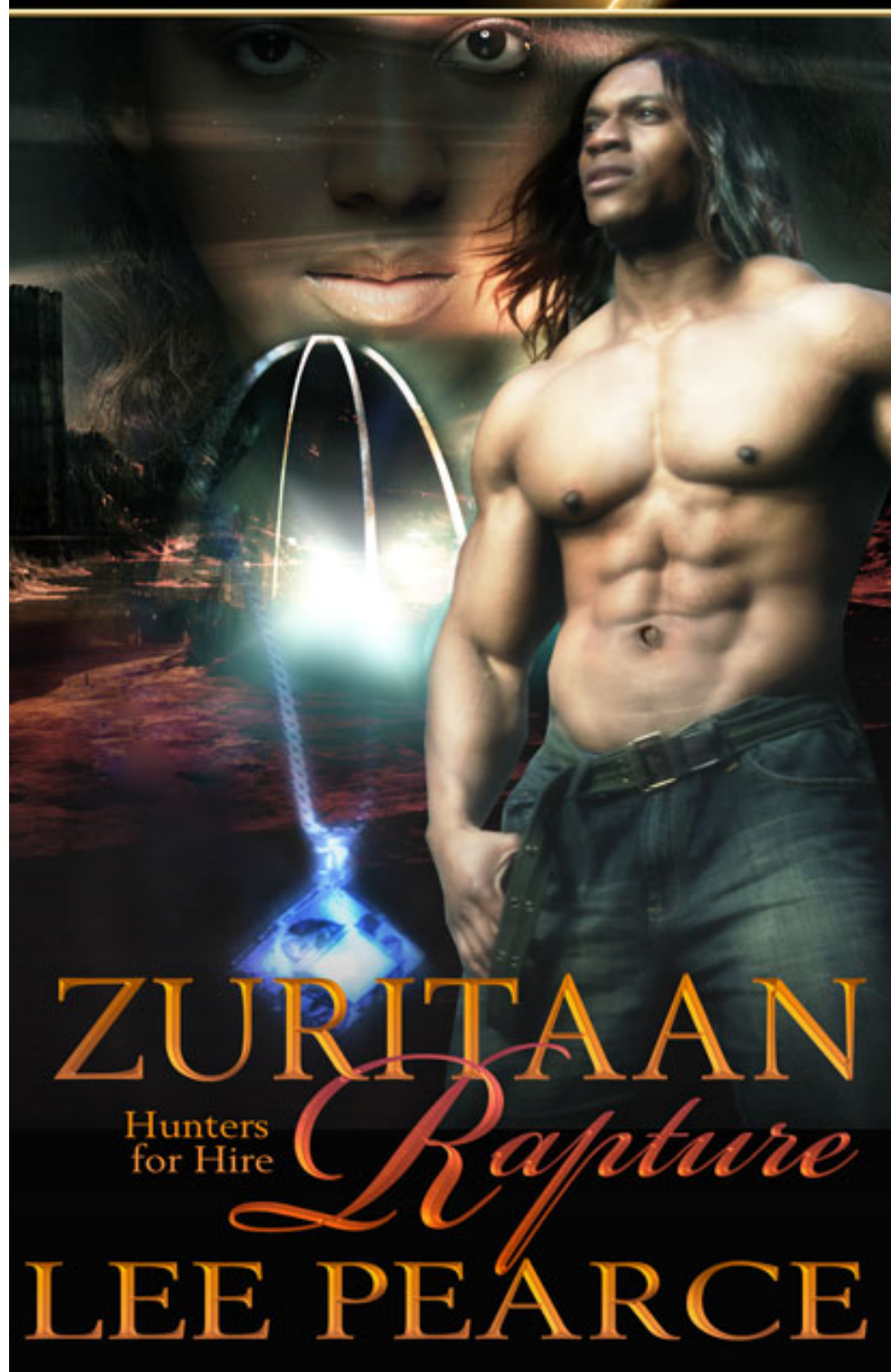


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



ZURITAAN

Hunters
for Hire

Rapture

LEE PEARCE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Zuritaan Rapture

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ZURITAAN RAPTURE

Lee Pearce

Dedication

I dedicate this book to all my friends who were not at all surprised I could write a super sexy romance. Your support is very much appreciated.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many people who have helped to mold this story—my good friends Mizan Ibrahim and Dave Moorhouse, who always believed in what I could accomplish; my parents, Gwen and Bill, who saw the writer in me even before I did; members of the Canadian Authors Association, without whose support and friendship I never would have continued to believe; Nikki Soarde, whose advice and encouragement helped to form this story; and Helen Woodall, my editor, whose skill and sense of humor made the process so enjoyable.

Prologue

Welcome to the Devil's Pit. Home sweet home. My name is Ulric Vonner and I run The Web, the base of operations for Bounty Hunters, Inc. You need criminals found? We will find them. The crime doesn't matter. Remember that we don't work for free—our fees are high but we always catch our man, woman, or whatever species it is that you're after. Of course, catching them and bringing them in are two different things. We may be scoundrels but we aren't without conscience.

I started this business fifteen years ago. Hunters come and hunters go but that's life. No one lasts forever, not in this business. Each of my bounty hunters has his or her reasons for turning hunter. I don't ask what they are and I don't care. They war with their inner demons, carve out a living for themselves and then they move on—provided they survive their stint as a hunter. I don't get attached and I don't mourn their loss. I learned long ago not to depend on anyone but myself. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, which is the primary reason I deal with the Amalgamation.

Behind every great power is corruption and the Amalgamation is no exception. However, they do pay well and I'm not without my own agenda. I fight to survive and to hold on to what little I have left. Bounty Hunters, Inc. gives me a purpose and a damn good excuse to move in the circles I do. It's said a man is judged by the company he keeps, so what does that say about me? In a galaxy fraught with danger, Bounty Hunters, Inc. will strive to satisfy all our customers—if it's in our best interests to do so. Though we may wear a veneer of legal process, we are bounty hunters and we hunt those we are paid to hunt. If in the process we bring down those who would do harm to others—so much the better.

What is a bounty hunter? We're just glorified rogues trying to make the best out of what life tossed our way. The galaxy is not without its flaws or its bad seeds and that's what we're here for — to do the jobs no one else wants.

The best way to learn about Bounty Hunters, Inc. and me is to first get to know the people who work for me. They are good people in their own ways but if you cross them, be prepared to face the consequences.

Let the hunting begin...

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Glossary

Aboolan: The natural inhabitants of the Aboo System and its planets who moved on after beings from Earth moved in to mine the planets for their natural resources.

Aboo System: Home of the Aboo mining planets. Crystolium-rich planets located two Smith Gates from Earth.

Aboo Two: Second planet in the Aboo System where Amalgama, the capital city of the Amalgamation of Planets, is located.

Aboolan War of 2112: War that broke out when Earthlings invaded the Aboo System for the planets' natural resources.

Abyss, The: Section of The Web where prisoners are kept until transported to another planet or prison facility.

Amalgama: The capital city and chief headquarters for the Amalgamation of Planets. A large, dome-covered city located on the planet Aboo Two.

Amalgamation of Planets: The primary governing body of the galaxy.

Amaya: Cintealios capital city on the planet of the same name.

Aurelie: The Web's day shift cook.

Azo Eta: Planet very similar to Earth, located in the Secundus System.

Bounty-hunter class: Class of small ships, specially suited to carry and operate with only a small crew. Preferred mode of transportation of the bounty hunters, hence the name.

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: Organization of bounty hunters set up and run by Ulric Vonner. They work for large fees and at their own discretion and are neither good nor bad, though they will break the law when necessary in order to bring in a bounty.

Bulkhead Disrupting Charge: Fired from a normal missile cannon, the charge attaches itself to a target's shields, weakens the shields, opens a hole through the target's defenses and fires a concentrated charge into the target's hull. Inflicts major, concentrated damage to a ship's hull.

Cintealios: The warrior race. These beings are human/humanoid and live to conquer those who are weaker. Largest opposing force to the Amalgamation.

Comm-tabs: Buttonlike communication devices that are pressed to the skin behind the ear.

Constance O'Rourke: Supply handler for The Web.

Control: Small space station situated near the Smith Gate. Controls the energy field that operates the gates and determines where a ship will emerge from the wormhole.

Copper Arrow: Copper balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light; an arrow that explodes on contact.

Devil's Pit: Seedy neighborhood on Quartus Seven where The Web is located. Location chosen specifically for its rough appearance and dangerous atmosphere.

Dexter Smith: "Dex", The Web's computer geek. If it's electronic, he can figure it out.

"Doc": Holographic doctor in The Web's medical wing. He has numerous robotic shells that he can download himself into, to perform various functions.

Executioner: Ulric Vonner's personal bounty-class cruiser.

Gold Arrow: Gold balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light and act as a claw, anchoring target to whatever solid surface is behind it, such as a wall.

Halcion Cartiere: Top commanding officer of the Interplanetary Military Forces.

Hub: The heart of The Web, located at the very center. Also contains the Conference Room where meetings are held.

Hunter Pack: Small backpack that holds more than it appears to hold.

Icsantheze Dagger: Daggers created on the planet Icsanthia. Sixty-six centimeters total length from tip of the dagger blade to the end of the handle—fifteen centimeter hilt, fifty-one centimeter blade. The blade is curved like a serpent slithering across a surface, golden in color, with pale green streaks through the blade. Handle is wrapped in emerald leather.

Interplanetary Military Forces (IMF): The military power behind the Amalgamation that works diligently to protect the Amalgamation and everything it stands for.

Intergalactic Security Agency (ISA): The job of the ISA is to explore new worlds and collect critical intelligence on any alien species discovered.

Interplanetary Senate: Body of five hundred representatives from across the galaxy. Most major systems are represented in the senate—five representatives each—with a few exceptions.

Jacobi Smith (deceased): Discovered worm holes usable for faster travel times. The worm holes became known as Smith Gates in his honor.

Jiborui: Home world of Krys Xan, the Amalgamation of Planets' leader. Exotic planet that is home to humanoid, hermaphrodite beings who are tall and slender and have very sharp minds. Key in the production of many space travel inventions that have made traveling throughout the galaxy and colonizing new worlds easier.

Jump Drives: Allows the vessel to navigate through nearby worm holes, effectively reducing travel times significantly. (Note: Control must open the gate. Also controls to which neighboring system the gate connects.)

Krys Xan: Hermaphrodite from Jurgia and leader of the Amalgamation of Planets. He presides over the Senate and all its members.

Military Sciences Lab: Based on Earth, its purpose is to create and cultivate the ultimate soldier.

Nursotics: Robotic nurses.

Orbit Wisps: Spectral, universal snitches. They barter information for energy cubes.

PHD: Personal Holographic Device. When activated, it alters the hunter's appearance, aiding in acquiring a bounty.

Plasma Cannons: Can target an enemy ship's deflector shield and will drain the energy from the shield determinant to the size of the charge. If used on a small ship without a shield, it can slowly deteriorate the ship's hull.

Quartus Seven: Planet where The Web is located. Also known as The City Planet. seventy-five percent of the planet's surface is covered by one continuous metropolitan area. The remaining twenty-five percent of the planet is covered in water. No indigenous life forms or plant life exist here.

Replicators: Basic replication of items such as food and clothing. Complex machinery cannot be replicated, though the replicator can retrieve items from storage compartments.

Sa-Ro Five: Largest agricultural hub in the Secundus System. This planet supplies food rations to many planets, including some from neighboring systems.

Scanners: Allow the ship's crew to scan other ships, space stations or planets for signs of life.

Sealy Garrison: Constance O'Rourke's assistant. If Constance isn't available, Sealy is the man to see.

Secret Sciences Police (SSP): Formed to ensure that no one toys with time travel or biowar sciences, to protect the Amalgamation and its interests.

Secundus System: System to which Quartus Seven belongs. Similar to Earth's system, Secundus possesses nine planets, many of which are uninhabitable due to extreme atmospheric conditions, though the use of atmospheric domes enables limited habitation of some of the planets.

Silver Arrow: Silver balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light and only work as a piercing weapon.

Smith Gate: Device used to access worm holes. It is located near the largest, most advanced planet in the system and significantly cuts down travel times.

Smith Hole: Proper name for the worm holes used by Smith Gates.

Spectra-shades: Special shades used to see Orbit Wisps.

Super Soldiers: Bio-engineered super soldiers, produced on Earth as supreme fighting beings.

The Web: Base of operations for Bounty Hunters, Inc.

Tomozava: A blue fleshy vegetable that is a cross between a tomato and a *zava* vegetable.

Tranq-ring: Ring that administers a dose of tranquilizer to a bounty/person/being but does not affect the ring's wearer.

T-Sdei Delta: The party planet. Located in the Secundus System, neighboring Quartus Seven.

Ulric Vonner: President and founder of Bounty Hunters, Inc.

Vanquiguard: Wristband that, when activated, creates an energy shield to protect the wearer.

Zava: Blue, tomato-like vegetable that is indigenous to the planet Azo Eta. Also known as *tomozava*.

Zeri: Night shift cook for The Web.

Chapter One

Oxam Singleton strode through the rank and filthy streets of the Devil's Pit, occasionally glancing at street markers and building names, matching memorized instructions given by the man he had come to see. Holding a long overcoat tightly closed across his chest with one hand and the strap of a sack in the other hand, he wound his way down the center of the street, trying not to look out of place but yet knowing somehow no one looked like they belonged here. Street people of all sorts hung in the shadows. The odd creature would sidle out into the bleak sunlight, swaying hips or breasts, muttering a question in his direction and when he did not acknowledge its presence, would spit at his feet and melt into the dark again. It was not these people—if that was what they truly were—who caused him to be so distant. It was the closeness of the walls, the stench of the gutters, the lack of wind.

Having had to travel through four Smith Gates from Irem of the Antilles System to here in Secundus had wearied the nearly hundred-and-thirty-nine-year-old man. He'd had to travel quickly once the plan had been set in motion. Time was important. If he could not convince Ulric Vonner of the immediacy of the situation, then more than just the opportunity to bring to justice a family of criminals would be lost.

Oxam walked past a blackened doorway, checked another store sign then returned to the doorway. He pressed a hand above the door handle, as instructed and waited. He thought he felt a slight vibration but it could have been a passing hovercraft at the end of the street. A soft click and the door cracked open. He pushed and walked inside. The door slid closed behind him, sealing off all sound and smell.

"Welcome, Mr. Singleton." The voice was deep yet reassuring. A man emerged from a doorway to the right then turned to allow Oxam to enter. The room held a desk and two chairs, one on either side. Oxam chose the closest, sat and placed the sack on

his lap, both hands now wrapped in the straps. People had died for what he carried. More people may die still.

"I am Ulric Vonner," the man said as he sat down and leaned back in the chair, coal colored eyes boring into Oxam's soul. He felt anxiety build. This man did not look like one to trifle with. No social niceties. He only cared about the job.

"I am grateful that you could see me on such short notice," Oxam paused. Time was short. Where to start?

"You mentioned Firestorm when last we communicated," Ulric began, his eyebrows raised.

Oxam relaxed. This was the man who had gotten his message many months ago. He nodded and continued. "Firestorm. Over five years ago, solar flares separated the Antilles System from the rest of the solar system for nearly ten days. A civil war broke out among the off-world miners. Land was expropriated illegally from the Cousheys, the local peoples, and, because it was considered a time of strife, the Planetary Council allowed the miners to keep the land. Hundreds of communities were destroyed. Thousands of landowners were murdered." Oxam felt his throat constrict. He still could see his wife's body and the bodies of most of his family rotting on the desert floor among the smoking ruins of the village he had called home. "We are a peaceful people. They took advantage knowing we would not fight back. They did not need to kill my people."

"And you know who the instigator is? You brought proof?" Ulric asked, his voice encouraging.

Oxam lifted his sack onto the desk top. He pulled the strap through the double loop and felt deep inside. Pushing the sack aside, he withdrew an envelope and pulled out four photographs. Ulric leaned forward to look at the first two Oxam spread on the dark surface. Ulric studied them for a moment then without looking up, asked, "Location?"

"Before I tell you where, you must do one more thing."

Ulric leaned back in his chair, again, his fingers crossed in a triangle in front of his face. Oyam took his silence as assent to continue. "If your people cannot save anyone else, they must save two people." He turned over the final two photographs.

"Who are they?" Ulric asked, not looking at the photos.

"They will need medical attention prior to removal." Oyam hoped that would be enough.

"Who are they?" Ulric asked, again, emphasizing the "who".

Oyam nervously fingered the pictures. He knew he had to tell, had to explain but could he trust this bounty hunter?

"A Seeker and Hammer."

Ulric showed no emotion other than a slight flush to his face. "The legend? It is true?"

"It is only a legend to the outer worlds."

"You said they will need medical attention?"

Again, Oyam reached into his bag. He placed two vials and an envelope on the desk. "The man they live with now – the one they believe to be their father and uncle – blocked their childhood memories. These vials – one for each – will break the block but the medicine must be given under controlled conditions. There will be side effects. I believe you have such a facility?"

Ulric nodded. "What happens if we don't get to them in time?"

"If they are not made to remember soon, they will go insane. They have, in their genetic makeup, certain abilities. Only they can control them but they have to remember who they were meant to be. No sedative, short of death, will help them." Oyam paused to swallow. How does one explain that without the Seeker and Hammer the planet will die? He pulled from the sack a small fabric pouch tied with a ribbon. He placed two fingers inside and pulled apart the top, the ribbons sliding with a gentle swoosh. He tipped the pouch over his palm and a small clear stone attached to a gold

chain rolled out. He held the stone up to the light so the bounty hunter could see the center glittering a bright blue. Even in the filtered light, it appeared to pulse.

"The legend states that the Seeker and Hammer must work together to find and bring to the surface these zuritaa stones. Do you see how it has a beat?"

Ulric nodded.

"Only Cousheys can make the stones sing. This beat is its song. The Seeker hears the song and can locate the stones in the ground. Once attuned to the song though, the Seeker loses all touch with reality. The Hammer is responsible for the Seeker's well-being and protection. One without the other cannot exist."

He passed the stone to Ulric who held it on his palm up to the light. "The pulse is gone." Oxam placed his hand over Ulric's, pressing the stone between. Ever so quietly a lilting tune filled the air as if a small bird had lifted from their hands, singing a soothing song. Oxam's hand loosened and the sound faded. He noted the lingering wonder on Ulric's face as he placed the stone back in the pouch. He had succeeded in convincing Ulric. Oxam felt a great weariness settle upon his shoulders.

"You will help us? Soon?" He pushed the envelope and pictures across the top of the desk.

Ulric nodded. "Very soon."

Oxam stood and grasped Ulric's hand to seal the contract. Then his legs gave out. He collapsed back into the chair. He heard Ulric speaking into the air, calling for the doctor to come. He wanted to tell him not to bother. He had done what had to be done. Ulric was leaning over him now, no longer speaking into the air, holding his wrist.

"Send the stone home," Oxam spoke but his voice had lost its strength too. He couldn't feel his body anymore.

Ulric nodded. "We will take the stone home. And you."

Oxam smiled at the thought of home, saw the sunsets he loved so much because of the way they seemed to last forever, saw the sun drop behind the blood-red hills and felt the darkness envelop him.

* * * * *

“The moment is but fleeting.” Pollo’s tongue rolled over Esara’s dark red nipple teasing its erectness with his tip. She moaned and he trailed wet saliva down the mountain of her silken burnished breast, into the valley between. He licked up beads of sweat then trailed up the side of her other breast. His mouth covered the nipple then sucked it and most of her breast into his hot cavern.

Esara arched her back as shivers coursed down her spine. Her breath came in staggered gasps, whenever she remembered to breathe. Her hips moved beneath his body. Her legs tried to spread but Pollo had placed his legs on either side holding her still.

He lifted his mouth from her breast and moved a little closer to her head. “Be patient, Esara,” he said, his hot breath caressing her neck as he bent to lick the sweat from the hollow. “We have all night.” His black eyes sparkled in the reflection of the fire and a smile played at his lips.

“I want you more than once tonight,” she said, feeling the ache grow between her legs. Already slick with her juices, Esara felt an unbearable emptiness that only Pollo’s cock could fill. She rocked her hips again and his legs loosened just a little. She felt his shaft sliding into the crevice between her legs and she squeezed her thighs tight, trapping his cock. She began to rock back and forth. If this was all she could have for the moment, then maybe she could drive him crazy for a while.

Pollo groaned and brought his mouth down on hers, forcing her lips open, driving his tongue deep inside. She responded with tiny bites, nipping the flesh. He had tried this before, diverting her attention away from his cock, slowing her down and she

wouldn't let him succeed this time. When he pulled away from her mouth, she managed to say, "Put your cock inside me, now."

She felt the pressure on her legs loosen a little more but instead of his hips going between her legs, she felt a rumbling in his chest. She realized he was laughing. She looked into his eyes as he said, "You dare to order your husband-to-be?"

So this was the game he wanted to play. She smiled coyly and glanced above her head where he held both her wrists immobile with one of his massive hands. "If I can't touch you then, yes, I will order you to satisfy me. Besides, we're not married yet. I can still choose another."

"Oh, really?" Pollo bent over her left breast and tickled her nipple with the tip of his tongue. "Does this satisfy you?"

"Yes," she arched her back again, wishing he would take the whole breast in his mouth again.

He sucked the nipple then gave it a slight bite. She gasped. He covered her mouth with his and plunged his tongue back in, nearly choking her. She felt his hips slide to her side, dragging his cock out from between her legs, leaving one leg draped over her knees. Disappointment and rage flared. She tried to roll over to his torso but he held her still.

Pollo's hand suddenly plunged between her legs, forcing them apart. His fingers grazed her clit and she jumped. He threaded between her fleshy lips and plunged his fingers into her channel, filling her. His thumb pressed down on her clit and made circles. His fingers kneaded deep inside. She felt a rising wave and closed her eyes.

"Pollo," she cried, "Pollo, your cock." It was all she could think to say. She wanted him so badly. To feel his solidness inside her. To hold him tight.

Suddenly his hand was gone and her legs were free. He placed his knee between her legs, pushing them open. She spread wide and raised her hips. He brought his other leg between hers and plunged his shaft into her wetness. His balls slapped her legs as he drove himself in, over and over. She matched his pace, feeling a heat rising within

her body. He quickened the pace, his breath coming fast. His hands parted her cheeks and he pressed his thumb against her anus. Her hands finally free she dug her fingernails into his broad muscled back feeling it ripple as he moved.

Lost to the deep feelings, Esara arched her back until her head bent right back. The wave rose through her stomach and chest. Her spine sizzled and then the heat exploded in her head. She came first, feeling her body milking Pollo's cock. He gasped, rammed himself in deeply once more, then collapsed onto his side, pulling her close so they remained a tangle of arms and legs.

They slept for a while in this way until Esara woke first, shivering. The cave, their cave, had grown cold. The fire had gone out as the dark blanket of night had crept into their sanctuary. She rolled over and cuddled her back in closer against his chest. His hands, calloused and rough from working at the zuritaa mine, grasped her own toughened hands tight against her chest, just below her breasts. Everyone worked at the mine. She pulled one hand free and began to draw circles within circles in the sand. The patterns glowed blue and warmth rose to envelop their bodies.

Valued outside their community, the zuritaa jewels were used for trade. The community lived off the profits of their tiny mine, so everyone took their turn at digging out the jewels or cleaning them or polishing them or taking them into the cities to trade. Each job was as important as the other, the latter being the most dangerous. Their mine was a good producer. Its vein ran deep. The outside estates would do anything to take it from them. It would make the off-worlders richer than they ever imagined.

Esara and Pollo's people cared nothing for wealth. They considered themselves fortunate they could subsist on the zuritaa jewels. The zuritaa rock meant much more to them. It was the foundation of their life force. Without the energy force of the blue rock, their bodies would wither and die. It had happened to other communities—the ones who had become greedy and given away all their stones without finding a new vein. These people had moved away from their settlement not believing they would die but

they had. Within a decade, the people had all vanished. It was a tale told at the evening fires to caution against greed and disloyalty. No outsider must know of their mine's location. It meant the death of their community.

Esara had been outside once. She had accompanied her parents to a neighboring estate. Her father had gone to speak to the patriarch, a short, block-shaped man who stank of the cast-off slag from his own zuritaa mines. The off-worlders, her father said, did not know how to remove the stones without harming the land. The result was a dirty run-off that smelled of death and rot. Her father said it was the land's way to tell them to stop digging but these off-worlders did not know how to listen to the land.

Esara had stayed in the shadow of their small hovercraft, sitting on the golden sand, letting the warm grains sift through her fingers. She preferred to stay close to the land, letting its warmth caress her body. She had watched her parents speak to the owner. Her father had presented a tube that the owner had opened. He had removed the paper rolled inside. He had glanced at it then tossed the tube aside and torn the paper, throwing the shreds into the wind. Esara had watched the wind take the pieces and lift them high into the sky, flying away like birds. Then the man had pointed toward their hovercraft. Her mother had taken a step back, her hand to her throat, also glancing in her direction. Her father had stepped forward, leaning over the shorter man, his hands clenched. He had spoken words that made the man step back then turn and glance in her direction, again. Esara knew they were talking about her and felt the night cold run down her spine.

Her family had left immediately. This episode had occurred nearly two seasons ago and she had not gone outside, nor had she wanted to, since then. She and Pollo had been betrothed and the community was caught up planning their wedding day, something they didn't mind them doing. Pollo and Esara couldn't get enough time alone as it was and took it whenever they could get away.

Pollo's hand strayed up to her breast and cupped it. "I seem to think you are not asleep." His voice vibrated on the top of her head where his chin rested.

"I was thinking about my parents and the last time we went outside." She shivered and he pulled her even closer against his chest.

"Why would you think of that now?" his voice showed some concern. He'd be thinking of her intuition and how often its predictions came true.

"I don't know. I—" Suddenly, an explosion rocked the ground.

Pollo jumped to his feet and ran the few steps toward the cave entrance. Another explosion's shock wave nearly knocked him flat. His shoulder scraped the cave wall. He pushed off and kept running. Esara ran after him. She could hear the sound of hovercrafts flying overhead and people screaming outside.

Below, the village was under siege. Hovercraft dropped explosives on the buildings. After each explosion, buildings blazed with orange fire. Other hovercraft landed and soldiers poured out, guns pointed toward the running people. Anyone who turned and threatened the soldiers was fired upon.

"Get dressed," Pollo said, his body tense, his fists clenching and unclenching, as if he were already fighting. He grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. Esara rushed back to their pile of clothes.

"Who are they?" Esara called over her shoulder as she jerked on her pants and blouse.

"I think I see the Gerardis insignia on the ships."

Esara's blood ran cold. "No." That man her family had gone to see. Gerardis. He had always wanted to know the location of their village. The elders had never agreed to partner with him. He refused to respect their traditions and sacred sites.

"What can we do?" she asked, holding Pollo's shirt while he pulled on his pants.

"We run."

"What?" She turned on him. In the flashes of burning buildings, she saw the indecision on his face. He wanted so badly to go down to the village but something made him hesitate. She knew what she had to do. Her mind was made up. She turned

around but before she could take a step she felt him drag her body against his, wrapping his arm tightly around her shoulders.

“Pollo, what are you doing?” she struggled against his arm.

“No, I have to get you to safety – ahhh.” She had slammed her heel down on his instep and slipped out of his grasp.

“I am not leaving my people to die.” She bolted toward the cave entrance. She’d only have a few seconds’ head start but that could be just enough. She heard Pollo running after her, his heavy breathing coming closer. As she made it to the edge, she felt his hand on her shoulder. She twisted, heard fabric tear and slipped out of his grasp.

Zigzagging down the slope, she half ran, half slid so as not to fall. She heard stones scatter and Pollo swear, guessing he had fallen. A boulder temporarily blocked her view of the village and as she ran around it, she heard the echoing grunts from Pollo as he closed in on her, again. She wasn’t going to abandon her people. Yes, Pollo wanted to protect her. But without her people, she was nothing. She had no reason to exist.

Esara rounded the boulder. Bright lights blinded her. Strong arms grabbed her body, held her fast. She screamed a warning to Pollo but too late. He careened around the boulder and skidded to a stop. Red laser sights beaded on his chest. He slowly raised his arms, his eyes darting around at the group of soldiers slowly circling them.

Another explosion, deafening and Esara flew through the air, hitting Pollo then the boulder. Pain flashed through her head. The night began to sift into her eyesight and she struggled to sit up, managing only to push up with her arms. She looked around for Pollo. His inert body lay just out of her reach. She wanted to touch him but her body refused to move. Her legs had been pinned by the body of a soldier.

Silver flashed as boots walked up and stopped. A hand took hold of her thick hair and jerked her head up. Light blinded her eyes.

“Is that her?” a gravelly voice asked. She thought she recognized the speaker but the pain in her head made her thoughts foggy.

As she fought the swallowing darkness, she heard him say, "If they'd only given you to me when I first asked, then none of this would've been necessary."

Chapter Two

Ten years later

Esara jerked awake, her heart pounding, sweat soaking her body. She struggled to breathe in the steamy air, felt the walls closing in, the lack of air movement. The dark dream. She recognized its aftereffects, especially the suffocation.

The heat in the garage had become unbearable and she had fallen asleep on top of the hovercraft she had been trying to repair. Parts lay strewn about the floor and nearby worktable. She had been working on this particular craft for two days now. It had defied all reason and her attempts to fix it. She could fix anything but not this machine, not today. She was tired of working on it. And the heat. Summer had come again. She should have taken a break long ago. Instead she had stubbornly continued. And risked exhaustion and the dark dream. She could never remember the dream but it left her fearful, anxious and even more exhausted.

Shaking her head to chase away the fear, Esara noticed long, dark shadows had crept along the floor. She must've slept for most of the afternoon. The sun hung low but still glowed hot. The sand floor radiated a fire that only could be found in the deepest parts of the desert. Esara found it oddly comforting even with her clothing clinging wetly to every curve of her body. She pulled her shirt away from her chest but it flapped back to stick to her breasts. The dark dream. She called it dark because it always left her feeling like a great darkness had come over her, filling her with dread and despair.

One of the shadows shifted. Esara grabbed the closest weapon, a metal cutter and swung it around, its white hot laser tip bursting to life. With a yelp, a man jumped back, his hands outspread. "Esara, it's me!"

"Jez, what the—" she switched off the tool and dropped her hand to her lap, absently rubbing her aching right thigh. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop sneaking up on me?" She spun around on the stool to hide the look of distaste on her face.

"I'm sorry." He stepped over the parts and walked around to stand at the side of the hovercraft. Jezemak, the son of her uncle and employer, always seemed to be present when she least expected him. His blond hair was plastered against his sickly pale skin. His wet shirt showed the hard muscles of his chest and upper arms. His body, though well formed and handsome, did nothing to hide the hardness of his face—small eyes set too close with skin too smooth to have character. His eyes lacked emotion except when she caught him staring at the servant girls. Then she saw lust. The girls did not seem to notice. They spoke of his handsomeness. Some even shared their beds with him. Esara wondered how they could do so with one she found so repulsive.

"Jez, why are you here?" she slid off the stool and moved to the driver's side of the craft, limping awkwardly. Ever since her leg had healed from the accident, it always ached after she didn't move it for a while.

"I was worried when I saw the lights still on. I came to see if you'd hurt yourself or..." he shrugged, his eyes questioning.

Esara opened the door and bent in to turn off the power to the drive. Enough frustrating work for today. She was desperately tired and wanted to have a shower before supper.

"Well, I'm fine," she said, backing out of the craft and turning around, stopping with a stumble. She grabbed the side of door to keep from falling, silently cursing the mining accident that had nearly taken her leg off. Jez stood mere centimeters away and grabbed her free arm, holding her upright. He smelled of the stench of the mines, a putrid smell that turned her stomach.

"Are you?" Jez's hand squeezed tightly on her arm but his eyes were full only of concern. As he pulled her close, he brushed a wet lock of her hair away from her neck.

She shuddered as his fingers touched her skin, leaving a searing streak behind. "You're not bothered by his return?"

"No," she slid away from his touch. "No, why should I?"

"Oh, well, only that you two were so infatuated with each other before and, now, it's been three years. You sure you feel nothing?"

A lightning-quick pain shot through her body before she could prepare herself. She stepped up to the worktable and grabbed it, her fingernails digging in to the gritty wood. She hoped Jez would not notice. Three years. A very long time ago. Yes, she thought she had loved him. A deep, soulful love that she'd only find once in her life. Then, he'd gone away. And her love had faded.

Or so she thought.

Jez put his arm around her shoulder. She wanted to push him away but a great weariness had settled upon her over the last couple years. She was tired of fighting him off. He really wasn't that bad a person. She could do worse.

"I am your friend, Esara," Jez whispered, his breath hot on her neck. "I hope you feel the same about me."

His fingers brushed her long black hair back from her face to put it around her ear. He traced her earlobe and then moved down her neck to her shoulder. Her body began to tingle. Her breathing quickened. It had been so long since she'd been touched this way. She closed her eyes and saw someone else.

"I was hoping we could be more than friends."

She barely heard him speaking and when she felt pressure against her lips, she opened reflexively and kissed him back. Then she stopped, startled. She opened her eyes. Jez held her close against his body, his arms wrapped around her waist. She could feel his bulging cock against her abdomen.

"Jez, no," she brought her arms up against his chest and tried to shove him away. His grip tightened and, for a few seconds, she thought he might not let her go then he

loosened his grip. She pushed him away and he stepped back, anger flashing in his eyes as he turned his head away. She saw him quickly clench his hands into a fist then just as quickly unclench them.

"Do I offend you?" Jez brushed his fingers through his oily hair.

"No, Jez," she said. He was the owner's son. She must not hurt his feelings too much. There could be retribution. "You surprised me. I didn't know you had such strong feelings."

"I do but I believe you are not over your feelings for him."

Almost relieved he had brought up the subject first, she reached out and placed her hand on his arm. "Perhaps I am not."

He placed his own hand on top. "Then I shall be patient. Three years is a long time. Much will have changed."

A rumble filled the air. Esara and Jez hurried to the shop doors. A shadow passed over the shop, traveled along the trail up to the main house and stopped next to it. A sleek, silver and black hovercraft floated to the ground. They watched from just inside the shaded shop doors.

"Must be one of the corporation hovercrafts," Jez said, leaning out slightly to get a better look. "Too expensive to belong to one of the jewelers."

"Nice of them to give him a ride out," Esara said.

"One of the perks of the new job, I would guess."

The hovercraft's door slid up and out of the way. First to step out was a tall man, dark skinned, dressed in the latest fashion of pants and shirt cut close in a way that showed he had not lost any of his hard muscular body that she remembered so well. Pollo wore his hair long and tied back in the fashion of the city. He would probably cut it soon once he got tired of the wind blowing it in his eyes and the sand settling on his scalp. Seeing him again took Esara's breath away. She felt a fever take over her body and an ache grow between her legs. Almost ashamed at her body's reaction to the sight

of the man she had once loved, she wanted to turn away but she continued to watch, wishing he would look her way, see her, run to her, sweep her up in his arms, tell her everything was good, again and that he loved her still. But instead he looked toward the house he and Jez shared with their father.

“Three years away has not softened him at all,” Jez said, breaking Esara’s reverie.

Then Pollo held out his hand toward the interior of the hovercraft. A slim, shapely leg appeared, bare to the hip Esara noticed, as it stretched to settle on the ground, followed by the body of the most beautiful woman Esara had ever seen. Round and voluptuous, her hips and breasts swayed enticingly beneath a sand-colored dress that covered her body from neck to knee. Her hair glistened a deep red, appearing on fire in the setting sun. Once settled upon the ground, she placed a hand on the small of Pollo’s back, spoke a few words and they both laughed.

“Oh, Esara, I did not know,” Jez said.

Esara wanted to turn and run but an eerie feeling of being watched froze her steps. She stared back at the hovercraft, the only place a watcher could be and after a few seconds, a man emerged. He jumped down to the ground, landing lightly on the balls of his feet, like that of a predatory animal, smooth and fluid but tense. His body rippled beneath a short-sleeved shirt and pants and as he turned to survey his surroundings, she swore she saw him raise his face and breathe in deeply, as if scenting the air. Even Jez noticed the odd behavior for his voice had a suspicious edge when he spoke, “I think these are not ordinary scientists.”

“Yes,” Esara responded. “I don’t think I will be skipping dinner tonight.”

* * * * *

Pollo’s neck ached with the effort not to look, not to turn around. He knew Esara would be standing there, waiting for him. And if he looked, he’d be lost. All would be lost. Fortunately, Win had stepped out of the hovercraft, allowing him to continue the

role they had developed, the one of lover, the one he knew would hurt Esara but was necessary for them to get through the next few days.

Win had played the attentive girlfriend, even making him laugh, giving him hope that all would be well, eventually. She could be very affectionate if she wanted. He had seen her with her mate—husband—Jack. They were inseparable. Hence, the reason why Jack had come along too. His role as scientist, unattached, would help Esara see they weren't ganging up on her. Pollo had seen the way women reacted to Jack. Sensing his werewolf genes, women reacted through their base instincts. He had felt it himself and knew it would give Esara something else to think about other than him and Win. Occupy her. Distract her. So they could get their business done.

As Pollo and Win slowly walked, arms linked, up to the house, he waited until Jack had caught up to them before speaking in a quiet tone. "Tell me."

"She is here. She's seen you. She's very confused. This is what we wanted, remember."

Pollo suddenly felt sad. "Yes. I wish this was over." Esara had been through enough in her lifetime already.

"You knew it would be hard." Win gave his arm a squeeze.

"I thought the hard part was facing them." Pollo jerked his head toward the house.

"She still loves you," Jack said, unexpectedly.

"If I only..."

"No, you agreed it would be best if we didn't involve her just yet." Win made him stop so that he had to look her in the eye. "Just a few more days, right?"

"We have company," Jack's voice dropped warningly low.

A door opened. "Welcome home, Pollo." An older man, his face lined with deep crevices, bowed deeply, his hands hidden among the folds of a long, flowing robe mostly worn by the desert people.

Pollo ran up the stairs and wrapped his arms around the taller man, lifting him up off his feet. "Oxar! It is so good to see you alive and well." Pollo set him down. "You are well?"

Oxar wheezed out a laugh. "Yes, Pollo, I am well. We are all well."

"I am glad," Pollo paused, "to be home." Oxar nodded ever so slightly. A loud voice echoed from the interior of the house. "Oxar, get my son in here. Now."

Pollo felt anger rising, looked down, noticing his clenched hands and took several deep breaths to calm his racing adrenaline. He hadn't expected to react this way. He thought he had his emotions under control. He waved to Win and Jack to enter. Oxar nodded to the newcomers as they passed on the stairs. "I will retrieve your bags."

A long, dimly lit hallway held a staircase that led upward to the bedrooms. They moved straight ahead to a large back room that extended the width of the house. A fireplace sat at one end, sofas and chairs in the middle and a dining table with over twenty chairs surrounding it stood at the other end. Directly in front, as they entered, stood a massive desk and chair surrounded by shelving filled with books that Pollo seemed to remember no one read. He had tried once to take a book but his father had stopped him.

"What would you do with it?" he had asked.

Pollo fingered the smooth spine, breathing in the warm smell of paper. "Teacher says we are to read a book for school." He had never seen so many words put together in such a tiny place as in this book before.

His father yanked the book from his adolescent hand. "These are too valuable. Not for school." He uttered the last word with disgust.

Pollo had clenched his fists, his anger unchecked. "I have to do my project."

His father turned back to the desk, waving his hand in the direction of the kitchen. "Go see if Oxar has a book you can use."

Pollo's anger threatened to burst.

His father sat down and looked up, surprised. "Why are you still here?"

"You have so many. Why can't I have one?"

"These books are not for you. They are to stay on the bookshelves. Now, go find Oxar. Tell him I want to see him."

Pollo rushed from the room, found Oxar and told him that Father wanted to see him. Oxar made him tell what had made him so upset. Later that night, Pollo found the book on the table beside his bed. He silently thanked Oxar. Within the year, Pollo had been sent away to attend university in Tia Nuru, the large city on their continent of Coush. At first he had thought it had been a punishment. Three years without seeing his cousin, Esara. It felt like an eternity. But after his first year, he realized he had been given a great opportunity. One he wished he could have shared with Esara. She so fascinated him with her glowing eyes, light laughter and spicy smell. He could watch her work for hours and she didn't seem to mind. He often caught her staring at him, sometimes adoringly, sometimes wistfully. And now, three years later, he had returned. And he had come home to release Esara.

His father sat behind the desk just like when Pollo had left. As he stood and rounded the massive desk to greet his visitors, hand extended toward the two scientists, Dolon Gerardis moved with a speed not expected from his short stature. Deep crags lined his face even more so but he had managed to dress like the gentleman he pretended to be. Pollo stepped back to introduce his guests, not before noticing how his father fixedly stared at Win, feasting on her long legs, slim hips and large breasts. She appeared not to notice and graciously allowed him to take her hand and hold it just a little too long.

"Father, this is Win Cedaron and Jack Torkin. Might I introduce my father, Dolon Gerardis?"

"A pleasure, Mr. Gerardis," Win smiled warmly. "Pollo has told us much about you and your lovely estate."

Dolon chuckled. "It is all my pleasure." He released her hand and turned to Jack.

Yes, Pollo had told them much about his father. Jack shook his hand once then released it still maintaining a warm smile and showing none of the dislike he must feel. "We are very excited that you have accepted our proposal."

Dolon licked his lips. "Ah, yes. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to have learned people such as yourselves come to research more efficient methods of extraction?"

"Father, perhaps we could discuss this later?" Pollo wanted to get away from Dolon as soon as possible. He thought if he could slip out before dinner, he could see Esara for a few moments. He had to talk to her. Explain. Even though the time was not right.

Win nodded, suddenly looking tired. Pollo had never seen her look exhausted in the time he had known her. "It was a long trip in that stuffy, cramped hovercraft."

Dolon took her elbow and turned her toward the front of the house, once again. "Yes, my dear, please, this way." Pollo had never seen his father be so charming.

Oxar appeared from the shadows, halting them. "Might I show them to their rooms, sir?"

As Win extracted herself from Dolon's grasp, Pollo moved up front. "Yes, I believe we all need to be refreshed."

Dolon bowed to Win and waited at the bottom of the stairs, his gaze lingering on her legs. She seemed not to notice. Oxar took them to the guest wing. He stopped in front of two doors. Each room joined the other with an inside door. They were to be used by a visiting nanny and children. Pollo never could remember Dolon having guests stay overnight.

"I was not briefed on your sleeping arrangements," Oxar said, looking directly at Pollo, "so I have prepared these rooms."

Pollo felt heat rising up his neck. Yes, he and Win were supposed to be engaged in marriage talks. But she had also brought along her husband. Who shares whose bed? was what Oxar wanted to ask.

Win stepped up to the door on the right, leaving the room on the left, coincidentally the one at the end of the wing and closest to the outbuildings, for Pollo. "This one will do fine for my first husband and me. Until Pollo and I have completed all negotiations, we will stay in separate rooms."

Even Oxar did not miss the emphasis on the word "all" and Pollo felt even more embarrassed. Yes, sex was a negotiated commodity in second marriages. Often just for political reasons, no offspring were expected from the unions, only a more positive relationship between families.

Pollo opened his door and noticed that his own bags had been set on the bench at the end of the bed. So Oxar had guessed correctly. He heard Jack thank Oxar and then the closing of a door. Pollo walked over to the window. The orange sand of the yard rose in twist-devils as the night winds approached. No greenery had ever grown on this property. The city had been full of it. Grass on the ground, shrubbery and trees that stretched to the sky but in the city one could conserve the rainwater and keep the greenery alive. Out here, rain evaporated before it touched the ground.

Two smaller houses sat across the lane. The servants slept there, one for women and the other for married couples and single men. If children happened along, the family was given a tiny house until the children married. Once childless, the married couple had to move back to the larger billet and let another family use the tiny house. This arrangement had seemed reasonable once. But now Pollo saw the unfairness. These people deserved better. And soon, he hoped, if all went well in the next few days, their circumstances would change. But that would depend on Esara and how she reacted to change.

Her garage stood at the end of the lane. Close enough to keep an eye on, far enough so that whatever happened inside would not be heard by anyone up here. Esara had once lived in the house but she had moved out shortly after he had left for Tia Nuru. He didn't know why. His father had not said in his letter but just that she felt she could work more efficiently living closer to her work. Pollo knew she wouldn't have given up

the warmth and security of the house if she'd had a choice. Again, another reason to see her.

Pollo flicked the lock on the lower window and lifted it open. It jammed about six centimeteres up and wouldn't budge any further. He placed his fingers beneath the wood frame and tried to shove it up. Breaking it wouldn't be a good idea, he knew but if that was the only way he could get out. A voice startled him. He whirled around.

"Not trying to go visit a certain someone, are you?" Win asked. She had changed into a deep red dress that clung a little too tightly but matched the dark red of her hair. He could even see her nipples standing erect beneath the fabric. She had seemed to have forgotten to pack underclothes.

Pollo looked away, embarrassed. "I-I just wanted some air." He walked over to his bag dragging its contents onto the bed.

Win sighed and stepped up beside him. She reached for a shirt, held it up to survey the wrinkle damage and shook it, snapping it in the air. He could smell the light flowery fragrance she wore. He felt his body responding to her closeness. He grabbed a pair of pants from the bag and the shirt from her hands but she hung on, forcing him to turn to face her. She had applied a glistening red lipstick that puffed up her lips. He so wanted to kiss them but this was her way, the way she hunted.

"Are you doing all this for my father?" he asked.

She smiled. "Do you think it'll work?" She leaned a little closer in to him. Her breasts pressed against his arm. He could feel their firmness through his sleeve. If only this was Esara now, playing with him. Then he'd kiss those lips, those breasts, that body. He would re-memorize every centimeter. Then he'd make love to her and —

"Win, stop teasing him." Jack peered around the door frame.

"Just maintaining the illusion," she said, leaning back.

"Well, it's working." Pollo gave a tug and she released his shirt. He stalked into the bathroom and locked the door. Tearing off his clothes, he turned on the shower, keeping the water cold and jumped in. The water sluiced over his heated body. As he

soaped his arms and chest, he noticed a familiar scent of spice. It tugged at his memory but only a shadow fluttered. It had been like this for the past month. Ever since he had met with Win and Jack and agreed to their plan including the drug therapy, he had begun to remember most of his childhood. Still some memories had to be allowed to come of their own volition. Win had said it would be like this.

So Pollo breathed deep of the spice and continued to lather his body working down across his abdomen to his penis and testicles. His cock responded by stiffening. The swelling felt natural, comfortable. The water fell more erratically, like droplets from a waterfall. He heard a familiar woman's giggle and Esara's face appeared. Water poured down her hair, her face to her breasts. He could feel her hand grasping his shaft, moving back and forth. Her other hand massaged his testicles. He held her breasts, massaging them in turn. It was a game they played. See who could come first. And he always cheated.

Pollo would trap her against a wall, quickly drop one hand between her legs, the other at her rear and tease her clit with his hand. Placing his palm on the hair just above, he would use his fingers to circle the slit, alternating running his fingers down the channel to her core, dipping in quickly, then retreating. Her gasps made him harder. Her hand would move quicker. And then, he'd feel his seed moving and he'd spurt over her hand and body. She'd collapse against his chest, breathing deeply, her own muscles contracting against his fingers, having orgasmed at the same time. Time and again, they learned their bodies were too well matched. They couldn't just bring one to orgasm. Both came as if they could sense the other and feed off of its hormonal eruptions. Pollo stopped soaping, realizing his penis had gone soft. No, he would wait for Esara. Only together would he feel satisfied.

Chapter Three

Dinner was supposed to be a quiet affair. Drinks in the lounge, a gourmet meal in the dining room and then coffee and dessert by the fire. But almost as soon as she arrived, Esara knew it would be anything but a simple affair. Compared to Win and Jack's elegant clothing, she felt dowdy and out of fashion. Pollo had not yet arrived but she was positive he would still see her as the backward desert girl he had been infatuated with and not the woman she felt she had become.

Win's red dress glittered whenever it caught the light. The dress fitted her form hinting at a muscular body. What it showed of her arms and shapely calves proved that as a scientist she was very much used to physical research. The men seemed drawn to her side, even the servants passing out the drinks glided closer to her than politeness allowed. She possessed an aura of sensuality even Esara could feel.

Jack had changed to long pants and a short-sleeved shirt. Esara glimpsed him from the back first, seeing his slim but firm rear, and as he reached for an hors d'œuvre, she noticed he had a strong, powerful body. His arms rippled beneath the sleeves of a shirt stretched taut across a broad chest. Upon closer inspection, she saw a handsome face with one jagged scar across his right cheek that disappeared just above his ear. A second scar began below that same ear, travelling down his neck, disappearing beneath his shirt.

That one should've killed him, she found herself thinking. Maybe the life of a scientist isn't so boring after all. She wondered what it would be like to caress those scars, to run her hands down his chest and...

"Esara, my dear!" Uncle Dolon's voice broke her reverie. Everyone in the room turned to look her way. "So nice of you to come."

She cringed at his words. The invitation had been an order as if he had expected her not to come.

Esara limped across the floor of the lounge, in actuality a greenhouse where Oxar grew herbs and other plants for cooking and medicines, breathing deep of the damp earth and heady spicy scents of the native plants to steady her nerves. She leaned heavily on her cane. Her right leg normally ached at the end of an exhausting day but today it pounded with a sharp pulse. She knew she had worked too hard on the hovercraft and was now paying for it.

A hand reached for her elbow and Jez stepped up beside her. She let him lead her the rest of the way across the room, grateful for his taking some of the pressure off her leg. "You let me know when you've had enough," he whispered in her ear, "and I'll take you back."

She squeezed his arm to acknowledge his offer all the while maintaining a smile and trying not to grimace. The last thing she wanted was to look weak in front of their visitors but it had been a long day and maybe she shouldn't have come after all. And she'd rather have Pollo's hand touching her skin right now, not a man she could barely stand to be near.

Jez drew her to a stop in front of the two scientists. Dolon introduced them. Win held out her hand. Esara grasped it, noting its soft texture. Win squeezed gently, saying, "You are the one who works miracles on the mining equipment. I have heard much about you."

"Miracles are not what I would call what I do," Esara said, almost enjoying the warmth of Win's grasp. She wondered how her rough skin felt to the scientist and, almost regretfully, pulled her hand away.

Jack took her hand immediately. He encased it in his own and she felt suddenly drawn into Jack's being, tumbling into the depths of his deep blue eyes, lost forever. "I am so looking forward to having you show us your mines tomorrow."

His voice rumbled over her body, making her skin tingle and nerves set on fire. She hadn't felt this way since the last time she and Pollo had been alone together. Suddenly feeling guilty, she dragged her hand out of his grasp. "It will be good to have you take a look at the mines. We've had such trouble with some of them and the others seem to be failing as we speak."

"That is why we are here," Win said. "To make your mines more efficient. We will do our best to discover the problem."

"Any help you can give us," Dolon spoke signaling for a servant to bring over a tray of drinks, "Would be greatly appreciated."

Esara took a tall frosted glass, one filled with the juice from an exotic fruit that was very expensive to bring in. Dolon was sparing no expense to impress his guests.

"Ah, my darling," Win glanced around their shoulders, "come join us."

Esara didn't bother to look. She recognized Pollo's footsteps as he crossed the stone floor. Jez stepped a little closer to her side as Pollo walked past and moved to stand beside Win. He took a drink from the offered tray and studied it as if he had never seen it before in his life. He had chosen to wear black pants and a black shirt. These items against his black skin made him appear brooding and secretive. He had tied his long hair back at the nape of his neck and Esara was glad to see he had not lost the strength in his neck. School hadn't made him soft, she thought.

"We were just discussing the mines," Win explained. When Pollo said nothing, she turned to Esara. "Tell us what your findings have been so far. Of the problems."

Esara wondered why Pollo wouldn't look at her. Was she so distasteful to him now that he couldn't bear to set eyes on her? "At first the bore shafts would break," she began. "We would go out to repair them and find that the drill bits had worn down to a dull fragment. Almost as if they had struck the molten rock surrounding the zuritaa stones. We knew from scans that the stones were there. It was almost as if they had moved away from the drill."

"You speak of the stones as if they were alive," Jack said.

"Sometimes I think they are."

"But how can stones be alive?" Win said, staring pointedly at Esara.

Esara felt as if she were being studied. "It's not so much that they are alive as that they can move." She passed her drink over to Jez so she could illustrate using her hands. Placing both horizontally in front of her, palms facing, she described the pockets the stones are found in. "The stones were here first. They formed during the volcanic period of this continent, Coush, when the earthquakes created great pressure on the earth. Gases became trapped beneath and over hundreds of thousands of years, as the gas pockets grew larger, the stones dropped into the pockets."

"And the movement now?" Win prompted.

"The pockets have been depleted. As the stones are removed, the earth around them is collapsing. With each collapse, any stones left over drop further into the planet's crust or...I'm really not sure. I just feel that the stones are moving, again. Going deeper. Away from us."

"Feel?" Win said.

Esara smiled and lowered her eyes, a slight blush creeping up her neck. "Yes, sometimes I think I feel the stones moving beneath my feet when I'm working on the mine shaft. Like—"

Dolon suddenly laughed. "Feel. Such is the stuff of old legends. One cannot feel so far into the ground."

"And you would know, wouldn't you?" Pollo said, his voice low and hard.

"What did you say?" Dolon turned on him, his stance tense. The air crackled between them.

"Nothing."

Esara stared at Pollo. She had never seen him speak so to his father before. Something had angered him. At that moment, Oxar announced dinner. Pollo downed

his drink and allowed Win to pull him away. Esara and Jez followed with Jack and Dolon behind.

Dinner was served with a minimum of fuss. The first course was a chilled soup, followed by a hot entrée of roasted *carbow*, a cow-reindeer mix raised as livestock at the southern shore farms, and ending with a bowl of shaved ice flavored with colored sugars, a spicy tea and a selection of cheeses. Esara sat beside Jez and across from Jack and Win. Pollo sat the end of the table across from his father. Esara felt his eyes upon her most of the night but whenever she turned to look at him, he was looking elsewhere.

As their tea was served, Dolon leaned toward Win and placed a hand upon her resting wrist. "Would it be distasteful of me to bring up the delicate subject of your marriage?"

Jack and Pollo shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Win merely smiled. "No, not at all. What would you like to discuss?"

Esara felt her pulse racing. She looked down at her lap to see that her hands had twisted her napkin into a tight knot.

"Perhaps, the timing?"

Win slid her hand from beneath Dolon's to fold her napkin across her dessert plate. "I would say as soon as decorum allows after Pollo and Esara are married."

Dolon chuckled. "Of course. Decorum."

Esara looked up at him, rage in her eyes. Marriage? To Pollo? Shouldn't she be asked first? Jez put a restraining hand on her arm and only then did she realize she had leaned forward almost ready to leap across the table. She glanced at Pollo and noticed he too seemed restrained but there was something else in his eyes. Hope, perhaps. And fear. Had Pollo known all along? That, more than Jez's hand, made her settle back in her seat. Marriage to Pollo wouldn't be a bad thing. Although they were cousins she had been adopted by Dolon, so it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for them to marry as they weren't related by blood.

"I see no reason for Pollo and Esara to wait," Dolon said. "I could have a Justice out by the end of the week and we could take care of both arrangements straightaway."

Esara felt sick. This was not the wedding she had imagined. And even now, she didn't know if she wanted to marry Pollo. He had not said two words to her since he had returned, let alone written anything to her over the past three years. She wasn't even sure she loved him. This thought sent a sharp pain through her chest and she winced.

"Everything okay?" Jez leaned over to whisper.

"I'm tired. I'd like to go." She rose and Jez rushed to stand to pull her chair out. She looked at the guests. "Please excuse me. I have preparations to do for tomorrow's trip and it's getting late." Glancing at Dolon, she nodded her head. He looked displeased that she was leaving so soon but she didn't care. She was tired and didn't want to be around Pollo anymore. Stuck with him in a hovercraft all day tomorrow would be taxing enough.

They all stood while she left the room. Jez accompanied her back to the garage. The night winds had begun to send twist-devils through the yard. The wind cooled her hot, sweaty skin, made her feel a little more refreshed.

"You do not seem to be the happy bride," Jez said, holding her arm tight.

"It will be a marriage of convenience," Esara said. "Pollo didn't even look at me. Three years was a long time."

"You don't have to marry him."

"Dolon seems certain we do."

Jez sniffed. "Dolon thinks you have the gift to find the stones. He believes in the old legends."

"The mines are going empty, Jez."

"Do you want to leave?"

"Here? No." Or did she? She had never been comfortable living at the estate. The house had been too large. Her room at the back of the garage leaked sand which for some reason, she didn't mind. But still she didn't feel at home. As she approached the steel structure, heard the wind rattling the metal plating, the sound grated on her nerves as if it were so out of place that her body was fighting against it. She reached for the door handle but Jez grabbed her hand instead. She turned to face him.

"Then stay here and marry me." Jez held both of her hands up against his chest pulling her closer. "You know I love you. In time, you will learn to love me."

"Jez, I—"

"Pollo has all but forgotten you. He ignores you even now. What would a marriage to him be like? He'll be away all the time with her, working in the city."

Esara pushed him away. "Jez, I really am tired."

"Please let me take care of you."

"Jez, thank you."

"Just say you will consider my offer. Take tomorrow to think about it."

She opened the door and stepped inside. Before closing it, she turned. He stood with the wind riffling through his hair, whipping at his jacket. He had spread his legs but still looked about to be blown away. "All right Jez. I will think about it."

He smiled and jogged back up the track to the house. She watched him for a moment, then closed the door and set the lock. She already knew what her answer would be. Now, she had to decide how to tell her uncle she was leaving. He would not be happy.

* * * * *

The dinner conversation was a nightmarish jumble in Pollo's head as he tossed and turned in bed. All he could see was the anger and hurt and sadness playing upon Esara's face the whole time and he could do nothing to comfort her. Once she had caught him looking at her and he had nearly folded, reaching across to her, telling her it

would be all right in a matter of days but he had turned away knowing that was the best thing to do right now.

He shoved off the blankets and sat up. The large side window afforded a view of the garage. An orange glow outlined the front door. She hadn't shut out the lights yet. He wondered what she was doing. Packing her equipment for tomorrow, perhaps. Working on the hovercraft? Maybe pacing the garage, unable to sleep like him. It wasn't fair what he was doing to her. Ignoring her. Maybe if he went to her now and explained. She could keep a secret. And then she would feel better.

And then, her limp. He had heard about the accident. The explosion at one of the mine shafts. She had been too close. Flying bits of metal had nearly severed her right leg. Killed her. He felt sick. If he had been here. If, only if.

Reaching for the pants he had thrown on the floor, he yanked them on. He strode to the second window and lifted the sash. This one slid silently upward and he bent over to climb out onto the roof. His feet felt the roughened wood shingles refreshingly painful. He needed to feel alive again. He crossed the roof quickly to the edge and swung down to the railing where he leapt to the ground. Staying to the shadows, he ran to the front of the garage. The door refused to budge so he moved around to the back where her bedroom sat and tried the door back there. It too, was locked. The wind had picked up and he could feel sand scoring his skin.

"Esara," he called. "Esara, can I speak to you?"

Silence.

"Esara?"

Then a faint voice. "Go away, Pollo."

"Please, I just want to talk to you."

"No, Pollo. We have nothing to say."

He yanked at the door, frustrated. "Please. I need to speak to you. Here. In private. To explain."

"Explain?"

"Yes, explain why I've had to be so cold to you. Why I've had to be—" The door latch sprang open. He yanked at the door and stepped inside. The wind slammed the door closed behind him.

She stood out of arm's reach wearing only a long yellow robe. Her brown skin glowed. He could see the impression of her breasts and hips against the fabric. She held it closed over her stomach but it flapped open between her legs whenever she moved her right foot, digging it into the sandy floor, the only betrayal of her agitation.

He stepped forward wanting to take her into his arms but she held up her hand. He stopped. "You wanted to explain." She turned sideways. "I don't have all night. Start talking."

So much to say. Where to start. "I love you."

"Get out."

He took a step forward. "I love you and I am sorry for ignoring you today."

"Today? What about for the last three years? Did you think I would just wait for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"No letters. No communications. Not even a message through your father."

"Esara, I wrote every week."

"Don't lie to me."

He took two steps forward. She didn't move away.

"I'm not. I did write them. Someone must have kept them from you. Dolon, maybe?" Again, another way this manipulative man had kept them apart, forcing Esara to forget him. He had been hurt at first but deep down, found it hard to believe she would have not responded to him.

"Why would he do such a thing? He wants us to be together more than anything."

"How about Jez? He seems to have a crush on you."

“Jez. Yes, I could see him doing that.” Esara’s shoulders slumped. She appeared to waver on her feet. “But why?” She turned back to face him and grimaced in pain. Pollo reached out and pulled her to him.

She resisted a little then gave up, leaning her forehead against his chest. “I am so tired, Pollo.” Her breath warmed his skin. He felt his penis harden.

“I’ve missed you terribly,” he bent his head down and kissed the top of her head. She raised her face and he moved his lips across her eyelids, her cheeks, to her lips where she opened her mouth hungrily to him.

Their tongues touched teasing then he pushed hers back into her mouth. He chased after her tongue and he felt her teeth come down gently, grazing his soft skin. He withdrew and dropping to his knees, he opened her robe. Wrapping his arms around her back, he took one large breast into his mouth. He teased the nipple with his tongue, then sucked on it pulling it farther in. Esara arched her back, pushing her stomach against his own hard nipples. Her hands kneaded his shoulders.

He moved to the other breast this time nipping at the nipple. She gasped and then pulled his head in closer so he had to take more of the breast in his mouth. She moved her hands back to his shoulders then down his arms, first gently, then raking his skin with her nails. He dropped his hands from her back to her buttocks and massaged the cheeks, letting his fingers drop between the crack, moving forward every so often to tease her moist entrance. She moaned each time he did so. She pushed her hips against his chest, insistent that he touch more.

Releasing her breast, he dragged his tongue down her stomach, tasting the salty sweat on her body. He reached the soft curly hair above her pubis, then moved down with his tongue to part her fleshy lips. He found the soft nub of her clit and began to circle it with his tongue. Soon she was dripping with juices. Her moans grew louder. His shaft had hardened to its full length. He knew it would explode soon.

Suddenly Esara pulled herself away. She dropped to her knees and grasped his penis in her hands. Stroking it, she leaned forward and licked its full length. He

groaned out loud afraid it would spurt all over her hands. She took its head into her mouth. The warmth drove him crazy. He could think of nothing else other than putting it inside her pussy. But she hung onto to it, not releasing it. Just when he knew he couldn't take any more, she released his penis. He shoved her back onto the warm sand, spread her legs and plunged his cock into her raised cunt. She gasped then began to move her hips to match his rhythm.

Her legs came up around his waist. Her arms grabbed onto his biceps as he grasped her hips and held her tight against his pelvis. She stared into his eyes. He stared back still seeing the woman he loved before the memory erasure. Did she sense anything different about him? Did she feel that he had changed? In the rising tide of his lovemaking, Pollo felt a current of anger trying to forge ahead. He pushed with his hips a little too forcefully and Esara cried out then bit her lower lip. He started to pull back but she dug her fingernails into his arms, stopping him, pulling him closer, again. She wrapped her legs around his back forcing him deeper.

The wind roared outside, sending waves of sand beating against the steel walls. Almost in the same rhythm, he drove his penis deep inside, feeling her body suddenly jerk and then the muscles contract. He paused then felt his own release pump into her body.

As Pollo slid onto his side, he saw the trace of tear-tracks down the sides of Esara's face. Frightened he had hurt her when he had let his anger come through, he bent over her face and kissed her temple, tasting the salt of her body. "Sorry." He kissed lower on her cheek, tasting more salt. "I am so sorry."

Esara rolled onto her side, nestling up against his chest, letting her head rest on his lower arm. She pressed her upper hand against his breast, covering his nipple with her palm. She still had her eyes closed, her dark lashes brushing the tops of her cheeks. He had to bend close to hear her speak.

"Don't ever leave me like that, again."

"Never." Pollo wrapped his lower arm around her back holding her close. With his other hand he lightly brushed his fingers down her back, across her rounded buttocks to her legs where he felt the bump of a new scar. Looking down, he noted the scar began just below her crotch, wrapped around the front of her leg dropping on an angle nearly around to the back of her leg. This accident had nearly taken her leg off.

"Never," he growled, pulling her legs close, then glancing in the direction of the house he had been deceived into believing was once his home by the man he had thought was his family, he vowed one last time. "Never, again."

Pollo waited until Esara had fallen asleep then he carried her to her cot. For a long while, he sat on the sandy floor watching her sleep. A smile played upon her lips when they weren't pursed in deep thought. He wanted to touch her lips with his own but remembered how exhausted she had looked earlier. He would have plenty of time soon enough to kiss her over and over again.

Then Pollo grabbed his head and moaned. What had he done? He hadn't meant them to make love. He had just wanted to talk to her. What would she think of him in the morning? Would she forgive him for using her once she knew the truth? He left her sleeping and gathered up his pants from the other room. The sun had begun to peek over the far Lime Mountains. He made it back to his room before the others started to stir.

Showering and dressing quickly, he was seated downstairs wolfing down breakfast when Win and Jack appeared. Oxar poured coffee and set the mugs on the table. A slight smile played at his lips but Pollo couldn't read anything else on the man's face. Did he know? He probably did. He was the one who had put Pollo's luggage in the far bedroom. And had probably oiled the window so it opened quietly. But Pollo said nothing. And neither did Oxar.

Win and Jack grabbed their own mugs and barely glanced at Pollo. Each had dressed in long pants, short-sleeved shirts and long-sleeved jackets. Pollo had warned them about the harsh hot wind out in the desert. While they ate breakfast, Jez and

Dolon joined them. As they finished, Oxar brought out a large insulated container. Pollo opened it and found enough food to last three days. He caught Jez peering over his shoulder.

"Are you expecting to hit sand storms?" Jez asked. "Or feed a village?"

Dolon laughed. "There are no villages out there anymore."

Pollo froze, his stomach doing flip-flops.

"Oh, really?" Win asked in a sweet voice. "Was the desert not once heavily populated?"

"Yes, a long time ago," Dolon shoveled meat and melon into his mouth. Juice dribbled down his chin but he did not notice. "But they have all since moved away. Found it more lucrative to sell their land and go live along the coast."

"How farsighted they were," Win said.

Pollo closed the lid, a little too loudly and muttered something about taking it out to the hovercraft.

"Is Esara not joining us for breakfast?" Win asked.

"I took food out to her much earlier," Oxar said, refilling her juice glass with a pink liquid. "Seems she was quite famished. Had quite an appetite."

Pollo didn't dare glance up but he did feel his face growing warm. He swung the box up onto his shoulder and headed for the door. Jack beat him and held it open for him. Pollo then lowered the box to get through the door. Jack took the handle on the other side and they carried it between them. They walked in silence but Pollo knew Jack wanted to say something.

"I said nothing," Pollo finally blurted when he could stand the silence no longer.

"I know." Jack said.

"You know?" Pollo said stopping abruptly. "You made me say it anyway?"

"Guilt is a heavy emotion. Some must confess to feel better."

They walked to the hovercraft and shoved the box into the dark interior. "I had to see her."

"I know."

"I love her."

"We know."

Pollo sighed and sat down on the ledge of the hovercraft.

"You worry for her."

Pollo nodded. "I am worried what she will do after we have given her back those memories. You heard how she talked last night of feeling the stones. Her body is already becoming that which her mind cannot accept. She is blocked from the ancient teachings that will help her become the Seeker."

"Again, only genetics. We will help her as we helped you." Jack stepped into the hovercraft. "Come. Help me with this. We must prepare. She is coming. They are both coming."

Pollo tied down equipment and crates while Jack began the preflight check. Win arrived first, carrying a large satchel she handed to Pollo who put it behind netting attached to the ceiling. She moved to the cockpit and took the copilot's seat. Esara arrived carrying a large duffel bag filled with equipment. She hefted it into the hovercraft and looked around.

"This looks like enough equipment for a month-long expedition," she said. "There's barely room enough to sit."

Pollo crouched by her large bag. "And what about all this? You afraid it might get stolen while you're away?"

Esara crouched down beside him, their knees touching. "I thought I might do some repairs while they took their readings. Might as well fill the time." Her hand touched his leg and he took it in his, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"Better get buckled in," Jack said, "We're ready to take off."

Pollo pulled Esara to her feet as he stood and led her to one of the two vacant seats. He strapped her in then reached above her head and turned on some switches. A dull glow lit the hovercraft's interior. He sat in the other vacant seat across from her, sandwiched between two stacks of crated equipment and fastened his buckle.

"All right back here," he called to the front.

The door slid closed, the light grew a little brighter and a monitor above Pollo's head turned on. Esara recognized the outside landscape. She watched the estate grow smaller as they flew into the desert. The first mine, called Number One, was the farthest out. In her own hovercraft, it would take all morning to fly there, skimming above the dunes. This newer craft covered the distance much quicker and in about half the time soon she saw the rusty arches growing on the horizon. They landed downwind and as the door opened, Pollo leapt out. Esara followed, after a short struggle with her buckle, dragging her duffel bag after her.

The scientists busied themselves inside, dragging a crate to the doorway. They flipped a switch on either side and the wood front opened, revealing two silver orbs attached by a thick cable about three meters long. Jack took out a remote control from the base of the crate and turned a knob. The orbs hummed to life. He made an adjustment on the side of one orb and they floated forward, the cable dipping between. He turned to Esara. "Take me to the opening."

She nodded and after stuffing the laser cutter and a drill in her pants pocket and then selecting two long poles with claws on the end which she carried, she headed to the base of Number One. Pollo followed, carrying a cable. Win followed with a satchel over her shoulder.

"Mine Number One is the largest producer of stones," Esara said, over the sound of distant pounding. "We bring out nearly ten crates a day." She pointed to where in the distance small boxes moving on tractor wheels crawled out of the ground and into a caged-in area and straight onto hovercrafts with the back two-thirds replaced by an

open platform where the crates sat. They watched as one of the transports lifted and flew off to the west.

"Where is it going?" Win asked.

"To a refiner on the outskirts of Tia Nuru."

"There is no security?"

"Not yet. There is no need. The stones are only valuable once cut. Right now, no one could sell what's in those boxes to anyone."

They turned their attention back to the arches. Two arches had been planted at the four corners of the mine and joined at the top of their curvature. At the cross a large box hung. Inside, it housed a sonic beater. Using sound waves the stones were gently broken from the soil around them and then picked up by small suction robots working underground and dropped into the boxes. Once a box reached a certain mass, the tractor took it outside and another tractor took its place.

"How deep does that go?" Win asked, pointing at the hole beneath the sonic beater.

"This one is about twenty meters deep," Pollo said.

Win pulled out a touch screen from her satchel and keyed in some information.

"Quite deep for a mine?" Jack said, twisting more knobs on the side of the globe.

"Yes, this one is the second deepest." Pollo said, looking at the touch screen.

Esara moved over to take a look at the globes. "How deep can they go?"

"One hundred meters," Jack said.

She tapped the metal casing. "And this will protect them from the sonic waves."

"No problem." He twisted another knob on the remote and the globes floated out to the hole. "Ready?" He glanced at Win and she nodded, her eyes fixed to the screen.

He twisted another knob and the globes dropped into the hole.

"Autopilot engaged," Win said. "I am getting readings." Pollo and Jack leaned over to watch the touch screen.

Chapter Four

Esara knew she would just be in the way—she could review the readings later—so she began her inspection of the arches. She walked to the farthest strut and seeing nothing loose, moved to the next one. A piece of tubing had come away about five meters up. The black cabling showed through a break so it had to be fixed or the sand would eat away at the cable casing, causing another expensive failure.

Horizontal pieces of metal had been welded onto the metal beams. Clipping the two poles by the rounded ends to her belt, with the claw ends hanging down but firmly attached with straps to her thighs, she grasped the rung closest to her chest and began to climb. She scaled the strut up to where the casing had come loose. It hung beyond her reach so she moved around to the underside of the strut, took one of the claws and let it grab an upper rung, then fastened the other to the opposite rung. Now she pushed her body away from the strut toward the casing, swinging out in the open air. She nearly laughed. This was the closest she had ever come to flying and she loved the feeling of only air surrounding her body. She closed her eyes and pretended she was not held securely by the claws and instead floated on the air currents like the birds she occasionally saw.

“Esara, you’re scaring our guests,” Pollo’s voice broke her reverie.

She looked down, still smiling and saw Win’s and Jack’s faces with looks of fear.

“I’m fine.” Esara grinned and waved down to them. “Very safe.” She reached out to the casing, brought it back to the strut and secured it in its clamp. The clamp’s weld had rusted through and broken open from the stress. She pulled out her laser, turned the beam to low and welded the clamp back to the strut. She then wrapped a sticky tape around the cut in the casing so that the cable was no longer open to the elements.

Swinging around the strut she unfastened the claws and climbed back down to the ground.

Pollo met her at the bottom. "I know you do this every day," he said, "but our guests don't know this."

"What do you think my job is?" she snapped. She had been enjoying herself. Now Pollo had spoiled her fun. "I have to get my enjoyment out of whatever or wherever I can. I just can't go traipsing off to the city anytime I feel like it."

She walked away from him and up to the scientists. They had both witnessed their exchange and now looked very busy with the screen.

"What do your readings say?" Esara asked.

Win turned the screen so Esara could see. A pictograph of two lines, one arching up and the other down and then meeting at the far end glowed. At the bottom to the left side sat a pile of squiggly lines. "This is a sideways view of the space beneath us. This is the cavern," Win pointed to the two outer lines, "and this is what is left of the stones." She pointed to the pile of squiggly lines.

"The cavern is so big and that pile is so small," Esara said.

"Wait a moment," Win pressed another series of buttons and the view changed. "This is a forty-five degree view. We're now looking at the pile of stones from the side."

"It's a line, not a pile," Esara said.

"Yes, we think it is a vein."

"A vein?" Esara had never heard of the stones described in that way. Usually just as pockets. But a vein? "That would mean that the stones aren't running out," Esara said out loud, "but that they are just buried deeper." She looked out at the sandy landscape and envisioned hundreds of mines, their arches littering the horizon, all joined by tunnels, slowly emptying, the ground collapsing around until the area was a giant hole.

"Maybe this is just a glitch," Pollo said, shaking the screen.

“What if it isn’t?” she said, her eyes wide. “This could mean the destruction of our land. Already we’re suffering cave-ins and —”

“Let’s not panic just yet,” Pollo said. “Let’s wait until we’ve read all the mines and then —”

“And wait to see if your scientists have brought death to our land.” She turned and limped back to the hovercraft, her leg suddenly aching fiercely. She unhooked the claws, threw them in her bag and hoisted her bag onto the floor. She waited impatiently while Jack loaded the globes back into their case and put the case next to her bag. During the flight, Esara couldn’t take her eyes off the box. In her mind, it had become a venomous snake, here to poison her land.

The next few mines showed the same type of veining. With no repairs to perform and only a quick inspection required, Esara found herself watching the scientists more and more as Win and Jack worked. Teamwork was a good way to describe it. Almost without speaking they seemed to know what the other wanted before he or she wanted it. Jack would hand a cloth to wipe the touch screen to Win before she held out her hand. Win would pass the water canteen before Jack finished turning around to take it. She wondered if this was what marriage was like. To know each other’s needs and wants before the other spoke them.

Pollo was not at all like that. She couldn’t read him. It was almost as if a barrier had gone up between them, one as solid and impenetrable as the earth surrounding the stones below. Only when he wanted to open up, would he allow her to see him, to know him. Last night had been different though. She had allowed him to comfort her knowing what would happen. Together they had a chemical bond, and once they started touching each other, they couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to stop. It felt too good. Too strong. Too comfortable. Was that love? Or just lust? Did she only lust after Pollo?

Sitting on the hovercraft’s ledge in the shade, Esara watched as sweat dripped down Pollo’s face and neck. He had discarded his shirt for a vest that showed off his muscular forearms and biceps. They too, glistened in the sun and when he raised his

water bottle to take a drink, the vest opened to reveal an ebony skin and flat stomach. She let her eyes wander down his stomach to his waist where his pants hid what she knew to be a beautifully sculpted cock. She felt herself getting short of breath thinking about the feel of his body against her skin, the touch of his hands, the warmth of his breath on her clit. She let out a long breath. Lust.

She glanced at Jack. But she didn't want any other man. She only wanted Pollo. Wanted his voice whispering in her ear. Wanted to share a life with him. Love?

"Getting hungry?"

She jumped at the sound of Pollo's voice. "What?"

"Let's eat. We've worked for hours. You must be famished." Pollo reached around her to pull out the insulated box Oxar had given them earlier. She breathed in his sweaty musk smell and felt her legs go weak. He handed her a dripping bottle of juice and a wrapped package of vegetables, meat and fruit.

"You okay? You look flushed?" he asked, sitting down beside her on the ledge.

She nodded and looked out at the scientists. They had started back from the mine, the globes bobbing along beside them like two little children. "If it's midday and we've only done a quarter of the mines, this means we'll have to stay out overnight so they can finish tomorrow."

Pollo nodded. He glanced inside the hovercraft. "Not much room. We'll have to stay in the caves."

"Well that'll take us about halfway around the perimeter then," Esara said.

Pollo handed Win and Jack their wrapped lunches and a cold bottle of juice each. Pollo explained about the distance around the estate and that they wouldn't be able to make it back to the house tonight. He wondered if they wouldn't mind spending a night in a cave. They seemed to think about it for a moment then agreed that it would be best for their research and use of time that they stayed out. Esara listened to the exchange and felt she had just witnessed something rehearsed. It was the strangest conversation she had ever heard.

They managed to visit another eight mines before finishing at Mine Fifteen. Mine Fifteen had been set up near a marginal find close to the Lime Mountains. Esara would never have chosen that spot but Dolon had insisted. Besides the Mountains were riddled with caves that could be used in an emergency, such as a sandstorm or a mechanical breakdown. It only took Win a few minutes to read the mine. Jack pulled up the globes after only a few seconds of floating under the surface.

Back in the hovercraft, Pollo directed them to a small ledge next to a cave he had remembered from a long time ago and they began the chore of setting up camp, even removing the cushions from the hovercraft so they'd have something soft to sleep upon. Win and Jack lit a fire while Pollo and Esara pulled out items for a makeshift dinner. Apparently, gourmet food was part of Oxar's survival fare. They laughed about it while they ate.

Win had boiled water and now waited while the tea steeped. It smelled delicious, making Esara's mouth water. Win poured the dark brew into four cups and handed the first to Esara. She sipped, found it wonderful and curled up on the sand in front of the fire, the cup nestled between her hands. The others entered a lively debate about the university sports team that Pollo had joined for his three years. *Kimchirri* was a competitive sport played by two teams made up equally of males and females on a large field with a single ball, the object of which was to get the ball through the opposing team's goal. The whole planet of Irem was obsessed with the sport and the obsession carried to most off-worlders, too. Esara felt left out, just a little but enjoyed hearing Pollo laugh, again and soon dozed off.

A sharp pain brought her out of a deep sleep. She fought the grogginess and the arms that held her down. Pollo looked down at her, his face upside down.

"It's okay, Esara, lie still."

She tried to move her arm, take away the pain but all she could see were wires and needles and little boxes with flashing lights. Esara struggled against Pollo.

"Damn it, hurry. The sedative is wearing off."

"We're working as fast as we can." Win was taping down a tube on her arm.

"We have to be careful. I told you her body had been weakened by the poison." Jack was holding up another needle in the air, filling it from a vial.

"Poison?" Esara struggled.

"It's all right. We're going to make you better. Make you remember." Pollo's voice was calm but she heard the panic in it.

"Pollo, don't let them do this." Remember? Remember what?

Jack inserted the needle into the tubing and squeezed the plunger. Darkness.

* * * * *

"And now we wait." Win leaned back away from the monitors. Jack fiddled one last time and sat down beside her, putting an arm around her shoulder. Win rested her head upon his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Pollo settled back with Esara's head resting on his lap. This first little while she would sleep heavily. It was not until the drugs began to fight the chemicals used to bring on her amnesia that she would start to have the nightmares. He wanted to be with her then. His own time of recuperation had been a trial. He wanted to help Esara through it as much as possible.

Two months ago, on a Tuesday night, he had just finished his last exam and was returning to his small apartment to finish revising his final paper. Win had stepped out of a small electric car and asked him for directions. He had noticed her beauty and thought it strange that the man who accompanied her in the car would let her get out on her own and approach a stranger. But he had begun the complicated set of directions to a restaurant on the far side of town when she had brushed his arm and he had felt a pinch. Next the sidewalk grew close and strong arms caught him before he hit.

He awoke the same as Esara had during the injections and struggled against the technicians. They had finally had to restrain his entire body before they could complete

the procedure. He grew to hate the dully lit white room. He couldn't see beyond his own bed. But it was what occurred while he was asleep that he most feared.

At first he slept. Then his mind lightened as if a hazy white fog had drifted in. Ghostly figures filtered through the mist. A dull pain began at the back of his head. He tried to ignore it. The figures grew more distinct. He recognized Dolon and Jez, then Oxar. Other people moved in and out of his field of vision. He tried to reach out to them. Tell them to come closer but they refused. Always moving away.

The pain had moved to the sides of his head, touching his temples, pounding with every beat of his heart. He'd tried to escape the pain. Tried to make the fog go away. Take the people away. But they kept coming. Kept forcing themselves through.

A sudden flash of light and he experienced his first memory. Hovercrafts landing. Soldiers shooting at running people. Esara running ahead of him. He couldn't catch her. Stop her. A soldier holding her. His arm reaching out to pull her away. An explosion. Darkness.

Pollo had nearly woken. He remembered two technicians frantically holding him down, one lying across his chest. The other tightening straps.

"If we go any tighter, he won't be able to breathe."

"We've never had a reaction like this before."

"We've never done this before."

"I didn't know Cousheys were so strong."

"You figured by the size of him he would be weak?"

"I thought the sedative would make him weak."

"We've given him enough to kill him."

"Aren't you done yet?"

"Almost. I don't have much more I can tighten. Okay. Now."

Pollo felt the man move off his chest.

"All right. I'll give him another dose. Poor bugger. He's in for a long night."

Pollo had nearly screamed when his body relaxed. He couldn't twitch a muscle. The fog enveloped him.

Giggling. Esara. Younger. Laughing. Both of them. Running through the desert.

The bird swooped over their heads. It had come from the sun. Suddenly. And it flew around them. Again and again. Three times. Then it had swooped low, whistled and flew into a tunnel. They had been walking in the desert—he could not remember why—since early in the morning. Probably one of Esara's ideas. And he had followed. He followed her everywhere. Had to protect her, he said, when the adults asked him why. They never stopped him. Just smiled in their oddly adult way and let them be. And Esara. Always wandering. Always needing him nearby.

Esara had run after the bird. Giggling. Her voice echoing its cry. "Tantu! Tantu!" The tunnel darkened but their eyes quickly grew accustomed to the dim light and they hurried on. They could hear the bird's cries echoing close by so knew a cavern wasn't far. And then the tunnel had opened up.

He had stopped. Had to survey the area. The cavern could hold his entire village. Round and rising far above to an open roof where plants grew over the hole. Anyone looking from above would only see a forest on top of a mountain. From below, delicate light filtered through. A slight breeze brushed his fevered brow. More caves pitted the wall of the cavern. Some even had ledges crawling up the sides. They wouldn't have to build many stairs to get to the others, he thought, already planning...

Planning what? he wondered.

"Pollo, come see the bird. It is so pretty." Esara stood at the far end beneath what appeared to be a ledge with a small hole in the wall. The bird had settled on the ledge and now sat preening its feathers.

He jogged across the floor, noting its hardened sand surface. Good for many feet to live upon. And came up behind Esara. She held out her hands to the bird and as Pollo came close enough to touch Esara, the bird lay down on her palms. Esara's body jerked once. Pollo grabbed her by the upper arms and the cavern changed.

High up, the wall to their right erupted in a cascading waterfall. Water poured down the wall, splashing onto the floor and disappearing into a crevice that spread along the wall for about two meters then stopped. Trees and shrubs sprouted around the bottom edge of the cavern filled with berries and fruit. Vines grew up the walls, spreading, blossoming with flowers and vegetables. The walls began to glow. Faintly at first, a blue light spread out from the caves, filled the air and surrounded them. Pollo could feel the light caressing his body. He could see it wrapping itself around Esara. Her body seemed to weaken and he pulled her tight against him, wrapping his arms around her chest to keep her standing. He felt it important that she did not drop the bird. For the bird was important here. Without it, they would never have seen the cavern for what it could be. A sanctuary. A place to live. And be at peace. The way of the peace.

The bird suddenly rose and flew off Esara's hands. The vision ended. Esara collapsed against Pollo. Pollo's own legs gave out and they both fell to the ground. He held her close, her body between his legs, her back against his chest, his hands holding her hands in her lap. After they had caught their breath, Esara spoke first. "We have to tell someone."

"Not just yet." Pollo didn't want to lose the connection of their bodies just yet. This felt a little too right, too familiar, too comfortable. She fitted just right into the curve of his stomach and chest. Her head settled comfortably against his shoulder. His chin rested on top of her head. The smell of her was of spice and other pleasant smells that women had. When had he started to think of her as a woman?

He noticed small rounded curves on her chest. Her waist and hips had lost their boyishness even though she had very strong arms and legs. But all Coushey women had long, lean legs and arms from working outdoors. Their bodies rivaled that of the men, lean without added fat. Their sparse lifestyle didn't allow for any additional fat. But the vision had shown them a place of bounty where they would never lack for fruit and vegetables. They would need only to trade for meat.

Pollo didn't know if it was the closeness of her body or the thought of providing for her but he felt his penis hardening beneath his short pants. Suddenly uncomfortable, he tried to shift a little so that Esara couldn't feel it but whatever he did, it just made it worse. Then to his embarrassment, Esara turned around. She knelt between his legs. Her breathing had quickened and she placed her hand on the bulge in his pants. He groaned and reached forward for her head, pulling her close to kiss her lips.

Losing her balance, she fell upon him. He fell back onto the sand and then rolled over pinning her under him. Raising her blouse over her breasts, he took one burnished red nipple into his mouth and sucked it, while rubbing the other between his fingers. He had seen his father do this to his mother and she seemed to enjoy it. Esara gasped and grabbed his head, again, drawing him up to kiss her. He rolled onto his side pulling her with him and with his hand holding her head so her neck wouldn't get sore, placed his lips upon hers. She opened her mouth, brushing her tongue along his teeth. He opened and let her tongue plunge inside feeling his tongue, on top, then on the bottom, then sucking it into her mouth. They played this way for the longest time enjoying the taste of each other.

Pollo could still feel the insistent pressure of his hardened cock. It had slipped out of the leg of his shorts and bobbed between her legs. She lay with one leg bent over his upper leg, occasionally rubbing her crotch against his thigh. He had also seen his father put his hand down between his mother's legs but he didn't know what he had done then but again his mother seemed to enjoy it. Esara wore a skirt that had ridden above her knees. He reached down, pushed the fabric above where her legs met and slid her panties down. Then he laid his hand between her legs. Warm and wet. He wiggled his fingers parting folds of skin.

She moaned through his kiss.

He gently probed. This was the first time either one of them had gone this far and he didn't want to hurt her. He let his finger drop, found her moist center and gently

circled its opening. Then he pulled out and traced up the channel. Esara's breathing had gone faster. He reached the V at the top. Esara jumped.

"I'm sorry, I—" He lifted his hand and stopped kissing her.

She grabbed his hand and put it back. Taking his first two fingers she guided him to touch a small nub and then pushed them back and forth. "Don't. Don't stop." He could feel her heart hammering against his chest. He rubbed harder when she shoved her pelvis against his hand.

He didn't know where her hand came from but suddenly she was holding his cock. He jumped, too. She moved the loose foreskin back and forth over his hardened shaft. He matched her rhythm, bodies pulsing against each other, hot breath searing skin. Faster and faster they moved. Her hand. His hand. She arched her back against him. He so wanted to mount her but knew he shouldn't. She was too young. Not yet. Could hurt her.

Then Esara cried out. White liquid splashed onto his hand. And he gasped, jerking his hot seed over her hand. They lay shuddering in each other's arms, their bodies twitching, then finally just relaxing.

Beams of light shone down on their glistening bodies. He loved the play of the multicolors of her skin, black and brown and red, as the sun caught it.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

She laughed and taking his head in her hands, said, "You're not so bad yourself." Her hands traced down his biceps and forearms. "Where did you learn to do that?"

He blushed, didn't know what to say, so didn't speak and she laughed again. "Pollo, I never thought I'd find you speechless."

"I, uh, watched..."

She laughed, again. "We all watch. How do you think I knew what to do with this?" She touched his partially limp penis. It bounced. Only then did he realize he had discarded his shorts and shirt. He lay naked while she still wore her clothes. He rose to

reach for his shorts but she stopped him. As he sat, she pulled her blouse off over her head. Then she slipped out of her skirt and sat cross legged before him.

“Pollo, today we were shown a great vision,” she said.

He crossed his legs and moved so that their knees touched. He placed his hands upon her knees. She took his hands, turned them over and placed her hands on top.

“Esara, this will become a place to live,” he said. “A sanctuary, I am afraid.”

She nodded, her eyes showing a bit of fear. “I fear so too.” She began to run her hands back and forth up his forearms and back to the tips of his fingers. His cock began to harden, again, pointing toward his crossed shins.

“But since we do not know when...” she leaned forward, letting her hands travel up his arms to his shoulders. She crawled into his lap spreading her legs to encircle his back. His cock bounced against her buttocks. “I want you to make love to me as our parents do.” She reached down and pulled the tip of his cock up against her channel.

“I should not,” he said, unable to move. It was as if her hand had paralyzed him. Her eyes bore into his, full of trust and love. “You are, we are, still young. I might hurt you.”

“You are the only one for me.” She looked about the cavern. “We have been blessed. Did you not feel it?”

Yes, he had felt it. The blue light had engulfed the two of them. They had been chosen. He too glanced around the cavern. Yes, they had been chosen. He leaned forward to kiss her lips. Parting her mouth, he gently moved his tongue around her mouth. Then he playfully bit at her tongue and when she withdrew, he nipped at her lips and her chin. Beneath her hand, his cock was at its hardest. He reached down and rubbed her clit. She moaned and began to rub against his penis, the tip penetrating. Ever so slowly, he pushed it further upward. Bit by bit he moved her hips further onto his penis until she covered his entire shaft.

When he could stand it no longer, he laid her upon her back and quickened the rhythm, all the time watching her closed eyes, her face for any signs of pain. He thought

to do it as fast as possible in case he wasn't reading her correctly but she began to gasp louder, holding onto his hips, forcing him closer to her.

Reflex took over and he pounded his shaft in to her channel, his testicles slapping against her legs. When he felt the pressure building up, he wanted to withdraw but she held him tightly, her legs wrapped around his back. He exploded into her core. She yelled and her body jerked. He felt her muscles contract around his penis, milking him. They both collapsed onto the sand. He had never felt so complete in his life. Esara was him. He was Esara.

Chapter Five

Esara's body spasmed. Pollo awoke. The fire still blazed but he felt chilled. Win fiddled with a dial then moved back to sit beside Jack on the other side. Esara moaned and her sweating body jumped, again.

"She's suffering," Pollo said. "Do something."

"You knew it would be difficult," Win said. "We have to let the medicine run through her body."

"Can't you give her any more sedative?" he pushed her hair away from her sweaty forehead. "Like you did to me?"

"It took two days for the medicine to work," Jack said. "You fought it all the way."

"The memories are not good ones," he said. "I think I knew I didn't want to remember."

"We can't give her any more sedative," Win said. "Her body is already weak from the poison."

Pollo ground his teeth. "If I hadn't promised to keep Dolon alive for you, I would personally strangle the man. What was his motive?"

"To keep her so weak, she wouldn't want to leave."

"But I wasn't going to take her away. We were going to live here. Forever."

"He didn't know that. He didn't know how you would be after being away for so long. He needed insurance."

Pollo picked up a solid hunk of stone and clay and crushed it in his hand. The bite of the stone as the clay fell away felt good against his skin. How he could have allowed Esara to be manipulated in such a way was beyond his understanding. He should have known. Should have felt that something was wrong.

"Tell me your findings of her," he said. He had to know everything that had happened to her while he had been away.

"I don't think this is the right time," Jack said.

"Tell me," Pollo growled. "I need to know. Wouldn't you?" He glanced at Win then quickly back to Jack.

Jack sighed, understanding what Pollo hinted at, pulled out the touch screen and let his fingers dance across it. "Her right arm was fractured two and a half years ago. It has healed fine. Fourteen months ago, she sustained a concussion and broken left shoulder. Both have healed perfectly, though she may suffer from headaches. And six months ago, her right leg was broken. Her immune system began to fail just after that. I can only guess it was at that point that the poison began to be administered."

"Began?" Pollo's blood ran cold and he shivered again. Win put another piece of wood on the fire. Sparks flew up, dancing upon the cave's ceiling.

"None of us has any traces of the poison," Jack responded believing that was what Pollo had meant.

"Then how was it given?"

"It would have to be ingested," Jack said, his hand rubbing his chin as he gazed at the touch screen. "Either through food or something she touched every day. Any ideas?"

Pollo shook his head. "Can't be food. Oxar is one of us. He wouldn't have poisoned Esara. He knows how important she is to us."

"Then that leaves touch."

"Touch?" Pollo wondered. "I spent some time with her in the garage."

Jack and Win both looked at him disapprovingly.

"I couldn't stand her being so upset. I had to comfort her."

Win huffed and jabbed at the fire. "You could've jeopardized the whole plan."

"I...we didn't really talk too much," he said, blushing.

"Well, at least you two reconciled before coming out here today."

"I hope she forgives me for deceiving her," Pollo mumbled, not really caring if they heard him or not. Her well-being was the most important thing to him right now. Nothing else. No one else. Not even his own.

"Well, there are lots of tools in the garage. How long has she been working on that hovercraft? What about the air filtration system?"

Pollo nodded. "Yes, there is so much I didn't touch. It could be anything."

"Well, she won't be going back there once we're finished here," Win said. "She can stay here and wait for you to return after you've gotten us past the security system and we've arrested Dolon."

"Jez won't let his father go without a fight."

"If we explain to him?" Jack asked.

"He was there," Pollo said, staring into space, "I think."

"You think?"

"I keep seeing his face but it is just a flash. She was the one who saw more before the explosion. And after." Pollo shuddered. This memory was not such a good one. "I know he was there later. Much later."

"When you two were taken to the doctor?" Win prompted.

Pollo nodded and closed his eyes, trying to hide from the flood of pictures moving across his mind.

* * * * *

Pollo jerked awake as a sharp pain sent his nerves tingling and his limbs jerking. Dolon stood over him, holding a charged probe used mainly to scare rodents out of hiding. Pollo smelled burning skin and looked down to see two flaming red spots over his heart. His hands had been tied behind his back and his legs at the ankles. A gag had been shoved into his mouth.

“Good of you to join us, Pollo is it?” asked Dolon Gerardis, a minor estate owner at that time, whose ambition was equally matched with his cruelty. “Hate you to miss what is going to happen next.”

A door opened and Esara stumbled in and fell to her knees. She faced Pollo and when she saw him, relief flooded her face. She tried to crawl to him but one of the guards grabbed her by the hair and held her still. She groaned. Her eyes met Pollo’s. Now full of rage, he wanted to tell her not to do anything. *Do whatever they say. Don’t get killed.*

Don’t die. He choked back sudden tears.

“So these are the legendary Seeker and Hammer?” Dolon circled them, waving the probe in the air. “They don’t look so legendary, do they?” The guards laughed.

Pollo muttered something through the gag. Dolon knelt down close to Pollo’s face. “What was that, Legend?”

Pollo just glared at him.

“I would guess it wasn’t a very heroic thing you said.” Dolon pressed the probe against Pollo’s arm.

A shock coursed through his body making him jump clear off the ground. He fell onto his side, writhing uncontrollably. He tasted blood in his mouth. When he could hear, again, he heard someone crying.

“Stop, please. Please, don’t hurt him.”

Esara. *Don’t.*

“And you are the Seeker?” Dolon stood knelt down by her side. He ran the edge of the probe, no longer glowing, down her neck, over her left breast and stopped it in the crevice between her breasts. She didn’t move but Pollo could see the muscles in her neck bulging. “They say you are beautiful.” He stared at her breasts. “I see they are right.”

Pollo sat up, roaring. He scrambled his legs beneath him and bolted forward, only to land face-first on the floor, too far from Esara. Dolon came over. He tensed his body preparing for another jolt. Instead, he suddenly flipped over onto his side. Dolon kicked him a second time in his side. He heard a sharp crack and felt a jabbing pain in his side. Pollo had to swallow blood this time or choke. And he couldn't choke. He had to stay alive to protect Esara.

"Please, please. Stop." Esara cried out. "Why are you doing this?"

"I like it," Dolon said, walking back to her side. "Now, do you know what I'd really like?" He knelt beside her again but kept his eyes locked on her own.

"What?" her voice wavered.

Pollo could hear she wanted to make a deal. But she was still cautious. *Whatever*, he wanted to tell her, *do whatever to stay alive*.

"I want you to come work for me."

Pollo nearly laughed.

"What's the catch?" she asked, hope betrayed in her voice. They both knew it was too good to be true.

"Well, aren't you the smart one? Let's see if you can follow this. I can't leave the two of you together. It is said if I kill one, though, then the other will die. Is this not correct?" Dolon paused.

Esara locked eyes with Pollo.

"I am guessing you won't tell me one way or the other," Dolon continued. He stood and walked over to stand halfway between them so they could still see each other and him. "So we have a problem here. I know if I keep you two alive, you will try to escape. I will find you, bring you back, punish you and then you will try to escape, again. It will become very tiresome. And no less tiring on you two. So what to do?"

The door opened suddenly. Jez, Dolon's only son, entered followed by another man carrying a large case. Jez moved over to stand close beside Esara.

"Ah, the doctor has arrived." Dolon watched as the man moved to a table set up against a far wall and placed the case on top. He opened it then turned around, crossed his arms and leaned against the table. Only then did he look at the two people on the floor.

"I do have another solution," Dolon said. "Memory erasure."

He walked over to the table and let Esara and Pollo think about it for a few minutes. They stared at each other. Forget each other? Live together but never remember what they had shared for the past few years? That they loved each other? That their lives meant so much more to the land than this man could ever understand? That to forget was to give up everything that was important to them? What would happen? To them? To the land? Would the land forget them too? Forgive them?

Pollo saw the fear play out on Esara's face. Then saw her make her decision. He shook his head. *Better alive. Stay alive. Someday we will remember.* He saw the fear return to her face. And a little shame. Death was the easy way out. She had nearly succumbed.

"Well, Esara? What do you choose?"

"I'll go first," she said. Jez grabbed her under both arms and lifted her to her feet. He held her against his chest, his arms tight beneath her breasts. Esara did not stop looking at Pollo.

The doctor pulled out a long syringe. It was the type without a needle but still the pressure would be painful enough. The doctor tore her sleeve, pressed the syringe against her upper arm. A loud hiss filled the room. Esara's eyes widened then her lids fluttered and she passed out into Jez's arms. Jez picked her up and took her out the door.

The doctor filled another syringe. Pollo tried to roll away but two guards held him still. The doctor jammed the syringe against his neck. A hiss and the icy liquid shot into his skull. He groaned then blacked out.

Pollo gathered up Esara and rocked her back and forth. Tears poured down his cheeks. "I am so sorry." He whispered it over and over. She muttered something and he stopped the rocking motion to bend closer to hear. But she didn't speak, again.

Jack and Win laid out their blankets to get some sleep. He took two blankets and covered Esara with one. The other he put around his shoulders. Convinced, he wouldn't sleep, he soon found his head drooping. He dozed soon after.

* * * * *

Esara struggled through the murky mist that hung about everywhere. She knew there was a door somewhere. She had seen it once. She would find it again. But the mist. It clung everywhere. To everything. Everyone. The door. Where was... Ah, yes, here it is.

She opened her eyes. Glowing embers of a dying fire did little to light the cave. The scientists slept on the other side together. She felt her pillow move and looked up to see Pollo's sleeping face. He had taken a blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders. Now he snuggled his face in to it as if to hide from the night's chill. He looked so innocent yet lines of worry creased his face.

She gently eased herself up off his leg then sat up. A lone tube pierced the skin of her forearm and she pulled it out. No pain but it bled a few tiny drops. She stood up. Both legs felt strong. No pain. Feeling an overpowering urge to wash, she turned away from the cave entrance and walked down the tunnel, into the darkness. She had been here before, when she was much younger, she remembered and followed the winding tunnel as it sloped downward.

Soon she could hear falling water. The tunnel opened to a small chamber. An underground river had chosen this spot to break through and drop to the next level below. She tore off her clothes and stepped beneath the stream. She heard laughter and screeching and let the memory flow.

She saw herself as a very tiny child, barely able to walk. Her mother and father and her uncle and aunt and their two older children, her cousins, all stood beneath the waterfall, naked. They played and splashed and joked and laughed. At one point her parents disappeared for a little while around a corner where the water flowed too, then they came back and her aunt and uncle disappeared for a while. It was a very happy time. Esara felt a great weariness come over her. She placed both her hands against the wall behind the water and leaned against them, letting the water pour over her body. She had a feeling no amount of cleansing would make her feel better.

Then that memory ended and another started. She was slightly older, with her father sitting high on top of one of the mountains, listening. They did that. For hours on end. Just listening. The wind whipping across their skin, through their hair. Sand stinging their eyes. Grit in their mouths. But still, just to listen. Sometimes they didn't even speak. Just sat there.

Another memory. Again, a little older. And another. And another. They kept coming. All the time, always a little older. She began to try to shut them off. She knew what was coming. But first there was Pollo. Beautiful, strong Pollo. So made for each other. Fitting each other like a glove. Cautious Pollo. Not wanting to ever hurt her. She almost had to force herself on him. Then lots of time for love making. Except the last time. She slammed her fist against the stone wall.

"No." She didn't want those last memories. "No." She hit the wall, again. Felt stone tear skin. "No." She slammed it again. "No, Pollo, no." Too late.

A hand reached through the water. Pulled her away. Dark arms twirled her around. Held her close.

"It's done now," Pollo said.

"I-I was ready to die."

"I know. That's why I didn't let you."

"But you would've died too."

"A minor point."

She felt his chuckle through his chest. She started to laugh. She wrapped her arms around him, laughing more and more until she could barely breathe, then she stopped. She leaned her head back and he kissed her.

"I suppose you didn't react as badly as this?" she said when they broke to take a breath.

Two people laughed behind them. They turned. Jack and Win undressed by the entrance. Jack strode forth first. "Oh, no, he didn't behave badly at all. We just had to fix some windows and some electronic locks on the medical ship."

"You?" Esara looked at Pollo, not believing he would react so violently.

Win strode into the waterfall. "Seemed he felt a powerful instinct to protect somebody. Had to get back to her as quickly as possible. Didn't understand he was in a ship in planetary orbit."

"So you just remembered about a waterfall all the way down here?" Jack asked, watching the water splash on his outstretched arms.

Win came from behind him, ducked beneath his right arm and came up facing him. Water splashed across her ample breasts. She reached out and rubbed the water over his chest.

"My family used to come here. All the time." Esara spoke and the sadness crept into her voice. Pollo drew her close.

"The memories will come quickly and when you least expect them," Jack said. "You'll just have to ride with them."

"There's something I want to remember more," she muttered stretching up on tiptoe. "Love me, Pollo," she whispered before taking his head and kissing him deeply.

Pollo picked her up. She wrapped her legs around his torso. He ran his fingers along her cheeks, putting pressure on her anus.

Esara continued to kiss him, alternately pulling and pushing his tongue into her mouth. So much the same. So different. The man she had known long ago, back again.

Not the man she had only recently known. He kissed her nose, each cheek, an eyelid, forehead, the other eyelid, as if learning her body all over again. Then he moved down to her earlobe savoring the soft velvet of her ear. Then to her neck dragging his tongue across the pulse of her jugular down to the dip at the base of her neck.

Lifting her higher, he nestled a breast into his mouth, licking the nipple and sucking the soft flesh. He held her tightly. She arched her back so he would take more of her body into his mouth. He obliged by pressing her close. Then he moved across to the other breast. But she stopped him.

“Down,” she said.

He lowered her and she knelt in the pooling water. Taking his bobbing penis in both hands, she licked it up and down the stem. One hand moved down to massage his balls. She squeezed and pushed upward. Pollo groaned loudly. Then she took his cock full into her mouth, pausing when his tip touched the back of her throat. She breathed hotly.

“Esara,” he cried. “I’m going to fall...”

She pulled his cock a little out of her mouth then breathed again.

Pollo moaned again and pulled her up. “Stop or I will come before you.”

She laughed, “We used to play this game, you and I.”

He kissed her roughly. “Then let’s try, again.” He dropped to his knees and with both hands on the small of her back, held her pelvis against his face. She felt his tongue dart between her legs. It parted her lips and he teased her clit. She felt the buildup of pressure in her stomach. He ran his tongue down her slit to her vagina, dipping in and out, then tracing back up to her clit. He dropped a hand and put pressure on her anus, again. She knew she was going to come first and didn’t care. It felt so wonderful to have Pollo touching her again. Loving her again.

Esara heard gasps and animalistic growls. She glanced over to see Jack and Win standing close enough to touch. Win was riding Jack’s penis, one leg astride his hip. He held her close, his hands rubbing her butt cheeks. Even though their eyes were closed,

Esara saw a deep pain on their faces. Like they badly wanted their lovemaking to mean so much more. She wanted to touch them. Started to reach out to them but Pollo stood at that moment. He picked her up and slipped his cock inside her pussy. For the briefest moment she was consumed with him and only him. Then unable to ignore the cries beside her—for that's what they had become cries of anguish not lovemaking—Esara reached over and touched Win's shoulder.

The water glowed blue. The walls glowed blue. A blue light filled the space around them. All sound ceased. Time slowed. In a slow rhythm of love, all four loved together. Esara felt their love. And something else. She felt a deep genetic determination to maintain the werewolf species. And failure. Theirs was a species which had mutated from its natural form. Win had sacrificed much to save Jack's life. Esara shut off the memory. Concentrated on Pollo's actions. More important. This. Now. Come. Come with me. Let me fix this. And they orgasmed together. All four.

After, they silently dried off and dressed. Still without speaking, Esara led them back to the camp. Pollo rebuilt the fire and handed out food for breakfast.

Finally Win spoke. "Is that what it is like?" she asked Esara.

Esara nodded.

"It is...is..." Win fought for words she couldn't find.

"Wonderful." Jack finished.

Pollo smiled. Esara nodded. "It is a gift. It is The Way of Peace."

"No wonder Dolon wanted to own you." Win sucked on a piece of fruit. "This is delicious. I've never tasted fruit so sweet."

Jack raised an eyebrow at her statement. Then he reached into his pack and pulled out a handheld touch screen. He turned it on and placed it between him and Win. She didn't seem to notice, instead reached for more fruit.

"Tell me who you really are," Esara said.

Win nearly choked on the fruit. Jack raised an eyebrow at Pollo who merely nodded.

"We are bounty hunters," Jack said.

Esara nodded. "That explains what I saw happen to you two in the vision."

"What vision?" Win sputtered and more juice dripped down her chin.

"Back there," Esara jerked her head back down the tunnel. "I saw you two in great danger. I felt the danger. And the suffering."

"That-that was a long time ago," Win said looking steadfastly at Jack.

Jack nodded. "And you saw it? Why that vision?"

"I felt you had a great sadness. Something that you had to give up in order to live. No, survive."

Pollo glanced at the touch screen. It had started to beep. "What does that say?"

Jack picked it up too quickly, nearly dropping it on the hard floor. Win had stopped eating and stared at the fruit smeared on her fingers. She said very quietly, "I don't eat fruit."

Jack's fingers flew across the screen, tapping and tapping, again, the same code. Then he passed the screen to Win. "Cell splitting has begun," he said. Win smiled, reached for his hand and held it against her cheek. Then they both looked at Esara. For the longest moment their mouths moved without sound, then Win spoke. "Is that what you do?"

Esara paused. What did she do? Pollo nodded. "She fixes things."

Esara grinned and took Pollo's hand. "I fix things."

"Well, this changes the plan," Jack said.

"How?" Pollo asked.

"What plan?" Esara said.

"Both of you stay here," Win said. "We'll manage the arrest and let you know when it's safe to return."

Pollo stood. "No. I am not staying here."

"Neither am I." Esara stood.

"Yes, you are." Both Pollo and Jack said together.

Esara sat back down. "Why?"

"If I die, you can find another Hammer. If you die, it will be another generation before there is another Seeker."

"No, Pollo, there will be no dying today."

"Esara, I have to help them get through the security barrier. Then I'll come right back."

"And you know the new code?" she asked.

He stopped. "New code?"

"Yes, I implemented a changing twenty-four-hour code."

"Tell me what it is."

"I can't."

"This is not a game, Esara. Tell me what it is."

She held up her left hand. Win and Jack sighed. Pollo's shoulders slumped. "Why?"

"Numbers were too hard to remember. I implemented fingerprinting. Hadn't been done for centuries out here. Only I can get you back in."

Esara stood and picked up one of the pieces of equipment. She walked to the cave entrance and looked behind her. "Coming?"

They packed up the hovercraft and turned it back toward the estate. Esara guided them on a direct route that took them just a few hours to return. During that time, they explained the plan to Esara. Simple enough, until she asked what would happen to the rest of the servants. These people taken from the desert, their homes destroyed in the name of progress, needed a place to begin again.

"I won't help unless we can help them."

Pollo sighed. "I think we've lost control over this mission."

Esara smiled sweetly. "What good is a fresh start without a family? They have been our family for the last ten years. We owe them a chance at life."

Pollo nodded. And they revised the plan.

Chapter Six

They should've known that something was wrong. The landing pad was empty of workers and other hovercrafts. There should've been people arriving with samples and leaving to go back out to the mines. The landing area was normally a very busy area. But then they didn't want to question their luck. Probably everyone had gone out to the mines already. They had just missed the workers.

Win and Jack loaded up with two weapons each that Esara could see. She imagined they had others hidden on their person. Jack even gave Pollo his choice of weapons. He chose one that was small enough to fit in his hand.

After Esara had imprinted her hand on the security dial at the edge of the landing pad, they split up immediately. Win, Jack and Pollo headed for the main house where Dolon would most likely be this time of day. Esara headed to the servants' houses. She found the first one, the one for families, empty but didn't expect it to be inhabited. The children would be at school at this time of day. The second building, the men's house was empty too. Again, they would all be out working at the mines. When she opened the door to the third house, she expected to hear children's voices at their lessons and the quiet murmur of women. But, again, the schoolhouse was empty. A cold feeling settled in her stomach.

She ran out to the garage. That would be the last spot anyone would be if they were still here. She never set the alarm during the day so wasn't surprised when she could just walk right in her door. Again, no one. She even ran to her personal quarters. No one. Nowhere. Then she saw it. Sitting outside at the back of the garage. A place where no one would think to look. One of the military's hovercrafts.

A cold jolt ran through her body. She had to warn the others. But was she too late? They would have entered the house by now. Maybe not. Maybe there was still time. She

spun around and crashed in to Jez. She jumped back and tried to steady her pounding heart.

"Esara, it is good to see you," he said, his hands reaching out.

"Jez, you startled me."

"I saw you arrive. Wanted to come get a report on the mines from you."

A report? Her mind had gone blank. What report? Oh...

"We were correct," she said, walking past him toward the unfixable hovercraft. "The mines are drying up."

"They must've found a solution."

She nodded and picked up one of the tools from her worktable. "Yes, it seems the mines we saw are all connected by underground veins. We want to check out the rest of the mines too, to see that this is true." She waved toward the house. "We came back for more supplies before going back out."

"Is this so?" Jez's voice came from just behind her.

She jumped when his hand touched her neck. She took a step sideways to move out of his reach but her legs had turned to rubber. She grasped the edge of the table.

"You see, Esara, I think you were manipulated into a plot Pollo thought up," he said, remaining where he stood. His eyes had gone cold and distant. "We found out that your scientists are really bounty hunters come to arrest my father. The military doesn't take kindly to having one of its own successful miners taken away and having operations shut down."

Esara's knees gave out and she collapsed on the floor. Only her arms kept her upright. It was a trap. The others had walked into a trap. They needed her help. If only she could... Her elbows wobbled and she fell onto her side. What had Jez done to her? How had he drugged her?

Jez crouched down. He removed clear gloves from his hands, pulling one inside the other and tossed them to the floor.

"I told them I would take care of you," he said, picking her up, cradling her body close to his chest. Her head flopped back. "You are mine now," his hot breath seared the skin at her throat. She felt her eyes closing and could do nothing about it.

* * * * *

She felt the mattress first, hard and scratchy beneath her naked body. Then she felt his hands on her stomach, rubbing in a circular motion, brushing the bottoms of her breasts, grazing the pubic hair. She turned and in the dim light of the shed saw Pollo's face.

"Pollo, we don't have time for this," she said, reaching for his hand. Her hand just flopped against it, uselessly.

"Everything is all right," he whispered in her ear. "It's all done."

"They're safe?" she asked. She was supposed to help. To be gone by now. "But I'm supposed to help them."

"Shush," he pulled her closer to him. "We're safe now." He bent down and pressed his lips against hers.

Hungry for his touch, she opened her mouth and drew him in. She rolled onto her side, putting one leg on top of his, expectant for his touch. He kissed her gently at first. She reached down and grabbed his penis. Flaccid at first, something he had never been before, it hardened beneath her insistent touch. He continued to kiss her lips but his hands squeezed her breasts, twisting them painfully. She grabbed his wrists and tried to move away but he rolled her onto her back and pinned her down with the weight of his body. His weight made breathing difficult. Panic itched at her stomach. Esara's head began to pound. Light flashed in the shed as if someone had walked by outside. She caught a glimpse of Pollo's head. Short dark straight hair against pale flesh lay nestled between her breasts. Not Pollo. Jez. The drug. The drug still affected her mind. Clouded it. Making her think he was her lover.

"No," she muttered, grabbing a handful of his hair and pulling upward.

Jez looked down into her eyes. His eyes had taken on an angry lust, a look she had never seen before. Esara felt fear taking control of her actions. She squirmed and tried to slide out from under him.

“Jez, no.”

He smiled and reached beyond her head. She heard the stretch of latex. When his hand returned to her field of vision, he showed her a tiny vial and began to unscrew the cap. “This is a very potent drug. It makes the user see what she wants to see.”

He dabbed a drop on his first finger, then recapped the vial. “You see I do love you. And over time, you will begin to see me each time we make love. For now though,” and he touched his finger to her neck, “I will accept that you will see me as him.”

Already she could feel a cloud growing in her brain. She tried to fight it. “You will never be him.” But even as she spoke the words she saw Pollo’s face hovering. He bent down and she kissed him. A distant voice told her to stop. She put her arms against his chest but he pulled them out and yanked them above her head. With one hand he held them tight. He was too strong for her to fight.

His kissed her, harshly biting first on her tongue and then on her lips. She thought she tasted blood.

“Who am I?” he demanded.

“No.”

He bent over a nipple and bit it hard. She screamed.

“Who am I?” he repeated.

Why was Pollo asking? Something was wrong. Then he sat up. His enlarged penis jerked and white liquid spurted onto her stomach. He collapsed on top of her, wrapped his arms around her chest and rolled onto his side, pulling her with him. Soon his breathing slowed and deepened.

Fighting sleep herself, Esara slid out from between his arms and sat up. Her legs had gone numb but she wiggled them until feeling returned. Something was wrong and

she had to get outside. The feeling was so strong she didn't even bother to look for clothes. Walking quietly to the door, she tried the latch. It lifted but the door wouldn't budge. Putting her shoulder against it, she shoved it but again it wouldn't move.

"Come back to bed, Esara," his voice held the hint of a threat.

She turned and saw Pollo's face but heard Jez's voice. The drug. Remember the drug. *You've got to get it out of your system.* She smiled. "I was looking for water," she said, walking back toward him in what she hoped was a seductive way. "Do you have anything to drink, Pollo? Some juice? Some wine?" She crouched down beside him.

Jez reached up and brushed the hair from her cheek and put it around her ear. The same motion he had done every day for the past year. Now, she found it hard not to take his fingers and break them. Instead she kept smiling and sat down beside him. His penis lay curled across his leg. So small yet so grossly large when excited. Almost inhuman. Like Jez. Jez had an underlying streak of cruelty. The only thing she had going in her favor was that he believed he loved her. But for how long? How long until she made a mistake? And he hurt her? Or worse.

She had to stay alive. Remembered Pollo's demand that she stay alive when they were first kidnapped and their memories erased. She had convinced herself death was the way. But now she knew she had to stay alive. Help Pollo and the others. First she had to find out where the others had been taken.

She reached out and took Jez's hand. "Jez." He jerked when she spoke his name. He reached for the vial but she pressed his hand. "No, Jez. If you want me you can have me." He stopped and sat up. He raised a hand to her shoulder but stopped himself, suddenly wary.

"What do you seek?" he asked.

"Tell me where you took them," she said.

He sighed. "They are no longer your concern."

She turned her back, pretending to be offended. "Jez, do you want to keep pretending to be a man you aren't, to get me to love you? Or do you want me to love you as you?"

He scurried around to face her, kneeling before her. "Do you think you can love me?" Such desperate hope etched his face that she almost felt sorry for him. She reached out and touched his cheek.

"Jez, you have always been kind to me," she said. "You were always there when he wasn't."

He nodded his head, eagerly.

"I was blinded by my own infatuation and did not see what was in front of me."

"Oh, Esara, I was so hoping you would come around. I just didn't think it would be so soon."

"I have been blind."

Jez leaned forward and kissed her. She took his head between her hands and kissed him back with as much passion as she could find. His penis, cold and flaccid, rubbed against her stomach. She shuddered.

"Are you chilled?" he asked, rubbing her upper arms.

"A little," she said, thinking he would go get a blanket.

Instead, he leaned forward, until his chest pressed against her breasts, forcing her onto her back. "I will warm you, my love."

Jez lay atop, kissing her face. His body reeked of unwashed sweat. His greasy hair dragged upon her skin. She fought the revulsion to shove him off. He moved his head down to her neck and then to her breast and sucked for a long time. Shifting his body off, he curled up by her side. His penis began to solidify, again. It was a mass of red skin, mottled with purple veins and a tiny head. His balls were small, the skin stretched tight with patchy bits of hair. She had seen a better pelt on a molting horse. She felt that

he might fall asleep as he pulled and nipped at her soft flesh. But then, slobber dripping from his chin, he moved to her other breast.

"Jez, where did you take them?" she asked.

"Who?" He moved his hand to her other breast and twisted her nipple between his fingers. She jerked from the sudden pain but he pulled at it, then twisted it again, ignoring her reaction.

"Pollo. The other servants." She reached around to his neck and shoulders and began to knead them. Maybe she had upset him with her question. Maybe he would relax a little if she appeared to care for him.

"Oh," he said. "Dolon sent them to the new mine."

Her heart skipped a beat. The new mine. The deepest one yet. Out of necessity. They'd had to dig the hole very deep just to find the pocket of stones. They called it the Pit. Her hands stopped for the briefest of moments then she started up, again. She hoped he hadn't noticed.

"Jez, please stop," Esara grasped his fingers and dragged them from her nipple. His hand flew up to her neck, wrapping around it.

Wind buffeted against the shed. The walls shook.

"Jez," she gasped, feeling his grasp tighten. She arched her back trying to wiggle out from under his torso.

A few of the wooden slats flew off. Bright light pierced the floor. Another slat wobbled behind him and bent inward. Jez continued to kiss her body, oblivious to the surrounding storm. He crawled down her body, releasing his hold on her neck, until he knelt between her legs, spreading them wide. Jez placed his hands against her pussy and flicked at her labia. Esara tried to wiggle out of his reach but he grabbed her hips, drawing her down until the tip of his penis lay upon her furry mound.

"Lie still."

Esara stared at the glittering light through the creaking walls. Wind struck the wall. She saw a board bend inward, rotating on two nails. It tore free and flew through the air. Esara lifted her arm over her face. She heard a sickening thud and felt Jez stiffen between her legs. She lowered her arm as he fell to floor, his eyes wide, full of surprise. A piece of the wood stuck out of the back of his head. She lay still for the longest time watching his eyes glaze over. It was much easier not to move. The wind died off. The walls stopped shaking. Her body started to shiver. She crawled away from Jez's body and retched into the sand.

Chapter Seven

“Interesting how the females of your species put up the greatest fight.” Dolon Gerardis stood with his feet spread wide in front of a kneeling Jack. They both glanced at Win’s unconscious body lying on the wooden floor of his office.

“Perhaps you enjoyed striking her, Dolon,” Pollo said, fighting against the bonds that held his hands fast behind his back. “A female, as you say.”

Jack growled but did not move. He had been gagged as well as tied. They had made it as far as the front door before Jack had stiffened. “They were shielded,” was all he got out before the soldiers surrounded them.

Win reacted by instinct. She leapt upon the closest two, knocking their guns out of their hands before a third one behind them hit her squarely on the head. She crumpled to the porch floor.

Meanwhile, Jack and Pollo had each managed to take out a soldier but they were overwhelmed by more soldiers and dragged kicking down to the floor.

Dolon had come out once they had been subdued. “Tie their hands. Bring them to me.”

Jack had bitten one of the soldiers as he was lifted upright, so they gagged him. Pollo and Jack walked into the house. Win was dragged by her feet, her head bouncing over the threshold, and dumped to the side. Jack struggled to get closer to her but a soldier held a gun to his head until he stopped moving.

Dolon stood in front of Jack. “So when were you going to tell me you were bounty hunters, hmmm? Before or after you arrested me?”

Jack just glared at him. Dolon turned to Pollo. “And you, my adopted son, were you the one who hired them?” He knelt down in front of Pollo and searched his eyes. He must have found the answer he sought. “When did you start remembering?”

Pollo turned his head away. Dolon slapped him across the face. "Do not look away from me when I am speaking to you. You always were insolent. Hard to train. I only kept you because she begged me."

Pollo stiffened.

"Yes, she did not take to the brainwashing as easily as you did. She struggled with it, terribly. Seems she wanted to make sure you survived." Dolon moved across to look at Win. "When I finally agreed, she let the final dosage be applied. And she became my niece." He chuckled. "My step-niece." He laughed harder. "Must always leave the options open. We can't have her being without her Hammer."

Pollo lunged toward Dolon but two soldiers grabbed him by the shoulders and held him back.

Dolon laughed some more. He glanced at Jack and jerked his head at Win. "It seems you two are going to have an early retirement." And he looked pointedly at Pollo. "And you, my adopted son, are going to have a tragic accident. But do not fear. I have sent Jez to comfort Esara. Let us pray she knows how to handle herself around him. She will learn to appreciate him as her new Hammer."

"Dolon if he hurts her—" Pollo said, anger building.

"My boy, do not fear," Dolon said. "Jez has learned much about chemistry in his time here. He will make her feel very, uh, grateful for his loving touch."

"Dolon, she won't—"

"Oh but she will, Pollo. Did you think she would remain loyal to you while you were away? Why do you think I sent you away? I had to give them a chance to get to know each other."

Pollo knew he was lying. Esara would not give herself to another man. She disliked Jez. Found him distasteful.

Dolon seemed to read his mind. "Yes, my son may not be the handsomest man but he does know how to mix the right drugs. He has become legendary among the female

staff here because he plants in their minds what a wonderful lover he has been to them. And he leaves them to wonder why their insides are so pained after. My son has a rather large appendage. But at least he knows how to make it more pleasurable for the female. I imagine he will be just as generous with your female."

"Where are the other servants?" Pollo asked. "Oxar?"

"Seems you have given me no choice but to do some housecleaning," Dolon said, "I have sent them to the Pit."

"You bastard," Pollo lunged again but two soldiers held him back. "The women and children?"

"No, not them," Dolon said, looking affronted. "Do you know how much I'll get on the slave market for them?"

"The children?"

"Oh, the children especially. There are men..." Dolon suddenly stood. "Enough of this. We're wasting time." He waved at the guards. "Get them loaded in the freighter. Take them out to the Pit and dump them with the rest. Then you know what to do."

The men were yanked to their feet and since Win had not yet gained consciousness, she was dragged by her shoulders outside. The hovercraft had landed in the front yard and they were tossed on board and flown out to the landing pad. A large flatbed freighter like the ones they had seen at the mines yesterday, sat waiting. They were shoved inside an airless crate and sealed in. The crate walls were made of four centimeter thick plastic. The walls had been gouged from years of carrying rough stones but offered no hope of escape. None of the gouges had broken the plastic. Sweat soaked their bodies immediately. The freighter lifted off the landing pad.

Win revived enough to sit up then nearly fainted from the heat. They explained to her what had happened inside.

"I hope Esara can stop Jez before he attacks her," she muttered. "She is a strong woman," she added hoping to alleviate Pollo's fears. Pollo said nothing.

“Why is it called the Pit?” Win prompted, trying to distract Pollo.

“It’s the newest mine. Dolon is obsessed with finding new wealth. He had Esara find a new area that would be good to dig. She chose this. Unfortunately, we had to dig down thirty meters to find the pocket. It’s called the Pit because it is so deep.”

“But where are the people?” Win asked. “In the hole?”

“Yes, we had a freak rainstorm the day we finished digging. Water poured in and when it drained, we discovered the soil around the stones had been washed away. A large cavern had been exposed. This is useful for the mining equipment. The carts can move faster. Also useful for hiding unwanted items. Only one way in or out.” They soon discovered what Pollo meant.

The heat in the freighter made them drowsy so when it landed, they were too weak to fight. The soldiers dragged them out and to the edge of the mine. They waited at the edge for a long time. A humming sound grew louder and out from the darkened depths popped a cart on a hover pad. It settled on the sand and the cart rolled off toward the waiting freighter. The soldiers shoved them toward the hover pad and while the empty cart moved onto the pad, they untied their hands. Jack ripped the gag out of his mouth and tossed it far away. He lunged at the nearest guard and received a prompt jab in the gut that made him double over.

Pollo helped him into the cart. Win followed and the cart moved out over the hole. It dropped fast, making his heart leap into his throat. The deeper they went the further he felt he was going from Esara. Esara, at the hands of Jez. He didn’t want to think of what he was doing to her right now. Especially if she was drugged. He tried to block out the image of her naked body writhing beneath Jez. Or would he force her to do other things? How sick were his tastes? Jez had a knack with tools. A vision of Esara chained to the wall of her garage flashed through his mind. Jez holding a flaming wand, brushing it against her breasts, her stomach, her legs, leaving red welts. Esara screaming Pollo’s name, calling him to help her. Jez laughing, stripping off his clothes, pulling her legs around his waist, penetrating her.

The hover pad jarred to a stop. Pollo nearly tumbled out but Jack grabbed him. They stepped carefully onto a carpet of blue rock. Even through the soles of their boots they could feel the uneven surface. If one fell, they'd suffer severe cuts and bruises. As the cart slid off the hover pad, they had to move quickly out of the way as another cart rumbled forward to take its place, its load of stone having lost its blue shine.

Pollo led them into the darkness. He could smell smoke from a propane fire. He found a group of men huddled around a tiny fire. They greeted him as a conquering hero only to find he hadn't come to rescue them.

"Bring your friends close," Oxar rose from the crowd. "It will get cold tonight and I do not know how they will fare."

"What happened?" Pollo asked, ushering Win toward the group. The men moved aside and she stood before the tiny flame.

"During the morning meal, the soldiers arrived and hurried into the house," Oxar lowered his body to a crouch, again. "Dolon came out soon after with the soldiers. They made us all get into one hovercraft. I saw him taking the women and children to the house. Then we left. That is all."

"We underestimated his suspicions," Jack spoke.

"It was not the father," Oxar said.

Pollo's raised his eyebrows. "Jez? What would Jez suspect?"

"He suspects everything. He sees evil in everything. If it attracts Esara's attention, then he is highly suspicious."

Pollo muttered something under his breath, sounding almost like a growl. He strode back to the hole and stood under it, his fists clenched, his body tense.

"What is the matter?" Oxar asked.

"Dolon gave Esara to Jez," Win explained.

"Oh..." someone in the group said.

"The man is cruel. He doesn't respect women." Another spoke.

"He uses drugs. They don't remember." Oxar explained.

"Esara will see through it," another said. "She is very strong."

"No one is that strong."

"We need to get out of here," Win said, glancing at Jack.

Jack nodded. "It won't be long now." He touched his ear. "Not long." He glanced at Pollo standing in the fading sunlight. "Pollo, come away."

An explosion sounded outside. Sand rained down. Jack ran at Pollo, knocked him out of the way, just as a rock fell down.

"What?" Pollo shook his head.

"Our ride is here."

* * * * *

The wind died down. Sunlight coursed through the open spaces, warming Esara's skin. Her body ached everywhere Jez had touched her. Her breasts had begun to turn purple with bruises. Her shoulders felt tender when she touched them. It was much easier to lie still. Immobile. Let the pain subside. But somewhere out there was Pollo. And he needed her help.

Esara glanced outside. What was the time? she wondered. And what had happened to Pollo? And Jack and Win? She saw her clothes heaped in a corner. She crept around Jez's body and still not trusting the strength in her legs, sat on the sand to pull on her pants and her shirt. Her underclothes had vanished. She didn't want to think what Jez had done with them. Finally, grasping the wooden walls, she pulled herself upright. Her knees wobbled. Her body felt unattached from her mind.

Jez's body had begun to attract flying insects. In this heat, he would smell soon. She dragged a dusty blanket off the mattress and spread it over his body. Maybe that would keep the smell down until she could leave the estate. Forcing another board free, she slipped out of the shed. In the distance she saw the garage and even farther away she

saw the house. She hadn't realized that Jez had been bringing his women out here and doing these things to them and she had been so close.

She limped back to the garage obscured to anyone looking from the house for the last portion. She made it inside just as a group of soldiers ran past. She didn't have much time. She had to find the women. If they hadn't moved the hovercraft, then she could crowd them in to it. Running up the path, she encountered no soldiers. Sliding in a back door, she stopped to listen. Dolon's voice came from the front part. She had entered the kitchen which fortunately had a back way to the basement. She tiptoed down the stairs and found the hallway empty. There must be a lot fewer soldiers here than she thought. Or maybe they were out at the Pit.

Two doors refused to open under her gentle prodding. The first she knew was a small cold cellar from which she had often come down to retrieve canned foods for Oxar. The second door led to a large storage room. The third room she couldn't remember. Its door was open and when she stepped inside, the light from the hallway showed a small square room with a dusty table and two chairs. Her heart began to pound. She remembered. She saw Pollo tied and gagged lying on the floor. The doctor at the table. Dolon giving his ultimatum. She shivered as she remembered the icy chill of the injection.

"Reliving happier times?"

Esara jumped and spun around. Dolon stood at the end of the hall. He started forward. She had a few seconds. Should she pretend not to remember? Should she try to hide the anger bubbling up and threatening to burst? Or should she just play it quiet? Let Dolon lead the way?

Dolon took her by the arm and pulled her back to the middle door. He unlocked the door and pushed it open but didn't enter. There was no room to step anyway. It had been jammed with the women and children. They looked from Dolon to Esara and fear crept over their faces. Some of the children began to cry. Dolon pulled the door shut and locked it, dropping the key into a front pocket.

"Why are you doing this?" Esara demanded.

He dragged her back down to the smaller room and shoved her inside. She stumbled against one of the walls but remained upright.

"Uncle, talk to me."

"You needn't call me that anymore," he said, standing in the doorway, his back resting on the door jamb. "I know you have regained your memory." He seemed to be waiting for someone.

"Dolon, I don't care what you do to me," she said, walking up to him, placing her hand gently upon his arm. He didn't twitch but he didn't look at her either. She hoped he would still see her as the niece he believed he had raised. "But what are you doing with them?"

He grabbed her hand and bent it backward, nearly breaking her wrist. "I am going to sell them." He pushed her back in to the room and onto one of the chairs. A much older man entered after him followed by two soldiers. She recognized the doctor even before he laid out his case, once again. The soldiers took up position behind her chair and each placed a heavy hand on her shoulders. She groaned as they pressed on the bruises Jez had left.

"Apparently Jez was found a few minutes ago," Dolon said, turning sideways to her. "I don't know how you made it look like an accident but his naked form speaks otherwise." He spun around and struck her across the face.

Esara's head whipped to the side. She swore she heard her neck break but apparently it was just the creak of the chair as the soldiers struggled to hold it upright. She tasted blood, again. A couple of teeth wobbled when her tongue touched them. Fear made her heart race, gave strength to her legs. She tried to stand but the soldiers leaned forward and held her forearms tightly against the arms of the chair.

"He was a monster," she said, spitting out blood. "He tortured women and..."

Dolon leaned over, his head centimeteres from her face. She could've bitten his nose if she stretched but felt that would be counterproductive. Besides, she was getting tired of tasting blood in her mouth.

"My son had his," Dolon glanced down at her cleavage, "particular tastes. But at least he got to have you. I would imagine you had him at his most natural." His eyes traveled down to her legs.

"Dolon," she got him to look at her face again, "don't punish the women because of me. Let them go. I'll stay. Do whatever you want."

He sighed. "You've already failed me. The Pit. It's a failure. The stones coming out of it are worthless. Crumble even before they make it to the freighter."

"I told you that pocket wasn't ready. Maybe in another thousand years but..."

"You are the Seeker. You are supposed to Seek."

"That's not how it works."

She barely saw his arm move. Her other cheek stung and she felt the skin around her right eye begin to swell.

"You do not tell me how it works." He slapped her again.

Tears stung her eyes and spilled down her cheeks before she could stop them. The doctor cleared his throat and Dolon looked at him, as if remembering that he had arrived.

"But it doesn't matter. You'll forget and start again for me. Just me."

The doctor pulled out the syringe and leaned over Esara. The soldiers grabbed her shoulders again holding her fast to the chair.

"Dolon, you don't have to do this," she said, trying to lean away from the doctor. "I'll help you. I'll do anything..."

The doctor placed his hand on the side of her head, pushing it away. She felt the pressure of the syringe. The hiss.

"Dolon, please..." the room grew fuzzy, dark.

* * * * *

Soft sheets. A light spicy smell from laundry hung out to dry. The gentle touch of hands on her skin, spreading a cream over her body. Exhaustion made her lie still. Her body didn't want to wake up. It felt good just to be quiet. The hand pressed her breast and she gasped.

"Esara." The voice. The doctor? "I gave you a sedative. It'll make you feel groggy for a little while more but you've got to give your body a chance to start healing. Rest a little longer."

She tried to lick her lips but her face had gone numb. She couldn't even open her lips.

"I'm applying a salve to heal these bruises," he said. "If I don't you'll be very sore."

She wanted to push his hands away. Couldn't move. Instead she felt him rubbing the salve on her skin. She heard sharp intakes of breath and muttering then a cool sheet was drawn up over her body to her chin.

"Esara, the drug's effects will wear off in another hour or so. By then I'll have figured out to get you out of here."

The women. The women too, she wanted to remind him. Then it occurred to her that she was remembering. That none of her memory was gone. She relaxed under the sheet.

A little while later she opened her eyes a little as a door creaked and familiar footsteps walked in.

"How is she, doctor?" Dolon asked.

"Still sleeping."

"Leave us."

"Dolon, this isn't a good idea. She needs to rest."

"Get out."

"Dolon, when she wakes in the morning, she'll remember nothing. She'll be yours to do as you please. Mold as you please."

"There is no one left to bond with her," Dolon said. Esara's heart skipped a beat. "The cave-in at the mine was a success. All that remains is a hole in the ground. If she is to live then I will take the place of Pollo."

Esara moaned, the only sound she could make. Pollo dead? No. He couldn't be dead. She'd feel it. But then the doctor had numbed her body. She couldn't feel anything. Could Pollo be dead and she'd feel it when she woke? Would she awake? The Seeker was not supposed to be able to live without the Hammer. Would she just drift off to sleep and... But she didn't want to die. She tried to make her legs move. All she could get was a tingling sensation. She must've moaned again for she felt the bed dip down. Cool air touched her breasts as the sheet was pulled back.

"Dolon, this is not the way."

"My son did all this?"

"Yes."

The sheet was slapped back over her chest. "I'll need her to give me children. I must have a son to inherit." The bed bounced up as Dolon rose. "See to it, doctor."

"First thing. When she wakes up, I'll take her to the city for tests right away."

Footsteps and the creak of the door. "No, not right away," Dolon said. "We have to bond. She must be mine before she goes." The door closed.

The doctor sighed, then bent his head close. "I am sorry. I thought I could get you away without having to deal with him."

"I've handled him before," she said, "He is not my concern right now."

He looked at her, his eyebrows raised. She placed a hand over her heart. "Pollo is not dead. Tomorrow, I will go out to look for him." Esara allowed her eyes to close. Her body felt so heavy. "I just need a few moments to rest."

The doctor sat down in a nearby chair. "I will be here, Esara, if you need anything."

Esara heard his voice echoing in the room but drifted off before she could answer, the cool sheets gently caressing her bruised body.

* * * * *

Many voices echoed in the large space outside her room. She opened her eyes. She stood in the middle of a long narrow cave. Candles had been lit and placed on the many crevices and outcroppings by the ones who had prepared their new home. Her feet brushed flowers that had been laid upon the floor. About halfway down the length of the cave a small table held a tray of fruit and a bottle of sweet wine with two glasses. And at the far end, a pile of pillows had been laid upon their bed and more flowers had been strewn on top. She wondered how many friends outside she'd be thanking later for decorating their room.

Esara heard Pollo sigh behind her as he stepped into the cave. He wouldn't like all the fussy preparations that had been done to their wedding bed. But tonight was about the two of them. Just the two of them. The voices outside faded as she imagined the people moving away into their own sleeping quarters.

Esara started to turn but felt Pollo's hands grip her shoulders. He stood close, his chest against her back. Lifting Esara's hair, Pollo slipped the large button at the neck of her wedding gown through its hoop. His breath seared her skin sending hot waves through her breasts and down between her legs. She felt moisture build between her thighs.

His hands slipped beneath the light fabric and pushed her gown down her shoulders. His hands followed in a lighter than air caress that made the hair on her arm stand on end. The dress hung from the tight band that covered her breasts. Pollo's hands moved forward, cupping her mounds with the gentlest of pressure. Her nipples strained painfully against the fabric. He teased their tips with his fingertips, brushing them ever so lightly. Electric tingles raced down her stomach and legs, weakening her knees. Afraid she would fall, Esara leaned back against his chest and hips. She felt a familiar hardness.

His lips pressed against her neck. His tongue trailed wetly down to her shoulder where his teeth raked along the upper ridge. She turned her head wanting to take his tongue into her mouth. Instead he came back to her neck and kissed his way up to her ear. All the while, his hands massaged her breasts, squeezing hard, then soft, then hard.

Esara rubbed her hips against his body feeling his swollen cock. Her womb pulsed with need, sending cream dripping down her legs. She tried to force her hands behind but they tangled in the fine fabric. Sweat dripped between her breasts. He kept squeezing in an alternating rhythm until she felt her body shudder. A small orgasm. She heard Pollo draw in a surprised breath. He had given her an orgasm without himself coming. Pledged to be together forever by the power of the zuritaa stone, Esara finally knew what it was to be her own person living alongside her soul mate, able for their bodies to share each other in their own time, no longer needing to be the same and react as one.

Esara rolled her head back, expecting to find his lips. A shock of cold on her nipples made her gasp. He had rolled down the band from her breasts, leaving the tight fabric wrapped under, pressing them upward. He moved around in front of her and dropped to his knees. His mouth encircled one nipple, licking and nipping at it, sending tingles down her spine. One hand at the small of her back held her tight against his body. His free hand played with the other nipple.

She reached up to grab his head, but again her gown's fabric restrained her arms. She could only stand, arms hanging futilely at her side, as his mouth moved to the other breast. His second hand moved around behind her back to join the other as they slid down to grasp her buttocks. His hands covered them completely, his fingers sliding in the channel to tease her anus through the fabric. The constant roughness caused her body to jerk in another mini-climax. Cream splashed down her legs. She was surprised at her body's quick reaction.

Pollo lifted his head from her breast. With a teasing smile, he unclipped the band, allowing her dress to drop to her hips. She pulled her hands free, grabbed his head,

bent over and pressed her lips against his own. His mouth opened. She sent her tongue in search of his warmth. His tongue met hers then gently pushed back. As their lips separated, Esara felt the rest of her gown slip off her hips to the ground.

Reflexively spreading her feet for balance, she felt him reach a muscular arm between her legs and lift one leg over his shoulder. His head moved in close. His tongue parted her fleshy lips, lapping at the sweet liquid. His warm breath sent shock waves up her spine. Her fingers dug into the large muscles running along his shoulders, afraid she might fall. He circled her clit several times. She felt pressure building in her pelvis. Then his tongue moved down to her opening, pushing his way inside.

It had been a long time, years in fact, since he had taken her so intimately. He moved his tongue as one familiar with her needs yet seeking out a new way to please her. Grabbing his shoulders, Esara leaned backward, opening herself up more so he could reach her as deeply as possible. Her breathing became labored as she felt herself wanting to come, again. This time she tried to stop it. He moaned. She felt dull pain in her fingers and pulled them away, seeing long scrapes on his skin.

Pollo stood, lifting her onto his shoulder. Before she could protest, he dropped her onto the bed. Pillows bounced onto the floor. He stood looking down at her body. She could see the hungry need in his eyes. Her own channel yearned to feel his penis fill it. He yanked his shirt over his head, then pulled both pants and underpants down in one swift motion. His cock jumped upward, dripping with pre-cum juices. She scrambled to her knees and reached for his penis but he stepped back out of her reach, a sly smile on his face. Bending over, he yanked off his shoes, tossing them far behind him. His socks, pants and underpants followed next. Then too fast for Esara to see, Pollo sprang forward, forcing her to fall backward.

He slid between her spread legs, his hands lifting her cheeks toward his penis. He inserted the head into her slick valley and pushed. Esara sighed, wanting all of him inside her at once. As he filled her lower body, Esara rolled her hips toward him. He filled her completely then began to pull back. She reached for his back, trying to make

him stop, but only got hold of his forearms as he lifted his body high. He slid back into her and lowered himself at the same time, their skin slick with sweat, rubbing together.

Matching his thrusts, Esara lifted her legs over his back bringing him as far inside her body as possible. She felt the pressure building again, traveling up her stomach and chest. His breathing came in gasps. Blood pounded in her head. The force moved into her head. She forgot to breathe. Her pelvic muscles jerked, milking his cock. Pollo shuddered once, twice, then dropped to her side.

As they caught their breaths, he pulled her close, his hands lightly caressing her arms, legs and stomach, whatever he could reach. She closed her eyes as he whispered. "This moment may be fleeting, but we will have many, many more of them."

Esara woke, her body sweating. Still feeling the contracting muscles of her dream orgasm, she whispered back, "We will have many more."

Chapter Eight

“Plan B.” Pollo said and moved away from the observation windows. The ship had been in geosynchronous orbit over Cough since its arrival a month ago so rescue had not been a difficult feat. Only the timing could have been better. Esara was still down there. “When do we go?”

Jack folded his arms and glanced at the makeshift bandage wrapped around Pollo’s upper arm. “Have you gone to the Medical Center yet?”

Pollo turned away from him. “I’m fine. Just a scratch. Besides won’t your boss’s favor to the Cintealions be growing ever larger, the longer we stay here?”

Jack sighed. “It is not my job to question what Ulric has to do to allow us to get our bounty. Something, or someone, must have done something amazing to convince him. He is generally a follow-the-rules type of guy. Go to the Medical Center now, Pollo. We’re not leaving until you’re seen to.”

Pollo gritted his teeth together. “She is down there still. What if Jez really is torturing her? What if Dolon was right about Jez and the size of his...his...thing and he’s hurting her right now or what if she fights back like she will and he gets angry and...”

“And you could be getting yourself upset over nothing,” Jack said. “We all saw the way Jez looked at her. He worships her. I don’t think he’ll hurt her any more than you would. Now, go to the Medical Center so we can get Plan B in motion.”

Pollo heaved a huge sigh and pushed off from the ledge. He crossed the floor in a few giant strides. He didn’t believe Jack for a minute. Jez was known to use the women servants and the women had always been sheltered after their time with him so he had never really heard any rumors about Jez or the size of his manhood. Maybe Dolon had just said that to drive him crazy. The door slid open and he turned to the left.

And if Dolon had lied then what plans did he have for Esara? Dolon believed in the legend of the Seeker and Hammer, especially in the part that one cannot live without the other. Very much open to interpretation, Pollo knew both could live without the other. This was just a rumor spread so that off-worlders would leave them alone to live a peaceful life. So if Dolon became obsessed after killing Pollo, would he force Esara to bond with Jez, the logical choice? Or would he take her himself? Esara would not agree to either choice but especially not with her foster uncle. Incest was frowned upon in both their cultures. The only way she would accept him was if he erased her memory, again. What would be the effects of the drug if used a second time? And Dolon would make sure it took this time even if it meant brain damage. Pollo had to get back to her. He had to stop Dolon before he got to Esara. He stopped before the Medical Center door and started to turn back. The door slid open. Win placed a firm hand on his arm and pulled him in.

"Win, I'm fine. I should —"

"Pollo, there's someone who wants to speak to you."

"What?" he glanced around the brightly lit room. Four gurneys sat at strategic points. A fifth one had been curtained off at a far end and Win led Pollo to this one. Who? Who would be on this ship, wanting to talk to him?

"He's been waiting for you to get here," she said.

"Why didn't you tell me? I would've come sooner."

Win pulled back the curtain. An elderly man sat upon the gurney, his eyes pale and sunken in the dark, weathered skin of his face. A medical technician touched the man's hand. "He's here, now. Pollo." The eyes focused upon Pollo. Pollo's heart gave a jump and he grasped the man's hand, bent forward and held the man's hand, palm down, against his forehead.

"Sit, Pollo," the man said, his voice strong for one so old.

Pollo felt pressure behind his knees and glanced to see Win holding onto the back of a chair. He sat but still held onto the man's hand. Win and the med tech backed out of the area. Win drew the curtain closed for privacy.

"I thought you were dead, Oxam," Pollo said.

"So you do recognize me?"

"You have the same eyes as your brother."

"Ah... And how is my brother?"

"Healthy. He is here. Do you not want to see him?"

"No, not yet. I needed to see you first." Oxam reached down the inside of his shirt and pulled out a long chain. On the end was a small, blue stone.

"Is that..." Pollo released Oxam's hand and reached for it.

Oxam grabbed Pollo's wrist. "Yes, it is the First. I cannot give it to you until she has touched it. You know this to be true."

Pollo nodded, transfixed by the stone. Still he wanted to touch it. Feel its smooth edges. He wondered if it was warm or cool. He leaned back in the chair. To touch it without the Seeker's guidance would be suicide. Only she could control the stone's power. Through the Seeker, the stone would recognize its guardian. Until then, the stone belonged to Oxam.

"Your brother will be happy to see you return from your exile," Pollo said, trying to get his mind off the stone. Even when he looked away, the stone's image hung before his eyes, like the sun when he looked at it too long.

"After my Seeker passed on, I felt lost. Our people did not need me anymore. They were happy and well settled," Oxam's eyes looked distantly out of the window into space. "I had never been off planet. I knew I had been fortunate to outlive my love so I went exploring."

"Sixty years is a lot of time to explore."

Oxam chuckled. "There are many lands to see. Many people to meet. Not all as bad as Dolon Gerardis." He looked back at Pollo.

Pollo frowned at the reminder. "Did you hire the bounty hunters?"

Oxam nodded. "Myself and others."

"Why have you taken so long to arrest him? It's been over a decade."

"We waited until Esara began to show the signs. You see, being a Seeker is in her genetic makeup. My brother first saw the signs when she was a little girl."

"But don't you normally take a Seeker into seclusion?"

Oxam nodded. "We couldn't risk drawing attention to her. The community decided to keep her identity a secret and let her grow up with all the other girls. Besides, she had found herself a doting bodyguard." Pollo looked away, feeling heat rise in his face. Had he been that obvious? "We didn't think she needed much more protection than you."

"And when Dolon tried to buy her from her parents?" Pollo remembered. "Why didn't you take her then?"

"We thought she was safe still," Oxam confessed. "Not until Dolon attacked the community did we know we were wrong. When scouts from the other communities finally got there, they found everyone dead. Suspicion fell upon the Gerardis estate. Oxar got himself hired as Dolon's Head of House so he could watch over you two. He realized quickly that your memories had been erased. It took nearly ten years to find the antidote."

"Just in time too."

"She had stopped being able to fix things, hadn't she?"

Pollo nodded. "I could feel her growing frustration. I thought it was my own."

"Your empathy never left you, Pollo. You still felt what she felt."

"And then I was sent away."

"Not a good thing. Her body began to fail without you."

“And the poison?”

“Oxar didn’t know about it until it was too late. Again, to take her off it would’ve sent her into severe withdrawal. That was why we had to hire them.” Oxam waved his hand toward the end of his bed but Pollo knew what he meant. “They have the best medical facilities money could buy. And the best medical personnel. We had to make sure she lived. The planet needs her. The zuritaa stones need to be put into rapture, again.”

Pollo started to stand but Oxam pulled him close, grabbing his hand. He tried to pull away. “I have to get back to her.”

“I know.” Oxam grasped the stone in his other hand. His body jerked. Pollo’s mind filled with a bright blue light. He closed his eyes against a light that could not be extinguished. Oxam’s voice came from within his mind. “She is still alive. There is another trying to help her. He is of the blood but he does not know it. His life is in danger while he is near her. But he is compelled to stay by her side. I see his death. It is not long in coming. Esara too. I see her... An explosion. Fire raining down upon her. She...”

Pollo opened his eyes. Oxam released his hand. “That is all.”

“When?” Pollo stood.

“Soon. Go now.”

* * * * *

As the sun rose, Esara could finally move her body. Speaking took a little more effort but the doctor signaled her to be silent, anyway. He pointed down the hallway. She nodded understanding. No need to wake Dolon. He would just complicate matters. She pointed downward. The doctor shook his head. He pointed out the window toward the landing pad. She shook her head and pointed down with a quick, jerking motion. Her mind was made up. The doctor looked out of the window wistfully then nodded in agreement. The women and children were coming too.

The doctor handed her some clothing then turned his back. Esara nearly laughed. He had applied the salve to her naked body just a few hours ago and now he was showing some propriety. She glanced at him and noticed he was strangely attractive. Even though he had the pale skin of the mine owners, he had the same bone structure as Pollo—high cheekbones, straight thin nose and a square chin. She thought his attractiveness strange because she'd never considered herself attracted to anyone else but Pollo. By helping her now, the doctor had made an enemy of Dolon. He would be hunted down and killed. He would have to come live in their community in order to be safe, she knew. She would speak to him later.

Pulling on her pants and then a sweater, Esara felt strangely alive. Such a strange feeling to have considering Pollo was dead. Or at least, Dolon had said he was dead. But he had lied to her before. Not until she saw Pollo's body would she believe he was gone.

Carrying her shoes in her hands, Esara touched the doctor's arm to signal she was ready to go. He opened the door a little, peeked out then signaled her to follow. The hallway was empty. Esara could hear Dolon's faint snores at the far end.

The doctor stretched out over the banister but didn't see or hear any movement below so they tiptoed down the stairs. Even at the foyer, the house seemed strangely silent. Had they caught the guards sleeping? The sun had risen high enough to start warming the house. They would surely notice the increased heat soon and awaken. The doctor noticed the silence too and he looked at her. She shrugged and pointed toward the back of the house and down. He nodded. Better to not push their luck and keep moving.

As they rounded the corner to the kitchen, Esara glanced out the window. Then she grabbed the doctor's arm and made him look. Several more hovercrafts had landed on the trail. Soldiers marched out to meet the hovercrafts. As the first hovercraft landed, the door popped open and more soldiers spilled out. So it was a changing of the guard.

Esara and the doctor knew they had very little time. They dashed down the stairs, not bothering to mask their footsteps.

Esara tried the second door where she knew the women were being held. It was locked. The doctor pushed her out of the way. He had picked up a metal pry bar from the cold cellar and shoved it between the door handle and frame. With one push, the door sprang open. Esara heard gasps but she stuck her head in the door. "Come quickly. Out to the landing pad. We're leaving."

The women and children ran from the room and up the stairs. The doctor led them out. Esara followed to the front door. The front path would take them away from the back trail, around the servants' houses and out to the landing pad. They would never be seen if they kept the few bushes between them and the soldiers.

Esara closed the basement door behind and then hurried to catch up, closing the front door too. No sense giving Dolon any idea which door they had used. As she spun around, her hair caught and she fell back onto the porch. A dark boot fell upon her throat cutting off her air supply. She glanced up into Dolon's reddened face. Fury made him push down until spots floated before her eyes. She grabbed at his leg, trying to pull it off.

"Uncle, please," she managed to croak.

He tilted his head and released the pressure ever so slightly. "What did you say?"

"Please, Dolon," she said, letting her hands drop to the floor by her head in a gesture of submission. "Please let me up."

He removed his boot and allowed her to slowly stand. He raised a gun toward her stomach. A breeze blew his hair into his eyes and he turned slightly to put it to his back.

"Dolon, don't hurt her," the doctor spoke behind her. She heard the porch stairs creak.

"Leave me," she said over her shoulder. "I'll be staying."

Dolon smirked and leaned to the side. "Seems your attempt to save her has been fruitless." And he fired.

"No!" Esara spun around in time to see the doctor fall. She dashed to his side, smelling burning skin. A small hole had formed just below his heart. His empty eyes stared at the sky. Dust rose from the driveway in a small cloud and dropped, gently blanketing his face. She looked up at Dolon and snarled. "You didn't have to kill him."

Dolon pointed the gun at her head. "Yes, I did. He disobeyed me."

She lunged at him, hoping to take him at the knees but he sidestepped at the last moment. She skidded across the porch, landing against the front door. He reached down and picked her up by her sweater. Holding her against the wall of the house, he glanced around. The soldiers had run to the front of the house to see what the commotion had been. Esara only saw a mass of blue uniforms. The wind had whipped up twist devils. She felt sand stinging her unprotected skin.

"Sir?" one of the soldiers spoke, breathlessly. "Sir, do you need some assistance?"

Dolon tilted his head as if thinking. "What do you think, Esara, do I need some assistance?"

She looked at him blankly. Her eyes began to water from the wind.

He shook her roughly, her head banging on the wall then jammed her up against it, again. Her head rang. "Do I need some help with you?"

She shook her head. "No. I'll do anything..."

"Sir, we can take her to one of the houses. Lock her in."

"Would you like that, Esara? To be locked up. By those men? Available to them at any time, night or day?"

"Sir..." the voice came low and threatening as if disgusted. His voice had a familiar tone to it.

Esara glanced their way. Over twenty men stood on the grounds. Probably more out behind the house.

"I wonder what it would be like to bond with so many? How about it? You would have your own army of Hammers."

Her blood chilled. She felt sick. She shook her head. The wind rattled at the porch's floor boards.

"Or is that not how it works? Only one, eh?"

She nodded weakly. He raised the gun and stuck it in her stomach. She felt the edge dig in just beneath her ribs.

"Sir, we'll take her now." The soldier had come onto the porch. Esara could see his face. His eyes looked familiar.

"Stand down, soldier," Dolon said. "I have everything in hand here."

Esara saw a second soldier following close behind the first. This one seemed more slim than the other. More shapely, more feminine.

"No, sir," he said, "We cannot allow this..." He reached out and put a hand on Dolon's shoulder. Suddenly, he yanked him away from Esara, grabbing the gun at the same time. The other soldier grabbed Esara as she fell to the floor, pulling her away from Dolon's outstretched hands.

Esara tried to pull away but the soldier held her fast. Removing his helmet, the soldier said, "It's all over now, Esara."

Startled, she looked into the soldier's face. Win stared back at her. The air stilled.

"Happy to see us?" Jack said, fastening handcuffs to Dolon's wrists.

Esara hugged Win, laughing. "And Pollo?"

"Very much alive," Win said. "He's helping to load the servants onto the hovercrafts."

Esara ran from the porch to the landing pads where three hovercrafts sat. Pollo stood outside the middle one, helping the male servants to get on board. She called out to him and waved. If it wasn't for the ditch separating them, she would have run to him. He waved back then ducked inside.

Jack had given Dolon to the real soldiers and they took him to the farthest hovercraft. Then Jack joined Win and Esara at the first one and ushered them on board. The women and children had already been crammed on board, so Esara crouched down on the floor near the door. As Jack and Win took the pilot seats and started up the engine, Esara stared at the second craft's windows, imagining she could see Pollo looking out at her, waving to her, smiling and laughing.

His hovercraft lifted off, a little jerky and settled in the air. She laughed thinking he wouldn't like the turbulence. She could see the third craft beneath. It seemed the soldiers were taking their time loading Dolon on to it.

First a bright light blinded her then the shock wave knocked her down. The second hovercraft became engulfed in a ball of light. Esara scrambled to her feet and ran across the landing pad, screaming Pollo's name.

Chapter Nine

Burning debris dropped from the sky all around Esara. Her feet pounded on the hardened sand platform. The hovercraft craft slammed into the ground, its shell split at the roof and peeled open to reveal an empty interior. Every bit of matter had been evaporated in the explosion. Only metal poles stood like skeleton remains. Esara noted all of this in her shocked mind. Nothing organic remained. Nothing. No one.

She skidded to a stop at the edge of the landing platform. Again, the rational part of her mind registered the five meter drop that separated her from the next platform and the fact she wouldn't make the jump without breaking a leg or worse. She heard the heavy breathing too late. A massive arm wrapped itself around her torso and she felt herself lifted up and swung away from the edge.

"No!" She hit and scratched at the arm that held her so tight. "Jack, let me go. I can fix it."

He merely grunted in response. She tried kicking his legs, his knees, his crotch, anything but he kept her legs swung to the side, away from any vital body part as he carried her back to the hovercraft. Then she saw Dolon Gerardis standing on the far side of the remaining hovercraft. He too, looked shocked, then as he looked across the platforms and their eyes met, a slow satisfied smile crept onto his face.

"Bastard!" she screamed. "Jack put me down. He did it. Dolon did it. I have to kill him."

"He will face justice, Esara," Jack grunted as he lifted her higher on his hip.

"No, no more. The deal is off. I will pay you twice as much. Just don't take him off this planet."

"No, Esara. You know I can't risk you getting hurt. You're too important."

"Jack, put me down." She felt herself being lowered and knew as soon as his grip loosened, she'd run, leap across the divides and kill Dolon with her bare hands. Jack dropped her into a now-vacated seat. Holding her down with his hand on her chest, he snapped the safety harness into place.

"Stay or I will put up a force field to keep you in place."

Esara glared at him. He didn't remove his hand until the hovercraft's door lowered and locked into place. In the dim interior, she suddenly realized what had happened. As Jack removed his hand, she felt an emptiness. Half her soul had been ripped from her body. She tried to figure out if she could have been wrong. She had seen Pollo enter the other hovercraft. She had not seen him leave. Could he have left without her seeing? She looked up at Jack.

"Why?" the question came out in her suddenly weary voice.

Jack crouched down in front, placed a hand on each of her knees, his mouth moving but no words coming out. His face was etched in pain. His bright blue eyes, the ones she had been charmed with at dinner, shone with tears of frustration. He stopped trying to speak, mindlessly patted her knees, stood and made his way to the cockpit. Esara swallowed tears. Pollo was dead. She glanced about the cabin. The other women servants had made it. No one else was missing. Just Pollo and the male servants. They were alone and looked just as shocked as Esara felt. They had lost husbands, sons and fathers too. How could this have happened?

The hovercraft rocked as it lifted off the platform. Her head bounced off the shoulder beside her. She looked up and recognized Mindy, one of the cooks.

"Where are we going?" Mindy asked, her voice barely louder than the hovercraft's engines.

Esara glanced at the cockpit. The hunters had never told her where the safe place was located. Now, she began to have her doubts. Jack and Win, the bounty hunters, known to do anything for the right amount of money, could not be trusted. She glanced around the cabin, again. Over thirty of the women had been jammed into the

hovercraft. All were skilled and worth a lot of money on the slave market. Jack had even said, she, herself, was “too important to risk getting hurt”. He probably had meant too valuable.

Pollo was dead. The thought kept running through her mind. She felt grief but also fear. The legend said that the Seeker cannot live without the Hammer. Why was she still alive? Should she not have collapsed by now? Dead of a broken heart or whatever it was that made heroines die? A hand on her leg jerked her back to the cabin. One of the little girls, Kate, had crawled over to sit on her feet. She looked up at Esara with pleading, fearful eyes. Esara made up her mind. If she was living on borrowed time, then she would act. She had nothing to lose now except the lives of her friends. She could at least see they were safe.

She slowly unsnapped the safety harness buckle and shifted forward in her seat. Reaching down, she picked up Kate and replaced her in the seat, so if anyone glanced back, they would see only full seats. Then she sidled forward to the cabin, keeping in the shadows along the seats, all the while looking for anything that could be used as a weapon.

Jack and Win both worked at piloting the hovercraft, faces forward. They appeared to not be too worried about their passengers. Neither had put up the barrier that kept criminals out of the cockpit. Finding nothing that would be even remotely convincing as a weapon, Esara resigned herself to the fact she might have to knock one of them out and fake the other with a handle or something else gun-like. Then she noticed Jack had not bothered to snap closed the leather flap of his shoulder holster. And the way he sat, bent slightly forward to watch the instrument panel, left the butt of his gun protruding. She'd have to move fast. They'd see her in their peripheral vision as she moved forward. She'd have only one chance.

Taking in a deep breath to steady her shaking hands, Esara leapt forward, stumbled a little on the matted floor, flung herself at Jack's chair and grabbed for his gun. Her

hand felt cold metal and she yanked the gun back. Jack turned his head quickly and looked at her, shocked.

"What the —" Win said, half rising out of her chair.

Esara waved the gun at Win, jerking it toward her chair. She sat down, slowly.

"Esara, don't do this," Jack said.

"Where are you taking us?"

"To the safe place just like we planned."

"Well, plans have changed."

"Please, Esara, you must trust us."

"You're going to drop us off where I say and then you're going to leave." She glanced out the window. They were flying low past Mine Fourteen, heading south. They'd skirt the Lime Mountains in a few minutes. She could take the women into the caves and lead them to the new zuritaa vein she had found as a child. There they could build a new community. She would have done her job.

"Keep on your heading. South."

"I guess the legend was wrong." Jack turned around, settling back into his chair.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't die, after all."

Esara remained silent. Borrowed time, she thought.

"Or maybe you didn't love him as much as you thought. Or he didn't love you."

"Jack, you failed in your mission. One of us is only alive now. Do you think you can sell me before I die? Who do you think will buy me knowing I am without the Hammer?"

"Money is not the only reason we do this."

Esara sniffed. "It seems to be an appropriate motivator in this case."

She saw the distant arch of Mine Fifteen. "Turn two degrees east now." Win made the adjustment.

"Where are we going?" Jack asked.

"Don't worry. We'll let you go. You'll be able to collect your payment for Dolon all the same."

The Lime Mountains rose in the distance.

"Esara, what made you suspicious of us?"

She was right. "Just fly."

"Nothing has changed. We're supposed to drop you off at the prearranged place."

"Tell that to Pollo." Esara felt the grief building up in her chest. She swallowed hard so as not to choke.

Suddenly weary, she leaned against the edge of the doorway. Her arm drooped, the gun hung at her side. She knew they would notice but if they even twitched in her direction she could raise the gun high enough to shoot their feet or legs before they disabled her. They flew in silence until the cliffs loomed high above the hovercraft's windows. She pointed to a ledge beneath a dark spot on the wall. It looked about as good as any other spot. It even felt right.

"Land there."

In a few minutes of perching on the ledge, the women had exited the hovercraft. Esara watched as they vanished into the dark tunnel. One stopped to wait for her but Esara waved her on saying she'll be along soon. When she had disappeared, Esara turned back to Jack. She turned the gun around and held it out to him. As Jack took back his gun, she sat down on an empty seat.

"I suppose what I have done is against the law," she said. "Kidnapping. Threatening you. And you'll come looking for me in time too."

"Are you turning yourself in?" Jack asked.

Esara looked at them. "Yes, I am."

"But what good is a corpse to us?" Win asked.

"I'd rather not have this worry. Let's go."

"Well, we can't."

"Why is that?"

"We're waiting for someone."

She glanced out the still-open hatch. "Who?" *More treachery?*

A shadow moved in the distant tunnel. Running. Legs emerging into the sunshine. Then a body. Of a ghost.

Pollo jumped into the hovercraft and yanked her into his arms. "Why didn't you come with the others? I thought..."

"She was too busy turning herself in," Jack said, humor in his voice.

"I saw you die." Esara placed both hands on either side of his head and looked deep into his shiny black eyes. Tears spilled out of them and she realized she too, was crying.

"A hologram. If I died right in front of Dolon, then he'd know you would die and he'd never send anyone to come looking for us."

"You could've told me."

"We needed your true reaction. I am so sorry," Win said.

"But I thought..." she looked at Jack and Win. "I was prepared to kill you."

Jack huffed and waved at her. "I knew you would never fire. Not after what you've done for us. Besides the gun was set on stun. Uh, shall we?" He looked at Pollo.

"I think it's time Esara sees what she has created," Pollo said, "But first there is something very important that needs to be done." Pollo lowered his head and kissed Esara full on the lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her hands in his hair and kissed him back forcefully. His arms travelled around her back, pulling her tightly against him so that she could feel his cock hardening. "We need to feel complete, once again."

The hovercraft rocked beneath their feet and they fell in a heap on the floor, Esara on top. She dropped her legs on either side of his hips. He grasped her buttocks and spread them so she cradled his erection. Unable to bear the feel of him through their clothing, she unsnapped his pants and freed his penis. Then wrenching off her pants, she settled over the stem and pushed herself down until he filled her. She began to rock back and forth.

"I do hope they fly slowly," Esara said as Pollo reached up to grab her breasts. He didn't seem to mind the fabric covering. In fact, the roughness raking over her nipples made her more excited.

He smiled. "Well, at least you haven't stripped us both completely naked."

"If I had the time...oh!" A wave began to build in her stomach. She forgot what she was about to say.

Pollo's hands dropped to her legs. He bent up to kiss her neck, placing one hand behind her back. Esara felt his other hand touch her clit. He parted her fleshy lips and began to massage in circles. The wave blossomed in her stomach. Pollo suddenly rolled her onto her back. He began to pump, slamming his balls against the backs of her legs. She felt the swell build and then explode in her head. He pumped one last time, then collapsed on his side, holding her close. A second later, the hovercraft jarred to a stop.

They hastily stood and rearranged their clothing. When they were decently attired, Jack opened the hovercraft door. A loud cheer echoed as Esara and Pollo stepped out. They were immediately surrounded by friends. Oxar forced his way in to the crowd, crying, "Give them some breathing space."

As the people moved aside, Esara noticed the hovercraft had landed inside the mountain. The other hovercraft sat to the rear.

"Before we build our new community," Oxar called out to the group, pausing until they became silent, "we need the Seeker and the Hammer to find The Way of Peace."

Esara looked at him, sudden panic making her feel sick. She had never before had to search for the zuritaa stones. And so many people here. She couldn't concentrate. The

air had left the cavern. She found herself gasping. She tried to step back but came up against something hard.

“Remember when we were young?” Pollo whispered in her ear.

At first, she shook her head. Her memory had gone blank, again.

“You and I. The bird. We followed it in here. You kept calling it ‘Tantu’.”

A gasp went up from the crowd. Esara nodded. Yes, she did remember. The large bird had swooped down from the sky, circled around them three times as they stood out in the desert, then disappeared into the tunnel. She had run after it, mimicking its cry of “Tantu”. Pollo had followed her in and that was when they discovered the rounded interior. The bird had flown to the far end and perched on a ledge. She had run up to it, stopping only when she was close enough to touch its white breast.

Pollo held her hand and led her to the other side. Already, she could feel something drawing her close. The perch still remained. “He had sat here.”

“Then what did you do?” Pollo said.

“I touched the bird.”

“And?”

She stepped back, shaking her head. “I can’t do it. The bird’s not here. I need the bird.”

Her last few words became drowned out as a roar filled the cavern. They all looked up as a third hovercraft descended from the sky. It landed beside the other two hovercrafts. The door slid open and two men emerged. Most noticeable on the first man was his black, shoulder-length hair. As he scanned the crowd, his coal colored eyes took in everything in a cold, intelligent way. Jack approached him as he stepped down from the hovercraft. They spoke a few words, then turned back to help the second man step down.

Oxar was already pushing his way through the crowd. He swept up the second man in a hug that lifted him off his feet. Esara saw the similarities between the two men

and knew she looked at the exiled Oxam, brother of Oxar. The crowd held back, unable to believe that the legend had returned home. Esara stood in awe. She had heard all about him. He had been a Hammer once. His Seeker had died and he had vanished. They had thought he had died too. She didn't know how many more resurrected ghosts she could handle today.

Oxam pulled away from his brother, his eyes scanning the crowd. He found her quickly, his eyes filling with recognition even though they had never met before. He strode toward her, his robes spreading out behind him as if he might take flight at any moment. He stopped just in front of her and glanced over her head. She felt Pollo tense.

"I am in most honorable company," he said and bowed his head.

"We are honored to have you here." Pollo spoke, his voice deep, reflecting the ancient intonations elders would use when telling stories.

Oxam lifted his head and looked directly at Esara. He reached down the front of his robe. "If the Seeker will allow, I must return a token." He began to withdraw a long chain. "This belonged to my beloved. And to all the Seekers before her. It has been my duty to keep it safe until you were ready." The string ended in a glittering blue stone.

Esara gasped. Oxam held the stone high in the air so that the sunshine might make it glitter and dance and so that all would witness the transference. "This is the First. The oldest. The mother of all zuritaas. It belongs to the Seeker. It is for the Hammer to protect." He placed the necklace around Esara's neck.

She felt a sudden great weight. Her legs buckled. She couldn't breathe. Her heart fluttered in her chest. Pollo caught her body beneath her arms, his hands holding her upright, his fingers beneath her breasts. Her pounding heart settled to a slow steady rhythm and she could draw in a deep breath. Her legs strengthened.

Oxam turned to the crowd, his arms spread, his robe flapping in the windless cavern. "My people, you have chosen wisely. They both have the strength to survive the zuritaa stone's power."

A great cheer rose up, echoing off the rock walls. Esara felt the vibrations deep within her body. She also felt a warmth filling her chest from Pollo's touch. She turned back to the stone ledge, placed both hands upon it and closed her eyes. A hush fell across the crowd. From the sand beneath her feet, she felt a different vibration. Almost like that of a wind moving the grains of sand across her skin, it spread out from her feet, up the wall to her hands where it tickled her palms. She laughed out loud.

Esara opened her eyes, wanting to see what made her hands so sensitive and instead a blue light filled her sight. She could still see everything clearly but with a blue hue. She heard people gasping behind her. Someone started singing. Pollo turned her around so she could see blue light had filled the cavern. The sand glowed blue. The shadows had become dark blue. Even the hovercrafts glowed with a blue light.

"We have found our home," Pollo said, his dark eyes glowing with a bright blue light.

"And ourselves," Esara reached up and kissed him. He kissed her back, his hand travelling across her body, twisting her around and crushing her to him.

About the Author

Lee splits her time between living in a small town in southwestern Ontario, Canada, and at her cottage on the Lake Huron side of the Bruce Peninsula, where the rugged landscape is the inspiration for her fantasy-based writing. When she is not lost in creative thought, she works as a medical secretary in a health center for a major automotive manufacturer.

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