I suggest we begin landing immediately," Bork said when Mra Kubo Kan asked for his report.

Kubo Kan ruminated over the suggestion for several moments before transferring his attention to Lymra Sabin. "Is this your conclusion, as well?"

Sabin bowed politely. "We were not challenged when we entered their air space or landed. I have not observed any sign of an active military defense system myself and it seems certain that little authority exists when we have not, thus far, discovered survivors of any description."

"But?" Kubo Kan prodded.

Sabin shrugged. "We have not been here long enough to ascertain with any certainty that they are defenseless. We have only explored a miniscule area. The city we are camped outside was clearly hit hard by the disease, became a death trap, and the humans evacuated. Since we haven't yet spotted them, it's impossible to calculate their numbers or their strength ... or weakness. The captain of the shuttle, Amerigo, is the only pilot capable of flying their crafts and, although Bork, On, and I have been studying the crafts—and I see no reason why it should take long to acquire the knowledge or skills—we are limited in covering much ground at this juncture.

"Our findings from the data we collected aboard the Mertosin after we arrived in orbit seemed to indicate that the disease had run its course. We've observed nothing since we reached the surface to indicate that that is not the case, but, again, we have not yet found any living specimens to examine."

"The humans who came with us have not contracted the disease, however," Bork pointed out.

Sabin nodded. "We estimated the germination period to be seventy-two to one-hundred-forty Earth hours, however. We have only been on the surface thirty-six. They would not be showing symptoms yet."

Kubo Kan glared thoughtfully at them for some moments. "I will send a squadron of landers to evaluate their defenses. If they are not met with any significant resistance, we will begin sterilization of the affected areas."

Sabin felt his lips tighten with anger, but he merely bowed respectfully and issued a salute. Bork sent him a triumphant look when they cut communications.

It was a pity, Sabin thought irritably, that both Bork and Tande had behaved with surprising circumspection since they'd arrived. The arrogance of the grundts could've been counted upon to antagonize the humans otherwise and lay the ground work for their defeat. Undoubtedly, Kubo Kan had not picked them at random as it had seemed at the time but had carefully selected them for their temperaments.

It seemed to him that the pair had made more progress toward winning the humans over than either he or On had.

With disgust, Sabin considered his previous analysis as he left the grundts' room and headed down to the room where everyone gathered for meals and decided that On was undoubtedly correct in his assessment. Emulating the humans made them more comfortable, made them feel a stronger kinship, which in turn made them more open to an alliance.

Not that the grundts were copying the humans. They were behaving typically for grundts, which just happened to be very much like the humans and the humans had

accepted them, despite their appearance, with surprising ease. That was subject to change radically once the humans realized their true purpose in coming to offer aid, but by then it might be too late. In any case, there was no guarantee that the humans would turn from the grundts to them. It didn't seem logical even to him that the humans would trust the mahn only because they no longer trusted the grundts.

The interaction between him and Danielle, at least, had seemed promising when they had first arrived. Both the females Joyce and Su-lynn had seemed open enough, yet he could not comfort himself that he had managed to advance beyond a tentative acceptance. None of them went out of their way to avoid him, but none went out of their way to approach him either.

On seemed to have been somewhat more successful with the males of the group.

It defied logic that he found that annoying.

The humans had already gathered in the room when he arrived. The smell of the food they consumed for the meal they referred to as breakfast wafted to him and he felt his stomach growl in response.

Surprise flickered through him. He had found that he liked much of their food. The smell, the taste, and the appearance were all pleasing to him more often than not, but he had never found himself anticipating the chore of replenishing his body's needs with quite so much enthusiasm. One ate to survive and it was certainly satisfying to replenish the needs, and gratifying when one had the means to do so, but he had never considered it a source of entertainment or pleasure before.

The humans clearly enjoyed meal times. He was not altogether certain of whether it was because of the food, or because it was a time to relax and socialize, but it appeared to be a combination of the two most of the time, even when the food wasn't particularly appealing. Regardless of their anxieties, distress, or even anger, they generally calmed and achieved emotional balance at the very least and typically brightened and became more hopeful, even cheerful.

He had thought it a peculiar circumstance to begin with, but he realized he had begun to anticipate the meals himself.

It made him uncomfortable, made him wonder if his close association with the humans was somehow corrupting him, changing him. He had not mentioned that to On because he had thought it irrational, and yet he realized it was the main source of his uneasiness about dealing with the humans. Regardless of how the humans seemed to view it, there was nothing 'wrong' with being in control of their emotions. Holding their emotions within a tight rein allowed them to act and react with logic and reason at all times—not like some mindless beast who had nothing to guide them but their instincts, which were poor guidance at best and could be disastrous at worst.

"Where is everyone?" Danielle asked him curiously when he had helped himself to the food and a cup of the hot beverage they called coffee.

He settled his plate and cup on the table across from her and pulled the chair out. "We had to send a report. They are coming."

He discovered she was frowning when he looked up and uneasiness wafted through him. Contrary to his expectations, however, she didn't seem to view the meeting of the 'visitors' as they were referred to with any suspicion.

"I guess y'all didn't see anything of Jim, Richard, or Dr. Morton?"

Surprised, Sabin looked around the room, realizing he should have noticed that

nearly half of the human crew was absent. "I did not."

He discovered that the anxiety in Danielle's voice was contagious. His belly tightened.

A completely illogical reaction considering it was based upon nothing more than her uneasiness. Struggling to ignore it, he focused on his food.

It was cold, barely warm, at any rate. He discovered it wasn't nearly as appetizing at the cooler temperature, but his stomach was still complaining, so he ate anyway.

Bork, who'd arrived shortly behind him, wasn't inclined to overlook it. "Fuck! It's cold!"

"I'll re-heat it for you," Joyce volunteered, getting up. "Anybody else?"

Tande helped her collect the plates of the late comers and headed into the kitchen with her to re-heat them.

Sabin observed the interaction between the humans and the other visitors with a good deal of irritation. In only a handful of days, they were all behaving as if they had known each other, and worked together, for a very long time. The grundts were even picking up the human slang.

For that matter, On was interacting as comfortably as the others.

He got up and headed into the kitchen to rake the remains of his food out. "I will go check on the others," he told Danielle when she joined him at the sink.

"I was going to. I'll join you."

Sabin discovered he was inordinately pleased that she'd opted to go with him, until it dawned on him that she'd already voiced her concern over their absence. He realized then that she was only going with him because he had volunteered to check and she either didn't trust him to do so, or she was too anxious to wait for a report. The latter reflection leavened his pique over it, however, illogically increasing his own sense that something was wrong.

It *was* illogical, he assured himself. No doubt the others had merely overslept, which was not particularly surprising when they had been a part of the group that had lingered well into the night to imbibe the intoxicating brew LaRoche had 'discovered' on his excursion the day before. Danielle headed directly to LaRoche when they left the kitchen to get his master key for the rooms.

LaRoche sent him an indecipherable look over her head and decided to join them.

It was unreasonable that the captain's decision should annoy him. It was highly unlikely that the excursion would allow him any opportunity to advance his agenda—and yet it did.

The rooms were empty, showing no sign that any of them could see that any of the missing men had even slept in the rooms. The three of them paused in the corridor to consider the situation.

"Did any of them say anything about going out last night?" Danielle asked.

Nick shrugged. "We were all pretty drunk before we headed to our rooms. I don't know where the hell they might've gone, though."

Danielle glared at him angrily. "If they were drunk, they could've taken it into their heads to go anywhere! It was completely irresponsible to bring the damned beer, Nick! No one is of any frame of mind to handle chemical depressants!"

"Don't start that shit!" Nick snarled. "We're grown men. I think we know what

we can handle!"

Danielle narrowed her eyes at him. "Obviously not!"

Uttering an expletive under his breath, Nick whirled away and stalked down the corridor. Danielle glared at his retreating back for several moments but, before Sabin could think of a response, she hurried after him. They were met in the lobby of the hotel by a group of the others and an unpleasant announcement.

"The bus is gone."

"Oh my god!" Danielle exclaimed. "They've gone into the city!"

Chapter Six

"I am not certain I understand how you arrived at that conclusion," Sabin said calmly. "It is completely illogical."

Danielle, much to his dismay, whirled on him, targeting him with anger.

Which was just as unreasonable as her conclusion to his mind.

"*Logic!*" she spat at him angrily. "In the first place, they were probably drunk, which means they weren't thinking clearly. In the second—we all have families! Do you think it hasn't occurred to all of us to go into the city to look for them?"

Sabin lifted his brows at her vehement response to what had been a perfectly reasonable remark delivered in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice. He could not fathom how that seemed to have antagonized her. He was about to point that out when On intervened.

"You're most likely correct. The intoxicating beverage interfered with their reasoning abilities and they became convinced that it was safe to search for their cherished ones," he said quietly. "If that is the case, though, there is nothing that can be done about it. If they left during the night, they have been gone many hours now and it would be impossible to locate them in such a large city."

"But ... we can't just abandon them!"

"I'll take the chopper up and have a look," Nick said grimly. "The bus should be easy enough to spot. I'll be the only thing on the ground moving."

"There would be an unnecessary and undesirable risk of contamination," Sabin pointed out.

"I hate to agree with him, but he's right," Danielle said, abruptly reversing her viewpoint.

Indignation at her assertion that she disliked agreeing with him completely outweighed any satisfaction it might have given him that she *had* agreed. Sabin eyed her with a good deal of irritation. On and Nick seemed equally indignant.

"Goddamn it, Danny!" Nick growled. "As you were so damned quick to point out, it's my fault. It's up to me to try to haul them out of there."

"Even if you could, you'd be putting everyone else at risk!"

Nick ground his teeth. "I can at least have a look to see if that's what happened. We don't know if they were even sober enough to drive the damned bus. They could've thought better of it and stopped. They could've wrecked the bus."

"I'll go with you," Bork suggested.

"Joyce and I will go with you, too. The more eyes, the better chance of spotting them, and you can keep your focus on flying the thing. It's bound to be tricky taking the chopper low enough to see anything," Su-lynn volunteered. "Let's suit up, first, though."

"Anybody else? Danny?"

Danielle chewed her lip indecisively, struggling with the same urge, she didn't doubt, as the others—to go to see if anyone in the city was still alive, to seize the

opportunity, however remote, that she might actually spot someone important to her.

"I will pilot the other chopper," Sabin said.

Danielle glanced at him a little doubtfully, which annoyed him. He imagined he could almost see the thoughts formulating in her mind. It did not make him feel a good deal better when she voiced those thoughts and made it clear he had guessed correctly. "Do you think you can fly it?"

"It is no more complicated than flying the lander," he said with just a touch of annoyance threading his voice. "It is only different."

It mollified him somewhat that she seemed to accept that readily enough.

Then she promptly insulted him all over again.

"You think he's ready?" she asked Nick.

Nick glared at him but finally shrugged. "He's a pilot. I think he can handle it."

"I am overwhelmed by your confidence," Sabin said coldly.

Joyce snickered. Even Danielle bit her lip to hide a smile.

He didn't know what the fuck they found so amusing about the comment. He wasn't particularly pleased by their reaction, but he was even less pleased when it dawned on him that he had said it to deliberately provoke Nick's antagonism.

They split up in three groups since the choppers were not designed to carry more than three to four passengers. One group, which included Tande and the draes, would stay in case the missing men returned. Bork, Su-lynn, and Joyce joined Nick. Danielle, Bud, and On joined Sabin in his chopper.

Danielle, who took the seat in the front next to him, looked distinctly uneasy as he began to power up the craft. Gritting his teeth, Sabin did his best to appear oblivious to the blatant display of her lack of faith in his abilities.

On made no attempt to. "If you would be more comfortable in the rear, I will take that seat," he offered.

Danielle sent him a tremulous smile. "Thanks! I think I can see better from here, though."

So much for thinking she had taken the seat to be closer to him, Sabin reflected with annoyance.

Not surprisingly, his distraction cost him. His take off was bad enough it sent a flicker of alarm even through him. Danielle's grip on the console and the hand strap near the door tightened noticeably. "Wind sheer," Sabin announced through gritted teeth.

Danielle sent him a wide-eyed look, but she didn't dispute the outright lie.

Dragging in a deep, calming breath, Sabin was relieved to feel his heart rate even out. When he'd achieved calm, he was able to focus, and the craft responded accordingly.

It was proof, of course, of the dangers of allowing emotions to overcome reason, but he suspected Danielle didn't see it that way. No doubt, to her, it was only proof that she had been right and he had not fully acquired the skills of piloting the machine. He felt an unaccustomed urge to debate the matter with her to make her see it as he did. Not only was he certain that that would be an exercise in futility, however, he thought it was more proof that Danielle was somehow, slowly but surely, undermining his self-control.

It was some consolation that he felt he was beginning to understand her better, and thus her species. But not much when he considered that he had only managed it by sliding precariously close to *feeling* as they did. He thought his greatest fear was that, to

unleash his primal instincts, would mean to be forever afterward at the mercy of them.

It would make him an outcast among his own species. Most likely they would consider him a threat to their society, and he feared that would not be an inaccurate assessment.

It was debatable whether ostracism, and perhaps destruction, disturbed him more or if it was the prospect of having to deal with a part of himself that he'd not previously considered might exist.

He could not help but resent the fact that On seemed far more intrigued by the notion that they had, latent within them, the same traits and urges that the humans had that he found so disturbing. Did that point to the possibility that On was more defective than he was himself? Or less so?

Or was it some defect in the method they had chosen to propagate their species that no one had anticipated? Theoretically, they should have been able to anticipate the exact same results each time. Barring the effects of nurturing and individual experiences, *he* should be exactly the same mahn as his contributor. Was he? Had the first found himself battling instincts that should have been discarded long since in the process of evolution?

He had not met him, naturally enough, since he was long dead. He had never even met the primary of the previous generation. He had studied the accumulated data regarding his line and he had, briefly, met one of the primary's batch mates, but that was not enough to determine much beyond what he could expect to look like when he aged. It was certainly not sufficient time to allow him to determine much about his personality or temperament or to detect flaws in either.

Danielle drew him from his unpleasant thoughts by producing a far more unpleasant sound that made his heart contract in reaction. He flicked an alarmed glance at her at the keen intake of breath and then directed his attention to searching for whatever it was that she'd seen. "It's the bus!"

Sabin frowned. "You expected to find it," he said somewhat crossly. "I cannot fathom what there is about actually doing so that would encourage you to make that unnerving noise."

Danielle turned to look at him blankly for a moment and then glared at him. "It's stopped."

"I see that. It appears to be intact, however—and abandoned," he added. "They have no doubt set out on foot from here."

"I don't see how you can tell that it's abandoned!"

"I did not see movement inside and the road is clearly blocked. It is a logical assumption if they were determined to reach the city."

She sent him another sharp glance, but she didn't argue with him. Taking the communications devise, she relayed their discovery to LaRoche. Sabin watched as the other chopper, which had distanced itself from them until it was little more than a dot, flew in a tight semi-circle and headed toward them.

It hovered close enough for the others to study the bus for several moments and then swung in a circle around them. Sabin glanced at Danielle. "Will we continue the search?"

Instead of answering, Danielle lifted her gaze to the skyline of the city. He could see that she was wrestling with her thoughts. "I'd hoped there was a chance that we

could catch up with them before they entered the city.”

Sabin did not entirely understand the reasoning behind that hope, if indeed there was any sort of reasoning behind it. They had ascertained that the men had left during the night. It could not have taken them much above an hour, Earth time, to reach the first barricade.

LaRoche spoke on the communications unit. “I’m going to look for them a little longer.”

“Acknowledged.” She hesitated for several moments. “We’re turning back,” she finally said decisively.

Someone settled a hand on her shoulder. Sabin was surprised and not particularly pleased to discover it was On. “It is not safe to land—or to try to negotiate this craft between the buildings. You would not be able to recognize anyone we might spot from the air.”

Danielle glanced at him sharply and lifted a hand to place it over his. “I know. I still want to look ... and I don’t.”

Their exchange made Sabin uncomfortable and, at the same time, angry in some indefinable way. He turned his mind from both with an effort. “We are airborne now. The craft is fully fueled. We might as well look for survivors beyond the city.”

Danielle looked at him in surprise but nodded, looking far less distressed than she had a moment before. It made Sabin feel unaccountably better.

Particularly when On removed his hand from her shoulder and sat back.

Sabin almost regretted that it hadn’t occurred to him that On was in a precarious position and would likely land in the floor of the craft if he had acted on inspiration instead of warning them that he was about to change directions. The image brought a faint smile to lips.

“What’s running through your mind?” Danielle asked, a teasing lilt to her voice.

Sabin glanced at her in surprise.

“Something amused you.”

Sabin considered it and finally shrugged inwardly. “I was thinking if I had not warned On before I turned that he would have fallen to the floor.”

Danielle surprised him by chuckling huskily. “Evil man,” she chided without heat.

He glanced at her sharply, but he could not see anything in her expression that seemed to indicate that she thought he was. “You do not think so,” he said finally.

Her lips twitched. “No, I don’t ... but it was an evil thought. It would’ve wounded his dignity if nothing else.”

“A wound easily recovered from.”

“*Not* easily recovered from,” Danielle contradicted. “I still carry the scars from every wound to my dignity that I ever suffered.”

Sabin glanced at her curiously. “Now, I cannot tell whether you are being facetious or serious.”

Danielle smiled wryly. “A little of both. Don’t you have awful memories from your childhood that you still cringe about?”

“No.”

“You wouldn’t,” she retorted tartly. “You were probably always perfect.”

Sabin frowned. “You are suggesting that it is possible to grow into perfection?”

Danielle shook her head at him. "You certainly don't suffer from a low opinion of yourself, do you? I'll say this for you, Sabin—conversations with you are often frustrating and frequently annoying but never boring. "

Sabin studied that over in frowning silence for a time. He *felt* insulted. He just wasn't certain whether she had intended to insult him or not. "You will no doubt be amazed to hear it, but I find conversations with you much the same," he said stiffly when he had considered it thoroughly and finally decided that she *had* intended to be insulting.

She laughed.

There was no understanding the female, he thought irritably. He could not recall a single time when she had reacted as expected. When he was serious, she was amused. When he tried to say something he was certain must amuse her because it was completely illogical, she glared at him.

"You are suggesting that I should not feel self-esteem?" he asked tightly.

"Far be it from me to suggest such a thing!"

Now she was angry when only a moment ago she was amused! It was one of those comments she often made where she meant the opposite of what she said, he was sure. "What flaws do you perceive that I need be concerned about?"

"I haven't *perceived* any ... beyond conceit!"

Sabin felt his frustration mount. "I am not conceited," he retorted stiffly. "You are the one who said that I was perfect. I made no such claim."

"I did no such thing!"

Sabin stared at her in disbelief. "You said 'you were probably always perfect.' I distinctly heard it."

Danielle turned her nose up at him. "I didn't mean *I* thought you were. I meant that *you* thought you were."

"That is what you said," Sabin reminded her with determined patience.

"But it isn't what I meant."

Sabin frowned, wondering if it was worth pursuing to see if he could discover what she *had* meant, but it seemed to him that the conversation had already gone well past reason. In any case, he discovered he didn't particularly want her to enumerate what she saw in him that was flawed—in her opinion. "This is an opinion," he said dismissively. "It is not necessarily a fact."

"Yes. Mine!"

The sense that he had lost the argument settled in the pit of his stomach in a hard knot of frustration but, turn it though he might, he couldn't quite figure out why he felt he had. Perhaps it was the triumphant tone of her voice?

It was completely illogical, damn it! She had not made any point at all beyond insulting him and he wasn't even sure why she had felt the need to insult him. "I am not conceited," he muttered under his breath. "There is a vast difference between confidence and conceit."

"And you suffer from both."

Sabin slid a narrow-eyed glance at her. The distraction nearly cost them all. Preceded only by a handful of heartbeats by an explosion, something hard pinged against the side of the chopper. Danielle sucked in a sharp breath when it struck her door, creating a spider web crack across the glass.

"Gunfire!" Bud bellowed from the back. "Pull up!"

Sabin had already jerked the chopper aside and begun a climb to evade, however. Despite the evasive maneuver, several other bullets pelted against the sides and bottom of the machine, although, fortunately, the bullets were too spent by distance to do much more than bang against the metal as if someone were slinging pebbles at them.

When Sabin had leveled out the craft again, he circled around.

"I think it came from that old barn," Bud said loudly enough to be heard over the noise of the engine and rotors.

"I see him!" Danielle said, pointing. "There's someone in the loft."

"Another sniper near that burnt out truck," Bud pointed out.

Danielle twisted in her seat to look back at Bud. For a moment, the two merely stared at each other. Slowly, they began to smile and then to grin broadly. "Survivors!"

* * *

Nick's group met them on the tarmac when they returned to home base. Danielle was so excited she all but fell out of the chopper when it finally settled. "We found a group of survivors!"

Nick's group had been wearing expressions of distress until that moment. They stared at Danielle, stunned and disbelieving while it slowly sank in and then Su-lynn let out a whoop of excitement. She raced to Danielle, flung her arms around her, and executed a joyful dance for several moments.

"How many?" she gasped when she finally pulled away, voicing the question being babbled around them by the others.

"At least two," Sabin said dryly, examining the dents in the sides of the chopper.

Everyone turned to stare at him and then looked at Danielle again. She shrugged. "They fired at us, but we got a good look at the place. They've built a sort of make-shift fortress with vehicles. I think there's a good chance there's at least one family, possibly more. It looked like a very large area to secure for only a couple of people."

Some of the excitement of the others waned. "You didn't actually see but two?" Nick demanded irritably.

"We didn't actually see two," Bud volunteered. "We saw two gun barrels. They shot at us or we might have missed the place completely."

Everyone exchanged uneasy glances. "Looters?" Joyce said questioningly.

"There's no telling what's been happening," Danielle said pointedly. "Obviously, there's been a complete breakdown in authority. I found a map in the chopper. I've marked the place on the map. I think the further we get from the city the more people we're going to find. Hopefully some larger refugee camps, possibly a medical center."

"It's something," Su-lynn agreed, patting Danielle's shoulder, although her smile faded. "I'm sure you're right. We did a fly over, as low we dared. We didn't find any of the guys, but the city's a shambles. I'm guessing there were wide-spread riots in the streets. A lot of it's been burned, although it's hard to say whether it was an effort to contain the disease, or from the rioting, or even accidental. It looks like a war zone."

Danielle sobered. "You didn't see any sign of survivors inside the city? None at all?"

Joyce shook her head. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying and Danielle was suddenly glad she hadn't demanded to be taken to see it for herself. She looked away. "We hadn't really expected to, though, had we?"

"Which direction did you take?" Nick asked brusquely, redirecting the

conversation and effectively focusing everyone's mind on the first ray of real hope they'd had since they'd arrived.

"I followed the highway south of the city," Sabin responded.

Nick nodded. "Well, bring the map. Let's study it and see if we can pinpoint some likely spots to look."

By the time they'd poured over the map for hours and discussed and marked possibilities, it was mid-afternoon. Guessing that the people fleeing the city would've wanted to avoid any other population centers for the same reason they'd fled the city to begin with, they'd marked areas where it seemed food, water, and a possibility of shelter would've been fairly accessible. Bork had suggested that perhaps the people had fled to the nearest military outpost, but Danielle flatly vetoed that, pointing out that the military had clearly been called in to handle the rioting and had set up the barricades to prevent the populace from leaving the city. It seemed very unlikely to her that the survivors would've fled *to* the people they would almost certainly have seen as their enemies at the time. They would've been looking to escape infection and would've lost faith that the authorities could protect them. It sparked a brief debate among them, but the human camp agreed with Danielle and the visitors finally conceded that they would know their own people best.

Since the people they'd located had greeted them with hostility and they calculated that they weren't likely to reach the place before dusk, they decided to spend the afternoon locating another mode of transportation and stocking up with supplies.

Nick told the group that he'd spotted a car dealership not far from the airport and asked for volunteers to accompany him to appropriate a vehicle. There were plenty of cars in the airport parking lot, of course, but none with keys. The dealership should have the keys in a fairly accessible place.

"We need to take our side arms," Bud said. "In point of fact, I wouldn't mind looking for a little more artillery while we're at it. They were using rifles. Body armor wouldn't be a bad idea, either. I think they just figured they were defending their turf, but we could run into some real bad guys—snipers."

"Good point," Nick said approvingly.

Mikhail offered to stay and guard the home base.

Nick sent him a wry look.

Mikhail returned it blandly and after a brief pause Nick seemed to grasp his meaning. He glanced around at the others thoughtfully and zeroed in on Sabin. "You game, Sabin?"

Sabin stared at him blankly. "Game?"

"I'm thinking it'll take more than two of us to get the vehicles and the supplies."

"Bork and I will go," On volunteered, ignoring the indignant glare Bork focused on him.

Nick studied Bork. "You going or staying? Four would be better—one to drive, one to ride shotgun."

Bork seemed more inclined to go once Nick put it that way. Or maybe it was just that he'd objected to On volunteering for him?

Danielle considered objecting. She thought it would be safer all the way around if they stayed together. They'd already lost Lindsey and possibly Dr. Morton, Andre, Richard, and Jim, as well, and they hadn't even been home a full week. She decided

against it when she realized it was possible that the missing men would return. Without any way of communicating, they would have no way of knowing where the rest of the group had gone.

She still didn't like separating when there were so few of them, but she could see the sense in it, particularly since Dr. Morton and the others had deprived them of the only ground transportation they had. When they'd settled the details, they split up to search for supplies for the trek. The dealership 'near' the airport, as far as they could tell, was going to be a very long hike. At the very least, the men would need some way to carry water that wasn't too awkward. Su-lynn and Danielle both thought it would be wise to take a blanket roll, an emergency medical kit, and enough food for a couple of meals—just in case.

Neither Bud or Nick wanted to be burdened with the extra supplies, pointing out that it would slow them down and that the dealership probably wasn't much more than a half a day's hike.

"But you don't know exactly where it is and none of us know what to expect," Danielle said patiently. "Don't you think it would be better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it?"

They didn't, not when it meant lugging 'all that shit' for miles, but Bork and On weren't inclined to argue about it and once they'd taken the packs made up for them, Bud and Nick sullenly shouldered their own and the group set out.

Danielle and Su-lynn followed the party from the hotel and watched them until they disappeared from view. "Maybe it would've been better to take one of the choppers and try to drop them closer to the place?"

Su-lynn shrugged. "If there'd been any place handy to set one down, Nick wouldn't have suggested hiking to it," she said dryly. "Let's just hope it isn't further than he thought. I don't remember seeing one."

Danielle looked at her sharply. "You think he just said that and he has something else in mind?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying I think it's strange that he didn't take one of the choppers up to make sure he knew where it was and that there wasn't any place to set it down closer. He didn't seem keen to take any of the visitors along, did he?"

"You think that's significant?"

"It is to me, but then I'm starting to get seriously paranoid."

Danielle glanced around to make certain they were still alone. "You think the visitors have an agenda other than the one stated?"

Su-lynn lifted her head and studied the area around them. "Maybe they only came to help ... maybe not. Even if they didn't come with anything sinister in mind—look around you! There's a hell of a lot of really nice real estate available now, isn't there? And we're seriously outnumbered."

"Bork keeps bringing up the military. He's mentioned them at least three times within my hearing—just a question here and there, nothing too probing, but enough to make it clear that it's on his mind—like him suggesting we head to the nearest base to see if the survivors are there. And, as far as I know, none of them has said a damned word about talking to our leaders since we arrived."

Danielle shivered as a chill crept down her spine. "That doesn't necessarily mean anything beyond the fact that it has to be obvious to them that we don't even know where

to look for our leaders—assuming we still have some that survived this. We hadn't had communications in weeks before they arrived, but they could've been monitoring everything broadcast over the last hundred years. Surely, if they'd come to invade, they would've broken through our security and gotten all of the information they needed? Hell, they could've gotten just about any information they wanted over the Internet before it went down—including maps that pinpointed most of the military bases around the globe."

"You have a point, and yet they wouldn't know as much about us as they do if they hadn't been monitoring broadcasts, would they?"

Danielle frowned. "Say you're right—and I'm not disagreeing—what do you suggest?"

Su-lynn shrugged. "Caution. What did Nick say when you and him went off the other day right after we got here?"

"Pretty much the same thing you have. And I agreed with him then. There's just something about them ..." She frowned, considering it. "I don't know. I guess it's more a feeling. I can't think of anything they've actually said or done to make me feel ... threatened or distrustful—aside from the fact that they're aliens."

"Except that they haven't seemed all that anxious to rush to aid mankind? We've got an excuse. Even our training didn't prepare any of us for what we've had to deal with—we're still human—and, when it comes right down to it, we weren't trained to deal with this kind of situation at all. We're having to wing it. The sheer scope of this disaster, compounded by our personal losses, has made it hard to figure out where to start or what needs to be done first. Nobody can think about much of anything besides looking for their families.

"The visitors should have cool enough heads to know where to start and what to do, even though we don't, particularly if that was their reason for coming. They should've had a plan of action already in place, don't you think?"

"And yet they haven't mentioned one, haven't attempted to direct us at all. They seem perfectly content to merely follow us while we stumble around trying to figure out what to do."

Danielle nodded. "I guess that's the part that's been bothering me. I got the impression that they were completely prepared and I've been expecting them to take charge—or at least try to."

"I suppose it could be argued that that would instantly create friction they might not want, but still ..."

"They've got no reason to worry about whether we like it or not. So that means it isn't us they're worried about, right?"

"I think it comes back to the military," Su-lynn agreed. "It makes sense that they wouldn't want to be attacked, but you know damned well that they've already reported back that there wasn't any sign of a challenge when we landed. And Nick's been crisscrossing the area in the chopper for days without a sign of any military."

"Maybe that's what they've been waiting for—the ground crew to report back on the possible strength of our defenses?" Danielle said uneasily.

"I think that's exactly what they've been waiting for," Su-lynn said. "I'm not much of a strategist, but it makes sense to me. And, if we're right, they'll start the invasion any day."

Danielle felt a wave of nausea. “We need to try to contact the military ourselves—see if there are any defenses in the area. If anybody still has communications capabilities, it’ll be the military. I just don’t see how we’re going to manage it when we have the visitors right under us.”

“We can’t. We only have two options that I can see—killing or capturing them, or somehow ditching them.”

An image of Sabin instantly leapt to Danielle’s mind and her belly tightened with reluctance. “I couldn’t agree with attacking them when we don’t know whether we’re even right or not. It would be unconscionable to attack them when we could be wrong and they really did come to help. Besides, we don’t outnumber them anymore—we might have had some chance of overcoming them before Dr. Morton and the others took off. Now there’s more of them than us, and they’re better armed.”

“Except they’ve no reason to expect us to try anything like that,” Su-lynn pointed out.

“If you’re right about them, they’ve every reason to expect it and that might be why there’s always at least one of them close by—*because* they’re expecting us to be as deceitful as they are.”

“I think we still have to try. And I think we’re running out of time. I don’t know why they’ve hesitated, but I don’t think they will much longer. They’re going to invade and when they do we won’t be able to do anything to stop them.”

Chapter Seven

Danielle discovered when she glanced around again that Tande had come out of the hotel and was heading straight toward them. Sabin had appeared, as well, although he was making a pretense of having no interest in them at all and had merely settled on the low wall that bordered the raised flowerbed that surrounded the building.

"We need to think of some way to get everyone together to form a plan," she said quickly under her breath.

Su-lynn nodded and then turned to look at Tande as she approached. Since neither of them wanted to make it too obvious that they'd been discussing something they didn't want overheard, they stood their ground and waited for her to reach them.

"We were just discussing whether we should pack up everything we might find useful so that we can load it up when the guys get back and carry it with us," Danielle volunteered when she reached them. "I don't know if it will be practical to continue using this as home base when it seems everyone has scattered."

Something flickered in the grundt's eyes—suspicion, she thought—but she merely nodded and seemed to consider it. "I don't see that it would be a waste of time regardless of what everyone decides. I will help."

Su-lynn nodded. "I'll go get Joyce."

"I think I'm going to take a master key and start at the top and work my way down. Some of the previous occupants might have left things that could be useful."

Sabin joined them. "I will go with you, but perhaps we could start around the center? Mikhail has gone to the top to see what can be seen from there. Tande can join him and search the higher floors while we start in the middle and work down."

Danielle smiled with an effort, quelling the urge to glance at Su-lynn. "What about Ci and Sha?"

"There is far more on the ground floor. They had can help Su-lynn and Joyce sort through it."

Tidy. Danielle tried not to think about what Su-lynn had said about the way they always made certain that they were always within view of at least one of the visitors. There was no reason to object, however, that wouldn't make it obvious that they'd noticed.

Without argument, she followed Tande and Sabin inside. When they'd retrieved a couple of master keys, they headed up on the elevator, stopping on the sixth so that she and Sabin could get out.

Sabin looked her over assessingly when they emerged from the elevator. "You are ... alright?"

Danielle sent him a look of surprise. "Why wouldn't I be?"

His lips flattened. "The projectile—the bullet? You were nearly hit."

"It scared the hell out of me at the time, but I wasn't hit. I'm fine. I guess we might as well start with the nearest room and work our way around until we reach the elevators again." The near miss wasn't something she wanted to think about. She looked

away, studying the numbers on the doors in both directions. She wouldn't have been alright if they'd been close enough the bullet had shattered the window instead of just cracking it. She didn't think she would've been 'fine' anyway, except for the fact that it confirmed they weren't on a dead planet. As it was, the proof of survivors had been far too thrilling for her to dwell on the danger.

"You are still angry with me?"

Uh oh. If Sabin had noticed she wasn't behaving normally, it seemed certain the others would. "I don't remember being angry with you."

Sabin frowned. "You seemed angry."

Danielle thought it over and finally remembered the discussion. "I'm sorry you thought so. I wasn't really angry ... just ... I don't know. A little irritated, I guess."

The room they entered smelled stale. Unidentifiable odors lingered in it since the air-conditioning unit in the room was shut off. They made a cursory exploration, checking beneath the beds, in the closet, and the drawers. Danielle removed a pillow from one of the pillow cases and headed into the bathroom.

Sabin stood in the doorway, watching her as she collected the tiny bottles of toiletries on the vanity. "What are those?"

Danielle glanced at him in surprise. "Shampoo and cream rinse for cleaning the hair, soap for the rest and lotion—luxuries I guess—but I'm more inclined to consider them necessities. Believe me, all of the women will."

He didn't move away from the door immediately when she turned to go and she looked up at him questioningly. It occurred to her abruptly that she hadn't *really* looked at him before, hadn't studied him at any rate. She didn't know why. She'd certainly studied the other aliens whenever the opportunity arose and she thought they wouldn't notice her staring.

Beyond glancing at Sabin and On from time to time, though, she realized she'd made it a point *not* to look at them.

He really was sheer perfection—breathtaking. Her stomach went weightless as she studied him now, picked apart the exotic features that somehow seemed to just miss being completely human. Aside from his elfin-looking ears, the strange slant of his heavy, black brows was probably the most alien feature. Instead of arching, they winged upwards at the outer corner of his eyes, creating a perpetual stern look that only became more pronounced when he actually frowned.

She wondered if she'd simply assumed he was arrogant because the brows and his soberness suggested it—or would have if he'd been human and she could actually count on having some inkling of what might be going through his mind. He certainly never—or rarely—gave anything away in his expressions.

"You know that the odds are not good that you will find any of your people among the survivors?"

Danielle felt as if her chest had suddenly caved in. She struggled to take a breath and couldn't, felt dizziness wash over her. "Don't!" she said faintly.

She must have looked as near fainting as she felt. Sabin abruptly grasped her upper arms to steady her. It helped, but she still felt herself sinking toward the floor, felt the strength go out of the hand gripping the pillowcase. It hit the floor beside her.

Sabin glanced around and finally pulled her from the bathroom and guided her to sit on the edge of the nearest bed. She covered her face with her hands when he released

her, leaning forward, struggling to fight off the blackness that seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

"I should not have spoken of it."

"No, you shouldn't have," Danielle agreed, but found she couldn't summon the anger she wanted. She'd been doing just fine shielding herself from the one thing she couldn't handle at all. She didn't need him to tell her and she didn't want him to. She needed to hang on to the belief that she was going to find them alive.

She discovered when she finally dropped her hands from her face that he'd crouched in front of her. He actually looked concerned.

"I deeply regret that I have caused you pain. It was not my intention, but I cannot believe that it will help to delude yourself. It seems to me that you will only suffer more later, if you can not begin to accept the possibility."

Danielle felt her chin wobble dangerously. "You think this will spare me anything at all? I have to believe ... I have to think there's a possibility. Don't you see that?"

Now, he did. He had not expected to unleash such a powerful dam of emotions or he would have kept his thoughts to himself. He had only thought that her determination to ignore all indications of complete disaster were as unhealthy as the female, Lindsey's, certainty that there was no hope at all. Now that he had, he could not think of any way to remedy the situation. "Yes," he responded uneasily. "I do see. And you are right. It is no more realistic to believe the worst than to believe the best. Shall I fetch Su-lynn?"

She sniffed a couple of times and abruptly leaned forward, slipping her arms around his shoulders and burrowing her face against the side of his neck. A shockwave traveled through him and then—utter chaos. He stiffened, unable to think what to do, unable to think at all. Equal, opposing urges whipped through him—the first to clutch her as she had him, the second to shove her away—creating more turmoil. He couldn't bring himself to do either, couldn't seem to command any part of his body. A tide of heat and then cold washed through him, creating a bone deep quaking that began to grow stronger, leaching him of strength as it gained ground. Balanced precariously on his knees from the moment she'd flung herself upon his chest, feeling the strength leave him, and the quaking increase until he was certain she must feel it, until he began to think it would shake him apart, he finally sat backwards, settling his buttocks on his heels.

She was still gripping him frantically, however, and she didn't let go. She followed and the two of them nearly toppled onto the carpet. He caught her waist when she landed on his thighs, but he thought it was more instinct to try to balance the two of them than from any conscious effort to either shove her away or pull her closer.

He wanted both, at the same time. The contact was almost more than he could bear and, at the same time, he welcomed the hectic sensations pelting him, the excited hammering of his heart, the dizzying heat that swarmed over him as if every nerve ending had been electrified.

Her face was damp and her eyes red-rimmed when she finally lifted her head and looked at him. He could feel her heated breath against his face. When he breathed, he could smell her, taste her. "Tell me what you need and I will get it," he said, his voice sounding hoarse and strange to his ears.

She swallowed audibly, sniffing. Her gaze flickered over his face and moved to his mouth and he felt it almost like a touch. "Comfort," she finally said.

He couldn't grasp what she meant. His translator had either malfunctioned or his mind had. He wasn't certain which until she leaned closer and brushed her lips lightly along his. He knew then that it was his mind.

He licked his lips when she'd lifted hers, tasted her, and lost the last of his ability to reason. When she pressed her lips to his again, he clamped his hands to the back of her head and tried to absorb her. She made some sound. He couldn't tell whether it was indicative of distress or pleasure, but then he couldn't think at all. Clumsily, he pressed his lips against hers until he could feel his teeth grinding against the sensitive skin of his inner lips. He eased the pressure only when his own pain began to supersede the pleasure pouring through him. When he did, she tilted her head slightly and stroked her tongue along the seam where his lips met. He opened them, tried to capture her tongue so that he could taste more of her.

She sighed into his mouth as he caught her lips beneath his. A measure of satisfaction wafted through him when he'd fit his mouth comfortably over hers and could pull at her lips and tongue. The pleasure that rolled through him was like nothing he'd ever experienced or even imagined.

His heart was hammering against his chest wall in way it never had, in a way that should have caused him some alarm, especially when he realized his mind was reeling and he could not seem to catch his breath. He found instead that he welcomed the sensations, wanted more.

He didn't want to stop, even when he felt her begin trying to pull away. It took an effort of will he would never have thought necessary to force himself to ease his grip on her. He managed to drag in an unsteady breath when she'd pulled away and lifted her eyelids to look at him. He stared into her eyes, struggling to gather his wits, trying to understand what he saw in her eyes, fighting, most of all, the sense of desperation that was beginning to take hold of him to draw her close again so that he feel her touch.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, pulling completely away from him and getting to her feet.

He studied her but the struggle to bring some sort of order to his mind and senses made it impossible to grasp more than the fact that she regretted what had happened and she did not want more. He got to his feet with an effort, mildly alarmed, now, that he felt so weak and disoriented. The discovery that his penis was as hard as a rock and throbbing as if it would explode did not help. Embarrassed at his condition, he turned away from her, trying to will the blood away from that particular area. It was not as difficult as he had thought it would be given the fact that it was hard enough to drive rivets through steel.

When he'd managed to garner a semblance of calm and turned, he saw that she'd retrieved the pillowcase she'd dropped.

What he wanted to know—what he *needed* to know—was why she regretted it. "You are ... alright now?" he asked, feeling uncomfortable, strangely awkward even to ask.

She nodded.

He noticed she did not ask if he was alright.

He was not. He felt almost ... ill in the wake of what had happened between them. The return of blood from his groin to his brain had cleared his head somewhat and eased the painful throbbing of his genitals, but he was no closer to understanding either

why she had touched him or, having done so, regretted it.

For comfort, she'd said, although how she could find comfort in the turmoil that he had experienced he could not fathom.

Unless, illogical as it seemed to be, she had not felt the chaotic bombardment of every sense at once?

Still bemused, he followed her from the room and into another, and another, staring absently around while she searched, focused on trying to unravel what had happened and understand it. It dawned on him after a time that it was unlikely that she had experienced anything approaching what he had.

To his culture any touch, however accidental, was a grave breach of etiquette at the very least—a matter of extreme embarrassment to the one clumsy enough to have befouled another—and a prosecutable offense at the worst. Danielle, he had no doubt, was accustomed to touching and being touched in the most intimate of ways. He'd studied the vids they'd captured during their studies of humans. He'd been appalled when he had seen the almost animalistic way the humans *wallowed* upon each other, the way they'd seemed to revel in brushing every part of their bodies against one another. And those, presumably, were not even sexual in nature. Their rites of sexual intercourse, where they not only exchanged skin contact but bodily fluids were even more shocking.

Not that he had watched more than one. Those had been far too disturbing even for study.

Although he was obliged to admit that it wasn't nearly as revolting to watch two humans enact the mating ritual as it was to see two grundts—or any of the other species aboard the Mertosin—copulate.

It seemed reasonable to assume she had not been nearly as affected as he was. It did not particularly please him to arrive at that conclusion, but he could not find fault in it.

He still could not quite fathom why she had thought it would comfort her but, evidently, she had been wrong, for she had not seemed to be comforted at all. She had seemed ... embarrassed, which he also did not understand since it was socially acceptable to her people. He was the one who should have been deeply mortified by the experience ... except that he had not been.

He discarded the latter thought as having no bearing on the puzzle that troubled him.

Unless he was wrong, *she* was embarrassed. The question was why?

Because he had not known what to do or how to do it, and that had reminded her that he was mahn and she was human, he decided after a little more thought. He was well aware that his appearance made it difficult for her to accept that he was as alien as the others. The moment they tried to communicate and hit the cultural barrier that lay between them, he could see it in her eyes—the sudden realization that he was not the same as she. He looked like her people. He could speak her language, but, despite his studies, he still had difficulty understanding the way they thought and felt about things.

By the time they had searched two more floors, most of his discomfort had vanished, but his head had begun to throb with pain from wrestling with the puzzle he was no closer to understanding than he had been when he'd started.

* * * *

To everyone's relief, the expedition party returned near midnight. That didn't last

past the discovery that On had been wounded, however. The bullet had carved a shallow trough along his back.

Someone had tried to shoot him in the back as he was entering the building where they'd found guns. Hostility and suspicion radiated from Bork, who'd been with him at the time, but it was hard to say whether the anger glittering in both Bud and Nick's eyes was from wrongful accusation, their own suspicions ... or guilt.

The four of them had split into two groups—which accounted for the suspicion. It didn't seem reasonable to think that Nick had sent Bork and On to carry weapons to the vehicles they'd confiscated and then dashed out the back of the building to take potshots at them as they headed back in, though, and she didn't believe either Bud or Nick would have considered trying to shoot them in the back.

She was still embarrassed, angry, and disgusted that *someone* had. He had been armed. They all had, but On's firearm had been secured in its holster. To try to shoot anyone when they were, to all intents and purposes, unarmed, and hadn't provoked the attack was bad enough. To try to shoot them in the back was unconscionable.

Su-lynn had offered to attend his wound and Danielle to assist. Their services were politely, coolly declined. Ci and her sister, Sha had patched him up and informed the group that the wound had not caused extensive damage.

Danielle, at least, was genuinely sorry that he'd been hurt and relieved that it hadn't been worse. She thought most of them were, but that didn't change the fact that the incident had raised distrust among them to a noticeable level when, before, they'd all tried hard to hide the fact that they didn't particularly trust one another.

It also further complicated feelings that Danielle was already having trouble dealing with. She'd been in a state of complete denial since before the visitors had arrived and nothing that had happened since had changed that condition by more than a hair. Like everyone else, she'd been torn between the mounting evidence of global disaster and the refusal to accept it on the strength of nothing more than emotional grounds. Despite that, or maybe because her strained emotions made her vulnerable, she'd been instantly drawn to Sabin on a purely physical level and, by extension, because they were virtually identical, On, as well. She'd determinedly ignored it, but she'd been aware that she was vulnerable to them because she found them physically appealing.

It wasn't just a physical and possibly chemical appeal, though, and she'd come to realize that her attraction to both men also wasn't just because they looked so much alike. Their personalities appealed to her, too, and, in that sense, they were vastly different.

She might have gone on telling herself that her attraction was nothing more than physical, or possibly chemical, or due to the fact that they were exciting purely by virtue of being so exotic except that she'd made the mistake of kissing Sabin, and On had been hurt, and had come within a hair's breadth of being killed. Those two incidents radically altered her perception, or rather ripped away the veil of denial she'd been working so hard to maintain.

She was wide open to both men. With any encouragement on the part of either of them, she was lost.

She didn't know what she'd been thinking when she'd kissed Sabin.

Well, in all honesty, she knew damned well that *thinking* hadn't actually entered in to it. She regretted it, tremendously, on so many levels that she wondered if a touch of insanity had inspired it to begin with, but she couldn't take it back, unfortunately.

She'd told herself that she just wanted to be held, that she just *needed* the comfort of another human being, just for a moment, to shore up her crumbling defenses.

She'd lied to herself. She hadn't, for one moment, lost sight of the fact that Sabin wasn't a human being, and she hadn't wanted comfort from *anyone*. She'd wanted to feel Sabin's arms around her.

He was so completely in control at all times, so competent, unshakable. He was like a fortress and she'd wanted shelter in that fortress to make her feel safe.

She still wasn't certain if he'd been completely revolted because he looked upon her as an inferior species, because she was a *different* species, or because he simply wasn't comfortable with physical contact at all. She had noticed, however, that both On and Sabin eschewed any and all physical contact so she thought it *was* possible that it wasn't her in particular but everyone in general.

That didn't change the fact that she'd been aware almost the instant she'd flung herself at him that, far from welcoming it, it made him excruciatingly uncomfortable.

And she'd persisted anyway.

She'd done worse than that. She'd taken it to another level.

Kissing, clearly, wasn't a custom he was familiar with. She wasn't *vastly* experienced with men, but she'd certainly had enough experience to tell when someone else wasn't.

She had to say one thing for him—he might have been clumsy enough to begin with to give more pain than pleasure, but he was a quick study. He'd more than made up for the awkward beginning with enthusiasm unmatched by anyone she'd ever kissed before in her life. The kiss alone had been so wildly exciting it had brought her within a hair's breadth of coming. If he'd touched her breasts or stroked her clit, she was pretty sure she would've exploded like a quasar.

If it hadn't suddenly occurred to her how embarrassing it would be if some of the others decided to come look for them ...

Fortunately, it had. Equally fortunate, it had cooled her down enough to allow her to think and to realize that she might very well be consorting with an enemy of mankind. She'd felt almost ill when that suddenly dawned on her.

She didn't believe it, but she was well aware that she simply didn't want to believe it and couldn't trust her judgment.

It had made the rest of their search for supplies extremely awkward—made any interaction uncomfortable—although she supposed, given time, she would get over it.

Her behavior also made her situation far more difficult than it needed to be or would have been if she'd kept her head and her distance.

As if she wasn't in enough turmoil after her encounter with Sabin, Su-lynn had come up with what she considered the perfect solution to their problem of communicating without being overheard by the visitors and hit her with it while the two of them were preparing the evening meal. She'd suggested they pretend to develop a sexual interest in the men of their group, which would give them the opportunity for privacy to talk.

It was a great idea—except for the fact that they had no way to tell the men before hand—and the fact that Joyce and Su-lynn were not only both gay, but partners, and everybody—in their group, at any rate—knew it.

And except for the fact that she'd made it clear, to Sabin at least, where her

interests lay.

It could prove to be more than a little awkward for all of them, but Danielle knew she was right. It was their best chance and the least likely to arouse the suspicion of the visitors.

She still wasn't happy about the fact that they were going to be playing musical beds for the benefit of the aliens, but it wasn't going to be any more uncomfortable for her than it was for Joyce and Su-lynn.

"It'll have to be Bud or Mikhail. Nick and I have a history."

Su-lynn looked irritated. "All the more reason you should target him. It would seem more natural."

"The visitors don't know anything about our affair. There's no reason why they'd think it any less suspicious."

"I beg to differ. With the way Nick behaves around you, he might as well be wearing a sign. We're going to have swap anyway if we're to have any hope of passing a lot of information quickly."

"He was blatantly flirting with Joyce just the other day—that first night when we got here," Danielle pointed out.

"Which is exactly why I'd rather she didn't target him," Su-lynn said tightly.

"He's just thick-headed enough to think he's charmed the pants off of her."

"You pointed out yourself that we'd have to swap around."

"Yeah, but I don't want Joyce in there with loverboy until he knows the score."

"Fine!" Danielle conceded irritably.

"Tonight."

"Why tonight? They might not even get back before morning and we were planning to leave at daybreak."

"Because it might be our last chance for a while—once we get on the road we don't know what will happen or what our circumstances might be—and because the sooner the better. At the very least, once we leave here, we're going to have to be on the watch for an opportunity to ditch our watchdogs."

Danielle frowned. "I'd assumed, though, that we would be leaving a note for Dr. Morton and the others and would be swinging back periodically to look for them. *They* would know about that and could intercept us even if we did elude them."

Su-lynn looked away. "I don't like the idea of abandoning them any more than you do, but they made their choice. I doubt we'll be coming back this way for any reason, so if they're not back by morning, they're on their own."

Despite Su-lynn's determination to put their plan in action that night, in the end, they didn't since the atmosphere was too volatile to make it seem the least bit 'natural' to flirt. Danielle was relieved, but she knew it was only a reprieve.

Su-lynn was right. If there was any chance, at all, that the intentions of the visitors were to launch an invasion the sooner they developed a plan of offense the better.

* * * *

Nick brought the SUV he was driving to an abrupt halt the instant they heard the first crack of gunfire. When a second shot followed closely on the heels of the first, and a bullet ricocheted off of the hood of the vehicle, he shoved the transmission into reverse and backed off until he thought they were out of range. "Apparently, they aren't open to visitors," he said dryly, glaring out of the windshield as he scanned the field in front of

them for some sign of the sniper. "I guess this is the place."

Danielle unfastened her belt and crawled between the seats, wedging herself between Sabin and Ci and digging through the supplies in the rear of the vehicle. When she'd found one of the pillowcases they'd used for packing, she emptied it and climbed to the front again. Nick studied it and shrugged. "It's worth a try, I suppose. Give it to me. I'll wave it around."

Danielle ignored him. "I'll do it," she said determinedly, opening the door.

Another explosion erupted around them the moment she did. The bullet struck the ground close enough to prove that they weren't completely out of range and that whoever was shooting at them had a fair aim.

"Give me the damned thing before the bastards shoot you!" Nick snapped.

Danielle ignored him and began waving the pillowcase wildly in the air. "We just want to talk!" she yelled out.

"So talk!" someone in the distance responded.

Danielle got out cautiously. "I'm Lt. Danielle Stevens, U.S. Air force. We came to help if anyone is sick."

"Everybody that was sick died. So you can keep on moving."

With an effort, Danielle swallowed against the wedge of dismay that rose in her throat. Wariness, she could understand. She hadn't expected such determined hostility. "Could we at least come a little closer so that we could talk more comfortably?"

"We ain't got nuthin' to talk about—especially not with any damned soldiers! Just turn around and get the fuck out of here."

She was sorry she'd told them her military title. She might've gotten a better response if she'd told them she was Dr. Stevens. Of course, she wasn't a medical doctor, but they wouldn't know that. "I'm ... we're doctors and ..."

"I told you we didn't need any damned doctors!"

"Maybe you could tell us if there are any other survivors in the area that might be a little more reasonable!" Nick yelled, getting out the vehicle.

His angry bellow was followed by a fairly prolonged silence. "How many of you are there?"

Danielle glanced at Nick questioningly over the hood of the car. "Twelve in all."

Danielle frowned at him. She didn't think it was a good idea at all to mention the visitors. If the men were so hostile toward them, they certainly weren't going to be receptive to the alien visitors.

Nick merely shrugged.

"Get out of the vehicles and walk toward the gate."

Nick turned and motioned toward the others in the vehicles behind theirs. No one was particularly anxious to approach the gate, but everyone got out.

"You can leave any weapons you're carrying."

"What guarantee do we have that you won't shoot us down?" Nick demanded angrily.

"You can take my word for it, or you can't get back in those trucks and get the fuck out of here. I don't give a fuck which."

After a brief debate, everyone put their guns in the vehicles and headed toward the makeshift barrier they could see about a hundred yards away. They'd managed to get within thirty feet when one of the defenders bellowed at them to stop where they were.

“What in the fuck are those things?”

Chapter Eight

Nick threw a smirking glance at the visitors that made Danielle feel like slapping him. It was juvenile, and dangerous besides, considering their exposure and the evidence of hostility already amply displayed.

"They're visitors who came to help."

One of the men snorted. "*Aliens?*" the other gasped in disbelief.

Instead of pointing out that the situation hardly warranted costuming themselves as aliens, Danielle tried again. It wasn't for the sake of the visitors, she told herself. *They* were in the line of fire and, in any case, if the people inside took exception she didn't doubt they would be considered enemies by association. "They intercepted our transmissions about the problem and came to see if they could help us."

"Good timing!" one of the men growled.

"They can hardly be blamed for that," Danielle said. "They came a long way."

"Well, they can go back the same damned way! We don't need you and we sure as fuck don't need them!"

Danielle tamped her anger with an effort. "We've already established that. We're just trying to see if there are any other groups around that might need help."

A woman joined the men. "Where the hell have you been, sister? Are you blind, or what? It's too damned late to help anybody that needed help. They're all dead!"

Danielle felt a wave of grief roll over her, but she reined it as she had her anger. "We were on the Pegasus—the international space station. The last communications we had were that the authorities were trying to quarantine the outbreak."

"Lucky you! Y'all got to sit up there all safe and sound while everybody here was dropping like flies!" the woman snarled angrily, although there was a thread of tears in her voice barely held in check.

The men snorted derisively. "Is that what they called it? Quarantine? They rounded everybody up and wouldn't let them leave—shot them when they tried!"

It seemed pointless to try to explain that the soldiers were under orders to contain the disease and that anybody could be a carrier, could have spread the disease further. Under the circumstances, there hadn't been any other way to try to stop the spread, but that wasn't going to comfort the people that had been forced to stay and risk infection when they might have had a chance outside the city.

If they knew anything about any other groups, she didn't think they would say so and considering their hostility that seemed unlikely. "Have you seen others pass this way?"

"A few," one of the men said with obvious reluctance. "We took a few in—the ones willing to camp outside until we were sure they weren't sick. The others kept moving."

The urge to ask them how many people were inside rolled through her, but Danielle contained it. They weren't likely to tell them, but they *were* likely to become more suspicious if she asked. "We had family in and around the city. Have you seen any

little boys—twins? About eight? Sandy blond hair?”

The woman's shoulders slumped. Her animosity evaporated. “Not many kids at all. It was worse on them ... and the elderly.” She paused, obviously struggling with her emotions. “We haven't seen any twins that would fit that description.”

Danielle told herself she hadn't really expected anything, but her disappointment was so profound her throat closed up and she couldn't find the voice to ask more.

She'd started a wave, however. Her crewmembers surged forward eagerly and began to pelt the trio atop the wall with questions about their own family members and friends.

“Any boys at all named Cary or Kyle?” she shouted, trying to make herself heard, trying to tell herself they might have, somehow, been separated. When the trio on the wall merely continued to shake their heads, she tamped her disappointment and tried again, asking about her mother and sister. “Anyone named Munroe or Collins? Anyone at all?”

She stared at them hopefully as they turned from time to time to call out a name, hoping against hope that someone she knew had found shelter here, but, to every inquiry, the answer was no. Feeling crushed, she turned away finally and almost ran full tilt into Sabin.

He grasped her upper arms to steady her and she looked up at him. The urge to throw herself at him and weep like a baby was so strong she thought it would choke her. Instead, she muttered an excuse, pushed away from him, and rushed back toward the SUVs. Nick caught up with her. At first, she wasn't even sure who it was that had grabbed her and swung her around, but any port in the storm, at that point, was welcome. She fell into his arms gratefully, but she cried harder when she realized it was Nick and not Sabin.

He was surprisingly empathetic, holding her in a way that seemed protective, but then she supposed he'd had hope of finding some of his family members, too. It was a side to him she'd never seen, wouldn't have expected of a man like him.

For a few moments, she allowed herself the luxury of wallowing in her grief and disappointment, but she heard the others when they began to return, struggled to compose herself and finally pulled away. She sniffed when Nick cupped her cheek, knowing her face was a complete wreck and unwilling to allow him to look at her, but she finally yielded to his determination. He dismayed her by dipping down to kiss her, but, like his embrace, it was a surprise—almost completely platonic. “This is only the first group we've found. There's still a chance, Danny.”

It made her feel unaccountably better to hear him say it—almost as if it was some sort of confirmation that her hopes weren't doomed to failure. She nodded, but she couldn't manage even a faint flicker of a smile. “I know ... but I was so hoping ...”

She couldn't prevent her voice from disintegrating into a wail on the last words, but she clamped her lips together and sternly commanded herself not to yield to the urge to start sobbing again.

He pulled her against his chest again, giving her an affectionate squeeze. “It's alright, baby. It's going to be alright.”

It comforted her even though she knew it wasn't true. “I've cried all over you,” she muttered.

He chuckled. “I'll survive. It'll dry.”

She felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment when she finally pulled away and discovered their audience. She'd certainly put on a fine show for their visitors! She didn't know what was worse—that Sabin had witnessed it after their encounter the day before, that the others had, or that she'd given herself a pity party and made it that much harder for her fellow crewmembers, who were also searching for loved ones. All of them looked as if they'd been crying or wanted to.

She didn't look at the visitors to see how they'd taken the display of emotion. She didn't doubt that they'd seen it as a weakness, though.

Not that she supposed they'd actually had to know that the entire crew of the Pegasus was close to crumbling under the weight of their grief when Lindsey had already killed herself and Jim, Andre`, Richard, and Clancy had taken off without any regard for the danger to themselves or their crewmembers—if they should want to return.

Nick reached across the console and squeezed her hand when they were in the car again. "They said others had passed," he reminded her.

* * * *

Sabin felt an odd sense of hollowness form in the pit of his stomach as he watched Danielle and Nick together that he could not convince himself was hunger. A vague sense of nausea and anger joined it, began to burn as he studied the way Nick held her.

In a detached corner of his mind, he realized with a touch of surprise that there was almost beauty in the way they held each other and yet he could not truly appreciate it, could not stop the image from forming in his mind of himself standing as Nick did, holding her.

If he had known how to give her what she needed, he thought abruptly, she would have turned to him. It *would* have been him holding her. He had seen it in her face when she had looked up at him. Beneath the hurt in her expression and in her eyes that had lanced his chest with almost as much pain as a knife wound, he had seen that she was seeking comfort.

It was a need she had, he realized, to balance her sorrow. Or perhaps to distract her from it?

Abruptly, he saw the logic in it when he had thought there was no logic at all.

Struggling to oust the unaccustomed feelings, he glanced away after only a moment, realizing that the longer he watched them together the more pronounced the emotions churning within him. On met his gaze and there was something in his eyes that told him On knew what he was feeling, what he was thinking.

Wondering if he was that transparent, or if On suspected because he had felt those disturbing things stirring within him, Sabin returned his gaze for a long moment and finally headed toward the vehicle.

It flickered through his mind, as he settled inside, that he had felt that odd sense of emptiness before. It was so similar to the sense of hunger that he decided that that was what it was—hunger. It just wasn't a need for food. And he was not entirely certain what would appease it.

The embrace had not. The kiss had not. In both cases, he had not felt fulfillment. He had felt more want, more emptiness that needed to be filled.

Perhaps it could not be? Was it like that for them? A gnawing emptiness that could not be filled? Or was that emptiness the reason they sought each other in touch?

He pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind as the others finally got back in the vehicle.

And then Nick touched Danielle's hand and Sabin felt a flare of the same anger he had felt before. Ci was studying him curiously that time when he glanced away. Irritation flickered through him.

Clearly, it was obvious to anyone who looked at him that he disliked the way Nick touched Danielle. It was not even of particular relief that Danielle had failed to notice since he was well aware of why she had not. If she had been able to tear her gaze from Nick, she *would* have noticed.

Annoyed with himself, he focused his gaze outside the vehicle as Nick finally started the engine and they began to move. He did not understand his preoccupation with the female, but it was certainly not a good thing. Beyond the discomfort it caused him, it was distracting and he could certainly not afford that.

* * * *

The startled, confused expressions that flitted across both Mikhail's and Bud's faces when Joyce and Su-lynn began their seductive assault was almost amusing despite the black cloud of depression that had settled over Danielle as they progressed, finding no signs of other survivors. Toward sundown, they'd finally stopped at an abandoned hotel to stay the night.

The accommodations weren't nearly as luxurious, or as secure, as the one they'd stayed at before. The hotel was one of the sort built in a strip where all of the doors to the rooms faced an open corridor. Since it wasn't a luxury hotel, it also didn't have a restaurant inside of it, but the pancake house next to it had what they needed to prepare a hot meal.

Their encounter earlier in the day with survivors had profoundly affected all of them, however. Without discussion, without consciously acknowledging the need for it, they had all switched to their military training. Their first priority once they'd decided on a 'camp' was to take their weapons and thoroughly search the area as a team. They saw no signs of habitation that indicated that anyone had been in the immediate area for weeks. For the sake of safety, however, they decided to divide the group between the three rooms closest to one end of the hotel rather to spread out and each take their own or even to pair up since that would still mean twice as many rooms to guard.

Or rather, Nick suggested it and no one argued.

After surveying their expressions at the announcement, he shrugged. "We'll draw straws for bunkmates later. First order of business is we need to find someplace to fuel up the SUVs before we find ourselves on foot."

They split into two groups. Half went to search for fuel for the vehicles and the other half stayed to guard the rooms they'd staked off for their use and to prepare a meal for the group. Danielle, Sha, and Bud had ended up with kitchen duty while On, Tande, and Joyce strolled the perimeter and kept an eye out for any sign of trouble.

The pancake house had been raided at least once and the kitchen area was a shambles, but the range still worked and whoever had ransacked the place had been more interested in foods that didn't require refrigeration than perishables or cooking implements. To preserve as much of their own food supply as possible—also because Nick and the others had taken off with the supplies—they focused on putting together a meal from what they found.

The meal turned out to be something of a hodgepodge. Since the restaurant's specialty was pancakes, most of the inventory was breakfast type foods, but there were fixings for salads that were still fresh enough to use. They sat down to eat as soon as the other group returned. The lights still worked, but no one knew how long they would have power and it was already dark out when Nick's group returned.

Bud had shoved tables together to form a buffet table to hold the food and, a short distance from that, pushed another three tables together and shoved chairs under it to accommodate the group.

Joyce and Su-lynn immediately set to work on Mikhail and Bud, somehow managing to squeeze between them when they all formed up into a line to help their plates and then following the two men to the table and taking seats next to them. Danielle, who'd put 'the plan' from her mind since they'd formulated it, knew immediately what they were doing and viewed it with a good bit of consternation.

They'd decided to split up four to a room. That would work out great for the four of them, always assuming neither Bud nor Mikhail turned tail and ran, but it meant she was going to end up bedding down with at least two of the visitors even if she volunteered to be Nick's bunkmate. That being the case, she wouldn't get the chance to have any sort of discussion about the situation which, unfortunately, was liable to leave Nick a lot of room for misinterpretation.

Almost as if the entire thing had been carefully orchestrated, Nick sat down in the chair left vacant beside her. When he'd settled his plate and glass on the table, he draped one arm across the back of her chair, coiling his long fingers along the side of her neck and stroking it rhythmically. "How're you holding up, baby?"

As uncomfortable as she already was with Nick's familiarity, that discomfort increased exponentially when Sabin and On took the chairs across from them. Her first impulse, which was to throw off Nick's hand, increased, as well, but she realized she couldn't if she was to maintain the ploy Su-lynn had suggested.

"Fine," she murmured, trying to ignore the almost mesmerizing stroke of his fingers and the flutter it created in her belly.

"You're sure?"

She nodded and, to her relief, he removed his hand.

Almost as if he was trying to be provoking, however, he leaned in to plant a kiss along her temple even as he removed his arm from around her. "Good."

She wasn't certain whether Nick instantly realized what plot was afoot, or if he was merely inspired by the apparent interest of Joyce and Su-lynn in taking advantage of the sleeping arrangements to indulge in a little swap, slap, and tickle. It worried her that she didn't know because she had no interest, whatever Nick might think, in renewing their previous acquaintance. After listening to the exchanges between the four at the end of the table, he looked down at her. "Guess that means you're stuck with me as a bunkmate," he murmured huskily.

Annoyance flickered through her immediately. Duh! As *if* she could sleep a wink in the same bed with any of the aliens! She sent him a tight smile. "As long as *I* don't get stuck," she said pointedly.

He uttered a bark of laughter at that that caught her completely by surprise. Amusement flickered in his eyes, when she met his gaze, but there was a glitter of something else, as well—anger and desire. He wagged his thick blond brows at her.

"Baby, I'm beat. It's been a long day. If anything should happen to pop up between us, just ignore it. It'll lay down again."

"As long as we're clear on that."

"Scouts honor I won't try anything ...," he murmured with amusement, then leaned closer, "... unless you change your mind."

She sent him a look and determinedly focused on her meal, wondering how much Sabin and On had heard of the exchange between them. It seemed unlikely they could've failed to hear at least part, regardless of the other conversations at the table. She'd kept her voice low, but Nick certainly hadn't made any attempt to.

He chuckled huskily, flicking a glance across the table. "Relax, sweetheart," he murmured, settling a hand on her thigh and squeezing it. "I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to."

Sabin's glass shattered. One moment he was merely holding it, the next it was just so many shards and the liquid it had contained was all over the table.

Drawn by the sound of breaking glass, Danielle whipped her head toward him and stared at him in openmouthed shock when she saw what had happened. Joyce instantly sprang up from her chair. "I'll get something to clean up the mess."

"My god! Did you see that? It just shattered!" Su-lynn exclaimed. "Did it cut you?"

Dull red color crept upward from Sabin's neck, exposed by the neckline of his suit, and all the way to his forehead, finally disappearing into his hairline. Seeming as surprised and bemused as everyone else, he opened his hand and stared at the mingling of blood, tea, and pieces of glass in his palm. Shoving his chair back, he stood abruptly and strode toward the kitchen where Joyce had disappeared in search of cleaning supplies.

Danielle struggled with the urge to follow him to see how badly he was hurt.

As if he sensed her inner battle, Nick draped an arm almost casually across her shoulders and leaned close enough to nuzzle his nose against her ear. "That was a hell of a thing, hmmm?"

On's chair squawked as he stood abruptly and headed toward the kitchen, as well.

Nick uncoiled his arm from her shoulders and executed an exaggerated stretch. "I *am* beat. Ready to head for the room?"

Danielle didn't try to hide the irritation she felt when she looked at him. The idea had been to execute a ploy for private discussions without arousing the suspicions of the visitors. She supposed, in that sense, nothing Nick had said or done *would*, but he'd certainly managed to draw a lot more attention to the two of them than she'd wanted.

Of course, she didn't suppose Nick knew—unless Su-lynn had managed to get a few minutes alone with him to talk.

It still angered her that he'd made such a huge production of it, mostly because she knew what he was up to.

He needn't think, just because he was determined to stake a claim to her, that she was going to go along with it like a whipped puppy!

His expression hardened as he met her gaze. His eyes, she saw, were glittering with suppressed anger, making it crystal clear nothing he'd said or done had been purely accidental—flirtation just for her benefit, maybe not for her benefit at all. Even as she rose from the table, however, she felt a vibration roll through the floor beneath her feet. Within a couple of heartbeats it had increased from a barely discernible vibration to a

violent shaking.

The entire room erupted into chaos as the building began to shake harder and harder. Everyone sprang to their feet and began to babble exclamations and questions at once.

"Stay put!" Nick bellowed at her, heading toward the door.

A sudden premonition hit her. "Don't go out there, Nick!" she screamed at him just as someone grabbed her from behind and hauled her completely off her feet.

"The freezer!" Sabin yelled above the din of breaking glass, shuddering timbers, and the growing howling noise from outside. Without waiting to see if anyone else had heard him or would comply, he hauled Danielle toward the kitchen area.

Danielle didn't have time to assess anything more than the fact that it had begun to seem as if the building would shake apart. Ceiling tiles and light fixtures were raining down on them even as they made it to the kitchen. She was dimly aware that it was Sabin who was carrying her and that everyone else was struggling to reach the dubious safety of the walk-in freezer. The door was standing wide. Joyce and On were already inside, crouched in a tight ball at the back when Sabin hauled her in. He carried her to the back, shoved her down, and curled around her.

The door of the freezer slammed shut and blackness engulfed them a split second before something that felt like a 747 slammed into the wall of the freezer. Sucking in a sharp breath, Danielle clutched at Sabin frantically, digging her fingers into him in sheer terror. For an eternity, it felt as if the freezer would become their tomb and then the shaking stopped as abruptly as a switch being turned off.

The lights blinked off and on several times and then died completely.

Danielle discovered she was panting for breath, but she wasn't certain how much was from terror and how much from the fact that Sabin was crushing her with his weight. He seemed to realize it—whatever 'it' was—had passed the same time she did. He eased away from her. "Are you injured?" he asked.

Danielle released a shaky breath, conducted a brief internal examination, and shook her head. "No," she responded when she realized he couldn't possibly see her. "You?"

He hesitated. "I have nothing serious."

She sensed that he'd turned away from her.

"Did everyone make it? Is everyone here?"

There were around a half a dozen responses of 'yes' or 'me.'

"Su-lynn?" Joyce called out in a shaky voice.

"I'm here, baby," Su-lynn responded, obviously too shaken up to realize what she'd said. Or perhaps, in that moment, she just didn't give a damn?

"What the *fuck* was that?" Mikhail growled.

"I don't know," Nick responded, "but I'm going to find out."

They heard him working at the door and a grunt as he shoved against it.

"Somebody give me a hand. The door's jammed."

Danielle clutched at Sabin a little frantically when she felt him move, grabbing his arm. He hesitated and finally knelt beside her again. To her surprise, he slipped his arms around her and pulled her closer. She knew she shouldn't give in to the impulse to cling to him, but she couldn't resist burrowing her face gratefully against his chest. He felt wonderfully hard and solid and warm and strong. She clutched two fistfuls of his suit

in her hands to hold herself as tightly against him as she could get. "You are cold and shivering," he murmured in a low voice.

"Because it's a fucking freezer," Nick growled.

"The power's out," Su-lynn pointed out.

"Which mean's ..." Nick didn't finish the sentence. "I don't know if the door's blocked or what, but we need more help here."

It took all Danielle could do to pry her fingers loose once she'd begun to absorb Sabin's warmth, but she commanded her fingers to let go. She felt his hand move from her back and coast lightly along her cheek and then he released her and stood up and began trying to feel his way to the front of the cubicle. Joyce whimpered when On got up, as well.

Danielle shifted closer to Joyce as the men began battering at the door. A tiny draft of air wafted to them and Danielle felt herself relax fractionally when she realized that they wouldn't suffocate, at least. With grunts and growls of exertion, the men continued shoving at the door until they finally, apparently, managed to push it wide enough to slip out. She heard Nick's voice from outside. "Shit! Watch the debris!"

Scrambling to her feet when she heard everyone else leap up, Danielle stumbled out behind them. A section of the roof, she discovered, had collapsed on top of and around the freezer. With everyone else, she carefully picked her way through the rubble, stumbling and nearly falling over and over since they had no light beyond the little that filtered down to them from the stars.

The moment she emerged from the building and looked around, she saw what had happened. On the distant horizon, a mushroom cloud glowed evilly in the night sky.

"Oh my god!"

For a time, all of them were frozen where they stood.

"The suits!" Nick bellowed abruptly. "Get into the suits!"

The warning galvanized everyone. Rushing to the SUVs, they began pushing and shoving to try to unload the supplies and find their suits. Two of the vehicles were lying on their side, though, and the third on its top. None of them had any clue of which was which or where their belongings were.

"What happened? What do you think happened? Is it a strike? Would they do that? Why would they do that?" Joyce babbled, voicing what was on everyone's mind.

"A strike? On our own soil?" Bud demanded angrily. "No way."

"The nuclear power plant!"

"Shit! China syndrome! Jesus fucking Christ! I hadn't even thought about it! How far away is it, do you think, as the crow flies?"

"How the fuck would we know that?" Nick growled. "Close enough to see the mushroom cloud and nearly get blown away!"

"Shit! We need to scrub down before we get in the suits! There's no telling whether we've picked up radioactive particles or not, or how much!" Mikhail announced abruptly.

No one argued. Grabbing their suits as they found them, they raced into the hotel, hoping against hope that they could even get water. It was as black inside the hotel rooms as the inside of a cave and no one wanted to waste more time searching for a flashlight. Danielle wasn't even sure who she'd followed into the room and she didn't care at the moment. When she heard the shower come on, she followed the sound,

throwing off her clothes as she went. "I'm coming in!"

"There isn't much room!" Su-lynn responded. "On's already in here with me."

"Just give me the soap when you're done. I'll rinse when you've finished."

It was hard to even work up a lather with the few sprinkles of water she managed to catch in her palm by leaning around On, who was standing behind Su-lynn.

He caught her waist to steady her. "You go after Su-lynn. I will wait."

Danielle wanted to leap at his suggestion. Very few things, to her mind, were worst than dying of radiation sickness. She couldn't quite bring herself to disregard his life over her own, however. "I think we can probably both manage to get under the spray when Su-lynn's done," she said shakily. "Thanks!"

"That ought to be cozy," Nick drawled from nearby.

"For god's sake, don't start, Nick!" Danielle exclaimed tearfully. "It isn't bad enough?"

Nick let out an irritated huff. "You're right! I'm a total asshole. Forget I said anything."

As if she could when he put it like that! She wasn't in the mood, however, to try to soothe his ruffled feathers, particularly when he had no damned right to be so possessive to start with! Since Su-lynn stepped out of the shower just then, that made it easier to ignore his foul temper.

Christ, she thought angrily while she scrubbed her skin and hair frantically! You'd think they intended to screw in the damned shower!

She didn't know if it was Nick's remarks, or if she would've felt it anyway, but, despite her anxiety, she discovered she wasn't able to completely ignore the fact that she was standing breast to breast with On. They couldn't bathe so closely without bumping one another and if the raging erection she felt slap against her belly was any indication, On was having just as much trouble keeping his mind on business.

She was actually vaguely amazed he'd managed one. She could barely collect spit in her mouth for the fear pounding through her.

She turned to hand Nick the soap when she'd worked up a good lather. The bar shot from her hand and hit the floor of the shower. "Sorry! It slipped."

She nearly butted heads with him when they both bent down to search for it.

"I'll get it. Just stay put," Nick said irritably.

"It is on my foot," On responded.

"Well, in that case, you get it."

He slipped when he tried to bend down. Danielle made a grab for him to help steady him and they both slammed into the wall of the shower and nearly slid to the floor—not *out* of the shower, fortunately.

"Just kick it over to me," Nick said tightly.

It was a lot harder to get her mind off of showering with On and focus on the important issue at hand after they'd wallowed all over each other trying to regain their feet. She didn't know how thorough she'd been in bathing, but once she had rinsed the soap off, she got out. They were lucky they had any water at all. She didn't want to be standing under it when it ran out and Nick was left with no way to rinse.

On stepped out behind her, moved past her, and strode from the room.

She couldn't dry off. The room seemed intact but there was no way to tell whether it, and everything in it, had been contaminated or not. Trying not to think about

what she might be picking up with her wet feet, Danielle left the bathroom to try to find her suit—which she'd dropped as she'd rushed into the room to bathe.

"It's pitch black in here. I can't see to find my suit."

On, apparently, could see better. He moved to the door and opened it.

Danielle caught a brief impression of the water gleaming on his skin in the light from outside and then focused on finding her suit, trying to put the image from her mind.

Their precautions were haphazard at best, but she was still relieved when she had her suit on. It was designed to protect them from radiation. Hopefully, it would be enough, but only time would tell.

Nick strolled out of the bathroom a few minutes later and out the door. On, still shrugging into his own suit, followed him. Danielle watched them anxiously. She didn't want to go outside, but she didn't want to stay inside the hotel room by herself, either. None of them knew what kind of shape the building was in. It seemed to have weathered the blast surprisingly well, but that didn't mean it wasn't structurally damaged and extremely dangerous.

When she'd managed to get her helmet secured, she decided she was probably in no more danger outside than inside. It was just a matter of one threat as opposed to another.

She discovered she was one of the last to reassemble outside the hotel. It appeared that most of the men had gone to study the vehicles. They seemed to be trying to flip one of them upright.

The two drae women, easily recognizable even in their suits, were headed toward the group, and Danielle trailed after them. She stopped when she spotted the puddle of gasoline on the pavement. "It's leaking gas."

Nick lifted his head and turned to look at her. "We noticed. We thought we'd try to get it upright before the tank emptied."

"I'll help," she said, surging forward.

"I think we got this one covered."

They did and they didn't. They'd ranged themselves from one end to the other, but they couldn't lift it high enough for gravity to take over. Sabin strode past her and wedged himself between Nick and Bud.

Apparently, he added just what they needed. They heaved the SUV up and it tipped, rocking as it landed on all four wheels. Nick eyed Sabin with disfavor for a moment. "Good thing you happened along," he muttered ungraciously. "You want to give us a hand with that one over there?"

Sabin bowed his head and then followed them. Within a few minutes they'd lifted that one, as well, and moved to survey the third.

Nick turned to study Sabin. "I don't suppose you could use that little trick you used in the hotel to get the door unlocked?" he asked sardonically.

Sabin studied him for a long moment. "It is not metal."

Not 'it's too big.'

"That's what I thought. I think we'll have to consider this one a loss." He turned to study the other two. "Maybe those, too, but we might as well give it a shot."

Sabin watched the others as they walked back to examine the first two SUVs more carefully and then turned to his brother. "It is not worth the display," On cautioned him.

"Twelve in two vehicles that can only comfortably seat four will be nigh unendurable if we must travel for very long. It will also reduce the amount of supplies we can carry considerably."

On glanced around and finally lifted his faceplate, switching off his communicator. "It is not metal."

"It is not *completely* metal," Sabin countered, having turned off his own communicator. "There is enough to make it convincing and we will work together. They will think one could not manage it alone."

On studied him. "You want to do this to please Danielle. She will not be. She will begin to look at us as she does the others."

Sabin frowned. Uncertainty drifted through him, but he knew On was right or he would not have felt the concern that she would view their abilities with fear and loathing. "It concerns you?"

On shifted uncomfortably. "It concerns me, yes. I know it should not. She is not likely to survive this and even if she does, she will not look upon me as anything but an alien being, but it does."

Sabin was a little taken aback, more than a little. "She is human ..."

"Do not speak to me as if you do not want her yourself. I am not blind. I have seen the way you look at her. You would never have considered another before yourself before, risked your destruction to go after her. There is no logic in that. You would not have considered throwing yourself upon another to shield them with your body as you did her. Her life is not of more value than yours."

Sabin's lips tightened, but he did not bother to deny it. "There is only one Danielle," he said pointedly. "That alone makes her more valuable. She can not be replaced. It was logical to protect her."

On frowned. "I will not argue that, but ... do you not consider that each of us is unique in our way and of value?"

Sabin turned to study the others, pinpointing Danielle without any effort despite the bulky, awkward suit she now wore, despite the darkness that should have made it impossible. "We are one, On. Our progenitor had value or we would not exist and therefore we have value."

"I know the diktat as well as you, Sabin. That is not what I asked. I asked if *you* felt that you were of less importance because we exist. I know that we are the same and yet I also know that I do not perceive things in exactly the same way that you do."

Sabin stared at him for a long moment and finally shook his head. "That is a dangerous way to begin thinking, On."

"More dangerous than the way you have begun to think of Danielle?"

Sabin frowned. "You expressed similar thoughts. Does that not support the fact that we are the same?"

"It does not. Nick wants her and he is not one of us."

It took no more than that to give rise to the churning in Sabin's stomach that he was becoming far too familiar with. He shook it off. "I tire of this discussion. There is no purpose to it and it is dangerous besides, in many ways. We will summon Tande and Bork to help us right the machine. They will think it was mostly their strength. They are too arrogant to consider it anything else."

On surveyed the lot. "Where are the nasty grundts?"

"Reporting to the Mra, of course," Sabin said dryly, turning from On and striding purposefully toward the hotel.

The grundts emerged from the shadowy interior of the hotel room before the two of them reached it.

"Mra Kubo Kan is not convinced the explosion was not a display of power," Bork said abruptly.

"That does not surprise me," Sabin retorted. "I do not believe the humans knew anything about it, however."

Bork shrugged. "Not these. They were clearly panic stricken and could not have behaved so convincingly if they had had any warning."

Considering how panic stricken Bork and Tande had been he was amazed they had had the time to notice. "As I said."

"He will begin phase two immediately. Even if it is true that it was a power station and not a bomb or missile, they may have others that are also unattended and have become unstable. One must surmise, if that was the case with this one, then it might also happen with others and we do not want the planet irradiated either by design or accident.

"I had him triangulate our position and scan the radiation levels. They are higher than I would like, but not nearly as dangerous as we had anticipated. The heaviest cloud is moving to the north of us. We must continue south."

Sabin nodded. He'd expected as much, but it was still disturbing to find they had run out of time so quickly. "We have managed to right two of the vehicles. If you and Tande would assist, I believe On and I together can produce enough power to help right it. It is not entirely metal, but there is enough, I believe."

Bork didn't look the least bit pleased at the idea.

"If we cannot, we will forced to travel in only two. It is certain to be extremely uncomfortable for all."

Bork grinned at him abruptly. "For you and On, certainly. I would offer my lap for any of the Earth females—most particularly Danielle."

Bork was trying to provoke his temper—and he succeeded—but Sabin managed to refrain from showing it.

"Pig!" Tande said with venom.

Bork narrowed his eyes at her. "I am your superior!"

"And you are a pig," Tande snapped, stalking away.

Bork glared after her. "This is an Earth insult she has learned. What is this 'pig'?"

"A particularly nasty beast according to my data," On said blandly. "I am certain that I could pull up the data for you."

Bork snarled at him and strode after Tande, catching her arm and pulling her to a stop.

"Now they will fight and then they will fuck the rest of the night," On said irritably as he watched the pair.

Sabin nodded. "I believe that I will sleep in the vehicle. I cannot think it would be more uncomfortable than having to view, or listen to, their mating ritual."

Chapter Nine

Eventually Sabin managed to direct the grundts to the project he'd gone to solicit their help for. Truthfully, neither he nor On had ever attempted to use telekinesis to move so large an object but, theoretically, it wasn't limited by size or weight. It could be used to move any object of any size. Of course the main reason they didn't want to try it without the aid of the grundts was the fact that they had gone to great pains to convince the grundts that, even though their species had such abilities, they were very limited in scope. It was the sort of thing that unnerved the grundts and, like humans, they weren't inclined to look with favor on anything that unnerved them. They were more likely to strike it down if it was within their power.

It had not been as difficult when the grundts had first conquered their world, for that matter. They had been aware of their abilities for many generations, but those abilities hadn't progressed significantly throughout their evolution. It wasn't until they'd been forced by their reduced circumstances to begin replicating themselves rather than reproducing that they'd unlocked the key to strengthening them significantly enough that they became a potential weapon for them.

And now was certainly not the time to enlighten the grundts.

It was well he had insisted they needed to attempt it. By the time they'd succeeded in flipping the vehicle onto its wheels, the others had determined that only one of the other vehicles was still operational. They were still reduced to only two until or unless they could find another.

Everyone was exhausted by the time they'd done what they could with the vehicles. Although it had become a practice to congregate for a while after their evening meal no one was particularly in the mood for it. When Bork and Tande left the group at the vehicles and went back to the room they'd chosen, Joyce, Su-lynn, Mikhail, and Bud headed to the room they'd staked out for the night.

On and Sabin stood with the draes until Danielle and Nick had gone in to the last room. Ci and Sha turned off their communicators and looked at the two mahns expectantly.

After studying the door of the grundts' room for several moments, On and Sabin turned their communicators off and removed their helmets, as well.

"What is the status?" Ci asked.

"They will have begun phase two by now," Sabin responded. "Kubo Kan suspects the atomic blast was a show of power. He will try to secure the planet while they are still too weak to strike back."

Ci and Sha exchanged a look. "What of the humans? Have you made any progress at all toward discovering where their arsenal is housed?"

"No," Sabin responded reluctantly. "They have been deeply suspicious of our motives from the beginning. There was no way to broach the subject without making them more suspicious." He frowned. "It would have been far easier to win their confidence if the grundts had behaved as arrogantly as they can generally be counted

upon to behave, but perhaps the grundts have finally learned their lesson? Either that or Bork and Tande are far less disdainful of other species than grundts in general.”

Ci nodded. “I have been surprised, as well, but then they are a mated pair. It seems to lower their aggressive tendencies. We will have to hope for the best and approach them. It cannot be put off any longer if Kubo Kan has ordered phase two. Unless they have had some warning and drastically changed tactics, our people will be in the first wave, but Kubo Kan will expect them to act quickly. He will begin prepping to drop his main force and we will lose our window of opportunity to destroy their fleet.”

“We will find ourselves battling the humans,” Sabin said grimly. “The odds of success have been significantly reduced. I had not expected to find their communications so thoroughly disrupted—or that things had reached such a pass that they had begun to turn on one another. They will be far harder to persuade when they do not even trust their own people anymore. I do not like the odds of uniting them or of convincing them to join our movement. The outcome we hoped for would have been far more likely if they had still had communications and a military to command the cooperation of their people. As it stands, I am no longer certain we should chance it. If we fail here, there may not be a home to return to.”

“There has never been a better chance,” On said forcefully. “And we are not likely to have another in our lifetime. I, too, am dismayed that so little has gone according to the plan we had formulated, but we were always aware that there were too many factors that could not be calculated with any certainty. I believe that we can still trust that the grundts will act as we expected them to. They are creatures of habit and thus predictable. As we had expected, the moment they realized that the Earth was ripe for the plucking, they sent the bulk of their military here. If we attack here, successfully or not, they will send for reinforcements and that will reduce their strength so that our forces at home can overcome them.”

Ci nodded. “It is still a good plan. It can still be successful if we can find their atomic weapons and utilize them.”

“I do not like it,” Sha said slowly, “but if they can not be convinced to help, we may have to try to force them to give us the coordinates. If we can not destroy the grundts’ battleships in orbit before Kubo Kan deploys his army, we will be fighting a superior force on the ground and that will certainly end disastrously for all concerned—including the humans.”

“Sabin and I will approach them tonight,” On said. “You two will have to watch the grundts and make certain they are not listening in.”

Ci and Sha exchanged a look. “They will be preoccupied with one another,” Sha said dryly. “I would rather *not* watch them, but we will distract them if it should become necessary. If you hear me and my sister fighting loudly then that will be your signal that the grundts are prowling.”

* * * *

As little as Danielle had looked forward to dealing with sharing a bunk with Nick, she wasn’t happy about the newest disaster to befall them, even though it meant it wasn’t likely that she would have the problem she’d anticipated. Their suits alone were a powerful deterrent from any amorous ideas Nick might have had, but they also meant she wasn’t likely to get any sleep even if she could settle her nerves enough to try.

Nick, she discovered, wasn’t even inclined to talk. When she’d settled on the bed

beside him, he merely lay on his back and stared at the ceiling.

She would've welcomed that much, at the very least, anything to take her mind off of the thoughts churning in her head. She was in too much turmoil to come up with anything to say herself, though. Every thought she managed to capture was a question that Nick was no more likely to have an answer to than she did.

They were alone, at least for the moment. She knew she should take advantage of it and discuss their fears about their visitors, see if they could at least begin to formulate some plan, but she couldn't bring herself to do that after the confrontation they'd had in the shower. She *might* be able to direct Nick's mind to the big picture if she brought up the visitors, but she knew it was a lot more likely that Nick would address his personal issues and she just couldn't deal with that at the moment.

It angered her because it made her feel guilty and she knew she had no reason to feel that way. The intimacy she'd shared with Nick had ended months ago and, truth be told, hadn't even really qualified as an affair. It had been more like a hit and run.

She was actually grateful to him for spiking the possibility of a relationship, even a short term one. There was no getting around the fact that Nick was a powerfully attractive man. It wasn't that he was particularly handsome, although he was a long way from plain or ordinary, but he had enough charm for three men, and he'd proven, many times, that there weren't many women who could resist that charm no matter how level-headed they might ordinarily be. If he hadn't played fast and loose, she would've been hurt. She hadn't come away from the encounter completely unscathed as it was, but she hadn't been dragged so deeply under his spell that she'd been crushed, either.

Under the circumstances, he certainly had no claims on her—either physically or emotionally—and he had no right to think he did.

On and Sabin entered the room while she lay staring at the door, trying to will the uncomfortable, and completely undeserved, sense of guilt away. There was something about them, an almost palpable tension, that instantly set her nerves to jangling even before Sabin spoke.

Instead of moving to the other bed to claim it, the two moved around it and sat down on the edge facing her. Reaching up, they removed their helmets and set them aside.

"We must talk," Sabin said, his voice even and colder than she had heard it before.

Feeling Nick stir behind her, Danielle sat up, as well. "It isn't safe to take the helmets off," she said as her mind leapt immediately to the danger.

"It *is* safe. The radiation levels are within an acceptable range."

Danielle turned to look at Nick, but of course it was too dark to really see his expression. Apparently, he didn't doubt On knew what he was talking about. He pulled his helmet off. When he had, Sabin held his hand out for it.

Nick hesitated but handed it over and Danielle saw Sabin switch the radio off in the helmet. Mystified, becoming more uneasy by the moment, she took hers off and handed it over.

"Kubo Kan has ordered phase two of the conquest of your world," Sabin said without preamble. "He has interpreted the explosion of the nuclear power station as a show of power by your people."

Danielle was too stunned even to speak. The turmoil of before was as nothing

compared to what erupted at his calm statement. "But ... it wasn't like that! It *was* a nuclear power plant!"

"This Kubo Kan, I take it, is in charge of the invasion?" Nick growled.

"Yes. He is Mra—you would call this a general, I think, although it is a station of far more power among the grundts."

"And you're telling us this because you're peace-loving people, right?" Nick responded with heavy sarcasm.

Danielle shot a quick glance at him, but she was still virtually blind. "Can I open the curtains?"

The question seemed to take Sabin off guard. "We must speak quietly, but, yes. The grundts are ... occupied."

Getting to her feet, Danielle crossed the room and opened the curtains wide to let in as much light as possible.

"We *are* peace-loving people. The mahns are intellectuals, far more interested in the pursuit of knowledge than material things," Sabin said when she'd settled again. "But even a species not inclined toward violence must turn to it when it is the only way to protect themselves. And the grundts know no other way."

"What is it you want?"

Sabin seemed taken aback. Danielle was. "At least give them the benefit of a doubt, Nick, and listen what they have to say!"

Nick surged to his feet. "Because they told us we're about to be invaded and taken over by their damned fleet? They're *with* them, Danny! I wouldn't trust a one of them further than I could throw them!"

Danielle glared at him. "Then leave! I'll listen. I think I can make up my own mind!"

Nick glared back at her. "Don't do anything stupid that you'll regret just because you're hot for the aliens, baby!" he growled angrily.

It was almost like a physical slap and Danielle recoiled from it. "That's low, even coming from you! And I'll thank you not to paint me with your brush! *Some* of us can think with more than their dicks!"

"You're going to sit there and tell me you *don't* have the hots for Yen and Yang bot?"

"I'm not going to tell you a damned thing, Nick LaRoche! Because it's none of your damned business!"

"We do not have time for this!" Sabin interjected. "They will already have begun phase two—landing the first wave to contain and disarm. If you do not trust, then we can not prevent your world from falling just as every other world has fallen to their 'Confederation of Planets'. You will not be invited to become a part of it as equals. They will rule, just as they rule all of the other worlds they have conquered. You will be a subjugated people—those who survive—and few will.

"The main purpose of the first wave is to make certain the disease has been contained and will not spread further and also to secure all weapons that they can find and dismantle whatever remains of your defenses. It is primarily *our* people who will be sent in the first wave. It is not the habit of the grundts to risk the lives of their own when they can use others to take the first brunt of attack.

"It is clear your people will try to fight from the behavior of those we have

already met ... and they will lose. They are not trained soldiers and they have few weapons with which to defend themselves.”

Danielle stared at him in horror. “What can we do? You implied that we could stop it. What do you think only a handful of us can do?”

Sabin hesitated. “We must know where your nuclear weapons are.”

“There!” Nick snarled. “Didn’t I tell you? You think we’re stupid enough just to take you to them? We wouldn’t tell you if we knew, and we don’t.”

Danielle massaged her temples. “The grundts are going to hear you if you don’t lower your voice!”

“I would suggest that we remove to another place for this discussion,” Sabin said tightly, “but it would immediately alert the grundts if they discovered we had done so. The final conflict will be here—on Earth—whether you are willing to trust us enough to help or not. The plan was set in motion before we ever left our own part of the universe.

“Our people will find the nuclear weapons, whether you cooperate or not. It is only a matter of whether they find them in time to save your world. We are prepared to die if we must to save our own worlds.”

Nick stared at him hard for a moment and finally moved to sit on the bed. “So tell us the plan.”

“The ships that you saw when we arrived constitute the bulk of their forces,” On said. “When they are on conquest is the only time that they divide their forces and leave themselves vulnerable—to our forces. Your nuclear weapons are powerful enough to destroy their ships. What we do not know is if you have enough to do so, if they have the range to reach the ships, and if we can get to them in time to program them to strike while the ships are still beyond the Earth’s atmosphere. If that is the case, your world will not become irradiated beyond supporting life. If we cannot move before they send the next wave, then the bulk of their soldiers will be on the ground and we may not be able to reach your weapons to use them. Even if we should manage it, once their soldiers are on the ground, it is likely your world will be lost to you. They are well armed and well trained. You are not and you will not be able to defeat them—we would not be able to defeat them.

“We will do our utmost to destroy them with or without your help and whether or not we survive ... or you survive. We would prefer to live. We would prefer that your world not be destroyed to save ours, but we will do what we must.”

Nick said nothing when On had finished, frowning thoughtfully as he considered what he’d learned.

Danielle considered it, as well, but not nearly as long. “Did they do this to us?” she asked hoarsely. “Is that how it started?”

Sabin studied her pityingly. “If you are asking if they are ruthless enough to have done so—yes, they are. Did they? I do not know, but I was inducted into their service when they conquered our world. I have lived among them for many of your years. They are like ... the water beast that you call a shark. They are drawn by the death throes of a world. I am sorry. In all likelihood you called them, your people. By broadcasting your disaster, they came to know of it, and they always wait to pounce until their enemy is weak.”

Nick made a sound of disgust. “Like buzzards, you mean?”

Sabin thought it over and nodded. “Eaters of the dead ... and the weak. They

came to our world just as they have come to yours. Our world had become unstable—we are not certain if we brought it upon ourselves or if it was inevitable. All worlds go through many changes in their lives. Ours became inhospitable due to a drastic climate change and our civilization crumbled and our people died until they were few when once they had been many—much like your world. It was the same with the world of draes—except war had brought them to the brink of extinction—the same, so far as I know, with most of the worlds the grundts have conquered, although they are also not above preying upon more primitive worlds.”

Nick massaged his head. “I have to think about this. We have to talk to the others.”

“We do not have a great deal of time to ponder this,” Sabin cautioned. “You had little time when we arrived, and far less now.”

Nick glared at him. “I’m a ship’s captain, goddamn it! I can’t make the decision for everybody on this planet!”

His outburst brought about a prolonged silence. “We are aware that it is not an easy decision to make. We would have preferred to speak with your world’s leaders, but ... there is no time to search them out even if they are still alive,” Sabin said, not without sympathy.

Nick studied him thoughtfully a few minutes and finally nodded. “I’ll sleep on it. Tomorrow, I’ll speak to the others.”

On and Sabin exchanged a look and almost seemed to shrug. Standing, they removed their suits, folded them and set them aside, and then lay down on either side of the unclaimed bed.

Danielle had become pretty well accustomed to a lack of real privacy during her sojourn on the space station and she still felt a jolt when they undressed with a complete lack of concern and climbed into the same bed. Of course it was inarguable that the suits were miserably uncomfortable to sleep in, particularly the suits she and Nick had to wear ...

The distraction didn’t last more than a few moments before her mind returned to what they’d said. She was inclined to believe them and it terrified her, both because she could be wrong to believe them and because it might be the absolute truth. She found that, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t convince herself that they had a motive for lying.

Nick, she was sure, thought they wanted to know where the nuclear arsenal was so that they could disarm them. She could see why he suspected that, and yet she hadn’t seen anything at all about the two that made her feel as if they were devious—not in nature, at any rate. If what they’d said was true, though, they were part of a rebellion to destroy the grundts and they would’ve had to be devious, wouldn’t they? So they were certainly capable of it.

She fell asleep with such thoughts going around and around in her mind and woke some time later to a silence so dense that she could hear the even breathing of the men around her. Wincing, she turned onto her back and glanced at Nick. As dark it was, she couldn’t see his face well enough to be certain, but she thought he was asleep.

She stared at the ceiling, trying to will herself back to sleep, but the suit, even without the helmet, chafed her. Worse than that, her hair felt like straw from the soap she’d used to ‘decontaminate.’ Easing from the bed after a few minutes had passed and

misery outweighed the will to seek sleep again, she decided to check to see if there was any water left.

Closing the door behind her when she'd entered the bathroom, she felt her way to the shower, considered for a moment which handle supplied the hot water and turned it on. Cold spray hit her on the back of the head and she sucked in a sharp breath. Curbing the impulse to curse, she straightened, holding her hand under the water. The chill left it after a few moments but it barely warmed above tepid. She debated briefly whether she wanted to risk running out of water in the middle of a shampoo, or running out of even slightly warmed water, and finally took the plunge, deciding to simply bathe quickly.

There'd been tiny bottles of hotel shampoo and cream rinse on the lavatory, she remembered from before the blackout. Feeling around until her hand touched them, she grabbed the bottles and clambered a little awkwardly into the shower, wishing she'd at least left the door open for what little light she might have had from the window in the main room. The first bottle she opened was either hand lotion or cream rinse.

Great! She'd only found two bottles. Opening the other, she lathered her hair, scrubbed briefly, and rinsed. The door opened just as she was about to try to discover whether she had lotion or cream rinse.

Startled, she whirled to face the door, slipping. A large hand clamped around her arm, steadying her.

"This is a hazardous bathing device."

Danielle's heart rate steadied fractionally. "You startled me."

"I apologize. I thought ... you were distressed over what I had said earlier."

"I was ... am," Danielle responded shakily, wondering if that was really what had brought Sabin in. She didn't suppose, though, that he'd come to ogle her. It was so dark in the bathroom she couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

But he'd caught her when she'd nearly slipped down.

"Can you ... see?"

"Yes."

A jolt went through her. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

She couldn't tell by his tone of voice whether he was being completely honest or not. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"None."

She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "Did you need to use the bathroom? Because I'm almost done."

He hesitated. "I do not completely understand your customs," he said finally. "If it isn't acceptable to ask, I beg pardon. Did I offend?"

"Offend?" Danielle asked blankly. "When?"

"When I touched you."

Danielle stared at his shadowy form, searching her mind for anything he might have said or done that would've offended her, or made him think he had. It was actually a fairly short search despite the fact that she was more than a little disconcerted. "When you kissed me?"

He considered it. "Touched lips to lips—this is to kiss?"

A heat wave rolled over Danielle when his question summoned the memories she'd been trying so hard to blank from her mind. She swallowed with an effort. "I

kissed you. I was the one who offended.”

She heard him swallow. “You did not offend.”

“I didn’t?” Danielle asked a little doubtfully. “It seemed ... it isn’t one of your customs, is it?”

“No. We do not touch.”

“Like that.”

“At all.”

He was touching her now. He hadn’t released her arm. He shifted closer and Danielle felt her breath catch in her throat. For a handful of frantic heartbeats, she debated with herself. He might well be her enemy. He was certainly not of her kind, and yet she wasn’t repulsed that he wasn’t. Somehow, it seemed more thrilling—even though she knew it shouldn’t have.

She lifted a hand, slowly, reaching toward him. Her fingertips encountered a hard, molded surface, skin as smooth and silky as her own. Her palm cupped a male breast. She could feel his heart beating against her palm. “Do you want to kiss me again?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yes, Danny,” he murmured in a ragged voice, pressing against her palm as he moved closer.

She slid her hand up to his neck, lifting her face to him as she drew him to her and curled her other arm around his shoulders. His lips brushed hers and she sucked in a deep breath laced with his that sent her senses into riot. A wave of dizziness swept through her. She moved closer still, nibbling at his firm lips with her own. He held perfectly still while she explored his lips thoroughly, holding his breath.

She felt him tremble and eased away slightly. “Too much?”

He swallowed audibly. “More,” he murmured, brushing her lips again as he followed her retreat.

She traced the contours of his mouth with the tip of her tongue, sucking at first the upper lip and then the lower, coaxingly until he covered her mouth abruptly and kissed her deeply, piercing the cavern of her mouth with his own tongue. Skimming shaking hands along her arms, he curled his arms around her, lifting her and swinging her dripping form from the shower. She tightened her arms around him as his grip held her dangling above the floor, every inch of her body pressed tightly to his.

The wild excitement she’d felt when she’d kissed him before flooded through her, intensified by the feel of bare skin and muscle pressed tightly against her. The warmth of the blood rushing through her heated her skin despite the chill of the water. Her water slickened skin clung to his, slipped along it as he lowered her slowly until her feet touched the floor.

He lifted his mouth from hers, briefly, sucked in a harsh breath and covered her mouth again, sucking at her lips and tongue hungrily. It thrilled her, gave rise to heated imaginings of the two of them entwined, their bodies joined.

A flicker of doubt went through her, but she ignored it. *They* didn’t touch.

When he broke the kiss again to gasp for air, she pulled away, drawing him with her while she searched for the vanity with her hand. “Lift me up,” she whispered.

He hesitated and then grasped her waist and lifted her from the floor, settling her on the vanity. She tugged at him until he moved against her again. He caught her head between his hands, leaning down to kiss her once more. When he did, she settled her

hands on his chest and stroked them downward, lightly, caressingly, until she found what she wanted. He jerked in her hand when she closed her fingers around his cock, lifting his head and sucking in a sharp breath. She paused. "Did I hurt you?"

He seemed uncertain. "No," he said finally.

They didn't touch. Fresh doubts rose in her mind. Did he want her as she wanted him? Should she yield to her desire? Or was it wrong of her in too many ways to count?

And could they manage it? On and Nick were in the beds in the other room. The shower was out. She'd already slipped in it twice.

He settled the questions that rose to taunt her by curling his hand around hers where it rested around his cock. She stroked his engorged shaft, leaning forward to brush her cheeks and lips against his heaving chest, to nibble lightly at his skin. He shuddered, lifting a hand to the base of her skull and holding her to him.

She wasn't certain whether to be alarmed or excited by the hard tremors running through him, but the effect upon her was to increase the sense of need, of desperation that had been mounting from his first touch. She shifted, lifting her legs to wrap them around his waist, and dragged the head of his cock along her cleft until they made a connection.

He needed no further encouragement. The moment their bodies aligned, he shifted his grip to her buttocks and dragged her closer until the head of his cock was embedded inside of her. She released a sigh of pleasure, tightening her legs around him and easing rhythmically as he sawed back and forth experimentally, pressing a little deeper and then deeper still. She curled her arms around his shoulders, laying her cheek against his chest and relishing their deep connection when he'd sheathed himself inside of her.

He felt so good, she thought dizzily! Nothing that felt that divine could be wrong. It felt so right to have him inside of her she couldn't accept any possibility that it was wrong.

Lifting her head after a moment, she drew his head down to kiss him. He met her in a rush. There was a frenetic sense of desperation in the way he kissed her back that made her belly clench in reaction. He broke the kiss with a harsh breath. "Danny!" he groaned a little desperately.

His hips jerked, driving him more deeply, and she felt her entire body tense, shudder on the verge of climax. He made several stabbing attempts to achieve a workable connection and establish a rhythm. Apparently unsatisfied, he lifted her clear off the vanity and lowered her along the length of his shaft several times jerkily before he managed a smoother penetration. And yet Danielle had no complaints. Almost the moment he began to move inside of her, she felt herself rushing toward her climax. Within a few moments, she came shatteringly. Either her convulsing muscles set him off or he'd been as close to coming as she had. She'd barely peaked when he uttered a choked gasp and she felt him begin to jerk with his own release. His semen flooded her channel in a hot tide.

She dragged in a shaky breath when the spasms eased, clinging as tightly to him as her weak muscles would allow as he sat her on the vanity again. She felt his now flaccid cock slip halfway out, felt a flood of semen come with it and run along her cleft. She tensed fractionally, abruptly aware of the fact that they hadn't used protection, that it hadn't even crossed her mind. Then, she relaxed again.

He wasn't human even if she'd never felt a man who'd felt so wonderfully male.

He certainly wasn't carrying human sexual diseases—*any* sexual disease, because she was as sure as she could be that he'd never had sex before.

A mixture of emotions assailed her at the thoughts—*anxiety* and *pleasure* that he'd wanted her enough to ignore his own customs. *Anxiety* that he *had* and what it might mean to him, and a vast sense of disappointment as it occurred to her that there was no chance he might have impregnated her.

She recoiled from the thought the moment it struck her, released him, and looked up at him. He wasn't just a man of another race. He was a different species altogether, no matter how much he looked and felt like a man, no matter how much she'd enjoyed having sex with him.

The world was on the brink of destruction! *What* had she been thinking even to hope for a split second that he'd gotten her pregnant? Had she *lost* her mind?

He lifted a hand to her cheek, touching it so lightly she wasn't certain he'd even made contact and then he stepped away, turning almost like a blind man and striding from the room.

Dismay instantly assailed her. Had he seen something in her expression to make him think she was already regretting it?

How well *could* he see?

Or did it have nothing to do with her at all beyond the fact that she'd enticed him to do something completely unacceptable in his own culture?

Just how different could it be? His body was clearly made to reproduce the same way a human body was so it couldn't be the act itself that was such a culture shock. Was he revolted, now, to realize he'd had sex with a different species, one he might or not consider on the same level as she would having sex with some primitive tribesman?

They didn't touch—at all, he'd said.

She might've found that harder to believe, except that it was amply supported by remarks she'd overheard by the *grundts* that the *mahns* considered touching or being touched distasteful.

What did they do? Mate through a hole in the wall?

Chapter Ten

Sabin had no clear idea of a destination when he strode through the room where the others slept, no real sense of fleeing, but he didn't stop until he'd stepped outside the room. A cool blast of damp, predawn air hit him as he stepped outside, however, that made him check. He glanced around with a touch of surprise and then looked for some place to sit when he realized how weak and shaky he felt.

There was no place. Debris littered the raised walkway that joined the room, including broken glass—which was when he realized he was completely bare, head to foot.

It flickered through his mind to retreat back into the room and find his clothes and boots, but he dismissed the idea immediately.

He had been searching for peace from turmoil to think, he realized, but that could not be found when he brought chaos with him.

The strange weakness persisted. He focused on unraveling that curious circumstance as he settled his back against the wall of the hotel and crouched to rest on his haunches.

He intended to, at any rate. Once he had settled, he stared at nothing and analyzed nothing because his mind felt curiously blank.

On, he realized after a time, had followed him. He said nothing and Sabin did not acknowledge him for a time.

"I do not know myself," he muttered finally.

"Why do you say that?" On prompted after a few moments had passed and Sabin said nothing else.

He scrubbed his hands over his face and then lifted them to smooth his hair from hairline to the back of his skull, lacing his fingers together there and folding his arms around his head.

On frowned as Sabin bowed his head, staring down at his bare knees, feeling a flicker of concern that his attitude was of one folding in upon themselves.

"You were right. There was nothing rational or logical about my actions earlier. I am not certain myself whether I covered Danielle with my body to protect her, or because I wanted to be certain that I would not survive if she did not. Either way, there was no logic in it. I knew at once that it must be a nuclear explosion from the sheer magnitude of it. If it had been closer ..."

"But it was not."

"That changes nothing."

"It changes a very great deal," On retorted.

Sabin dropped his arms and flicked a glance at him. "Not what I did or the reason behind it."

On shrugged. "What do you believe that reason was?"

Sabin shook his head. "I do not know. I feel that I do not know myself anymore. I think things I have never thought before. I feel things I have never felt before. And I

do not understand any of it.”

On could not think of anything to say to that that Sabin was not certain to find objectionable. Instead, he settled his back along the wall, as well, and stared at nothing in particular as Sabin did. “How did it feel?” he asked after a while.

Sabin shuddered as memories instantly assailed him. He did not bother to ask what On was referring to. Clearly, On had been awake. There was no doubt in his mind that On knew what he had done. Perhaps On had even been awake and realized what he had intended to do when he had risen and followed Danielle. He was not certain that *he* had, at least not on a conscious level, but he had begun to realize that he had either changed a great deal on a subconscious level, or there were things about himself that he had simply never acknowledged that had always been there.

He was not certain which, and he was not certain it was something he wanted.

Yet, when that occurred to him, he felt an equal reluctance to be the same as he had once been. The way he felt when he was near Danielle, when he touched her and kissed her, was so powerful and chaotic that he was not certain from one instant to the next whether it was something he wanted to feel, or could deal with, and yet it was like a growing addiction. The more he felt, the more he wanted.

He had no reason to tell On how he had felt, or how he felt now, but he considered the question carefully because it was something he needed to know himself.

The fine tremors of weakness had finally left him and he was relieved but still confused about why he had felt it at all. He had been aware, on one level, that his heart rate had soared astronomically with his excitement—on a par with the sheer terror he had felt when he had realized the concussion from an atomic blast was roaring toward them. He supposed the weakness was an understandable side effect given the fact that his entire cardiovascular and respiratory system had skyrocketed so far above the norm for him that he was almost surprised he had not simply exploded from it.

And he still found it both perplexing and disturbing that it had taken no more than a touch from Danielle to produce such a debilitating effect on him—an effect that had begun powerfully and, unbelievably, had grown far more intense in a matter of only a few parsecs.

If he had not known better, he would wonder if Danielle had abilities of the mind as they did, but he realized that even considering it was nothing more than a search for an excuse for what he had done. “I have no words to describe it,” he said finally, but realized as soon as he had said it that he did. “A great upheaval. The feeling of having reached the very limit of endurance. And pleasure almost too intense to bear.”

All of it had been almost too intense to bear.

Which made it completely illogical that he wanted to do it again.

Almost as if On had read his mind, he frowned. “It is not something that you would care to experience again, then?”

Sabin surged to his feet abruptly as the feeling of desolation that had brought him outside to begin with flooded him again. “It does not matter whether I would or not. It is not likely to happen again. I am not even certain that I understand why she allowed ... why she ...” He ground to a halt. It was only partly because he discovered he could not recall any longer what he had done of his own volition and impulses and what she had urged him to do. There had been little thought or reason involved in it. For the first time in his life, he had acted completely upon instinct and desire and, because he had, he had

no memory of either. His recollection was made up entirely of how he had felt. All of that was so firmly imprinted on his mind it might have been burned upon it with a laser beam. Nothing else was clear.

He shook his head. "It does not matter. We have little time for such things now." He swallowed with an effort against an incomprehensible tightening in his throat. "I will only say that I have no regret. However this turns out, I will not regret that I chose to come and to sacrifice my life, if necessary, for the good of the many."

* * * *

As distressed as Danielle was when she realized that Sabin had left the room completely, she realized she was also relieved. She hadn't adequately considered the awkwardness of the situation.

No surprise since she hadn't considered it at all ... until afterward.

Brainless!

But then when had lust had anything to do with intelligence?

Still, she'd dreaded leaving the bathroom and climbing into bed with Nick while Sabin lay on the bed not much more than a foot away. The only thing that could've possibly made it worse was if they'd awakened the other two men.

And apparently they had—On. Thankfully, Nick was still dead to the world and had no idea that the woman he'd been working so hard to get to spread her legs had done it for the alien he obviously despised.

Of course, the chances were damned good that he'd figure it out. She wasn't placing a lot of faith on the possibility that either she or Sabin would be able to behave as if it hadn't happened.

Well, Sabin might be able to carry it off. She didn't think she could.

There was still a good chance that personal matters would be overlooked in light of the more important issue of surviving, but it hadn't been her experience that personal matters ever took a backseat. Danger and threat to life seemed to have the opposite effect of intensifying emotions.

Case in point—Nick.

He'd seemed content enough to flirt with her audaciously from time to time after their brief interlude—just enough to make certain he wasn't completely forgotten. She couldn't even flatter herself, though, that he'd ever tried to coax her into his bed again.

Not until the world had gone to hell, at any rate.

And suddenly she'd not only become infinitely desirable, but an object of his obsession.

Not flattering, not when the only other females available were more interested in each other—or alien.

It wasn't that she cared what Nick thought about it or how he felt about it. It wasn't any of his business what she did or who she did it with, but that didn't mean he'd be reasonable about it. She did *not* want to find herself in the middle of an unpleasant triangle. She was reasonably certain that Sabin wasn't likely to challenge Nick but just as certain that Nick wouldn't hesitate to challenge Sabin, and fighting among themselves wasn't going to help them survive.

Regardless, she would've been tempted to search for Sabin, to see if she could find out why he'd left like he had.

It was probably just as well that she'd discovered as soon as she returned to the

room that neither On nor Sabin were in their bed.

Sighing, not certain whether she was glad she'd done it or already regretting it, she pulled the sheets back, since Nick was lying on top of them, and covered herself with both the sheets and the coverlet. She could see even as she lay down again that it was getting close to morning. It was still dark out, but the sky had lightened enough to dim the stars. Resolutely, she closed her eyes and sought sleep. They had a hard enough day ahead of them without adding a lack of sleep to her troubles.

She surprised herself by actually falling asleep.

And woke with one arm draped heavily across her and a hand cupping one breast.

Playing with the nipple.

Disoriented, warmed by the exploration, she lay still, coming slowly awake and slowly warmer until she finally opened her eyes.

On and Sabin were standing on the other side of the room, fully clothed, staring directly at her.

Or rather the hand playing with her breast. For a handful of seconds her mind connected the stimulation with her encounter before with Sabin. His heated gaze warmed her more until his eyes abruptly shifted from her breast to her face, as if he realized she'd awakened.

His expression hardened and instantly dispelled the last dregs of sleep.

Danielle twisted her head abruptly and discovered, far from being asleep himself and unaware of what he was doing, Nick was propped on one arm, studying her. A slow grin curled his lips.

She'd forgotten just how damned sexy the man was with his rugged morning look—his blond hair curling wildly and a day's growth of beard. Glaring at him, she pushed his hand off of her breast, scrambling out of the bed so fast she nearly fell on the floor. Disentangling herself from the sheets, she glanced around for the suit she'd discarded the night before, snatched it up, and stomped into the bathroom to put it on.

She discovered the moment she turned the faucet on that the water pressure was way down, not much more than a trickle after her early morning shower. "Shit!" She hadn't considered she'd want water when she got up.

Because she was used to having water on demand!

Using it carefully, she washed her face, cleaned her teeth and used the toilet.

She'd noticed that neither Sabin nor On had been wearing their suits, which meant they believed themselves that the radiation wasn't a threat. She hated putting the suit on, that being the case, but she certainly wasn't going to stroll out to the SUVs naked and search for clothing!

When she'd dressed, she combed the snarls from her hair, gathered up the few toiletries she'd brought in when they'd arrived the evening before, and stalked out of the bathroom, ignoring all of the men.

Most of their group were already outside, sorting through the rubble of what had been carefully packed supplies. It was strewn across the parking lot now, much of it useless. Joining the pick up crew, she began gathering everything that still looked useable, discovering some of her personal belongings from time to time. Su-lynn and Joyce wandered closer after a few minutes.

"You're not wearing your helmet?"

Danielle glanced at her in surprise and then realized they obviously hadn't heard

that particular bit of news. "Sabin said they had a report from their ship that the radiation cloud passed north of us. The levels here are safe enough. And let's face it, if there'd been much, we would've gotten too much before we ever got in to the suits."

The two women exchanged questioning looks and then glanced around. Seeing that the grundts had also discarded their helmets and that neither On nor Sabin were even wearing their suits anymore, they took their helmets off, as well. "I guess you're right," Su-lynn agreed after glancing around again to make sure no one was close enough to overhear them. "We couldn't wear them last ... you know."

Danielle nodded, although the talk they'd had with On and Sabin the night before had pushed their own plans to the back of her mind. "Y'all come up with anything?"

Su-lynn released an irritated huff. "Nothing realistic—not that we got a hell of a lot of sleep—but pretty much nada."

"Sabin said they're starting phase two," Danielle said quietly.

Su-lynn sent her a startled look, but when she glanced up, she noticed one of the visitors had wandered near them. Instead of responding, she straightened and headed back to one of SUVs they were repacking. Since they were down to two vehicles, they'd rounded up some boxes and strapping from somewhere, Danielle saw, and were loading the supplies onto the roof to give them room inside for passengers. She followed Su-lynn after a few minutes with the things she'd gathered up herself.

Bud was on top of the vehicle.

"Sabin and On told us last night that we were right. The aliens didn't come to help. They came to invade, to take over," she told them, relaying as much as she dared of the conversation before she moved on again. Unfortunately, she'd slept longer than most of the rest of the group and they'd had the job of clean up well in hand before she'd come out. She passed on as much as she could in snatches, but she had the feeling that she hadn't managed to do much more than alarm the others.

Since the restaurant they'd used the night before was pretty much in shambles, they dug in to their own supplies for whatever they could find that was ready to eat and climbed into the vehicles. It was miserable for everyone except the two who managed the grab the front seats. Three of them squeezed into each of the backseats and two poor slobs ended up with the trunk space, which was roomy enough, but a hell of a long way from comfortable.

Danielle volunteered to sit in the back of the vehicle Nick commandeered. Su-lynn was stuffed into the back of the other.

Danielle took it as philosophically as she could. Her stature made it a little less uncomfortable for her, she thought, than for the taller members of the group—the draes were the tallest, the mahns not much behind them and the three men of their own group. That basically left her, Su-lynn, and Joyce as the primary trunk-sitters.

Aside from the discomfort—and the passengers in the rear seat weren't much better off since they were cramped together—it didn't seem to make much difference. The grundts, either by accident or design, made sure that one was in each of the vehicles, which precluded any chance of any kind of discussion either with their supposed co-conspirators or each other.

Danielle, who'd had the forethought to stuff the back with as many pillows as she could wrest from Su-lynn, curled up on the floor and drowsed when she discovered that trying to sit up in the back was more uncomfortable than lying down.

No one felt particularly talkative and most of the conversations that did arise revolved around the explosion the night before and speculation over whether or not they could expect more power plants to go up and what had caused the one that had blown up to do so. The most likely scenario, they decided, was that something had happened to the water supply used to cool the core. They weren't in an area that saw many quakes, so that was ruled out, and they knew it wasn't likely that there'd been anything near enough to the plant that might've blown up and set it off. Because of the danger the plants represented, those that had been built were erected in remote areas as far from population centers as possible.

When they'd exhausted that discussion, they began to speculate on just how many nuclear power plants there were and where they were. Unfortunately, they weren't marked on the maps so they had no way of knowing whether they were headed toward another one. It was a terrifying thought, but it was also another circumstance among a myriad of situations that they were powerless to do anything about. They worried over it for a while and finally moved to another subject when no one came up with any suggestions that would help them track the information down.

The most powerful research tool commonly available before the disaster—the internet—had begun to crumble sometime during the height of the outbreak when people had become sick or displaced and probably also because of power outages. Without people to man, and repair, the enormous server computer systems that connected the computers all over the world, the Web had disintegrated along with most of the rest of their technology. No one had openly acknowledged it, but, to all intents and purposes, mankind was within a heartbeat of becoming nothing more than cavemen again. There was nothing and no one to stop the regression. Their civilization was crumbling before their eyes.

There was no calculating how many homes and factories and businesses the nuclear power plant had supplied with power or how many other power plants had already shut down, but with them went the energy to power their technology and everything that required it was already lost and unlikely to be returned. For a time, the survivors would be able to scavenge food and shelter and fuel for heating and cooking, but that wasn't going to last. Without electricity, pumps wouldn't work, and without pumps there was no way to pull water or fuel from deep beneath the surface of the Earth.

Danielle felt a deep cold wash over her at the thoughts. They'd lost a lot of fuel when the SUVs had been flipped over. They only had enough water in bottles to last for a few days and about as much food. They had enough guns and ammunition to protect themselves from a small army, but almost nothing else.

And they wouldn't be facing a small army. There was no way to calculate how many soldiers the grundts had brought with them, but the ships that made up their fleet were enormous, big enough, she thought, to carry a small city—each. She'd seen around a half a dozen of them, drifting silently in space like alligators in a pond, camouflaged by the darkness surrounding them, barely visible. How many had she not seen?

Enough to conquer a world, and experienced in having done so many times over, if she believed what On and Sabin had told them.

She did believe them. It made sense, regardless of what Nick thought. She was willing to concede that his doubts had merit, but they had been working beside and living with the visitors for nearly two weeks. Alien or not, whether she completely understood

their cultures or not, there was nothing about either On or Sabin, or the draes, Ci and Sha that even hinted at a possibility that they were war-like or aggressive by nature. True, they were only a small representative group of their species, but they were with the grundts and they, personally, didn't seem like bullies. Logically, it followed that they'd come because they'd been brought, not because they wanted to come.

The grundts hadn't been overtly aggressive or abusive, and yet, to her mind, their superior demeanor alone spoke volumes. Almost from the first they had behaved as if they were completely in charge of the expedition—condescending to allow Nick to lead, but with the attitude that they *were* letting him.

Was she allowing prejudice to overrule reason, she wondered?

There was something about their appearance that seemed ... almost reptilian and she thought she'd distrusted them from the start more because of their appearance than anything they'd said or done in particular.

Was Nick right? Were Sabin and On trying to convince them that they were rebels fighting against the grundts just to get them to lead them to their most powerful weapons so that they could turn them over to the grundts and end any possibility that mankind could fight back? *Was* there any possibility that they could still prevent an invasion on their own, without help?

She didn't think so. She thought that was one reason she'd been so easily convinced, because she knew the missiles were virtually useless to them unless they could find someone who knew how to utilize the American defense system.

It seemed to her that they had very little to lose and a lot to gain by trusting that Sabin was telling the truth. Even if they were wrong, if they still had a defense that was manned and operational, wouldn't it still work out for the best to lead the visitors right to them? She didn't see that there was any other way to get a warning to them in time except to go directly to them.

A ham radio operator would be useful right about now, but although she knew there were still people who toyed with them as a sort of hobby, the odds of finding one seemed almost astronomical. Even if they miraculously stumbled upon one, the airwaves weren't safe. If the aliens had picked up the broadcasts about their outbreak, they could pick up a warning.

Morse code? What were the odds that the aliens couldn't pick it apart and figure it out within minutes?

An exclamation from the front of the vehicle broke into her thoughts and Danielle sat up to see what had happened.

"It isn't a plane," Nick said grimly.

"That is a medic ship," Tande announced from her position in the rear seat of the vehicle. "When we reported in last evening, Bork relayed the information about the survivors we had found and the nuclear explosion. The Mra must have decided that they should send help in case of need."

"So you didn't know anything about it and that's why you didn't mention it?" Nick asked, his voice threaded with both suppressed anger and suspicion.

"As you say—I did not know. Bork and I report, but we are merely soldiers. We are not privy to the decisions of those of rank unless they deign to inform us. Is it not this way with your own militia?"

"Actually, it is," Mikhail interjected before Nick could say anything else. "The

grunts never know anything about what's going on until the brass decides to let us in on it."

Tande turned to stare at him. "You say grundts?"

Mikhail reddened, looking supremely uncomfortable.

"He said grunts. That's what they call the men at the bottom of the chain—g-r-u-n-t-s. Because they do all the work," Nick said provokingly. "It's interesting—the similarity, isn't it?"

"We have a lot of words like that in our language," Danielle said quickly when she saw Tande's expression harden with anger. Obviously, she hadn't missed Nick's none too subtle insult. "It can be confusing when they're pronounced the same way, or almost the same, but they mean something entirely different."

Nick flicked her a sardonic look in the rearview mirror, but he didn't say anything else.

Apparently, although Danielle could see she was wrestling with her temper, Tande decided not to pursue that particular subject, but, just as clearly, she couldn't resist prodding Nick. "I expect we will see other ships, perhaps many, many more. Bork informed the Mra that all was in disorder here and that we had not been able to meet with any of the leaders ... because there did not appear to be any. Undoubtedly, the Mra decided to move forward with the plan to ... rescue the survivors and render aid."

"The survivors we ran into yesterday seemed to be doing fine and they didn't seem too keen about getting help."

Tande shrugged. "We did advise command that we were met with violent resistance. I am certain they will take appropriate steps to ensure the safety of all."

Danielle could see Nick's knuckles whiten as he gripped the steering wheel more tightly. She held her breath, but, despite his temper and his tendency to be reckless at times, Nick was no fool.

It made her feel ill that they'd led the aliens right to a group of survivors. Maybe they would've found them anyway, but that was beside the point.

It was worse that they'd spent so much time pouring over the map and trying to pinpoint others. Tande and Bork had been hanging over them the entire time, studying the map and, no doubt, taking mental notes. Of course it was all guess work on their side, but they'd done their best to point out the most likely places and if they'd been right ...

Apparently, Nick decided to take a chance on the possibility that Tande's memory wasn't perfect. He drove straight past their first turn off. Mikhail glanced at him, but kept his mouth shut.

Danielle waited tensely to see if Tande would say anything. She was about to relax when Tande asked Nick to pull over for a break.

Nick nodded without glancing back. "There's bound to be a rest area before long. We passed one a few miles back. I suppose you didn't need to go then?"

"As you say. I did not have a need then," she responded, smiling at Nick when he flicked a look at her in the mirror.

An expression of distaste crossed his features, but he focused on the road. As he'd predicted, they saw a rest area after a couple of miles. He slowed as they approached the off ramp and turned in. The vehicle behind them turned in, as well.

As relieved as Danielle was for an excuse to climb out of the box she'd been

forced to ride in, her heart was in her throat when everyone piled out of both vehicles. Tande glanced at Bork and headed toward the restrooms. Bork made an attempt to appear casual, but he wasn't far behind her and they didn't separate and head into the different bathrooms.

"That was ... not wise," Sabin said coolly.

Nick's blue eyes blazed with fury as he turned to look at him. "Exactly what are you talking about?"

Sabin surveyed him calmly. "They will know now that you are on to them and they will see no reason for pretense any longer. It would have been far better if you had stayed with the plan and turned when you should have."

Nick strode toward him furiously. "I'm not leading any more fucking aliens to any more people," he said through gritted teeth.

"You do not even know that it would have led to another group of survivors. You risked everything only because you thought it might lead to the deaths of a few when you should be thinking of needs of the many."

Nick looked for several moments as if he would strike Sabin. He controlled himself with an obvious effort. "Maybe you can't grasp this, but every single human being is important, every man, woman, and child. If we ignore the needs of an individual, we *are* ignoring the needs of all—or the many, as you put it."

"I do not agree, but it does not matter now. We will have to act." He glanced around and caught On's eye. Some silent communication passed between them and On nodded. Both men pushed through the group and strode briskly toward the restrooms.

Danielle watched them with a mixture of fear and shock. She glanced at Nick as it dawned on her that they intended to confront the grundts—alone and unarmed—and the grundts had taken their weapons with them. "Nick!" she gasped shakily.

He shot a glance at her, but he'd already drawn his weapon. Something flashed in his eyes and then he looked away and sprinted toward the building. Mikhail and Bud had drawn their weapons, but they looked undecided about whether to follow Nick or stay and guard the draes. Ci and Sha studied them a moment and lifted their arms in a gesture of surrender.

"Take their weapons!" Bud snapped, whirling before anyone could comply and rushing after Nick.

He skidded to a halt as Sabin and On appeared, each of them with the body of a grundt slung over their shoulder.

Danielle and Joyce wrenched the weapons from the holsters the draes had strapped to them at waist and thigh, although Danielle sent both of them an apologetic look. "Sorry. We can't take a chance."

Ci nodded. "We understand but, if we meant you any harm, we could have done so already."

Danielle swallowed with an effort as her heart leapt into her throat at the calm announcement. It was a little hard to believe. They were both extremely tall, but they were built like twigs.

Sabin, On, Bud, and Nick joined them again and Sabin and On dropped their burdens. "They were trying to contact command. I do not believe they succeeded, but even so they are under orders to report at the end of each day."

Danielle stared down at the grundts, feeling a little ill. "Are they ... dead?" she

asked a little weakly.

“They are not. We may have need of them.”

Danielle looked up at Sabin when he spoke. “What did you do to them?”

Sabin frowned and then almost seemed to shrug. “Interrupted the electrical impulses to the brain, rendering them unconscious. They should be bound.”

Mikhail and Bud volunteered to find what they needed and headed to the vehicles. An explosion in the distance halted them in their tracks. Everyone flinched and whirled in the direction the sound had come from. A black plume of smoke appeared in the distance.

“They’re attacking?” Danielle gasped.

“Perhaps,” Sabin responded grimly. “It is more likely that something else has blown up that was not attended. If it was an attack, it is most likely that there would have been more than one explosion.”

He’d hardly gotten the words out when there was a series of explosions and more plumes of smoke appeared above the trees.

“It could be a refinery,” Nick said after a few minutes passed and there wasn’t another explosion. “As much as I hate to agree with Sabin about anything, it doesn’t seem very logical to use so many bombs in such a concentrated area.”

Sabin looked at him curiously. “Why would you hate to agree with me if you believe what I have said is reasonable?”

“Because I just don’t fucking like you!” Nick growled.

Sabin frowned, but he didn’t comment.

“Ok,” Su-lynn said decisively when Mikhail and Bud returned and set to work tying up the grundts. “What the hell is going on?”

Chapter Eleven

Sabin very obligingly told them everything that he had told her and Nick the night before. A thoughtful, or horrified, silence held everyone for several minutes when he finished and then everyone began to talk at once. Glancing at On, Sabin turned to survey the grounds of the rest area and headed toward the nearest bench.

Ci and Sha looked surprised, but they followed the two off.

Everybody stopped talking when they discovered the visitors had simply walked off.

Nick stared at them, frowning in obvious displeasure.

"What the fuck?" Mikhail demanded in disbelief.

Danielle glanced at Nick before she responded. "Nick told him it was a decision that had to be made by all of us. I guess they just decided to let us talk it out."

"I don't trust any of the bastards," Nick growled. "For all we know this is just another fucking trick to convince us to play." He glanced down at the grundts at their feet and gave Bork a kick in the ribs. "What do you say, snake? Is this part of the plan?"

Bork glared at him furiously, struggling with his bindings and clearly cursing them behind the gag Mikhail had so thoughtfully fitted him with. Danielle wasn't certain whether it was in their own language or not, but she doubted they could've understood what he was saying, regardless, since Mikhail had used duct tape as a gag.

Seeing that both of the grundts were now conscious, Mikhail and Bud crouched to check their handiwork.

"I don't think we should have any kind discussion with these two listening," Joyce said shakily.

"We could always cut their throats and that wouldn't be a problem anymore," Bud said, grinning evilly at the grundts.

"Sabin said we might need them," Danielle objected.

Nick narrowed his eyes at her. His lips tightened. "I don't agree. Not that I don't see his point if they're supposed to report in, but what are the chances we could get them to cooperate?"

Danielle frowned. Her belly twisted at the thought of coldly executing them, but she ignored it with an effort and focused on what was important. "You're probably right, but I think we should err on the side of caution and keep them just in case we can use them. If they're too much trouble, you can always do it later."

She discovered that both Joyce and Su-lynn were looking at her strangely. "I don't believe you can talk about it so calmly!" Joyce exclaimed.

"This is *war*," Nick and Bud said almost at the same time.

"Did you miss something? They didn't come to help. They came to invade, to take over!" Nick added.

"I didn't miss anything!" Su-lynn snapped. "How do we know that the grundts are enemies and the others friends?"

"You don't believe that!" Danielle exclaimed, instantly defensive.

"She hasn't been screwing them," Nick growled. "Maybe she can think a little more clearly?"

If she hadn't been so stunned both by the accusation and his knowledge of what had happened between her and Sabin, Danielle thought she might have slapped him. She wanted to and she resented the way the others looked at her. She glared at him furiously for a moment, but held her tongue, realizing that he had, in one fell swoop, completely annihilated any possibility that any of the others would listen to her.

He reddened at the look on her face and looked away.

After a moment, feeling nauseated with the rage she was trying to hold inside, Danielle whirled and stalked off.

Nick followed her.

Mistake!

She whirled on him furiously when he caught her arm and dragged her to a halt. "Don't touch me!"

She discovered he was as furious as she was. He released her, but he didn't back off.

"Why?" he snarled. "Was it to get even with me for what I did?"

Danielle stared at him in disbelief. "You are so fucking full of yourself, Nick LaRoche! Do you imagine that every woman you fuck over and dump is just pining away and waiting for you to come back?"

He reddened but she couldn't tell if it was with anger or discomfort—a combination of both, she supposed.

"I thought there was still something between us," he said tightly. "Guess I was wrong."

"I'm sure it wouldn't be the first time! Still?" She uttered a disbelieving snort. "There was *never* anything between us but sex. You made that clear right off."

He dragged in a heavy breath. "This isn't the time to go over that," he said uncomfortably. "I'll admit I was a fucking idiot. Does that make you feel better?"

"Not really, but you're right. This isn't the time or the place. So let's just pretend we don't know each other like we've been doing, alright?"

He caught her arm to stop her when she would've stalked away. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Danielle felt her chin wobble. "Don't flatter yourself. I'm not that big of a pushover!"

"It didn't mean anything to you?"

"Don't go there, Nick! Just leave it alone and keep moving! You fucked me. I'm a big girl. I figured it out as soon as I saw you'd moved on to the next conquest. I don't suppose there's any point in lying about it. I thought, for about five seconds, that I wasn't just another notch on your bedpost, but I learn quickly. I thought I'd been pretty clear that I wasn't up for another round."

His expression hardened. "Yeah, you were, when you met up with robo boy in the bathroom last night. Was that what that was about? Putting me in my place?"

Danielle let out a huff. "You are *unbelievable*! The world doesn't revolve around you, Nick!"

"I'm not interested in the fucking world at the moment! I'm asking you, goddamn it! Is that why you fucked him?"

"No, it isn't!" Danielle snarled at him. "And how the hell would you know if I was fucking him or making love to him? You don't have a fucking clue what love is!"

They'd been so engrossed in their heated exchange neither of them had noticed that Sabin had followed them.

"Maybe *you* don't!" Nick said tightly just as Danielle glanced away from him and caught a glimpse of Sabin approaching them. "If you did, you would've figured out that *I* was making love to you!"

Danielle looked at him sharply, so stunned that it instantly pushed the fact that they were about to have an audience completely from her mind. Her heart seemed to trip over itself. Regret washed through her in a painful tide ... and then disbelief. "Don't even try to make me the villain here, Nick LaRoche!" she said shakily. "I gave you a shot at my heart and you blew me off. Now I'm the cold-hearted bitch that dumped you because you'd marked me and figured you'd come back when the notion struck you and pick up where you left off? What? I was supposed to *know* I was to wait until you decided you wanted me again? I was supposed to just wait until you made up your mind?"

Nick swallowed a little sickly. "I wasn't ready to settle down, goddamn it!"

"But now that the choices have been severely curtailed, I'm just what you wanted all the time, right?"

"It isn't like that, damn it! How the hell did we get back to what I did when this is about you and that cold blooded, alien bastard, anyway?"

Danielle poked him in the chest with her finger. "It isn't about Sabin because nothing that happens, or has happened, between us is any of your damned business!"

Nick's face hardened. Alerted by her straying gaze toward Sabin, he flicked a glance at him. "You decided to hedge your bets just in case they end up being the only game in town? I hate to say it, but you're wasting your time as far I can see. You don't mean a damned thing to any of them, baby!"

He turned and glared at Sabin. "You know what love is, robo boy?"

Sabin studied him coolly. "It is caring more for another than one cares for oneself."

Shaking his head in disgust, Nick stalked off.

Danielle felt her shoulders slump. She had to struggle with the urge to burst into tears. As ugly and hurtful as Nick's remarks had been, maybe because they were, she began to think he might have meant it when he'd told he cared and an awful sense of loss washed through her.

"He did not hurt you?"

Only to the depths of her soul. Danielle shook her head, trying to shake off the feeling that she'd made a terrible mistake. Had having sex with Sabin destroyed any possibility that she might have had something with Nick? Was she really sorry that she had lost that chance? Had she been lying to herself all this time? Trying to make herself believe that she'd never cared anything at all about him?

It angered her that he'd behaved the way he had and then turned all of the guilt over to her when he was the one who'd ruined any chances they might have had to build a relationship before it had more than gotten started.

He'd hinted that he'd run because he was afraid he *would* fall for her.

She thought that was, quite possibly, the worst thing he'd said—held out a juicy

carrot and then snatched it away again.

"No. He knows what happened between us and he's angry," she said finally.

"I deduced that," Sabin responded dryly.

Danielle felt an upsurge of completely inappropriate laughter. She wasn't certain if it was hysteria inspired or not, but she couldn't help the watery chuckle that escaped. Sabin looked displeased.

"I do not understand you much of the time."

"I know. Don't feel badly about it. Men never understand women."

He frowned, but he looked oddly relieved. "This is true?"

Danielle swallowed with an effort. The emotion she needed to release clogged her throat and created a painful knot. "Yes, it's true."

"If I was a man ... I am not certain what the customary response would be to this situation," he said finally. "Should I challenge Nick and 'kick his ass'?"

Danielle bit her lip. "I don't think that would be a good idea. What do you feel like doing?"

He considered it. "Kissing you."

She didn't think that was a very good idea either. "Why don't you?"

He looked disconcerted and mildly alarmed, but he moved closer. He lifted a hand and touched her cheek lightly. "He seems to care for you, Danny. He will shun you for touching an alien."

Danielle closed her eyes and swallowed a little sickly. "And you don't ... care?"

"I do care about you. This is why I said that. I do not want you to feel regret. I am not the same as you and I will never be. If I live, it will be my duty to return to my own home world. You understand this?"

Danielle nodded, fighting the tears that threatened to escape her determination to beat them back. "There are some times when it's better to act than to talk, you know," she whispered, reaching up to curl her arms around his shoulders and pull him closer.

His eyes gleamed with something she couldn't entirely grasp, but then he distracted her. Without a hint of awkwardness or reluctance or doubt, he tilted his head and lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her as he had each time before, as if there was no moment but the present one, no tomorrow, no world gone mad around them.

She was so dizzy and filled with heated desire when he lifted his head, she felt weak all over—blind and deaf to everything but him.

Which was probably why she didn't hear Nick or even realize he was there until a split second before his fist connected with Sabin's jaw. The blow wrenched Sabin from her arms. She stumbled sideways and caught herself.

There was a rumbling of stampeding feet that Danielle realized, dimly, was the others racing toward them. Mikhail and Bud each grabbed one of Nick's arms before he could follow the first punch with another. Sabin, examining his jaw with his hand, studied the writhing group with surprise, but anger slowly tightened the muscles of his face as he watched Nick sling Bud off and punch him and then turn on Mikhail. Striding forward decisively, Sabin touched Nick's neck and Nick dropped to the ground as if he'd been suddenly switched off.

Everyone froze, gaped down at Nick on the ground, and then lifted their heads to stare at Sabin with open-mouthed shock.

"Oh my god!" Danielle exclaimed. "Sabin! What did you do?"

Sabin lifted his brows at her. "He is merely unconscious ... as the grundts were. He will sustain no lasting damage," he said coolly.

Mikhail glared at him. "Well, that was a fucking underhanded thing to do!"

Sabin looked at him in surprise. "Why?"

"Because it was, damn it!" Bud snapped.

Sabin studied the accusing faces around him. "I do not understand. He was behaving violently and erratically. It would not have been at all logical to allow him to harm others."

"He didn't want to harm anybody but you!" Bud snapped.

"He did. He struck me, and then he struck you, and he would have struck Mikhail."

Danielle released a shaky breath. "He doesn't understand our customs," she said. "You know he doesn't."

"Well, it's time he started!" Bud snapped. "That's considered a low blow, and that's cowardly! We were holding him! He didn't even get the chance to defend himself!"

Sabin's lips tightened with anger. "Even on my world that is considered an insult," he said coldly.

"He hit Sabin without any warning at all!" Danielle snapped angrily. "You don't consider a sucker punch low?"

"Not when *he* was messing with *his* woman!" Mikhail shot back at her. "He should've expected it. I would've beat the shit out of him myself!"

"I'm *not* Nick's woman!" Danielle said angrily.

"Maybe you don't think so, but Nick thinks so and you damned well know it!"

Danielle gaped at Bud speechlessly. After a moment, she glanced at Joyce and Su-lynn to see what they thought of that outrageous claim. Su-lynn shrugged. "Men! They can always be counted on to revert to cavemen at the least provocation. If you guys are finished, we have other things to discuss."

Linking arms, Joyce and Su-lynn headed back to the picnic table where they'd been discussing what to do and who to believe.

Nick stirred. A moment later, his eyes popped open. For a moment he stared blankly at the faces turned down at him, then his face reddened with fury and he surged to his feet. Neither Mikhail nor Bud made any attempt to interfere that time. They stepped back.

"You fucking bastard!" Nick snarled, slinging an arm back to punch Sabin again before Danielle could grab him.

Sabin slammed his fist into Nick's face. Nick staggered back several steps and lifted a hand to his nose, which Sabin had rearranged and was now gushing blood. Uttering a snarl of rage, he launched himself at Sabin again.

Danielle sucked in her breath on a scream and danced out of the way, looking around frantically for someone to stop the fight. On strode toward her and relief surged inside of her. "Stop him—them! Before somebody gets hurt!"

On studied her and looked at the others. "I believe both are already injured."

"*Worse*, damn it!"

He narrowed his eyes as he watched Nick and Sabin trading blows a few feet away. "I do not believe that it is possible for them to inflict irreparable damage on one

another in this manner. Sabin has conceded that he will not use his abilities against Nick. He will follow your customs.”

Danielle gaped at him. “But ... he doesn’t know how to fight like we do ... does he? You said you were intellectual. You don’t fight, right?”

“No, but Sabin will learn. He is stronger than Nick.”

“Says you!” Bud snapped. “I’ll lay you any odds you like that Nick will kick his ass.”

On looked at him curiously. “He is beating Sabin in the face and stomach. He does not seem interested in kicking his ass.”

“Figure of speech,” Mikhail said. “You game for a bet?”

On frowned, obviously trying to figure out what they talking about. After a few moments, his brow cleared, but he still looked puzzled. “This is wagering, correct?”

“Yep. Our boy beats the hell out of yours, you hand over whatever you bet. Your boy wins, we hand over whatever we bet.”

“I don’t believe you’re having this conversation!” Danielle exclaimed. “Y’all aren’t going to do anything but watch?”

“Nope. It’ll make Nick feel better.”

“How will this make Nick feel better?” On asked curiously. “He is injured. Will that not make him feel worse?”

“Only if he gets his ass kicked.”

Danielle watched for a moment more and finally turned and left. She was shaking all over when she reached the table where Joyce and Su-lynn were sitting and dropped heavily down on one of the benches.

“Who’s winning?” Joyce asked.

“Nobody,” Danielle said, still struggling to keep from bursting into tears.

“They’re bonding,” Su-lynn offered. “It’s a man thing. You wouldn’t understand.”

Danielle placed her hands on the cold concrete top of the table, studying them instead of watching Nick and Sabin pounding on one another. Thankfully, On, Mikhail, and Bud joined them a few moments later. When she glanced anxiously toward the combatants, she saw that Sabin and Nick were stalking toward the restrooms, apparently to wash up. Both of them were spattered with blood, but she couldn’t see their faces.

“Stalemate,” Bud announced with a twinge of disgust.

Danielle glared at him.

He shrugged. “In case anybody’s interested.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Well! I hope everybody’s happy now that we’ve treated the visitors to a display of savagery!”

“I’m happy! How about you, Mikhail? You happy?”

Danielle punched Bud on the shoulder with her fist. “Ow! You going savage, too?”

Danielle ground her teeth and decided to ignore him—pointedly.

“Hey! We needed to clear the air.”

Su-lynn shrugged at Mikhail’s comment. “He’s probably right. Maybe it’ll ease some of the tension and we can focus?”

On looked confused when everyone turned and looked at him. Even as it apparently dawned on him that he was an intruder and he began to rise, Mikhail dropped

a hand to his shoulder. "You might as well stay."

Looking surprised, On settled again.

"We may as well wait until Nick and Sabin get back. Nick's the only one that knows where the command center is as far as I know," Su-lynn said, looking at Bud questioningly.

Bud shrugged. "I have a hunch, but I'm not a hundred percent sure."

Danielle didn't believe him, but since she only had a vague idea herself, she conceded that she could be wrong. The real question wasn't the location, in any case, and she knew it as well as the other's did. A lot people, both in the military, and outside of it, had at least some idea of where some of the weapons were if not all of them. Protocol was the real question.

Like the location of the weapons, she had a vague idea of what that protocol was but, in this case, 'some idea' or 'close' wasn't good enough.

"Nick was an 'insider' until a few years ago when his career suddenly took a mysterious nosedive—and he ended up as a shuttle captain," Su-lynn said. "I don't know if the decision was his, or if it was made for him, but I do know he was in to some deeply covert operations before that and in tight with a lot of the movers and shakers in D.C."

"Knowing Nick, I wouldn't be surprised to discover he pissed off somebody really important, but I don't know that for a fact, and I wouldn't be any more surprised to learn he'd simply kissed it off."

"It's just the sort of thing he *would* do, prove he could do whatever he set his mind to, or wanted to do—if he just gave a shit—and then turn his back on it as soon as he was satisfied he'd made his point."

"Regardless, I'm sure he's far more 'in the know' than any of the rest of us, far more likely to know where to go and what to do to gain control of the missiles. And, if doesn't know himself, he'll know who to look for and where to look."

Danielle couldn't say she was surprised to hear any of it. Nick had never been inclined to chitchat about his background, and she certainly hadn't been with him long enough to pick up much, but even she'd noticed that he gave off 'spook' vibes and/or special forces.

She thought, in all likelihood, that that was part of Nick's absolutely magnetic personality where women were concerned.

What surprised her was that Su-lynn seemed to know so much about him.

True, they'd seemed to be friends, but it hadn't occurred to her that they were long standing friends.

The two men returned a few minutes later. Nick was still carrying a wet paper towel and dabbing at his swollen nose. Sabin had a swollen nose, as well—and one eye was swollen nearly shut. Several knots had risen on his face—forehead, chin, and cheeks. Nick didn't look like he'd come off much better.

They both looked like pure hell and Danielle didn't know whether she most wanted to cry or find someplace to hide from her embarrassment over the fact that she seemed to have set it off.

She resented any of the others thinking that when she hadn't done anything wrong, but she knew they did, and it made her feel guilty on top of everything else, warranted or not.

Nick settled beside her and glared at Sabin, who'd taken a seat on the opposite

side of the table. "Are we going to do this or what?"

Surprise flickered in Sabin's eyes. He looked at On questioningly. On shrugged. "We do not have much time," Sabin pointed out finally.

"You keep saying that, but you haven't really explained," Nick said tightly.

"You saw one of the landers. That is the first wave. It means that our allies will have landed by now. There will be many grundts among them, but it is the habit of the grundts to send our people to die first, so we will outnumber them. If they meet little resistance, they will focus on finding weapons and confiscating them and also on disposing of the dead and destroying anything else that might constitute a contamination risk. They will burn the cities—any place of any size where the disease might still lurk—in order to be certain there is not another outbreak.

"If they meet resistance, they will fight until the people lay down their arms and then they will round them up and keep them imprisoned until they decide whether they can be trusted to submit or if it will be better to simply destroy them.

"You have little time. Your people."

Everyone stared at him hard for several moments. Nick broke the silence. "So you're saying your allies—your friends—whatever the fuck you want to call them—are going to march through and kill everybody that resists? Is that about the size of it?"

Sabin's face was hard as he met Nick's gaze. "They will do what they must to protect their own people," he said with cold emphasis. "Our own worlds are at stake, not just yours."

"But you're willing to take a chance on destroying the grundts' fleet, knowing your own worlds are at stake?"

"We are willing to die to save our worlds. We are not willing to throw our lives away, and risk the lives of all we know, by acting now when that is all that it would accomplish. We must destroy the fleet or they will turn back once we have openly rebelled and they will attack our people with malice and vengeance. Our worlds are virtually defenseless. The grundts have seen to that.

"Our plan is to use your weapons to destroy the fleet. It will cripple the grundts, but they will call for the others to come and destroy this world. Which means we must destroy the fleet and then prepare to destroy the others when they come. That is the only way. We must draw them here."

"The Mra will become impatient if it seems to take too long for the first wave to secure this world and he will order phase three. If that happens, the bulk of their army will be on the ground and we will be forced to fight our war across your planet. Many more will die, yours and ours. And, if they see any possibility that they might lose, then they will use the weapons on the ships to make this a wasteland where nothing can live.

"It is critical that we strike first—before they begin to realize our plans—and destroy the fleet. It is our only chance—yours and ours."

Nick studied him hard for a moment and finally turned to look at his fellow crewmembers. "This isn't my decision. I don't even like the fact that it's been dropped in our hands when, by rights, everybody ought to get a vote on something this important, but it is what it is. So, consider yourselves representatives of everyone else on Earth, and try to decide how you think they would vote if they had a chance. What do you say?"

Put that way, Danielle thought she rather preferred the idea of running as far away as she could get as fast as she could get there. She tamped down the sense of suffocation,

however, allowing an image of her sons into her mind, picturing them as she'd last seen them. It didn't help the sense of suffocation. Tears rose to clog her throat, as well.

What would be their best chance, she wondered? If they were still alive, and she wasn't *ever* going to accept that they weren't, what decision would be best for them?

It seemed significant that the people the grundts had conquered before them hated them so much they were willing to risk everything to be free of them.

Did she want that for her boys? Would they be better off as slaves of the grundts, and with some chance of a life of some kind?

They wouldn't have the world that *should* have been theirs, regardless.

"I vote we go with the rebels," Bud said before anyone else could speak up. "I guess I've always been a rebel at heart. Then again, it doesn't seem to me like we've got a lot of choices here."

Danielle could've kissed him. She'd been afraid to speak for fear everyone would instantly turn against the idea because they knew she'd been intimate with Sabin.

"I trust the mahns," Su-lynn said. "I never trusted the damned grundts. I vote with Bud."

"Me, too," Joyce said and then glared at everyone that glanced at her. "Just because I agree with Su-lynn doesn't mean I didn't make up my own mind or think about it!"

Mikhail glanced at Nick uncomfortably. "Sorry. I agree with the others. We've got a mess here already. We don't want them bastards moving in on us. If they'd come to help like they said, that would be a different matter, but I never believed that. It was just too damned convenient that they didn't show up until the pandemic had pretty well played out and it was too late to do a damned thing to help."

Nick shrugged. "That's why I never believed it myself. You do know we're taking a chance that there is no rebellion at all? That the mahns and the draes are just playing us to give them the locations? We could end up handing over the only thing we really have that they're worried about."

Joyce looked horrified, but none of the others seemed the least surprised.

"I considered that," Bud said, eyeing Nick so steadily that Danielle realized abruptly that he had no intention of taking that chance. If the draes or the mahns showed any indication of trying to disarm the weapons instead of using them ...

She felt oddly relieved. She didn't believe that Sabin and the others were lying, but she still felt better that they wouldn't be taking that risk on blind faith. If the decision hadn't affected anyone besides her, she would've been willing to take the chance. She wasn't as willing to risk her sons' lives.

She nodded. "I vote yes."

Nick sent her a sardonic look that made her want to slap him, but he merely nodded. "It's unanimous, then."

He got up decisively. "What are we going to do with our captives?"

Sabin and On had risen with the others. "We will keep them. We will need them to report to the Mra."

Nick eyed him curiously. "I can't wait to see how you're going to manage that."

Chapter Twelve

The lights flickered as Danielle stepped quietly into the corridor and eased her door closed. She froze, lifting her gaze to the fixtures, wondering if the lights were about to go out. When they didn't flicker again, she let out the breath she'd been holding and headed down the corridor to the room she knew Sabin had taken.

Civilization wasn't even gone yet and already they were missing it.

In some ways, it was hard to accept that it really was going to vanish, that everything they'd always known and taken for granted was just going to fall apart or stop and there wouldn't be any store to go to buy another, no repair people to call out.

In others, it wasn't nearly as hard to believe. The evidence, after all, was pretty difficult to ignore.

They'd had to head north when they'd decided on their plan to work with the rebels. Fortunately, according the latest data from the Mertosin, the radioactive cloud had been swept further east and north from their position by a weather front.

No one really wanted to take the grundts, but she also hadn't been able to bring herself to agree with Nick and Bud that they should just slit their throats. She imagined the time would come when she would as readily shout for their blood, or kill one herself, but she hadn't quite reached that stage yet. She was still squeamish. She still felt like it was uncivilized and she couldn't overcome her reluctance to ignore the laws of the land, even though there were no laws, no law makers, no law enforcers.

Ci and Sha had settled the matter, surprisingly.

"They are garbage. I would not be against dragging them behind the vehicle except that that would make them truly useless to us. I also do not care to ride inside with them and smell their stench, beyond the fact that the vehicles are too crowded now. We should tie them to the top with the baggage," Ci said.

Even Sabin and On had been stunned by that suggestion.

Bud had recovered first, grinning from ear to ear. "A woman after my own heart!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "I'm sure we can arrange things. The problem will be getting their fat asses up here."

"That is not a problem," Sha said. Grabbing Tande, she lifted the bound female up with no sign of effort, despite the fact that Tande immediately began to wiggle and fight.

Bud stared at her with a glazed look for several moments and finally scrambled on top of the SUV and secured Tande to the roof of the car.

Danielle was pretty horrified about it ... at first, but there was no arguing the fact that it was a great deal more comfortable for her and Su-lynn and, truthfully, they were bound and they were going to stay that. It wasn't as if there was anywhere that would have been comfortable for any of them. The explosion had shattered several of the windows and the grundts weren't anymore at the mercy of the elements on top of the car than they would've been inside—not much, anyway.

In any case, she'd had other things on her mind since the discussion—her sons.

As heartbroken as she'd been that she hadn't found them right off, the enclave of survivors they'd found had still buoyed her hopes of finding them. There were others, as Nick had pointed out. She'd been struggling ever since to hold on that, to hold on to an image of them being cared for in one of the refugee camps and safe, even if they weren't with her, just waiting for her to find them.

Sabin's grim outline of what they could expect to happen next—what was already happening—had again shattered her illusions of finding them safe. She didn't believe they would be harmed. Sabin had said that the troops would only protect themselves, not attack. She wanted assurances from the one man in her life she trusted to be honest with her.

If he couldn't assure her ... she didn't know what she'd do, but she knew she couldn't leave the area if they were in imminent danger from the aliens landing everywhere. She would have to go back even if she had to go back alone.

When she reached Sabin's door, she tapped lightly on the panel, hoping she wouldn't alert any of the others. Right or wrong, after Nick's nasty insinuations, she felt that the others were judging her just as he was. She shouldn't have cared, she didn't suppose. It wasn't any of their business what she did, and yet, it was the undercurrents of betrayal that bothered her. If things went badly, even though everyone had agreed to do this, if it transpired that they were wrong and the mahns were in league with the grundts, then she would be the one they despised. She would be the traitor to her own kind.

She would feel like a traitor and hate herself so there was no doubt in her mind that they would, too.

She didn't believe it was a trick or that Sabin and On meant them any harm.

But she wasn't absolutely, beyond any doubt, certain and the thread of doubt was why she was sneaking to Sabin's room instead of simply asking him in front of the others.

Because she was prepared to beg if necessary and promise anything they wanted if he'd just make sure her boys were alright.

Thankfully, Sabin answered the door almost at once. He stared at her in surprise for a moment, glanced up and down the hall, and then stepped back to allow her to enter.

She turned to him anxiously even before he shut the door. "I have to know ... you said the ground forces wouldn't attack unless they attacked—the survivors. I understand that, but ... they wouldn't hurt the children, right?"

Something flickered in his eyes. She wasn't certain what it was, but it didn't reassure her. "Danny ..."

She grabbed the front of his tunic. "No, wait! I know there is a possibility that they could get hurt if there's a battle. I understand that. I'm just asking ... I mean, the children won't be a threat to them, so they wouldn't do anything to them, would they?"

He stared down at her face. "They would not. Even the grundts would not." He shrugged. "The planet itself has value, riches they will want to plunder, but workers have value, too."

As horrifying as it was to think of them being used as slave labor, it was still far better than the alternative, and it wouldn't come to that if they were successful. She felt as if a weight had fallen off of her, tearfully grateful that he had dispelled her worst fears. "You wouldn't say that just to make me feel better?"

He lifted a hand to smooth her hair and then, abruptly, gathered her in his arms

against his length. "I think that I would say or do whatever you wanted me to," he murmured. "But this is the truth. They will not try to harm the children. Not because they have tender hearts but because they have a use for them, but their motives are of no consequence so long as the end results are the same."

Releasing a deep sigh, Danielle slipped her arms around him to hug herself more tightly to him. Tears of relief stung her eyes and nose, but she sniffed them away.

On was right. He was a fast learner, she thought contentedly. He'd learned the value of a hug for comfort.

"Do you have an image of them?"

Danielle pulled away to look up at him, her heart abruptly hammering with hopefulness. "Yes?" she said breathlessly.

He looked torn, but he came to a decision abruptly. "Bring it to me. It may be dangerous to attempt it, but I will try to get it to our people so that they can search for them for you."

Danielle was so thrilled she couldn't breathe for a moment. Abruptly, she leapt at him, catching his face between her palms and standing on her tiptoes to kiss him all over his face. "You wonderful, wonderful man! I lov ..."

He touched his finger to her lips, his expression abruptly stern and unyielding. "Do not! As much as it pleases me to see your joy, I will deeply regret that I even offered if this only leads to more heartache for you. You must ... promise me that you will not expect too much, because I cannot promise you that they will be found. You know this, Danny."

Danielle swallowed with an effort when she realized what he was saying. She nodded, sucking on her lower lip while she struggled to speak. "I know, but you'll try?"

"I will succeed in getting the image to those I trust. They will try, but that it is all they can do—try."

She nodded, struggling now between hope and despair. "I'll go get it."

He shook his head when she pulled away. "Tomorrow. It can not be done before then and ... you should not come here."

"Why not?"

His expression was stern. "You know why not, Danny ... and I know why you should not."

Danielle was suddenly ashamed that she'd sneaked to his room like a thief, shamed that she'd allowed the prejudice of the others to influence her. "I don't care if they know," she said abruptly.

She could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't believe her.

"I care."

She swallowed with an effort. "Don't push me away."

He closed his eyes. "I do not think I can." When he opened his eyes to look at her again there was a deep sadness in his eyes. "I am asking you to protect yourself because it is what I want for you. There are many things that I could protect you from, but I can not protect you from their thoughts ... or their words."

"They trust you ... just as I do."

He smiled faintly. "You know that is not true. They do not trust me. They do not accept me. It is never far from their mind that I am as alien as the others, regardless of the way I look. I have seen the ugly side of your people many times—and the beauty

only once.” He touched her face lightly with his long fingers. “I do not want to bring harm to this one beautiful thing. Stay with your own kind. They will forgive the one trespass if you allow it to fade from their mind. They will not forgive you for choosing another over your own kind.”

Hurt cut so deeply through her that she could barely catch her breath and Danielle knew abruptly that he mattered far too much to give him up so easily. “Will it fade from your mind?”

He swallowed audibly. “No.”

“You’ll leave when this is over?”

“I must. I am a leader among my people ... and there are so few of them left. Each loss is another blow that takes them closer to extinction.”

She understood—in a way, and yet, as long as he lived, where ever he lived, he was still a part of his own people and they hadn’t really lost him. She didn’t try to argue with him, however. She didn’t want to argue. Lifting a hand, she stroked it almost absently along his chest, smoothing the fabric over the muscles, enjoying the feel of them as they rippled against her palm in reaction and the acceleration of his heart beat. “We don’t have much time, then, do we? Do you really want to waste it?”

“You are a stubborn woman, Danny. Too stubborn for your own good,” he said gruffly. “Does it mean nothing to you that I would never forgive myself if I brought harm to you, only for desires I have no right even to feel?”

She leaned closer and rubbed her cheek against his chest. “It means a lot to me. Why do think you don’t have the right to feel alive? Isn’t it enough to be willing to risk your life for them? Don’t you deserve something for yourself?”

“I cannot think when you do that,” he said a little hoarsely. “But I am certain that was not logical.”

Danielle smiled faintly. “Which proves you can’t think straight. It was perfectly logical.”

She tipped her head up so that she could nibble at his throat.

“Danny!”

“Mmm?”

“You will regret this.”

“I don’t think so. I’m convinced I’d regret it if I didn’t.”

“I will regret it,” Sabin said hoarsely.

That gave her pause. She lifted her head to look at him. “Will you?”

“Yes ... no,” he muttered almost angrily, gripping a fistful of hair to bring her mouth to his and covering it with the desperation of a man tormented past bearing.

Sabin was a hard man to convince, Danielle thought whimsically, but the end results were worth the battle. He fought his urges to the bitter end, and, when the wall collapsed, the ride was rough, but she’d never experienced anything more wildly exciting.

A veritable wall of heat hit her the instant his mouth clamped hungrily over hers. Desire shot through her like flash fire, scorching every nerve ending and bringing them to vibrant life. The sheer desperation in his touch snatched her into an inferno of intoxicating, knee-weakening need, sending her body spiraling upwards from want toward culmination at a heady rate of speed. The feel of his mouth on hers, the caress of his tongue along hers, was only surpassed in sheer glory by the taste of him that flooded

her, the scent of him that she breathed. This, she thought dreamily, was worth fighting for. *He* was worth fighting for.

She rubbed against him, but there were far too many clothes between them to pacify her need to touch him, to feel his skin coasting against hers. The pressure only teased, made her ache more. She became more purposeful in her caresses, searching for a way beneath the clothing he wore. The design defeated her, or her own limited mental capacity of the moment. She plucked at it instead to direct his mind to her needs.

The message didn't seem to penetrate but the fabric parted with an odd grating noise. She felt the faint tremors running through him when she found skin at last and soaked up the warmth and texture of it with her palm and fingertips. The tremors grew harder, became hard shaking. His heart rate became faster, the beat harder.

He broke from her lips, gasping hoarsely and stared down at her with a sort of baffled desperation. Lifting her abruptly, he carried her to his bed and climbed awkwardly onto the surface with her, trying to keep from fully breaking contact. When he discovered that wasn't possible, he leaned away and tore the offending garment from his shoulders and arms. Leaving it hanging at his waist, he moved shaking hands over her, plucking at the clothing she wore and finally sat back on his heels, glaring down at her.

"I cannot fathom how you got in to this or how I am to get you out," he said almost petulantly.

The comment sparked a flicker of amusement despite her own frustration.

She sat up and dragged the zipper of her one piece suit to the bottom, rolling her shoulders to disentangle them and reached behind her back to unfasten her bra, dropping it beside her when it fell free. Sabin had, somehow, come to rest straddling her when they'd gotten into the bed, and she discovered she could only peel the suit to her hips.

She fell back against the pillows, leaving the rest in his hands.

Drawn by the bounce of her breasts, his gaze fastened on them and his entire attention seemed to instantly focus there. He lightly traced one of the blue lines that led to the tip, studying the nipple with apparent fascination as it came erect. Settling lower, he traced the other veins he could see beneath the skin. "Your skin is translucent here."

Danielle couldn't decide whether he found that fact appealing or repulsive. She swallowed with difficulty. "It's ugly?"

He flicked a look at her face. "There is no part of you that does not appeal to my senses. It is ... fascinating."

He seemed more fascinated by the reaction of her nipples to his touch. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensations wafting through her from his touch, although it was almost more torture than pleasure. "Kiss me there," she whispered in demand when she couldn't stand the teasing anymore.

He leaned closer at once, covering one tip with his mouth and sucking on it experimentally. She clasped her arms around his head. "More."

She couldn't have asked for more enthusiasm. His uncertainty vanished. He kissed first one and then the other with the same verve that he kissed her lips, pulling and suckling on them until she thought she'd lose her mind. She sank deeper and deeper into a heated, hazy cloud of fevered need until she couldn't be still, until she felt her body reach a surfeit of pleasure and explode in a minor eruption that startled her. Disappointment warred with pleasure.

She'd never come just from having her breasts suckled.

It had been woefully tame, though, and the disappointment from that and the certainty that she was done stole from the enjoyment of it.

She dismissed it when he lifted his head to look at her. He shifted upward then, framing her head with his elbows and seeking her lips. To her pleased surprise, she felt herself soaring upward toward the pinnacle again as if she hadn't already come. The tension gathered in her belly again, stronger than before.

Eager now to feel him inside of her, she began shoving at his clothing. He flinched when she found his erection and closed her fingers around the heated length of him, stroking him. His cock jerked in her hand threateningly.

He broke the kiss, panting hoarsely. Grasping his clothes, he shoved at them for a moment and finally rolled off of her when he discovered he couldn't rid himself of them while on his knees. He'd already straddled her again when he realized the bottom half of her own suit was still around her hips. Grabbing them and the panties she wore beneath, he jerked them downward past her knees and fell over her, trying to skewer her with his cock while her legs were still bound together at the ankles.

Nearly as desperate as he was by that time, she managed to free one ankle and spread her thighs wide enough to accommodate his hips. A gasp of sheer delight escaped at her as he dragged his cock along her cleft, found the mouth of her sex, and pushed inside of her.

It was an uphill battle from there. She was so excited that, despite the moisture her body had produced, the muscles along her channel were spasming, locked against his incursion. She heard him grinding his teeth together as he pushed into her and was expelled over and over, gaining just enough ground each time to frustrate both of them, until her natural lubrication finally overcame the resistance of her flesh and he sank fully inside of her.

He stilled, panting for breath. As he gathered himself and lifted away from her for leverage, Danielle caught a glimpse of On standing not three feet from them, watching. It startled her, sent a shockwave through her that caught Sabin's attention. He tensed, his head whipping in that direction, but, contrary to what she'd expected, the tension left him the moment he recognized his brother.

He met her gaze for a suspended moment in time and then lowered his mouth to hers.

For a handful of heartbeats, she resisted the lure and then crumbled beneath his assault to her senses as he began to pump inside of her, kissing her at the same time. The stroke of his tongue in one mouth and his cock in the other left no room for awareness of anything else. She curled her arms around him, lifting her hips to meet each thrust as fire blazed in her belly and each stroke brought her closer to culmination.

And still she felt On's heated gaze like a caress when Sabin broke the kiss at last and began driving into her with the hard, quick desperation of his own rising needs. With a strenuous effort, she managed to lift her eyelids a fraction and peered toward On. She hadn't imagined it. On's face was taut, his eyes blazing, his entire demeanor eloquent of the need thundering through him.

She dragged her gaze from him and discovered the same look on Sabin's face and came, shatteringly. Sabin began to shake all over, hard quakes, as if he felt her convulsions of bliss himself. Then, abruptly, he shuddered to a halt, gasping hoarsely,

jerking all over each time his cock spasmed with his own climax.

His locked arms shook harder with weakness when his body had finally ceased to spasm in release. He allowed his head to drop forward, panting for breath. His long black hair fell around them like a curtain.

Danielle studied him, pleased with the absence of tension that told her he'd thoroughly expended himself and yet doubtful, uncertain about what to make of On's appearance and Sabin's complete lack of animosity about it.

In point of fact, it was more as if he welcomed his brother watching.

Knowing he was watching, wanted her, had made her come, shooting her toward climax with breathtaking speed.

She wasn't sure she wanted to accept that, but she couldn't convince herself that it had interfered with her pleasure in any way.

Dragging in a last, deep, shuddering breath, Sabin seemed to gather himself and launched himself toward the empty space on the bed beside her, landing heavily, bonelessly, as if the action had taken the last of his strength and he had none left to break his fall.

She twisted her head to look at him and discovered he was staring at the ceiling.

"I feel as if there is hardly enough strength left in my body to pump my heart and lungs," he murmured thickly.

Danielle felt her lips curl in spite of the doubts still flickering through her mind. "What else do you feel?"

He thought it over. "Peace," he said finally. "A tremendous urge to sleep."

She chuckled.

Pulling in a sustaining breath, Sabin rolled toward her, folding one arm to prop his head on and placing his other hand on her belly, his fingers splayed as if he was comparing the measurements, or maybe the contrast between the darker skin of his hand and the pale white of her belly? "What brought you?" he asked, flicking a glance at On.

Danielle turned to look at On herself. He was frowning, she saw.

"I do not recall," he muttered after a moment. Dark color rose in his face the moment he said it.

The uneasy suspicion that it had somehow been arranged between them vanished and amusement took its place.

"It could not have been anything consequence, then."

On blinked, but he couldn't seem to drag his gaze from her body. His frown deepened. "It seemed so at the time," he said absently, his voice strained.

"Yet, you have now forgotten?"

On dragged his gaze from the damp hair at the apex of her thighs and stared at Sabin a little blankly. "I have misplaced it," he qualified. "I am certain it will come to me again."

Danielle glanced at Sabin questioningly. He seemed almost to be teasing On. Surprise flickered through her when she saw the gleam of amusement in his eyes and realized he was. The only thing she wasn't certain of was whether it was malicious in nature or not. She didn't think so, but she never would've expected him to tease On at all. They seemed almost inseparable in some ways. In others—well, they weren't demonstrative by any stretch of the imagination. If there was affection, it was hard to detect.

"He and I are one," he said, almost as if in answer to the question in her eyes. It seemed an odd statement and only gave rise to more questions.

"He wants you. He wants to feel the things that I felt."

Danielle felt heat rise in her cheeks. She didn't actually need Sabin to tell her that. She frowned. "I don't understand what you're suggesting."

"You do. You just do not understand what I am saying."

Feeling a flicker of both anger and dawning hurt, Danielle pushed herself upward on her elbows. "You want me to have sex with him?"

"You misunderstand," he said tiredly.

"I misunderstand," On said tightly.

Sabin lay back, staring at the ceiling. "When you watched me with Danielle, did you feel as if you were watching yourself?"

On flicked a lingering gaze over Danielle. "Yes," he said a little hoarsely.

Danielle felt her belly tighten, abruptly realizing what he was saying, what he'd meant all the time. "You want to watch?"

"Not if it is not acceptable to you. Not if it will make you believe that I do not care for you. I did not understand why Nick felt the need to batter me. I am still not certain that I understand that completely. You shared yourself with him before and I do not feel that what you shared with me was diminished in any way. Was it?"

Danielle swallowed, more uncomfortable with the turn of the conversation. She hadn't tried to make it a secret that she'd been with Nick before, but she hadn't tried to advertise it either. "No!"

"It would be diminished in some way if you gave to On what you gave to me?"

Danielle stared at him. "You wouldn't feel like it was?"

"I do not know. I have always thought of On and I and ... I have always thought of us as one. I do not think so, but then I have never experienced anything like this. All of it is new to me."

Danielle glanced at On, feeling warmth stir in her at the suggestion. She still wasn't sure she liked the idea of experimenting ... and yet it was tempting.

More than that. She wasn't immune to the desire in On's eyes.

But would Sabin discover that it did matter? Would it destroy something fragile and precious?

Or was it not there at all? Did it only exist in her?

She lifted her gaze to On, studying his face, feeling the sheer force of his need like a physical assault. Questions and doubts still churned in her mind, but she reached for him, grasping his hand.

He swallowed audibly. Doubt flickered in his own eyes. He resisted her tug at his hand until she released it. Almost trance-like, the moment she let go of his hand, he began pulling at his clothes in almost frantic haste to shed them.

A flicker of alarm went through Danielle, but heat flashed through her at his eagerness, as well.

Sabin's hand tightened on her. He shifted over, carrying her with him. She thought at first that it was gesture of possessiveness until she realized he'd moved over to give On room to join them.

The thought didn't seem to enter On's mind. She wasn't certain he even noticed. He settled on the bed facing her, a look in his eyes almost of wonder as he skimmed his

gaze over her. She didn't know if he was uncertain of where to start or worried that she would slap him if he touched her, but he merely stared at her so long that impatience got the better of her.

She shifted closer, until her bare body was pressed lightly against his. He jumped as if he'd had fire touch him and nearly fell off the edge of the bed.

Amusement fisted in her chest, but something else far warmer and more tender, as well. She caught his hand, guiding it to her waist and curled her fingers around the back of his neck, urging him closer. He tilted his head to match his mouth to hers as she lifted her face to him.

For several moments, he merely pressed his lips to hers. Then he sucked in a shuddering breath, opened his mouth over hers and her entire being erupted into chaotic pleasure. Surprise threaded the pandemonium as it flickered through her mind that it might almost have been Sabin, that there was barely a hair's difference between their taste and scent.

Then he banished the thought, swept the familiarity from her mind.

As fierce as his need was, as fervent as his exploration of her mouth, he didn't seem to be content merely to explore it endlessly as Sabin did. Beyond that, each touch almost seemed to carry a current of heat. He broke the kiss within moments and detoured to her throat, the side of her neck, her ear.

She wasn't certain if she was dizzy with his movements alone or with the barrage of sensations hitting her from different directions that drove her heat index through the roof.

He returned to her mouth, kissed her until the need for air drove him away and charted a path downward, lingering at her breasts just long enough to leave her gasping for breath before he moved lower. He worked his way all the way down to her belly, nipping and sucking at her skin until she felt as if she'd rolled in a bed of stinging ants, and then wound his way upward again.

It was all the foreplay she could handle for the moment. She coiled one leg around his hips, using it to banish the space between their genitals. Instantly distracted, he rolled, curling his hips and plowing his cock along the lips of her sex. Danielle reached between them a little frantically, grasped his engorged member and thrust it home, bucking to try to sheathe his length the moment they made a positive connection.

He uttered a choked grunt as her muscles clenched around his cock, as if he'd been punched in the belly but, far from deterring him, he seemed to lose focus in everything beyond driving as deeply inside of her as he could get.

He hit bottom and kept pushing for several moments, as if it took that long to reach his brain that he could go no further. Danielle couldn't find it within her to object. His grinding motions against her clit almost set her off. She locked her legs around him, squeezing her eyes tightly closed and rotating her hips and then arched her head back as her body began to quake with release, uttering a low groan.

On shuttered, pumping his hips despite her frantic grip on him with her legs. It drove her climax to new heights, rocking her so hard she was still spasming when he reached his own peak and bathed her channel with his hot seed.

Gasping for breath, she allowed her arms and legs to drop limply to the bed. On collapsed weakly on top of her, forcing the air from her lungs. She panted for breath, reluctant to shove him off despite the effort it took to breathe.

She wasn't certain if gratitude inspired it or if it was an urge to sooth, but she lifted a hand to stroke his damp hair and back when she felt the tremors still running through him.

She paused when it suddenly occurred to her that Sabin was watching the two of them, opening her eyes to look at him worriedly.

He met her gaze steadily. There was a light in his eyes that she couldn't fathom. His gaze flicked to On. "You are crushing her with your weight."

On moved with obvious effort. His eyes were clouded with confusion for a moment, but he stirred. Struggling, he pushed himself up and rolled off of her.

When he did, Sabin pulled her against his length and curled around her with his arm and leg. She nestled her head on his shoulder, trying to decide whether his attitude denoted possessiveness or protectiveness.

"You enjoyed watching?" she asked tentatively.

His deep sigh could've meant anything. "Yes. Not as much as I enjoy joining my body with yours, but, yes."

She still felt discomfort rise inside of her, confusion, anxiety, but she was so spent from climaxing she felt sleep dragging her down. She was drifting toward oblivion when she felt On move close behind her, felt his still slightly ragged breath brush her hair, his long legs glide along hers. She stirred, opening her eyes, and saw that Sabin and On were looking at each other. After a moment, Sabin settled his head on the pillow beside hers again and removed his leg from her hips. On moved closer, draped his arm across her below Sabin's arm and relaxed.

Chapter Thirteen

Danielle woke still sandwiched between On and Sabin, opening her eyes with an effort. It roused her further when she discovered that the arms and legs laying across her belonged to both of them and that they were each propped on one elbow like mirrored bookends, studying her.

A slow smile curled On's lips and lit his eyes.

Sabin's expression lightened, as well, though his lips didn't quite form a smile. He leaned down to rub his cheek and nose against hers, dragging in a deep breath, as if to capture her scent. "You must go back before the others awaken," he murmured.

Danielle frowned at him quizzically when he lifted his head to study her face.

"You did not put that from my mind," he said, amusement threading his voice.

She didn't know whether to be offended or not. She supposed it could be argued that she'd tried, but she hadn't—not consciously, she didn't think. She found herself smiling at him anyway.

Closing her eyes, she stretched luxuriously, enjoying the pull of her muscles. "I like it where I am," she murmured. She felt a cock rise against either thigh and smiled inwardly with satisfaction.

"I like it where you are, as well," On said, "but Sabin is right. It will be best for you."

She looked at him questioningly, wondering how he knew what Sabin had said earlier. She was certain he hadn't been in the room then. Then again, they'd been awake when she woke. She supposed, a little irritably, that they'd been comparing notes.

It stirred warmth inside of her when images of those 'notes' flooded her mind. She stroked a hand along Sabin's chest. "We could always experiment a little more before I go back. I'm not sure I got that just right. Practice makes perfect."

Heat blazed in his eyes and then he startled her by chuckling at her quip. Pleasure flooded her at the sound. He rarely even smiled. She'd never heard him laugh.

It seemed to startled him, too. His face flushed with color. "You are a corrupter of the mind, Danny," he said, amusement still threading his voice, but then he sobered. "Do not tempt me to ignore your welfare for my want of you. I have little enough willpower as it is. Nothing would please me more than to stay just as we are and explore human sexually to its fullest."

She didn't argue further, knowing he was right. When On climbed from the bed and held out his hand to help her up, she took it and allowed him to pull her from the bed. Instead of releasing her hand, he gave it another tug that brought her stumbling against him. Curling a hand along her neck, he bent to kiss her lingeringly before he released her.

She realized it was just the reassurance she'd needed that they meant it when they'd said it was to protect her. They watched her dress with interest that warmed her more. Sabin got up from the bed and strode to the door as she headed toward it. Opening it, he checked the hallway in both directions and stepped back to allow her to leave when

he saw no one.

She paused in the opening, looking up at him a little hopefully. Either he read it in her eyes or he felt the same impulse. He leaned down to kiss her briefly. "Bring the image to me when we meet for breakfast, but don't give it to me when the others are watching."

Nodding, Danielle glanced down the hallway again and then ran lightly down it on tiptoe until she got to her own room. Sabin had closed the door when she glanced back. Disappointed, she opened her own door and went in.

Nick was propped in her bed, fully clothed right down to his boots, his legs crossed at the ankles, his arms crossed behind his head. Danielle stopped as if she'd hit a wall. Guilt sent hectic color to her cheeks.

"Out for an early morning stroll?"

His voice dripped with sarcasm, but she thought most of her anger arose from the fact that he'd scared her. "Did you forget which room was yours?" she asked tightly, heading for the bathroom to wash up.

She wasn't actually conscious of the guilty impulse to make sure she washed the scent of On and Sabin off before Nick got close enough to smell sex on her. But she was far more interested in getting in the bathroom and slamming the door than she was in confronting Nick.

He launched himself from the bed and reached her before she could slam and lock the door, however, catching it with the heel of his hand even as it swung to. The door halted and popped back toward her too fast for her to catch it. She stared at him wide eyed. "What do you want, Nick?"

"You," he said grimly. "Did *you* forget which room was yours?"

"Don't start, Nick! I'm tired. I don't feel like arguing with you."

He caught her and dragged her against his chest, dipping his head and dragging in a deep breath.

Her heart slammed against her chest wall and began to hammer madly when he lifted his head. "Don't tell me. Let me guess why you're so goddamned tired."

"You're scaring me, Nick," she whispered a little hoarsely, resolutely refusing to acknowledge the fact that it was more than fear making her feel weak all over.

"*I* scare you?" he growled. "*They* don't scare you, baby? They scare the fucking hell out of me. Have you seen what they can do?"

"They wouldn't hurt me," she said, dismayed when she heard a thread of doubt in her own voice.

"You don't know what they would do. You don't even know what they're capable of. What they've allowed us to see ought to be enough to worry you. They don't seem to *feel* any damned thing! They're as emotionless as a pair of robots. Doesn't that bother you, at all?"

She wanted to cover her ears in a childish attempt to block out what he was saying, but he had her arms pinned by his grip on her. "They aren't emotionless, whatever it seems like to you. They feel ... everything we feel," she said angrily, tempted to inform him that the passion of their caresses surpassed anything she'd ever experienced before.

Except with Nick. She'd thought losing that was the worst part of losing him, the passion he'd shown her. She'd thought she would never meet anyone again that could do

that to her.

And now Nick was going to spoil this for her, too, she thought with a mixture of resentment and dismay.

He studied her face in baffled anger for a long moment and then caught her completely unaware, swooping down to cover her mouth in a kiss that was almost punishing. Shock rolled over her, annihilating any possibility of shoring her defenses. She struggled to catch her mind up to speed, but the affect he had on her senses was way ahead of her logical thought process.

Despair flickered through her, excuses for the heat that rose to his command.

She'd been aroused when she'd wakened with On and Sabin, stirred by their morning kisses.

It wasn't Nick. It was sheer animal lust and she was vulnerable because she'd been aroused to heightened senses even before he'd kissed her.

It didn't seem to matter. She responded, and it was all the encouragement he needed.

She wasn't certain he'd needed that or that he was even aware of it. It seemed the moment he'd begun to kiss her, madness had seized him. He stripped her, nipping and plucking at her skin. Shoving the straps of her bra down her arms, he suckled at her breasts until she thought she would black out, jerking her suit down her hips and shoving his hand into her panties when her suit hit the floor.

His eyes were blazing with a combination of anger and desire when he lifted his head. "Wet for me? Or a little gift from them?"

She gaped at him, too disoriented to fully grasp what he'd said.

Uttering a growl, he lifted her off her feet and slammed her against the wall. She lifted her legs to lock them around his waist instinctively to keep from falling. He took instant advantage, pressing his rock hard erection against her cleft.

"Nick!" she gasped in distress.

He covered her mouth, silencing her. She felt him tug at her panties, felt the seam on one side part. He fumbled with his pants and then she felt the pressure of his cock head against the mouth of her sex. She didn't attempt to evade his quest for dominance. She wasn't completely certain that that was what it was, although she'd begun to suspect that was part of it.

He paused, heaving for breath when he'd pushed inside of her, his eyes squeezed tightly. "Danny," he murmured raggedly, pressing his forehead to hers. "My god, I've missed you so much, baby." He kissed her eyelids, rubbing his cheek along hers and seeking her lips. "Don't hate me, baby. I don't think I could stand it."

Danielle swallowed with an effort, torn by so many conflicting emotions she couldn't grasp any of them, but she found herself responding with forgiveness to the plea in his voice, offering him her lips.

He kissed her deeply but tore free in the next moment, sucking in a sharp breath as her kegels clenched around his cock. "Aw, shit!" he ground out, stroking shakily in and out of her several times before he began to drive into her in a desperate rhythm that sent her flying out of control.

She gasped as the first convulsion hit her, groaned as it threatened to shake her apart. He gritted his teeth, almost slamming into her as his climax hit him, shuddering until she thought he would drop her and tightened her arms and legs around him.

The tension left him abruptly. He leaned heavily against her, huffing for breath, shaking with the effort to hold both of them upright. Finally, he eased away and allowed her to slip her feet to the floor.

Still braced against the wall, he held her and finally drew away enough to kiss her again.

Feeling very much like she'd just weathered a hurricane, Danielle opened her eyes to look at him when he pulled away and she sensed he was studying her. His eyes were still tumultuous. "You're mine," he growled. "You were always mine. Stay away from the fucking aliens!"

Danielle felt her jaw drop in stunned disbelief.

He sent her a wary glance when he'd adjusted his clothes—which he was still wearing!

Danielle glanced around the bathroom for something to hit him with. "You ... asshole!" she growled, surging toward the vanity and grabbing up the heaviest thing that came to hand—a palm-sized bottle of shampoo—and hurling it at him.

He deflected it with his forearm. "Goddamn it, Baby! What the hell's got in to you, throwing things? You didn't used pull shit like that!"

"Don't you 'baby' me, Nick LaRoche! Get out!"

"Fine!" he growled. "If you're still determined to play hard to get because I pissed you off ..."

Danielle grabbed the top of the toilet. When she'd finally managed to drag the heavy thing off, however, Nick had disappeared. She stomped her foot furiously when she heard the door of the bedroom slam behind him.

She dropped the piece of porcelain back on the toilet so hard it cracked in half.

Glaring at it, she went back over everything that had just happened, growing more and more angry—mostly with herself. Finally, she moved to the shower and turned it on.

Even the pleasure of a hot bath when it had become a luxury she couldn't count on anymore failed to sooth her. She finally sat in the floor of the shower and wept until she'd exhausted her tears.

She felt like hell warmed over when she got out.

No surprise since she'd spent most of her night—and morning—screwing instead of sleeping!

She was still struggling with her anger when she reached the restaurant downstairs where they'd eaten before. Fortunately, it wasn't her turn for kitchen duty. Sabin and On, who were already there, divided a glance between her and Nick and then focused on their food.

Guilt washed over her, but she resolutely dismissed it. She wasn't going down that road! She wasn't emotionally stable enough to defend herself and the three of them, she was abruptly certain, were taking full advantage of it. If they'd set out to deprive her of what little sanity she had left, they couldn't have done a better job of it.

She did her best to choke down as much food as possible, ever aware that they never knew when or if they'd get another meal, hot or otherwise, but it could've been cardboard.

Nick had upset her so much she'd forgotten to grab the photo of her with Cary and Kyle. She had it with her. She had everything she had left to her name with her, but it upset her more that the incident had pushed anything that important from her mind,

even briefly.

She knelt beside the SUV to take it out and slip it into her pocket before she handed her duffle to Nick to secure it to the roof with the grundt and the rest of their baggage.

Bork didn't look like he was weathering the trip all that well, but he still had enough spunk to glare at her. Nick noticed. With hardly a pause, he punched the grundt in the jaw. "You look at her like that again," he growled, "and I'll cut your damned throat. I don't give a fuck if they think you're useful or not."

Danielle overheard the exchange despite the fact that Nick had muttered the quiet threat. She received it with mixed feelings—none of which had anything to do with the grundt.

Deciding to pretend she hadn't heard, she opened the back door of the SUV.

"Why don't you sit up front?"

She pretended she hadn't heard that either.

Nick's expression was thunderous when he got in and slammed the door several times. "Fucking thing's shot," he muttered when he'd glanced at Su-lynn, who'd taken the front passenger seat.

She lifted her brows at him and glanced back at Danielle.

Nick hunched his shoulders and glared at the crooked hood ornament.

Danielle reddened at the speculative look in Su-lynn's eyes and focused on her hands in her lap.

Sabin and On came out of the hotel a few moments later, each carrying a coverlet they'd taken from the beds. Sabin moved to their vehicle and flipped the coverlet onto the top. Nick climbed out. When he did, Danielle scurried out, as well.

"What are you doing?" Nick growled.

Sabin flicked a glance at him. "The landers will be patrolling. Very likely, we will be stopped if we are spotted. I did not think it wise to leave the grundts displayed. It would be an invitation to disaster."

Nick reddened. Danielle could see he was disgusted that Sabin had thought about it and he hadn't. He sent her an accusing look over the top of the car. As if it was *her* fault he'd been distracted by his dick! She returned it with an indignant one of her own and got back in the vehicle, moving to the center of the seat.

Sabin got in beside her when he'd finished tying the coverlet down.

"You think it's secure enough that the wind won't snatch it off?"

"It would have been better to wrap it around him, but he is liable to smother."

Nick frowned. "It might look too much like a body anyway," he muttered. "How much longer do we need to keep them?"

"How long until we reach this place?"

Nick shrugged. "Ordinarily, I'd say another day, day and a half. With things the way they are, who the fuck knows? We need to look for fuel before we set out again."

On spoke to Mikhail, who'd helped him secure the other coverlet and then Mikhail got into the vehicle and On strode toward them.

"Big surprise," Nick muttered.

"What?" Su-lynn asked.

Nick's lips tightened. "Nothing. Not a damned thing." He started the SUV and shot off before On had even gotten his door closed.

Danielle grabbed On's arm, fearing he'd fly out before he could shut the door as Nick swung in a tight circle out of the parking lot.

"Damn it, Nick! He didn't even have his door closed!" Danielle snapped.

"Am I bad!" Nick growled. "You ok, buddy?"

On sent him a narrow eyed look. "I am fine ... buddy."

"See, baby? All the aliens ... uh ... visitors aboard all safe and sound. No harm, no foul."

Danielle was ready to continue the argument, but Sabin settled a hand over hers. "On appreciates your defense, as I do, but as Nick said, no harm, no foul."

Danielle drew in a shaky breath and tried to calm herself. She'd thought after her crying jag in the shower that she'd regained her equilibrium, but she realized she'd overreacted to the situation. On had been in no real danger of falling out. If Nick had taken off before he was even settled inside, the situation would've been completely different. But she didn't think, as childish as his temper tantrum was, that Nick had really meant to hurt On or he could've—very easily.

Maybe he'd just wanted to scare On?

Or maybe he'd just been impatient and hadn't even realized On hadn't closed his door yet?

She supposed she should've at least given Nick the benefit of a doubt.

"I'm sorry," she said finally. "I know you didn't do it on purpose. It just scared me."

Nick flicked a look at her in the mirror. He didn't say anything, but some of the tension seemed to go out of him. He shifted uncomfortably, blew out an impatient breath and flicked a glance at On. "Sorry, man—really. I thought you were in."

"There was no real danger. You are forgiven."

Nick flicked a sardonic look at the mirror, but focused on looking for a likely spot to get gas instead of exercising his tongue. They swung into the first station they came to. Nick strode inside to the turn on the pumps and returned. After checking all of them, he looked around the paved lot until he saw the covers for the underground tanks. Fishing a flashlight out of the glove box, he got down and peered into each.

"Bone dry," he announced when he got back in, surveying the businesses around the one where they were parked worriedly. "There's no telling how long ago they had the last delivery, but I'm guessing if this one's dry the others around here probably are, too."

He flicked the ignition on to check the gas level and turned it off again without turning the engine over. "We should probably check, just in case."

Sabin and On got out of the car. "It will take less time if we each check one," Sabin offered.

Nick nodded, getting out, as well. "Let's make this quick. I don't like leaving the trucks exposed."

Sabin and On nodded and strode off in different directions. Nick watched them for several moments and then glanced in at Danielle. She could see what was running through his mind. He wanted to leap back into the car and leave them. Instead, after a moment, he headed off in a different direction at a loping run.

"I don't guess you feel like talking?" Su-lynn murmured.

Danielle glanced at her sharply. She liked Su-lynn. She always had, but she

didn't really feel like being psycho-analyzed at the moment. "About what?"

Su-lynn shrugged. "If you don't want to talk, that's fine. But I asked as a friend, not a psychologist. Sometimes it helps to talk."

Danielle uttered a derisive snort, not because she doubted that Su-lynn was sincere, but because she had so much baggage by now she hardly even knew where to start unloading. "I wouldn't even know where to start," she muttered her thoughts aloud.

"Maybe you could start with what you're most upset about at the moment?"

Danielle dragged in a shaky breath. "I don't know. Everything, I guess."

Su-lynn was silent for several moments. "What were you upset about when you came down to breakfast?"

Danielle swallowed as a knot of emotion abruptly rose in her throat. "Nick," she muttered.

"The two of you had a fight?"

"Something like that."

"I've never seen Nick behave like he has lately," Su-lynn said after a few moments. "I thought it was just the post traumatic syndrome—or maybe I should say ongoing trauma we're all trying to deal with, but Nick usually handles this kind of stress better than most. Anyway, he didn't have anyone—not like the rest of us."

Danielle glanced at her in surprise. "I didn't realize you knew him that well."

Su-lynn snorted. "Nobody really knows Nick. I've sort of known him for years, though. We went to college together, served together several years right after we went into the marines. Then he vanished for a few years—got into covert operations or something like that—and re-appeared on the D.C. scene. I didn't know him then—heard a few rumors—but we got together when he got out of whatever it was he was in to and got into the space program."

"You know a lot more about him than I do. I didn't even know he didn't have any family."

Su-lynn shrugged. "It was an aunt that raised him and that's about all I know—don't know why or what happened to his family—but she died while he was still in college."

If Su-lynn's objective was to make her feel better, she was doing a hell of a job! She wanted to tell her to stop, that she didn't want to hear anymore, but, somehow, she couldn't bring herself to. "I guess that was pretty rough on him."

"He cried all over me like a baby. He'd probably kill me for telling you that—likes to think he doesn't need anybody."

Danielle's chin wobbled. She cleared her throat, trying to dislodge the clogging emotion there. She needed to sniff, but she knew Su-lynn would be all over it if she did.

"I guess I should have seen this coming the first time I saw the two of you together—both of you trying way too hard to pretend you didn't know the other existed. Don't get me wrong, I've seen women act that way plenty of times around Nick—women he'd had a fling with that were pissed off that their dance ended so quickly. I've even seen Nick play that game around women when he was having trouble convincing them that he wasn't interested in another dance. Because Nick rarely looks back, seldom ever has any interest in another go-round. I've never seen Nick try so hard to pretend he wasn't interested when it was as clear as day that he was, though. I guess he never expected to see the day he was in that position—wanting to go back over the bridge he'd

burned—with no clue of how to build it again so he could get back. I never would've pegged you as his Waterloo."

Danielle felt blindly for the door handle and abruptly stumbled out of the car, gasping for breath, fighting the urge and run and never look back as she rounded the end of the car where she had a little privacy and leaned against it. She couldn't handle this! She couldn't handle anything else, she thought a little wildly.

It was so unfair! It was so horribly unfair!

She'd turned to Sabin for the comfort she needed and he'd been so sweet to her, such a wonderful lover!

And then he'd handed her off to On, and she knew he didn't really care or he wouldn't have done that. She'd tried her best not to believe that, but she did anyway.

And now Nick had to decide that he really did care, except that he didn't because she'd already turned to Sabin!

How had her life gotten so complicated so fast?

My god! Couldn't she even have a lover without having all of this ... emotional baggage to go with it?

It should have worked out, damn it! Sabin had been completely honest with her! He'd made sure she understood that he would be leaving her when all of this was over with, allowed her to make her decision about taking him as a lover with a full understanding of the limitations.

Except that she was afraid she cared a lot more about Sabin than she should and it was going to hurt like holy hell when he left.

She'd still been willing to accept the possibility as long as she had someone to cling to now when she most needed someone.

She wished Nick had just backed off when he saw what was happening, damn it! He just *had* to tell her that he really had cared about her! Damn him to hell!

Was she subconsciously deliberately sabotaging herself? Was she punishing herself for some reason? Maybe for living when she still wasn't sure if her babies were alive or dead? Or was she just that hopelessly inadequate?

She straightened, realizing her thoughts weren't helping her regain control of her emotions. Breathing deep, slow breaths, she searched the area for any sign of the men. She caught sight of On first, striding briskly in her direction. Sabin, she discovered, was already halfway back from the gas station he'd gone to check.

Nick would be on his way back by now, too.

Pushing away from the SUV, she looked the building over and headed inside to find a restroom. The building had been ransacked for pretty much anything of any use and everything else littered the floor. She picked her way to the back and opened the door to the bathroom cautiously. Expelling a pent-up breath when she saw it was empty, she went in to use the toilet and then moved to the lavatory to splash cool water on her face.

There weren't any paper towels—not surprising when there hadn't been more than a few sheets of toilet paper! She dried her face on the front of her shirt and headed out, feeling at least a little calmer. When she reached the door leading out, Nick grabbed her wrist and yanked her out the door, nearly giving her whiplash. "Lander!" he hissed harshly, all but dragging her around to the back of the building and shoving her between a large, overflowing trash container that stank to high heaven and the wall of the

building.

“Where is everybody?”

He threw her a look over his shoulder. “They took cover.”

Danielle lifted her head, listening intently, but she couldn't hear anything but her pounding heart. “Maybe they left?”

“It looked like they were going to land to me.”

“Oh my god! Nick! I don't even have my weapon!”

He pulled one out of the waistband of his jeans and handed it to her. “Don't shoot me in the back.”

She sent him a burning glare. His shoulders twitched. He looked back at her.

“Stay here. I'm going to see if they landed or left.”

Danielle grabbed the waistband of his jeans. He glanced at her irritably, but then some of the harshness left his features. He peeled her fingers loose from his pants. “Just stay put—whatever you hear.”

He took off before she could grab him again. Dismayed, she watched until he disappeared. Seconds ticked off like hours. Finally, feeling as if she was going to start screaming if she stayed where she was another instant, she eased to the edge of the trash container and looked around. At first, she didn't see anyone. Then she caught a glimpse of On and Sabin striding purposefully across the pavement of the building next door.

Frowning, she watched until they vanished from sight, trying to decide whether their behavior indicated everything was alright or not. Her first thought was that it must be, but she hadn't seen anyone else come out. No one had bothered to call an all-clear.

After debating with herself several moments, she looked for the closest place to hide and darted from the trash container to crouch beside a broken down truck. Easing to the end of it, she looked around again and discovered that she could see the bottoms of Nick's boots protruding from beneath a wild shrub just beyond the curb that surrounded the parking lot. Deciding it looked like there was room for two, she darted toward it, dropped to her knees and crawled under the branches.

Nick's head whipped around.

He gave her an ‘I'm going to kick your ass’ look and returned his attention to what he'd been watching. Danielle slithered a little deeper under the hedge.

Nick planted one hand on top of her head and shoved her down. She fought his hand off and wiggled a little closer until she could see what he was watching. A lander much like the one Sabin had piloted to Earth was grounded about a hundred yards from where they lay. As she watched, Sabin and On reached it. A panel opened on the side and a gangplank appeared. A few moments later two men who looked absolutely identical to On and Sabin except for the clothes they were wearing, came down the gangplank. The four men bowed to one another.

Danielle met Nick's hard gaze. After that one accusing look, he returned his attention to the men, however, carefully scanning the field, she was certain, for a closer vantage point.

She discovered they didn't need one. After exchanging a few words, all four men turned and headed toward them. The closer they came the more certain Danielle was that they didn't just appear to be identical. They were.

“All clear!” Sabin called as they came near enough to do so without shouting.

Nick grabbed Danielle before she could shimmy out from under the bush. “We

don't know what their intentions are," he cautioned her.

Danielle found herself torn between her belief in Sabin and the fear that she couldn't trust her instincts. After a brief hesitation, however, she pulled loose from Nick's grip and backed out. Brushing at the debris in her hair and on her clothes, she went out to meet the four men approaching them.

All four bowed when she stopped, trying not to stare. "Du and Tra," Sabin said. He glanced around. "Do you have the image?"

Danielle's legs felt so weak with relief she had to lock them to keep from falling down. "They're watching," she said quietly.

Sabin frowned but he didn't seem surprised. "We will walk back to the ship and wait for them to join us."

Smiling at him gratefully, still trying to ignore the flickers of alarm racing through her mind, Danielle fell into step with them. "Brothers?" she guessed.

She couldn't quite interpret the look that passed between them.

Sabin frowned, struggling with his reluctance to tell her the truth and an equal reluctance to lie to her, but he realized that, in a sense, they were his brothers, even though they were not in the context that she had used the word. "Yes," he said finally.

She smiled at the two stern faced men politely. "It's a pleasure to meet more of Sabin's and On's brothers. I'm Danielle."

They bowed politely again. "You are the one that Sabin told us of, then."

Danielle looked at Sabin questioningly.

"I told them that I had a task to ask of them for a new friend."

Danielle wasn't certain how to take that, but she supposed being named a friend certainly wasn't an insult even if it did make her feel like shit!

"The image?" one of the men in uniform prompted.

She wasn't sure if it was Du or Tra, but she glanced back even as she slipped her hand in her pocket.

Nick, she saw, was following them at a slow jog.

The others glanced back when she did. "Go with them," Sabin said. "We will wait for Nick here."

Nodding, Danielle continued with the two strangers. "Du and Tra. Those are ... interesting names. What do they mean?"

They looked at one another. "They are numerical."

"Numbers?" Danielle repeated blankly.

"Yes. Sabin is primary. On first, Du is second, and I am third."

Danielle frowned in total confusion. "Sabin's primary?"

"Yes—this has numerical significance, as well. Each batch—each generation is numbered. Sabin for seventh generation Au-tere—Seventh generation reproduction of our progenitor, Tere. We are all sabin, of course, and that is our proper designation—Sabin prime Au-tere, Sabin-On Au-tere, and so forth—but it is simpler, here, to use only the order when the batch is a known quantity. I am surprised that Sabin did not explain this, but he is modest. Tere was one of our greatest leaders and thus, of such importance that we are four. Very few progenitors were of significant importance to warrant a batch of four. Most have only two per generation. Some three, but very few four."

They reached the gangplank and both men stepped aside and bowed politely. Assuming that meant they expected her to lead the way, she stepped on the gangplank.

“Wait!” Nick called out to her, pushing past Sabin and On.

Chapter Fourteen

“Shit!” Danielle muttered under her breath. She couldn’t pretend she hadn’t heard Nick. She’d glanced toward him instinctively when he called out. Du and Tra stepped on the gangplank, almost completely blocking her view of Nick. Du extended his hand. “Give it to me.”

Danielle dragged the photo from her pocket quickly and placed it in his palm. Bowing, he moved past her and disappeared inside. “They were just going to show me the ship,” Danielle lied shakily as Nick reached them, wondering why she was keeping up the pretense at all.

Somehow, though, she couldn’t bring herself to tell him the truth.

Because she knew *exactly* what Nick would think if he knew about her arrangement.

He gave her an exasperated look. “Damn it, Danny! I don’t know about you sometimes! What the hell do you mean by charging off like that?”

Danielle bit her lip as a mixture of resentment and guilt swamped her.

He was so damned good at rubbing her the wrong way!

She saw the anxiety in his eyes, though, and it dawned on her abruptly that he was angry because he was afraid for her. “It’s just Sabin’s and On’s brothers,” she said lamely.

He shook his head in disgust and turned away. She knew he really, really wanted to give her an earful, but he didn’t want to air his doubts in front of ‘the aliens,’ as he persisted in calling them—which, of course, they were. She knew Nick meant it as an insult, though, and she was pretty sure the visitors had figured that out.

Sabin’s expression was almost as chiding as Nick’s when she glanced at him.

Irritation flickered through her. Even the visitors were giving her scolding looks now!

“How long before you will be missed?” Sabin asked Tra, apparently having decided to ignore the tension.

Tra met his gaze for a prolonged moment. “Not long. We dropped ground troops ten felds south, south west of this place and were told to survey a six feld perimeter. We took the chance and came because we thought it would be the closest drop point to your position that we were likely to have.”

Sabin nodded, but he looked annoyed. “If you find an opportunity where you are reasonably certain that you would not be missed for at least ninety parsecs, come for us. We are still at least a full day from our objective with the transport we are using—more if we cannot find fuel. And there is no way to calculate how much time it will take to prepare the weapons.”

Tra bowed. “Understood.”

Sabin hesitated. “I will take leave of Du,” he said decisively, and strode up the gangplank.

Danielle was fairly certain that she wouldn’t have noticed the surprise that

flickered across Tra's features if she hadn't gotten used to the mahns and she hadn't been looking directly at him at the time. Gnawing her inner lip, Danielle flicked a guilty look in Nick's direction. It didn't help her feelings to discover that he was studying her intently.

"I guess we might as well start back," she said tentatively.

Nick merely nodded.

She didn't believe for a second that he wasn't still thoroughly pissed off and she didn't particularly want to be alone with him at the moment, but she didn't think his mood was likely to improve if he had to hold his anger in.

He grasped her arm almost brusingly when she reached him and marched her back across the field at a pace she found difficult to keep up with. "What the hell was that about, Danny?" he growled when they'd put some distance between them and the ship.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't! Did you know anything about this meeting?"

Danielle sent him a shocked look. "Of course not! I thought it was just a coincidence. You think I'm conspiring now, too?"

"It sure as fuck wasn't a coincidence! Sabin summoned them. Why?"

Danielle wrestled with her conscience and finally caved in. "I didn't expect this. I was just as surprised as everyone else, but ... I asked him—sort of."

Nick stopped so abruptly she bumped into him. "You asked him what?"

"I was worried about Cary and Kyle after what Sabin told us. I just went to him to ask him if the grundts would hurt the children. He asked me if I had an image of them and when I told him I did he said he would give it to someone he trusted so that they could look for the boys for me."

She couldn't tell anything about his thoughts from his expression. After a prolonged moment, he glanced back toward the lander. "You risked ..." He stopped himself. "I know how badly you want to find your children, Danielle, but what if you're wrong about them?"

Danielle felt herself crumple, almost literally. They were her best hope of finding the twins. She couldn't bear the possibility that she could've been wrong and they wouldn't search for them. "You don't! You have *no* idea how I feel! I *left* them, Nick! I should have been here! I could've done ... something. I know I could've!"

She resisted when Nick pulled her into his arms, but he ignored it, wrapping her tightly against his length. "Don't you think everybody who was here—every mother and every father—thought the same thing? That there was something they could do? God only knows how many were wrong! You did your job—just like everyone else does. You wouldn't have left them if you'd thought they were in any danger. I know you. You would never have done that."

"I just want them back!" she wailed against his chest. "I *need* to find them."

Nick stroked her back, trying to think of something he could say to give her some hope when he didn't believe they were still alive or would ever be found. She was right. He didn't know what she was going through, but he sure as hell knew what he was going through trying to keep her from throwing her life away to find them—pure hell. "We'll do this, baby. You know we have to give everybody that's left a chance. And if everything goes according to plan ..." And nothing ever did! "I'll take you to look for

them. I swear it. We'll look as long as it takes."

She wept until she couldn't do anything but hiccup and felt so drained she could hardly stand. Embarrassment over the scene she'd created began to set in even before she finally gathered the strength to push away from him.

"We need to get going," Nick said huskily, tucking her against his side and guiding her back toward the vehicles. "I don't think it's safe to be out in the open now."

She hadn't thought about that.

She also hadn't thought about the awkwardness of being surrounded by three lovers while she cried her eyes out all over one of them. She sniffed, staring at the ground, too embarrassed and self-conscious to risk meeting anyone's eyes. "I need to wash my face," she muttered when she realized they'd reached the gas station again.

The others had joined them.

"Why don't I walk you?" Su-lynn said sympathetically.

She didn't really feel like she needed any help, but she merely nodded. No doubt they all thought she'd had a mental breakdown.

She headed toward the men's room, hopeful that she'd find tissue there, or at least paper towels.

"Whoops! Wrong room!" Su-lynn said, stopping her.

"I know. There's no paper in the other."

"Just wait here, then," Su-lynn said firmly, leaving her standing outside while she checked the room. She came back a few minutes later with a few sheets of tissue and a couple of paper towels. "Just as I thought—disgusting."

Danielle looked at her wanly, realizing abruptly that Su-lynn had wanted to be sure it was empty. She hadn't considered that it might not be. Shuddering at the thought of finding another corpse, she went in the restroom and splashed cool water on her face until she could at least get her eyes more than halfway open. The face in the splotchy mirror was still red and swollen—eyes, nose, mouth—but aside from feeling strangely empty, she felt a little better.

"Why don't you lie down in the back for a little while?" Su-lynn suggested when they reached the car again.

Danielle nodded, feeling a faint spark of interest in the possibility of 'sleeping it off'. Curling up with the pillows, she pulled the cover over her head, grateful that she could at least hide for a while. She wondered if Nick really believed what he'd said or if he'd only said it in an attempt to make her feel better for being a terrible mother.

She woke with a blinding headache when the vehicle stopped a short time later. Still feeling disoriented, she sat up and looked around when she heard the doors open and close.

Sabin turned to study her. "Are you feeling better?"

Danielle thought about it. "No," she said finally. "My head hurts."

"Lucky for you I have something for that," Su-lynn said with only slightly forced cheerfulness from the front seat.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Another place with no fuel," On replied, watching Nick check the pumps.

Su-lynn opened the rear door and handed her a couple of pills and a small bottled water. Danielle stared at the pills doubtfully. "What is it?"

"Just something for your headache."

Shrugging, Danielle tossed them in her mouth and chased them with a few sips of water. Either they were really big painkillers or her throat was swollen. She had a hard time getting them down.

She decided to get out to stretch her legs while she had the chance.

"Why don't you just lie back down?" Su-lynn suggested. "We'll be leaving soon, anyway."

Danielle shook her head. "I want to get out for a few minutes."

"Those painkillers are probably going to knock you on your ass," she said warningly.

Ignoring the warning, Danielle got out to look around. She felt oddly detached, but she supposed it was to be expected all things considered—those things being the night she'd had followed by two seriously draining crying jags. Instead of returning to the trunk space when everyone loaded up again, she climbed into the backseat.

"You sure you don't want to lie down?" Su-lynn asked a little worriedly.

"I'm fine," Danielle responded, although her head had begun to feel more than a little swimmy. "I took a nap. I feel better."

They were no sooner in motion again, though, than Danielle began to feel both dizzy and so sleepy she could barely keep her eyes open. Discovering she was having trouble staying awake or keeping her head up, she finally gave up the effort and dropped her head against the nearest shoulder.

"What the hell did you give her?" Nick growled.

"A sedative. Joyce and I have been popping them like candy. How do you think we've been holding up so marvelously? She was long overdue."

"Shit! If we don't find gas soon, we're going to be walking. I don't suppose you thought about that?"

"Well! I'm sure she's going to be upset to find out her crash was so inconvenient! She doesn't 'do' pills or I would've tried to get her to take some before."

Nick blew out a breath of disgust. "I'm just saying she's in no condition to walk now."

"I will carry her," Sabin said.

Nick flicked a glance at him in the rearview mirror. "I'll carry her."

"If she is unconscious long," On said, "then we will each carry her."

Sabin shifted her head from his shoulder and carefully turned her so that she was resting against him. She was so completely limp he found it alarming. Su-lynn did not appear to find anything about the speed the drug had taken affect or the results of it worrisome, but he found that, as illogical as it seemed to question her, he could not help but do so. "This is ... normal?"

Su-lynn glanced back at them. Releasing her seatbelt, she turned in her seat and grasped Danielle's limp wrist, holding it for several minutes. "She's alright. It isn't normal sleep. This takes her deep and keeps her there—no nasty nightmares to rouse her, no dreams. Just healing sleep."

Nodding, Sabin studied Danielle's face and realized it was the complete lack of animation that disturbed him so much. Even when he had watched her sleep before he had seen her eyes move beneath her eyelids, seen expressions flit across her face. She looked ... so completely helpless when she had always seemed so vibrant and full of life.

Lifting his free hand after a few moments, he smoothed her hair away from her

cheek and tried to arrange her so that she looked more comfortable, so that she would not awaken feeling the pain of cramped muscles. Her cheek was cool to his touch, cooler than he liked. He touched her arms and hands and found them the same.

He saw when he glanced up to speak to On that Su-lynn was still watching him when he had thought she had dismissed his concern and returned to her seat. Feeling his cheeks heat with discomfort, he turned to look at On. "Get the cover from the back. She is cold."

* * * *

It was dark when Danielle woke. Her first awareness was the discomfort of cramped muscles and of a lack of motion, her second that she was that someone was holding her. Confused by that discovery, she searched for her last memory even as her senses expanded to explore her surroundings and identified who was holding her.

She'd been lying down in the trunk space, she remembered.

How and why had she gotten from there to where she was?

She remembered after a moment that she'd gotten out, the headache, the painkillers.

She still couldn't remember how she'd gotten where she was. Shifting to search for a little more comfort, she opened her eyes and confirmed that it really was dark and Sabin was holding her.

"Where are we?" she asked, discovering her voice was husky with sleep.

"I do not know the name for the place ... a place to stay the night."

The temptation to sit up and look around wasn't nearly as strong as the temptation to stay where she was. "I slept all day," she said, surprised.

"Much of it," Sabin agreed.

She turned her face against his chest, dragging in a deep breath of him, enjoying the sense of contentment it gave her to feel wrapped in Sabin. "How long have I been like this?"

"I did not count the hours. Is it important?"

Danielle frowned. "I mean ... like this, laying on you."

"Since you went to sleep."

She mulled that over for a few minutes and pulled away from him. "Oh god! You must have been miserably uncomfortable! I'm so sorry!"

He stretched when she sat up. "Do not be. I am not. On offered to hold you for a while. I declined."

She didn't know what to say to that.

Her head had begun to spin when she sat up. She closed her eyes, rubbing her temples.

"What is wrong?"

"I'm just a little dizzy, that's all."

He drew her back to rest her cheek against his chest. "I expect that is the drug that Su-lynn gave you," he said neutrally.

She should have argued, but she didn't feel inclined to if he was willing to hold her. "Where is everybody?"

"Inside. Some left to check out the rooms, others to begin to prepare food, as has become the custom."

"For my headache?" she asked after mulling over what he'd said and realizing she

couldn't remember taking anything else.

He hesitated.

"The drug?"

"Yes."

That was some kind of painkiller to knock her out all day! Maybe it hadn't actually been the drug, though? Maybe it had just relaxed her and exhaustion had taken over? She hadn't been sleeping well for weeks. Maybe it had just caught up to her?

Dismissing it after a moment, she allowed her thoughts to wander and finally settle on the meeting in the field with his brothers. She hadn't really understood the conversation and that bothered her. It disturbed her more to learn that none of them really seemed to have real names—just numbers. She supposed every name had some meaning and a number wasn't any different in a way, but it still troubled her. It made it seem as if they had little importance to the people they should've been very important to if they couldn't be bothered to think up a name that was special and just for them.

"What's your world like?"

She felt him tense fractionally.

Desolate, Sabin thought, wondering why he had never really thought of it that way before. "Cold."

"Because of the climate change you told us about?"

"Yes."

"What was it like before?"

"Somewhat like your world, I understand—more temperate than now, in any case. This was before my time ... and I will be gone long since before it is this way again."

"But it's still home."

He considered her definition for home. He did not think it could be defined as 'home' in the truest sense, but it fit in the sense that it was his origins and where he would live out his lifespan—if he was fortunate enough to live through the coming conflict. "Yes."

She realized she didn't want to think about that. She did want to understand what Tra had been telling her. "It was nice meeting your brothers. Do you have sisters?"

Sabin shifted uncomfortably, seemed to struggle with himself. "There are only males in our batch," he said carefully.

"Four. What was it like growing up with three brothers?"

Sabin tensed. "Our customs are different from yours," he said finally.

"I know. I'm just trying to understand how they're different. I don't suppose you fought with each other? A lot of brothers do—here—but it really isn't a custom. It's just the way things are when personalities clash, and jealousy is almost inevitable. Everyone's just sure that their mother or their father loves someone else better."

"Do they?" he asked curiously.

"What?"

"Love some offspring better than others?"

"I don't know. I suppose, sometimes anyway. The thing is everybody's different. You can't treat them the same. Some children need more attention, or more help, than others. It's hard to give them what you know they need without the one who doesn't really need you as much becoming jealous of the attention."

"We are ... the same. Each of us was instructed in exactly the same things."

Jealousy would have been illogical when there is no difference.”

“They aren’t jealous that you’re primary?”

He sent her a startled glance. “There is no reason to be,” he said finally. “It is the order of things. I have the duty and responsibilities of the primary. There is no reason for envy.”

It seemed to her that there was plenty of room for jealousy if he’d inherited the position by birth, but she supposed they must accept that. He seemed to think they did, anyway. Historically speaking, however, on Earth the fact that the eldest got everything and the others got nothing hadn’t seemed to appease the younger siblings at all. “I got the impression from what Tra said that there must be at least a little bit of rivalry between families.”

She felt him tense again. This time she tilted her head to look at him. His face was shadowy, but she could see that his expression was hard. “Tra is inclined to speak too much and without adequate consideration,” he said finally. “What did he say that gave you that impression?”

“He said your great-great-whatever grandfather was a very important man and that gave your family stature. That you were modest and didn’t like to talk about it, but ... well, I guess y’all are allowed four children? And others are only allowed two or three. Does that mean one for each of you? Or are you each allowed to have four? Or just the primary?”

Sabin was silent so long that she thought she’d made him really angry, but she couldn’t figure out what she’d said that would have. Finally, he let out a harsh breath. “There are no children. There are no families. There was our progenitor—our genetic contributor.”

Danielle sat up. “I don’t understand.”

Sabin frowned. She could see his reluctance to explain further, but, with a sense almost of defeat, he did. “The change in our world brought our species to extinction. There were not enough contributors left in our gene pool to safely breed. Our customs were much like yours and most other species ... before. There were family units. After, when we had determined that we did not have enough to breed without weakening each successive generation, we turned to science to propagate our species ... safely. We are clones of Tere. We are not his descendants. We are one. We are the same.”

Danielle stared at him, unable to keep the horror she felt from being reflected in her expression. If she’d had time to assimilate it ... maybe, but she hadn’t suspected anything like what he’d told her.

All she could really think about, though, was how awful it must be for them.

“I understand that your people consider this an abomination—would consider us abhorrent. This is why I did not explain before.”

She startled him by caressing his cheek. “But you aren’t the same, whatever you think. On’s different from you. I’m sure the others are, too.”

He nodded. “There are variations, of course, in experiences once the batch leaves the facilities. This is unavoidable, but not considered of great consequence. We consult on new experiences and, whenever possible, or when it seems important to do so, the others endeavor to repeat the experience. The important thing is that the genetics are preserved and passed on for each new generation, the knowledge through education, and therefore nothing more is lost to our species.”

“Like the sex?”

He looked surprised. “I consulted the accumulated data on your species regarding these customs. It was my understanding that it was an acceptable practice, but there are many variations and, admittedly, confusing emotions and personal tastes and so forth that make it difficult to completely understand. I relied on the consensus that a human would refuse to perform whatever sexual act they found repugnant. On finds you as beautiful and desirable as I. He was far more anxious to experience than I, for I was concerned that the experience would be both physically and emotionally destructive to one of my species. I had not planned it, but when he came I decided that I would attempt spontaneity—which I found almost as unsettling as the other. I erred?”

Danielle didn't know whether to laugh or hit him. She discovered she was relieved, though. “You didn't offer because you don't care about me?” she asked tentatively.

He frowned. “I do not understand the correlation.” He thought it over. “This is ... some sort of taboo of your people? It is related to the territorialism of the male of the species, yes?”

“You could say that,” Danielle said dryly.

“This is why Nick is so angry? It is irrational and one of the many things I do not think I will ever understand. You *are* aware that your species is not naturally monogamous? Even when there is a pretense in the social sense that mating pairs are monogamous, they rarely are. You are suggesting that, if we adopt the pretense that we are not sharing, then it will be acceptable? But you know that he has had sex with many other women, and he can not help but know that you have had sex with other men when you have off-spring.”

“It's complicated.”

“Yes—and incomprehensible.”

Danielle chuckled. “We're a strange species, I guess.”

“To us, yes, and yet you are infinitely interesting.”

“Me? Or us?” Danielle asked, smiling.

“You. I have no interest in the others.”

She touched his chest. “So—we're still lovers?”

He swallowed audibly and Danielle felt his cock rise against her. “I ... want to be your lover if this is acceptable to you. I do not want to do anything that would bring hurt to you, Danny.”

“And On?”

“He will understand if you have no interest in repeating the experience. He will be ... disappointed, but he does not want harm to come to you either.”

“And Du and Tra?”

His brows rose. “You would be willing to take them, as well?” He frowned. “I am not certain that we could arrange for them to enjoy the experience, but I will keep it in mind and if the opportunity arises”

Danielle bit her lip. She hadn't actually expected him to be so damned obliging. She supposed she might as well get used to the idea that jealousy wasn't integral to his nature—any of them, apparently. “I have other needs at the moment,” she wryly.

“I find this very disappointing.”

Danielle glanced at him sharply. If she hadn't known better she would've thought

he was teasing. Sabin? Naw.

“Do you?”

“Excruciatingly, but I have discovered that it will go away if I ignore it.”

He *was* teasing!

She stroked a hand over his erection. “It’s a shame to waste it,” she said tentatively.

“I believe I have an infinite number of these,” he said dryly. “It has begun to seem so, at any rate. I have absolute faith that you can call it back whenever you like.”

“Really? Interesting!”

He chuckled. “It is a fact that you are well aware of, so do not pretend you are not. I will not believe it.”

Danielle discovered when they finally got out that she wasn’t just stiff and sore from sleeping in a cramped position for hours on end. The moment she stood, she realized she was still high from whatever in the hell Su-lynn had given her. She felt drunk and uncoordinated. Apparently, it was obvious, too. Sabin slipped an arm around her shoulders to steady her.

“I should carry you. You do not seem coordinated enough to walk on your own.”

“Thanks!” Danielle dryly. “I think I’ll get my land legs back faster if I walk, though. I see lights. Dare I hope there’s also water? Hot water?”

“I do not know. I have not gone in.”

“I thought you were psychic?” Danielle said teasingly.

He glanced down at her in surprise. “I do not have the ability to read the minds of the others. I can only communicate with my batch mates, and only then on a rudimentary level and when we are in close proximity. It is virtually useless.”

“I could think of a few uses for it,” Danielle replied, deciding to ignore the little flutter of uneasiness his admission caused her. Nick’s comments popped into her mind—that she didn’t know them or what they capable of. She dismissed that, too. She might not know *all* that Sabin and his people were capable of, but she certainly knew that they were capable of kindness, and gentleness, and generosity. “For one, it would eliminate the need to pass notes if you had something to say and didn’t want everyone to know. For instance, if I could just look at you across the table and suggest we meet afterwards in my room ...?”

“You do not need words to go with that look,” he said, smiling faintly. “Already, it is my favorite expression.”

“I’m that easy to read, then?”

“If you were, I would not find you infinitely interesting.”

Hearing sounds emanating from a short corridor off of the main lobby once they were inside, they headed toward it and found Mikhail, Joyce, and Bud handling kitchen duties.

Joyce looked surprised, but smiled. “Better?”

“Much. I still feel weird, though—spacey.”

She nodded. “Su-lynn could give you something to perk you up.”

Danielle shook her head. “It’ll pass. What’s the status on food?”

“At least an hour, I’m guessing. Nothing fancy, believe me.”

“I’m starving.”

“It’ll be delicious then,” Bud said straight-faced.

"I think I'll use the time for a shower. Maybe that'll perk me up."

"You should probably have Sabin keep an eye on you—just in case," Joyce suggested without looking at them. "You still look a little wobbly to me."

Danielle reddened, glancing at Sabin. "Thanks. Maybe I'll ask him. Which rooms are already taken?"

"First come, first serve," Mikhail said. "Try the rooms at the opposite end of the first hall."

Someone, they discovered, had thoughtfully left two unclaimed master keys on the check-in counter. As they helped themselves and headed down the corridor, Danielle turned the conversation over in her mind, trying to decide if it only seemed bizarre because she was loopy or if it really had been.

It had almost seemed like ... a conspiracy to push her and Sabin together. At the least, it sounded like acceptance without judgment. It certainly hadn't sounded like disapproval.

Had she only imagined, before, that they disapproved of her interest in Sabin? Or had something happened that she didn't remember, or while she was sleeping, that had brought about a change in their attitude?

She flicked a couple of glances at Sabin. "Did that seem really strange? Or is it just me?"

"Everything that I have seen, heard, and learned here has been strange," Sabin said promptly. "Their conversation did not seem more strange to me than usual."

Danielle was mildly insulted, but she could see his point. "They suggested we bathe together."

He lifted his brows at her. "They suggested that I watch since you are still not entirely free of the drug. Why is that strange?"

There were some things, Danielle realized, that seemed just too complex to try to explain, especially now. On the other hand, she certainly wasn't averse to it. Ordinarily, feeling as she did, she probably wouldn't have had any interest in anything beyond just bathing and collapsing until she heard the stampede toward the food. Time wasn't something she was going to have a lot of with Sabin, though, and opportunity wasn't either.

Besides, she'd always been particularly fond of shower sex and/or shower foreplay. For one, it was tidy. For another, the feel of the water was sensual in itself and it just seemed to magnify every touch and, at the same time, diversify, so that she felt stimulated all over. She paused outside the door when they reached the end of the corridor. "Do you want to?"

He stared at her blankly and she thought he'd either suddenly grasped what the suggestion Joyce had made had entailed or he'd remembered their first time. He seemed to wrestle with something. "We are not discussing a shower, are we?"

Danielle couldn't help but chuckle. She moved toward him, slipping her arms around his waist. "We can bathe together and save water—that's always important, especially now. And then, if I faint or fall down because I'm dizzy, you'll be there to catch me. Or—you could just watch."

He studied her thoughtfully. "That is both tempting and practical. However, I believe I am more likely to faint and fall down than you, and I do not think it the best of ideas at the moment. When you are feeling more yourself would be better."

The depth of her disappointment was amazing considering she actually didn't really feel up to romping at the moment, but she released him and stepped back. "I bow to your superior understanding," she said wryly. "You're right. It's a tempting thought but probably not a good one."

She stood at the door, watching him for a moment, wondering what *was* going through his mind, and finally went in.

Chapter Fifteen

The bullet that whizzed through the SUV shattered the cracked windshield, sending glass flying in every direction. Pandemonium followed. At the sudden explosion, Nick slammed his foot on the brakes and jerked the steering wheel. The vehicle abruptly careened onto the shoulder, wobbling and bouncing wildly as he fought to get it under control again. Danielle's sharp intake of breath took on the keen edge of a scream as two more explosions followed in rapid succession.

Behind them, she could hear the scream of tires on pavement as the other SUV caught gunfire. Sabin grabbed her, pulling her face down across his lap and curling over her. The awkward, twisted position, Sabin's weight, and the jerking and jolting of the car sent pain shooting along her spine and side. It intensified as the vehicle slammed into something and came to an abrupt halt.

"Everybody out!" Nick bellowed. "Take cover!"

Sabin pushed her in the other direction. "The other side!"

Too shocked to fully grasp what was going on, Danielle crawled across the seat to the open door and fell out. On caught her and dragged her in a crouching run to a tree. Panting for breath, she glanced down at herself and around, trying to take in everything faster than her mind could process it. She had blood all over her, but she had no idea whether it was hers or someone else's. On, breathing in short, hitching breaths, was beside her. Sabin had disappeared and she didn't see any sign of Nick until she rolled to her side. The two men, crouched over, were dragging Mikhail toward them from what was left of the SUV. The hood had been shortened and flattened by the tree it had slammed in to. Debris from the vehicle was strewn in every direction.

She didn't see any sign of Bork, who'd been strapped to the top.

Dragging her gaze from Mikhail, who wasn't moving, she searched for the SUV that had been following them. It, too had crashed, some thirty feet or so from where their own had. She could see someone slumped over inside, but she couldn't tell who it was. Her search for the others ended at the tree line. Ci blended so well with the colors of the forest that she only identified the alien woman by movement. She was bending over something on the ground.

"He's dead," Nick said grimly, jerking Danielle's attention back to her immediate surroundings.

She stared down at Mikhail blankly.

"Danny! Are you hit?"

Danielle lifted her hands and studied them and then searched her clothes. "I don't think so," she said shakily, wondering if the blood had come from Mikhail. "You?"

He shook his head sharply and she turned to look at Sabin and On.

Sabin was examining On and her heart leapt into her throat. "Oh god! How bad is it?" she gasped, scrambling toward them.

Sabin's expression was grim. She saw he'd torn On's tunic and was examining his side, but couldn't tell if the wound was in his arm or trunk. "The bullet that killed

Mikhail glanced along his rib and exited ... into his arm." He met On's gaze.

On shook his head. "They will be coming. Bind it for now."

Sabin nodded, swiftly tore his tunic in strips and bound the wounded arm and then wrapped a longer strip around his chest. "The rib may be broken."

On grunted. "Cracked, perhaps. I do not feel it in the lung."

"Can you move?" Nick asked grimly.

"Yes."

"Then we need to drop back and join the others. I think you're right."

"You're sure Mikhail's ...?" Danielle asked shakily.

Nick nodded jerkily. "Let's go."

They'd fared better than the other party. Sha and Bud were both dead. Su-lynn, Ci, and Joyce were injured from the crash. Not surprisingly, they'd lost both of the grundts, but then no one had pity to spare for them when so many of their own were hurt.

Bud had been driving when he was hit in the forehead. Sha, in the front passenger seat, had tried to control the vehicle, without success. She'd been thrown out when it crashed since she'd removed her seatbelt to grab the wheel. Tears streamed down Ci's face, but she'd left her sister when she saw she could do nothing for her and gone to see what she could do for the living.

Joyce had a head injury and even Danielle knew she didn't have much chance of recovering. Ci had bound her head, but blood was already seeping through the bandage. Su-lynn's right arm was broken and, like everyone else, she was bleeding from a number of cuts, but it looked like a survivable injury. She'd crawled to Joyce and pulled her head into her lap.

Danielle didn't know whether to weep or throw up when she saw the carnage, but reviving anger surged through her even as Nick began to curse under his breath.

"Stay here. Do what you can. Sabin, On—do what you can to kill the mother fuckers if I don't get them all."

Danielle surged toward Nick and grabbed his arm. "Nick! You can't go out there alone!"

"I usually work better alone," he said grimly. He hesitated. Abruptly, he snatched her close enough to plant a brief kiss on her lips. "I'll be back."

"I will go with you," Sabin said, straightening abruptly.

Nick narrowed his eyes at him. "Like I said, I work better alone."

"I am not unskilled," Sabin said grimly. "It will be better for the others if we take them out before they can attack here."

Nick hesitated a moment longer and finally nodded curtly. "Just keep quiet, stay low, and move fast."

Nick caught Danielle's shoulders. "Try to move everybody to better cover. They'll be heading for the vehicles. The further away from them you are, the better. Everybody got their side arms?"

At the question, Danielle checked to make sure hers was still in the holster. Relieved to discover it was, she glanced around questioningly.

"I will search the vehicle and around it for the rifles and ammunition," Ci volunteered. "The more we have the better. In any case, it will be a good way to assure them that we are still here."

The last comment apparently settled it in Nick's mind, although Danielle was sure

he was about to object. "Just stay low and keep your cover. I think they're to the northeast of us. They've probably already left their vantage point to finish us, but there's no sense in taking unnecessary risks."

Ci nodded. Her gaze settled on Bud. "Leave a few for me. I would like them to die slowly."

"No promises on that," Nick said through gritted teeth. "I'm going to wipe the bastards out if I can."

Danielle moved to Joyce and Su-lynn as soon as Nick and Sabin had disappeared into the woods, kneeling beside the two women. "How is she?"

Su-lynn lifted her head and stared at her dully. Her eyes were red and tears filled them. "Dying." She smoothed Joyce's blood soaked hair. "She doesn't have a chance. If I could get her to a hospital ..."

They both knew that wasn't possible. "I'm so sorry, Su-lynn."

She nodded. "Me, too. I thought we were going to grow old together."

Tears stung Danielle's eyes and nose. She sniffed. "Don't give up on her yet. She's a fighter."

Su-lynn's chin wobbled. "She was always the strong one," she agreed. "I don't know how I'm going to get along without her."

Danielle wiped her eyes and sniffed. "We should set that arm. I'll go look for your bag."

On grabbed her when she turned to head toward the vehicle. "You will stay here, where you are relatively safe. I will go and search for her bag of medicines."

"You're already hurt! I can move better."

On's eyes narrowed. "I will do it. You will stay here or I will bind you to that damned tree!" he said through gritted teeth.

Danielle gaped at him, so totally stunned that On, of all people, was behaving so ... aggressively that he'd pushed past her and run toward the wrecked vehicle before she recovered enough to object.

Su-lynn met her gaze when she turned to look at the other woman. She smiled faintly. "I guess the mahns are learning a few things from our men, too."

Danielle frowned, abruptly remembering something Sabin had said to her. "You think we're corrupting them?"

"I don't know about that, but I think they've picked up a lot more from being around us than they realize."

* * * *

Ignoring Sabin, Nick moved through the woods in surges, pausing every few minutes to listen to see if he could determine the direction their attackers would be coming from. It wasn't until he paused the third time that it occurred to him that he hadn't heard anything from behind him. Fully expecting to discover that he'd lost his tail, an unpleasant jolt went through him when he discovered that Sabin was almost directly behind him.

It wasn't rational to be thoroughly pissed off at the bastard for moving so quietly, but he was. He lifted a hand and pointed when Nick glanced at him.

Nick followed the direction and stared hard for a full minute at the movement in the brush about thirty yards ahead of them. The branches parted and a man, hunched over his rifle, stepped through.

A man.

Nick hadn't realized he'd expected to discover they'd come upon an alien search party until that instant. Rage surged through him as a second man pushed through the brush, and he was forced to accept that they'd been ambushed by their own fucking people.

Getting a grip on his fury, he held up a hand to warn Sabin to stay where he was and scanned the woods for a better vantage point. He didn't see one and he hadn't spotted terrain that was any better along the way. Carefully, noiselessly, he lifted the rifle he'd retrieved from the crash site and looked through the scope. As he did, a third man appeared behind the first two.

All of them were carrying hunting rifles.

Their position didn't give them an advantage and they were outnumbered. There'd been too many shots too close together for three men to have managed it with the rifles they had.

Settling his finger on the trigger, he waited, allowing the first to advance closer.

Sabin touched his shoulder and pointed again. Nick swung the rifle in that direction and saw that two more men had appeared a few yards to the left of the first three.

Five. Still, he hesitated. If there were more and they started firing the others might retreat and they'd have to worry about getting shot in the back. Sabin shifted restlessly and Nick knew he was wondering why he was still waiting, wondering if he just didn't want to fire because it was humans and not aliens.

Ignoring him, he swung his rifle a little further to his right and then back to the left, passing the first three, to scan the woods to the other side of them.

They'd fanned out, the fucking bastards, he thought when he saw another man appear. There was no telling how many there were and the first three were closer than he liked.

He moved his gun back to the one in the lead. The man was barely fifteen yards away by now. He was liable to spot them any second. He tightened his finger on the trigger. Before he could squeeze the shot off, however, the man abruptly became airborne and flew backwards as if a giant, invisible hand had slapped him.

For a split second, shock held everyone, and then all hell broke loose. All of the men began shouting. Most of them rushed toward the lead man, who'd smacked into a tree with a sickening thud and slid to the ground. Two more men broke from the brush at the shouting, whipping their rifles around wildly in search of the threat.

Throwing off his own shock, Nick found a target and fired. The crack of the gunshot jolted all of the men. About a third of them hit the ground, several whirled to flee. The others, confused about the direction the bullet had come from, began firing at wild random. Nick cocked his gun and fired again, striking one of the retreating men in the middle of the back. He slammed against the ground, but Nick didn't wait to see if he would get up again.

Sabin's gun went off close enough to his head to deafen him. The man's gun discharged as he fell and a bullet plowed into the tree Nick was crouched beside, sending shattered pieces of bark and wood out in a stinging shower.

Nick whipped his head toward the man who'd fired and saw him sprawled on the ground a couple of yards away. Flicking a glance at Sabin, he ducked behind the tree and

reloaded. A bullet from the opposite direction narrowly missed him. He fired several rounds in that direction until he heard a man cry out and then looked for another target.

For about five minutes, bullets flew fast and furious from every direction. The time between blasts began to dwindle, but Nick had no idea whether it meant the men were trying to find better positions or if they'd cut down the odds. He was sure he'd hit two and killed three. Sabin had killed one that he knew of. As near as he could tell that left at least two more completely unaccounted for ... unless there were more and he was pretty sure the two he'd hit were still going to be a problem, *if* he'd hit them.

"I am out of ammunition," Sabin announced calmly.

Nick searched his pockets. "Fuck!" he snarled when he only came up with two more bullets. He hesitated and handed one to Sabin. "Make it count. We're about to be down to hand-to-hand."

The firing stopped. They waited in tense silence, listening.

"Come on out. We won't shoot!" someone yelled out.

Nick snorted. "Kiss my fucking ass!"

"I'll kill you, mother fucker! You shot my brother!" another man screamed, jumping to his feet.

Nick shot him between the eyes. "I'm out," he said grimly.

Sabin, his back braced against the tree beside Nick, glanced at him. For about ten minutes they heard nothing more and then a branch snapped to their right. Nick stiffened. He was about to move around the trunk when Sabin gripped his arm.

He glanced at the other man sharply. Sabin pointed with a nod of his head. Releasing Nick's arm, he held up three fingers.

Frowning, feeling a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, Nick narrowed his eyes, searching the brush on their other side. His hope that Sabin was wrong was dashed. He could see a swatch of fabric. The bush behind him might be shaking from his passage, but not the one ahead of him. At least two, maybe three. At least one on the other side. Either there'd been more of them than he'd counted, or they hadn't killed as many as he'd thought.

There was no hope for it but to try to get their hands on the dead men's weapons. Before he could move, though, Sabin stopped him again. "We wait," he said quietly. "We cannot allow any to escape."

Nick gave him a look. The man had lost his fucking mind! It hit him abruptly, though, that not only was Sabin not a man, but he had slammed the first man against the tree. He still didn't fucking like playing bait, not when the bastards didn't have to get close to kill them.

He discovered he didn't have the option of deciding whether to agree or disagree, however.

"Put the guns down! Right ... now! I mean it, mother fucker! I'll shoot you where you sit!"

"Alright!" Nick said, holding up one hand and slowly lowering his empty gun toward the ground.

Sabin imitated his demeanor, holding one hand up and slowly lowering his own. Five men straightened from the brush, their guns trained on the two of them.

"Kick the guns this way!" one of the men growled.

Nick glanced at Sabin and saw his eyes were closed.

"Aw, look! The girly man's scared!" one of the men in the back snickered.

Sabin's eyes snapped open and Nick felt cold fingers creep down his spine. His eyes were black.

He lifted both hands abruptly and the men in front of them flew backwards like leaves before a hurricane, slamming into the trees with such force that Nick heard the nauseating crunch of bones. They fell to the ground as abruptly as they'd flown backwards.

Nick turned a stunned look on Sabin. Discovering he'd slumped back against the tree, he stared at him for a long moment and finally checked the pulse in his neck. His pulse was racing but had already begun to slow.

Shaking his head, he got up and left Sabin to check the men, grabbing a gun as he came across one. Three were dead. Two were still twitching. He lifted his gun, but Danielle's terrified image flooded his mind and then the others—Bud, Joyce, Mikhail, Sha.

Blowing out a disgusted breath, he lowered the gun. After studying them for several moments more, he returned to Sabin. He was conscious. "They are dead?"

Nick shrugged. "Two were still twitching. I left them for Ci. I'm going to check the others."

He found three others that were still breathing, but he knew there wasn't anything to be done for them, nothing he could do, certainly. He left them. He supposed it would've been more humane to finish them off, but he wasn't feeling particularly charitable. He didn't know why the men had attacked them and it didn't matter now. Bud, Mikhail, and Sha were dead and Joyce wasn't going to be far behind them. Su-lynn either if her broken arm got infected. The fucking bastards! It wasn't as if there wasn't plenty of things to scavenge.

He returned to find Sabin standing. "You up for the hike back? Or do you need to rest a few more minutes?"

"The weakness will pass."

Nick shook his head, still uncertain of how he felt about what he'd seen. "I thought you couldn't move anything but metal."

Sabin smiled thinly. "I lied."

Nick snorted. "If that's the only thing you've lied about, you're the next thing to a fucking saint."

Sabin lifted his brows. "I never lie unless it is necessary."

They'd been walking a few minutes before Sabin decided to ask the question uppermost in his mind. "Danielle said ... something that has made me curious."

Nick's expression tightened. He merely looked a question, however.

"It seemed to indicate that there are humans with abilities such as I have," he said slowly.

Nick snorted derisively. "Not like that! I know there are a lot of nut jobs around that seem to think they're psychic, but I've never believed it."

Sabin frowned. "There is something to it or you would not have heard about it."

"Maybe. I guess you have a point, but I'm pretty sure there aren't any humans that could do anything even close to what you did—and I'm not complaining. It freaked the fucking hell out of me."

Sabin could see that he was wondering if he or On would use their abilities

against them. He wondered if Nick would believe him if he assured him they would not, but finally decided that words were not likely to convince him.

Danielle leapt to her feet when they finally found the ragged remains of their party, but then stopped abruptly with uncertainty, checking both men for wounds. Unfortunately, both men noticed. Nick, his eyes glittering, slid a glance at Sabin. Sabin looked away, heading toward his brother and kneeling beside him. "We must attend the wound now."

Danielle glanced indecisively from Nick to On and Sabin. When she glanced at Nick again, however, it was just in time to see his knees buckle. She rushed to him and managed to catch him just in time to go down under his weight. She was too stunned for several moments to feel much pain beyond the blow to her stomach that knocked the breath from her.

"That wasn't very smart," Nick slurred, trying to push himself up. Finally, he rolled off of her.

"Where are you hurt?" Danielle asked anxiously.

"Donno. Din think I was. Adrenaline rush."

Danielle, who'd been checking him worriedly, discovered blood on the back of his head. Catching his face, she twisted his head to one side and then pushed his bloody hair aside to look. Lifting her head, she looked around for help. Sabin was attending On, however. Su-lynn, her arm now set and bound, was still sitting with Joyce. Ci joined her, pushing her fingers away to study the wound. "His skull stopped the bullet," she announced.

"Good thing I gotta thick skull," Nick muttered, sucking in a hissing breath when Ci probed the wound with her fingers.

"It is only a fragment, or some other debris. I will get the medicines."

Nick relaxed when she stopped probing.

Danielle stared at his pale face, feeling helpless, and angry because she did. The urge to stroke his cheek comfortingly struck her. She fought it, and then wondered why she did.

He sighed. "Don't get too excited, baby. I'm not going anywhere."

Danielle met his gaze and realized he'd been studying her from beneath his lashes. She felt her heart contract painfully. It didn't look too bad, but it could have been, and it had obviously been bleeding pretty freely. The loss of blood alone could be dangerous. She caressed his cheek lightly. "No, you're not, but this is going to hurt like hell."

"I've already got a splitting headache. I don't suppose it'll hurt much worse."

She looked up when Ci returned. Ci studied him a moment. "We need to turn him over so that I can mend the wound."

"I can manage," Nick grunted.

Danielle changed positions. "Put your head in my lap. It'll be more comfortable."

He managed a ghost of his cocky grin and planted his face between her thighs. If she hadn't been worried about him, she would've popped him. "I said my lap. Not there."

"I like it just fine where I am," he murmured, his voice muffled against her.

Danielle couldn't refrain from shivering as his hot breath filled her cleft, despite

her clothing. Deciding to ignore his attempts to be annoying, she rested her hands on his broad shoulders as Ci bent over the two of them and carefully clipped away the hair around the wound. After sterilizing a pair of tweezers and his scalp, she dug the fragment out, looking the bloodied thing over. Danielle felt her belly clench when she saw it actually was a bullet fragment. Tossing it aside, Ci probed to search for anything else.

Nick tensed and Danielle slipped her arms around his head, holding him. Ci sat back after a moment, cleaned the tweezers and used them to pick up a piece of gauze to dab at the blood. Apparently satisfied, she tossed it aside and carefully poured a thin stream of disinfectant on the wound again.

"She needs to put a couple of stitches in to close it," Danielle murmured when she saw Ci pull a needle out and thread it.

She discovered he'd wrapped his hands around her hips. His fingers dug into her buttocks when Ci pinched the scalp together and set a stitch. She found herself stroking him soothingly. He went limp with relief when Ci had set two more and clipped the thread.

Danielle studied what she could see of his face with dismay, wondering if he'd lost consciousness. She couldn't tell, but she couldn't bring herself to get up and leave him. "How is On?" she asked after a few moments, glancing up from Nick to look for Sabin.

"As well as can be expected," Sabin replied, settling beside her. "He will be unconscious for a little while and then he will wake and feel pain again."

She looked him over worriedly. "You aren't hurt?"

He shrugged. "Nothing of consequence."

"Everything is of consequence if it hurts," she said wryly.

"This is true, and yet it is nothing that need concern you." He glanced around at the others. "There are three of us with no more than small cuts and many bruises. On, Nick, and Su-lynn are in no condition to be moved at once and Joyce can not be moved at all."

And Mikhail, Bud, and Sha were dead, excluding the two grundts. "Bork and Tande are dead."

Sabin nodded. "Without them to check in, it will not be long before we have even more problems." He got up. "I will go and check the vehicles to see if I can find at least one that is still operational."

"What about ... the men that attacked us?"

"They are no longer a problem."

Ci got up, as well. "I will go and see what things of use I can find that we may need."

Danielle released a heavy sigh when they'd left. Wavering between an intense gratefulness that Sabin was unhurt and neither On or Nick seemed too badly hurt, and sorrow over everyone that had died, she tried not to think about anything at all. It was oddly soothing to sit with Nick's head in her lap and stroke him, but even that small pleasure couldn't keep her mind still.

They were on foot now and most of them too hurt to go on. She didn't hold out much hope that Sabin would find anything that could carry them because she couldn't think of anything they might've been attacked for except as an attempt to take the SUVs.

It is sickening that so many had died because of that, and more so because they'd been nearly out of gas. They wouldn't have gotten much further anyway unless they'd stumbled upon a gas station that still had power for the pumps *and* gas.

Ci was moving steadily from the crashed vehicles with what she could find. When she brought the pillows and cover from the nearest vehicle, the two of them eased Nick onto a pillow and covered him. He was shivering and she thought it was probably shock from blood loss which scared her more.

Trying to convince herself he was just chilled because it so much cooler in the shade, she tucked the cover around him carefully. He opened his eyes to look at her. For a moment he seemed disoriented but it passed so quickly she thought he'd just dozed. "I need to help Ci." She touched his face. "Thirsty?"

He swallowed convulsively. "Yes."

"I'll find the water first and bring you some."

On impulse, she leaned down and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Don't ever do anything like that again."

He lifted his brows questioningly.

"Get yourself hurt."

His expression turned sardonic. "I'll try to remember that."

"Good! You scared me!"

She found Ci kneeling beside Bud and paused, unwilling to intrude. Ci sighed after a moment and rose. "We must do something for the dead—our dead."

Danielle nodded, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat. "I don't know anything we can do but burn them. We don't have anything to dig with."

Ci considered it. "A fire might bring the curious."

Danielle lifted her head to study the sky. "It'll be a while before dark. If we hurry, the fire won't be as easily seen. We've seen a lot of fires, heard a lot explosions in the past few days. I don't see why it would draw too much attention."

Ci thought that over. "We will prepare and ask Sabin when he returns," she said finally.

Danielle nodded and followed her to collect her sister's body. Ci shooed her off. "I can carry her—all of them. You go and find something to burn."

Danielle wanted to argue, but she'd seen that Ci and Sha could lift the grundts above their heads. She didn't consider herself a weakling. She thought she was strong for a woman, but she couldn't lift anything approaching what the draes were capable of. Instead, she began gathering dried sticks and bits of paper.

When Ci had settled her sister, Cha, beside Bud, she left to get Mikhail. Danielle dropped the things she'd been carrying beside the bodies and went to look for more, knowing it was going to take a lot to cremate three bodies. She found Ci kneeling beside the trio when she returned. She had turned Mikhail and Sha on their sides, facing one another and placed their arms around each other. Surprised, Danielle watched her move to Bud and turn him so that he embraced her sister from behind.

She glanced up at Danielle. "So they will enter paradise together—Sha and her lover, Mikhail, ... and my lover. It is my deepest regret that he could not give me his child. Then he would have left me someone to keep me company until I can go to join him and my sister again."

Danielle swallowed against a wedge of emotion that felt like a fist. "I didn't

know," she said hoarsely. "I'm so sorry."

She *was* sorry. She empathized deeply, completely. It hadn't crossed her mind until Ci had said it, but it suddenly hurt bone deep to know she wouldn't have Sabin's child when he left.

Ci smiled faintly. "Your lovers and your troubles are enough to occupy your mind." She touched Bud's hair. "He was a wonderful lover. I am grateful for the time we had together, only sad that there could not be more."

She leaned down and kissed all three and then rose and helped Danielle build the pyre with what she'd gathered.

Danielle felt awkward even pointing it out, but more uncomfortable not to. "What about the grundts?"

Ci's lips curled in distaste. "Nothing would eat those disgusting creatures. In any case, I will not waste my time or my energy on them. Let the carrion feeders have them. They need to eat, too."

Danielle felt a twinge of guilt, but no more than that. Ci was right on all counts, although it seemed likely the carrion feeders were doing far better than any of the other wildlife. "Thank you for helping Nick. I didn't realize you were a medic."

Ci shrugged. "I am not—not trained, at any rate, except by circumstances. On is a healer. He would have done far more, and better, if he was not hurt himself and too weak."

Danielle sent her a startled look. "I didn't realize On was a medic."

"He is not. He is a healer."

Danielle frowned. "It isn't the same thing?"

Ci smiled wryly. "No. Anyone can be trained to be a medic—good or bad. On heals." She met Danielle's gaze. "It is his gift. Just as Sabin can move things with his mind, On heals with his touch."

Danielle stared at her, digesting that. "And Du and Tra?" she asked finally.

"Du is a fire maker. Tra is a maker of ice. Tere, their progenitor had all of these things. In them, there is a trace of all, but each has one ability that is stronger. And, from what I have heard them say, I believe that it is stronger than their progenitor's abilities. They consider it a flaw. I think it is merely a change ... a balance."

"This is ... typical of the mahns?"

Ci shrugged. "I do not think so. It is common place, but I do not think they all have the abilities and, of course, some are stronger than others. *Their* progenitor was exceptional. Of the other mahns I have met, some have these abilities, or others, and some have none at all. Of course, I am only guessing. They learned very quickly that it is fairly unique to their race, that few others have any abilities at all and, as it is one of their few advantages, it is something they have worked hard to hide from the grundts—from everyone they do not trust completely."

Like her? But then Sabin *had* used his ability. She remembered the first time and realized that it had probably only been Sabin if what Ci said was true. He and On had both manipulated the lock, together, as if it took both of them. She wondered how much flipping the SUV over had relied on the strength of the helpers and how much on Sabin. Had she seen the full range of what he could do? Or was he still holding back because he didn't trust them completely, doing only what was absolutely necessary to keep their mission on track?

It wasn't completely unique to *their* race, she thought abruptly. Humans had traces of some of those same abilities. Was that just coincidence?

Sabin had said he'd studied their data on humans. She'd assumed that the data he was referring to had been accumulated from transmissions they'd intercepted. She'd even considered teasing Sabin and asking him if he'd been watching porns and that was where he'd acquired his knowledge of human sexuality.

What if he hadn't, though? What if his people had an actual database?

And if they did, what could she make of that?

A wave of nausea swept over her with her thoughts, but she struggled against it and the idea that had caused it.

She didn't believe Sabin had had a hand in leading the invasion here. She wasn't going to believe that.

But she had to know how it was that his people seemed to know so much about hers.

Chapter Sixteen

On had regained consciousness when Danielle returned with the coverlet and pillows from the second SUV. Kneeling beside him, she pushed a pillow beneath his head and spread the coverlet over him. He shook his head. "I do not need that. Give it to Su-lynn for Joyce."

"I gave her a pillow and the sheets for Joyce. She isn't shivering. You are."

He looked torn, but when he'd glanced over to study Joyce, he subsided. "Do you want something for the pain? Or do you think you shouldn't have any of our medicine?"

"I do not have need. Save it. We do not know when we will find more."

Danielle gave him a look, but shook her head. "I didn't realize how noble you are."

She could tell from his expression that he doubted her sincerity. "I wasn't being sarcastic. I admire it, but I don't know when any of us will have a greater need than a gunshot wound."

"I did not say it to be noble. I do not need it."

She didn't believe that. Not that she had any kind of medical knowledge, but although he seemed pale from blood loss, she didn't think it was shock that had him shivering. She suspected it was the pain. "Can I get you anything else to make you comfortable?"

He expelled a deep sigh. "I would not mind if you ..." He stopped, frowning thoughtfully. "Caressed? Me as you did Nick."

Danielle felt her lips twitch, but she couldn't decide whether he was teasing or not. "You wouldn't?" she asked, stroking his black hair from his forehead.

"No. I am certain that it is something I enjoy."

She paused, realizing just from the way he'd said it that it was suggestive. "Sabin isn't certain?"

"Perhaps now. Not at first," he mumbled, his eyes closed.

She'd realized it wasn't something they were used to, but it hadn't occurred to her that it might feel strange to them or bother them in any way. She supposed she could understand. Their skin must be as sensitive as her own, but she'd grown used to touch so young she couldn't remember what it must have been like—that first touch.

She supposed that wasn't quite the same thing. Maybe the first intimate touch?

That *had* been disturbing, she realized. She hadn't quite been able to decide how she felt about it. It had felt good, but oddly unnerving, and it had made her feel *very* strange—a little guilty.

Maybe more than a little.

Leaning down, she kissed his forehead lightly and then his lips.

He tried to grab her when she kissed his lips and then sucked in a sharp breath of pain when it pulled at his injured arm.

"That wasn't smart!" she said irritably. "Now it'll hurt worse."

"Is the pain not enough? You must point out that it was unwise, as well?"

She couldn't help but chuckle, but she stroked his cheek and lightly stroked around the wound, trying to sooth it. "Does that help at all?"

He dragged in a deep breath. "No. It makes me hurt lower. If you will stroke me there, I am certain that it will feel better."

She eyed him suspiciously. "I had no idea you were such a tease."

"I am serious."

"Where?"

He caught her hand with his good hand and guided her hand down to his belly. She snatched her fingers back and he grinned, chuckling.

She studied him with a mixture of amusement and irritation for a moment and finally planted one hand on either side of his head, leaning closer. "I could take my jeans and panties off and get under the cover with you and then I could rub my sex back and forth across yours, back and forth, stroking it. Do you think that would make it feel better?" she whispered.

"Infinitely," he responded, his voice husky.

She dropped a kiss on his nose. "Well, you'll have to wait until you're better," she said briskly.

"Tease," he chided her.

"Yes, well, two can play that game. Behave yourself and I'll get you some water."

She helped him sit up when she'd gotten a bottle of water and handed it to him to drink. He sipped it, studying Joyce and Su-lynn. "Is she no better?" he asked finally.

Su-lynn lifted red-rimmed eyes. "I don't know. She hasn't woken."

"I will look at her."

Danielle planted a palm against his chest, meeting his gaze with a pleading one of her own. "Ci said you were too weak. It isn't going to make things any better if you hurt yourself trying something you're not strong enough to do right now."

Something flickered in his eyes, but he settled back. She saw frustration in his expression when he lifted the bottle to drink again. "I had thought Ci could be trusted," he muttered.

"I think she can ... at least, I know she wouldn't have told me if she hadn't thought there was something between us."

His gaze flickered over her face. "Is there?"

Danielle studied him uncomfortably. "I thought there was."

"To me, yes. I would not have made love to you otherwise. I thought you had only done it, though, to please Sabin, or perhaps because, to your mind as it is with Sabin, we are the same and so it makes no difference which of us you make love to."

A spark of anger went through her, but there was just enough truth to what he said to make her feel too guilty to challenge it or dispute it. She knew, although she'd desired On when Sabin had instigated the experience, she'd gone along with it mostly to please Sabin—even while she suspected that it meant he didn't actually care about her or he wouldn't have asked it of her. "I guess we were both confused," she said after a moment. "I thought you did it because it didn't matter to you who it was as long as you experienced it. I thought the two of you had arranged it because I didn't really matter to either one of you as a person, but only as a woman to have sex with."

He frowned. She could see he was angry, but considering his thoughts carefully.

"You know why we are here? Why we came to this world? Why we sought you out—all of you? Sabin has explained this?"

She nodded, confused but willing to listen, hoping he would explain it in such a way that she could banish the lingering sense that she'd done something 'wrong'.

"We needed you to help us in our cause and, because we did, we knew that we would have to gain your trust, befriend you."

She hadn't thought of it exactly that way, but she understood he was saying they'd set out with motives other than feeling friendly to make friends and allies they needed. It wasn't very comforting, not when it made her wonder if they actually *had* made friends.

"Sabin is prime. He chose you. I was to try to befriend the others. I did not *choose* to stay away. I did as I was ordered."

She met his gaze, wondering if she could trust the look of sincerity in his eyes, but, despite her lingering doubts, she *did* feel better knowing that Sabin had chosen her and that On had wanted to. "It wasn't because I seemed the easiest mark, was it?" she asked, using a teasing tone to try to hide her feelings.

He lifted a hand to stroke her face. "In many ways—most—Sabin and I and the others are the same. I am certain that you know this goes beyond the way we appear on the outside. Sabin would not yield his place because he was drawn to you—just as I was. Just as the others are. I do not know why, but, despite the fact that the mahns have struggled to evolve beyond our beastly ancestral instincts, they are still there, latent, only waiting to surface. Sabin does not believe this of himself. He does not want to. He believes what he was taught to believe, what we all are taught on my world from the time we emerge and begin to learn, that reason and logic must always prevail, that there is no place for instincts in beings of reason.

"I think it is much the same with your people. Sometimes you meet someone and you are instantly drawn to them, or sometimes repelled. You do not know why. You just are and, often, you find that the instincts that told you that you were compatible with a person were right—or that you should beware of them. Sometimes they are wrong, I suppose, or perhaps they are always right and you are completely incompatible with the person who repelled, or totally compatible, for mating, on the most basic levels with that person you are drawn to but not otherwise."

His comments caused a mad little flutter of her heart, Danielle discovered, wrestling with whether or not he was talking generalizations or if it was, as it seemed to her, a confession that he'd felt that way when he'd met her. *Was* it possible that they were attracted to one another because they were genetically similar enough to reproduce, with just that perfect balance of new genes to make it desirable? Or were they like the zebra and the horse? Close enough to feel interest and no hostility for their differences, but too different genetically to successfully reproduce?

Coming on the heels of her discussion with Ci, was her mind simply trying to make everything fit together the way she wanted it to? Or had her instincts inspired the desire to mate in the very beginning? Or did neither reason or instincts have a part in it at all?

She'd shelved her desire for another child after the birth of the twins when her and her husband had begun to fight about it. That hadn't stopped the decay of the marriage, though. The resentment, on both sides, had blossomed into resentment over

other things and then everything until they'd ended up divorcing anyway.

She'd never completely given up the hope for another baby, though. At least subconsciously, she'd still been searching for a mate because she wasn't satisfied that she'd filled her nest.

She'd always wondered if Nick had dumped her with such dizzying abruptness because she'd made the mistake of hinting that she wouldn't mind having another child. She'd *thought* she'd mentioned it very casually, but it was hard to convince herself that that wasn't what sent him into flight when he'd given her the brush-off right after that.

And maybe that was what was really at the heart of her refusal to give Nick another chance? Maybe it wasn't her fear for her heart so much as it was an acknowledgement that, however compatible they were sexually and probably also genetically in regards to reproducing, she already knew Nick was dead set against giving her the one thing she needed most?

Was On offering? Could he? Or had he just tapped into her deep-seated need for fulfillment and wanted to take advantage of it?

She met his gaze with an effort. "For me, I don't really know how I feel about it. I don't think of you and Sabin as being the same, or interchangeable. I see you as two very different men who look a lot alike. And ... I like the things that are different about you as much as I like the things that are the same."

She frowned, thinking back over the impressions she'd had at the time they'd had sex together. "I wanted to do it for you. I wanted to have sex with you. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't. I think I would've been angry and defensive if I'd really believed the things I thought then. It was more that I was afraid it was possible and I was wrong." She smiled faintly, feeling her color rise. "It was ... wonderful. I just needed to know that wasn't all it was to you—great sex. I know you and Sabin will leave when this is all over with. I understand. I'm not even against just having great sex under the circumstances. I think we all need it to feel alive, to feel like the world will go on like it always has. I just don't want to feel like I don't matter. I need to at least feel like it's important that it's me and just anyone wouldn't do."

On looked torn between pleasure, amusement, and anger. "I enjoyed making love to you despite my doubts. I cannot think of many things in life that would give me even nearly as much pleasure as repeating that experience many, many times, but I find pleasure in being around you even when you are not near me. I enjoy watching you with others, hearing your voice, or just looking at you.

"I think that whenever anything seems too simple or easy for your people, you distrust it, when the truth is that sometimes things simply are exactly what they appear to be. There are women on my world—my own people. You are not even the only woman of your world that I have seen—or that Sabin has seen. Or perhaps I should say that there have been many females of both worlds that we have encountered but not really been aware of, not in the sense that we are aware of you—that *I* am aware of you. You are far more than a convenience. In fact, although I hesitate to say—you are not convenient at all, Danny. You are a great deal of trouble."

She supposed she was an idiot to be pleased by that, but she didn't think he could've possibly thought of anything more reassuring to say than to tell her he enjoyed being with her even though he also thought she was troublesome.

"I am not," she said, mock serious. "I'm always easygoing and completely

reasonable.”

He grinned at her. “Except most of the time.”

She smiled back at him as she got to her feet. “Alright, maybe some of the time I’m not,” she conceded, leaving him to rest while she returned to the scavenger hunt for their supplies. It took hours to sift through and yet Danielle wasn’t too preoccupied to grow uneasy about Sabin’s lengthy absence. The only thing that kept her from growing too anxious was the fact that they didn’t hear any gunfire.

She hoped that meant he hadn’t run into any trouble. She tried to convince herself it did, but she was more than a little relieved when he finally returned.

Ci met Sabin as soon as he entered the camp they’d haphazardly set up and Danielle knew she was asking him about the burial fire. He nodded. “Before we leave here,” he said, “but I am not certain that we should until we are ready to move on. It may not draw attention, but I do like the risk that it might.”

Danielle moved a little closer when he sat down in the circle formed by their invalids. “Any luck?”

He shook his head, both weariness and worry in his eyes. “There is no hope for either of the vehicles we traveled in, although I had held out some hope for the one we were in until I examined it, and I have searched all those I found for several fields in both directions. They are either out of fuel or there is something else. They could not be coaxed to start.”

Danielle hadn’t expected anything else, but her shoulders slumped. “We’ve still got a long way to go. It’ll take us forever.”

She hadn’t noticed that Nick had woken up, but she supposed he’d simply been lying with his eyes closed because he seemed completely alert when he sat up and pushed the cover off. “On foot—yeah,” Nick said. He put a hand to his forehead.

Sabin glanced at him speculatively. “You are dizzy?”

“A little,” Nick admitted. “Mostly my skull’s splitting.”

“There should still be some painkillers in my bag,” Su-lynn offered.

Nick started to shake his head and then seemed to think better of it. “No. Not a good idea ... especially if it makes me as high as that one you gave Danny.”

Su-lynn looked at Danielle uncomfortably. “I have something that isn’t as strong.”

“If it won’t fuck up my head worse, I’ll take it.”

Ci grabbed the bag and took it to Su-lynn and then carried the pills to Nick when Su-lynn had dispensed them. He took them and searched the covers for the bottle of water Danielle had brought him.

“I do not like it, but I will have to summon Tra. Without Bork or Tande to report in, they will begin to grow suspicious very quickly.”

Nick shuddered as he downed his pills. “What about the other brother?”

“He will be needed there ... when the time comes.”

Nick lifted his head and studied Sabin. “Maybe my head’s really screwed up, but it seems to me that they’re going to get a lot more suspicious if Tra turns up missing, too—especially if he turns up missing with one of the landers.”

“This is true. He must try to pick us up and return without notice or he will be under suspicion, as well.”

Nick frowned. “There’s something wrong with the logic here.”

"Because it is not logical," Sabin said irritably. "But it is what must be done. I do not see any other way. We cannot expect to get to this arsenal on foot with so many injured. Even if no one was, it might well take too long. When Bork and Tande fail to report in tonight, they will begin to search for us and it will not take them long to find us."

"I'm not arguing with that," Nick said. "All I'm saying is, if that's what we have to do, then you need to try to get both of your brothers out of there. Leave one, and they'll torture him to get the information they want."

"He cannot tell what he does not know."

"He won't be able to convince them of that, though, and he isn't going to do you any good there if he's dead."

"He can if he can convince them that he has not turned but we have."

Nick shrugged. "It's your brother. All I'm saying is I couldn't be convinced. What motive is he going to give them for staying with the oppressors of his people while his brothers turn against them? Money? Power? Position?"

Sabin pinched the bridge of his nose. "The Au-tere must be there to lead the mahns. I can delegate to the highest available, but it must be the Au-tere."

Nick stared at him blankly. "You're their leader?"

"Here. Among those who were brought, I am of the highest rank."

"Wouldn't the leadership go to the next highest ranking mahns if you weren't there?" Danielle asked curiously.

Sabin glanced at her uncomfortably. He seemed to wrestle with some thought. "The Au-mar are not convinced that this will work."

"The Au-mar being the next highest ranking, I'm guessing?"

"Yes," Sabin said tersely.

"I'm starting to get the picture, but I'm damned curious about it. From what you said, I thought everybody was against the grundts? You're saying now that we really don't know how many rebels there are? What the force against the grundts is going to be?"

Sabin sent him a look. "All of your people are not united in agreement. I do not know why you would expect ours to be."

"Because we aren't logical and you claim to be?"

"It is not illogical that they are not in agreement. Their argument has merit. We do not govern our world, and we are restricted in our own pursuits beyond what the grundts demand constantly to appease their fascination in technology, and their greed for our natural resources. They do not agree that it is worth risking all so that we can have what we lost."

"I see your point, but that doesn't help us. What I'm worried about is the ground forces. Are they going to finish what they were sent to do even if we blow up the fleet? Or are they going to stop? Or is maybe half going to turn on the other half so that we've got a war raging on our soil?"

"The drae will throw down their arms and fight no more!" Ci said. "We may not all agree on everything at all times, but we are in complete agreement that we prefer to settle our own affairs and we despise the grundts."

"There will be grundts among the landers. I told you this," Sabin reminded him. "They trust us only because our worlds are held hostage each time we are taken to

conquer a new one, but, even so, they do not trust completely. Because they know they would turn upon one another for the right incentive, I must suppose. The first wave is always made up of conquered peoples, but each lander also includes grunts to keep them at task and watch them to make certain the Mra's orders are followed. Regardless of the rebels among them, regardless of how many join us and how many will be too afraid of losing to fight the grunts, there will be a battle among the ground forces. So long as the main force is not landed, however, I can assure you that the rebels far outnumber the grunts. *If* the main force is landed, the balance of power can not be assured. The rebels will fight to destroy them, regardless, but they will then be fighting a superior force.

"This is why I explained that the timing was critical. We must reach your arsenal and attack before they begin the next phase. And it is possible that the discovery of our defection could trigger that. They will know if I am involved that the mahn are involved. All will fall under suspicion, not merely my batch mates."

Nick sat pondering what Sabin had said for some time. "The first strike has to be ours," he said finally. "As far as I can see, that's *the* most important factor. I'm in favor of worrying about whether or not your people join us or join them after we take care of that."

Danielle sent Nick an annoyed look. "I agree with you, but you don't have to be an ass about it! He's worried about his own people, Nick. We can't expect them to ignore the needs of their people over ours!"

"He was the one talking about the good of the many being more important than the good of the few!"

"*Not* when the many doesn't include his own people!" She turned to Sabin. "What do you think our chances would be of taking control of a lander ourselves? Without involving either Du or Tra? I mean, if we could, then it seems to me that they'd have a better chance of convincing the grunts that they didn't know."

"We who?" Nick demanded immediately. "You, me, Sabin, and Ci? Su-lynn's arm's broken and On's wounded. It would be the next thing to suicide to take them into a fight."

Sabin frowned speculatively. "You are suggesting we lure one with some sort of ruse and then attack?"

Danielle glared at Nick resentfully. "I was only wondering if any of you thought it was possible." As much as she hated to admit it, the suggestion sounded pretty crazy the way Nick put it. She still thought some variation might work. She looked at Sabin. "What if you reported to the Mra that you'd convinced us? That was the original plan, anyway. Maybe we could come up with a convincing reason why he shouldn't send more than a couple of men to pick us up? You could tell him about the attack and the accident—about Bork and Tande and that we didn't have a way to take you there now."

"I'm not saying all that is bullshit, Danny," Nick retorted. "I can even see some possibilities, but I sure as hell don't like the idea of letting them know just how bad a shape we're in."

Danielle expelled an irritated breath. "Do you think I do? As Sabin pointed out, though, they're going to know about Bork and Tande before long anyway. At least it was an accident. They wouldn't think we were insane enough to kill half our people just to get those two, surely? And, if they buy the accident—which they should since it's the truth and clear as day if they just look—then they've got no reason to suspect that we're

on to what they have in mind, right?"

"I think her idea has much merit," Ci put in.

"I also," On agreed.

"Except that we'd leading *them* right to the center," Nick growled, "which I sure as hell don't want to do! It doesn't matter if you are with or against us. *They* would still know."

"There are ways that we could get around that," Sabin said thoughtfully. "A lander would carry us quickly enough that we could spare the time to lead them to a place that would not benefit them. We could then remove the devices which allow them to track us, leave them there, and head for our original destination. If they are convinced, it will give us more time. We can report that we have found many weapons and are preparing them for pick up."

Nick glanced at him sharply. "Say they did find something, what would they do with them?"

Sabin lifted his brows. "Take them."

"To the fleet ships?"

"Yes."

Nick's eyes narrowed in speculation. "And?"

Sabin looked confused for a moment. "They would add them to their armory of weapons."

"It's the nuclear weapons they're most interested in, though, right?"

Sabin nodded. "Those are your most powerful weapons and they know this. They have no real concern over the lesser weapons. They are certain, and rightfully so, that their own weapons are superior, particularly since they have the advantage of shielding and far more speed and maneuverability of their crafts. Your smaller missiles might cause damage if they could strike, but they will not be able to—or few will be able to. It would be more by luck than design if that was to happen."

Nick scratched the stubble on his jaw and chin thoughtfully. "If they're so sure the shielding and their maneuverability is so superior to ours, why are they worried about the nukes?"

Sabin shrugged. "This world would be useless to them for many years if your people used them to fight. And, as I said, there is always the possibility of a lucky hit. These enormous ships of theirs are costly to build and take much time and labor, as well. They do not want to have to replace even one."

"Why do you think we can wipe them out, then?"

Sabin hesitated. "We have saboteurs aboard the ships. It will be their job to make certain that the ships are disabled enough to prevent them from folding space and fleeing or from maneuvering quickly enough to avoid a strike."

"A suicide mission."

Sabin's expression hardened. "Yes. They are prepared to die if necessary. We all are. If they succeed, they die. If they fail we all do and our people will suffer far more than they do now."

Danielle studied Nick curiously. "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking about the Trojan Horse."

Danielle felt a shot of adrenaline rush through her. She gaped at Nick with a mixture of hope, fear, and excitement. "Nick! That's absolutely brilliant!"

He grinned, but she could see he was uncomfortable. "It isn't like I was the first one to think of it, baby," he said wryly.

"No, but ... we've been so focused the nukes, I never thought ... you *were* thinking about something else, right?"

He nodded, grinning at the look of bafflement on Sabin's face. "What if I was to tell you there's a possibility we could pull this off without your saboteurs having to lay their lives on the line?" He shrugged, amending the statement as another thought occurred to him. "At least there's a way that *might* give them a chance to succeed and still live."

"That has to do with a Trojan Horse?" Sabin asked blankly. "Horse—this is a beast, correct?"

He wasn't familiar with the term, but it didn't seem to take more than a few moments explaining for him to grasp it. Danielle didn't know about anybody else, but as accustomed as they'd become to Sabin's reserve, she was still disappointed that he didn't seem more enthusiastic when he'd grasped it. Ci more than made up for his lack. She brightened immediately and began to discuss what she knew about the grundts procedures. Even Su-lynn finally settled Joyce's head on a pillow and joined them for the discussion. She listened more than she actively participated, but she brought up valid points.

When they decided they'd covered every possible angle, they switched to a discussion of how to handle the pick-up. Sabin stressed the risks, made certain everyone knew how it could go wrong if they agreed to send for a lander and *did* agree that that was their best option. It wasn't absolutely necessary to call for a lander in order to initiate the Trojan project. They could still figure out a way to do that without the additional risk, but Nick reversed his earlier objections and argued in favor of calling for the lander.

Hours had passed. At some point, On had gotten up. Danielle had noticed, but she'd been too engrossed in the discussion for it to really register when he didn't join them beyond the thought that he must have gone to look for privacy.

She discovered when she finally looked around for him, however, that he'd gone to Joyce. It scared her and it must have shown. Everyone immediately turned to look.

Sabin surged to his feet and strode toward On.

Danielle—everyone else—followed suit.

He was sitting at her head, his legs crossed, his eyes closed, his hands resting on either side of her head.

"On!" Sabin said, sharply enough to send another stab of alarm through Danielle.

When he didn't answer, Sabin dropped to his knees beside him and grasped On's hands, slowly pulling them free. On's eyelids popped open and then his eyes rolled back in his head.

Danielle sucked in a sharp breath as he toppled backwards. Sabin obviously had expected it. He managed to catch his brother.

"What the fuck?" Su-lynn screamed. "What did he do to her?"

Ci restrained her without much effort.

Sabin's head snapped toward Su-lynn. "He did not harm her. He has harmed himself," he said grimly.

"Let me go! Let go of me!" Su-lynn demanded.

Ci looked a question at Sabin. When he nodded, she released Su-lynn. Ci, Nick, and Danielle all crowded around, trying to help Sabin with On. They finally managed to lift him and carry him back to where he'd been lying before.

Su-lynn glared at all of them furiously, hovering over Joyce protectively.

Danielle didn't for one moment believe that On had hurt Joyce or intended to, but she knew it was pointless to try to explain it to Su-lynn at the moment and she was too upset to try. When they'd covered him, she looked at Sabin and Ci anxiously. "What's wrong with him?"

Sabin flicked a gaze over her face. "He has taken her hurt, or some part of it, at least."

Danielle lifted a shaking hand to cover her mouth. "Oh god! *That's* how he heals?"

"There is no other way. It is why I would not allow him to do it before. He was weak enough from his own wounds." He shook his head. "There is nothing we can do. He will either cast it off ... or not."

Danielle felt like weeping—or cursing. Angry tears gathered in her eyes, but she batted them away with her lashes. She didn't know if she was more angry with Sabin for taking it so calmly or On for taking such a chance.

She realized when she glanced at Sabin, though, that he wasn't unmoved at all. Like her, like everyone else, he was simply trying to handle his emotions with some dignity and keep a cool head because a cooler head might prevail where emotion just focused one's mind in a useless cycle of regret that couldn't help anyone.

Realizing there was nothing else they could do, everyone had begun to drift away when a sound from Su-lynn caught their attention. Danielle thought, at first, that she'd sobbed because Joyce had died. She looked up at them, though, with joy, dashing at her tears. "I think she might be better! She moved! I saw her move!"

Danielle didn't want to leave On. She stayed with him while the others gathered around Su-lynn and Joyce again. Nick lifted his head after a moment and glanced toward them. "I'll be damned."

If possible, Sabin looked even more grim when he returned. He stared down at On for a long while and finally seemed to shake himself. Turning away, he approached Nick, spoke for a few moments and then left.

Danielle moved On's limp hand and clasped it between both of hers in her lap. His skin was cool. She had some idea that she was warming him up, but mostly she just wanted to maintain contact, as if she could somehow give him back the strength he'd given Joyce. "He went to make contact?" she asked Nick.

He nodded, lifting his head to scan the darkening sky. "I think it might be a good idea to gather some wood and make a fire. No telling how long we'll be here."

Nick was back before Sabin was. Danielle was beginning to feel anxious about his long absence when he came back. Everyone looked at him expectantly.

He studied On and Danielle for a moment and crouched in the front of the small fire Nick had started. "I think that he believed the tale. We will not know until the transport arrives—which he said that he would send at dawn."

"I thought he was in a rush," Nick remarked.

"I believe that he sees it as a punishment to make us wait and wonder. He was ... not pleased about Bork and Tande. When I told him the attack had convinced all of you

of the need for order and you'd agreed to take us to the weapons to see that they were secured, it improved his mood, though not as much as I had anticipated."

Nick frowned. "You think that means he's suspicious?"

Sabin frowned. "He is always suspicious—of everyone and everything. I do not believe he would have attained the position he holds if he were not. I can only say that he *appeared* to believe."

"Guess we'll find out in the morning," Nick said grimly.

Chapter Seventeen

They had little to nothing in the way of camping equipment. They'd avoided population centers, which were also the shopping meccas, and apparently the other survivors had followed a similar pattern, having escaped the cities once. Everything had been plentiful when they'd first arrived back on Earth, even though variety had been lacking and there were a lot of things that simply weren't to be had, but as time went on they'd found less and less. And they hadn't run across any actual novelty stores that carried camping equipment.

They debated whether or not to use the sheets they'd wrapped Joyce in to form a tent of sorts. The sky looked clear, but there was no saying it would stay that way—not that the sheets would help much in that respect—but they would serve as something of a wind break. Finally, since the day had been cool and the night promised to be cooler still, they decided to rob poor Joyce of the sheets and wrap her in clothing until they could move her to their make-shift tent. Danielle helped Ci gather brush when she'd pointed out that it might add a little comfort as cushion, but would certainly add a layer of insulation between them and the cold ground.

It was already growing dark by the time they'd formed a tent of the sheets, cleared away as many stabbing stones and sticks as they could and strewn the brush. Taking one of the coverlets, they spread it on the 'floor' of the tent. When they'd moved Joyce and On, who were both still unconscious, inside, they covered them with the remaining coverlet and everyone else filed down to the highway to pay their last respects to those who'd lost their lives.

Nick added the little bit of gasoline he'd been able to siphon from the tanks and they stayed until they were certain that the fire wouldn't spread and that they'd added enough wood to cremate the bodies as well as could be expected.

Their campfire had burned down to embers when they returned. Su-lynn crawled inside the tent to check on Joyce and On and stayed. Ci, Danielle, Sabin, and Nick settled around the fire for a while, going back over the plans they'd made and trying to find holes that needed to be filled.

Sabin informed them that he would meet the transport when it came and ascertain, if he could, if there was a threat, in which case he would do what he could to give them a head start to flee.

Nick informed him that no one would be running. The warning was a good idea, but they'd be waiting for the party if they came after them with bad intentions. Neither Joyce, nor On were in any condition to run, and Su-lynn not much better off.

When they'd drawn straws to divide up the night watch, Nick and Sabin ended up with the last two watches and Ci and Danielle the first two. The two women exchanged speaking glances and Ci got up to head into the tent to nap until her time.

Neither Nick nor Sabin moved.

Although she didn't think much about it at the time since it was still early, Danielle began to feel tension building the longer the two men lingered. She got up after

a little bit and left the two talking and went in search of privacy. She was tempted to inform them not to follow, but they seemed occupied enough and they had to know she needed to relieve herself.

"Don't go far," Nick said as she reached the edge of the light given off by the campfire.

Danielle rolled her eyes. "I doubt any wildlife would come within a mile of this place—not that there's much to worry about around here anyway."

"Watch for snakes."

Danielle halted and turned to look back at him. "Thanks! Now I feel better."

He grinned at her. "I was thinking about the two legged kind. I imagine the crawling ones have crawled off. Even if they haven't, it's cold enough they won't be moving as fast as you can."

When she'd taken care of her nature walk, she headed back to the funeral pyre to check on it and added a little more wood before she returned to camp. Nick had disappeared. Wondering if he'd decided to try to sleep for a while or had a nature call himself, she returned to the fire.

Sabin was staring at the dancing flames as if mesmerized. "This is very inefficient."

Danielle chuckled softly. One could always count on Sabin to point out that sort of thing. He sent her a curious look. She shook her head.

"Explain," he murmured.

"I don't know. It's just ... I guess it's the way you look at things. A lot of people would look at an open fire and think of it as a romantic setting. Others might think, better than nothing, and still others might just enjoy watching the flames dance."

He shifted to lie on his side, propping his upper body on one elbow and stretching his legs.

"What do you think?"

She lifted a hand to toy with a strand of his long hair. "I think you're beautiful in the firelight," she said, only half teasing.

He sent her a sharp look and chuckled.

Danielle smiled at the sound. "I like it when you laugh. It makes me feel very clever."

His gaze flickered over her face. "Does it?"

She studied his face in return. "Actually, no. It makes me glad that something I said amused you enough to get you to laugh, and sad at the same time because I don't think you've ever felt the joy of laughing much. Am I wrong?"

He turned to stare at the flames, considered the question. "I was content with the life I had on my world. But there is not much laughter, no. We are not inclined to enjoy the heights, nor suffer the great depths, but we are content—or were. After the great upheaval, the world recovered slowly. Generations suffered cruelly from nature, but in time they learned to deal with it and then there was not as much suffering or death. In time, they regained the knowledge that they had thought lost and then advanced far more quickly than any before.

"I am fortunate that I emerged into a world of peace and comfort and learning. I was content with the world that I had inherited ... until the grundts came. There was little contentment for anyone after that."

"How old were you?"

He glanced at her. "My age would not mean much to you. Perhaps some day I will calculate it for you in Earth years. Suffice to say, young—neither fully matured nor a child any longer, but somewhere between."

"What about your par ...?" Danielle broke off, embarrassed by her slip.

"My mentor had attained a great age, even for a mahn," he replied, as if he hadn't noticed.

She hesitated, but she didn't think it would offend him to speak her mind. "It seems so strange to me. I have a hard time trying to picture it in my mind."

He smiled faintly. "No more strange to you, I am certain, than your world and customs are to me."

Danielle frowned. "I got the impression that Ci's world was somewhat like ours, or at least their customs."

"Not a great deal, actually—from what I understand of it. I have not visited their world."

Danielle thought that over. "You mean the grundts had already taken their world?"

He shook his head. "Ours was the first on their path of conquest. They used our technology to conquer many more ... which is a great source of our discontent. It wasn't until they had nearly exhausted their own people that they began to induct those they had conquered into their war machines. We are not an aggressive species. They held us in contempt for that and were satisfied only to harvest our knowledge for a time. The more worlds they added to their 'confederation,' however, the more soldiers they needed and eventually our technology wasn't enough to satisfy them. They demanded that the mahns give them soldiers, as well."

"How long since you've been home?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "I have not mastered your time. A very long time now, though not so long that it has dimmed in my memory."

That could mean anything—years, certainly. He'd seemed to indicate that he was in his teens when the grundts first came, but he didn't look much more than thirty now. She supposed, at a stretch, that he could be a very youthful-looking thirty-five, which, she supposed, left somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen years to play with at the most if it had been several years after they'd first taken his planet before they'd taken him.

That was a long time to be away from home.

It made it far easier to understand why he wanted to return.

* * * *

Danielle was cold and tired and more than ready to try to sleep when it came time to wake Ci for her turn at watch. Sabin had stayed with her most of the time but had finally yielded to her suggestion to try to get some sleep. Crawling in without waking anyone, or bumping someone that was hurt, was no easy task, but she burrowed under the cover and took Ci's place. It was wonderfully warm after sitting outside for so long, warmed by Ci and warm on either side by her companion sleepers. She had no idea who they were, but she didn't particularly care, either. She snuggled up to their warmth until she'd chased the cold and surprised herself by dropping to sleep and sleeping deeply despite the hard ground, the strange night time noises from the woods, and the bruises

and aches from the wreck.

There was a hand cupping her breast when she woke up. She didn't find it particularly intrusive since the hand was merely curled around it, but when she finally roused enough to realize it shouldn't be there, she turned her head to see who it was holding her so familiarly. Black hair and a bandaged upper arm met her gaze, identifying the 'who' and she settled again, mulling over it.

On had appeared to be comatose after his attempt to heal Joyce, she remembered. The memory brought her fully awake and she tensed. Mindful of his injuries, though, she controlled the urge to whip over and look, instead shifting carefully until she lay on her back and could see his face.

His eyelids fluttered at her movement and slowly opened.

A slow smile curled her lips. "Feeling better, I see," she murmured teasingly.

He looked confused for a moment, then the hand resting against her breast tightened. He glanced down at his hand and then up at her face. "It fit very nicely," he said huskily.

"A basketball would fit nicely in that ham of yours," she said wryly. "Fortunately for me, I don't have to carry anything like that around."

He seemed to scan his memory for a reference and finally grinned. "This is perfect."

"Good answer!" Careful not to jostle him, she closed her eyes and stretched, discovering with a touch of surprise that she didn't feel nearly as stiff and sore as she would've expected after the accident the day before.

Lifting a hand, she examined it for the scratches that had been there the day before and then her face. She looked at On when she discovered her face, too, was free of the deep scratches from flying glass. Shifting to her side, she pushed upward on one arm to match her face to his and kissed him lightly. "You're a wonderful man, On Autere—but I'm going to kick your ass if you don't stop taking unnecessary risks!"

His lips curled when she pulled away. "I cannot fathom why it is that you people are always threatening to kick ass when you always target the face."

She sighed. "We're backwards that way." Reaching around him, she squeezed one of his buttocks. "Just watch yourself if anybody offers to punch your teeth in," she said, chuckling at the startled look on his face.

She discovered that, although it wasn't even completely light out yet, the tent was empty except for Joyce. Scooting away from On, she crawled out of the tent. There was no sign of Sabin, but Su-lynn and Ci were crouched around the coals from the fire the night before, watching Nick try to coax the fire up again with twigs to brew coffee in a can.

Snagging the bottle she'd been drinking from the night before and her duffle, she went into the woods to take care of nature and make a stab at grooming herself a little. She had no idea what had happened to her toothbrush or the toothpaste. Her duffle hadn't weathered the wreck well. Everything small seemed to have disappeared out of the tear in one side. She'd managed to find her brush, though, and a change of clothes that were relatively clean—cleaner, at any rate than the clothes she'd worn the day before and free of tears.

Nick had disappeared when she got back. Frowning, she joined Ci and Su-lynn for a few mouthfuls of coffee—the can hadn't been big enough to brew much and one sip

was enough to convince her that her teeth hadn't really been designed for filtering coffee grounds.

She'd just rinsed her mouth and spat when she heard sound of approach—more, it seemed to her than two. Her hand went automatically to her sidearm when she saw that it wasn't Nick and Sabin as she'd assumed, but rather Sabin and several strangers. As they emerged from the shadows, though, she recognized Du and Tra among the men.

Her mind leapt instantly to their last encounter and from there to turmoil as questions roiled through her mind. Before she could jump to her feet and rush to them with her questions, fingers coiled around the wrist of the hand still resting on her sidearm, redirecting her focus.

It was On, she discovered. He shook his head fractionally in warning.

She stared at him blankly, still too caught up in the rollercoaster of fear and hope that had assailed her the moment she recognized Du and Tra to grasp what he was trying to impart to her.

"The Mra has sent us an escort for safety. He thought it wise, after the attack, to send more soldiers ... and, of course, we will need help to load the weapons," Sabin said coolly.

His remarks finally penetrated and Danielle eased her hand from her weapon, struggling to beat her chaotic emotions into submission and find her wits. There were four grundts among them, she saw, realizing that might be a strong indication of distrust.

She didn't know what to think of the fact that the Mra had decided to send Du and Tra to join them.

Unless they'd volunteered?

She quashed that hopeful thought—that they'd asked to come just so that they could give her information about her boys. They wouldn't have risked exposure by requesting the detail, she didn't think, especially when Sabin had apparently ordered them to stay with the others to keep the mahns in line.

Did that mean the Mra was dangerously suspicious, had begun to put two and two together? Or was it just a chess move to ensure that he'd cut off the Au-tere from the others mahns—insurance in case they *were* thinking about doing something?

Sabin, hard to read at any time, wore a bland expression impossible to decipher. He glanced around at the campsite. "Where is Nick?"

"I think he went to take the leak," Ci volunteered smoothly—not quite accurately, but still with complete aplomb.

Sabin nodded, meeting On's gaze for a long moment. "We should carry Joyce to the lander first."

"I don't like moving her," Su-lynn said immediately.

Sabin nodded. "I understand, but she will fare much better once we have taken her where she can receive medical attention. You have virtually nothing here to treat her with or I would not have suggested it. I do not like the necessity of moving her, either."

Su-lynn looked like she would've argued more, but Joyce, herself, intervened.

"It's alright, Su," she called weakly from the tent.

Su-lynn instantly forgot anything else, rushing into the tent to join her joyfully.

Sabin turned to the grundts. "You must move her with extreme care. She has a serious head injury from the crash."

One of the grundts glanced around suspiciously. "It does not look as if anyone

else sustained much injury.”

“Except the dead,” Nick drawled dryly, stepping into the clearing.

Danielle could see the grundts’ starts of surprise at his sudden appearance, but except for one who made an abortive grab for his sidearm, the others merely tensed.

The grundt that had spoken before smiled with an effort. “It is a good thing that we are here to secure the peace. Such vicious attacks will cease once we have gathered the weaponry and restored order.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Nick agreed pleasantly. “We weren’t sure we were doing the right thing until those bastards attacked us yesterday. Proof positive that a gun in the wrong hands is a dangerous thing.”

The grundts seemed to relax. The speaker jerked his head at two of them. “Mind what he said about the injured female.”

They discovered when they’d gathered up the few personal belongings they still had and followed the party back to the lander that there were a half a dozen more soldiers, but these weren’t grundts. There were two other mahns and one was a drae, as Ci was, but Danielle had no idea what the other beings were or if they came from the same world as any of the others. Three of them, although humanoid, looked more like freshly plucked birds than anything else that came to her mind, right down to the beaks they had instead of mouths, the holes that formed their nostrils, and the reddish skin and enlarged pores. They’d been detailed to finish disposing of the corpses, evidently.

The funeral pyre they’d built, although they’d done their best, hadn’t completely consumed the bodies and had been relit. They’d also rounded up the bodies of Tande and Bork and set them ablaze.

Holding her breath at the stench of burning flesh, Danielle followed the others quickly up the gangplank. The interior of the lander had the look and smell of a vehicle that had seen a lot of use and carried many passengers. It didn’t actually smell offensive, but the variety of scents was certainly noticeable and it was impossible to dismiss the impression of a military transport from the ‘bare bones’ look of it to the number of utilitarian seats the thing boasted.

The men carrying Joyce had settled her across a row of seats in the very rear of the craft. Joyce had knelt beside her and was fussing with the pillows and cover she’d brought to add to her comfort. Danielle took a seat in the next row, watching Su-lynn try to secure Joyce in with safety buckles that hadn’t been designed for carrying anyone supine and resisting the urge to give her suggestions.

Nick stepped into the row she’d picked. “You don’t want to sit by the window?”

She didn’t particularly. That was why she hadn’t moved all the way down. Shaking her head, she tried to draw in enough to allow him to pass and take the seat himself. On settled to her left and then Ci, leaving the last seat for Su-lynn. When Danielle looked around for Sabin, she saw he’d taken the pilot’s seat. Du, she supposed, was seated in the co-pilot’s seat and Tra had taken a seat at the navigation console.

Seeing that they appeared to be waiting for the rest of the landing crew to board and that those who already had seemed preoccupied, Danielle leaned toward Nick. “Where are we going?”

He named a base somewhat to the north west of their position. Danielle mentally mapped it and then looked at him questioningly. He shrugged. “There’ll be plenty there to make the little aliens happy,” he murmured. “It was the best I could come up with that

wouldn't make them wonder why we were headed in this direction."

He had a point, but she couldn't help but wonder if they'd question the distance.

When everyone was finally aboard, the gangplank was raised and the hull sealed. The engines were so quiet that it took Danielle a few moments to realize Sabin had started them. She didn't think she would have then except for the vibration that began to travel through her feet and upward. Her belly tensed.

She must have looked as uneasy as she felt. On and Nick both reached to place a hand over hers at almost the same instant, and then sent one another challenging looks. Nick's was unmistakable—marked by a darkening of his skin, a lowering of his thick blond brows and a tight compression of his mouth. On's was far more subtle—more of a cold, superior narrowing of his eyes, and yet it conveyed the same sort of territorialism.

Danielle was jolted at the discovery. She'd seen that expression flicker across Sabin's face more than once when Nick had bristled at him like a cur dog snarling over the bone another dog had his eye on. She just hadn't realized that much the same thoughts and feelings must lie behind it as those Nick made no attempt to hide.

She knew she shouldn't have, but she turned both hands and grasped theirs, pretending she had no idea that they weren't exactly delighted that she'd taken both offerings. She'd barely done so when her stomach dropped from under her.

She hadn't braced herself to go straight up, but that was exactly what the craft did. Like a Harrier jet, it lifted upward until she'd finally managed to reclaim her stomach and then shot forward from a virtually still position at such a velocity that it plastered her to the back of her seat.

She was glad she hadn't taken the window seat. The blur of motion in her peripheral vision was enough to make her feel vaguely sick to her stomach. Apparently Nick wasn't favorably impressed with the view. When the craft finally settled into a cruising speed that lightened the pull against them, he closed the portal cover—either that or he decided it was a good excuse to pry his hand out of hers so that he could search for the way to close it with both hands.

She didn't think they'd pulled that many G's when she'd had a rocket strapped to her ass to shoot her into space. The thought gave her pause, however. She should've considered that this craft wasn't an ordinary airplane but rather a ship designed to make surface to space trips and back again. Her mind was simply trying to fit a square peg in a round hole because that was what she was used to and the only time she'd seen one in flight, even briefly, was when Du and Tra had met Sabin on the field.

The ride was more similar to fighter jet rides she'd taken than commercial jet flights, unnervingly bumpy as it skimmed across air currents at speeds she didn't doubt were super sonic. She had no idea if Sabin typically flew like a bat out of hell or if he was trying to cut the time because the destination they'd chosen to take the grounds to was so much further than their original one, but it made for a miserable forty-five minutes.

Danielle was glad when she felt the craft begin to decelerate despite her anxieties about what would come next. It seemed particularly ominous, though, that they hadn't been challenged at all when they must be approaching the air space of the base Nick had given them directions to. They hadn't seen any planes since they'd returned, of course. As bizarre as it seemed not to see any commercial aircraft, though, that was reasonable when everything else had been disrupted—eerie but understandable. The absence of any

military craft had even been somewhat understandable, but she'd assumed there were still *some* patrols—just nothing near the particular area where they were.

What had happened to their defense system? Had it completely collapsed? Had the chaos been so widespread, so out of control, that the entire military had been deployed to try to bring order? If that was the case, though, *where* had they been deployed? They hadn't seen any patrols out looking for looters.

Of course, that sort of thing would have been focused on the population centers where the problems had been multiplied, and they'd been avoiding them.

There seemed no explanation other than the fact that the military had been as decimated as the rest of the population.

When the ship had set down and the gangplank lowered, she discovered Sabin had landed outside the base perimeter. She tensed as she emerged, fully expecting to hear a warning shot and demand any second. With the exception of Joyce, and Su-lynn, who'd announced that she would stay to keep an eye on her, the entire group disembarked, however, and assembled at the foot of the ramp without incident.

Nick moved to the front of the group and walked briskly and with every evidence of confidence toward the gate. Danielle had to wonder if he felt, as she did, like he had a bull's eye painted on his forehead. The base was quiet. Beyond the breeze that stirred the trees and the trash that littered the ground, there was no movement and no sound. It was like a ghost town, creepier, somehow since it seemed untouched, unlike every other place they'd been that had shown signs of looting, riots, or damage from fire or explosion.

Danielle glanced behind them at the family base housing. Here and there, she could see toys that littered the lawns. An empty playground stood at the corner. The chains creaked faintly as the swings shifted in the wind.

Feeling cold fingers creep down her back, Danielle returned her attention to the gate they were approaching just as a soldier stepped out of the guard shack. Her heart jerked to a painful halt, but even she wasn't certain whether it was fear inspired or gladness. She felt an almost dizzying sense of relief, though, however much it complicated an already dangerously complex situation.

Before they'd even reached the gate, a military jeep shot around the corner of the barracks across from them and screeched to a halt at the gate. Four men, heavily armed, tumbled out.

If Nick hesitated, she couldn't tell it. He led them directly to the guard on post before he stopped.

"State your business!" the guard barked, his gaze flickering over the group.

"We need to speak to whoever's in charge."

"General McPherson isn't currently available. You can leave your name and a number where you can be reached and an appointment can be set up."

Nick's expression soured. "There aren't any fucking phones in operation that I've been able to discover." He gave the man his name, rank, and serial number. "This is a time sensitive matter. We need to speak to whoever's in charge ... now."

One of the other soldiers came forward. "What is your business?" he demanded as the guard had.

"National security. Are you in charge?"

The soldier, who was wearing the insignia of a sergeant, looked each of them over

with a hard faced expression that gave none of his thoughts away. "Secure their weapons, private," he growled finally when he met Nick's gaze again. "You should know better than to approach a base fully armed. You're lucky we didn't shoot you down and ask questions later, Captain."

Nick handed his side arm to the private butt first. "These aren't the times when any sane person would be traveling unarmed."

Danielle flicked a look at the visitors, wondering if they would allow themselves to be disarmed. To her relief, although they looked reluctant, the Au-tere's had readily presented their weapons. The drae and the trio she'd been told were salas followed suit. The grundts looked more than a little reluctant, but after a few tense moments they handed over their weapons, as well.

Summoning the other soldiers to move forward with a gesture, the sergeant returned to the vehicle and spoke into a radio. They waited in tense silence for about ten minutes before they heard the sound of another engine. A troop transport appeared at the end of the barracks where they'd first seen the small vehicle and lumbered up to the gate.

The sergeant jerked his head at them. "Load up."

Danielle glanced at the others uneasily but headed toward the end of the truck. The back, she discovered, was empty. Sabin helped her negotiate the steep climb into the back and she flicked a smile of appreciation at him even though she hadn't really needed the help. When she'd settled on one of the benches, she found herself between Nick and Sabin.

Waiting until everyone had climbed in and the truck was in motion, she flicked a questioning look at Nick. He shook his head. "I'm playing it by ear," he responded quietly, studying the men in the vehicle that had fallen in behind them.

They discovered when the truck finally came to a halt and they were told to get out that they'd been brought to the main headquarters building. They were escorted inside by the troops and told to find a seat and wait.

A few minutes later, an officer exited one of the closed office doors and approached them. "Captain LaRoche?"

Nick stood to attention and saluted. The officer returned the salute. "I'll speak to you in my office."

There was a rumble of disagreement from the grundts, but their leader silenced them.

"Would you care to tell me what the fuck those things are you brought onto my base!" the major demanded the moment he and Nick were alone.

"As far as I've been able to determine, the lizards represent an invasion force. The others claim to be rebels and have expressed a willingness to fight with us to destroy the invaders," Nick said grimly. "I don't have a lot of time to bring you up to speed. We're not talking national security. We're talking global and we need to move fast. The grundts have at least a dozen warships in orbit right now that are big enough to hold an invasion force we've got no hope of stopping ... unless we can destroy the fleet."

Major Learner paled slightly, but his expression hardened even more. "Ordinarily, I'd send you for a psyche evaluation. Under the circumstances ... what are we talking about here?"

"Their leader has already ordered the first phase—since they're parked over us, I'm guessing the plan is to sweep continent by continent. They arrived at the Pegasus

posing as a rescue mission—so we got a good look at what's up there.

"Phase one, as I understand it, is to contain the disease and eliminate that threat—clean up—search out pockets of resistance and convince them to lay down their arms or put down resistance by force if necessary, but their main goal is to disarm us and make sure they've contained our nukes."

Something flickered in the man's eyes. "We don't have nukes here."

"I know, but if I remember correctly, you do have MOABs."

The man's eyes narrowed. "And you expect us to hand them over just to try to pacify the fucking aliens?"

Nick glanced at the door. "Trojans," he said more quietly. "I don't want to have to use more nukes than we have to—not when they're liable to cause us more harm than the fucking aliens. We don't even know if we can actually destroy them with the ICBMs, although the rebels have a plot to disable the ships and make them vulnerable. I'd still rather not take any chances.

"They'll confiscate our weapons and transport them to their armory—on the ships. I want you and your men to act as if you've been ordered to give them up—or whatever. Just make sure you fit them with a little surprise—or a couple of backups, just to be on the safe side. They may or may not know how to disarm them. They might not think it's necessary given what they've seen so far. Do you have men who could fit them with a back-up detonator? It wouldn't hurt to pack a timed device, as far as that goes, but it would have to be on at least a twelve hour delay and that could throw a wrench into things when we don't have a clear idea of when their Mra is going to order phase two. It'll take me a while to bring the command center up and reprogram the nukes."

The major frowned. "Just who the fuck are you?"

Nick's lips tightened with reluctance. It disgusted him to have to impugn *her* reputation. It was bad enough that he'd been the instrument used to ruin a brilliant political career and cost her a second term in the White House but, he thought, under the circumstances, she would completely agree that it was necessary and of far less importance than this situation. "Let's just say I might not have the highest security, but I was intimately acquainted with someone who did."

The major gaped at him for a long moment. "Shit! I thought you looked familiar!"

Nick felt his face reddening. "I won't expect that rumor to start up again. I'm only telling you because I want you to know I'm dead serious and I *can* see this through. I need you—the country needs you to make the right decision here."

"This is still way the fuck above my pay grade," the major shot back at him.

"Maybe, maybe not. That depends on how many officers are left that are higher ranking."

Before the major could respond, they heard a tremendous scuffle outside. Even as the two of them surged toward the door, it slammed open.

Chapter Eighteen

"The grundts were becoming suspicious," Sabin said coolly. "We were forced to act. We can not keep them unconscious long and still convince them that nothing has happened."

Nick nodded and turned to the major. "This is Sabin Au-tere, leader of the rebels. Can you handle the order, Sir?"

The major stared at Sabin for a long moment and finally met Nick's gaze. "We can handle it. I'll speak to the men."

Sabin frowned. "The men who were set to guard us are also unconscious." He shrugged at the look the major sent him. "I thought it better than allowing the grundts to kill them."

The major still wasn't appeased. He was furious, but Nick suspected that was because it unnerved him that the visitors had managed to take out so many men without a single shot being fired. For himself, if he hadn't hated his guts, he would've almost been willing to pat Sabin on the back. Nothing else, he felt sure, could've cinched the matter so quickly or completely.

Nodding curtly, the major led the two of them out through the waiting area. As Sabin had said, the grundts were unconscious and also the soldiers who'd been on guard. Everyone else was gathered around the unconscious soldiers except for Sabin's brothers.

Sabin spoke to them in his own language and the three of them continued through the room and out of headquarters.

"What was that about?" Nick asked when they were seated in the major's jeep.

"They are to remove the soldiers from sight, allow us twenty parsecs, and then rouse the grundts with ..." He hesitated, frowning. "Implant in their minds what we wish them to believe, that we passed through under escort of the guards to examine the weapons. They will be angry, but they will not realize that we have been gone long enough to instruct your men on what must be done."

The major looked him over uneasily. "I don't know what twenty parsecs are, but I hope to fuck its enough."

"I also," Sabin agreed. "A parsec is a unit of time measuring approximately one and one half times the unit you refer to as a minute."

"That isn't much," the major grumbled, "but it's more than I expected." He used the radio to summon the men to assemble in hanger C.

Nick felt his gut tighten with frustration when they arrived and found only a small platoon assembled. He didn't think it would've made him feel as bone deep sick if he hadn't gotten his hopes up to begin with at the discovery that the base wasn't deserted as it had first appeared. "This is all the men?"

The major sent him a hard look. "We're short-handed," he said dryly. "At this, I've got twice the men I had last week. There was a full battalion when the base deployed to handle the quarantines and put down riots, but we've been bleeding ever since. I sent out a few squads to try to round them up at first, but when the squads didn't

come back I realized there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do. The family men wanted to try to get their own families to safety when the pandemic hit us."

Leaving Sabin and Nick near the door, he strode briskly toward the assembled men to address them.

Sabin looked the hanger over curiously. "The grundts will not be pleased when they discover there are no nuclear weapons here. They are liable to suspect this for the ruse it is."

Nick shrugged. "I have a feeling they're going to feel a little different when they see the MOABs. They're pretty fucking impressive."

"What is this MOAB?"

Nick grinned abruptly. "We call it the mother of all bombs. Next to the nukes, it's the most powerful weapon we have."

The major returned. "The men have their instructions," he announced, flicking a glance at Sabin.

Nick nodded, feeling some of his tension ease.

The men had already removed three and set to work on them when the rest of their party arrived. As Sabin had predicted, the grundts stalked into the hanger radiating fury. They came to an abrupt halt, however, when they saw the massive MOABs.

When the party had wandered off to inspect the bombs and the men working on them, the major slipped a small, thin device into Nick's palm. Nick looked down at it, lifted his brows, and then casually shoved his hands into his pants pockets.

"Just dial 1-800-yur-fckd when the time comes," the major murmured. "There'll be a clone in every package delivered."

Nick couldn't help but grin. "The communications sat's still up?"

"The one we'll be bouncing this off of is. My master sergeant suggested it since you'd indicated that timing was critical. With that, you should be able to orchestrate a one-man war."

Nick nodded. "Not hardly. This will be the first salvo and, hopefully, damned effective. You're going to need to do what you can to muster the ground forces to repel the invaders that have already landed—and any others that make it through."

The major nodded curtly and left him, striding forward to meet the grundts. After studying the activities for several moments through narrowed eyes, Nick joined the group, satisfied that the rebels among them were running interference to make certain the grundts had no idea what was going on.

He still didn't completely trust them. It eased his mind that he didn't have to place blind faith in their motives.

"The Mra will be pleased by the show of faith," the leader of the grundts, aptly named Jert as far as Nick was concerned, was saying as he reached them.

The major nodded. "I'm not particularly happy about it, but I'm a soldier. Once Captain LaRoche had assured me the orders came down from high command and explained the situation we certainly don't want weapons of mass destruction in the wrong hands."

Jert eyed Nick speculatively. "I will contact the Mra and report so that he can send a lander to secure the weapons here. There are no nuclear weapons here, however."

Nick feigned a look of surprise. "I guess they moved them."

The major took his cue. "They did ... when they deployed the bulk of the base."

They didn't want to leave any here with no more than a battalion on duty. I'm surprised high command didn't know. I would've thought the order had come down through them, but communications were already spotty then. I suppose the general made the decision and didn't get the chance to report in."

Nick nodded. "They'll be able to track them from the center."

Jert divided a suspicious look between them. "You will take us there now."

Nick shrugged. "You didn't want to wait for the landers to get here?"

He could see the grundt's suspicions shift to the possibility that he was being lured away by a bigger carrot. He could also see that the grundt didn't like the idea of staying when the suggestion had been made by a human. "We will leave half the men here to oversee and you will take me to this center."

"Fine," Nick agreed after only a brief hesitation. "The sooner the nukes are secured, the better. We don't need a bunch of trigger happy idiots like the ones that attacked us getting their hands on them. Not that I think they had the brains to blow their noses, but even a monkey can push buttons."

* * * *

As terrifying as the possibility of discovery was now that they'd committed themselves to the plot to try to destroy the grundts and the certainty of an imminent global war, Danielle couldn't seem to focus on much besides her personal dilemma. No opportunity to speak to either Du or Tra presented itself, however, until they reached the hanger where the MOABs were being prepped for delivery and their groups merged and then dispersed as the leader of the grundts went outside to contact the Mra. Evidently, Du had been looking for the same opportunity. The moment they found themselves far enough from the others to have a little privacy, he spoke.

"I deeply regret, but there is no news for you as of yet."

Danielle hadn't realized just how hopeful she was until her hopes were dashed. She struggled with her emotions, gulping deep breaths to try to tame the rise of misery threatening to envelop her.

A look of panic flickered through Du's eyes. "Do not despair. The search continues. If it is possible, they will be found. There is ... too much chaos to make this an easy task."

Danielle nodded her understanding, unable to form words for fear of what might escape instead. On approached them. Settling a hand lightly along the back of her neck, he squeezed gently. A soothing sort of warmth seemed to flow into her. She wasn't certain if it was something he'd done with his ability or merely the comfort of his touch, but it calmed her.

A frown flickered briefly across his features as he allowed his hand to fall to his side. Du bowed and left them with every evidence of relief.

Danielle glanced up at him. "Do you think there's a chance ...?"

He studied her for a moment and looked away. "I do not want to give you false hope when this is so important to you. I cannot calculate the odds either way, but there is certainly a chance." He seemed to wrestle with something and finally reach a decision. "There is one in your keeping whose future depends solely upon you. It is imperative, for his sake, that you take the greatest of care of yourself."

Danielle gaped at him blankly as he stroked her cheek lightly and left her still struggling to untangle the cryptic remarks. She was still in a hazy fog of mixed emotions

and confusion when their party split up and she discovered they'd be traveling on without the others.

She noticed, dimly, that both Nick and Sabin glanced at her worriedly from time to time as they made their way back to the front gate and then to the lander, but she was only vaguely aware that something about her behavior had struck them as odd. The first of the landers the grundts had summoned arrived as they were going up the gangplank, however, and it was enough to redirect everyone's attention away from her.

One explanation occurred to her repeatedly, but each time it did, she dismissed it as absurd, unlikely, impossible. Try though she might, however, nothing else came to mind that seemed to fit what On had told her.

How could he tell that she was pregnant, though, when she hadn't noticed anything, herself, to indicate the possibility?

The thought tantalized her one moment and filled her with desolation the next. Had he merely suggested it because he knew how close she was to complete despair? Had he done it because he knew how badly she needed something to hold on to to keep her sanity? And, if that was the case, was it still true? Or was it a lie to help her hold herself together?

She couldn't give up on the children she had even if what he'd said was true! It just made it that much harder! Because, if it was true, she might risk its life trying to save the others. She wouldn't have counted the cost before. Now it gave her pause, and maybe that was what he'd intended?

She was so caught up in wrestling with her thoughts that it seemed they'd barely become airborne when they began to descend again. The distraction was so all-consuming, in fact, that she was confused for several moments about what was happening around her.

On approached her and crouched beside her seat when everyone else had gotten up and filed out, laying a hand lightly on her knee. "Have I erred in telling you this?"

Danielle swallowed convulsively several times before she could speak. "You meant that I'm pregnant?"

"You are."

Danielle frowned. "I don't see how I could be."

He smiled faintly. "Even I know how this was accomplished, though I have not participated in such a thing before."

Danielle felt her face redden. "I know that!" she said testily. "It's just ... I know it's possible. It just seems so ..."

He studied her for a moment. "Inconvenient?"

Discomfort wafted through her. "How can you tell when I can't?"

"I sensed the presence when I touched you to give comfort. There was the distress of two. It is the only explanation."

The suggestion that her own distress was felt by the budding life within her upset her more. "He feels my ... emotions?"

"The child shares everything with you."

Danielle digested that for a moment, still suspicious that he was using the possibility to force her to think of someone besides herself—and the boys. "It's a boy?" she asked tentatively.

"I cannot say that—nor who fathered the child, although I confess it is unlikely

that it was either me or Sabin.”

Danielle abruptly felt like crying. She hadn't realized until he'd said it that she was hopeful it might have been Sabin—and then she felt horrible for hoping that when she saw the understanding in On's eyes. “Nick won't be thrilled,” she mumbled.

She wasn't sure *she* was happy about it. There had been a time when there wouldn't have been any doubt, when she'd thought Nick was a wonderful prospective father for Cary and Kyle and considered having his baby. He'd rejected all of them, though, when he'd dumped her the moment she considered being more than his lover. It wasn't that she couldn't forgive him for it so much as the fact that he'd proven untrustworthy. If anything, the things that had happened since made it all the more imperative that she not consider tying herself in any way to anyone unwilling to fight for them when they needed him. On's thoughts almost seemed to echo her own.

“Then he does not deserve to know,” On responded coolly. “It would give me the greatest joy. The child deserves nothing less than that. He is hope for a future.”

Maybe, Danielle thought morosely as she took her restraints off and followed On from the craft.

If it survived.

If they had a future.

It seemed likely they'd know before much longer.

The smells nearly knocked her out when they emerged from the craft and she discovered they'd landed in the center of a metropolitan area. It wasn't recognizable, at first, but when she'd covered her mouth and nose and looked around, her heart almost stopped in her chest as her gaze settled on the monolith rising toward the sky in the distance.

Shock rolled over her and then the most horrible sense of desolation she'd felt since they'd returned to Earth. She turned blindly away from the sight and found herself face to face with one of the grundts.

“This city has great significance?” he asked, eagerness clear in his voice.

It took all Danielle could do to refrain from attacking his smirking face. Someone settled a hand on her shoulder and she forced the rage she felt to a manageable level. “It's the capitol city,” she said tightly.

She didn't know whether to be grateful for her intervention or not when she discovered it was Ci. She supposed she was, but the urge to expel her frustration was hard to hold inside without being sick.

Luckily, the grundt was so excited about the revelation that he dismissed her.

“You will have vengeance in time,” Ci said quietly.

Revenge against who, Danielle thought despairingly? She hated the vultures that had swarmed to feast on them and yet, as far as anyone knew, the disaster was of their own making. Every building within sight was gutted. She didn't look closely enough to see if bodies littered the rubble, but the smell of death was as thick in the air as the smoke from the latest fires. The disease had been the catalyst and they'd done the rest to themselves. There *was* no one to blame.

She'd already begun to despise the grundts, though. Regardless of their innocence in actually having a hand in the disaster, it was easy to see they expected to reap the benefits.

What was left, as meager as it was, was *theirs* by damn! It was all she could do to

pretend not to notice the proprietary way they looked everything over—as if it was already theirs. They could rebuild and make a future for their children and grandchildren if they were left in peace to pick up the pieces!

Shaking her anger the best she could, she tried to focus, knowing it was important for all of them to keep their heads.

The building Nick was leading them to was, like everything else, a shambles, burnt out with only a few walls still standing. She didn't know why Nick had led them here, but she discovered that, as little as she trusted him on a person level, she had every confidence in him on a professional level. Whatever he had planned, she believed, was their best chance.

She just wished she knew what that was and hoped fervently that it wasn't going to turn out to be the wild goose chase it looked like to her. She didn't think the grundts would be able to maintain their façade as visitors whose only interest was in helping them to restore order if they began to think they were being led around with empty promises.

They were already examining the building suspiciously, she saw as they reached the portico and climbed the steps. As if he knew exactly where he was going, despite the mess, Nick strode confidently inside, pushing at rubble here and there to clear the way and climbing over walls that couldn't be moved.

As near as she could tell, they'd reached roughly the center when Nick stopped. After surveying the area, he began clearing again. She met Sabin's questioning gaze with a shrug and then focused on helping to clear away the rubble. They unearthed a metal box after about thirty minutes—an enormous vault, it seemed to her.

Nick summoned Sabin to help him turn the wheel that seemed to be a manual override for the lock. It was clearly a strain even for the two of them, but the crusted mechanism finally gave. When the door swung open, the similarity between it and a vault increased until she discovered that the foot thick door opened to a stairwell. They descended in virtual darkness, dispelled only by tiny emergency lights that lined the stairs.

To Danielle's relief, they reached a landing with far better lighting and found themselves facing elevator doors.

Nick moved to the keypad beside the elevator doors and began punching in numbers. His efforts were rewarded with the mechanical whir of the lift and the elevator began to rise.

An odd sense of unreality swept over Danielle and not just at the discovery of an elevator beneath the White House that led deeper into the earth. Nick hadn't randomly punched the security code in. He'd known it.

He looked extremely uncomfortable when he noticed her staring at him, which only deepened her sense of foreboding.

Puzzling over it, she looked away.

She hadn't had any idea there was any sort of security bunker beneath the White House, but it was hardly an amazing discovery. Extraordinary measures were taken to guard their leaders. It didn't even make sense *not* to have something like this close enough the president could reach it within moments, not when life could be measured in minutes or even seconds in the event of an attack.

Just what sort of Washington 'insider' had Nick been, she wondered, to not only

know where it was and precisely how to reach it, but to have the code? There couldn't be more than a handful of people who knew it if there were even that many.

It seemed unlikely he would tell her, even if she had the nerve to ask, and she certainly wasn't going to, but it wasn't just surprising that Nick knew so much. It was unnerving and it made her wonder who Nick LaRoche really was.

He hadn't been the sexy 'boy next door' type she'd originally thought. He'd disabused her of that notion very quickly.

And maybe he wasn't the daring devil-may-care rogue she'd decided he was either?

It seemed they stood waiting for a very long time before the chime sounded, announcing the arrival of the cubicle, and that was almost as unnerving as everything else she'd just discovered.

Just how deeply did this thing go, she wondered, feeling a shiver along her spine as she filed in with everyone else?

The panel on the elevator looked like something from a high rise.

Not comforting.

It was a large elevator, but still crowded with so many of them—crowded enough she thought it wouldn't attract much notice if she sidled a little closer to Sabin for comfort. He surprised her by settling a hand along her hip at her waist and giving her a light squeeze. Emboldened by the encouragement, she turned brazen, surreptitiously reaching behind her to clasp his other hand, and then leaned back against him.

It was as close to a hug as she could manage without drawing unwanted attention and it comforted her and left her wanting at the same time.

She didn't know what was about to happen, but their mission took on a reality that she hadn't really felt before—not while they were struggling to reach this place and not even while they'd sat around the campfire and discussed a battle for their world. She felt almost as if she'd departed from reality from the time she'd set foot on Earth again. It had the feeling of a nightmare one couldn't seem to wake up from but, at the same time, it was too real, too horrible, and painful.

Even finding herself seeking comfort from a being she knew to be alien to her world seemed too surreal to accept. They'd discovered life beyond earth years before, substantiated it, but—microbes, primitive, simple organisms. They hadn't found anything complex, nothing to prepare them for the culture shock of being surrounded by aliens of so many species, of being invaded.

Despite the warmth she leached from Sabin's nearness, she was shivering by the time the cubicle finally reached the lowermost level and the doors opened.

The smell of death was almost a slap in the face, despite the fact that they'd had to deal with it for weeks.

There were some things nothing in the world could protect one from.

The disease had found its way down and claimed more victims.

Ignoring the smell, Nick led the way out and down the dimly lit corridor to a vast, cavernous room at the far end. He had to key in another code to enter. A musty gust of air hit them as the doors opened, but thankfully it didn't carry the smell that had become all too familiar.

"No doubt they're all in the infirmary," Nick said grimly. "They would've tried to contain it."

The room lit up to a brightness that was almost blinding as they walked in. Everyone paused to allow their sight to adjust. The stranger in Nick's skin strode away from them purposefully and began to flip switches and punch buttons as he made his way down a long console.

Jert wandered off to look everything over. He returned within a few minutes. "Where are the nuclear weapons?"

Sabin stepped up behind him and dropped a hand to his shoulder. Jert wilted as if he was a puppet whose strings had been cut. Grasping the grundt beneath the arms, Sabin lifted his crumpled form from the floor, dragged him to a chair, and dropped him in to it.

It wasn't quite what Danielle had expected.

On, she saw, had dealt similarly with the other grundt that had accompanied them.

Nick flicked a distracted glance in their direction. "How long will they be out?"

"As long as necessary."

Nick seemed to think it over. "I wouldn't mind having confirmation that our packages have arrived," he said. "I don't suppose you can arrange that?"

Sabin looked around. "I believe we may have need of restraints for that."

"Try the third door down the corridor on your left. It's a supply room," Nick said grimly. "I believe I'll see if I can bring us up a visual of the battlefield."

Danielle watched him for several moments and finally looked around for a place to sit. On joined her when she'd dropped heavily in the swivel chair nearest her, crouching down to study her. "They are certain to have food and water, and none of us have eaten. Would you like for me to fetch you something?"

It seemed almost obscene even to think of food in the light of what they hoped they were about to accomplish and yet the body had needs—and if On was right, it wasn't just her she needed to look out for. She nodded, wondering if the hollowness in the pit of her stomach was hunger or pure terror.

When the huge screens at the front of the room came to life, she no longer had to wonder. Her stomach went weightless as a view of space from the cameras aboard Pegasus filled the screen and then everything inside of her twisted into a painful knot as the panning cameras focused on the invasion fleet. They could see the smaller crafts they used as landers docking and taking off from the main ships, but of course there was no way to tell what they were doing beyond that—whether they were carrying stolen cargo aboard or prisoners or if the small crafts leaving were bringing down soldiers or merely returning for more filched goods.

After studying them for some minutes, Nick turned his attention to the console again. Two of the three screens went blank. He punched in commands for several moments and checked the screens again. Frowning when there was no change, he continued punching and glancing toward the screens until he'd pulled up a different view and then another and Danielle finally realized that he was checking satellites, either to try for another view of the invasion fleet or simply to see which were still operational. Finally he stopped and turned to look at the screens. A look of disbelief crossed his features followed by exhilaration.

Sabin and On had returned. Sabin had handed off the bindings he'd found to the draes and the salas. When he had, he turned to survey the monitors himself.

"This is excellent. I had feared we might not have the means to judge the

effectiveness of the initial assault.”

Nick chuckled shakily. “Better than that. They haven’t disarmed the military satellites. I checked. They’re still fully functional and fully armed. We have three, each with a dozen warheads.”

Sabin nodded, evidencing no great surprise. “We had noted two. The Mra was more interested in retrieving those from the surface since those in orbit were readily available to him.”

Nick sent him an incredulous look. “He wasn’t worried about collecting the nukes we have in orbit?”

Sabin shrugged. “It is always a delicate operation—collecting the weapons of mass destruction of a species—but we were already cognizant of the fact that communications on the surface were nonexistent. They are fixed and the warheads trained upon targets on the surface. We had no reason to believe there was anyone still alive who might use them against us. In any case, they were judged too small to pose a significant threat to the shields and they appear to have been designed to hit stationary targets. They do not have the capability for rapid realignment.”

Nick frowned. Dragging up a chair, he sat down at the key board and began tapping to bring up data. “I can realign them, though,” Nick said after a few moments.

“They will notice if the satellites begin to change alignment,” Sabin said warningly.

“They’ve only got one in their line of sight,” Nick said pointedly.

“And that is the only one that might pose a threat. Beyond that, they will instantly know that you are preparing to attack and the Mra will order phase two.”

“The only one right now. I’m realigning the two they can’t see and adjusting the speed—just a couple of bursts to bring them around. It’ll bring them into a little higher orbit, but that could be a good thing—as long as I don’t miss.”

Sabin still didn’t look particularly happy about the situation, but he didn’t argue further. “By my calculations the landers carrying the munitions to the fleet should have arrived by now.”

Nick nodded. “It takes two to enter the launch code sequence for the ICBMs—or alter them.”

Du stepped forward and bowed. “I have the latest coordinates of the fleet.”

“I can calculate the coordinates,” Nick responded.

Du shook his head. “They are due to shift into a new orbit in the next thirty minutes, Earth time. The shifts are random in both timing and direction. The coordinates I have are for the next shift.”

Nick’s face hardened. “If your intel is off, we’ll miss the fucking ships completely!”

Du stared at him blankly. “The mahns who programmed them are completely reliable.”

Nick still looked unconvinced. “If they’re so reliable I don’t see why they couldn’t also program a shield and drive failure and make the ships sitting ducks for us.”

It was clear that Du didn’t instantly grasp the reference to ducks, but he understood the implication quickly enough. “The computer would instantly alert the crew if that was attempted—will, if it is still necessary. This is why those who volunteered had to agree with the full understanding that it would cost them their life. It

must be done very precisely in coordination with the launch of the nuclear weapons so as not to allow them time to correct or to attempt to evacuate.”

It sounded completely reasonable and Nick still didn't like it. He saw no alternative but to trust his instincts where the mahns were concerned, however—and trust that his back-up plan would pull them out of the mess if he was wrong.

Du took up station on the mirror console and keyed the override code Nick gave him. Danielle sat listening while they called out codes to one another and checked and rechecked their data, feeling her nerves tighten until she felt like she would scream.

Sabin dragged a chair up, dropped into it, and faced her. His knees bumped hers as he sat forward and picked up the MRE On had brought her, examining it. “This smells good. Looks good, also.”

“Eat it if you're still hungry,” Danielle offered. “I'm not really hungry at the moment.”

He fixed her with a stern look. “It will do you no good for me to eat it.”

“My stomach's in knots. I don't think I can.”

“A little then.”

She didn't know whether to glare at him for his persistence or smile at the coaxing note in his voice. Instead of arguing further, she took the meal from him and took a small bite, chewing slowly.

“I have sent Tra to take word to as many as he can reach to make ready to fight. Uter and Jaate will bring Joyce and Su-lynn down here. I can not imagine a safer place than this.”

“I doubt there are many safer than this,” Danielle agreed ruefully.

Sabin nodded. “I wish I want you to stay here when we go.”

Danielle paused, swallowing the bite of food she'd been chewing with an effort that nearly brought tears to her eyes. “When you go?” she echoed in dismay, her mind leaping instantly to his assertion that he would leave Earth and return home.

He took her hand when she set her meal aside, clasping it loosely between both of his. “We have taken every possible scenario into consideration in formulating our plans, but there are far too many variables to calculate all or to adjust as swiftly as may be necessary when and if the need arises. There will be a battle on the ground, regardless. All that remains to be seen is how it will play out and how difficult it will be to triumph ... if we do. I will have more peace of mind if I know you are here, safe from harm.”

Danielle thought for several moments that she would burst into tears, partly because he'd brought the battle ahead so vividly to mind and partly because he'd never made it more clear how deeply he cared for her. She was pretty sure no one had ever said anything nearly as sweet to her. “What about my peace of mind?” she asked a little hoarsely. “Don't you think I'll be just as worried about you?”

He looked surprised and then as if he couldn't decide whether to be gratified or insulted. Clearly, he felt both. “As gratified as I am to hear that, I can not stay here and allow you to go in my stead. You are far stronger than I in that respect, but neither can I take you. I am a male of the mahns. We are too single-minded to succeed with heart and mind divided. One task will almost certainly suffer the consequences of neglect while we are focused on the other.”

It took Danielle a few moments to realize he was joking, or had at least made the comments tongue-in-cheek. She uttered an inelegant snort of laughter.

His eyes gleamed with amusement. "You are the only one who finds humor in anything that I say."

"Maybe I know you better?"

His gaze flickered over her face. She thought for several moments that he would kiss her. Instead he pushed his chair away and stood, leaving her to join Nick, On, and Du when he heard Nick comment on the coordinates. "If your intel was correct, they should be moving any minute now." He flicked a glance at Sabin when he joined them. "Now would be a good time to see if the packages were delivered."

Nodding, Sabin moved to the grundt named Jert and touched his fingertips to the base of his skull. Jert's head popped up. For a handful of seconds, he looked confused and then he began jerking against the restraints. When he realized he couldn't free himself, he turned a deadly look upon Sabin. "Traitor!" he spat. "I knew the mahns were not to be trusted!"

Sabin's face hardened. "I am a patriot—to my people," he said tightly. Lifting his communicator, he held it front of Jert's face. "Now, you will hail the Mertosin and ascertain if the weapons your people confiscated have been taken aboard."

Chapter Nineteen

Jert's eyes widened for a moment in shock before they narrowed again. "You have sabotaged us!"

"Good guess," Nick said dryly. "Make the call."

"I will do no such thing!" Jert snarled. "Do you think we are stupid? They will check the weapons when they take them aboard and they will disassemble whatever device you had your men place in them!"

"I figured they'd try. I don't intend to give them time to."

Jert growled at them, wrenching at the bindings.

"I don't think he's planning on cooperating," Nick said grimly. "I hope you had a backup plan."

Nodding, Sabin stepped behind him and cupped the grundt's skull. Almost the instant he did, the grundt's face went slack. His eyes dulled. Flipping the communicator to open the channel, Sabin held the device in front of the grundt's face. The image of another grundt appeared on the screen. "Lymra Jert!"

"Have the landers I sent with weapons been unloaded?"

"Yes, Lymra! We have taken the bulk into the hold of the Mertosin. The remainder was sent to be unloaded on the other ships as we are nearing capacity. You have located the nuclear weapons?"

"We have. Are the ships en route?"

"Allow me to check."

The screen went blank for a handful of seconds before the face reappeared. "Yes, Lymra Jert. They have been unloaded and are on their way to the surface again. If you will give me your coordinates, I will direct them to you."

Jert named coordinates. "We will be sending the nuclear warheads up to you very shortly."

"I will relay your information to the Mra."

Cutting communications, Sabin released the grundt's head and stepped back, wiping his hand along the leg of his trousers absently. "I must disinfect this," he said with disgust when he'd studied his hand.

"*That's* how you got Bork and Tande to report in?" Nick demanded.

Sabin glanced at him. "It is repulsive entering their minds, but yes."

Nick shook off his shock. "Are we a go?"

Sabin hesitated. "You have confidence this will work?"

"If *you* don't, order your saboteurs to stay."

After studying Nick for a long moment, Sabin flipped the communicator open again. His hail was redirected per his request to Au-Tal. "It is raining, Septin Au-Tal." He paused for a moment. "Bring your overcoat when you come."

There was a long silence on the other end. "Repeat?"

Sabin repeated the cryptic message.

Nick was staring at him with a faint grin when he closed communications again.

"Damned if that didn't sound like some of our code."

Sabin lifted his dark brows, but smiled faintly in return. "Where do you think we learned it?" He sobered almost at once. "The computer will be on to him inside of three parsecs. If he abandons post and this does not work ..."

"Well we're about to find out. How long will it take him to abandon ship?"

"He works in the cargo bay. One parsec to alert the others, three to upload the program. If he is fortunate enough to get aboard one of the departing landers ... another two to five parsecs."

"Can you translate that into minutes?" Nick asked dryly.

Sabin frowned thoughtfully. "Approximately ten minutes."

"It'll take half that to get the ICBMs ready to launch."

Ignoring Sabin, he focused on entering the data and the entire room fell deathly quiet except for the sounds of the keys and the exchanges between him and Du. Feeling her fingers begin to cramp, Danielle discovered that she was gripping the arms of her chair in white knuckled fists. She had to focus on her hands to release her hold. She was staring unblinkingly at the screens when she saw several dust-like particles shoot out from three of the enormous ships. "What's that?" she asked breathlessly.

Sabin narrowed his eyes and then he moved closer to the screen. "Escape pods. Nick!"

Nick's head jerked up. At the same time, his hand went to his pants pocket and he withdrew the cell phone the major had given him. "Good thing he put it on speed dial!"

Danielle could hear the ring tone from where she was sitting. The strains of the National Anthem made goose bumps erupt all over her. "Nothing's happening!"

Nick's face hardened. "Give it a minute, baby. It takes a few minutes for the MOABs ..." He broke off when they saw that the Mertosin seemed to be vibrating.

"There!" On said, pointing to one of the other ships. "There is something happening ..."

Abruptly cracks appeared in the huge ships, and then pieces began to fly away in every direction. "Launch! Now! Now! Now!" Nick bellowed.

A row of smaller screens lit suddenly, showing a dozen ICBMs rising from their silos and then disappearing into the sky until all that could be seen was a trail of fire and smoke. A huge piece of one of the ships zoomed into view on one of the cameras mounted on the Pegasus and one of the big screens suddenly went black. Danielle lurched against the back of her seat as the chunk of metal seemed to fly straight toward them.

"The MOABs have disabled more than half of the fleet," Sabin murmured, disbelief evident in his voice. "The flying debris alone has crippled the Sbingie, the Lestrade, the Jjenthe ... what sort of weapon did you say these were?"

"We don't call them the mother of all bombs for nothing," Nick said with a pleased snort.

"The Miatate and the Tisdial have launched their fighters," On said, pointing to what looked like swarms of bees emerging from bee hives.

Almost before he could finish the sentence one of the ICBMs found its target. Three more slammed into other ships in such quick succession it was hard to count the impacts. Blinding white light filled the screens for several moments, almost seeming to

pulsate with each successive blast. Danielle looked away, quickly covering her eyes. When she thought it was safe to look again, she saw that the light, smoke, and debris was slowly dissipating.

Dismay filled her. Three of the ships still looked almost completely untouched.

"Fuck! They must have blown up the nukes before they could make impact."

"They are damaged," Sabin said grimly. "I could not see how many of the fighters avoided the blasts."

On moved closer to the screens, scanning them while Nick and Du worked the console to fire off more missiles. Abruptly, he pointed to an area of space that seemed to be fluctuating. Danielle stared at it hard, trying to decide if it was her eyes, the cameras on the satellites, or some frightening result of the atomic blasts.

"They are coming!"

A ship nearly the size of the Mertosin appeared on the screen where there'd been nothing but wavering space before. Behind it, four more that were perhaps half its size appeared in quick succession.

"What the fuck?" Nick growled.

Sabin shot a quick look in his direction. "I told you that they would send for the remainder of the fleet if they were given the chance! We needed to lure them here to destroy them!"

"With what?" Nick bellowed. "Do you have saboteurs on them, too? Because if you don't we sure as fuck aren't going to destroy them if they can pop in and out of a fucking rabbit hole!"

"They fold space! They could not otherwise travel so far!"

More blasts as the last of the first wave of ICBMs exploded interrupted the budding argument. When the screen cleared enough to see again, they discovered that not one had hit a target. The newly arriving ships had detonated them before they could make impact.

"The satellites won't be in range for another ... ten minutes."

He punched the launch codes for the one satellite already in range. Only half of the missiles had broken away when a blinding beam of light from one of the grundts' ships blew up the satellite and the remaining missiles.

"Oh my god! There's more!" Danielle gasped when she saw the same wavering of space that they'd seen just before the new ships had arrived.

Everyone turned to search. A disk shaped ship appeared, and then a second and third. A cigar shaped vessel emerged directly behind them and then two that were triangular. They began to fire beams of light almost as soon as they appeared—directly at the grundts' remaining ships.

"They are ours!" Ci shouted excitedly. "They are ours!"

"Hold!" Sabin ordered at almost the same moment.

"Too late!" Nick said grimly. "The second wave is already away. I can't stop them."

Sabin whipped a look at him. "You can not disarm them?"

"I can try—they've already taken out the only military satellite in range, though."

Sabin returned his gaze to the screens.

"Which are yours—I mean the mahns?" Danielle asked, knowing he was concerned about his people.

He flicked a long look at her. "The ships that are shaped like a disk. The lozenge shaped ships belong to the mirpods."

"Those which are triangular belong to the drae people," Ci said, pride threading her voice.

The moment he mentioned disks, Danielle felt a jolt run through her. Abruptly, everything, all the questions and seeing coincidences, fell into place. Earth people had claimed sightings of 'flying saucers' for years.

It explained Sabin's extensive knowledge of them in a way she hadn't expected. She supposed she should have put it together before.

For a moment, a sense of profound betrayal swept through her. Then she noticed the look in Sabin's eyes and she realized immediately why he hadn't explained before. He'd known it would make her distrust him, maybe even despise him, and she knew, suddenly that the only reason he hadn't told her was purely personal. It was the same reason he hadn't wanted to tell her he was a clone.

What she thought of him mattered to him personally. He cared for her and he was afraid she'd judge him on the actions of his people.

She wasn't sure of how she felt about that—not happy to discover that the 'intellectuals' of his race had studied them—maybe done a lot more than just study them.

She realized, though, that it didn't change the way she felt about Sabin or On or their 'brothers'.

She was still disappointed that he hadn't trusted her enough to try to explain.

Wrenching her gaze from him as the missiles came within view of the only remaining camera a few seconds later, she focused on the battle. One impacted with the limping ship On had referred to as the Miatate or possibly the Tisdial. A second missile bypassed the other damaged ship and kept going. Danielle narrowed her eyes, trying to see past the blinding flashes of light, but it dazzled her, making it impossible to see much besides bright spots on her retinas.

For several minutes more, everyone remained frozen, watching the battle in space above them as the rebel ships strove to finish off the fleet and discharged their own fighters to face off with the grundts' fighters. Finally, Sabin seemed to shake himself. Dragging his gaze from the screen, he looked at Danielle and then strode toward her.

Surprised but thrilled when he lifted his arms and gathered her into an embrace, Danielle wrapped her arms around his waist and clung tightly to him, wanting to reassure him that nothing had changed the way she felt about him.

"It is time," he murmured against her hair, stroking a hand lightly over her head.

Danielle felt a tingle even through her hair as his fingers touched her neck and then a split second of realization before blackness engulfed her.

"What the fuck did you do to her?" Nick bellowed when he saw Danielle's knees buckle.

Holding her limp form, Sabin bent to sweep an arm beneath her knees and lift her. "She will be safer here," he said coolly, striding from the control room.

Nick fell into step beside him. "That was an underhanded trick!" he growled.

"She would have demanded to come with us," Sabin responded coolly.

Nick wrestled with his temper, but he knew Sabin was right—all the way around. "The sleeping quarters are this way. How long will she be out?"

"Long enough for us to be gone."

Nick glanced at him sharply when he detected a trace of amusement in Sabin's voice. "If you think that'll prevent her from tearing into you when we get back, you don't know Danny very well," he said dryly.

Sabin glanced at him, but he didn't respond.

Su-lynn met them as they entered the main living area. "My god! What happened to her?" she exclaimed, rushing forward.

"Sabin," Nick said succinctly. "She's going to be really pissed when she wakes up."

Ignoring both of them, Sabin looked around and finally merely carried her to a long couch and lowered her carefully to it. He touched her face lightly before he straightened. "If she will not forgive me, it will still be easier to bear than the possibility that she might die."

"Of course she'll forgive you!" Su-lynn said immediately. "But you can expect to catch hell anyway."

Sabin smiled faintly. "Take care of her."

"It's not that I don't agree with you a hundred percent," Nick said conversationally when they'd all gathered in the elevator for the trip to the surface, "Danielle's never been in a battle and I prefer it to remain that way."

"As do I," Sabin agreed.

"She's a damned fine shot, though, and we're going to have a hell of a fight on our hands if even half of those fighters managed to get through."

Sabin said nothing until they'd reached the surface. He stopped Nick before he could follow Ci and the others. "She is carrying your child. A battlefield is no place for her ... however brave, however determined she may be to help defeat the enemy of us all."

Nick felt as if someone had just punched him in the gut. It took him several moments even to manage to gasp in air. "She's what?"

On sent him a cool look. "I detected the child that is growing within her."

Nick felt like he was going to throw up for several moments. Rage was the only thing that helped him to master it. "Not mine," he said through gritted teeth, struggling with the regret and the jealousy that made him nauseated.

It hit him blindingly that he was leaving to face a battle he might not come back from. If he died, there would be nothing of himself left behind and the regret only made him feel sicker.

"She said that you would be angry," On said tightly. "I could not believe it, can not fathom why you would be angry when I know that you care for her."

Nick swallowed with an effort, trying to banish the image that rose in his mind of the last time they were together. He'd been trying to erase it from his mind every since. If he hadn't been so stupid with jealousy ... but that wasn't an excuse and he hadn't tried to convince Danny it was.

The wonder of it was that she hadn't tried to blow his head off for it, or at least accused him of rape for his roughness. He hadn't really intended it that way, but it had to have seemed like it to her.

"I can't have children," he said sickly. "I got fixed."

Sabin and On both stared at him blankly.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Christ! I didn't want to leave any little

deposits that might come back to haunt me. I had a vasectomy years ago—before I met Danny. If she's pregnant, it isn't mine."

Pushing past them, he stalked through the rubble toward the lawn where the others had gathered to search for their pick-up.

On watched him for a long moment and finally turned to look at Sabin. "You have reproduced."

Sabin, already pale, turned a sickly hue and swayed slightly. "You think it is mine?" he asked hoarsely, turning to stare at the door that sealed the hideaway.

"Do you think it is mine?" On asked, catching his attention.

Sabin studied him for a long moment. "It is possible ... but we are one. It is not likely that we would be able to tell ... would we?"

On frowned, thinking it over. "The genetics would be the same," he said finally, mildly disappointed.

A faint smile curled Sabin's lips. "The Au-tere has reproduced! After seven generations we have created an entirely new being!"

On chuckled shakily. "They said it could not be done!"

"You are certain you were not mistaken?" Sabin asked uneasily.

On shook his head. "I am certain."

Still bemused at the discovery, the two of them finally made their way out of the rubble. "I made the right decision," Sabin said with finality. "My instinct was to protect her and it was more accurate even than I realized. I thought that it was sentiment."

"And now you believe it was not?"

Sabin frowned. "It was you who posed the theory that we had latent instincts. Are you saying now that I was not unconsciously aware that she was carrying my offspring and that it was not a logical decision?"

"We are not incapable of sentiment," On said pointedly. "You have displayed far more even than was seemly."

Sabin narrowed his eyes at him. "I have not!"

"You touch her publicly," On said.

"I have ... on rare occasions, but not in an unseemly way and only because I enjoy touching her. This is sexual in nature and has nothing to do with sentiment. Undoubtedly, my latent instincts made me aware that I had the possibility of successfully reproducing with her."

On frowned. "As you pointed out, it might have been me who successfully reproduced."

"I am certain now that it was not. I mated with her twice as many times as you did."

"Which is to say twice, for I have only mated with her once."

"Precisely. The odds are in my favor."

That seemed inarguable so On allowed the subject to drop even though it rankled for some inexplicable reason. It was also true that they were one. In a sense, regardless of which of them had succeeded, it was the same.

He still preferred the possibility that it was his child. The entire concept boggled his mind, however, making it far more difficult than it should have to focus on their task, even though they heard distant sounds of battle before they reached their party. Noticing finally that everyone except him and Sabin was focused on something in the distance, he

turned to see what had caught their attention.

He couldn't identify the crafts he saw weaving through a swarm of landers in the distance.

"I hope to hell you're going to tell me those are enemy crafts trying to shoot our damned fighters down!" Nick growled.

Sabin narrowed his eyes at the aerial battle. "I cannot identify them from this distance."

"Shit!" Nick cursed as one of the jets abrupt disintegrated. "We've got some serious problems if we can't tell the allies from the enemy."

* * * *

Danielle jolted awake with the last thought that had crossed her mind when she'd blacked out. The room she found herself in disoriented her.

"I see you're awake."

Danielle turned to look at Su-lynn when she spoke and pushed herself upright jerkily. "He ... he knocked me out!" she exclaimed in dawning anger. "That low down ...!"

"He's long gone by now," Su-lynn said neutrally when Danielle pushed to her feet, looked around, and then stalked toward the door.

That stopped her in her tracks. She turned to look at Su-lynn. "How long was I out?"

Su-lynn shrugged. "Hard to say. My watch stopped about a week ago. An hour, maybe."

"That long!" Danielle exclaimed in dismay.

"I'm guessing. Could've been longer. Might not have been that long."

Danielle turned toward the door again and ran out of the room, racing down the corridor until she reached the war room. The lights came on as she entered, assuring her by that alone that the room was empty.

Su-lynn met her at the elevator. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going after them."

"You're going to get yourself killed."

Danielle glared at her angrily. "A lot of people are going to die! We didn't get them all. I saw their fighters."

"Do you really think you can make that much of a difference?" Su-lynn asked after a long pause.

"Do you really think we have a chance in hell if everybody asks themselves the same question and decides to hide instead of fighting?" Danielle shot back at her.

"You didn't decide. Sabin decided for you. You aren't a fighter, regardless of your training."

"Because he thinks I'm pregnant!" Danielle snapped.

Su-lynn gaped at her. "Why would he think that?"

Danielle shook her head. "On thinks I am. I know he told Sabin!"

"Well, if you are, you've got no business even *thinking* about going out there! It isn't just *your* life you'd be risking!"

Danielle felt her face crumple as that hit home. "*They* are out there!" she wailed. "I can't just sit here safe while they're out there fighting! I have to help. I couldn't live with myself if anything happened ..."

“Sometimes the best help you can be is staying the hell out of the way, Danielle! Even supposing you could find them now, they’re liable to get killed trying to keep you from getting killed. Did you think about that?”

Danielle sniffed, mopping at her face with her hands. “I didn’t even get to say good-bye!”

Su-lynn hugged her, patting her back. “Then you’ll have to give them a special hello when they get back, right?”

Danielle was so upset it wasn’t until much later, when she’d exhausted her tears, that it dawned on her that Su-lynn might have lied to her to keep her from going outside. By the time it did, however, she knew absolutely that it was too late to try to catch up to them.

She thought she would’ve preferred being with them even if it meant dodging bullets, or whatever the grunts’ favored weapon fired, than being trapped a half a mile underground with no idea what was happening on the surface.

Despite everything she could do to keep herself occupied, she was ready to climb the walls by the second day. It didn’t help that they were entombed with those who’d sought shelter before them. Her flesh crept every time she paced past the infirmary where the former leaders of what had been the United States of America lay.

It was almost as bad to think about what they had to face if and when they managed to win the war for their world. What would be left? Anything? Anyone? They didn’t even have any idea of how many had died before from the pandemic, and the riots, and the predators that emerged in the aftermath to prey on the survivors and take what they wanted. They’d seen plenty of evidence of survivors since they’d returned—all the places they’d stopped had been ransacked for food, water, fuel, clothing—everything necessary for survival and a lot of things that weren’t—but they’d seen very few actual survivors.

Was there any chance, at all, that she would find her boys after war had raged across the lands already desolated by disease and strife? Would she ever even know whether they’d survived? Whether anyone of her family had survived?

She discovered when she finally tired of her thoughts and went in search of something to chase them to the back of her mind that the war room contained a radio set to pick up the frequency used by the military. She sat for hours listening to static just to catch the occasional blast of chatter that came through, most of which she couldn’t even understand. She couldn’t decide whether it was her location, so deep beneath the surface, that made the signals so weak, or if it was the loss of the satellites, but she gave up on trying to adjust it to improve the quality of the transmissions.

It was comforting to hear anything at all. Even when she couldn’t understand what they were saying, it was still distinguishable as English and the fact that it was on the military frequency meant that they had an army. Somehow, they’d managed to muster men and equipment to fight.

That made her hopeful that there were far more survivors than they’d thought there were.

They’d been in the bunker for nearly a week when Danielle woke up one morning—or afternoon—she had no idea whether it was day or night—and promptly threw up. She didn’t know who was more alarmed, her, Su-lynn, or Joyce.

Fearing the worst, Su-lynn immediately began to scramble to find protective gear

and quarantined Danielle. It was like closing the barn door after the cows were gone and they all knew it, but none of them could really think straight for the terror that instantly gripped them.

After two days of checking Danielle's temperature and vitals it finally dawned on all of them that Danielle hadn't contracted anything but pregnancy. Feeling stupid with relief, they raided the supply room and threw a party.

Danielle tried to get into the spirit of it, but it was hard to when all she could do was wonder who'd gotten her pregnant and if the father would live to see the baby.

Almost as if Su-lynn had read her mind, she asked the delicate question.

Danielle felt a knot of emotion rise in her throat. "On said it couldn't have been him or Sabin. That only leaves Nick."

"Only?"

Danielle glared at her.

"Sorry! That was stupid and I didn't mean anything by it, honestly. It's your business, not mine."

Danielle sighed despondently. "I don't even know how it happened—I mean, with all of them."

"Well ... they're all pretty. If I was 'in' to that sort of thing, I think I'd have a hard time deciding," Joyce said sympathetically.

Danielle smiled wanly, but covered her face. "That's not the worst. I'm not really sorry if the baby *is* Nick's. After the way he did me before, I tried really, really hard not to like him, but I do. I always did. Except ..."

"You're crazy about Sabin?" Su-lynn prompted helpfully.

"Is it that obvious?"

Su-lynn and Joyce exchanged a look. "To everybody, I imagine, but him."

Danielle sniffed. "He said, as soon as he could—when the war was over—he would be going home. He was always honest with me. I can't say he wasn't. It was really stupid to fall for him, wasn't it?"

"It isn't something people can help, you know. It happens, or it doesn't."

Danielle nodded. "I'd love it if it was Sabin's baby. I wish ..." She stopped. "You know, I've made the damndest mess. Whatever happens, I lose."

"No you don't!" Su-lynn said bracingly. "You'll have a baby. If they're all determined to act like idiots, there's nothing you can do about that, but you'll still have a baby."

"I'll be alone—with a baby. I don't even know how I'm going to manage to take care of it."

"You can always stay with us until you know what you're going to do."

Danielle looked at Joyce in surprise, feeling her face heat. "I'd be in the way."

"We need to stick together," Su-lynn agreed. "It isn't going to be easy for anybody after everything that's happened, but Joyce and I have a nice little cabin in the Smokies—assuming it's still there. If it isn't, we'll just appropriate a place."

"We picked it because it was far enough from any neighbors that might disapprove of us that we wouldn't have to endure the stares or the snubs, but its got its own generator for emergencies. We have a fireplace and plenty of wood to burn for heating or cooking. It's actually a pretty big house—four bedrooms—a little more than we needed but we fell in love with it and ... we'd actually thought about having

children.”

Apparently Joyce read the look on her face pretty accurately. “Artificial insemination,” she said dryly.

“I didn’t ... uh ...”

Su-lynn shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll work on not unintentionally insulting each other.”

Danielle wasn’t sure if Joyce had been serious when she’d first suggested it or not, but they all discovered that discussing the house and the possibilities considerably lightened their spirits and relieved the monotony of their existence.

When another week passed without any word, it was Su-lynn who decided to make a trip to the surface to see if they could find out any more about what was happening than the little they managed to decipher from the radio. Arming themselves, they left Joyce, who was very vocal about her displeasure, and took the elevator up. Since neither one of them was certain they could remember the code Nick had used to open the elevator doors or the protective blast door, they blocked them when they emerged to keep the doors from closing.

It was night time and almost as dark outside as it had been in the stairwell. Smoke drifted in the air, but it was hard to determine from the smell alone what it was that was burning. There were no city lights. Danielle thought that, of all the things she was going to miss, that would be one she missed most—not because of the lights themselves but because the lack of them meant the world had changed past recognition.

They couldn’t hear anything—the silence of the night was almost deafening, but it was impossible to tell if it was the silence of peace or the silence of absence.

Disappointed, they went back down into the bunker to try to sleep for a few hours and try again. It was mid-morning when they emerged the second time as far as Danielle could tell. Smoke still drifted in the air like fog, obscuring much of the devastation, but the silence was as profound as it had been the night before even though they wandered around outside for nearly an hour.

Still uncertain of whether the war was over, or who’d won, they returned to the bunker and huddled over the radio for days, listening intently, picking up a few clear words here and there and arguing over what the garbled words were.

“We can’t just stay here forever,” Joyce said irritably after nearly another week had passed. “I think we should go home.”

Danielle felt her heart leap at the words even though Joyce wasn’t talking about her home. “She’s right. If there’s still fighting, they’ve moved away from the area.”

Su-lynn sent both of them a look of disgust. “We’re miles from the cabin—*many* miles. There’s no telling what might be happening between here and there or what we could run up against. There must be enough food in the supply room for a couple of years.”

“I don’t think I can stand living underground right on and on,” Joyce said.

“You really shouldn’t be traveling yet,” Su-lynn said, without much conviction.

“I’m fine now. You know I am. I want to feel like I have a life, Su! This isn’t a life! It’s just waiting!”

Danielle dragged in a shaky breath. “If the war’s over, Sabin and the others will have gone back to their own worlds and ... Nick doesn’t have any reason to come back. If we’re waiting here because of them, then I don’t think we should. Traveling isn’t

going to get any easier on me. I'm already starting to show, and I'm just going to get more clumsy and tire more easily when I blimp out. We either need to go, or forget about leaving until after I've had the baby. It's almost winter. There'll be snow on the ground, snow in the mountains. Assuming the cabin is still there, we'd still have to make sure we had enough food and wood to keep warm to make it until spring."

As worried as Su-lynn was about leaving their sanctuary, she'd obviously endured as much of the bunker as she could stand, too. "I'll have to see if I can find some kind of transportation. We'll never make it on foot. *If* I can and *if* I can find enough fuel to make the trip, then we'll go. Agreed?"

Joyce was immediately anxious about Su-lynn's projected mission. "We should stay together, Su!"

"We do it my way or we aren't doing it at all!" Su-lynn snapped. "You're in no condition to walk for miles or run if you have to and neither is Danny."

No amount of arguing could move her from her position and they both discovered when they tried to back out and stay that Su-lynn wouldn't agree to that either. "I'm going to lose my mind if I have to stay in this fucking hole until spring!"

It took her most of the following day to find what she was looking for and get back and both Danielle and Joyce were a nervous wreck by the time she finally drove up to the portico in a bright red SUV with a half dozen gas cans strapped to the top. "It might as well have a fucking bulls eye on the side of it," she said, disgusted. "But I couldn't find anything else that would run."

Danielle wasn't especially happy about it either, but there didn't seem to be anything to be done about it. "Maybe we could keep an eye out for a paint store?"

Su-lynn stared at her hard for a moment. "You know, I think I saw some paint in the supply room," she finally said thoughtfully.

It was army green, they discovered, but dull enough not to attract nearly as much attention—they hoped. In the waning light of the day, they splashed it over the vehicle the best they could, hoping enough would stick to at least be a little camo.

In the bright sun of the following morning, they all viewed their painting efforts with disgust. The paint was still tacky besides looking like hell, but as badly as Danielle felt about ruining the paint job on what had been a beautiful wonder of technology, she still felt like their chances were better of reaching their destination without being shot by someone who wanted to take it. They stuffed as much of the supplies from the supply room into the vehicle as they could and set off.

Danielle tried to focus on happy thoughts as they drove away, but it was hard even to cling to the hopeful tales they'd woven for themselves about the cabin in the mountains. It didn't lighten her heart the further they drove and the closer they came to their destination. Her heart felt heavier with each mile, but she'd done her best to put the past to rest. She had a baby on the way and two friends willing to share their home with her. Nothing was ever going to be the same, but no amount of weeping for everyone and everything she'd lost was going to bring them back and the baby deserved the best she could do for it.

Chapter Twenty

The jubilation the three of them felt when Su-lynn followed the long, winding drive up the hill and they discovered their cabin looked much like it had when they left it lasted until they got inside and discovered it wasn't entirely untouched. Someone—or several someones—had been through the house and collected everything that appealed to them and hauled it off.

Joyce promptly flopped on the couch and squalled. Leaving Su-lynn to comfort her, Danielle trudged out to the SUV and began bringing in their own booty, stolen from the President's bunker, no less. After she'd worn herself out, Joyce finally got up and joined the parade in and out of the house.

Su-lynn left Danielle and Joyce trying to find places to put the food away and went outside. Her hammering brought both of them to the front where they found her nailing a piece of plywood over the broken window in the front door. Not surprisingly, they didn't find any of the flashlights or hurricane lanterns Joyce and Su-lynn had stocked for emergencies.

Galvanized by the deepening shadows as dusk approached, Danielle and Joyce left the task of putting away the food and went out to check the generator. Thankfully, it was still there—empty, but workable. They took the last of the gas cans and managed to fill the tank and crank it up. The house lit up like a Christmas tree. For a few moments, they enjoyed the show until it occurred to Joyce that that explained the fact that the generator tank was empty.

As angry then as she had been upset before, she stalked back into the cabin and began switching off the lights. The sound of an electric saw echoed to them from Su-lynn's workshop. Danielle and Joyce shared a look, shrugged, and focused on trying to put the house to rights.

"We should have a go at cooking an honest-to-god home-cooked meal," Joyce said when they'd straightened the great room and the kitchen.

"I'm game," Danielle said, immediately cheered by the idea. "Not that the MREs aren't the best I've ever had—I didn't even know they made gourmet MREs—but something simple and familiar sounds good."

"Actually, I was thinking about scavenging ingredients from them and trying to make something—at least the meat. The alternative is that can of tuna the bastards who cleaned us out missed."

"It still sounds like a good idea to me. You want help? If not, I'm going upstairs to clean up the bedrooms."

Joyce shooed her out. Su-lynn entered the house with a stack of plywood pieces as Danielle reached the stairs. She aborted her previous goal and followed Su-lynn.

"Need help?"

"It wouldn't hurt. I want to cover all the windows. I never thought windows would give me the creeps, but I don't think I'd sleep a wink knowing glass was all that stood between me and the sort of bastards that were here before."

Danielle was all in favor of beefing up security as quickly as they could. Su-lynn had brought a cordless drill/screw driver to handle the job, which went surprisingly quickly with her holding the boards in place and Su-lynn setting the screws. They'd covered more than half the downstairs windows by the time Joyce called them to eat.

She didn't sleep well for all that. It seemed the moment she closed her eyes the ghosts of her past rose to haunt her. She dreamed about her boys. She dreamed about Sabin, and Nick, and On, and woke choking for breath with her eyes damp from the tears she'd tried to cry in her sleep.

Exhaustion seemed the best cure for heartache. From the time they woke each morning until it was too dark to see, they worked on barricading doors and windows and then moved outside to begin working on a stout fence. It wasn't much to look at since they had to build it out of freshly cut pines that Su-lynn took down with her chain saw, and then cut into workable lengths, but all of them began to feel more secure the closer they came to completing what was very nearly a stockade wall.

At least they had some hope that it would be.

They'd only been at the cabin a few days when the temperature began to drop rapidly and the first snow fell. For two days, they stayed inside, bundled in everything they could find to put on and fighting over who was going to stand in front of the fireplace. Thankfully, it hadn't been cold long enough to maintain the snow. It melted away and the temperature rose enough to make cutting more wood for the fireplace a little less miserable.

Danielle was actually in favor of taking down the fifteen feet of fence they'd managed to get up and using it in the fireplace since they'd cut down all of the trees nearest the house and began having to walk further and further for more. The gas in the generator ran out, despite their efforts to save the fuel for the most necessary usage. After debating whether to try to siphon what was left in the gas tank or use it to drive to town, they finally decided to make the trip to town to see if they could find anything useful that scavengers hadn't already taken.

No one wanted to leave the house unguarded, though, and they finally drew straws to decide who got to go and who had to stay.

Danielle strongly suspected she'd been shafted, but she'd agreed to draw and didn't argue when Joyce and Su-lynn got into the SUV and drove off. In all honesty, she didn't know which was worse—having to stay by herself and guard the house, or having to brave going in to town.

The trip down from DC hadn't exactly been uneventful. They'd spotted roving bands of people that behaved more like gangs or animals than civilized people, trying to chase them and throwing whatever they could grab up when they realized they couldn't stop them.

It was more unnerving to realize there were survivors when they behaved like that than to see no one at all.

As soon as Su-lynn and Joyce disappeared down the drive, she went inside and barricaded the door. After checking the guns several times to make certain all of them were loaded and ready to fire, she paced a while, wondering just how long she could expect the pair to be gone, wondering what the chances were that they'd find a little fuel for the generator and maybe candles or oil lamps that they could use for light.

She'd really begun to hate the nights. As exhausted as they were from all the

work it took to survive, she didn't *want* to have to go to bed almost the moment the sun went down. She understood that they couldn't afford to waste what little electricity they had from the generator burning lights they didn't really need, but it had begun to seem as if she had no life at all. Working, eating, and sleeping was survival, not a life.

She supposed she'd be glad of a little more sleep once the baby came. She could vividly recall, despite the years that had passed, just how exhausting it was to have an infant. Of course, she hadn't had *an* infant. She'd had two and it had seemed one was always awake in those first few months.

Her throat closed at the memories she'd allowed to creep in when she'd worked hard not to remember at all. Maybe, a few years down the road, she'd be able to allow herself to enjoy the good memories without the painful ones overshadowing them, but she couldn't do it now.

She'd finally given up on Su-lynn and Joyce and gone into the kitchen to find something to eat—by herself—when she heard the sound of an engine. Dropping the MRE to the floor, she dashed into the great room and grabbed up one of the rifles. The sound grew louder while she waited and listened tensely, making it clear that the vehicle was coming directly toward the house.

She couldn't tell if it was their SUV or not.

It seemed most likely that it was.

They hadn't seen or heard another vehicle since they'd arrived.

She was still leery of opening the door. Instead, she moved from the door to the windows, trying to peer through the tiny cracks between the pieces of plywood her and Su-lynn had covered the windows with.

She couldn't find an angle that would allow her to see who it was and her frustration and fear mounted, particularly when she realized the vehicle was loud enough it had to be virtually at the front door. Su-lynn would've honked to let her know it was alright.

She was trying to decide whether to announce her presence by bellowing out a demand to know what their intentions were, or to keep quiet and hope they'd go away again, when she heard a car door open and close—four doors.

Her heart leapt into her throat and tried to choke her.

"Su!"

Danielle nearly felt faint when she recognized the voice. Her knees were so weak, she could hardly make it to the door. She paused just as she gripped the cross piece of lumber to remove it, wondering if her mind was playing tricks on her.

While she stood debating, she heard footsteps, as of someone climbing the steps—heavy footsteps.

"Su! It's me, Nick!"

"Nick!" Danielle gasped, hardly daring to believe it was really him.

"Danny?"

Danielle broke several nails in her haste to remove the barricade and get the door open. Her heart surged painfully when she saw him standing in the doorway. His face was gaunt from weight loss, his handsome face covered with a beard, but it was Nick. She launched herself at him joyfully, laughing and crying at the same time. "Nick! I didn't think I'd ever see you again!"

His arms tightened around her almost crushingly. "That makes two of us, baby!"

God! I've been half crazy trying to find you! Why did you leave?"

Danielle was blubbing so much she could hardly talk. "We didn't think you were coming back. We didn't know what else to do."

"Jesus, baby!" Nick said hoarsely, squeezing her tightly again and finally pulling away.

It wasn't until then that Danielle remembered she'd heard several doors open and close. She mopped her eyes with her hand, trying to bring the strangers behind Nick into focus.

"Sabin?"

His lips curled in a tentative smile.

Danielle rushed toward him, flinging her arms around him. "I thought you'd gone home!"

His arms felt so good around her, she wanted to stay forever, but she drew away after a few moments and went to hug On as she had Nick and Sabin, feeling almost giddy with joy. "Come in!" she said finally. "I've forgotten my manners I'm so excited to see all of you!"

On caressed her cheek. "We have found what you lost, Danny," he said quietly, stepping to one side so that she could finally see the two boys hovering together with wide, fearful eyes at the foot of the stairs.

She thought for a moment she'd faint as she stared at them and familiarity washed over her. "Cary? Kyle?" she whispered in disbelief.

They looked like they couldn't decide whether to rush to her or run away and the sudden fear struck her that they weren't her boys at all, or that they didn't remember her. She nearly fell when she tried to negotiate the stairs to get to them. Someone caught her, steadied her, but she barely glanced back. "Have I changed so much you don't know me?"

"Mom?" Cary said tentatively.

She nodded, unable to speak, gathering them to her when they finally overcame their reluctance and launched themselves at her hard enough she flopped down on the stairs and nearly toppled backwards. She dragged in a deep breath of their scent, felt their thin frames with a mixture of joy and pain to find them so changed. "Just look at you two! You must have grown a foot since I last saw you!" she said tearfully.

The boys exchanged a look and her heart was so full it felt like it would burst. Despite all the changes she saw in them, that was so familiar it made her feel like crying harder. "It's cold out here. Let's go in."

More than a little worried that the men would leave now that they'd delivered the boys to her, she couldn't decide who to hold on to. Relief filled her when they all filed inside behind her.

The boys had headed directly for the guns, she discovered, leaping forward and shooing them away. "They're loaded. You're never to touch the guns!"

It hurt to see them scurry away from her and she regretted speaking to them so sharply.

Nick, Sabin, and On collected the guns and removed them from temptation by placing them on top of the armoire that held the TV no one could watch anymore. Nick picked up the board they used to bar the door, studied it a moment, and closed the door, dropping the wood in place. Sabin and On remained by the armoire, looking the great

room over with interest, and finally wandered over to the fireplace to warm themselves.

Danielle had never felt so awkward in her life.

She'd missed them all so badly! She was so thrilled to see them!

And she couldn't think of anything to say.

She wanted to hug and kiss them over and over, but mostly she just wanted to touch them to assure herself they weren't a figment of her imagination, that her mind hadn't just snapped.

"Who's hungry?" she asked as cheerfully as she could. "I was just about to fix something."

Everyone followed her into the kitchen.

When she passed out MREs, she excused herself and rushed to the bathroom to check her appearance. It wasn't comforting. Her face was red and splotchy from crying and the shirt and jeans she was wearing were old, torn, and stained—to say nothing of the ungodly fit. Donated to her by Su-lynn, who was nearly the same size, they *had* fit—before. Now, even though she seemed to have lost weight everywhere else, her breasts were straining against the knit and so was her belly, and she couldn't fasten or zip the jeans. Her constant tugging on the hem of the shirt to try to cover her expanding belly had stretched the top completely out of shape.

At least she'd brushed her hair when she got up that morning, she thought glumly. It almost didn't look bad.

Accepting defeat, she splashed cool water on her face and combed her hair, and then headed into the kitchen again.

"How *did* you find me?" she asked when she'd gotten everyone a glass of water to wash down their food and finally settled at the table with them.

Nick reddened faintly, unwilling to admit he'd been so frantic when he discovered she wasn't in the bunker that he couldn't think beyond the possibility that she and the others had been taken by one of the bands of ruffians. "I finally remembered this place and thought it was worth a try to see if you'd come here."

Danielle shifted guiltily in her seat. It hadn't occurred to her until long after they'd left that they should've left a note—just in case Nick actually *did* come looking for them. She supposed, if she'd felt a true connection it would have occurred to her.

She wouldn't have left at all, she realized with abrupt clarity. She would've stayed forever, waiting.

She'd left because she hadn't felt that she was important enough to them to bring them back and she hadn't left a note for the same reason. She'd never expected them to find it.

Instead of apologizing, or accusing them of guilt over the incident by default—because they'd failed to convince her she mattered to them, she merely smiled. "I'm glad! I'm so glad you did!" She included everyone with a look and a smile, focusing finally on the boys. "I can't believe you found them. I'd given up hope." Her voice cracked on the last word, but she cleared her throat and managed a smile when the boys sent her uneasy looks. "Where *did* you find them?"

Nick flicked an uncomfortable look at Sabin. "The interment camp the grundts had set up upon their arrival. They had already been taken in when I gave Du and Tra the task of searching for them, but the camp was ... overcrowded and ... they were hard to identify by the image you had given us."

She was sorry she'd asked. It explained so much ... and left so much unanswered.

And maybe she didn't really want those answers.

She supposed it was possible the boys had contracted the disease and that accounted for the way they looked, but she was afraid the truth was even worse than that. They looked like they'd been starved and neglected. She didn't even want to think what else might have happened to them to account for the fact that they weren't the little boys she remembered.

"Any news?" she asked with determined cheerfulness. "We haven't seen anyone in months. There was a radio at the bunker, but we couldn't really tell much from the little we picked up."

Nick grinned abruptly. "Good news and better news! Which do you want to hear first?"

"Don't tease me! Just tell me!" Danielle said, gazing at him hopefully. "The war's over?"

"Pretty much. I heard there was still some fighting somewhere out in the southwest but, to all intents and purposes, the grundts won't be a problem for anybody for a very long time.

"The mahns, the draes, and the lupins had managed to secretly repair some of their old space crafts—those were the ships you saw follow the grundts through the fold—and were waiting for the show down. As soon as they intercepted the fleet's distress call they came after them. Between us, we pretty much annihilated their fleet. The major from the base managed to get out an alarm before the grundts we'd left confiscating weapons hauled him and the others to the interment camps and, luckily, we still had a few fighter pilots at their posts.

"Unfortunately, the grundts were able to launch a significant number of fighters and landers before we blew their fleet ships to hell. It was a lot harder to whip their asses than we'd hoped it would be, but we did it."

Danielle threw her arms up impulsively in a cheer. "Hoorah for our conquering heroes! I'm so proud of you! All of you!"

She chuckled when all three men blushed, wishing she could think of a better reward for their efforts than a cheer that seemed to embarrass them as much as it pleased them, or maybe more.

"So ... was that the good news or the better news?"

Nick glanced at Sabin and On. "I'll let them tell you the best news."

"There's best news, too?" she asked teasingly.

Sabin shrugged uncomfortably. "The allied forces who fought here—most of them, at any rate—have decided to stay and help in whatever way we can to restore order."

Danielle was thrilled beyond words. Nothing really registered past his statement that they meant to stay—at least for a while. "You'll be staying? Here? On Earth, I mean?" she added quickly. "That's ... wonderful!"

"We've already restored power to some fairly large areas in the south east."

Danielle stared at Nick as if she'd never heard the word. "Power?"

He grinned at her. "Real, honest-to-god electricity. They've all been where we are now. They've developed some ingenious answers to the problems we're facing

now.”

“Oh my god!” Danielle screamed and then covered her mouth, shooting a glance at the boys. It dawned on her abruptly that they’d probably seen and heard so many things a child should never know that worrying about ‘language’ in front of them was downright absurd. “That’s so much better than ‘good’ news and ‘better’! There aren’t words to describe it!”

“Well,” Nick said uncomfortably, “it’s definitely good news after way too much bad news. The President’s declared marshal law, though, to try to restore order as the first order of business. Gangs of thugs have been roaming the countryside, creating more problems. They’re to be rounded up and incarcerated or shot on sight if they prove too difficult to arrest.”

“The President?” Danielle repeated blankly. “I thought ...”

“The former Secretary of Health and Welfare is standing President at the moment. So far, she’s the only cabinet member we’ve found. She ordered marshal law in effect until further notice.”

“I can’t wait to tell Su-lynn and Joyce the news!”

“Where are they, by the way?”

Danielle’s eyes widened as it occurred to her abruptly that she had no idea how long they’d been gone. “They took the SUV into town to try to find fuel for the generator and whatever else they could find that we need.”

Nick got up abruptly. “I guess I’ll go check up on them.” He sent On and Sabin a questioning look.

“I will go also,” On said promptly.

Danielle glanced from one to the other. “But you’re coming back, right?” she asked hopefully.

Nick’s eyes gleamed. “Oh, you can count on that, lady. You and I have some unfinished business.”

Thrilled to her toes, breathless with anticipation, Danielle sent him a wide-eyed, hopeful look. “We do?” she asked weakly.

“Oh, yeah—we do!”

Danielle was so unnerved by the exodus from the kitchen—and then the house, and fearful that something might happen to them, or that they might decide not to come back after all—that it was some moments before she realized Sabin hadn’t said anything about going with them. She sent him a look of hopeful wariness when On and Nick got into the SUV and drove off.

He tilted his head at her questioningly and finally lifted his hands out slightly to his sides in a gesture that almost looked like surrender. “If you are still angry with me for what I did, I will not try to defend myself.”

Danielle stared at him blankly, searching her mind. Even when it finally occurred to her what he was talking about, she couldn’t summon any anger. Her chin wobbled with the threat of tears yet again. “I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again and I didn’t even get say good-bye.”

“I am here now,” he said gently.

Danielle released a shaky breath and walked into his arms. He gathered her close and then his arms tightened, as if he could merge them together. “I don’t want to say good-bye—ever,” she muttered, burrowing her face against his chest and breathing in his

welcome scent, feeling the wonder of being enveloped by his warmth and his strength. He seemed thinner, like most everyone else, and she felt a pang realizing the suffering that had caused it.

She tensed when he stroked his hand over her head and he paused. After a moment, he continued the caress as if he hadn't noticed. "Trust is a fragile thing," he murmured. "Can you at least trust that I would never do anything to harm you, or allow harm to come to you if it is within my power to prevent it?"

She didn't have to think about it. As angry as she'd been at the time, she hadn't doubted that he believed he was protecting her. "Can you stay ... at least a while?"

She heard him swallow. "If I am welcome."

She drew away to look up at him. "You can't doubt that?"

She could see he had, but the troubled look vanished from his eyes and she felt the tension leave him. She hadn't even realized he *was* tense. "This is for Joyce and Su-lynn to decide ..."

She chuckled. "Believe me they'll be glad for the distraction. They've been really kind and patient, but I know I'm putting a strain on their relationship. They hardly ever have time alone."

Amusement gleamed in his eyes and something else that made her heart speed up. "I would be very willing to distract you so that they have more time together."

Danielle flushed, but with eagerness.

Maybe a little shyness.

She wondered if it was just that she hadn't felt desire in so long that she felt heady with it now at just the suggestion of appeasing it.

"What did you have in mind to distract me?" she asked teasingly.

"I have been reviewing the data on human sexuality in my free time. I thought we might discuss your views on the conclusions that were drawn from it," he said promptly.

She chuckled huskily, fighting the urge to drag him inside and up the stairs immediately—while they had the chance. Fortunately, it hit her in the next moment that they weren't actually alone. "Interesting subject," she murmured. "It could take hours to discuss it."

He looked surprised, vaguely alarmed, but pleased. "This is many parsects?"

"Many, many—in fact it might be a subject to hold our interest for days."

He laughed, the first full fledged laugh she'd ever heard him utter. "I am not certain I have the stamina for that," he said ruefully.

He pulled a little away from her, coasting a hand lightly along her distended belly. "He is growing," he said, a strange note in his voice. "I confess I had my fears. You have had no trouble?"

Vaguely embarrassed and uncomfortable with the change of subject, Danielle shrugged. "Nope. A little morning sickness. It scared us half to death. We all thought I was coming down with the plague. It was a relief to realize it was just morning sickness, even if it was pretty miserable."

He looked confused. "This was because it is mine?"

Danielle felt her heart palpitate in response to the question. "It's actually pretty common—to get morning sickness." She hesitated, but she was more uncomfortable at the idea of withholding the truth than confessing. "I don't really know who the father is."

He smiled easily. "We have discussed it—Nick, On, and I—and concluded that it

is most likely me. Perhaps, On, but the odds favor me.” He frowned. “Though I suppose it makes very little difference either way as we are one. The contribution would be the same either way.”

She lifted her brows at him. “But not Nick?”

He looked uncomfortable. “It is not my place to speak for Nick.”

Which meant, regardless of his tactfulness, that Nick refused to claim the baby as his. That didn’t surprise her, but it hurt a lot more than it should’ve that he’d deny any possibility that it might be his. She swallowed her pain with an effort. “But you’re ... ok with the possibility that it’s yours?”

He grinned. “I am beyond gratified. It will be the first child born to a mahn in many generations ... something we had given up all hope of ever seeing.”

Danielle didn’t know why, but the comment sent a flicker of alarm through her instead of a thrill. She realized why in the next instant.

The child represented hope for a world light years away, to a people almost as different as they were the same. What value would they place on a child that was half mahn?

She pulled away from him.

He scanned her face worriedly. “What have I said that has brought that look to your face?”

She looked away. “I don’t know what you mean,” she said evasively.

“Fear,” he said grimly, touching her jaw and forcing her to look at him. Understanding flickered in his eyes as he studied her, and then anger, and finally resignation. “I do not understand family as you do—only the concept. It is not something that I have experienced. You know this. But I have seen the unspeakable pain it caused you when you could not find Cary and Kyle. I told you that I would never harm you or allow you to come to harm. I swear on the one thing most dear to me in this life that you need never fear that I would ever separate you from this child or allow it to happen so long as I have the breath and strength to prevent it.”

Danielle swallowed convulsively, searching his eyes for reassurance and found it in his gaze. “What thing is dearest?”

He smiled faintly. “You.”

She wasn’t certain she believed him, but there was no doubt in her mind that she wanted to. Slipping her arms around his waist, she hugged herself tightly to him. She wanted a kiss—at least that much to appease the need to get closer to him, but a sudden blaring voice from inside distracted both of them.

Glancing at Sabin in alarm, Danielle pulled away abruptly and rushed inside. The boys were cowering on the far side of the great room, she discovered, and the doors to the armoire open. Striding forward, she looked at the bright screen. Nothing but ‘snow’ and a dim, unrecognizable image appeared on it, but the message that was repeating was as clear as a bell.

This is the emergency broadcast system. Stay tuned to this station for information regarding our national emergency. On the eastern seaboard, power has been restored in the following states and counties: Alabama ...

After staring at the TV blankly for several seconds, Danielle uttered a squeal of delight and began dancing up and down. “TV!”

She’d forgotten to turn off the generator!

Su-lynn was going to be pissed off if she didn't find any fuel!

"Oh hell! I forgot to turn off the generator! We need to conserve the fuel so we can all watch this when they get back!"

* * * *

The day hadn't been all joy. Cary and Kyle were so clearly traumatized by everything they'd been through that she hadn't been able to cling to them and smother them with her affection. As badly as she wanted to grab them up every few minutes just to reassure herself that they were real, they were so skittish, she didn't dare. Su-lynn had promised to evaluate them as soon as she could and try to coax them out of their protective shells, but she thought Danielle was handling them as they needed to be handled. She had to behave normally, reassure them as much as possible, and allow them to come to her when they were ready.

The awkwardness of being around Sabin, Nick, and On after so long, after so much had happened, eased as the day wore on, but Danielle realized that that, too, was something that would take time to banish—if it could be worked through at all.

She was a nervous wreck long before sunset and it only got worse as they lingered in front of the fireplace to share news after they'd eaten and she'd put the boys to bed. Not that she, Su-lynn, or Joyce had a lot of news—which was just as well—since she was too anxious to try to converse like a rational human being, torn between terror at the possibility of intimacy with any of the three and the equal paralyzing fear that she wouldn't have the chance for intimacy with any of them.

Sabin was her primary target, but she wasn't any less aware of Nick or On and, despite the hurt she'd felt to learn that Nick had rejected the possibility that the baby was his, his promise to her earlier in the day when he'd left to find Su-lynn and Joyce had her nearly all to pieces with anxiety and hopefulness.

She couldn't help but wonder if she was just hormonally challenged at the moment—either because of her pregnancy or the circumstances of not having had sex in forever—because she was faced with three men she wanted with equal enthusiasm, or both.

The voice of reason screaming in her head didn't help matters. If she went with Sabin, she lost all chance with Nick. If she chose Nick, she lost all chance with Sabin. She had no idea where she stood with On, but she knew, sooner or later, he would leave just as Sabin would. She adored both of them, but they weren't offering any possibility of forever—or even very long.

Nick certainly wasn't. He'd made it clear he not only wasn't a one woman kind of man, he also wasn't a commitment of any kind sort of man. It would almost have been better if he'd allowed her the illusion as so many men did. Then she could've at least been happy for a little while—until she discovered he had another woman on the side or two or three, and brought her world down around her ears.

Trust her to find three painfully honest men!

Didn't they *know* women only wanted honesty when they were telling them what they wanted to hear?

She supposed she *did* appreciate their honesty, but it didn't seem to leave her any room for even fleeting happiness.

Realizing after a while that she couldn't make the decision, she decided to leave it in the hands of fate. If fate decreed, however, that she end up alone in her bed, she

thought someone might have to shoot her to put her out of her misery. She didn't want them to leave in the worst kind of way, but she didn't think she could handle very much of having them dangled under her nose and just out of reach.

She was so weak kneed when the moment of truth finally arrived that she wasn't certain she could make it up the stairs. Su-lynn and Joyce led the way with the candles, handing them off and heading to their bedroom when they reached the head of the stairs. That left the other three bedrooms—hers, the one where they'd bedded the boys down on a pallet, and the only free room. Sabin, On, and Nick had trailed them up, making her that much more jittery because she could almost feel their gazes on her.

Her hands were shaking badly enough when she turned to them that she thought the flame on the candles would go out.

"I do not need one," On said. "I will take the room where the boys are sleeping."

Nick divided a long look between her and Sabin. "Guess I'll take the other."

Disconcerted, Danielle watched him stride down the hall and disappear. She was relieved that he wasn't angry—she really was. If he had been, it would've crushed her spirits and made it difficult to get her mind off of him and on Sabin.

It was pretty deflating to have him walk off without even challenging Sabin, though.

Sabin took the candles from her. "We do not need these."

Swallowing with an effort, Danielle met his gaze with a mixture of uneasiness and need. "I usually put them out when I've undressed and found the bed."

Something glittered in his eyes, making her belly flutter. "Then we will keep them lit."

Nodding a little jerkily, she turned and led the way to her room.

After glancing around, Sabin set the candles very carefully on the bedside table and turned to look at her. She looked at the glowing candles, wondering just how well he could see her. She'd wanted to see him. She hadn't considered that he'd be able to see her equally well and she was misshapen with pregnancy to say the very least.

Then again, from what he'd indicated before, his night vision was far better than her own.

Dragging in a shuddering breath, she began to undress slowly, watching him as his movements mirrored her own. The mellow, flickering light of the candles danced over his skin, creating tantalizing shadows along the contours of his torso and muscular arms. Had she forgotten how beautifully formed he was, she wondered? Or did he look far more appealing because her eyes saw from the heart now?

Then again, she thought whimsically when he was as naked as she, maybe it was always her heart that had found him so beautiful?

Chapter Twenty-One

A combination of impatience and an unwillingness to allow him to study her as she had him pulled her to him. She lifted her palms to his chest, relishing the smoothness of his skin as her palms and fingertips absorbed the sensations, translated it into pleasure, and every nerve ending in her body seemed almost to unfurl like the petals of a blossom seeking the sun, slowly warming her from her breasts to her sex, despite the chill of the room.

He lifted his hands and settled his palms along her upper arms, curling his long fingers around the flesh and drawing her slowly closer until her distended nipples brushed along his chest with each breath she took. Her belly bumped lightly against his, sandwiching his erection between them.

She lifted her head to meet his gaze as he released his hold on her arms and cupped her breasts, massaging them lightly with his fingers as he drew his hands from her chest wall to the pointed tips and gently plucked at them. Her heart leapt at his touch, surging faster, pumping the warming liquid of her body more rapidly and shooting her temperature upwards several degrees.

She lowered one hand, slipping it between them and cupping it around his cock, pressing it tightly against her belly as she stroked upward with her hand. His eyelids slid half closed. His breaths became more labored.

Dropping his hands to her waist, he guided her to the bed and climbed in beside her. Stretching out full length facing her, he lifted a hand to her shoulder and slowly followed the line of her body, along her arm, the crook of her waist and the rounded curve of her hip.

"This is forbidden on my world," he murmured, his voice husky. He met her gaze, dragging his hand back upwards via her belly to cup the uppermost breast in his hand. "I understand why ... now."

"You do?" Danielle asked a little hazily, far more focused on his touch and the sound of his voice than the meaning of what he was saying.

He released her breast and grasped her shoulder, pushing her to her back as he moved closer. Bending his head, he walked his lips in a nibbling sort of way along the upper slope of one breast and then sucked at a small patch of skin along her throat. "I do." He spoke the words against her skin, making the nerves tingle with the vibration of his voice.

She shifted restlessly beneath his touch as he retraced his path the same way and teased the nipple with the pluck of his lips. "Why?"

He sucked at her nipple, teasing it with his tongue. When he released it, he pushed upward to align his face with hers. "Once you have tasted, there is a hunger that is always there," he murmured, tilting his head to align his mouth with hers.

She'd forgotten how wonderful his mouth felt on hers, she thought dizzily, as she twined her arms around his shoulders and tangled her fingers in his silky hair. The heat that had blossomed before expanded as she descended into a dark whirlpool of

sensations. His scent and taste were an aphrodisiac, drugging, thrilling, building the excitement threading her veins to fever pitch. Her mind, unable to process everything at once, descended into chaos. One moment she was focused entirely on his scent and taste, the texture of his tongue against hers, the heated pull of his mouth. The next her mind flashed to the feel of his body gliding against hers as they lay entwined, moving restlessly against one another in their eagerness—supple skin and hard muscle, steamy heat wafting from their bodies with the rise of their excitement. And then her mind flitted to the feel of the flesh of his back in her kneading hands. And then back to the feel of his mouth on hers.

He broke the kiss to explore her body with his mouth. She arched to meet him, clinging to his shoulders, trying to pull him closer, to guide him from one breast to the other, trying to absorb him with all of her senses at once.

The need built, became desperation. Her heart thundered in her chest. Her lungs labored until she could do nothing but pant dizzily for breath. A whisper began in her mind, became a chant of need—*now! Now! I want it now, need it. Give it to me.*

She tightened the leg she'd coiled around his hips, curling her hips to ride up the tantalizing hardness of his shaft. It sent a mixture of pleasure and pain through her tender, swollen lips when he curled his own hips and thrust. It didn't ease the ache.

She pulled on him a little more frantically, trying to shove the leg pinned between them under his hips and open her body to his. He lifted to allow it, rolling into the cradle of her thighs. Her breath left her in a rush as his weight settled on top of her, but she wrapped her legs around his hips, digging one heel into his buttocks to urge him on.

"Sabin!" she gasped when he merely hunched against her, giving her more pain than pleasure.

He lifted his upper body to look down at her, his eyes glittering feverishly.

"Come inside of me," she demanded, trying to reach his cock with her hand and align it so that she could mount it herself.

A hard shudder ran through him as he grasped it and dragged it along her moist, heated cleft, searching—finding. She gasped, throwing her head back as he pressed inside of her and she felt the delightful pleasure/pain of counter pressure, the thick, hardness of his flesh parting hers with welcome force.

She shifted eagerly to meet his next thrust. Nothing, she thought, could be more lovely than the feel of his flesh merging with her own, gloving him. Her channel quaked in vigorous applause as his flesh stroked the bundle of nerve endings inside of her, impatiently awaiting each pass, throwing off sparks and jolts of exquisite pleasure each time.

She clung to him as he surged into her again and again, enjoying every moment of it, wanting it to last forever, but she'd no sooner thought of prolonging the bliss than her body could contain it no more. The convulsions that ripped through her were explosive, jarring. She sucked in a quick breath as her climax hit her, groaned as ecstasy flowed through her in a molten, surging wave. Gasping for breath, moaning, she rode it till it peaked and then, as she wafted downwards toward earth again, she felt his climax, heard his hoarse grunts for breath as his body ejected his seed, felt his big body shudder, and the thrill that shot through her made her come again.

The mellowing aftershocks were as pleasurable in their own way as the climax—climaxes—had been, she mused lazily, caressing him with her hands to sooth the last of

his shudders. He lay perfectly still beneath her touch, sucking in deep breaths and holding them a moment before he expelled them to slow his heart beat. She felt it slow to its normal rhythm against her breasts, felt him cool, heard his breaths come easier.

She'd begun to wonder if he'd drifted to sleep cradled in her arms when he stirred. "I like the feel of your hands on me," he murmured.

She smiled faintly against his chest. "*I* like the feel of my hands on you."

He shifted downward to disengage their bodies and align his face with hers and she felt a pang of regret to lose the flaccid bit of flesh that had fit so wonderfully well inside of her.

His gaze was somber as he studied her face and she wondered what thoughts were running through his mind. "What are you thinking?" she asked curiously.

"My mind was wondrously blank," he retorted.

She chuckled. "That's one of the wonderful side effects of great sex," she murmured. "You *have* been studying."

A faint frown appeared between his brows and then cleared as the memory surfaced. "You were not pleased before?"

She gave him a look. "I think you know better than that."

Amusement gleamed in his eyes. "I believe I would still like a report."

She closed her eyes, dutifully thinking it over. "Great, great ... fantastic."

His lips curled. "I always like to know that I am improving in my studies."

"I'm not sure I could handle a lot more improvement. That was pretty mind blowing."

"Now I am disappointed. You promised hours ... days ... years."

"I don't remember saying years."

He stoked her face. "But you will promise them to me," he murmured.

She tensed, searching his eyes, feeling a heady warmth flow over her as it sank into her what he was asking. "Yes, I will."

He leaned down to kiss her lips lightly. "Good. I have not finished my studies."

Danielle chuckled despite the stab of disappointment that went through her.

"You're such an ass! Now I don't know if you were serious or not!"

He sobered. "Did I not seem serious when I asked?"

Doubt flickered through her. "Yes," she said hesitantly.

He shook his head at her chidingly. "You are a curious species. I am certain it will take me years even to begin to understand ... how I came to love you with such painful need when I had thought my species had long since become master of their emotions instead of slave to them."

Danielle sucked in a quick breath and felt as if everything inside of her inflated with sheer joy. "You love me?" she asked breathlessly.

"To the point of insanity. In fact, I believe I must conduct a study into it to determine which side of the line I am currently standing on."

Danielle smiled at him. Catching his face between her palms, she drew him down to kiss him. "You're still completely sane. I'm the one that's crazy ... crazy about you."

Releasing her hold, she pushed against his chest until he rolled onto his back and then straddled his waist. He folded his arms behind his head, studying her with a faint smile on his lips. "Is that your way of saying you love me, too?"

She leaned over him, bracing on her hands. "No. This is," she whispered,

launching her own assault, caressing him with her mouth and hands until he was too feverish with need to hold still any longer, and then mounting his shaft and riding him until she came. He caught her hips when she'd ceased shuddering with her climax and tipped her onto her back, thrusting into her in desperate pursuit of his own.

Afterward, he spooned with her, idly stroking his hand over her belly. "I wonder what it feels like to be inside of you," he murmured.

Danielle smiled sleepily. "You haven't figured that out yet?"

He paused. Nuzzling beneath her hair, he nipped her ear. "Redirect your mind, woman! The poor fellow is exhausted."

Danielle chuckled. "You meant for the baby? Warm and snug, I suppose ... although I imagine he's beginning to wonder what that long, hard thing is that keeps poking him."

He tensed. "Do you suppose he is aware of that?"

"Don't even think about sticking anything up me to have a look."

"I had not. Now that you have brought it up, however, if you are not averse to the notion ...?"

"Didn't I just say I was?" she asked testily.

"Yes, but it would not be nearly as intrusive."

"Or as much fun."

"How much longer will you be gestating?"

"I think I'm around half way."

He sat up. "It takes that long?"

"Sorry for the inconvenience," she said dryly.

"You should be," he murmured, laughter threading his voice. "I do not know if I will be able to contain my impatience."

Discomfort flickered through her. She still wasn't certain it was his. The depth of his disappointment if he discovered it wasn't settled tightly in her chest.

It wasn't as if he didn't know! Or that he could reasonably blame her if it turned out the baby wasn't his.

She shifted over to look at him worriedly. "You'll be terribly disappointed if it isn't yours, won't you?"

He gazed back at her solemnly. "I will not be disappointed, either with you or the child."

Vaguely reassured, she nuzzled her face against his and then began to nibble a trail to his ear.

He sighed heavily. "If you are going to begin that again, you insatiable female, I believe I will have to summon reinforcements."

Danielle uttered a snort of a laugh, jerking back to look at him. "I was just loving on you," she said, pouting when he gave her a stern look.

"We have hours—days—years. I believe it might be wise to pace ourselves." He looked down at his cock. Grasping the flaccid member, he shook it at her. "The heart is eager but this fellow is dead ... for the moment."

Danielle settled again. "I'm fine. I just thought you might want to again."

He studied her thoughtfully. "You desire On and Nick as you do me."

She sent him a sharp look. "I love you."

"And them, also." He frowned faintly. "I truly do not completely understand the

customs of your people, though I suppose I should, given those of my own. Our taboo is based upon reason and logic, however, not emotion. We cannot afford to taint the gene pool we have left. The progenitors knew what they were doing when they forbade casual sexual intercourse or any touch. It is far easier to abstain altogether than only to taste a little.

"You have the capacity to love many. It is not diminished in any way by the number of people you love that I have been able to determine. It point of fact, the more you love, the more capable you are of having those same feelings for others. Will it make you easier in your mind if I say that you must reserve the love you feel for me only for me? You can not share it with the others. And I will not expect you to give to me the love you have reserved for them."

Danielle studied him doubtfully. "It really doesn't bother you?"

"I did not say that. I have discovered that I also have a capacity for the same territorialism as the human male. Thankfully, I do not find it nearly as debilitating as Nick does. It does not lower my intelligence, as it appears to with him. Will you cease to love me if you make love to them?"

"No! Of course not!"

The tension went out of him. He settled again, gathering her closely against his length. "Good! I have realized that I feel a great deal of affection for my batch mate, On—and, oddly enough, Nick. It would grieve me endlessly if I had to kill them." He nuzzled his face against her neck. "I will if I must, mind you. I have found that I covet your affection as much as I enjoy making love to you."

Danielle smiled tentatively. "You are a very strange species."

"On is far stranger than I."

Danielle wiggled her butt against his groin and sighed when she didn't get more than a faint lift in reaction. "About those reinforcements ..."

* * * *

A half smile of affectionate amusement played across Danielle's lips as she stood on the back porch, leaning against the frame of the kitchen door. Cary and Kyle were trying to explain the rules of the ball game they wanted to play to On and Sabin.

"You're wasting your time, boys," Nick called to them from the pitcher's mound they'd set up in the back yard. "They'll spend all their time trying to calculate the trajectory and spoil the fun."

Without glancing at him, On lifted a middle finger in his direction.

"I got one just like that," Nick taunted.

Danielle shook her head. The back door of the house that backed up to theirs slammed, catching her attention. Joyce, carrying a basket on her hip as she headed to the clothes line, lifted a hand and waved. Waving back at her, Danielle turned to head back inside.

It hadn't taken a lot to convince Su-lynn and Joyce to abandon their cabin in the mountains. The discovery that power had been restored in a number of areas south of them was sufficient.

She was glad they'd come. She would've been worried about them if they hadn't and it was nice to have some female companionship now and again.

It was also comforting not to be the only 'oddballs' in the tiny but growing community.

Of course, people seemed to be a little more tolerant than they'd once been—they'd discovered it imperative to pull together as a community—but she knew she was the talk of the town.

They just hadn't quite figured out what the relationship was between her and the three men living with her.

Truthfully, she hadn't entirely figured it out herself.

She knew where she stood with On and Sabin.

She still hadn't figure out why Nick had come with them.

She'd thought, at first, that he was just being helpful. He'd helped them load up their belongings, haul them south, locate a suitable abandoned property within the 'modern' zone and move in.

And then, instead of moving on as she'd expected, he'd settled in with them.

Curious.

Frustrating.

Tantalizing.

Discovering smoke was billowing out of the oven, Danielle rushed to it and opened the door. When she'd fanned the smoke away and examined the buns she'd been 'browning' she glared at them in disgust. Dragging the pan out, she examined them and finally grabbed a butter knife and scraped the charred surface until she reached the nicely browned area.

The back door slammed behind her as someone entered.

"Saw the smoke signal—figured lunch must be ready," Nick quipped, dragging a chair out from the kitchen table, twitching it around, and straddling it backwards.

"I got distracted," Danielle said irritably. "They're alright. I scraped the burned part off."

Nick grunted. "Watching the wrong buns."

Danielle felt her face heat, but she didn't bother to deny it. Setting the pan down on the table with a clang, she marched to the back door and bellowed, "Lunch!"

The stampede toward the back door, she knew, was Cary and Kyle. They slammed into the door together and fell back, fighting over who was going to get through first, and finally tumbled into the kitchen.

"Wow! Hot dogs and hamburgers!" they exclaimed almost in unison.

"Nope!" Danielle growled when they started fighting over the same chair. "Wash up first!"

Whining and muttering, they left the kitchen and then tried to race each other to the bathroom.

She looked up with a smile when Sabin and On followed them in. They stared at the food on the table curiously, and, she noticed, without a lot of enthusiasm.

"Hot dogs and hamburgers on burnt buns—it's an American classic," Nick murmured.

Danielle glared at him. "They're not burnt ... anymore."

"Uh uh," Nick cautioned when On and Sabin pulled out chairs. "Wash up first."

The two examined their hands, shrugged, and left the kitchen. Cary and Kyle almost ran them down in the race back to the kitchen.

"You didn't wash your hands either," she told Nick pointedly.

"I figured I'd wait till the first rush was over," he said, slowly rising from the

chair and turning it to face the table again.

Danielle frowned when he left, wondering why it was that he always seemed to work so hard to get a rise out of her—of any kind.

Not that she let him see it if she could help it.

But there was no getting around the fact that he looked damned good in the worn jeans and knit shirt he had on.

Unable to resist, she glanced at his ‘buns’ as he left the kitchen.

“I saw that.”

“You did not!” Danielle said indignantly before she thought better of it.

He laughed.

Cary and Kyle were as thrilled with her efforts as she could’ve hoped.

And it *had* been an effort whether *some* people realized it or not!

She’d gotten the idea when she’d gone to the butcher who’d set up shop a block from their house. He’d been grinding meat and she’d asked him if he thought he could make hot dogs ... or a close facsimile. When he’d agreed to see what he could come up with, she’d hunted the woman she’d been told was making condiments and selling them from her house. The catsup didn’t look much like catsup—no red food coloring--but it tasted like catsup. She’d gone to the baker after that and placed a special order for buns and then went to the man she’d heard had potatoes.

It had taken almost a week to round everything up and hammer out a trade agreement for the goods.

And then she’d burned the damned buns.

Shaking the depression that caused her, she pulled out the condiments with the flourish of a magician and proudly plopped them on the table. The boys looked the catsup over a little doubtfully but shrugged and slathered it on their buns, dropped another dollop on the plate to dip their ‘chips’ into and tore into the food as if they hadn’t been fed in a week.

Sabin picked up a wiener and examined it doubtfully. “What, may I ask, did this come off of?”

Danielle nearly snorted her water through her nose. She was still coughing when Nick explained. “You know ... dogs?”

“Nick! I will strangle you!” Danielle threatened when she’d caught her breath.

Sabin sent her amused look that assured her he’d been perfectly aware of what he’d suggested when he’d held up the wiener and waved it at her.

“It’s chicken lips and assholes,” Kyle supplied helpfully.

Danielle gaped at him. “Kyle Stevens! Where did you ...? Nick!”

“That’s what Dad told us,” Cary said.

“Oh.” Danielle studied him worriedly a moment, but the flicker of grief in his eyes passed quickly. Relief filled her. Either On had helped them over the first ‘hump’ or their natural resilience had finally kicked in. They’d been behaving almost like their ‘normal’ selves since the move, but she was still uneasy about them. They had nightmares way too often for her comfort and they never wanted to talk about them. “Well, they aren’t. He was teasing. And they aren’t dog parts either,” she assured Sabin.

All in all, despite the less-than-appetizing discussion about the origins of the hot dogs, Danielle thought the meal was a success. Cary and Kyle were in heaven. Even though it wasn’t just like the fast foods they missed, it was close enough to delight them.

Sabin, On, and Nick also seemed to enjoy the meal thoroughly—either that or they were just really hungry.

When they'd finished, Cary and Kyle dashed outside again and then ran back when they discovered none of the men had followed them. "You coming?"

Sabin and On got up and followed them.

"I'll be there in a minute," Nick called after them.

Sending him a curious look, Danielle finally got up and started to clear the table when he didn't seem inclined to talk. He caught her around the waist and dragged her down on his lap when she started past him.

Startled, she glanced back at him.

The amusement had vanished from his eyes. There wasn't even the teasing, seductive gleam in them that she was used to seeing. "We need to talk. I need to," he amended, tightening his arm when she started to rise. "Just ... give me a minute ... please."

Danielle felt her throat close. He pressed his forehead against her back. "I screwed up, baby. I know how badly I screwed everything up. Shit! I knew it then."

He fell silent for so long, she began to wonder if that was all he'd intended to say.

"You scared the hell out of me, baby," he murmured raggedly. "There's just no way to whitewash it. I knew right then ... almost from the first time I set eyes on you, I think, that you were the one—the *only* one. I was damned hardheaded, though, so used to getting what I wanted and then heading off any time things started looking too serious. I was determined to stick to the routine even when I realized I didn't want to for the first in my life.

"I know I'd probably be better off lying to you, but the truth is I wanted you to know I'd gone off to another woman. I wanted to burn my bridges because I was scared shitless that, if I didn't, you'd take me back."

Danielle glanced at him over her shoulder. "You didn't want me to take you back?"

"Stupid, huh? Really stupid! I did want you back, too much. I don't honestly know what the fuck I was thinking. That I didn't want to settle down, that I wasn't ready and if I screwed things up with you then there wasn't any danger of it happening. Because I sure as hell wasn't interested in anybody else. I didn't walk away from you, baby. I ran like hell.

"I was doing a pretty fucking good job of convincing myself I was glad I'd screwed it all up until it finally dawned on me that I'd thrown away the only thing I ever really wanted."

It was a lot to digest, and almost as confusing to her as he seemed to be about it. She *thought* he was saying he did care about her—he just didn't want to. When he eased his grip on her, she turned in his lap to study him. "Is that why you didn't want to have anything to do with the baby?"

He looked away, swallowing a little sickly. "I told you I was a dumb ass," he muttered. "It isn't my baby. I know it isn't, because I got fixed before I even met you. I thought I was being smart—making sure I didn't leave any kids behind when I moved on. And I guess it was, because I had a hell of a career and I would've screwed up sooner or later."

Danielle felt a flash of cold and then heat sweep over her. She couldn't decide if

it was relief to finally know, absolutely, that Nick hadn't fathered the child Sabin was so thrilled about or if was grief that it wasn't Nick's and never would be. "It was because I mentioned that I'd like to have more children."

He stared at her in confusion for a long moment and finally shrugged. "Maybe that was part of it, too. I don't know. Maybe that was a lot of it. I don't think I realized how much I'd given up until I found out you were pregnant and knew he—they could give you something I couldn't."

"Two things hit me right then—that I'd given up the one thing I might still have had to bring you back to me. And that, if I died, no one would even miss me. It would be like I'd never existed at all."

Danielle cupped his cheek. "I would have missed you."

His gaze flickered over her face. "Yeah?"

"Yes."

He tilted his head, studying her. "I could still try knocking you up and tying you down. On offered to fix the little problem. I'm not too keen on having his hands anywhere near the jewels, but I'm just about ready to try anything, baby."

Danielle chuckled, shaking her head. "I'm pregnant now. You can't knock me up."

His eyes gleamed. "And I'm still shooting blanks, but we could always practice."

Danielle hesitated, but she could see he was dead serious despite the teasing tone. More than that, she saw pain in his eyes that she'd never seen before.

Climbing off his lap, she took his hand and led him to his bedroom. She stopped him when he would've drawn her into his arms and kissed her. "I love you, Nick ... but you have to understand that I love On and Sabin, too."

Something flickered in his eyes—a flash of anger—but he drew her close. "Yeah, but *I'll* still be here when they go home," he muttered. "I love you. I can outwait the bastards."

* * * *

"Papa! See!"

"Yes, sweetie. Very pretty," Sabin said absently, focusing on the images he was studying.

"You didn't look!" Cara said, tugging on his shirt.

He lifted his head and looked down at his daughter blankly for a moment. "You are beautiful."

She preened for a moment and then frowned at him. "My pitcher, Papa! Not my dress!"

He lifted his brows and finally took the piece of paper she was waving at him. "This is beautiful also."

Beaming at him, Cara took her 'pitcher' back and skipped out of the room.

Sabin watched her depart and met Danielle's gaze. "What was that?"

Danielle grinned. "It was a unicorn. Couldn't you tell?"

"I thought that the beast of fable was horse-like?" he asked, frowning.

"They were."

His frown deepened. "That did not look a horse," he said with conviction.

"She's only five. Give her a few years."

He nodded. "Tell her that they only have four legs."

Danielle moved closer. "What is it that you're so fascinated with?"

He looked surprised but shifted aside to allow her to look. "This is Cara's DNA. This is yours. This is mine and this is On's."

Danielle nodded. She had some familiarity with the charts, but not enough to tell much about them. "The patterns aren't the same."

"Precisely! There are mutations here that should not be."

Uneasiness slithered through her. "Is that bad?"

"It is incomprehensible—unless I contaminated the specimen. This is mine. This is On's. They should be identical."

Danielle studied them. "There's only a couple of things that don't match up."

"But there shouldn't be any."

"Why did you even run the test then?" Danielle asked curiously.

Sabin reddened faintly. He seemed to wrestle with something a moment. "I wanted to see if there was any variation that would prove, conclusively, that I had produced Cara rather than On. I began to think about the fact that his ability was not the same as mine and that it might appear differently in the DNA strand."

Danielle kissed his cheek. "But you've always said you and On were one."

"But we are not one!"

"Oh! Look! This marker matches Cara's! Isn't that what you were looking for?"

"It is what I was looking for," Sabin agreed, satisfaction momentarily replacing the irritation in his voice. "She is mine."

He picked up another. "This one is Drake's. You see here—this proves conclusively that he is On's. On will be gratified."

"Did you do one for Stevie?" Nick asked from the door.

Sabin swiveled around to look at him. "There was no question about Stevie."

Nick bounced the infant he was holding. "Hear that, precious? I'm indisputably your daddy."

The baby grinned at him toothlessly. Settling her against his chest again, he gave Danielle a smoldering look and used his eyebrows to urge her toward the door. She bit her lip, rolling her eyes at his efforts at subtlety. Leaning down to kiss Sabin's cheek, she moved toward the door.

"I wouldn't worry too much about the charts," Nick said, catching Danielle's hand as she reached him. "Nature has a way of balancing things, you know."

Sabin turned to look at him coolly. "This could be potentially catastrophic for the mahns," he said irritably. "It might mean the DNA samples have somehow become corrupted."

"And it might mean that nature is trying to find balance," Nick reiterated. "Think about it. Maybe the mahns should stop screwing with cloning and allow nature to set things straight?"

Danielle sent Sabin an air kiss and mouthed 'love you.'

He smiled at her a little absently. "I love you, too." His gaze moved to Nick and he frowned. "Before you suggest it, I am not putting the baby to bed."

Nick sent him a sour look and dragged Danielle from the room. "Maybe that'll convince him to take his ass back to what's-it-called," he muttered, studying the baby thoughtfully. "We'll ask On."

"I do not have to take my ass back to my world to give the report. I can send it

with Du and Tra when next they come,” Sabin called after them.

Nick’s brows lowered to form a sullen shelf above his eyes. Lifting his free hand, he smoothed it over the back of his head, shooting Nick a bird. “Damned alien!”

“I have been living here for six years! When will I *not* be considered an alien?” Sabin demanded indignantly.

“Never!” Nick shot back at him.

The End