



# *The Sarran Plague*

"Thirsty," she whispered. Then a strong, gentle hand lifted Anya's head. She nuzzled closer, breathing deeply of fresh linen, vanilla, and man—definitely man.

"Drink, Pa Mici, drink," a deep basso voice rumbled.

Anya's eye caught a snapshot of dark blue eyes, tousled midnight black hair. A thin white scar traced along the outline of a square jaw. Her vision was fuzzy around the edges. The hair on his muscled arm tickled across her back. His palm cupped the nape of her neck, supporting her head. The thumb stroked downward. She trembled, leaning into the light caress.

The thick fingers of his other hand curved around a filigreed silver tumbler with maroon and gold swirls.

"Please, thirsty," Anya mumbled as her lips pursed round the proffered straw.

"Careful, Pa Mici, lips that shape beg a kiss," the deep voice murmured.

The juice flowed through her mouth and down her throat, easing the dryness. Voices in her mind, one was here, the basso. The other, a baritone, was close by. The vibrations sang sweet music to her sex. Anya's skin flushed rose. She reached up and traced a finger along the thin scar.

"Your skin is exquisite, Pa Mici. Do you feel us yet?" His soft, mobile lips swept light kisses across her cheek and nibbled at the corner of her mouth.

"Name?" she insisted, sticking out her lower lip, her mouth in moue.

"Jonal. Rest now," the voice soothed.

"'Tis such a good dream," Anya whispered, as she grabbed his arm. "Please, don't make me wake up."

*A.C. Katt*

Sarran Plague © 2008 by AC Katt

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

An Eternal Press Production

Eternal Press  
206 - 6059 Pandora St.  
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada,  
V5B 1M4

To order additional copies of this book, contact: [www.eternalpress.ca](http://www.eternalpress.ca)

Cover Art © 2008 by Shirley Burnette  
Edited by Foery K. MacDonell  
Copyedited by Sherri Good  
Layout and Book Production by Ally Robertson

eBook ISBN: 978-1-926647-67-8  
Print ISBN: 978-1-926647-75-3

First eBook Edition \* April 2009  
First Print Edition \* April 2009

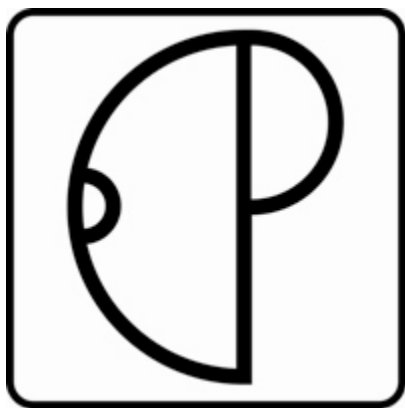
Production by Eternal Press  
The United States of America.



*The Sarran Plague*

# *The Sarran Plague*

*A.C. Katt*



## *Dedication:*

*To Wendy, Loukie and Mychael, and L.J., each of whom helped along the way. But most of all, to my loving husband, who put up with the creative process and cared enough to listen.*

## *Acknowledgements:*

CNN is a subsidiary of Time Warner.

## *Chapter One*

*A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.*  
- Joseph Stalin

*Earth, July 12th*

Twenty-six-year-old pediatric resident, Anya Forrest, laid alone in Manhattan General Medical Center ICU. Her reddish blond hair hung limply about her face. Only her icy blue eyes were visible under the respirator mask. Her heart and liver were failing, and her skin had acquired the same bluish-yellow tinge as the urine stain on the wall. Anya was terminal. Four weeks ago, she should have been moved to a hospice—a sunny, peaceful place to die. But there were too many patients and too few staff to give palliative care. Therefore, Anya stayed in ICU, hypnotized by the plip-plop of the IVs and lulled by a cacophony of digital breath. The pain was intense. She knew she wasn't going to make it when Mark Stern, the Chief of Staff, had stopped by her bed and asked if she needed anything. That was three days ago, when she could still speak.

She remembered how it began. It was the Fourth of July. She had taken a break and joined some of the staff on the hospital roof to watch the fireworks...

\*\*\*\*

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435: Barren Trion, Rising 92*  
*Earth, July 4th, eight days before*

Fireworks filled the night sky across the United States of America. It was Independence Day. Aerial shells burst, scattering shooting stars in red, then white and blue. Layer cakes—combinations of sandwiched shells— sent up a rainbow of colors to burst in the sky. Peonies, threaded stars of fire and chrysanthemums, peonies with tails and willows, lit the night sky. Roman candles sent up arcs of shooting stars. There were waterfalls, fountains, and specials designed to imitate the planets of the solar system. Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn exploded into the sky. The finale was Blue Earth—triple rocket fountains surrounded the rotating sphere, highlighting this year's theme of environmental awareness.

Celebrants spotted a magnificent explosion in the upper atmosphere. They looked up at the fiery disk. It was a show-stopping display. Everyone agreed that green mist was an apropos finale, until, that is, they noticed it became a slimy oil-like substance on their skin. Breaking news headlines streamed across CNN. Banners shrieked from print. Talk shows spoke slime 24/7. Environmental groups expressed outrage. The EPA investigated, and Congress planned hearings. The executive branch had no comment.

It was a two-day media fest. Then the NYPD nabbed a serial killer on July 6th. Someone leaked photos of twenty-six naked women stacked like cord wood in a New York City townhouse basement. The killer was a local politico with DC connections. Some of the women were prominent socialites. The arresting officers appeared on all the morning shows. One network producer threw together a special series on American serial killers. Green slime slipped off the national radar screen, and America went back to business as usual.

Individuals in the three lettered agencies noted the official non-response. Information was on a need-to-know basis. It seemed no one needed to know. The rather curious story should have had longer legs. No UFO claims, no conspiracy theories, nothing on the airwaves. The guys in intelligence were very nervous. Analysts were information junkies. There was no information outside of the initial reports. In the aftermath the dots connected. By July 7th, the agencies still awaited the second shoe. It had to drop; it was a matter of when. As usual, the public had no clue.

The first cases hit the hospitals the evening of the seventh. The virus took forty-eight hours to incubate. Another twenty-four passed before

## *The Sarran Plague*

full onset of symptoms. On July 7th at 21:00 hours, hospitals became holding facilities. On July 21, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta provided the media with maps of the infected areas. Every state reported Plague, even Alaska and Hawaii. There was no time progression. No sunburst pattern to suggest an initial area of contamination. No case zero. It started everywhere, at once. No one asked questions. They were too busy trying to survive. Reports from CNN showed the rest of the planet in the same condition. No outside help was available to anyone. Everyone tried to save their own.

By the end of six weeks, fifty percent of the female population was infected. The CDC named it mixed immune response syndrome. The public called it the Plague. It was a virus, and symptoms varied. All known autoimmune diseases combined in strange variations. Lupus, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, mixed connective tissue disease, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, and diabetes marched in terrible lock step. The possible combinations were mind-boggling. The victims were all female.

The National Institutes of Health compiled statistics that linked Plague to ovulation. It ignored prepubescent, post menopausal and sterile women and struck only the fertile. Someone had manufactured the Plague. It underwent constant mutation. There was no apparent cure or treatment. Both NIH and CDC worked round the clock. Symptoms worsened as ovulation neared. Episodes, called flares, brought new symptoms, more pain. Each flare brought a patient closer to the brink. Women begged for death, which seemed, in some cases, preferable. The cycle worked rapidly in some, from health to near death, four days from exposure.

As women dropped dead, hospitals became understaffed. If there was a tech to take blood, there was no one to test it. Hospital labs ran with one or two male techs. Nurses came out of retirement. Governors mobilized the National Guard. The White House called in the Army and the Army Reserve. The federal government drafted all single men. Medical facilities returned women to their husbands or families for palliative care. Divorced men returned home to tend children. Patients with no family waited to die in medical facilities with little staff to treat them.

\*\*\*\*



To Anya, the hospital was home. She was an orphan. Upon leaving St. Brigit's, she had lived at or near the hospital since starting medical school. Aside from her cat, Tigger, she had no friends outside of the hospital. Before, Anya had been five-foot-six and small-framed and, at 150 pounds, a bit overweight. Now, the bed, blankets, sheets, and machines overwhelmed the shrunken nude body in the bed. Dr. Forrest's one vanity was that she had not cut her hair since childhood. At the orphanage, she had cried and fussed when the nuns tried to cut her hair. The only memory she had from before was of a soft-spoken woman brushing her hair. Anya refused to let it go. One young nun, Sister Rose, had taken pity. She'd taught Anya to braid and pin her hair to keep it neat. Sister Rose assured Anya if it was neat, it could be long. After that, she had pinned it up tightly.

Loosened, her hair flowed below her waist. It might have looked thicker if Anya spent money on hair products or cosmetics. She did not. St. Brigit's taught its students that frivolity was useless, so Anya bought her cosmetics, lotions, and hair products on sale at a drug chain, not caring much about hair type associated with any product. A better shampoo and a bit of conditioner would have produced a healthy, shining mane that would drive women into jealous snits and a man into instant lust, but Anya's life was busy with her studies and her patients. She had little money, few residents did. She brushed her hair for maintenance.

Her luxury was her orange and white tiger cat, Tigger. Tigger was the constant in her life, the only living being that was even close to knowing the real Anya. She had fallen in love with his huge paws and audacious personality when he was a kitten at a local shelter where she had gone to seek some undemanding company. Since she was an orphan, she had no friends from before college—orphans learned not to get too close. After she entered school, she had no time for socialization—she needed to study to keep up her grade point and retain her scholarship.

As a result, Anya had never been in love, she had never had sex. The nuns had been very specific, threatening terrible consequences, including disease and the devil—not necessarily in that order. As a physician, Anya knew that the act of love did not send someone into the devil's arms or to death's door. There was a voice in her head that said, *hold out for love*. Her virginity would be a gift to her lover; the only one she had to give. Someday hadn't come and Anya didn't want to be alone anymore, so she had gone looking for a safe companion and found a real friend.

Tigger knew all of her secrets; they had developed a language of sorts. He didn't care that she had to study or work long hours. As long as he had her lap when she returned and his kibble and toys while she was gone, Tigger was a happy cat. Every piece of clothing Anya owned, every piece of furniture, was covered in cat hair, however, since it was just the two of them in her small apartment, neither cared. She worried about him being all alone. What would happen to him without her?

Anya knew where she was. The sights, smells, and sounds said Manhattan General, and this was her hospital. Her skin texture was yellow and thick. She felt the rash move over her body in concert with the virus. Each patch of scaling skin was a prophecy of the next horror. She had not slipped into unconsciousness, although she longed for that state to shut down the bulldozers that danced on her bones. The pain was intense, despite the morphine drip. Her blood ran through her veins like acid. Her throat and mouth burned as if she had swallowed drain cleaner.

Anya's senses were hyper-aware. She heard the click of the monitors and muted alarms from the succession of medical equipment throughout the wing. She sensed the vibrations of the stretchers and gurneys as they whizzed by in the corridors and the heightened thump of soft-soled shoes running on vinyl floors. The intercom announced code after code with colors and numbers. She knew the language. The entire hospital was overwhelmed with too many cases and not enough beds or staff to tend them. Her textbooks had taught her the exact number of staff necessary per patient to run a safe and efficient ICU. Vitals not checked or charted by machine or staff told Anya more than shouted codes.

Manhattan General's policy dictated that human contact and interaction was essential to patient recovery, yet she only remembered Mark coming in to see her. He asked about Tigger and sent an orderly to take her keys to feed him and change his box.

The deadly rash snaked up her left breast. She felt the destruction of each cell, as it fell to the intruder. Her body had no reserves left to fight the virus. Pain ruled her mind and heart. Despite her oaths and her supposed strong moral fiber, she longed for the end. Tears ran down her blotchy cheeks, salt stinging her abraded skin. Her body was in constant spasm, not allowing even the slight respite of sleep. Her throat was parched and sore from both the respirator and her silent screams. There was no one for Anya; the tubes in her mouth muffled her sobs. She

would die alone, unloved by anyone, save an orange cat. She dare not close her eyes again; she did not want to go unto the dark alone.

*Wait...what was that*, voices murmured in her head. The conversation was muted, but intense and masculine. It was a buzz, a fly in her brain. Her path inescapable, she walked toward a blue light, yet the outline of the moon—no, three moons—at her back called her name causing her to stop, despite the light's gentle promise. But the buzz, she couldn't shake the buzz. She turned toward the moons. She heard the voices, closer now. Anya almost understood the words. The buzzing had ceased. Curiosity, one of her besetting sins, rooted her feet to the path. Forward was the blue light, pulling at her and promising peace; surrounding her on her left and right sides was the constant buzz of conversation, to her back were the strange moons and the pain.

She lifted her face toward the sky; the voices came down from the heavens. Tenderness bathed her body...her imagination escaped the tyranny of her innocence. Lust ran like a fresh breeze through her brain. She felt a masculine presence. *Two*, she thought. She felt gentle fingers brush against her nipples, and wet, soft kisses flowed across her collarbone to the back of her neck. And then, a bite. Both nipples pushed erect against the soft thin cotton of the hospital gown. Need, she needed. She felt the blood moving to her labia, as the lips engorged, becoming heavy. Opening outward, throbbing. Rational thought intruded on her arousal. *Anya, you're dying here, in pain, breathing your last. You're a physician. You know the score. What the heck is happening?*

The thought fled and all was sensation of hands and lips. Her body tensed, climbing, climbing the precipice, a burst of light came. It was white, blinding in her brain, her lower body pulsating in rhythm, leaving the hospital linens damp. It came—a whisper, a tendril of hope, and then a thought drifted into her consciousness. “We’re here, with you,” the voices said. “We are one, BondStirred; you will never be alone again.” The thought gave comfort even as she turned from the light and headed back to the pain.

\*\*\*\*

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9437: Phase 1, Barren Trion, Rising 100  
Earth July 12<sup>th</sup>*

## *The Sarran Plague*

Tonas, Prince of LightClan and co-Admiral of the Sarran Fleet stood quietly by the command console in the StarRoom—the Admirals’ ready room, adjacent to both the Admirals’ Quarters and the Bridge. Tension was evident in the line of his heavily muscled back and torso. At six-foot-nine, he was leaner than his BondMate. Tonas had broad shoulders. His movements were supple, tempered steel sheathed in grace and elegance. Hair the color and texture of sweet Rhine wine hung down his back. A black strip of Nathrian leather matching the boots that embraced brawny calves gathered it up in a queue.

The bulge between his thighs was evident in the Sarran flightsuit. Tonas looked well endowed, even for a Sarran. At rest, his package was merely impressive; fully erect, it reached well over his belted waist. Sarran clothing enhanced the race’s carnal attributes, and Tonas wore clothes especially well. All wore the standard-issue maroon flightsuits on this mission. They were uncertain of weather or custom at their destination. But Tonas’s flightsuit was crisp and unwrinkled after eight tines of continuous wear. The sharp uniform suggested a certain personal sense, a deliberation and precision that carried over to everything he did. The precise placement of the six-sided stars of rank bespoke his contemplative character. His voice soft, he weighed his words and decisions. His face was rugged and not traditionally handsome. However, when lit by a smile that put a silver glint in the shamrock green eyes, it was a face that, before his WarriorPairing ten cycles past, had left many a fem longing to see it up close and personal. Meeting Jonal had changed that. Once the two warriors formed their bond neither looked elsewhere.

Tonas did not fail often. When he did, all knew that there was no road not taken. He had captured the dirt blaster and forged his own. Despite Tonas and Jonal’s absorption in each other, and their mutual dedication to the Sarran cause, they yearned for their fem. The WarriorPair conducted relentless, meticulous, psychic scans for their fem on Sarran. In their ten cycles together, the pair had worked their way into the highest ranks of the admiralty and to Brightstar. They held the Command Cruiser of Sarran Fleet, but had not yet found the fem to fill their hearts.

So, Tonas practiced the virtue of patience, knowing as he always did that the Bonding would come in time, and he tried to instill patience in his fiery counterpart, Jonal. As they traveled back to Sarran after what they believed to be the final victory over the Zyptz, they had lain in each

other's arms, passions spent, whispering of the search to come. It was time, Tonas had said, time to comb the entire planet for that one fem who would make them whole, complete them. She would revel in the love and passion only they could give her; with them, she would be complete. With her, they would be whole.

On the Bridge for arrival at Sarran, their hopes turned ashen as they beheld their home. Streaks of green slime circled the living planet. The remains of the Zyptz Warrior Bird, Ipz, floated through space. That hollow, soulless message appeared on all subspace communication channels.

*Communication Console: Cycle 9432 Planting Trion, Rising 20*

*This is the Final Communication to the Humans from the Zyptz Cradles:*

*"Even now in your flush of victory, we have sown the seeds of your defeat. We have exterminated your future. We will watch your extinction with glee."*

*Supreme Leader Hanitz, Zyptz Invasion Force*

It was all hideously real. Not a tree, nor a wall, nor a building was out of place. But all the fems of mating age were dead, unclaimed, or part of a Triad; all were taken to the Goddess.

Tonas and Jonal had not coupled since that rising, almost as if denying their passion and joy in each other would bring back the future they had envisioned. The Sarran mourned, and the galaxy mourned with them.

After two cycles of hard work, the Alliance found a humanoid species that might ensure Sarran survival. They arrived at their destination, a beautiful blue planet its inhabitants called Earth. As they entered orbit, Tonas held some hope for the Sarran culture and people. Their future lay in the hands of the primitive race on the blue planet below.

The elders had debated. Could these primitive fems serve to anchor a Triad? They had at last agreed that these Earthen fems would be able restore the breeding stock of population. They needed to rebuild their people, so the current generation could at least patch their broken souls with the hope that their sons would know true Triad, even if they could not. However, before the prize, came the trust of a planet new to the Galactic Alliances and suffering from a Zyptz attack. The planet's governments had yet to let the citizens know the source of the plague that had circled their world. The only reason the Earthlings had not tried to knock them from the skies—not that they could with their primitive weaponry—was the antidote and vaccine that had been supplied on first contact to the most powerful and prosperous of the Earthen nation

states. They were in this leader's White House to use at his discretion. It had worked on test subjects. Now Tonas and Jonal danced the delicate minuet of negotiation.

The Leader needed the vaccine and antidote to save his population. He and his advisers also wanted advantage to maintain their country's position as top predator in their violent world, a world the Leader was working to change. Tonas and Jonal bargained for the survival of their own race. The Sarrans had the vaccine, the antidote, and the technology for FTLs (Faster Than Light Speed) travel. The Admirals held the winning hand, but it was necessary to play the game to the end. They tensed, anticipating the response to their last offer. The problematic issue was the trade off. Some of the Earthen fems had already unknowingly been BondStirred by Sarran WarriorPairs. It was not something the Sarrans planned, it just happened. One of the pairs affected were the Admirals. The Alliance Scientists were correct. The Earthen fems were a match for the Sarrans. However, joy was short-lived for Tonas and Jonal, their connection to their fem told them she was dying. With heavy hearts, Tonas and Jonal asked to make their plea in person and planet-wide.

The White House Leader insisted on secrecy. He was afraid that his people would react with fear and violence. The Americans explained that a Triad in their culture was both a homosexual and polygamous liaison. These types of liaisons were considered indecent and immoral on most of the planet. Some of the population, the Leader explained, would react as if the women were being sold into slavery.

The Sarrans were in shock. The Sarran fem was given every care. She was the center of her BondPair's universe, they explained. But on this issue, the Americans would not budge. America was the only big nation on the planet Earth still in control after the plague hit. Smaller nation states were still in control of their populace, according to Sarran reports from the ground, but with the smaller populations, the fems taken would be missed.

Jonal ran his fingers through his hair. The tousled black curls just touched his shoulders. His lightly tanned complexion sported visible stubble crossing the edge of his jaw, easing around his soft lips, suggesting a heavy beard despite a recent shave. At six-foot-seven, he was shorter than Tonas, but wider through the shoulder and solid. Jonal was granite to Tonas's steel. Massive muscle definition rippled across his shoulders and pecs, down to his washboard abs and flat stomach. His

maroon flightsuit, made of Nathrian leather, pulled tight across his cock and balls. Although not as long as Tonas's member, Jonal's cock was wide, the plum-colored tip a fist in heat. Knee-high black boots of the same subtle material were fitted to hard calf muscles. Navy eyes flecked with silver flashed with impatience, barely restrained anger and passion.

That touch on his mind had awakened him from the robotic state he had assumed since the Ipz. He burned with returning hope, flinging back and forth through the talks from despair to hope again. He now knew the elders were wrong—the Earthen fems could Bond.

As he paced the room along the star table, the tic in his jaw throbbed, stretching the line of a thin scar down the right side of his face. It was a tic his BondMate knew well, and it betrayed his impatience. The scar transformed Jonal's face from cold beauty to vibrant male. But unlike his BondMate, he paid little attention to his appearance. His suit, although impeccable in tailoring, was rumpled and a bit unkept. Though he could be preternaturally still in battle mode and on the Bridge, here in the StarRoom, he showed his fire. Jonal was an instinctual Commander, sizing up situations and acting in parsecs of receiving input. He and Tonas were the ideal command team. They balanced each other perfectly. Tonas was used to his pacing. In more light-hearted moments, Tonas had teased him about wearing a rut in the floor around the table where Jonal had paced their way through the Zyptz War. Jonal had not paced since they saw the wreckage of the Ipz on Sarran.

"Tonas, don't they understand their fems and their planet are doomed unless they take what we offer? Don't they care about their people or ours?" Jonal shouted to the blond giant, banging the table for emphasis. He turned, looking at his Bonded, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. "How do you negotiate terms for what is given away?"

"Our Elders sprung to ill-founded conclusions, Tonas." Jonal brushed his hair back from his face. His intense frustration was evident in his clenched teeth.

"They had insufficient data to make a sound working theory," Tonas explained.

Jonal shouted, "Our fem endures, suffering, below our boots. The longer we linger over this continent, the more intense the song that stirs our Bond. Anya is ours. We recognize her as ours. The Bond summons. Primitive or not, when our fem *needs*, we provide." Jonal's emotional anguish had merged with the siren song of fem to WarriorPair. His

## *The Sarran Plague*

organ pressed against the fine leather of his flightsuit. For the first time in three cycles, passion flamed. He swayed from lust to intense pain. "The sewer sucker below negotiates duplicity while sentient life lies in misery."

Tonas, Prince of LightClan, leaned on one of the consul desks. Outwardly, he was the cooler, more deliberative of the WarriorPair, yet inwardly he seethed. Down there on that blue planet was their destiny. He felt her every whimper. He couldn't comprehend how she held on. His loins ached and hung heavy. Tonas saw the tension in Jonal's face. There was urgency just under the surface driving him. They shared an instinct that demanded instantaneous response to threat.

Their fem, heart of their Bond, was on the planet beneath their boots, and her life force was faint, thready. Tonas's muscles screamed for freedom to defend, champion, fight. They could not. Neither the Galactic Alliance nor the Sarran Elders authorized war. Trade, yes. Outright bribery, if necessary—even capture—were possibilities, but not war. Tonas rose to his full height, green eyes shooting golden sparks of light.

"They fear us, Jonal," he said, attempting appeasement. "They have just had their first taste of the Zyptz, their population decimated, and they don't know who to trust. The Elders were arrogant in their assumption that inferior technology equaled insufficient intelligence. The intelligence is there; they need time. Geological and cosmic events forced the course of life on this sphere into rebirth more than once. The evidence lies before us on the pockmarked surface of their moon. The planet itself is still actively volcanic. They have not learned to harvest and direct the core energy. We can offer them a future free of accidental extinction, with unlimited energy. What the planet offers to us is more valuable than any known object in the universe. It offers fems, life." He finished with a breath of bitterness.

"Goddess take me, Tonas, she's down there and she's ours by right of Alliance. Alliance Law extends even to this backwater of the universe. I need to take her pain away. My member is hard. I'm overwhelmed by guilt at our lust and grief for her pain. I am enraged at being herded into calumny by the roach below. I am lost. My Light, we have been one since our twentieth cycle. Ten cycles ago we pledged under a Tierest tree. Physical desire, intense need for you, for her, and I reach out with my mind and body and I'm alone. Dammit, I need you both and soon. I'm alive again. We haven't been alive since the Ipz."



Tonas waited and watched Jonal pace around the table, caressing the inlays, straightening the wide burgundy leather chairs. The StarRoom's carpet was well worn under the broader man's boots. Jonal had marked this path through the Zyptz Wars. Jonal's fingers ran through his hair and the tic in his jaw appeared more often. Those strong, blunt fingers pulled at the sleeves of his flightsuit, loosened the collar. He stopped abruptly and banged the table again, his body vibrating with anger. Tonas didn't try to calm his Bonded. Jonal's fire was finally kindled after three cycles of suppression and focus on the mission. His body vibrated for release.

"What more could they possibly want? Fems are dying, Tonas, dying. What is it going to take?"

Tonas didn't answer; instead he grabbed Jonal and pulled him into his arms, lowering his mouth onto hungry lips. The shock of his Firefly's taste after so long a thirst for both of them sent Tonas reeling to near climax.

"Too long," Tonas whispered as he licked and teased his kisses across Jonal's deep jaw line in deliberate slow appreciation of his lover's beauty. Tonas reached the corner of Jonal's mouth. He outlined it with his tongue. His kiss deepened. Tongue and lips became a frenzied, brutal, invading force. They dueled, sending shock waves that reached past the wet, lush cavity of mouths to engorged cocks and hardened sacs.

Jonal's cock grew long and wide against Tonas's body. The cockhead resembled a plum-colored fist outlined against Tonas's own member. For the first time in three cycles, they were lost in each other—their responsibility, for a moment, set aside. They clung to each other, hips moving in a circular motion in sync with their mouths. Lips moved over flesh, licking, biting and marking. Jonal unfastened the panel of the uniform beneath which Tonas's cock lay hard and ready. He pulled, exposing the long golden spike to the air. He grabbed, pulling hard, his fist circling with his thumbnail pushing into the slit revealed with the foreskin pulled away. Jonal dropped to his knees. He used his other arm and pulled his lover's hips toward his face. Tonas groaned as Jonal inhaled the scent of the coarse golden hair -- cinnamons, exotic spice—that feral, earthy odor his senses craved. Jonal buried his cheek against Tonas's sac, kissing and taking each of the tight balls and rolling them inside his mouth. His left hand moved behind the sac to the heavy yellow-gold ring decorating the guiche piercing on Tonas's perineum. It matched the white-gold piercing on his own, their personal symbol of

commitment to their Bond and their love. He tugged gently, then twisted and pulled as his mouth rode his lover's shaft. He ventured as near as he dared to the hard muscled cheeks, clenching the forbidden crease where completion lay. Tonas's hands pushed down on Jonal's shoulders. Jonal's mouth moved to the shaft, his tongue worried the point just underneath the area where the foreskin attached to the head. He licked the circumference.

"Jonal...Goddess, your mouth. How I have missed that mouth. Please...Firefly, please..."

Jonal moved his lips down Tonas's twitching member, planting kisses—his tongue following the pulsing, ropey veins.

"I need you...I want...oh, my love, she's with us. I can feel her; she's wet...Jonal," Tonas shouted.

"Yeah," Jonal whispered. His chest heaved and his hands shook. Sweat formed on his upper lip. He stretched his mouth over the purple cock head, running his bottom teeth on the underside as his mouth descended down the shank. He sealed his lips, sucking, running his tongue, his throat working as it had so many times before. He felt what Tonas was feeling. He felt himself sucking and being sucked. He was Tonas, and Tonas was him. They were joined, mind to mind. They heard each other's thoughts, and they felt each other's senses. And now...she was there. She was wet, wanting, needing. She felt them. The link was almost complete. Almost there...

## *Chapter Two*

*Our patience will achieve more than our force.*

--Edmund Burke

The communication console lit up. Tonas pulled away. His body strained, begging. But the console was lit, now was not the time. The government below had forwarded the final proposal. The incoming communication would decide their fate. Tonas dropped to his knees alongside his Bonded, taking deep breaths trying to push away arousal. He grabbed Jonal and held on. "We are one, never alone again."

It took some time for them to stop shaking.

"It's going to work, Tonas," Jonal said. "We were almost there and we're not even on the planet yet. The Bond is so strong."

"Come, Jonal," Tonas said rising and pulling the heavy man to his feet. "We have work. There are twenty-five hundred WarriorPairs in the Brightstar Fleet, each with a potential fem on the surface – maybe each of them feeling the first stirrings of the Bond. Every fem with a high enough psi rating and potential compatibility is unconsciously broadcasting to this vessel. We are responsible for every pair, for every potential Triad – for the survival of all things Sarran."

Tonas's words burned in his throat, "I feel her, Jonal. But her touch, her radiance is dim. Our passion fed her soul, briefly. But you are right, there is little time. She is here, in my mind and yours. I have operated on anger for so long, that love and desire are almost strangers. I'm so sorry, Firefly. I've failed you."

"No, Tonas, never that. We both needed the time to heal." Jonal tried to comfort him.

"The pull is intense. I need both of you in my arms, yet she is the key. We need our fem, she is our future. And she needs us now." Tonas grimaced with the pain of longing.

"She is alone, dying and fearful, and there is something she worries over—taxing her limited strength." Jonal sighed. "Something that lives." His brows moved together.

"Tonas, could it be she has a mate? There is a heavy feeling of an impending loss, someone she loves—fears for."

"The Goddess could not be that cruel, Jonal. I have to believe that."

Jonal rose with Tonas and moved to the console. Both men still strung with unspent passion.

"Calm, Jonal," said Tonas. "Whatever is to be in our Bond must come second to our duty." He drew in his breath and sighed. "We need to do this right, Firefly. We *must* control our desire for completion and think of our burden. It is only a few more tines. We cannot act in haste. We came to offer mutual assistance, not war, and they must not know how desperate our situation is. They claim that theirs is a monogamous fem/male culture, despite the evidence in their literature and art to the contrary. All primitives fear what they do not understand. Our ways are foreign to them. What is normal to us is perversion to them. We must tread with delicacy, like a slink laptard stalking prey. I will not lose this to poor execution."

"We must outflank the enemy here. I don't trust this Earthman in his White House. I don't like secret treaties. We need data and a plan to maneuver around this roach. But to lose the fems would be unendurable, leaving us broken. He has to accept this last offer. And then, we corner the rodent," hissed Jonal.

Tonas moved forward and ran his fingers along the scar on the side of Jonal's face. He stroked his thumb across Jonal's thick lower lip and fingered the cleft that delineated his chin.

Jonal moved his head. His lips brushed the palm of Tonas's outstretched hand. "I bow to your patience, My Light. We wait, but not long."

Tonas opened a hidden panel along the far wall of the room. He took two matching tumblers of silver filigree etched with maroon and gold. He filled the tumblers with a clear, blue liquid and turned, bringing one to Jonal's mouth.

"To our Triad BondMate," he said, as they each drank from his BondMate's tumbler and let the Sarran Asta brandy flow as a fiery snake down their throats.

Jonal drank from Tonas's cup, "To our BondMate, one way or another she'll be ours by this moontide."

A voice sounded from the consoles "Admirals, a communiqué from the surface."

"Re-route it here, Lieutenant Septis," Jonal replied.

"Break seal, by command, Jonal."

"Break seal, by command, Tonas."

Tonas stepped over to the console, the communiqué scrolled open on the screen.

"They agreed," he shouted, "Bless the Goddess, they agreed."

Jonas said. "Septis, get me the Bridge on a secure channel."

Septis responded, "Line open, Admiral Jonal."

Jonal: "Commanders, Lunas, Saxton, broadcast this communication fleet-wide."

Lunas: "Confirm, sir."

Saxon: "Attention all fleet personnel; this is Commander Saxon with orders from Brightstar. Attention: all fleet personnel.

"Admirals, the links are in place."

This is Jonal, Admiral, and Prince of FireClan: "Ready the vaccines and antidote for transport. Brightstar medical pre-assigned staff report to surface teams for teleportation. Saxon, Lunas, distribute coordinates to section leaders, teams of ten pairs to each collection point. Pharmaceutical team, make sure you have complete instructions on antidote and vaccine manufacture. Warriors, proceed to your posts."

This is Tonas, Admiral, and Prince of LightClan: "Communications, Lieutenant Septis, you have the Bridge." He followed Jonal to transport, headed for the cargo bay issuing orders enroute.

"Saxon, Lunas, have remaining lead section pairs inspect the fleet's Quarters. Make sure all is ready to accept the fems. Non-paired Warriors of all ranks are assigned to barracks. Those who have already psi'd their fem's location have been assigned to the center nearest that locale. We go in twelve tine shifts. If a pair finds their fem, they will be immediately replaced by backup, until all Warriors Triad. First shift goes to BondStirred Pairs. All fems will have received the antidote and the vaccine prior to transport. As you are aware, with virus mutation, one without the other is useless to those already infected. Once the drugs are

administered by the advance teams, fems will be placed in Earthen transport vehicles, conveyed to collection points and then beamed aboard. BondStirred claims will be recognized immediately on surface, Warriors cleared to return with their fems. Back up teams stand ready to replace the Bonded in new Triads."

Tonas and Jonal stepped from the Transport Pad into the cargo area of the ship. The surface teams had assembled.

"Tonas, Admiral: Non-Sarran, Alliance crew should be assigned to all but weapons systems."

"Jonal, Admiral: I need Fleet Medical, now."

Medical Officers Bane and Flagen, fraternal twins and Warriors of FireClan answered the Admirals' summons.

"Here, sir..." Bane and Flagen of the FireClan responded. Jonal narrowed his eyes. His body gave off waves of hostility.

"Medical Officer Bane, you and your *second* are in charge of antidote and vaccination in Sector Two, the Manhattan Population Center in New York, United States. Take the list of all Brightstar Medical Personnel and assign one team to each of the remaining distribution centers. All of whom are to transport simultaneously in two marks time. Tonas and I will join you in Sector Two at 24:00 tines Earthen Time. You both report directly to me and me alone. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," replied Bane and Flagen. Jonal did not miss the arched look Bane sent to his twin."

*Was that really necessary, Firefly,* Tonas spoke to Jonal's mind.

*Yes, it was.* Jonal shot back.

Jonal continued, "Jonal, Admiral, Non-Sarran Medical Personnel are to transport for arrival triage. Antidotes will be administered on surface, transportation thereafter. Assign medics to each Fem unless they have been BondStirred on the surface. In that case a medic is only necessary for critical Fems. If a Bond is stirred on ship, the Fem's medic will be reassigned. According to Earth Government USA data, there are four thousand four hundred and forty eight Priority One cases. These Fems are the most genetically compatible, ironically because they are the ones most severely affected by the virus. The Priority One List has the additional advantage of no pressing ties to the planet, no clan to miss them or note their absence. Those Fems not paired from this first group will be assigned a medic, Quarters, and taken to Sarran as guests of the people, and hopefully find Triads among our defense forces, Tonas."

"Tonas, Admiral: We beam to the surface in ten parties of 100 to the coordinates given. Timepieces have been set to local time in your translator chips. Additional chips will be given to each Bonded Pair to be inserted immediately upon recognition of their Triad mate. We rendezvous at the distribution sites, Moontide, 24:00 times Earthen time. Are there any questions? None, good. May the Goddess bless our endeavor. May today be Sarran's salvation."

\*\*\*\*

"Laptard piss. What *did* you do to him?" Bane asked his twin. "Flagen, his eyes shot comets."

They were standing together with the group for sector two, Manhattan. Since their group would be accompanied by Admirals Tonas and Jonal, they would be among the last to leave. *Tonas, he still called him Tonas in his mind, despite the ten years that separated them. And he still hated Jonal and Jonal knew it.* Flagen thought.

Flagen looked over at his brother. Though not identical, the twins could be mistaken as such. Bane had the same honey blond hair, the same brown eyes. He was perhaps a half-inch shorter than Flagen's own six-five. Both he and his brother were lean and muscular. Both had gone into medicine. They were separated in their eleventh cycle and had roomed separately at the academy. The BondMates in their Triad had thought it would be a good thing to separate the twins. They told the brothers that it was to prepare them for lives that could only be lived independent of each other. They needed to draw apart to enable a PairBond and eventually find a fem to form a Triad. Up until that time, Flagen recalled, he and his brother had been inseparable. After, Flagen, bitter and wary at both the separation and the result, had stayed away.

"Flagen, where are you, brother?" asked Bane. The inscrutable look left Flagen's face and he smiled back at Bane.

"I'm afraid it's a small bit of unfinished personal business. It has nothing to do with you, Bane. I knew it would probably be like this when I was accepted for the mission. I was positive that they would have weeded me out before liftoff if Admiral Jonal had his way. I probably got the posting because I was not Bonded, a plus for this mission, and the Admiral knew I was likely to remain so."

Bane shook his head. "So many of us are heart sore, Flagen. I was on Brightstar when we came out of FTL planet side. We could not draw

weapons. Had we known, we would have engaged before the jump. We thought to come home to celebrate victory." Bane chest pulled in as he drew air deeply. "You know how I feel about this mission. I don't think a Bond is possible with an alien culture. Without the fem, well, even if you love your BondMate, it's still just fucking."

"Without your true BondMate, it's not even that," Flagen replied. He hardened his expression and straightened his back.

\*\*\*\*

Bane remembered the first time he had a real conversation with Flagen since the early academy risings. It was morning, just after rising...

He had jolted up into a sitting position when he heard the pounding. He shook his head and tried to toss the sleep from his fogged brain.

"Bane, open up!" Flagen shouted his name into the com, banging loudly on the door of his rooms. "Open up."

"All right, all right." Bane leaned over to grab his treds and padded across his small room. "Admit," Bane spoke to the control console. "Admit Flagen. Laptard piss, Flagen. Come in and stop waking the dead."

"I was just trying to roust you, twin of mine. Is it my fault that both tasks require the same amount of noise? I got the job, Bane."

"What job?" asked Bane.

Flagen responded, "Co-medical officer on the Brightstar."

"Oh," Bane answered flatly. "You didn't tell me you applied. I thought you disapproved of this whole Earthen fem business."

"Doesn't matter if I approve, it's going to happen anyway," said Flagen. "This is a plum assignment. It will lead to better things. This kind of assignment is not usually handed out to Non Bonded personnel, but I'm not alone. Check your communicator," said Flagen.

Bane touched his communication device. He usually turned it off while he slept, although the base main could override the off duty mode of any officer, if necessary.

Bane laughed as he read the message. "I guess you know I'm going with you. Looks like I get to spend time with my baby bro. Maybe you will find a Bond on this trip and a fem to boot."

"Bane," Flagen interrupted, "I told you already. I will not pair. I will not Bond. I will not mate with an Earthen fem. I have no BondMate. There is no one out there for me. I've already accepted that. It has to do



with taking the opportunity to be co-medical officer on the Brightstar and having the chance to serve with my twin. I don't have to like the mission. I just follow orders and keep the natives healthy. And cut out the baby bro bit, you're only five mots older than I am."

"Well, baby brother, I guess you'll be serving under me," quipped Bane.

"Beside you," amended Flagen. "Co-medical officer."

Something strange flashed over Bane's face, "Yes, bro, right beside me. It will give us some time together. We used to be close. I haven't seen you much in the last two cycles." *And not much at all since the Academy*, he added silently.

"Been busy doing research, just like everyone else on the planet. We saved a few of the younger ones, at least. There will be some pure Sarrans left after this debacle. Maybe we should have taken up the Alliance's offer of clones. Goddess knows, having no center for a Triad, or a center that can't cement the Bond would be the same as fucking a corpse."

"Sarrans don't clone people," Bane said.

"Yes, I know. Sarrans don't clone people. Sarrans mate for life. Sarrans have only one Bond brother. Sarrans protect. Sarrans preserve. Laptard's piss, Bane, you know how sick I am of that litany. How moral is the alternative?"

"What do you mean?"

"What we are actually doing? We plan to kidnap a group of primitive fems from a world on the outer edges of the galaxy. Oh, yeah, taking them away from everything familiar, and let's not forget, using them like breeding cattle. This is morality? Can we claim the moral high ground here?" Flagen asked.

"Sarran would only need to produce one generation of clones from existing DNA to replace our fems and grow them in the vats offered by the Galactic Alliance. Or, if that offends, use the Earthen women as incubators, pay them well, and send them on their way. After each of them has been pregnant a few times, our supply of women would be restored. We would have to wait a while for Triad, but we are a long-lived race and our males are fertile until death. One generation, and with enough clones, everything goes back to normal."

"Flagen, that's disgusting," said Bane. "Sarran Warriors don't treat fems that way, even Earthen fems. They are our hearts."

"If we don't clone our women, we might never have a heart again. Will those primitive aliens have the strength to make a Bond? Will they be faithful to the Bond? I'll bet none of them are virgin either." Flagen spat the word out.

"Are we virgin?" said Bane. "Most of the Warriors in the Fleet were sexually experienced with women and the occasional male before being BondStruck. Our fems explore their sexuality before Triad. Why would it matter if the Earthen fem are not virgin?"

"Because, Bane," Flagen said slowly, "I wanted a strong Warrior to bond into a Triad with a virgin fem. Maybe I was a young fool. I dreamed of my mates. They were going to be everything to me, as I was to them. Did you ever feel a BondStir, Bane?"

"No," answered Bane. "I haven't."

"I felt it once, the beginnings of it. I waited too long to make a claim. Someone else got to him first. He would have been a heroic mate. He was about three cycles my senior. I knew my call was stronger. Yet, I hesitated. I lost."

"You could have challenged for him—contested the Bond before it fully formed. I'd have stood beside you," Bane said quietly. "Who was it, Flagen? Maybe you still have a chance?"

Flagen shook his head. "It wasn't to be. And I'm not the type to settle. It will be all right, eventually. I'm happy to be serving with you, bro. I'm excited. This is going to be our first trip together since we were kids," Flagen said as he slowly smiled. "And the other thing—the Bond—I can't miss what I never had." Flagen crossed over to the door.

"Yeah," said Bane, also grinning. "We'll get to serve on the command ship Brightstar with the two best Admirals in the fleet. That is going to put our resume in the top of the top, Warriors and medical officers. Wow."

"Sure, best Admirals in the fleet. We do have that left, don't we?" said Flagen as he waited for the door to open, the panels slid apart, then he left.

Bane shook his head and came back to the present. *And now, we begin.* He watched Flagen's posture as the Admirals came towards them. There was something else there. It wasn't just that Flagen disapproved of the mission. Bane didn't fully approve of this approach either. A different expression—helplessness—had flickered across his twin's face and vanished. The Admirals passed. The sector two team gathered on the pads. Transport beams flashed blue, one, and then another. Bane and

Flagen stepped up onto the pads from the cargo bay gridded floor. The mission was underway.

## *Chapter Three*

*The character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done.*  
--Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

*Sarran Calendar: 9435 Barren Trion, Rising 104-105*  
*Earth July 14-15th*

For a Friday night, Manhattan General's ER bays were quiet. Wednesday and Thursday saw emergency service vehicles ferrying the most critical Plague patients in the tri-state region to this hospital. All other patients had been assigned to different facilities. Hospital personnel were instructed by the government to keep this group of Plague patients alive at all costs. Martial law had been declared earlier in the week. Doctors were now empowered to ignore do-not-resuscitate orders with impunity. Homeland Security and CDC instructed the staff to employ every drastic technique know to modern medicine to prolong the life of the critically ill. According to the government, in these cases, death was not an alternative.

Antidotes and vaccinations were overseen by a pair of representatives from CDC: Drs. Bane and Flagen, who had arrived from Washington twelve tines ago. Dr. Mark Stern, Manhattan General's Chief of staff, grudgingly admitted that Bane and Flagen knew their stuff, despite the fact they were both supercilious, egotistical sons of bitches.

At thirty-six, Stern was the youngest Chief of staff in the medical center's history. His specialty was infectious disease, until he came in from the field to take the job at Manhattan General. He wore gold, wire-

framed glasses and had a pocket protector with several pens in his lab coat. Blond streaked hair, slicked back, with a hard, heavily muscled body that the staff claimed *lurked* over them. He resembled a California surfer gone on to become a pro-wrestler, body beautiful with brains.

His smile was an odd sort of a half smirk. His voice barked authority. The bark, combined with his sarcastic bent, made the med students scatter and the residents shudder. No one on staff wanted to be the subject of Mark's rapier wit. If a patient went south because of staff neglect, the innocent were known to draw straws to decide who faced him—the guilty just quietly submitted their letter of resignation. Errors were barely tolerated, but were considered correctable learning experiences. Neglect invoked the Wrath of God and every staffer at MGMC knew exactly who God was. The CDC Doctors were exempt only because their arrival coincided with the worst crisis the hospital had ever faced. Mark watched Bane for about two hours before he grudgingly conceded that he might know what he was doing. After that, there were patients to tend.

Drs. Bane and Flagen came armed with two hundred and sixty-two vials of vaccine and antidote, which they immediately administered to patients. Bane told Stern that this group, and ten others, were part of a small clinical trial; administering only to the worst cases—those who had no other hope of recovery.

Mark Stern did not believe in using human beings for guinea pigs, but these circumstances were different enough from the clinical norm that experimentation or prayer were the only two options. Mark had no faith in prayer. These patients had no chance but the test drugs. He had reluctantly agreed to the trial. Not that his acquiescence meant shit. Bane and Flagen had the authority from Washington to do what they damn well pleased.

He detested bureaucrats. It did not please Mark Stern that he was, once again, answering to Homeland Security. What he found even more unnerving was his reaction to Bane. It started after they had shared a few cups of coffee. If it had been whiskey, he would have sworn Bane slipped him rohypnol and had his way with him. If he had, it wasn't rape—Mark's cock twitched every time he looked the CDC goon in the face.

And if that didn't please Mark Stern the doctor, it pleased Mark Stern the alpha male, even less. He knew he was bisexual. The gender of his lovers was completely immaterial to Mark. But Mark was commitment-

phobic and, from experience, had learned to be one suspicious son of a bitch. As a result, Mark was having some difficulty accepting that Bane had gotten his hooks in deep and quick. It felt both right and *wrong* at the same time, and it was driving him nuts. Flagen, he simply disliked. But both were excellent physicians—he had to give them that.

Twelve hours had passed since the trial meds had been administered. All of the patients had experienced some slight improvement. Kidney and liver functions had returned, and those patients who were hooked to respirators now only needed oxygen assistance. Vitals were at least in reach of normal ranges, and the rash began to retreat. Bane and Flagen ordered all patients to be readied for transport to a larger quarantine facility. Mark didn't think they were ready. Not that either man asked his opinion. After all, he was only the Chief of staff. It really pissed him off. He had thought at least one of them would make a pretense of consultation.

*Governmental assholes, why had he expected any fucking better from Bane than from any foreign or domestic paper-pushing public health hack?* Mark fumed to himself. He hadn't felt so powerless since med school. The current situation was, in Mark's mind, weird and out of control. It wasn't the first time since the epidemic began that he felt that way. This was his specialty. His mind should be making connections. He was missing some vital link, information that would put this riddle to rest. Maybe when his body and mind didn't thrum with exhaustion, it would come to him.

It was imperative that the origin of the virus be pinpointed and dissected. If it wasn't, it would haunt them again, because it would become resistant to the vaccine and morph into something else. No one was asking questions, at least no one but him. Worse still, no one even tried lying. When the government yokels stopped bullshitting and lying at the same time, the U.S. of A. was in deep waters playing Titanic. His attention came back to business as one of the first year medical students walked up.

"Dr. Stern, the remaining critical patients are stable."

*Finally*, Mark thought. Aloud he said, "I need twenty-five members of staff ready in five to be briefed by CDC on procedure. Take doctors, then physician assistants, degreed nurses, EMTs and first year medical students, in that order, to make up the number. The remaining staff will attend the cafeteria briefing at 22:00 hours. STAT." The resident took flight. Mark grinned. He still liked that he could make them do that.

At exactly 22:00 hours, every hospital employee was called to the employee cafeteria for instructions. They all came – secretaries, lab techs, aides, janitors, housekeepers, doctors and nurses. By 22:15, all of them stood waiting, except for Dr. Mark Stern and twenty-five others who had attended the initial briefing. At exactly 22:30, Bane and Flagen took the makeshift podium. The staff stood in awe of the giants from CDC. Drs Bane and Flagen, flaxen haired with hazel eyes, were as tall as NBA stars but built like linebackers. Every woman left standing, and every gay guy in the house drooled big time. Bane did most of the talking, and Flagen just stood beside him with an air of quiet authority. Despite the crises, the hospital grapevine buzzed and the hot topic was, “Who are these two hunks and why are they at CDC?”

Stern's disdain for doctors who pushed paper rather than treat patients, had spilled over to the staff. Stern's views were on record in a book he wrote about his time with the United Nations. The fact that he offered these two even grudging respect was extraordinary. Yet, no one remembered either Bane or Flagen from medical conferences, where hacks were known to congregate for free meals and golf. Most of the staff shrugged them off as foreigners because of a slight accent to their English; foreign medical personnel came to the United States in droves nowadays. Foreigners at the CDC made sense, so the gossips just left it at that.

Trucks would arrive at 24:00, midnight to the civilians. These trucks would take the critically ill to a central quarantine facility. Trained medical personnel would stay with the patients until they were met by people from CDC. The janitors, maids and other non-medical personnel would help with transport to the ER staging area, and sterilize all the newly vacated rooms, putting personal belongings in the plastic bags provided with the patient's name, social, date of birth, current known address, and occupation prior to illness. Dr. Bane had been clear about consequences, should a staff member misappropriate any patient's personal belongings. All of those present would make sure nothing went missing. The threat didn't need to be overt. Bane's voice, combined with the look on Flagen's face, conveyed menace.

\*\*\*\*

By 23:40, the ER was empty. What staff they had was up on the floors, or in the cafeteria, awaiting instructions. Mark was behind the triage

desk awaiting the rest of the team. At 23:45, the elevator doors opened opposite the triage desk; Drs. Bane and Flagen stepped off with as many residents and staff as could fit in the small space. *Bink*. The second elevator in the bank opened, discharging staff, then the third. At 23:50, the low headlamps of what looked to be a long line of transport trucks in full camouflage, pulled up to the ambulance entrance on the east side of the four block, brick and cement hospital complex. Heavy booted Army Rangers in full battle dress, accompanied by huge men in maroon, form-fitting uniforms with knee-high, shiny black boots jumped from each truck and lined up to the right of the ambulance doors as if they were awaiting a signal. At precisely 24:00, the ER ambulance doors opened wide.

"Stern," said Bane, "Come with me." Flagen followed.

Annoyed, Mark walked alongside the CDC goons.

"Who's in charge here?" asked a guy with a chest full of fruit salad, a helmet, and an attitude.

Mark peered down at the shorter man. *Yep*, Mark thought. *Short, attitude, flunkies on either side. Morgan*, he read the name from the bar over his jacket pocket. *Four stars and impressed with himself*. He stepped forward. Stern had dealt with this particular type of asshole throughout his United Nations career.

"I am..."

"General Morgan," answered Mark. "Dr. Stern and my colleagues from Homeland Security, Drs. Bane and Flagen."

"You are aware that we are now under martial law."

"Yes, it's all over the net and the airways," Mark replied with sarcasm. "With CDC and Homeland Security direction, emergency services have moved all of the most serious cases in the city to our facility as directed. They are on the floors above awaiting transport. There are two hundred and sixty two here. They all have received both antidote and vaccine. I don't like to argue with the government, but in my opinion, they need additional recuperative time before being jostled by transport.

"Your objections are duly noted, doctor."

Mark was about to argue further, when out of the corner of his eye, he noticed two giants step to the side of Morgan. Mark, at six foot three, was no runt. These guys were just shy of seven foot and it was obvious from both their stance and body language that these men were no one's flunkies. Flunkies did not project auras of self-assurance and



competence. Mark noticed they didn't seem too fond of Morgan, either. He sensed that the dark one was hyper and the light one was attempting restraint. *Where did they get these guys?* Mark wondered. *All of the maroon uniform types were over six foot six, putting Bane and Flagen on the short side of this equation.*

Fuck! If Mark hadn't been so damn tired, he would have put it together long before now. Bane and Flagen were with the maroon uniforms, not the government, and the two in front of him were in charge. These men exuded authority. Just behind him he heard Bane and Flagen move as if they had come to attention.

"Dr. Stern." The larger blond one interrupted with a deep whiskey tone. "I am Tonas, and this is Jonal. Please believe that all care will be taken in transport. Each patient will be provided with a medical team to see to their needs. I assure you, Doctor, we have taken every precaution."

Although still dubious about the situation, Mark instinctively liked Tonas and was inclined to trust him. His instincts had been honed as a combat medical officer, and later in Kosovo and Darfur. They hadn't steered him wrong, yet. Tonas was a combat veteran, not a puffed up paper pusher.

"Dr. Stern, if we may proceed?" Morgan said politely, taking his new tone of respect from Tonas.

"Drs. Bane and Flagen have set up the evacuation procedure," Mark said. "Gentlemen, would you care to give a report to the General and er...Mr. Tonas?" The two behind him almost leapt to the fore, confirming his suspicions.

Bane took the lead. "All of priority one cases in this sector are on the floors above. Staff is waiting on our signal, sir. These," Bane said, sweeping his arm to indicate the bank of six elevators, "have been commandeered. They are electronic/mechanical transport that will shift the fem...er patients from the floors above to this area. From here the stretchers may be loaded for transport."

Mark was mildly amused. Although their eyes were directed at Morgan, they seemed to be reporting to Tonas and the raven haired Jonal beside him. *Who the hell had figured they could pass these guys off as hailing from CDC or from Homeland Security? Agency types would be his first guess, or some kind of special ops, his second. Come to think on it, Bane and Flagen didn't fit the lackey mode either. His finely tuned anti-government hackles*

hadn't risen at them – more so at the idea of them. If these guys were agency, they were field ops, not desk jockeys.

Morgan interrupted his thoughts, "Priority one cases?"

Flagen continued, "Priority One cases are those where the patient is critical and has no immediate family to nurse them through the long recovery and vital recuperative stages. They all will be housed in a central location and given the best care we can provide."

An aide-de-camp touched Morgan on the shoulder. A whispered conversation ensued. Morgan nodded, "Ah, the special cases..."

Dr. Mark Stern shivered, *What was it about that word, special?*

Another officer, a captain, approached the General, "Sir, General, sir. Transport is a go, and vaccination points are set throughout the quarantined areas for the female children, sir."

"And the antidote-vaccination combination, Captain?" The black haired, Jonal spoke for the first time.

"Sufficient supply has been transported to every distribution point in the Eastern sector. With the help of foreign medics, we should have either the vaccination or the antidote to the entire population sector by 09:00 hours. We are doing it house to house, sir.

"All the paperwork is in order, sir. Four-thousand, four hundred and forty-eight priority one cases nationwide, sir. Two hundred sixty-two cases consolidated in this facility."

Jonal, ignoring General Morgan addressed Mark directly. "Are the patients ready for transport, doctor?"

"I'm still concerned that moving the patients this soon after crisis will cause permanent damage. I would like to see the transport. I need to know my patients will have everything they need."

"Rather than just checking the transport, Dr. Stern," said Bane, behind him, "you are welcome to accompany the patients. Once transport is complete, your work here is done. We will need all the help we can muster on the other side."

Flagen shot Bane a look of incredibility. It was that look that made up Mark's mind.

The one named Tonas raised his right eyebrow. "Bane, to me, accompany us?"

Mark went still to listen.

"Explain." He heard Jonal, the dark haired one say abruptly.

Mark casually leaned toward the whispered conversation. Only some was intelligible, but obviously something was going on.

He heard snippets from Bane. "Strange, sir, feels like a pulling...no idea what it means...just know he has to come..."

Words in a lower tone hissed from Jonal to Tonas. "Is it a possible Bond? Can't be! But...Elder's council...fem..."

Tonas sighed. "Permission granted."

Bane crossed back to Flagen and spoke in a low tone, gesturing wildly. Flagen looked furious, and turned away with a sigh. Bane followed.

Mark lifted his head and pretended to check charts as he watched Jonal walk across the room. Then Jonal asked, "May I call you Mark?"

"As long as I can call you Jonal," Mark riposted.

"Of course, Mark." Jonal continued, "Mark, do you have any family or anything of importance that would tie you to this section?"

"No, Jonal. May I ask why?" He had felt from the beginning that this whole operation was weird. If he had the chance to get answers first hand, he was going to take it. Mark Stern had accepted the position as MGMC's Chief of Staff after Darfur. Here, he had climbed his Everest, showing how administration could be skillfully combined with real mentoring. After reaching the top, the thrill was gone. He was up for something new, something that would shake up his complacency. Although devastating, the Plague had been his first challenge in years. Now that his part was over, he didn't want to go back to what was before. He sensed that there was more to this scenario than what appeared on the surface. This was no vanilla government organization. Curiosity won over caution. He had already made up his mind. Mark was just waiting for one of them to ask.

"Dr. Bane has indicated that you are an excellent physician. He suggested that you would make an outstanding addition to our medical staff. Of course, compensation would be equal to or greater than you currently receive. You would be given the opportunity to study the Plague and its effects at close range. There is also a chance for research into medical techniques, anatomy and physiology that few physicians...the opportunity is very rare, let us leave it at that."

"I accept," Mark answered immediately. This was the reason he had studied medicine. And he knew deep in his gut that this was no position with Homeland Security or CDC.

"Do you have anything personal you absolutely must have accompany you? Most of what you need or want can be provided," Jonal said.

"I do not. However, one of the patients is also a pediatric resident at this hospital, Dr. Anya Forrest."

Jonal's eyes lit up, shooting silver sparks. "Really..." Jonal answered.

Mark watched the beginning of a facial tic that intersected the thin scar along Jonal's jaw.

"Do you know her well, Mark?" Jonal asked.

His tone lowered and went flat. He unconsciously took a step toward Mark with his upper body pitched forward.

*This is one guy I don't think I want to engage in a pissing match*, Mark thought. With a more conciliatory tone Mark said, "Yes, I do. She is on the hospital staff. Once recovered, she would also make an excellent addition to any medical organization. Even though her specialty is children, I found her throughout her residency to be adaptable to most circumstances. This hospital participated in many clinical trials where her input was invaluable. She is on the list, so I know she will be accompanying us...but there might be a problem with Tigger."

A tight, hard expression crossed Jonal's stone-like countenance. *Anger, jealousy – both*. The words just popped into his mind. The music from the Twilight Zone played in Mark's head. Tonas crossed the room to join them.

"Jonal?" he asked.

"Dr. Stern, Mark, said we have the honor of another physician in our ranks. Dr. Anya Forrest." Jonal said as his eyes flashed with anger. Dr. Forrest has an impediment." Mark was astonished to hear the barely leashed temper in Jonal's tone. Tonas's presence seemed to soothe, but he also seemed a bit perturbed.

"What impediment, Dr. Stern?" Tonas snapped. "We were assured that all of these cases were priority one, no family, no ties." Mark looked at him strangely. It was almost as if Anya's case affected him directly. Tonas, unlike Jonal, did not give the impression of a man who wore his emotions on his face often. Mark looked from Tonas to Jonal and back. These guys were *tense*.

Mark laughed. The looks he received in turn would have frozen Brazil.

"Tigger is Anya's cat. She goes nowhere without him. She has been very anxious about him since she became ill, so anxious that it seemed to make her sicker. I asked one of the orderlies to check on him from time to time. He is healthy, but yowling his head off for his mommy."

"A cat, you say." Jonal looked confused.

"Yes," Mark answered. "A cat, her pet cat."

"I see, Mark. It is Mark?" said Tonas, exchanging a long glance with Jonal. "May I take the liberty of using your given name?"

"Yes, Tonas, you may."

"I trust you can arrange for your orderly to accompany one of my men to fetch the cat, Tigger, with such supplies as he/she would need for, say, a six-month stay. Of course, we will pay for the supplies." Tonas turned slightly to the right. Dr. Flagen was just outside Mark's peripheral vision, leaning on a column, listening to Jonal and Stern.

"Actually, Tigger is an it," Mark enjoined.

"An it?" Jonal asked. Tonas turned his head with a jerk.

"Oh, yes," said Mark, enjoying himself. Somehow or another, these gentlemen were not conversant with politically correct house pets. "Tigger has been fixed, castrated so as not to reproduce."

Both men's hands twitched. Mark was impressed that they had the discipline not to grab their balls. He continued, "We have an animal control problem here in the U.S. and both male and female pets must be neutered if obtained from a shelter."

Both Tonas and Jonal grimaced. "I'll send one of my men with your orderly," Tonas replied. He turned his head. "Flagen, come forward."

"Yes, sir," Flagen replied, issuing a strange kind of salute.

Mark thought his voice sounded rusty – almost unused.

*These guys are so not with CDC*, Mark thought. If he was correct, and his inner radar was rarely wrong, the two in charge were lovers. The intimate glances and unspoken communication suggested more than friendship. If he didn't know better, he would have thought the government had formed a gay brigade. He had observed Bane's overtly sexual scan of his body.

*Bane was a damn good looking man*, Mark thought, still confused by his overtly sexual response to the man. Sensation roared down his skin, prickling with premonitions and something else. Was it a sense of destiny, adventure? Something momentous was about to happen.

Mark watched as Tonas directed his attention to Flagen. "Doctor, I knew you were on the roster. I'm surprised you didn't come up to Quarters."

Mark glanced at Jonal. The tic was back. This time there was no ambiguity in the body language; it was hostile.

"I didn't want to intrude on you and Ad...Jonal, sir. It's been a long time since the academy, sir. I didn't think you remembered me," said Flagen.

"I remember you, Flagen. You were the youngest in the genetics lab, but you pulled me through that course." Tonas chuckled, "I was proud of my C, but you were the reason I got it." Tonas's head turned back to Jonal, as if in answer to an unspoken command.

Tonas cleared his throat, "Dr. Flagen, would you please accompany Dr. Stern's orderly and help him recover Dr. Forrest's cat?"

*More secrets*, Mark thought, scratching his chin. *Christ, do I need a shave and a drink*. Tonas motioned to General Morgan.

"General Morgan," Tonas said. "Could you or one of your staff make whatever arrangement is necessary for a fixed feline pet? I'll authorize any personnel, permit or supplies."

"Tonas." Jonal hesitated.

Absently, Tonas replied, "I see no harm as long as it can't reproduce. We'll keep it in Quarters."

"May we begin, Dr. Stern?" Jonal asked looking pointedly at General Morgan.

"Immediately, sir." Mark answered. There was a firm sense of things that were said but not heard, conversation fragments and unfinished sentences, questions and answers left hanging. *Shit*, thought Mark, *figuring this out was going to be one hell of a ride*.

\*\*\*\*

Jonal and Tonas were standing in the emergency room some thirty mots later. Transport worked quickly and efficiently. Twelve patients had been moved from the upper floors through the ER and into the waiting vehicles. The transports were sent to a place called Central Park, where General Morgan and his troops had set up a city of canvas material they called a camp. As each truck entered the park, it was stopped and everyone locked down for collection by the ion beam transporter. At the other end, on the Brightstar, medics and BondMates waited anxiously.

Jonal paced the ER, checking each patient as she was brought to the doors. "By the Warrior Moon, Tonas, I am tired of waiting. Where is she? I know she is here. Mark said she was here. What is the delay?"

"Mark!" Jonal shouted before Tonas had the opportunity to say a word. "Where is Dr. Forrest? She was on the critical list and should have been down in the first transports."

Mark looked at his new boss and thought, not for the first time, that there was more than met the eye here. "Anya is a doctor, Jonal. She is no longer on a respirator. Even sedated, she insisted that the others be taken before her. In a language you would understand, sir, it's a matter of honor and medical protocol. According to the orderly I sent to get her cat, she was much more relaxed once she knew it had care. She will be down soon. Is Anya's case special to you in some way, sir?" *Where did that come from?* Mark had barely used that salutation in the Army.

"You could say that, doctor." Mark turned, surprised that Tonas answered his question before Jonal had a chance to speak.

Tonas continued smoothly, "Dr. Stern, Dr. Bane will take you to transport. You will both be needed at the other end. I'm sure with your very well-trained staff and General Morgan's men, our business here will soon be concluded."

As Mark walked out to the transport with Bane, the last thing he heard was Tonas's call to Bane's shadow. "Flagen, a word before you go."

"Yes, Admiral!"

*Admiral?* Mark thought. *Wonder where that came from?*

## *Chapter Four*

*Hell is paved with good intentions.*

--Samuel Johnson

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B112*

*Earth Calendar: July 22nd*

"Thirsty," she whispered. Then a strong, gentle hand lifted Anya's head. She nuzzled closer, breathing deeply of fresh linen, vanilla and man—definitely man.

"Drink, Pa Mici, drink," a deep basso voice rumbled.

Anya's eye caught a snapshot of dark blue eyes, tousled midnight black hair. A thin white scar traced along the outline of a square jaw. Her vision was fuzzy around the edges. She picked up a slight hesitation between his words and her understanding. His lips moved and she received, a nanosecond later, a weird built-in satellite delay. The hair on his muscled arm tickled across her back. His palm cupped the nape of her neck supporting her head. The thumb stroked downward. She trembled, leaning into the light caress.

The thick fingers of his other hand curved around a filigreed silver tumbler with maroon and gold swirls.

"Please, thirsty," Anya mumbled, as her lips pursed round the proffered straw.

"Careful, Pa Mici. Lips that shape beg a kiss," the deep voice mumbled.



Sweetness exploded on Anya's tongue—a mélange of fruit? She didn't recognize any of the flavors. Her eyes closed. The juice flowed through her mouth and down her throat easing the dryness. Voices in her mind, one was here—the basso. The other, a baritone, was close by. The vibrations sang sweet music to her sex. Anya's skin flushed rose. She reached up and traced a finger along the thin scar. Anya knew she was dreaming. Her hero's face was on the cover of every romance novel she ever read. He was an American privateer, scarred from a run-in with a British man-of-war, or maybe a Regency Duke, scarred in a duel over his sister. It couldn't be about a woman other than his sister. After all, this was *her* dream.

"Your skin is exquisite, Pa Mici. Do you feel us yet?" His soft mobile lips swept light kisses across her cheek and nibbled at the corner of her mouth.

"Name...my pirate... name," she insisted, sticking out her lower lip—her mouth in moue.

"Jonal. Rest now," the voice soothed.

"'Tis such a good dream," Anya whispered, as she grabbed his arm. "Please, don't make me wake up."

\*\*\*\*

"Saxon, Lunas, you have the Bridge," Tonas said as he crossed over to the double paneled doors to the StarRoom. The panels slid into the wall with a *whoosh* and closed behind him. He strode around the table, past the twin consoles over to a second entry. Brightstar recognized his biological signature and granted access to the Admirals' Private Quarters. The lounge was darkened. The thick, maroon carpet muffled the sound of his booted tread. His eyes swept across the paisley swirls set within square patterns that led to another set of pocket doors. A soft light escaped from underneath the panels, illuminating, the intricate navy, sage, ivory and gold threads of the carpet design.

"Jonal," Tonas called quietly. He stepped further into the room toward the warm glow.

The paneled entry parted and the dark, broad figure of his BondMate emerged from the slumber suite. Tonas frowned; he heard no other sounds. Tonas moved across the living area and placed a kiss on the nape of Jonal's corded neck. His lover lifted his head, giving him better access. Tonas's lips touched Jonal's skin. The bristles of Jonal's night

shadow rasped along Tonas's cheek. He raised his arm and pulled Jonal in and held him for a moment. His other arm went up and stroked his Firefly's hair. He needed this; he was so very tired.

Tonas paused. "She's still out?" he asked, despite knowing the answer. He frowned. "She should be conscious by now. Bane and Mark released her to Quarters yesterday. It's been eight rises since Anya received the antidote and vaccine. Most of the others are already awake and out of bed."

"She took some juice," Jonal said. "I think her mind is beginning the journey back." His navy eyes lit up in remembered pleasure. "She thought she dreamed. Called me a pirate or a Regency Duke. I consulted the database. Separately they made no sense, but together, an archetype of Earthen romantic tales."

"I'm glad you're so amused," Tonas grumbled as he stepped away. Tonas stretched, the muscles of his back playing along his golden skin. He felt stiff, and he circled his neck and raised his shoulders up. "Some of our Warriors have very unhappy fems. Better she should think this is a dream and we are heroes, Firefly. It's preferable to a well-placed kick to the sacs."

Tonas headed toward the magnon wood server that was hand-rubbed to a dark sheen. He opened the cabinet and took two tumblers from a set of six, set them on a black lacquered tray, and poured a double shot of Asta into each. Light refracted from the sharp edges of the hand-cut glasses, and the reflections danced on the tufted golden suede material covering of the wall behind. The padding dampened the ship's noise and created an oasis of tranquility in the sea of tension that was a war fleet on alert.

The illusive reason for his unease came into focus. Tonas drew a deep breath. His mention of the other Warriors was not casual. Jonal would see. Jonal *knew* him. Would soon posses his body, the way he already owned his soul. Tonas ached for the deeper connection. For ten cycles they had skirted the forbidden. Tonas needed his lover to be so deep inside him, that Jonal would feel his heartbeat on his cock. He *wanted* Jonal to drive hard into his passage, heavy sacs slamming against his butt cheeks, feeding him his seed, which would then combine with his own for Anya. Their future resided on the fragile shoulders of the fire haired beauty sleeping in the next chamber.

They were destined to love her. She was as essential to his happiness as Jonal was. But he was at a loss at how to express his need, his love. He

was the Prince of LightClan. His mind was logical, compartmentalized, and orderly. His emotions were not carried on his countenance. He was also afraid. Only Jonal knew the depths of passion that roiled within. His Firefly wielded the match that lit his soul on fire. Anya could anchor their hearts, bring them back to laughter. Jonal had the words to woo her, the beauty to offer. Tonas had only his battered heart.

Tonas set the tray down on the ornate space chest that doubled as a serving table. Jonal took a tumbler. They drank. The fiery Sarran brandy spread warmth, and Jonal could see some of the tension leave Tonas's face and neck.

Jonal studied his partner's face. He knew that look. Two small furrows had appeared between his beloved's brows. Tonas's beautiful mouth was pulled tight, and his hands had an almost imperceptible tremor. Trying to ease Tonas's tension, Jonal used their BondLink to tease. *You're just jealous, My Light, because she was awake in my arms, not yours.* He took both tumblers and placed them back down on the tray, freeing their hands. He pulled Tonas into his arms. *What ails you, My Light? It can't be jealousy.*

*Not jealous, worried. I can't help but wonder how she will react, to me – to us and the link.*

*You belabor the issue, Tonas. I've felt her, you've felt her. It will be fine,* Jonal reassured. Jonal felt the metallic tang of fear. *Why are you so anxious over this?*

"Fear of the strength of my desire," Tonas answered aloud. The others that would steal...what I would do? I'm not making much sense, am I? I'm feeling very primal – over you, over her."

"You fear your need? The urge to capture and hold...to survive?" Jonal asked, instantly understanding.

"Yes, no... Jonal, we were once so savage that it took two to protect and claim a fem. We were not born to Triad. We evolved to it. One mate was always at hand to protect the fem from other Sarrans who would mete out death to offspring not of their line, and capture rival Warriors' fems for their own. Are we going there again? We kidnapped these fems, Firefly. Will we have to stand guard to keep the fems in as well as the rogues out?"

"It was necessary for our survival, Tonas," Jonal replied in exasperation. He turned and sat.

"Yes, it was necessary," Tonas said. "But also cruel. It left 4,462 fems without a choice in their destiny. How are we to convince them we offer

a better life than what they've known, if we've taken away all choice? It is not the Sarran way, to leave a sentient without choice."

"Zyptz left us without choice," Jonal said angrily, his deep voice becoming staccato.

"We bring home to Sarran fewer than forty-five hundred fems, at least a third who are already BondStirred to WarriorPairs in the fleet. We may have Sarrans fighting Sarrans as they have not for nine millennia."

"We do have the promise of more," Jonal replied, looking up.

"You are not serious," Tonas said flatly. The furrows between his brows grew deeper, his breath louder. "Think. Do you see us being able to go back and take fems at will? They may not value their fems as we do, but they do value their possessions. You studied exchange systems at the academy. In a market economy, a scarce commodity becomes an expensive commodity, and scarcity induces hoarding in primitive cultures—not sharing. What will be the cost of this action, to us on Sarran, to Earth...to the fems?"

Jonal's face ticked along the line of his scar. *We are arguing—good.* Jonal's mind flashed from beneath the small barrier of his private musing. *Here, we lance the boil of his worry.*

Aloud Jonal continued, "We gave them the vaccine and antidote. They agreed to the trade. You make too much of this. I agree, they had no choice, but where was ours? The Bond is a biological imperative. It cannot be fought. We must Bond to survive. We have always had a scarcity of fems on Sarran. You and I both know that a WarriorPair originally performed sexual acts in public as a way to exhibit their fitness for the Bond. Warriors demonstrated sexual skills, as well as their Warrior training, to the fem. We demonstrate our fitness; she makes her choice. Do you doubt our ability?" Jonal continued, "Earth would have entered the Galactic Union eventually, Tonas. And with their abundance of fems, and the shortage of same, galaxy-wide, some kind of agreement was inevitable." Jonal ended with a shrug.

"But did the fems agree?" Tonas snapped back. "Are we slavers—dealers in flesh? It never occurred to me the genetic material was such a close match. The BondStirs began as soon as we hit orbit. I just didn't think where it could lead. What if our fem is resistant? What if she refuses us? It does not matter that we wish no harm. Their God is a harsh God, Jonal. He burns his forsaken. Will we burn, Jonal? Will we never be able to belong to each other fully, as well as to our fem? Are we sentenced to be forever just short of true mating?"

"We saved lives, My Light, billions of lives. In return, we took a tiny percentage of fems, who would have died had we not intervened." Jonal whispered gently. Rising from the couch, he stepped around the chest and moved closer to Tonas. "Given the opportunity, we would have courted our Bonded, in a proper Sarran manner. We did not have time—neither did she. Anya will know our passion and our love. She will come to us willingly. She already feels safe in our arms. Since the first eve aboard, whenever she became agitated, you have been able to settle her by just stroking her brow. You always think too much, brother."

Jonal drew back, his eyes raked over Tonas's form. "You intellectualize that which I know in here." Jonal drew his right fist over his heart. He grabbed Tonas's strong hands and pulled him into his arms, bringing them both down to the couch.

His Tonas was splendid, Jonal thought. His vest stopped high on the waist, and was held over the breastbone by a platinum chain. Matching embroidery trimmed both vest and trews. The bottom of the trews stopped just above the knee, meeting the high black boots. One of Tonas's forearms was cuffed in platinum, etching on the wide cuff signified rank within clan. Tonas's cuffs were platinum, as befitted his status as LightClan Prince. Jonal's were golden, the metal of the FireClan. Although the bands were clan, the fine etchings were of their own design.

On the Tierest tree grew the sweetest fruit on all of Sarran. It was under a Tierest tree that they first kissed. They took the tree's delicate fruit from each other's mouths, licking along the trail of juice that escaped the corners. Under that same tree, they first made love. Two other pieces with the design rested in their slumber chamber. One was an arm cuff that matched, but done in platinum, red and yellow gold, entwined, one metal for each of the three tree branches. The cuff was dainty and finely wrought, like their fem. The other was a cuff for a nether lip to match the guiche rings that sealed their Bond. It too, was dainty and fine. Would she ever agree to have their band on her slender arm, or its mate on her outer lip?

They sat for a while in silence, Tonas at the edge of the couch. His face in Jonal's glossy hair, Jonal gently stroking Tonas's arm.

*Did I tell you I kissed her today?* Jonal asked, mind-to-mind.

*I know, I felt it,* Tonas replied.

Tonas was not yet completely calm, so Jonal's hand circled his back in soothing motions. Tonas turned and spoke. "What happens if they reject

us, all of us, and our way of life? What if the cultural conditioning cannot be overcome?" Then mind-to-mind again, *No, dammit, she, Anya. I don't give laptard dung about the others, right now. We've given our lives for the others and I don't want...*

*So here is the meat of the trouble.* Jonal pulled him closer, his heavy arms continuing to stroke and soothe. *Yes, My Light, my love. We have something too precious to lose.* Jonal whispered into Tonas's ear, "Usually these positions are reversed. I preen and beg for your attention. You are the calm and determined one. Why these doubts, now?"

Tonas straightened his back. Dropping his head into his hands, his voice broke. "I'm so weary, Jonal. I'm tired of war, of fighting. We planned to just go home to Sarran, find our fem, and live our life. Now we must fight even for that." Tonas sighed shaking his head, hair spilling out over his shoulders as he undid the black tether. "And I already hunger for her. We have to find a way to make her happy, to give her a choice."

Tonas went back to the mind link, his voice full of the tears he refused to shed, afraid that spoken words would be somehow inadequate. *I love you more than anything in this universe, and know you, too, yearn in desperation. I felt it today, over the link, when you kissed her – the need, the enormity of the desire. And then it came to me. What if the Earthen fems, no. What if Anya cannot accept you and I, our love and physical need for each other as well as our need and desire for her? What do I do if she chooses you and rejects me? What if she cannot, will not, accept us both – as we are – in Triad? Will I never be able to hold you or kiss you? Will I never be able to feel you deep inside me or me in you? Will she let us love each other, either in Triad or alone? Can it be our fate – yours and mine – to love each other, but always be denied completion? Can I live without the expression of our love? What if we become like the people on her planet, afraid of love in all its forms? Any sexual expression, other than their norm, is dirty and shameful there. Have these fems enough heart, enough freedom of mind, enough love, to accept us for what we are and adapt to our ways? It is not as though it is physically impossible. They were capable before the vaccine and in practice, if not in word. I've seen in the programs they broadcast. The slight biological modification...*

Tonas stopped and looked up and over at his Firefly's eyes.

There was fierceness there. It was mesmerizing. The promise in those eyes had made his decision so long ago. Jonal reached for Tonas and touched his hair. He ran thick fingers inside the shell of Tonas's ears and under his chin. Tonas felt his mental claim.

*Mine*, Jonal shouted, hot with passion and laced with tenderness. Tonas turned his cheek into Jonal's hand. His tongue licked along the palm.

Jonal pulled Tonas over, moving the taller man along his length. His arms tightened around Tonas. He whispered as he kissed and tongued his lover's ear. "Once, My Light, I almost lost you before I had you. Did you know I knew that, Tonas? I know even now, he is on this ship. He wants you still. He would challenge me, if he dared. I watched his eyes devour you while we waited at the hospital for Anya." Jonal stroked and petted his lover's skin. "But your eyes saw an old friend; you didn't even notice his passion. Yet, when you look at me, you see mine and return it tenfold. I've always felt there was more of a chance that I would lose you, My Light. I love you so much. How could you think I could ever let you go?"

Jonal switched over to the link. *You are mine, ever mine. I swear to you now, Tonas, I will never choose anyone over you. Nor will I let anyone, even Anya, stand between us. It will be as we always dreamed. The three of us. Equals in all things, loving, pleasuring. I will never be without you. You will never be without me. Whatever needs to be done, will be done. We will have all, I swear. I will never, ever leave you willingly. My place is with you... and Anya.*

*I know, Jonal, I know. I need, I want you now.* Tonas shivered.

Jonal grabbed Tonas's face. "Do you know that your eyes taunted me since my first sight of you, My Light? Just looking at you made my cock hard; watching your eyes as we spoke made it leak. I was afraid that I embarrassed myself with a wet spot on my front. I just couldn't get enough of you. But you sent me away. I was dying inside. I thought that I was alone in the feeling," Jonal said.

"I was waiting under the Tierest tree for my study partner," Tonas said. "I told you I was there every rising. I wanted you to come back." Tonas smiled and cuddled closer to Jonal. "I know I asked you to meet me the next rising, earlier, so we would have time before I had to study."

"And the next rising, I came and I couldn't even talk. All I could do was grab you and do this." Jonal caught his mouth in a burning kiss. He pressed in, his teeth scraping Tonas's lips. Tonas answered with his mouth traveling the line of Jonal's full lips, tongue exploring the molten cavern of his mouth. Jonal's hand went lower to the platinum chain fastening the sides of his vest. He loosed the chain and pushed aside the maroon leather to rub and twist the tight brown nubs on Tonas's chest. Slowly, Jonal removed the vest, caressing each arm as he lifted the

leather away from the shoulders. His hands massaged, stroked and pinched. His mouth trailed kisses down to the tight nipples. He bit down, stroking with his tongue to bathe after causing the slight pain. Jonal was still in soft woven trews of the finest linen. His huge erection tented the material, the head spewing pre-cum. He removed his sleep trews and placed them on the floor, simultaneously rubbing his hard member with the juice leaking from the head. Jonal spread the creamy, plentiful substance over his diamond-hard cock—Sarran slick.

He reached down and lifted Tona's legs one at a time, removing the leather boots. Jonal massaged the calve muscles, each leg in turn—long sensuous strokes. Some were feather light, some deeply kneading. He moved over Tona and placed his lover's legs on the chaise. He kissed and sucked lower. Turning his head toward Tona's phallus, his hand pressed the package and stroked outside the leather.

Tona groaned. Each kiss, each flutter of his lover's hands, stroked Tona's hunger higher. He moved his hips so that his length fit into Jonal's hand. Tona's cock was pulsating. Jonal undid the belt and the front fastenings. The loosened trews slid easily down Tona's legs, followed by Jonal's hungry mouth, as each inch was bared. He kissed and nibbled a trail from Tona's brown nipples to his groin, following the faint trail of golden hair down his stomach. His hands continued to caress the silken skin while Jonal's hot mouth followed the path of his hands. Tiny nibbles turned to bites. His teeth came down hard, and he pulled on the skin, sucking, raising up a mark.

*You bear my mark on your body, in your flesh.* Jonal sent the thought directly into Tona's mind. Jonal continued squeezing the nipples with his fingers, kneading the flesh until they beaded tight. Jonal moved one of his hands between Tona's legs underneath his cock to the small strip of skin between Tona's anus and the scrotal sac. He pulled at the platinum ring, twisting it in rhythm with the hand that stroked Tona's rock-hard cock.

"I'm not going to survive this, Firefly. Ease up, I won't last," Tona pleaded.

Jonal's soft, nubile lips trailed behind his hand—licking, biting, pulling up skin and twisting it in his mouth. "Remember, I started to kiss you and then we couldn't stop. Our hands and mouths were all over one another. It didn't matter anymore, that there was so little time. Your partner never came."



"I remember, Firefly, and I've never wanted anyone else but you since that moment. You, and now Anya." Tonas moaned, his long, strong fingers clenched in Jonal's soft curls. He massaged his scalp, pulling and directing his mouth. He shoved his long, sweet cock to rub against Jonal's jaw. The leaking tip traced the thin scar on his Firefly's cheek. It was pulsing with need. Each turn of the little ring caused a teardrop of his bittersweet essence to leak. Jonal continued to suck his skin. Tonas's hips began to rotate, pushing his shaft toward Jonal's hot mouth. Ebony hair swayed back and forth, as Jonal moved, bathing Tonas with black silk. Some hairs were caught by the slick and clung to Tonas's erection. Jonal's lips rolled over his sweaty flesh. Tonas's body shook. Tremors moved in waves from scalp to toes, until it all centered in the turgid meat of his shaft.

Jonal put his face into Tonas's groin and inhaled. *I could get drunk on your smell. Sweat, musk, cinnamon – it is like no other.*

"If you don't stop for a moment, I'm going to blow without you...please." Tonas implored.

*No, My Light. This is for you – only for you.* Jonal's love bathed Tonas's brain in passion.

Tonas's thoughts fragmented. *Need you, want you, love you. Oh Goddess, take me."*

Golden hair streamed over the plush tapestry pillows as Tonas's head and body bucked with need. Jonal moved so his mouth was positioned directly over Tonas's cock. It stood at attention like a steel girder. He cupped Tonas's balls in one hand, gently squeezing, rubbing then releasing. Jonal kissed and licked the sensitive area where Tonas's leg met his torso. He breathed in the essence of his lover. He used his tongue and teeth to pull the little ring of promise. Marking the place his shaft ached to be placed.

Jonal bit along the side. The velvet skin of Tonas's cock burned his tongue. His mouth plunged, taking Tonas in all at once. His mouth kept a steady rhythm. Up and down, Jonal's tongue curled around Tonas's girth. Jonal varied the beat. Stopping, he drove his fingernail, then tongue into the slit, trying to penetrate his lover in the only place he could currently pierce. His tongue licked the sensitive underside revealed by the foreskin, now pulled back tightly by the force of blood rushed into Tonas's need. He licked and sucked so hard his cheeks hollowed. He moved his hands over Tonas's tight ass, rubbing and

squeezing the cheeks in promise. He relaxed his throat to take Tonas in deeper than he ever had before.

"Firefly, please...oh Goddess, swallow me, make me come..."

Jonal used the link. *You are so beautiful. I'm so lucky; how could you think I'd ever let you go? I hunger for you inside me. In my dreams, I take you into me and we become as one, whether it is the two of us alone, or the three of us together.*

In and out, in and out, Jonal's mouth was relentless. He sucked, tracing his teeth around the foreskin, slipping his nail into the slit, down again to the balls, the perineum. Tonas bucked again. Jonal lightly slapped his ass, and then bit down hard on the tight white cheek next to the forbidden hole marking the entrance to paradise. Jonal sent a silent promise to the future. His mouth moved in rhythm with his stroking hand. He took Tonas fully, swallowing him whole. This time he accelerated the pace. He was frantically licking, biting—sucking harder and harder.

Jonal gloried in Tonas's hands, which moved over him, wildly now. Jonal felt Tonas's fingers pressing against his scalp, running through his hair, pressing down on his head. He could tell Tonas was ready. He felt the burn crawl up his partner's back, the intense heat build in Tonas's belly. His own balls tightened and pulled up to his cock.

Tonas began to shout, "Jonal, Jonal, love you, Jonal, harder, please, Goddess." Jonal stopped moving, letting Tonas fuck his mouth, controlling the speed.

"I love you, Firefly, please...Oh Goddess, don't stop." Jonal felt the white, hot ropes of Tonas's seed shoot into his mouth and down his throat. Jonal worked Tonas's cock so that he caught every drop. He let Tonas's cock soften, and then pulled his mouth from the shaft, licking and rubbing his face against it as he retreated. Jonal laid his head on Tonas's hip, moving his silky hair over Tonas's loins. His hand still lightly stroked Tonas's belly. *I love you, Tonas, now and always*, Jonal sent mind-to-mind, along with his overwhelming feelings of happiness and gratitude that he, Jonal, had been his light's choice.

## *Chapter Five*

*I had been told that the training procedure with cats was difficult. It's not. Mine had me trained in two days.*

--Bill Dana

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B113*

*Earth Calendar: July 23rd*

Jonal entered their Quarters from the door that led from Brightstar's common corridor. The Quarters' lights were dimmed and it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust.

"You look amused." Tonas smiled, leaning against the wall that led to the galley. Jonal took a breath and drew in the distinct aroma of Transian tea, a stimulant that became all too familiar during the war.

"And you look tired. Were you up all night again, staring at Anya? I thought you would sleep after we loved, My Light."

"She kept flailing her arms with agitation, moving all over the bed." Tonas paused and greeted Jonal with a kiss. "I laid my body over hers so she wouldn't hurt herself. As long as I held her, she was quiet. I might have slept some. I expected you earlier."

"Was there a problem on the Bridge, Firefly?" Tonas asked.

"Everything is routine. I turned the shift to Saxon. He and Lunas haven't found a fem in this group. They don't seem disturbed, but I'm going to try and insure their command of the next expedition. They might have a better opportunity to meet prospective fems with a treaty

in place. They volunteered to alternate over the next few shifts—give us time with Anya.” Jonal sighed.

“That was decent of them,” said Tonas.

“I told them we appreciated their honor and courtesy. We have been very, very fortunate in our crew. We have asked much and they have always given more.” Jonal answered.

“Don't forget, Jonal, you trained them well.”

*It was always a joint effort, My Light. We work together well, but no work will be done if you are too exhausted to lift your head from the pillow. Go back to bed, lie down beside her. If she wakes, she won't be alone. I'll join you soon, I'm afraid I need the cleansing unit.*

“I don't want her to wake alone,” said Tonas aloud. “She was always alone, before, except for the little furry Beast. I can't understand a society that claims to love offspring; yet puts those without clan into an institution.”

Jonal said, “I believe that is what causes her dark dreams. Even the idea of an institution isn't as bad as giving the young to women who have no maternal instinct to raise. Could these stupid humans not see that women who want no partner and join an organization dedicated to celibacy, would not be a good fit to teach the young?”

“Either the young are a burden, or to the more idealistic among the celibates, a mission—an invitation to turn them into copies of themselves. If a femspring can not be as they are, she must suffer great bouts of regret or shame.” Tonas answered. “We are all raised to meet the expectations of our society. If we fail, we suffer remorse. Even if we fail at something we were never meant to do.” Tonas looked down and grabbed at Jonal's arm, “You are hurt.”

*Don't scold, my love.* Jonal laughed and spoke aloud, “That's where I was, with the Beast. He drew blood this time. I need another cleansing.” Jonal ruefully held up his arm for inspection.

Tonas's brows furrowed as he looked at the scratch. “It's not deep, but you should cleanse and swab it. Those little claws are razor sharp. The Beast is a compact, but has his defenses at the ready.” Tonas smiled, the smile reaching the bright green eyes. “What did you do to the poor Beast that he felt the need to abuse your magnificent form?” he asked archly.

Jonal said, “I just went down to the hold to feed and play with him again. I swear he is swifter, stealthier, and has better reflexes than a Snarkcat. I grabbed at the bounce globe and he clawed my arm. He immediately sheathed his claws, but drew blood. I believe he was under

the illusion that his reflexes were better than mine. I got the globe, but paid with a scratch. He looked at me as if he couldn't figure out how it happened," Jonal chuckled at the memory.

"Didn't Mark say the claws were to be trimmed?"

"And who do you suppose is going to attempt that, the cargo crew?" Jonal asked. "Hardened Warriors all, veterans of the Zyptz War and countless smaller skirmishes, yet they quake in fear of a 20 lo Beast."

"He is fierce when he hisses and his coat stands on end. Makes him look bigger than 20 los, but I believe that's the objective—looking bigger. Some kind of survival mechanism. Is it true that the crew want little to do with him?"

"The cargo crew will feed him the kibble. They will even play with the bounce ball and others of his toys, but they balk at the stuff in the tin. There is also the stink of his piss in the container. We also need to find a better substance to contain his scat and absorb the odor. They loathe changing that pan. That stuff the corpsman gave Flagen is useless. It turns liquid piss into a piss clump. I can't see the benefit there. I think that's going to remain one of our chores. Cargo Chief Kassan said he absolutely refuses to change it again. We have to find a better way." Jonal shook his head and smiled. "Maybe I'll set one of the idle science officers on it. Medical's borne the brunt this mission."

"Notation: Private Log, Jonal. Have science look into odor and scatcat management."

Tonas's face contorted with laughter. "And who will get that duty? The Alliance science advisors may be Warriors, but their attitude is mutinous when assigned research unbecoming. Making Beast piss and scat scant fits the book definition of unbecoming. Tack on 'Waste of valuable resources and Diversion of Discretionary Funds,' both Codex offenses, if I recall correctly. You fill in the blanks, we've jumped onto this path often." Tonas finished with a flourish.

"But Tonas, my love, we have jumped, but we have never landed. After ten cycles, our records are still free of Codex Findings. Codex Hearings, I'll grant you many, but not findings. Rimmed the edge, but saved by the letters." Jonal's eyes sparkled as he recalled how very close to the line they strayed.

"PTA, Primary Trade Application. Those three letters saved our sacs many times." Tonas smiled in return.

Jonal's inner demons quelled, a relaxed and happy Tonas had migrated to the partners' desk and set down the mug of Transian. "Why

don't you dump the tea and we'll share some Asta? Thanks to Saxon and Lunas, we're free from duty for a few shifts." Jonal said.

"As Mark would say, I'm OK with that," Tonas replied. "You win, we ask science. Who was the last one to go on report?"

"I'll ask the Chief. He'd probably be delighted to make a recommendation. He can do more with spit and tape, than science and engineering can with molecular re-assemblers. He can tell me which one of the splitters has been giving him grief." Jonal crossed over to the credenza and poured.

"Firefly, you have half of Tigger's coat on your uniform. It looks like he danced over you, not the bounce globe. Did he attempt to sneak out of containment again? He has tried to slip through my legs at least once a rising. Then he makes that horrible yowling noise when he's thwarted. I feel an occasional dart of a weak probe into my mind just before he starts. I'll stake credits that he knows she is up here. You know, as a small predator, he might do with fresh cooked meat. It might make him feel more settled."

"The only thing that's going to settle the Beast is Anya. Maybe I can find some more information in the data we uploaded on feeding and ridding it of scat. I had the information put on library crystals. The organizational system is clumsy, but navigable. We uploaded the Library of Congress and links from their data net to other sources. They still lack a common tongue, but the translation chips are effective," Jonal said. "The data gathered is in printed format with illustrated text. From what I've been able to research, cats are clean, intelligent animals armed with quick reflexes and stealth. They are extremely flexible and finely muscled, to say nothing of beautiful. It says much for Anya that she prefers this pet over others the Earthen people keep." Jonal sipped half of the Asta and passed the small tumbler across to Tonas.

Tonas to Jonal along the link: *I think Sarran warriors have a lot in common with these cats.*" He arched his brow. *Beautiful, but deadly when crossed. Loyal, intelligent – did I say beautiful?* Tonas moved forward and embraced Jonal, his lips and tongue across the shell of his ear. *You taste of Asta and Jonal, my favorite flavors. Thank you for last night, Firefly.*

*You know I enjoyed it as much, if not more, than you, My Light.*" answered Jonal. Then aloud, "Why don't you finish the Asta and go lie down beside Anya? Saxon and Lunas have Brightstar covered; I think we are a bit superfluous. I'm going to medic this scratch and then to the

cleanser. I could use a bit more sleep myself, and a lot more Tonas. I'll join you when I'm done."

\*\*\*\*

Anya slowly woke, fully conscious this time. She heard no codes in the halls, smelled no antiseptic. She was on her back, propped by dozens of silken pillows rather than a standard hospital rising bed.

Still afraid to open her eyes, Anya's hand clenched reflexively on the bed covers. *What was this?* Her long, slender fingers moved across the bed covering, infinitely soft, smooth, almost the perfect combination of silk and satin. As she rubbed her thumb against her middle finger, she noted her nails had grown and wondered how long she had been unconscious.

Her senses seemed heightened. Scents began to tease at her nostrils—spice and musk. A second scent beguiled her senses, was it cloves and vanilla? Anya heard a very faint hum, almost imperceptible. It vibrated through her subtly. Machinery? Noise seemed muffled, soundproofed, carpeted. *Who the hell carpeted a hospital room? I am having the ICU crazies.*

Any medical professional who worked in or around patients in an intensive care unit knew the syndrome. A patient who spent more than a week in a unit would lose their hold on reality. Although quite sane, individuals reported hallucinations—blends of fact and fantasy. When she had been a medical student on ICU rotation, one of the patients thought she was housed in a bed in back of a theater, kidnapped by witches trying to trap her daughter. Dr. Stern had spent considerable time trying to talk the patient down. She finally calmed, but wasn't herself again until she left the ICU.

But, this place didn't smell like a hospital or a hospice. *God, not a hospice.* She had awakened only to die! Fat tears began to roll down her cheeks.

*Wait, Anya, she told herself sternly. That underlying buzz is not medical equipment. You know what medical equipment sounds like.*

She took a mental inventory of her body.

There are no IV Lines, no tubes; she briefly remembered drinking through a straw and a beautifully designed tumbler.

*This cannot be a hospice or a hospital.*

Anya banked her emotional responses, making a deliberate effort to deal with the facts her senses had presented. With eyes still closed, Anya

inhaled deeply. *What was that, a regular rhythm in and out, the even breath of sleep?*

Beyond that, Anya listened. *Was it running water?*

She opened her eyes, keeping them open this time. She gingerly moved one arm, then the other, followed by each leg in turn. They responded sluggishly to her commands. She ran her fingers lightly over her body, feeling for her ribs. Her stomach was now a hollow above her mons. Her breasts felt the same, her thighs smaller. Her best professional guess was that she had lost thirty or more pounds. The water stopped. She heard heavily cushioned footsteps, but suddenly she was too exhausted to care where she was. She closed her eyes, just for a minute longer.

\*\*\*\*

*"Pa Channa, Pa Channa, you must wake now and eat something."*

Anya awoke again with a start. She looked to her right toward the voice and was confronted by the biggest, most beautiful man she had ever seen. Large, troubled, emerald eyes with gold flecks scanned her body. She felt a draft and looked down to discover she was naked under a gauze-like golden sheet, soft as silk but too sheer for modesty. Two strong, muscled arms pulled her into sitting position. The room was immense, decorated in a combination of medieval castle and sultan suite. Golden sheers hung from a ceiling frame surrounding seven hand-painted tiles. The gauze wrapped sinuously over four ornately carved posts tied with braided metallic ropes. The walls were tufted in soft golden suede. All of the fabrics had opalescence, an inner shimmer. Anya kept searching the room, consciously avoiding the man in front of her.

The furniture was built in, made of something that resembled fruitwood with a transparent ivory wash. A delicately carved tree motif decorated the face. The tree bore three branches from the main root. The leaves were green and vine-like, the fruit clustered and painted in gold leaf. It was familiar, yet alien. She stiffened. *Nope, you are not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.*

*Look at me Pa Channa,* a voice whispered.

*Did he whisper? Did I hear that? Oh my God! He didn't speak, his lips didn't move. I'm not going to panic, I'm not going to panic,* she repeated over



and over in her mind like a mantra. *I will not panic. I'm a physician, a scientist. I will not panic.*

The man was half-naked and wore armbands.

*Who are you? What kind of place is this? How long have I been here? I have to leave. I have to get up. Where the hell am I? Am I dead?*

*Wake up now, Anya, she told herself sternly, thinking that it must be a dream.*

She closed her eyes, opened them again. He was still half-naked, and still had armbands. She panicked and began to struggle, banging her arms on the golden chest, fingers catching on the light brush of hair arcing over his pecs. The giant held her gently but firmly, moving one hand in a slow circle on her back. She bucked.

"Don't hurt yourself, Pa Channa," the blond Adonis said in a firm baritone. She tried to kick.

Another pair of arms grabbed and held Anya by the hips, just above the bone. *Oh, no, Anya told herself, I am not getting turned on by this. Sister Edwana was right, too many romance novels did fry my brain.*

"Calm, Pa Mici, don't be frightened It's all right. No one means you harm. Pa Mici, shushhhhh." She felt the caress moving the smooth fabric of the sheet along her thigh.

*I recognize that deep basso voice, Anya thought. The sweet, unfamiliar juice, the beautiful tumbler was no dream. It came from the left; the other voice was from the left. She turned and met navy blue eyes. Anya took in the unruly midnight blue-black hair, the scar on the right side of his face, and skin, lots of bare skin.*

*Good God, I'm lost in a Conan movie, Anya thought. She began to fight in earnest. Anya couldn't move. Their arms were like steel bands; their combined bodies were granite weights across her chest and legs.*

Anya then did the one thing that she despised in all heroines, in all the movies and all the novels. She began to cry.

The two barbarians looked at each other. Typical men, they didn't know what to do.

\*\*\*\*

Tigger could not figure where he was or how he had gotten here. He woke up from a nap and found himself confined in a strange kind of cage. Jumping down from his perch on the couch, he walked the perimeter. There were no obvious bars or fencing, but his infrared vision

told Tigger that there was a wavy barrier around the whole of the space. Some of the things around him were from the apartment he and Anya had shared. But this wasn't home. Tigger recognized their couch, the shelving, books and Anya's desk and chair. His toys, his dishes, bed and litter box were all there, and within reach and within the confines of the barrier. Containers formed a line against one of the invisible walls. He went over to his box and sniffed. Ewww, he thought, cheap litter.

Tigger did not adjust well to confinement.

Except for the one trip to the vet in his carrier (Mama had warned him that would happen if he threw his lot in with the humans) he had no limits except for those he imposed on himself. His feral mother had been hit by a car when he was three months old. She had been with Tigger and his littermates long enough to teach them how to hunt and to use their special feline senses. He had enough time in the wild to become an efficient hunter. But Mama had died and that was what happened to cats that were feral. Anya had gotten him from the shelter a week after he arrived. She was responsible for taking him out of the cage he hated. He had His Anya, which was enough. Once in his new home, he quickly learned to unlatch windows and open doors. When Anya wasn't around, he roamed. He protected Anya and most of the building.

He loved her dearly as she loved him, but as a human, she had no idea how much she actually received in return. Tigger was the reason she never saw a rat, mouse, or roach in her small space. He tried as best he could to keep her from any danger he sensed either coming or at hand. On Independence Day, he had physically thrown himself at her to try and prevent her from leaving the apartment. Anya had gently put him down and sternly told him she had to go to work. He yowled, scratched the wall, even broke a few of her knickknacks. She had still left, although somewhat later than she wanted, and just as he had expected, she didn't return.

Tigger was a very intelligent cat. He had listened to the reports on the televisions and radios he could hear from the window in the kitchen that looked out over the airshaft. He heard about the sickness and he knew Anya was a healer. Tigger had enough food. Anya stored the food in a covered plastic pail in the kitchen and Tigger could flip the lid. Someone came from the hospital to change his box and give him fresh water. If they didn't, water was always available from the toilet. He missed his canned food, but mostly he missed Anya. He paced the apartment, ate, drank and paced some more. He didn't roam, couldn't take the chance to

miss her if she stopped at home. He slept, but not the deep, good sleep he slept on Anya's lap. He took catnaps, with one eye open and an ear cocked, listening for her step, her key in the door lock. Fourteen days after she left, he just knew. Anya had the sickness. Most cats were fond of their human companions, but Tigger loved Anya fiercely. She took him out of that cage and gave him love. That day, the day he realized Anya wasn't coming home, was the last day he remembered until he woke up here.

Anya's clothing, music, and some knickknacks were in the containers. He knew that by smell. Tigger had pried the lids from several of them out of boredom. From the time he woke up in this new place, he felt the subsonic buzz that told him he was in motion. But the motion was different from the forward drive and swing of the bus he and Anya rode to the vet. The buzz, along with his acute feline hearing and other senses, told him that he was a long way from home. What was worse, there was no fresh Anya smell. Different humans came in and out on a regular schedule to change the box and give him fresh water and kibble. None of them smelled like Anya and he was getting agitated.

Tigger had done something that few felines did with their human companions. He had linked with Anya. Anya was a good human. She gave freely of herself to Tigger and to other humans. It hadn't taken Tigger long to decide to give feline link to Anya. Very few humans received the link, and of those who did, none but those with psi training knew they had it. Psi was not an ability that the humans cultivated. Maybe that would change, but it wasn't Tigger's concern. Tigger watched over Anya through the link. It was through the link he realized she had fallen ill, but now, somehow, the link was blocked. It wasn't broken; Anya was still alive, and he didn't believe she was far away. That would feel different. No, Tigger knew the link had been blocked for some reason, and he was determined to find out who was capable of blocking the link and why.

Tigger tried to read the humans who fed him and changed his box, but got nothing. It was weird—they had psi but were locked. Most humans were psi deaf and blind, and were unable to form or detect a psi link. Most cats were psi deaf, too. His mama had shown him and his littermates how to link. She also warned that most cats and almost all humans couldn't. Tigger didn't know why, and neither did Mama. But Tigger accepted linking and his ability to read minds as natural, and

used it to protect his Anya. He found it strange and irritating that they shut him out.

Tigger began to hiss and growl at the males who entered his area. He figured the more noise and trouble he made, the sooner someone higher up in the human chain would come. The higher up the chain, the more they would know. Eventually, someone would know about Anya and take him to her. So when they didn't react to his hiss and growl, he used claws. And finally, after three days, he got results.

Two males came down to the enclosure together. Tigger could tell that they were in charge. He could smell the authority when they were within a hundred feet of the enclosure. Within seventy-five feet, he smelled Anya. But Anya's smell was a bit off. The dark one was Jonal, the light one, Tonas. They called each other by those names.

He yowled when they came, trying to tell them to take him to Anya. He used his psi. They were psi capable, but they deliberately blocked him. He tried to sneak past them, tried to follow them, and tried to psi them. He tried everything—one at a time and all together. They threw his Nerf ball and played. He jumped on their laps. He purred, he yowled. Ahhhhhhhhhh!

Tigger perceived some things by smell and cat sense. Jonal and Tonas were mates, and they were also Bonded to Anya. Humans, at least in Tigger's experience, did not mate in threes. He knew his nose and psi sense could be completely trusted. Cat senses didn't assume; when they knew, they knew. Cats didn't equivocate; friend or foe, predator or prey, object or person, things were either one or the other. Both of these males were mates to Anya, as well as to each other. Not something in his prior experience, but true nonetheless. Tigger looked forward to raising many healthy litters with Anya and her men. But first, Jonal and Tonas needed to learn that Tigger's place was beside his Anya, not here in this container. On the eighth day, the dark one showed up, just as Tigger's patience was at its limit. The litter stunk, he had no canned food, and his water was stale. Jonal brought out the ball and Tigger clawed him.

\*\*\*\*

Tonas kept talking softly to Anya, quietly whispering, as he would to a wild bronc. "Shush, Pa Channa, my darling, shush. Channa, no-one will hurt you here. Please, Channa. You break our hearts with these tears."

Tonas looked over at Jonal. *Have you any ideas? I can't watch her cry. Her fear and sadness overwhelm my soul.*

Anya gave up the struggle, though her body was still racked by sobs. She leaned into Tonas's caress.

Jonal sent to Tonas. *Mine as well. She is so fem, so slight. I'm afraid for her. She can't have a sedative. Wait...maybe the Beast will calm her. Mark is always talking about the effects of tame animals on humans.*

*That's it! Call Mark and transport the Beast,"* Tonas thought. Aloud he whispered, "Pa Channa we have something for you, something to make you happy. I swear, Pa Channa, calm down and let me wipe your face." Anya began to breathe deeper and tried to control her tears.

Jonal moved away from the bed and started through the door into the living area, roaring at communication. "Jonal, Admiral, Prince, FireClan. Doctor Stern, report to the Admirals' Quarters. Cargo, prepare the Beast for immediate transport to Admirals' Quarters, now."

Tonas listened to Jonal give orders as he gently stroked Anya's hair and arms. She was so beautiful, so fine and fragile. He had never believed an alien woman would be as attractive to him in the physical sense as one of the Sarran fem. Anya took his breath away. He ran his large, long fingered hand over her skin, breathing in the delicate, but rich, floral scent. It was lavender, the bottles from her Quarters said. The pale, silken skin was enticing, so soft and so very clear. You could almost see the veins below the surface. Across her nose and cheeks was a dusting of tiny golden flecks. That drew attention to her ice blue eyes. He had never seen another creature blessed with such feminine beauty. She was thin from the illness, but he and Jonal would take care of that, take care of her always, if she let them.

"That's it Pa Channa, breathe," Tonas murmured, as he placed a light kiss over her forehead. She was quiet now, and her sobs had diminished to sniffs, then stopped, replaced by deep breaths. Her body no longer shook, but she was still tense in his arms.

*".Merrrrrrrrrrrow."*

Anya jerked up, and looked around. *Impossible*, she thought.

*"Merrrrrrrrrrrow, row."*

Tonas smiled. The bed shook slightly, and then the Beast pounced. It walked up on Anya's legs and started to rub against her face as his claws kneaded the delicate sheet, pulling threads. Tonas moved and placed Anya beside him. He withdrew his arms, giving Anya space to reach Tigger.

"Bzzzzzz, pzzzzzzzz."

"Tigger? Tigger, oh my God, Tigger. It's you, it's really you. Tigger, Tigger."

Jonal was right behind him, *I actually felt a push in my head, and it wasn't Anya.*

*I really believe that her Beast has more psi potential than the planet's human population,* Tonas replied. Their minds brushed Anya's.

*Well, more than most of them,* Tonas conceded, as he smiled at Jonal. The expression transformed Tonas's stern countenance to true magnificence. His green eyes were lit with happiness.

## *Chapter Six*

*Honor isn't about making the right choices. It's about dealing with the consequences.*

--Midori Koto

Anya's slender fingers slid across the white and orange tiger cat, performing a discrete inspection. Tigger had a pouch; he looked well fed and hydrated. His eyes were clear and not runny. His coat needed brushing, evidenced by the amount of hair he shed with each stroke. The tender pink pads of his four paws were unabridged. His claws were much too long. *I can't avoid them forever by inspecting Tig. I need answers.* Anya cringed. Her first question was straight out of a B movie script. *I refuse to ask where I am. If this is a B movie, I will not follow the script.*

Still avoiding the combined gaze of the anxious men, she gave the room another quick sweep. Beyond the bed was a sitting area with three overstuffed chairs and two side tables. To the right of the chairs was the entry. The other door, she assumed, led to the toilet. The huge men stood between her and both doors. She was naked, clinging to a cat, and had just had a meltdown. There was only one option left. She survived sixteen years in an orphanage by knowing when to yield. It was time to punt. Anya stuck out her chin, raised her head, and looked directly down her nose in her best Sister Edwana imitation. "I am Dr. Anya Forrest, and you are?"

"So formal, Pa Mici," he laughed. "I am Jonal, Prince of FireClan, Planet Sarran. The golden giant by your side is Tonas, Prince of LightClan. We are the Admirals and Commanders of the Galactic

Defense Force and," his deep voice lowered to a bare whisper, "your BondMates."

"We stayed at your side through your recovery, Pa Channa. The Medical Officers released you into our care. You were exhausted." The blond, Tonas, whispered into her hair. She pulled back, wiggling toward the left of the bed.

"Wait a minute, back up. My what?" she stuttered. *Careful, Anya, she cautioned herself. These guys are really big. They also have your hormones working overtime, and that impairs your judgment. I need to slow this down.* Anya's pale sapphire eyes bounced from one set of perfect pecs to the other. *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it is the cast of Gladiator, with perfect buns. Why now? I've spent years with my libido safely in the freezer.*

Sister Edwana's voice rang in her head. *Consequences, Miss Forrester, where there is lust there are consequences. You are a consequence of inappropriate lust. By your very existence, you exhaust the largess of the parish. You consume parish resources that could be more fittingly applied in missionary work and in the propagation of the faith. It is your sacred duty to repay that debt to God, and to the good people of this parish. Reading this trash will bring about the same fate that befell your mother.*" She was twenty-six-years-old, and whenever the demon lust had struck, that voice played on continuous loop until the lust passed.

*But it's not passing. Edwana was right, I am totally screwed up. They are telling me that I belong to both of them. I'm turned on, not freaked out.* Aloud, Anya said softly, "First, can you please tell me where I am and how I got here. Maybe then I can handle the eh...other thing."

"I feel your anxiety, Pa Channa. Why are you frightened? It is our honor and our duty to care for you, to see to your comfort. Jonal and I could not let you wake alone. Who is it that distresses you so?"

Anya's heart did a little dance. She flustered this Adonis of a man? She had no idea how to react. Here she was, naked under a sheet, in a room with two men whose mere presence made her nether regions damp, and *he* was flustered. Neither Sister Rose nor Miss Manners had prepared her to deal with this situation.

A disembodied voice broke her musing, "Admirals, Dr. Stern." Visible relief flooded Tonas's harsh features.

"Mark—Dr. Mark Stern," Anya said. "Manhattan General's Ma...what?"

"Tonas, Admiral, Price of LightClan," the blond said into the air. "Admit Dr. Stern to Admirals' Quarters."



"Mark," Jonal said. "In here."

Anya's mouth dropped and her eyes opened wide in disbelief as Dr. Mark Stern, her Dr. Stern, MGMC's Chief of staff, walked into the bedroom.

"Finally decided to join the living, Dr. Forrest?" Mark said.

Anya sputtered, "Dr. Stern, Mark?" She looked down again at her nakedness under the gauzy sheet—with hardened nipples, no less. Anya felt the flush of heat that crept up her face. "I need a..."

Jonal stood in front of the armoire, tracing his fingers around a cluster of the gilded fruit. The front panels disappeared, revealing a tumbled rainbow of color jammed to overflowing. He retrieved a robe of incandescent material that shimmered like silk when it moved. He carefully lifted Tigger to her side, and then tucked the robe around her body.

Anya, abashed at the casual intimacy of the act, blinked. "Thank you, Jonal," she said, her voice conveying disbelief. His gaze was warm. Navy eyes stroked her body. Anya shivered. *Both men are so handsome, it's almost devastating.* She brought the open robe up to her chin. Tigger settled back on her lap as if nothing were amiss. Anya felt the dampness at the juncture of her thighs. She lowered her eyes and pretended to look away. Anya had quite a bit of practice as a schoolgirl in peering at someone, unseen, using those lush lashes as camouflage. Bare chests, both well-developed. Her physician's eyes told her that neither of these guys were gym junkies. They did real exercise. Mmmm.

*What is wrong with me?* These two refugees from Wrestling Mania were making her body thrum with heat. *They aren't even my type.*

*Do you have a type? If you do, you've been seeing too many men, dear.* There it was, Anya sighed, Sister Rose's implanted devil, the Catholic Schoolgirl conscience.

*Whenever I even contemplate being naughty, it shows up to taunt me. I've contemplated naughty so much, that I could name him and know how he took his coffee. Conscience, I've managed to conquer once or twice.*

It was the other demon that she couldn't shake, Consequence. Sister Rose was right, she didn't have a type. She'd spent her life standing between the devil Conscience and the demon Consequences, arguing with them and not doing a darn thing. She was twenty-six-years-old and a virgin to boot. Edwana and Rose had made an impression and done their duty.

## *The Sarran Plague*

*You have found your match, Anya, and it just happens to come as a set.* Anya's body jerked up. She narrowed her eyes, staring down each of the three men. *That was not my conscience speaking.*

"Umm, Dr. Stern, may I speak with you privately?" Anya asked.

She watched as Mark looked at the Pantheon Escapees. The dark one answered in a hard voice that brokered no arguments, "Ah, Pa Mici, anything you have to say can surely be heard by your BondMates."

Anya heard the steel in his voice, but what really intrigued her was the tenderness of his expression. The navy eyes sparkled in invitation. His glossy black curls fell in front of his face. Her fingers itched to touch them. She clenched one hand into the gauzy fabric. The other stroked Tigger with more vigor. She caught his tail. He objected, stood up, circled, and laid down again—his tail tucked neatly under his body.

Tonas chuckled at Tigger's air of affront. "Ah, Pa Channa, you must know that we cannot bear to leave you alone." Tonas breathed into her neck. He slid his fingers along the length of her arm. The caress was hypnotic. Anya tried a strategic retreat to the left and bumped into his buddy. She was well and truly flanked.

Sighing, she realized if she insisted on a private discussion, the consequences could be of a nature she refused to contemplate. Anya acquiesced. "OK then, Mark, have you any idea where we are and how we all got here?" She waved her hand to include Tigger, and almost got Tonas in the nose. A small glimmer of satisfaction swept her face, then left instantly. Her expression carefully schooled, she adopted a demeanor of poise and polite interest.

*But can you screen your thoughts as well as you can your beautiful visage?* There it was again. *I'm acquiring a third voice. I'm channeling Sybil,* Anya inwardly groaned.

"Anya, please excuse my informality, but I think we are all beyond that," Mark said, as he carefully eyed the half-naked men. Mark's reaction to them told Anya that these two were powerful, indeed, if they had Mark Stern skirting round their tempers.

"I'll give you the abbreviated version," Mark said. "Anya, the Plague was manufactured by an alien species. They geared it to mitochondrial DNA and ovulation cycles."

Anya thought for a moment. "That accounts for the staggered onset...Mark, why didn't we see it?" Anya shook her head. "It wouldn't have done any good if we had. With half the population down, we didn't

have the resources." She paused, "I noticed a difference in severity of the flares at onset. Mitigating factors?"

"Yes," Mark replied. "Fertility cycles determined onset. Immune reaction was determined by a genetic component that was triggered by potential for psychic development."

Mark turned to the Sarrans and explained, "ESP or psychic research has been largely dismissed on Earth as a refuge for New Age scam artists. We never recognized the potential. Psychic abilities lay there with all of the other so-called *junk* DNA. By the way, UFO researches were also labeled as cranks." Mark looked wryly at the giants on her sides and then back to Anya. "See where that led us."

"Where do they come in?" Anya asked.

Mark's answer was both quiet and direct. "Tonas's and Jonal's people—the Sarrans—brought us the vaccine and antidote." He continued, "Three cycles ago, the same aliens that attacked Earth attacked Sarran."

Anya's body slammed back into the pillows, pulled under by a wave of grief and anguish. She smelled smoke and charred metal, a memory that wasn't hers. Tonas's chest heaved. His normal golden skin-tone paled to a ghostly white. Jonal trembled. Her mind was awash in a sea of anger, guilt, and despair. Then her vision cleared as the men at her side regained control. Anya knew she had some latent empathic ability; it was one of the reasons she became a physician. But that had been strong, beyond anything she had ever *received* before.

Tonas took up the narrative, his voice harsh. "The Zyptz made war on humanoids for centuries. They are an insectoid species unwilling or unable to share habitat, with any other form of intelligent life. It takes a nester queen and her drones only 15 cycles to strip a planet to bare rock. Any fem they found clinging to life; they sold into slavery. The men, they tortured. I won't even begin to describe what was done to the children.

The Galactic Alliance negotiated and made treaties. They broke them all. We attempted containment. They became more aggressive. Finally, the Alliance decided to push them out of humanoid space and force their expansion in another direction. We had them on the run, but they found the ultimate weapon. They seeded our world with Plague. There was no vaccine."

He turned slightly to Jonal. Something passed between them. They were lovers. Anya couldn't explain how she knew, she just did. She felt

encompassed in their physical need for each other. Tonas's eyes were suspiciously bright. He blinked and lowered his head. She felt, rather than heard Jonal soothe him.

*Where do I fit in all of this,* she wondered.

Jonal picked up the story, giving Tonas time to recover. "It took the combined science of Sarran and the Galactic Alliance two cycles to find an antidote and a vaccine. It was difficult. All of our fems succumbed." The basso voice was tight, clipped. Another wave of emotion bathed her consciousness—emptiness, profound loss.

Anya's mind spun. All of them, gone? How unimaginable, genocide on a planetary scale? Her brain roiled with questions. She watched the men. How did they cope? How did they deal with that kind of massive loss? It finally all clicked. Oh my God, Earth—the insects—they tried to do that to Earth.

"Mark, did Earth survive? Why did these insects attack us? Were we in the way?"

"It was biology," Mark stated flatly. "Our DNA and reproductive functions are the closest to Sarran DNA of all the known humanoid populations."

Tonas spoke gently. "Pa Channa, the Zyptz sought any race compatible with our people. We hoped we had time. You are in a remote corner..."

"We would have embraced death, but for the existence of this planet, your species," Jonal said. "It's why we continued the research, found the vaccine. It gave us hope and a reason to continue. We knew they would look. It was a race, one we almost lost."

"But we succeeded, Firefly," Tonas said. He picked up Anya's hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed the palm. Pure, raw desire shot straight from Anya's palm to her channel. Her body screamed for more. Anya straightened her back and shoulders to focus away from desire and back to the information. She needed to understand her situation.

She cleared her throat, snatched her hand from Tonas's and placed it firmly back on Tigger. Her action was clearly at war with her need. "So, the Sarran saved the people of Earth?" she asked the room at large.

"Yes. We lost very few on the planet," Mark said, rather tentatively. "There were about 4500 ICU cases too far into flare to be saved by conventional means. They evacuated 4500 to the Brightstar. Anya, the Zyptz tailored the Plague virus to aggressively attack Sarran DNA. The differential between Sarran and other humanoid genetic code is psi

talent. Any woman with latent or undeveloped psi talent was more susceptible to attack."

Anya hardened her voice. "I understand that much, Mark. They saved us. I know I am aboard, I'm empathic, I fit the profile. Four thousand five hundred women with latent psi in their DNA needed advanced medical facilities, facilities Earth didn't possess. I'm grateful I'm alive. That still doesn't explain why I'm here in this bed, rather than an infirmary. Could we get to the part where you explain why I'm naked in the harem with the two sultans, or is this the ICU crazies?"

Jonal attempted to pull Anya into his arms. He was soothing again. She felt it. Her ability to *read* these guys was expanding exponentially.

"Pa Mici, I told you before, you are sound of mind. You are right where you should be, with Tonas and me." Anya jerked away from Jonal. Tigger hissed. She was caught in between them.

"You may think I belong here, but it's what I think that counts. And I think the jury's still out." Anya tucked the robe around her and said in a tight voice, "The rest of it, Mark, now." There was a connection here she wasn't quite making. She knew she had a bad case of the hots for these two. The question remained: How did these guys make her hormones sing? What was this Bond business?

"The U.S. government had been in negotiation with the Sarrans since the eighth of July. The government caught the Zyptz contaminating the atmosphere from a spy satellite feed on July 4th. The Zyptz cloaked and were invisible to our technology until the Sarrans arrived early on the sixth, and began blowing them out of the air. The Sarrans were a day behind them. It was no coincidence that the Zyptz found Earth. The Sarran Elders were worried about security. Brightstar fleet was aware their mission was probably compromised."

"Too many people knew too much about our arrangements with the Alliance, Pa Channa," Tonas interjected, as he idly began to stroke her thigh. Anya took his arm and, with a sigh of exasperation, moved it away.

"Does Your Highness have trouble with the translation of the word no?" Anya asked sweetly. "Continue, please."

*She, like her Tigger, has claws, Firefly. We swim in deep waters,* Tonas sent to Jonal.

Aloud, Jonal picked up the narrative. "We chose your country, by tracing the satellite signal. From our own experience, we knew what to expect planetside. Since we traced the signal back, we knew we were

expected. We could have come in cloaked, but we had no reason for subterfuge."

As if finishing Jonal's thought, Tonas continued, "After disabling the enemy, we attempted immediate contact with the signal source. Your government hailed us on all monitored channels."

"Anya," Mark said, "Jonal and Tonas were given a mission, not only to save Earth, but also to save the Sarrans. They offered our government the vaccine and antidote, no strings attached. They presented Earth with unlimited prospects for trade and technology transfer. Brightstar brought an invitation for Earth to join the Galactic Alliance, something that would not have been achieved by Earth in our lifetime, if not for the Zyptz. In return, the Sarrans only begged for the opportunity to present their situation to our women. They needed volunteers—women to go back to Sarran and help them repopulate the planet. Their Elders had thought this through; they had contracts prepared with very generous terms. Anyone who volunteered would have been amply rewarded."

"The Elders felt we wouldn't be able to link with Earthen fems, Pa Mici. They were wrong," Jonal whispered.

"The White House refused their offer, Anya, flat out refused. So many women suffered. Dammit, Anya, it's hard to explain this. Fucking politics," Mark exploded. "Finally, around July 14th, the epidemic had reached a point where the Government had to do something. Women were dying. It was evident, even to the politicians that Earth would not survive without its female population. The Pentagon, at the behest of the executive branch, made a counter proposal. They would let the Sarrans take 4500 women. Those were the women who were already in ICUs across the country, with no hope of recovery other than Sarran medical facilities, if the Sarrans would provide the antidote to the rest of the population. The catch was that the whole operation had to be covert. Warriors in the Brightstar Fleet knew they had mates on the surface. Those women with talent broke through psi shields and broadcast their suffering. Fleet Warriors instinctively responded to compatible mates."

"We could not stand by and let it happen again, Pa Channa. Jonal and I, we felt you weaken. You were within the Goddess's grasp. We couldn't wait. We wanted to give you choice. There wasn't time for any more negotiation. It went against all honor, but..."

"There were the other Warriors, Pa Mici. We had to think of them. We had all lost mothers and sisters on Sarran. For once, honor be damned. Tonas and I knew that what they proposed, taking, instead of

asking, was hypocrisy, a conspiracy of silence." Jonal spat out his words in derision. "We couldn't let our men watch, yet again. It wasn't entirely selfish." Jonal turned his face away.

Anya looked at the three men before her. Not one was comfortable with telling her the truth. "I gather that I called the two of you, no, don't answer that yet." She looked at Mark. "The United States Government sold 4,500 women to the Sarrans in return for *control* of the vaccine that could save the Earth's population. Did it save everyone, Mark? Did the bastards distribute it to the rest of the planet, or are they holding them hostage?"

Mark tried to soothe her. "The Sarrans didn't let them do that, Anya. The Sarrans weren't that stupid. The assholes that tried to hijack the vaccine were out-manuevered before the negotiations concluded. As soon as the women were transported safely, they forced the U.S. Government to distribute supplies of the vaccine and antidote, plus the formula for its manufacture, through the U.N. As soon as the Brightstar fleet reaches Sarran, preparations will be made for a return journey. The Sarrans will land under U.N. sponsorship, and the treaties and technology transfer will benefit all of mankind." Mark smirked, "The Sarrans have bigger guns. I believe Congress is fine-tuning the impeachment process."

"So I get a ticket home? One round trip to the far reaches?"

"You already know, Anya, that isn't the way this is going to go down," Mark replied. His word were stark, naked, the truth.

"In essence, 4500 women are forfeit?" She finally got it. A breeder, she was to be a breeder. She'd been sold by the government she thought would protect her.

"Initially, our government believed the women would be bred. The Sarrans on Brightstar never even considered that a possibility, once they realized they had fems on the surface capable of bonding. To a Sarran WarriorPair, finding their fem, their female anchor, is the point of their existence. It's very difficult to explain, but the Sarran fem has more respect, more freedom, more choice, than any woman on earth ever imagined."

"So, as long as I serve as a brood mare, all is right with the world? Mark, I came from a culture where women were considered either baby factories or nuns. You could do other things, but babies were your *raison d'être*. I will not go backward." Anya spoke with anger and vehemence.

The men beside her went very still. She sensed a conversation just beyond her grasp.

Tonas pulled her around to face him. "The Bond is genetic. It is real. It was not manufactured or programmed," he said. "Had I or Jonal met you on your planet, there would have been an instant attraction. Your scientists call it pheromones."

"Mark, I need honesty here. Did the vaccine cause the Bond?"

Red-hot anger hit her in the face. Jonal stood and loomed over her. He enunciated every word. "You think that we would or could lie to you? You are our fem, the base of our Triad. Think you so little of our honor, that we would subject you to abuse at our hands? We would cut them off before we abused you. We would lay the galaxy at your feet for just a smile. We loved you before we saw you. Your shape and features didn't matter. Your essence called to us across space. How could you believe...?" Jonal turned on his heel and flung himself out of the room.

Tonas rose up as if to follow, his whole body tense. Just as abruptly as he left, Jonal appeared back at the entry. Tonas sat back down on the edge of the bed. He didn't attempt physical contact. Despite her feelings of ill usage, she was disappointed in a weird way.

He spoke to her quietly. "To answer your question honestly, yes, every woman on earth now carries some Sarran DNA. But that was necessary for the vaccine to be effective. Did we do this deliberately to gain an advantage over Earth? I don't know. I am not an Elder. However, I can say that our elders never expected the Earthen fems to be able to bond with our WarriorPairs. Knowing that, it is hard to believe that we would plan to take more fems than the minimum needed to begin re-population. For a WarriorPair to take a fem who is not their BondMate is an anathema to our civilization. I have to conclude that the inclusion of the DNA was not a political decision, rather a desperate, scientific one.

"Is that bit of DNA an advantage to Sarran? Yes and no. Yes, because it will give our Warriors a wider opportunity to bond. No, because some of the potential fems who could bond might be unwilling to try. Others won't want to go to Sarran and will not complete their bond for that reason. The Warriors who BondStirred either type will be forever without a fem. I've seen WarriorPairs commit suicide after losing a fem. Some of our Warriors may choose to stay Earthbound with their fem, which would be advantageous to Earth, but not to Sarran.



"In addition, the Sarran WarriorPairs will have to compete with Earthen males. Some of your largest spiritual organizations will condemn us for our so-called deviations. According to some Earth standards, we are immoral because we practice polygamy and homosexuality, even though both are practiced in all four corners of your Earth. We have seen your vids and read your publications. You deny these things yet, they are done. For us, these things are natural, as I expect they will be to your population when you evolve. We were made that way millennia ago by our genetic scientists, we are what we are and cannot change that, nor would we want to do so. But, Pa Channa, our bond with you is real.

"I know this, because Jonal and I felt the BondStir as soon as we pulled into Earth space, before you were vaccinated. You reached out to us. You were frightened and alone. We made you a promise then. We said you would never be alone again. We kept our word. Since we first gained your side, one of us has always been present. One of us slept in the infirmary. Since you've been in Quarters, one of us has been beside you. You have never left our care." Tonas looked at her with sadness. He rose again and put his hand out to Jonal. "Yes, we are lovers. For ten cycles. But you are part of us. As necessary to each of us as we are to each other." They embraced. Tonas took Jonal's chin between his finger and thumb, moving his face up for a kiss.

Anya was so fascinated by the Warriors, that she had almost forgotten Mark, until he spoke her name in that familiar cutting tone. "You are Bonded to Jonal and Tonas. From where I see it, it's the best thing that's ever happened in your narrow, constricted life. For once, keep an open mind, Anya. Forget your damn upbringing, go with your own inclinations. Learn about the Sarran people and the nature of a Bond. This isn't a fucking perversion. This is their whole life and now, yours."

"How do you know, Mark? You're not a woman. You aren't relocating permanently to an unknown culture. You aren't being asked to consider sexually submitting to..."

"Did I mention that there were 4,500 women and one man, Anya? Me. I'm the man. I am BondMate to Dr. Bane, a Sarran Warrior of the FireClan." Mark spoke quietly, then he slipped out of the room.

Shamefaced, Anya peeked up at Jonal and Tonas. "I'm sorry. You've been nothing but kind. I didn't understand. I didn't know..."

*You know us, Pa Mici; you just need to remember.*

## *The Sarran Plague*

*We have time, Pa Channa.*

*"You are in my mind. I hear you."*

*We have been since you first took ill, Pa Mici. Tonas and I never left you alone. You needed us. We are prepared to wait for you. Please, give us a chance."*

*We only ask that you sleep in our bed, with us. We will not touch you against your wishes. We can not touch you sexually, unless you specifically ask, Pa Channa. That is the law. We need you near us to know you are safe.*

*"Tonas, that was your voice in my head. You call me Pa Channa, Jonal named me Pa Mici."*

*Pa Mici means my beloved little one, Jonal sent.*

*Pa Channa means my heart, Tonas told her in the same manner.*

*"Oh...I've been horrible after all you have done for me. You even thought to bring Tigger. Please forgive me. I am so very sorry."*

*She begins to truly see and recognize us, Firefly. There is hope. Their relief at her contrition was palpable.*

*Tonas said, "Anya, you need to eat and you need time to yourself. There are robes in the armoire, but most of your clothing is in the dressing room beyond the cleansing unit. Some of your things are there, but..."*

*Jonal interrupted, "The other garments are traditional Sarran attire. We hope you find them comfortable. We'll get you better, handmade things, when we get home."*

*Tonas continued. "The other entry leads to the living and food preparation chambers of our Quarters. Ask aloud for anything you want. We can replicate most anything, but it isn't as good replicated as fresh. For fresh, you need to go to the mess hall. You might want to go when you are stronger to speak to the other women."*

*"My Light, let's leave it thus, for now. If you need, Anya, just call. We will hear you. Tonas, love, let's give our fem some privacy. Your toilet things from your abode are set out with some additional things from Sarran." His mind tone changed color—brighter, more playful. "Pa Mici, I'm curious. What is the relationship of the muscles glutinous maximus to breakfast rolls?" With that, they both left the room.*

*Anya was in shock. They were both in my head. I don't believe this. They heard me waxing poetic over the state of their buns. Shit. That means they heard everything. God damn. They know I'm hot for them. Fuck. Shit. Damn. They know everything I've thought for as long as I've been here. Fuck. Anya*

stopped. She was cursing in her head. If she could do it in her head, why not out loud.

Profanity was rather liberating. She had cursed more in the last two minutes than she had in twenty-six years. Mark was right. My upbringing has limited me. I was turning into a miniature of that self-righteous bitch, Sister Edwana, right down to the celibacy. Well, Sister Rose, a conscience, even a wee bit over-developed one, is a good thing. However, Sister Edwana, let consequences bedamned.

*I need to figure out how to shield my thoughts, or do I wear some kind of lead hat? I hope they all can't read me like tha., Shit. I need to ask them, or better yet, Mark. Damn, another male to whom I owe an apology.*

"They're right. I need to shower, get dressed, find something to eat, then take the time to think. Tigger, don't knead the bedcovers," she said absently, as she rose from the bed.

"Well, they have to care a little. They brought Tigger."

*I'd say they care a hell of a lot.*

"Dammit Tigger, someone was in my head again."

The cat cocked his head at the sound of his name and purred loudly. Both Sisters Edwana and Rose did several turns in their respective graves.

## *Chapter Seven*

*O, what may man within him hide,  
Though angel on the outward side!*  
--William Shakespeare

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B114*  
*Earth Calendar: June 24th*

Tonas entered the StarRoom. “Mark, Bane.” Tonas acknowledged the two WarriorPhysicians. He settled in next to Jonal. Theirs were the only two of the six chairs around the table that viewed all three entranceways and holographic consoles. Tonas extended his arm to Jonal and froze. Examining Jonal’s flightsuit, he frowned. Beast hair clung to the bottom of his sleeve. Beast tufts were omnipresent, covering every flat surface. Fine yellow hairs even floated from the airshaft. Tonas looked down in horror, his own flightsuit was covered.

Jonal noted his lover's distraction with a sigh. Tonas’s concern with the condition of his wardrobe bordered on an obsession.

In his research on Earthen culture, Jonal had found quite an apt comparison – *The Odd Couple*. He was *Oscar* to Tonas’s *Felix*. Jonal broke out in a smile. The script struck a chord of familiarity. It so amused him, that he had communications tap into library archives to view the movie and television versions. Jonal had drawn comfort from the recognition that the human condition was not so different from the Sarran condition. The episodes had Jonal laughing out loud—absorbed in the domestic comedy. He anticipated a future evening at home on Sarran, sharing his

discovery with his lovers, all chortling at his and Tonas's exaggerated character quirks.

He was humming the musical theme under his breath, when he sensed that Tonas's level of annoyance had ratcheted up a notch. He looked up. Tonas was wiggling about, attempting to clean Beast shed off his seat, but the fur flew either back to the chair or onto his uniform. Minor annoyances had erupted out of proportion for the last two risings. Winning the heart and trust of their fem was a painstaking process. Delay in completing the Bond resulted in sexual frustration. They had waited so long for complete union. Better not to dwell; it would come when it would come.

Mark shot Bane a smirk. Both men were aware from Tonas's expression that he was suffering from more than a surfeit of cat hair. Jonal broke into a smile for his partner. *Annoyed at the mess, My Light? I understand if you stroke the cat with a brush, the hair will be on the brush and not in the air.*

*Since you know so much of cats, the Beast can be your job,* Tonas zinged back.

*I think you are more frustrated with the care and feeding of his Mistress, than her Beast's hair.*

*And you, Firefly, are you any less cursed in temper?* Tonas deflected. *I recall you living up to clan reputation on many occasions recently. The carpet here bears witness.* Jonal rolled his eyes and the tension in the room dissipated.

"Sirs," Bane began. "Mark and I feel that something needs to be brought to your notice."

"And that is?" Tonas leaned toward Bane, waiting for Bane to speak. Tonas tensed. He took their current stalemate with Anya personally.

Jonal knew that a discontented, grudging Tonas was a man with little patience. He had loathed leaving the suite, feeling that every moment should be devoted to easing Anya into their lives. A wave of tenderness for his lover overcame him. These last risings had seen a reversal of their accustomed roles. It was Jonal's turn to calm, to soothe and distract his lover.

"Mark," Jonal interrupted. "I see you have found a substitute for your Hair Wax. I have not seen your sun stripes so slicked since you left Manhattan General. What is the Sarran substitute? Tierest oil?"

"Something like that. Bane likes it when I slick back my hair. It oils my palm," came Mark's salacious retort.

"Pardon, Admirals. He meant no disrespect."

Bane was toadying. Tonas didn't like it. "Do not worry, Bane. Jonal, Mark, and I understand each other very well."

"Yes, Bane. Dr. Stern is good for our egos." Jonal added.

*Let him speak, Tonas. There is ship business other than our problem with Anya. Saxon and Lunas may have temporary command, but Bane's visit necessitates our attention. This wasn't a social call,* cautioned Jonal. Aloud he said, "Bane?"

"Some of the single crew are churlish to the UnBonded women," said Bane.

"I expected that," Jonal admitted, his inflection flat. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Flagen." Mark said.

Jonal's body clenched at the mention of his name. "What about Flagen?" Jonal demanded.

Tonas felt Jonal mentally stiffen. He watched as Jonal's fingers gripped the lip of the table. Jonal lost all objectivity upon hearing Flagen's name. He was sensitive to Jonal's antipathy toward Flagen, and knew he was the cause. Jonal never believed that it was Tonas who delayed their Bond, not Flagen. Jonal's sin was temper.

Tonas needed information, choices. Choice was only available through information. His devil lived in detail. When confronted by the BondStir and his own overwhelming response, he attempted to diagram and dissect the emotion. A halftide had passed and with each rising, the urgency for his BondMate grew. It grew until it became compulsion. Tonas realized that emotion was unavailable for dissection. You felt what you felt. When he got to his Firefly, Jonal was almost mad with grief, believing that Tonas preferred Flagen. He shook his head, permitting his mind to rejoin the conversation.

"As you know sir, the majority of the crew are single Warriors," Bane stated. "It was determined that singles should join the crew, in case the ship was left short-handed with all of the WarriorPairs seeing to the welfare of their fems."

"I know," said Jonal. "I wrote the order."

"Yes, sir. Some of the UnBonded Warriors are refusing to accord the Earthen females Sarran fem status. A vocal contingent claim the Earthen as a sub-species whose genes would contaminate our clans." Bane was hesitant, but his body sung a song of its own. His demeanor was closed off, his mouth was dry. Mark's arm came around his shoulder, pulling him closer.

*Tonas, look at Bane. He's frightened, and Mark is in full protective mode. I'm inclined to trust his instincts.*

Tonas's brows furrowed in concentration, something wasn't right. "How do you know this, Bane?" probed Tonas.

Jonal made eye contact with Mark, inviting him to join the conversation.

*You were right, Firefly. We do need to focus here. I do not like the stink of this."*

Bane replied, "My brother, Flagen, and I had decided before this mission, not to pursue a PairBond; to avoid or refuse it, if that was possible."

"It is a formidable foe to battle," Jonal offered in sympathy.

"I had no idea of the power of the Bond, sir. When I saw Mark, it was as if I fell into a vortex. It takes an incredible amount of will to deny the Bond, even for a short time. I only held out for..."

"I believe it was two risings, Bane," Mark rejoined, grinning broadly, without a trace of the usual cynicism. Bane gave him a look that promised retribution.

"I have been there," Jonal confided. "Tonas held out for a halftide, and drove me near insane."

*Does he know your history with Flagen, Tonas?*

*I think not, but there was no history, Firefly. There was no connection other than friends. He never approached me for anything more. I know I never approached him. In conversation over study, Flagen may have mentioned a twin, but he said they were no longer close. Since there was no relationship, Flagen couldn't have spoken of one to a brother he rarely, if ever, saw, Tonas replied.*

*I always thought that they were identical, not fraternal twins. There have been rumoured incidents between fraternal twins on Sarran, Jonal said—his colors turning darker.*

*What type of incidents? Tonas asked. You usually pay gossip no heed.*

*When the gossip concerns underage FireClan femspring subjected to abuse, I listen. Jonal hissed. Bane is uncharacteristically cautious. That caution becomes evident in Mark's overprotective reaction. Bane does not want to be here. He is here at Mark's insistence. Why not take it to Saxon and Lunas, if it has nothing to do with us? Why would Mark insist, Tonas?*

*Shush, Jonal. Listen...Tonas spit back.*

"My Bond with Mark taught me that there is enough compatibility between us to Bond without genetic aids," said Bane. "I mean, Mark had

neither the vaccine, nor the antidote, yet the Bond was recognizable and complete as any Bond with a Sarran. To test that hypothesis further, Mark asked, and I agreed, to give him a dose of Sarran genetic material. The Bond proved. We will even be able to form a Triad," Bane concluded.

"Who authorized this experimentation, Dr. Bane? I don't recall Jonal or I approving a genetic transfer to Mark."

"I have the vial, and I am trained in its use. Although the practice is usually overseen by an Elder, it was not necessary in this case. There was no one whose interests needed protection," said Bane.

"Perhaps, but who saw to Mark Stern's interests?" Jonal reproached.

Bane's face blanched. "I did not think..." Bane stuttered.

"No, you did not," Tonas snapped.

"But I did," Mark asserted. "It was my body, my call. I refused to complete the Bond with Bane, unless there could be a fem and children. I would not ask him to give that up for me."

"Wait. We have a test that recognizes a Bond has formed? Do you know of this, Jonal?" Tonas demanded.

"A potion exists that all medics carry by Codex, Sarran law. The Elders use it in the Rites of Dissolution or Challenge. The first rite exists as a safeguard against fraudulent Bonds; claim of Bond where none exists, or Bond initiated for personal or political gain. The second use is complicated. If there is more than one claimant of BondStir with either a PairBond or Triad, the potion and the accompanying rite, determine the outcome. The desired mate has blood taken by a medic. Both Elders and public witnesses supervise the procedure. The Elder and medic allow the blood to mix with contents of the ampoule. The Medic injects a portion of the formula into the first claimant. If there is no unusual result, the Bond is real and reaffirmed to the first claimant. If the Bond is not complete or compromised, the claimant becomes violently ill, losing control of his innards for a moment. It literally and physically displays that the claimant was *full of shit*. A false Bond gives an opportunity to the second claimant to prove his case. No Warrior would risk such very public humiliation, unless he was sure of his Bond." Jonal added to Tonas in private, *I did some research, long ago, My Light, I thought I faced a challenge for you.*

*I would not have challenged the Bond, Jonal. Don't you know that by now? Haven't I proved over and over again to you, that once we met, you were always my choice?*



*I never doubted your heart, Tonas, once you gave it. I expected a challenge from him. I know I would have never given you up,* Jonal argued.

"You have me curious," Mark said. "Death is the only way to break a Bond, or so I was told. However, the Rite is named Dissolution. You didn't mention dissolution."

"True. Dissolution is so horrendous, so torturous, that few Sarrans will discuss its existence," Jonal stated. "A mate asking for Dissolution is publicly adjuring the Bond. The petitioner, by requesting the rite, has declared their mate so horrific, so foul, that they are ready to risk death to be free of him. A true PairBond, once completed, ties you into your mate's soul. Dissolution of a true Bond is torture. I have heard it described as having your beating heart pulled from your chest, and living long enough to watch it crushed under a boot heel. It is worse for a Triad. Few survive. It is never done."

"Merrrrrrrrrrrow?"

All four heads turned at the sound. Mark barked, "Who has access to...?"

"Ah, Mark, it's the Beast. He goes everywhere," answered Bane.

"Yes, he does. I don't care to think how, but the computer has been programmed to let him roam as he wishes." Jonal laughed.

"And we have ample proof that he wishes to roam everywhere," answered Tonas, brushing more hair from his uniform.

"Anya used to have a special sticky brush for that Tonas," Mark said smiling.

"I'll import them by the cargo-load, if it keeps the shed away from my flightsuits," Tonas bantered back.

"I don't think it keeps the hairs away, My Light. It removes them once they are there. To stop the Beast from shedding, you have to use..."

"I know, a brush," he responded, resigned.

Tigger walked around the table twice, tracing Jonal's path. He jumped up onto the empty chair next to Tonas, then bounced from the chair to the middle of the Star table and curled up in the starlight.

*Beast, is an apt description,* Tonas sighed.

*Be careful, My Light. He understands...*

"Should we not be discussing the topic at hand?" Jonal interrupted with a smile for the cat. "I believe you were concerned for the fems."

"It's my brother—my twin. He disdains the new fems, and is very vocal. I'm torn, because he's family, but it's not right..." Bane trailed off.

Mark picked up Bane's hand and kissed it on the inside of the wrist. "It's okay, dear, I'll do it."

"No, Mark, I have to," Bane began. "At the hospital, just before Flagen went for Beast, I told him that I Bonded with Mark. We argued. He did not want me involved with anyone from Earth. He thought they were an abomination. He was angry enough about the fems, but well, Mark put him over the top. We had promised each other not to Bond to anyone but a Sarran Warrior and Sarran fem. He told me to wait, that everything would come about. I told him I made up my mind. I didn't see him again until we were aboard Brightstar."

Tigger approached Bane with a sniffing. He sat down, placing his long body between Bane, the Admirals, and Mark.

Bane continued. "When we got to Brightstar, Flagen was enraged. I'd never seen him like that. When he saw Mark, he swore at me and lifted his hand to strike out. He recovered himself well enough, but has rarely spoken to me since. When I sought him out, I heard him speaking to other Warriors, playing on their fears, stirring trouble. I can't tell which of the single crew are grumbling or which are actually a threat."

"Has this matter been brought to the attention of Commanders Saxon and Lunas?" asked both Jonal and Tonas, speaking as one.

"Saxon and Lunas are currently investigating an anomaly in the communications log," Mark replied.

*The good Doctor cuts a wide swath, Firefly.*

*I also, heard some disquieting rumors. So I asked Mark two days ago, to keep alert for anything that seemed unusual.* Jonal responded silently to Tonas.

"Saxon and Lunas have no fem, gentlemen. I suggested to Bane that the issue was better taken here," Mark stated.

"You do have a point, Mark," Jonal said, "A very unpleasant point. Bane, you have given us much to ponder." Jonal stood and moved away from the Star table. "Dr. Bane, you are dismissed. I believe your name is on the duty roster."

"Mark, would you mind taking a quick look at Anya?" Tonas asked.

"Sirs." Bane stood and saluted. He grabbed Mark by the shoulder, pulled him into a quick embrace, and left.

The atmosphere in the StarRoom deadened. "Report," demanded Jonal and Tonas

"From the time of my original briefing in Central Park with you, Jonal, and General Morgan, I've kept close watch on the twins." Mark paused. "I'm not sure that Bane is the traitor. If he is, I think I would

know, but it also strikes me that if he isn't, I should know that, too. Our Bond feels real, unexpectedly so. I've always been bi-sexual, so it wouldn't have been out of character. My agency training says trust no one. Despite my training, I'm not able to act with impunity here. Bane is Bane."

Mark took off his glasses and wiped them with a cloth from his pocket. "Bane brings out all of my protective instincts. However, I can't swear he isn't guilty. I don't have the evidence to clear him, yet. Moreover, I resent the block in my head that prevents him from knowing all of me. This is the fucking reason I left covert operations. I feel like I'm doing harm, not good. After my stint in Darfur, I got out. When they found out I was going with you guys, they dragged me in again by the balls. I have something going here that I will not fuck up. I can tell you this much, you have more than one set of covert operatives and saboteurs on this skyboat."

Mark stood and began to pace. "There is someone in Communications who is sending covert messages to a shadow ship. He is working with one of the Alliance Observers. The Observer is Juraens, from Muranskya. But before you string him up; send your Elders a coded message on a secure channel. Juraens is more than he seems. His paperwork is too perfect. He could be Elder Security. They had to have sent some. I would have. The mission is too crucial to Sarran survival, not to send backup. Juraens doesn't stay in a room for long once I've hit it. Can't get a read on him, and I don't like it. Flagen has been stirring up the non-Bonded crew, but openly. I believe he has his own agenda. Your security arrangements sucked. Who was your security chief?"

"Jotus and Natem, a BondedPair. Suicides—both—lost their fem to the Ipz. They held on after helping with security for the research teams. They had a son just about to enter the Academy. Jotus and Natem spent two phases working side by side with us planning this mission. It didn't make sense that they took their lives." Jonal shook his head.

"They were looking forward to Boaz's graduation from the Academy. The courses had been accelerated, because of the crisis. Their joint suicide took place three tides before we were scheduled to leave Sarran. This mission was scheduled to be home in time for all of us to be there for the Cadets. The atmosphere there is bleak, the Cadets think they are the last of us." Tonas's eyes glittered with unshed tears.

"The Elders offered us a replacement. We refused, because we felt there would be insufficient time to run a full background checks. You were truly Goddess sent, Mark," explained Jonal.

"Merow Meow Mrrrrrrrrrrrr Meow." The Beast was doing a tap-dance on the table. He had not budged, despite Tonas's earlier command. His paw was worrying a piece of laptard tusk inlay. He pulled and pulled with his front claws. Jonal reached over to nab him.

Tonal shouted, "Beast, you're going to gore that table, Beast..." With one mighty tug and pull, the laptard tusk wretched free. Jonal picked up the ivory-like inlay and examined it. A glint of metal, thinner than a razor blade and no longer than a needle, caught the starlight from the dome. It had a tiny head. Jonal tossed the tusk to Mark, who grabbed it out of the air.

Jonal put out his broad hand and began to pet Tigger from furry head to sleek tail, and slapped the table with the other, "Tonas, the Beast found a Goddess-be-Damned transmitter." Tigger dove under the table for cover.

"Stop shouting and banging on the furniture, Firefly. You're scaring our hero," Tonas replied. Aloud, "Mark, what do you make of this?"

"It's a listening device, but not one made on Earth. Frankly, we have better miniaturization technology in the most industrially-challenged centers on Earth. That toy doesn't look like it can carry a signal too far. Let me see it," Mark answered. He examined the device, turning it over in his hand. "Definitely not Earthen technology, but crude. Who do you boys know that can come after you with tech just this side of shoddy?"

"I know where it is made," Jonal snapped, pulling the tiny pin from Mark's hand. He broke off a piece of tusk, freeing it, and took it over to the magnetic destabilizer for destruction. This is a Zyptz device. I've cleaned up after them before. Who, on this ship would want to cooperate with the Zyptz after what they did? Do they have agents on Earth?"

"Wait, Jonal. Before you trash that, let me look at it again," Mark requested. Jonal passed the small pin back to him.

"I think we may be able to turn our tiny problem into an asset," Mark said.

"How so?" Tonas asked.

"This is not a long distance transmitter. It's a local device. A distance device would have been too risky. Someone on the Bridge might have picked up a stronger signal. This little sucker is transmitting to a

recording device located nearby. Find the device, and we overwrite the recording, feeding the traitor bogus intelligence."

"Mark, could this have been planted by your government?" Jonal asked in a blunt fashion.

"Off the record," Mark sat down across the table. "I don't know. The President is a decent man who is desperately trying to clean up a legacy of waste, fraud, and abuse. However, he hasn't much time left in office. But I wouldn't put it past our bureaucrats or our military, or for that matter, the opposition party, to have a hand in this," Mark grumbled. "They have a saying on Earth. 'It is hard to ke track of the players without a scorecard.' I lost mine when I quit the Agency. My grasp of the game is out of date." Mark rubbed the finish of the table with his thumb.

"Since the millennium, politics in my country, and all over my planet, have become more and more corrupt. One of the reasons I left both the Government and UN service is an inherent dishonesty in the system. There are no more good guys and bad guys. If I turned one way, I helped the morally reprehensible. The other way, the morally bankrupt. As the saying goes, six of one, half-dozen of the other."

Mark got up to pace. "As you know, I agreed to take this assignment as a one-off, to protect the welfare of the women from Earth, who were in danger from a spy in your midst. They deserved an advocate and more protection than they were getting. I made it clear at the time to my government that I didn't agree with the way this went down."

"Neither did we," intoned Tonas, the sarcasm had more of a sting coming from the less volatile of the two Sarrans.

"I know. I've come to admire Sarrans and the way you people do business. It reminds me of the way my country used to be. Everything changed. This is no longer a cover story for me, gentlemen. Bane says he is my mate. He gave me the ampoule when Anya was transferred to your Quarters. I was down for three days."

Tonas signed. "You took a very big chance, Mark. But what is done, is done. So, now you know."

"Yes, I know. Sarran's Warriors are almost genetically identical to Earth males. The only difference is the forced opening of a permeable channel from the top of the rectum to the vas deferens through to the scrotal sac. It enables the sperm from both partners to inject into their fem. Do you have any idea if the difference was genetically manipulated?"

## *The Sarran Plague*

"I wondered that myself at times during this mission. Jonal and I think there is a chance that it was an evolutionary mutation that the geneticists used as a prototype to counter the perpetual shortage of fems. By promulgating the mutation, the amount of fems necessary to keep the Warriors from blowing up the planet was halved. Our history shows that most of our wars were fought over the scarcity of women," Tonas ruminated.

"The majority of Sarrans believe it was genetic manipulation. We are an ancient people who have been to the stars, and been knocked out of them many times. Civilizations have risen and fallen. Even so, we were always stalwart librarians. The truth is probably buried in the stacks on Sarran in Ulnas City, if it isn't in the fleet archives. Our librarians have spent cycles trying to get all of recorded history on crystal. Just as their forbearers tried to get it down in whatever format they used. We have over one hundred millennia of recorded history, five millennia in the current era. We think we were one of the first star-faring planets, but there could have been others that destroyed themselves, or were destroyed by natural means, before us. Now, you are officially one of us. Just so you know, Mark, we considered you one of our own before Central Park," Jonal said.

"Welcome to the Sarran Warrior Brotherhood, Mark." Tonas reached out his arm to clasp and receive Mark's. Jonal did the same.

"If you trust me enough, I'll take the position of Security Chief, covertly. Once we land on Sarran, that part of my life is over. Agreed?"

"Agreed," the Warriors conceded.

"You must wonder how we survived so many millennia trusting strangers. You have much to learn about Sarran and her people. By the way, you do not have to hide your talents, unless you wish to do so for the mission. Tonas and I were aware of them and their intensity as soon as we met you and shook your hand. I assume you realized we also carried the gift," Jonal said.

"Yes, of course, although it took me a bit longer than a handshake. I'm not used to being around other talent, except Anya. And Anya was raised to believe that her talents were not a gift from God, but an abomination that came from the evil one. She has overcome so much in such a short time. Don't give up on her—she's worth it," Mark said emphatically.

Whoosh...Meow, Merow...HISSSSSSSS, clunk.

Tigger came back into the StarRoom carrying a small box. It reminded Mark of the old Earthen matchboxes. He stood to examine the prize.

"Your turn, My Light. What is he into now?"

"Speak well of our hero, Firefly, for I believe he has fetched us the recording device. He worked while we discussed philosophy. What do you plan to do with this, Mark?" Tonas asked.

*I don't care what they think, this animal is intelligent and psychic. If he could only brush his own Goddess-be-damned coat.* Tonas sent to his mate.

"How is it that the Goddess-be-damned Beast can find things that we can't, Mark? You know more about these *cats* than we do," Jonal asked.

"On Earth, there was some research about animals hearing at a different frequency. Not my field. But the devices could have been tuned to a frequency that resonated, and he just followed the noise to kill whatever was bothering him," Mark answered.

*He is as resistant to the belief that Tigger could have psychic gifts, as the other Earthen are to the fact that he has them. A paradox, My Light,* Jonal sent.

Jonal smiled sheepishly at his mate and said, "Go and get the Asta from our private supply, Tonas. Let us toast our new Warrior. Get that tu'na tin from Anya's things. Beast deserves it, despite the smell."

"Does this make me EarthClan?" Mark queried, half kidding, half serious.

"No, not you. But there is an EarthClan now. Sarrans derive their clan from their Mother. All of the future Mothers are now from Earth. Our generation is the last of the Clans Fire and Light." Tonas turned and left the StarRoom.

"He's going to the Quarters to get the Asta. You'll like it." Jonal said.

"Mark, Juraens isn't security backup. He is what your former fellows called Secret Service. We have had an Elder traveling with us incognito. Even we have no idea whose identity he assumed. The Elders appointed TeZarron to witness. His isolation is intentional. He and TeBron, his BondMate, lost their fem and their femspring to the Ipz." Jonal put up his hand, motioning Mark to silence. "Before you ask, they have an offspring, Nafer. He is but six cycles and barely knew his mother. TeBron is with him. They couldn't risk their offspring on such a dangerous and uncertain mission. There has been so much loss." Jonal's voice tightened.

"Mark, you need to watch Flagen. There is a history there. He almost challenged me for Tonas. Tonas doesn't believe this, but I know this for fact. I don't like that our Triad Ritual remains unfinished. But we cannot

force the issue. However, if Flagen finds out...Anya already has the genes in her system, but I will not risk her, not when she is just over being so ill. I've lived in fear of losing Tonas for ten cycles. Now Anya has become as dear to me as he is, and fear has become terror. Tonas, at least, is warrior trained and can defend himself but Anya, has no training and lives alone, I can't...

"I understand, Jonal. To me, Anya is family. Rest assured I will guard her with my life. I would like to lay low and scurry back to Sarran as fast as we can move our asses, foreword to ensure the safety of all of the fems. We know about Communications and we have a hook to get to the guys who left this little calling card, thanks to the Beast's sharp ears. Flagen has something up his sleeve, no doubt. It may not be treason, but it sure the fuck is ugly. We'll find out who and what, and then," Mark's voice became very cold, "we'll deal with them."



## *Chapter Eight*

*And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight inside the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.*

-- Anais Anin

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B114*

*Earth Calendar: June 24th*

Anya peered into the cleansing area. The Admirals' Quarters were endlessly fascinating. What the Sarrans called a cleansing unit would put a bath at a five-star resort to shame. She paused to admire the details she missed in haste the day before. The walls had been upholstered in maroon watered silk, and on her left, stood a burnished chrome and brass heating cabinet with three stacks of absorbent toweling in the lower unit. The textile was of medium weight, yet absorbed more moisture than the thickest Egyptian cotton weave. The giant-sized towels were no surprise, considering the size of her Warriors.

*Her Warriors. Where did that come from?*

The beveled glass was acid-etched with an opaque outline of the now familiar three-branched tree. Encased behind the upper doors of clear glass, were bottles of bathing lotions. Anya chose a small flask of fine porcelain. The artisan depicted two men engulfed by passion in such exquisite detail, she felt the pangs of their hunger. She held the stopper under her nose; the cinnamon-musk was redolent of Tonas. A ruby glass jar encased in a filigree of fine wrought silver sat on the second shelf. She returned the flask with care and reached for the filigree base of the jar. It

popped up at her like a jack-in-the-box, activated by the heat of her hand. This scent spoke of fresh-washed linen with a trace of vanilla—bright and clean. Anya recalled line after line of rumpled cotton sheets waving in the breeze of a city rooftop. A swirl of her finger and the texture on her wrist said shaving soap and Jonal. She inhaled, breathing deep in her lungs the perfume of both men. These aromas had begun to symbolize her vision of haven and harbor.

A three-sided bathing pool bisected a fifteen-by-fifteen square area tucked away in the right corner of the room. Cushioned headrests curved around the three rounded angles, marking the location of the carved marble seats beneath the waterline. The bubbles gurgled and sang a bewitching song. At St. Brigit's, water had been the ever-present chug-chug of the industrial washing machine. Anya giggled. How had the lush sensuality of this place brought her mind to St. Brigit's washroom, where fifteen little girls with hair pulled tight, in Peter Pan blouses and plaid jumpers shared three sinks, three commodes and two tubs in a cold and damp basement? Seven bathed on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, eight on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Bathing took precisely fifteen minutes. Sunday morning, libations began two hours earlier than usual, at 5:00 am. Everyone arrived bathed for Sunday Mass.

Anya shook her head and came back to the present. The shower stood a smidgen to the left of the far wall. Shaped as a six-sided star, the jets mounted twelve chrome and gold columns that sprayed mist from thirty-six nozzles.

A second paneled entry stood directly to her right. She popped in for a brief peak, and stood frozen to the floor. The chamber stunned her with its delicate artistry and femininity. In the far left corner, a vanity sat, be-curved and gilded as ornately as a piece shipped direct from Versailles. A stuffed ivory boudoir chair sat before it, and resting atop, a three-sided holographic projector masqueraded as a fine antique mirror with beveled edges. The walls shone with low luster mint stripes, alternating with lines of orchid-like ivory and pink flowers running parallel to pencil-thin gilded stripes.

A large glass-bowl sink mirrored the two on the other side of the partition. It sat atop a second heating cabinet unit. The towels within were the color of aged lace edged with ribbons of pink and green. A selection of Earthen perfumes and cosmetics exactly duplicated her own, down to a new lip gloss. Added, were high-end varieties of her drug

store brands of hair and skin products. Beautiful bottles of exotic style and color yielded florals and musks with delightful, if unfamiliar, fragrances.

A low "meow," brought Anya's attention to the cushioned cat bed, one of many strewn about the Quarters. Beyond Tigger's bed, was a floor-to-ceiling mirrored wall. A perfect circle of light stood in front of the mirror. She walked to the wall and placed her hand on the polished surface. Her reflection shimmered, and then disappeared. *Another holographic projection*, she mused. *Someone went a bit overboard on the Versailles thing*. Anya winced at her bratty tone. But this was the most difficult, most emotionally jarring, experience of her life. Her Warriors' loving tenderness completely overshadowed the overwhelming prospect of hot monkey sex with two men. Jonal and Tonas saw her, Anya. They knew her. This room, over-feminized and fussy as it was, came directly from the locked doors of her most hidden self. Somewhere among things she wasn't permitted to even admire, let alone desire, was a place inside her that yearned to be a girl. Not a contributing member of the community, nor an upstanding example of womanhood, but the pampered darling of doting parents enveloped by a sea of chintz. "Foolish frippery, froth, and feathers," Sister Edwana had called it.

Here her dreams were displayed before her like a banquet for a starving peasant—rack upon rack of hand-finished garments, in both Earthen and Sarraan style. Heels, strappy sandals, clogs, boots, slippers, and sensible flats in every color, occupied back-lit cubicles. Clear plasticine drawers displayed bras, camisoles, panties, and boy pants, silk decorated with finely wrought lace, satins, lawn, cottons and linens in every color, and all her size. Everything from gowns to jeans, cashmere sweaters to plain white tees arrayed in elegant order—and so very obviously for her and her alone.

As a child, Anya had spent so many hours indulging this fantasy. Her rear pinned to the punishment chair, her fingers on her lips, and eyes on a saint, she daydreamed whole afternoons away, imagining this very scene. She examined her bounty and found herself unmoved. After twenty-six years, she finally probed into the reality behind her illusion. Anya never needed gifts; she needed a giver. She sunk to her knees on the cushioned floor of her wardrobe, put her head between her arms, and began to sob.

\*\*\*\*

Jonal recognized the change in his heart rate. Panic was not a familiar sensation, but acknowledged, if still unacceptable. Terror contorted time, collapsing times into seconds, or contorting seconds into risings. The doors opened into the corridor. He sprinted the last few yards from the transport to Quarters. The computer opened the private entrance. He flew past the living and slumber chambers without a glance and flung himself into Anya's dressing room. He found Tonas on the floor with their Anya sobbing in his arms. *Is she all right? Goddess, I couldn't read her. Tonas, do we need Mark?*

*She's fine, physically. Take a breath, Firefly.*

*I was in engineering. I never felt such desolation and anguish. I pictured...*

He dropped to the carpet, and gathered them both into his strong arms. *Tonas, I couldn't read her.* Jonal closed his eyes; sweat gleamed on his upper lip and forehead. He drove back the terror, wresting control of his body from the black, cold fear. Torture had always had one definition in Jonal's emotional lexicon, losing Tonas. Now, there were two.

*I felt a fissure open beneath my feet, creating a fathomless canyon. I clung to the side, the rock and soil loosening beneath my fingers. I began to fall. I struggled, and as I fought, my eyes looked up and we were there, Tonas, you and I. I realized then that it was Anya falling, and I went cold and I ran. My Light, you were right. We took away her choice, we did everything wrong.*

"No, my loves," Anya replied. "You have done everything right."

Jonal and Tonas exchanged expressions of simultaneous confusion. Anya had heard their entire psi'd conversation and answered without noting their conversation had been unvoiced. She was distraught, unhappy in their trust, yet believed they had behaved with propriety and honor?

"Hold me, please, both of you," Anya asked. Tonas cuddled Anya to his chest. Jonal drew them both tighter into his embrace.

"It's from before, when I was in school. I need to explain this to you, and then you'll hate me."

"Anya, there is nothing that you can say now, or have done in the past, that could make either Tonas or I hate you. When the Bond formed, we saw deep into your heart. You have lived all of your life in service to others who used you badly. They envied your quick mind, your outer beauty, and your perfect soul. It held no malice, no envy, just sorrow, and even that would not reside there still. But, it was cultured, and tended, and reinforced every time you fell within their web," Jonal tendered. "You are beautiful, and you are loved."

Anya shifted, positioning her body so she faced both men. "You did everything right," she emphasized. "You delivered my childhood dreams. You furnished this room with no expectations other than my pleasure. Since we boarded, at any time, one or both of you had the means to overcome my will and enforce yours. Yet, you kept me cradled and safe—never alone—soothing my sleep and guarding my dreams, even when it appeared I would remain a barrier to yours. How can I tell you how small and petty I feel in comparison to...?"

"You are dauntless, Pa Mici. The light of your soul makes the stars dim in shame," Jonal said.

"Who would ever dare to tell you that you are unworthy? You held high position by your own merit," Tonas affirmed.

Tonas lifted his hand and ran it through the loosened plait of Anya's braid. He looped the whorl of molten copper around his wrist, and pulled her mouth to his. Tonas placed his hand at her neck, and feathered a kiss across her cheek. "In Triad, no merit holds you to us, there is no testing, no requirements. The BondStir seeks connection to other parts of the whole. You were always one with us, and we were ever seeking you," Tonas told her.

"Nothing in you is undesirable, Pa Mici. No ghost or demon that haunts your past can make you detestable." Jonal kissed her forehead and continued in a laughing voice. "There may be things that make your mates unhinged, or soft-headed, but that is different, love, it is life."

Anya giggled and then grew serious once more. She drew closer to both her mates, seeking their approval and encouragement. "I was raised in a place where the two of you together, and the two of you with me, physically, is against the rules. It was pounded into my head for eighteen of my twenty-six years, along with other garbage not worth repeating."

"Pa Mici, there is no fault in you..."

"No, please, let me continue. I've loved both of you since the beginning. You were the reason I clung to life in that hospital bed. I spent my childhood with people who possessed narrow vision, and in addition, were handicapped by dogma, and that stewed in bitterness. I was bright. I learned quickly. I was only eleven when I realized that their perspectives were askew. I was incapable of existing within the boundaries they set. Yet, my existence depended on others' largess. Escape was impossible, conformity was my only choice. I knew I could never entirely hide my nature, but I locked down as much of my curiosity and personality as I could, and worked hard to escape. But I

didn't, not entirely. I want to join with you and complete the Triad. But their voices ring in my head and make it difficult. You are all the love I could never find to embrace, everything I was ever denied. I want you both so much, that I dream of the tastes of your skin. But something has held me back. I'm trying." A few stray tears escaped the luminous pale eyes.

"We can wait, Pa Channa. There is no rush. Now that we've found you, we have time."

"Oh no, Tonas, there is a rush. I see you and Jonal. Your sensuality and passion are glorious. The air around the two of you is incandescent with heat. Could we, maybe, just take it slowly at first?" Anya smiled, appealing to Jonal. "The fissure was the steel bands around my heart. I looked at all of this," she gestured to the contents of the dressing room, "and realized that what I missed all along wasn't the gifts, it was the love of the givers," she smiled, as a few more tears trickled down her cheeks.

Tigger chose that moment to stroll out of the storeroom and rub against Anya and her Mates. "I still can't believe you thought to bring the cat."

"As much as we'd love the acknowledgment, Pa Channa, it was Stern who informed us of Tigger's place in your heart."

"Of course, but the two of you decided to get him for me, and that means everything, Tonas." Anya stood and gave Tonas a hug. She took her other arm and tried to maneuver it about Jonal's broad shoulder, but he took it and pinned it between his hands, suckling each finger and kissing her wrist.

A baleful meow interrupted the human activity, and Anya sighed in resignation. "When he's hungry, it's all about the dish. There will be no peace until it's filled to his satisfaction. Can you tell me where you put the kibble?"

Jonal groaned, while his eyebrows rose in hyperbolized ire. "Your dish will not see any tu'na for at least a tide, Beast. The kibble is in storage, the entry next to the wardrobe. It also leads out to the galley. The small things we didn't unpack are there. The larger items are in the hold. There is a smaller container of his kibble in the pantry, along with his dish. We brought enough to last six months, until we could manufacture a substitute." It was obvious and endearing that they needed her praise as much as she did theirs.

"We scattered his beds about the chambers, Pa Channa. He has several commodes on the ship, and Kassan is building a smaller model for chambers. He has been well-received by the crew."

"Jonal, Tonas, that's it. That's where it is. Remember this morning, you asked for the brush? It's there with his things." Anya hustled to the stow entry and swung back, eyes shining at her men. "No one ever took such good care of me before. I love you both so much." Anya scooted through the entry to storage.

*You asked for the brush, Firefly?*

*I love you, My Light,* Jonal sent back on a wave of warmth.

"Guys," Anya murmured in a hesitant voice "Maybe we could start the project when I finish with Tigger."

"The project?" Tonas questioned in confusion, earning himself an elbow to the ribcage.

"Of course, Pa Mici, you only have to ask. Why don't you soak in the bath to relax, and then put on one of your robes? We'll meet you in the slumber room in about 60 mots."

"Okay," she answered shyly, but willing to try, as she pulled her head back from the entry.

Jonal pulled on Tonas's belt. *We prepare, My Light, wine, stems and then to the slumber room to rid our fem of some of her demons.*

*We must ask Mark about the demons, Edwana and her cohort Rose. From the little I could glean of the sisters, they used methods of coercion on the little femsprings outlawed to our shock troops. She spent cycles with these tormentors. To think of overcoming such mental bombardment is a testimony to her bravery. She has no vanity. No conception of her courage and grace.*

*My Light, we have much to learn. The intensity of the BondStir is not a license to discard courtship. We know the flavor and depth of her psyche, but not her favorite color. She and we have much to explore.*

\*\*\*\*

Anya sniffed each of the fragrances, both Earthen and Sarraan, set on the third shelf of the upper cabinet. She scrutinized each vial, testing the contents on a hankie. Anya searched for a signature fragrance. Cinnamon and musk called Tonas's name just as vanilla and washed linen said Jonal. It would be floral, she decided. Flowers appealed. The aroma could not assault the senses; it had to be charming, but subtle. At the far end of the shelf, there was a small collection of bottles, soaps, and

crystals. The sensuous, curved lines of the soaps and the sheen of the bottles beguiled. Discretely placed on each bottle, and stamped into the soap, was the emblem of the three-branched tree. Anya pulled the stopper of a jar that seemed to be an appropriate size for bath oil. The fragrance was flawless. Floral, the notes were sweet, but not cloying. It had the depth of lavender, with the fullness of lilac. Underlying was a base of a crisp citrus. It was her essence. She took the jars and poured a few drops into the water. Bubbles bounced, flounced, and flew around the pool. She put the jar back on the shelf, grabbed soap and a washing cloth, and immersed herself under the bubbles.

Thirty minutes later, relaxed and refreshed, she rose from the water. She pushed a button and the water ran through a cleaning cycle. It took only five minutes for the pool to become as it was before she bathed. Anya's skin glowed; the bath oil left a light sheen and a touch of fragrance. It appeared she didn't need her customary lotion. She rubbed down with one of the heated towels, vigorously drying her hair as well as her body. Curiosity coaxed her into removing the stopper of the smallest vial. A whiff told her it was perfume. Feeling just a bit daring, she touched the stopper to the pulse points at her wrists, the nape of her neck, the backs of her knees and her collarbone. Her inner clock told her she had just enough time left to dash to her vanity and brush her hair.

She cleaned her teeth and washed out her mouth, then sat on the low boudoir chair, running the bristled brush through her fine hair. Anya pinched her cheeks and wet her lips. Crossing over to the wardrobe, she pulled out a long, opaque robe in the muted pink of restaurant mints, and pulled her arms into the sleeves. She belted the tie and headed for the slumber chamber. Sighing in relief as she realized she was the first to arrive, she arranged herself on the top right side of the bed in a nest of silken pillows, and with a quick intake of breath, waited for her princes. *OmiGod,*" Anya thought. *They really were Princes.*

\*\*\*\*

The crystal stems waited next to the uncorked wine on a lacquer tray. The tray sat atop the first of two tables that flanked the three matching chairs. Tonas entered behind Jonal, watching as his Firefly shrugged off vest and trews. The fine view of Jonal's bubble ass had his cock diamonds hard. Anya curled up in the right corner of the bed, looking edible in the pink robe. Tonas poured, and as usual, they worked in



perfect synchronization. Jonal picked up two glasses. He crossed the room to hand one to Anya. Her eyes were round with wonder at his nakedness. "Do you like what you see, Pa Mici?" Jonal raised one eyebrow in question.

Anya chuckled, "Jonal, if egos were rivers you'd be the Amazon." Although she reached out for the proffered wine and sipped delicately, her eyes trained on Jonal's wide, blunt cock. The wine was light, fruity, dry—but not overly so. Heat flooded his genitals, rode his chest, and blazed from his eyes, which followed the line of her throat to her breast as she swallowed. The sight of Anya's arousal at Jonal's nudity, short-circuited Tonas's brain. Her breast quivered, betraying a slight disquiet. Her small pink tongue slipped out over her plump lower lip. She wet it and giggled.

"My Light, she laughs at me," Jonal pouted.

Tonas made a show of removing his trews, floating his hand down the outline of his ass and thigh as he dropped them to the floor. "Firefly," Tonas replied, coming up behind Jonal, "we laugh, but love you mightily." Tonas pressed his chest and rubbed it along Jonal's back. His hands moved to the front of his lover's chest, lightly flicking his brown nipples, while tonguing the back of his neck under the drape of black hair. Jonal rotated and allowed himself to fall back upon the bed just down from Anya's feet. His engorged member was now visible. Tonas saw Anya's rapt stare.

Tonas licked the shell of Jonal's ear and bit his neck, kissing the backbone down to the curve just above the crease. Anya moved closer, positioning herself just a length from Jonal's shoulders. Jonal shuddered, his cock already leaking drops of his essence. Tonas had never been this close to the forbidden before now. He stroked his hand over the round, dimpled cheek in provocation. Tonas licked first at one cheek, then the other, and then he grabbed and squeezed each cheek in turn. Tonas felt Jonal shake with unspoken desire. Anya made small noises, biting her lips. Her arms made involuntary movements toward them both. Her skin heated and suddenly, the air was ripe with the smell of the Tierest flowers. She had chosen their scent. He bit lightly on Jonal's cheek.

*Soon, Firefly, soon this is mine. Mine to love, mine to kiss, mine to share.*

\*\*\*\*

Jonal felt Tonas's tears track down his crease, and almost lost his control when his lover began to lick them away. He twisted, and it brought a gasp from Anya, pulling his gaze in her direction. Her hand was inside her robe, where she circled her breast and nipples with her fingers. He smelled Anya's dampness and the odor of the Tierest tree, so dear to his heart. Jonal didn't know how much more of an assault his senses could bear without release. Jonal wretched up and hauled Tonas into his arms, moving his lover to the top of the bed and placing him in the middle. Jonal pulled Tonas's face to his, peppering it with kisses. When he reached his mouth, he stuck out his tongue and licked at the edge of Tonas's lips, savoring the taste and smell. His hands feathered down along the golden curtain of Tonas's hair. Tonas's juice leaked onto his thigh. Combining their pre-cum allowed their cocks to move more freely against each other. Jonal began to grind his hips against his lover. His kisses became more intense, demanding. He pushed his tongue inside Tonas's mouth and plundered. His teeth worried the edges of Tonas's tongue and lips. He broke the kiss, it was too much. He took full charge.

He flipped Tonas's on his back and bit and licked his way down, frantic to gain his destination. When he reached Tonas's hard member, he swallowed and sucked with frenzied, barely tethered violence. Tonas was ready, he didn't need more foreplay. He bucked into Jonal's willing mouth, spraying seed down the back of his throat. Jonal did not stop sucking until Tonas cock was soft and still. He heard Anya's gasps and knew her finger had moved downward. Tonas stirred. His hand caressed Jonal's face.

"Come up to me, my Firefly," he heard Tonas whisper. "Let me take you higher." Jonal swallowed a shout as one of Tonas's hands kneaded his sac, as the long fingers of the other surrounded his rod and worked it hard. Anya's breathing was harsher, and her gasps were louder and less controlled. Jonal could feel the air around the bed move with the rhythm of Tonas's hand and Anya's fingers. He felt her release, smelled her cream on their sheet; for the first time, he had no more control. He spurted into Tonas's loving hand.

\*\*\*\*

Anya lay quietly in the circle of her lover's arms. She screwed up her courage and attempted the mental channel. *My loves, can I touch you?*

*Would it be okay if I learned your body? I see the rings. They are so beautiful. Could I touch you, and wait till next time for you to touch me?*

"Of course, Pa Chana," Tonas answered aloud.

"However you want it to be, Pa Mici," Jonal rejoined.

\*\*\*\*

*Oh bother,* thought Tigger from beneath the dresser. *No snuggles for me tonight.* He put his paws over his ears. Eventually, he gave up. It was time for a walk.

Tigger made his usual rounds. He visited with Syn and her White Persian, the Duchess. Checked on Mark and Bane, and hung out in the lab for a bit. He felt something off there and had enough of feelings this evening, so he headed over to the Chief. Chief Kassan was in charge of the cargo bay. Tigger and the Chief had made friends when Anya was still missing. Kassan would come into the holding area to feed him and change the box whenever Tonas and Jonal were too busy with Anya or duty to come down. Because the Chief held the keys to his kibble bowl, Tigger made a science of Chief Kassan. He was a Xercadian, he had said, humanoid, with an overdeveloped chest and arms, bred to haul and stack, as tall as a Sarran. The Chief was surly, but once he no longer had to change the piss box, they were buds. It was Chief Kassan, not the science officers, who had devised a solution for Tigger's commode. The crew constructed a heat chamber with a seat. Four slots were situated in a round form that allowed perfect purchase for front and back paws. A scalloped edge allowed room to raise the tail. Waste flowed down onto a pad that was incinerated at high heat when the computer sensors read the chamber as empty. Several had been designed and installed throughout the ship for Tigger and the Duchess. Smaller units were in design, to be installed in Quarters. This allowed Tigger and The Duchess the same freedom of movement enjoyed by their human companions. Chief Kassan was one of the few humanoids who realized immediately, that both Tigger and Duchess were more than they appeared. Tigger and Duchess also knew that about the chief.

Although he didn't communicate with the Chief on a psi level, Tigger knew the Chief understood most of what he said. They would sit together every night for what the Chief called a bit of the leis. Chief would have some fiery liquid, and Tigger lapped at a bit of ale. Kassan would recite all of the doings on the ship and in the cargo bay that came

his way every rising. The Chief was a gossip, and had sources all over the ship. Privately, Tigger felt that the security office should pay attention to Kassan's gossip. They would learn more from him, than from their bugs and tapes. Kassan led Tigger to suspect that there might be a listening device planted in the Admirals' Quarters. Now he needed to track who had the opportunity to plant it. Tigger had three humans to look after now. Chief Kassan, Tigger suspected, could look after himself very well.

By the time he returned to Quarters, all was as it should be. His humans were wrapped around each other, fast asleep. He jumped onto the bed, circled a few times, and plopped, placing a head on Anya's arm, a paw on Jonal's shoulder, and his tail atop Tona's head. *One of these days, that one would learn not to gripe about cat hair.* Tigger settled in for the night.

## *Chapter Nine*

*The Lamb that belonged to the sheep, whose skin the Wolf was wearing,  
Began to follow the Wolf in the Sheep's clothing; so,  
leading the Lamb a little apart, he soon made a meal off her.*  
--Aesop's, Fables, A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B115  
Earth Calendar: June 25th*

Anya picked at her breakfast. She had awakened this morning in her lovers' arms, but they didn't stay put long enough for a second act. She had stuck out her lower lip and attempted a pout. Having had little practice, it was unsuccessful at best, laughable at worst. It earned a buss on the cheek from Jonal, and a distracted pat on the head from Tonas. She was seriously irritated with her princes. Anya bristled. *I am not some toy spaniel to be put on a pillow to get fat on bon bons whiling away the time until my masters' return. This sucks big time. I'm going to have to talk to Jonal about attempting some meaningful work. Maybe I can find some of the other women and see what they need.*

Anya threw on a peach toga-type blouse of brushed silk edged with ivory satin ribbons. She attached a coral and mother-of-pearl cameo to her shoulder, and slipped on a pair of ivory satin pants bordered with the peach silk. Dainty ballerina flats in peach and ivory completed the ensemble. Just because she didn't *need* the Princess Di wardrobe her lovers had provided, didn't mean she couldn't wear it. She twisted her hair atop her head, holding it with pearlized sticks topped by coral

flowers. She found a pair of mobe pearl earrings that were just right for the outfit, and with a quick slash of peach gloss, off she went.

Anya had free rein of the ship, and she wanted to explore. Tigger was AWOL, Jonal and Tonas were in conference in the StarRoom, and the only other person she knew on board, Mark, was in there with them. It was time to *boldly go where blah blah*. An apt metaphor, she thought. The fleet ships were refitted with universal signs adapted from common Earth usage. Unused to free time and having little responsibility, she studied the symbols. Assured she could find her way around without a problem, Anya left the Quarters. As the command Star Cruiser of both the Galactic and Sarran fleet, Brightstar was the size of a micropolitan city of 50,000, stuffed into two square miles of sardine can. The corridors reeked of art deco canoodling one of the French Louies—ornate and pre-fabbed. As Anya roamed, men gawked, but none approached her until she hit a corridor near the mess hall.

She had presumed that the mess was quiet this time of day, just after breakfast, but not quite time for lunch. She knew she was close by when a whiff of fresh-brewed Jamaican Blue Mountain titillated her nose. A quick reverse to backtrack engaged Anya in a near on collision with a Sarran male. She pushed up against the sidewall to stabilize her position, leaving handprints on the calendared crenellations. Looking up, she targeted a face, and that triggered a connection. "Hey," she called. "Aren't you Mark's Bane?"

"No, I'm Flagen," he retorted. "I belong to no Warrior. I'm Bane's brother, his twin." If anger were solar flares, his eyes shot power outages. She stepped back. Flagen's lips distorted into a perversion of a smile, and he herded her toward the java scent, riding her heel. Anya wasn't cowed, but could distinguish between retreat and surrender. She chose the former and crooked her back to avoid contact with his shoulder. For an instant, Anya took solace in the surety that her mates were but a focus away.

"Where are you taking me?" Anya demanded.

"You wanted coffee." He challenged, "That is one aroma that every Earthen I've seen can follow straight to source. Without it, you all have the look of a stomped bronc in a hails-out."

They entered a hall and Anya froze and gaped. She had seen pictures of old automats, but this was a Horn and Hardart on steroids. Disks heaped with obscure vegetation and Sarran viands, sat amid Mickey D's, shrimp etouffee, and egg foo yung—each encased in cubicles of gold and

glass. It appeared the Washington sycophants had donated sundry take-out menus and a dated set of Time-Life cookbooks to re-assemble Earthen cuisine for the women. The result was a mishmash of the freaky and the mundane, combinations guaranteed to be barfers. She snickered, and wondered what Stern's comments were on bureaucratic creativity.

"Really," she cocked her head. "With this selection, coffee's the only sane alternative." *I must remember to speak to the boys*, she thought. She cased the hall, spying a spigot attached to a massive urn that appeared broad and rowdy enough to encase industrial waste—it looked about right.

"This is the coffee?" she noted, with Flagen still on her heels. She grabbed a large-size tumbler of heatproof plasticine, and pulled the lever. Levers seemed to transcend culture. Basic humanoid mechanics endured, a snugly thought. She looked to the left, *Hello little pink packets, and cream*. She quickly prepared a cup and sipped.

Flagen's face morphed from an impersonation of a serial killer to merely grim. "Your face is incandescent. This coffee, is a drug?"

"Some believe it is. I prefer the word nectar, myself." Anya laughed, "stomped bronc, huh? Present company included?"

"That requires some consideration. Do you go out in a hails-out sans a slicker or gear?"

*He actually cracked a smile.* "I've been known to channel a submersed rat, or two."

"Is that a drowned rat, or a 'You dirty rat?' My translator does not pick up the elegance of your slang."

"But mine picks up the sting of your bite, or perhaps the goad of your prick," Anya countered. "Do you shroud all your enmity in wit?"

"Enmity? Why would you say that?"

"You seem to bristle at all things Earthen."

"Maybe it's but a penchant for things Sarran."

"Maybe," she conceded. "What was it like?"

"Mountains, valleys, desert, much like your Earth; but clean. Our sins against our cradle, long passed. Tierest trees, brumbe bush." Flagen stopped. Anya watched him take a breath. "Paradise, home, as one of your poets cried, *Nevermore*." He shifted his eyes from her sight.

Anya impulsively reached for his hand, patted it awkwardly, then withdrew. "Yesterday is always *Nevermore*, Flagen."

He scrutinized her face and seemed to discover a fabled swan, rather than the troll he anticipated. "You Bond the Prince of Light, little ember?" Flagen asked in an eerily tender tone.

"He and Jonal, when the deed is ever done," Anya replied in honesty.

"Do you have distaste for the LightClan Prince?"

"No," she asserted. "He's magnificent, both gentle and kind. I'm in love with the galoot, and Jonal is..."

"Jonal is Jonal," Flagen finished her sentence for her, although Anya wasn't sure that his interpretation resembled hers. "Maybe I will taste this coffee of yours while you tend to your second helping." Flagen's face was preternatural. His meter had jumped from violation to free game score faster than light speed. He was volatile and it turned her shaky. Flagen did mood alterations as often as starlets did body mods, and with as little purpose. It was time for a graceful and quick exit line. She looked around for a fast and dirty excuse and seized on...deliverance.

"Mark, over here. I've just met your...brother-in-law?" Anya reached for the right term.

"Flagen." Mark said his name with such crack and sizzle, that Anya had to check for steam with his spit. Mark had not wowed the in-laws.

"We were discussing Sarran and ca...co..coffee." Darn, she hated when she stuttered, and Mark knew she only did it when her nerves were fried.

"I believe your Bonded are calling security." Mark gently took her arm and eased her away from Flagen.

"Security? What is it with these guys? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, haven't you told them that on Earth we had a women's movement? Sensitivity training is in order, and they need classes on gender issues. Geez Mark, can't I ever get out of there?" Anya grumbled. "Most likely, the cat threw up again. They keep on feeding him strange stuff." She sighed once more for effect, and scrambled to the corridor. *I am soooooo gone, out out out. Though I might have overplayed that one a tiny bit.* She made her way back to Quarters.

Mark watched Anya scurry through the arched entrance. It looked as if that nice little tail had been a bit singed. He decided to go back and find out what had yanked Flagen's chain this time. "Slumming, Flagen? Xenophobia in lock down?" Mark's eyebrow rose in a suggestion of derision.



Flagen gave a classic Gallic shrug. Mark marveled at the interchangeable body language exhibited by both Sarran and Earthen. He was sure research would someday prove a common genetic source. He scowled at his brother-in-Bond, permitting his fury to manifest on his face.

"If this is a jealous tantrum, you are engaged in a duel without a saber. Alligators look indolent in the sun, but they have teeth. They don't eat often, but when they do, they swallow you whole."

"I found her wandering the corridors. I brought her to the mess." Flagen adopted an innocent tone. So innocent, it reeked of sarcasm and innuendo.

"Anya belongs to Tonas and Jonal. Are you so bone-headed that you believe a wound delivered to Jonal or Anya will not hurt Tonas? Can you be that obtuse?"

"Earthen spitscum, what do you know of Sarran Ways or Honor? You master my brother, you do not master me, and I wonder if you truly are his master," Flagen sneered, "or his witless dupe. A thought for you to ponder, *Doctor*."

Mark rose up off the chair and put his face into Flagen's so far, that their noses almost touched. Mark spit out each word.

"Listen, you mere excuse for an asshole. You stay out of my business, you stay out of Bane's business, and you stay the fuck away from Anya whom I consider under my protection. If you can't understand what I just said, may your Goddess help you. There will be nothing, and I mean nothing, to stop me from crushing your skull."

Flagen pulled up his arms and pushed against Mark's chest, making him step back. Flagen braced into combat stance.

"You waterscum, Earthen deviant, they belong to me. The fem, Tonas...they always have. And now...I can lay claim to them. Even scumsuck like you, cannot ignore Sarran law with impunity. You aspire to be Sarran, you dare claim to master a Warrior, you belly the sewer pipeage, Earthen." Flagen kicked his chair toward Mark and strode out. Mark's eyes traced his path.

Mark psi'd urgently to Bane, *Go to Jonal, warn him, now. Flagen claims he has leverage, Sarran law.*

Jonal paced around the table, while Tonas sat at the console, scanning security holos. Jonal had caught a wisp of distress from Anya's mind earlier, and had the computer scan holo feed from every section of the ship. He found Anya in the mess looking frightened at a table with

Flagen. He went ballistic. Tonas was only able to calm him by calling Mark, and asking him to go to the mess and see if she was in trouble. Jonal continued to pace. Tonas's eyes widened at the scene enacted on the viewer. His body blocked the console.

"Admirals," the computer said. "Chief Medical Office Bane, with a message from Medical Officer Mark Stern."

"Tonas, Admiral, Prince of LightClan. Enter."

"Admiral, sir, Chief Medical Officer Bane. May I speak freely, sir?"

"Report," both Tonas and Jonal replied.

"Mark said Flagen was sniffing around Anya. When he arrived, she was very uncomfortable, but unharmed. He gave her the opportunity to exit, and she took off like a shot. He says he has everything under control."

"Jonal, easy. Mark would know if trouble was threatened. He would have sent word."

Jonal's voice was menacing. "No threat, My Light, nothing there...not on your part, but always on his. He will stop at nothing." Jonal sat at the console, elbows on his knees and head in his hands. "He wouldn't have dared approach her, if he didn't have something."

Tonas spoke quickly. "Bane, find Anya. Bring her to Quarters using any means necessary, now."

Jonal looked up, brushed tears away from his eyes, and sobbed brokenly, "They can't take you away. I wouldn't survive." He began to shake with the intensity of a man who had endured torture for cycles and finally broke. "I've known for cycles that he would strike. I didn't know where or when. You didn't see what I saw, the plotting, the envy, and so many near misses during the war—assassins that the Elders named Friendly Fire. I never knew when I went to medical, whether I would die of my wounds or by his hand. You thought it was jealousy. It was, but it was also fear."

Tonas choked back anger and sorrow. "Why didn't you tell me, Firefly? There is nothing we can not face together."

"He was your friend. I did not want to take that friendship away from you. I tried to hint that all was not well with Flagen, but you wouldn't look."

Tonas sighed. "Sometimes, dear Jonal, you must point out the obvious. Do not screen your mind from mine. Had you opened that door, I would have seen long ago. It doesn't matter now, my lover. Honesty compels me to say that I knew he once entertained the idea we

could Bond, but he never pursued, and I found you. You, Firefly, put all others out of my heard and heart until our fem." Tonas stood and reached for Jonal, pulling him into his strong arms and moving his mouth across soft lips. "We wait for Anya, Jonal, my love, and then we wait no more."

Anya appeared in the command corridor just as Bane left the StarRoom. "Princess," he called.

Anya looked around to see who he was calling.

"Princess Anya," he repeated.

"Oh, Bane, you need me in medical?"

"No Princess, excuse my abrupt address, but the Admirals need you immediately. I am to escort you to them."

"Dr. Bane, the entrance is fifty feet from where we stand. I can make fifty feet unescorted." Anya bristled.

Bane grabbed her arm. "This way, Princess Anya. You are in danger, Princess; there is no time to argue." Bane half pulled, half dragged, Anya in the other direction.

"Let go of me, you ass. Mark just sent me here." Anya tried to shake his arm away, Bane pulled back. "You're hurting me," she yelled.

"Computer, Anya," the double panel swooshed. At the sound of the door, Bane dropped her arm. Her two Warriors charged out of the room. Tonas slipped one arm around her back, the other beneath her knees, and literally swept her off her feet, carrying her inside.

"Bane, dismissed, with our thanks," Jonal snapped.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, why are you thanking that chowder head?" Anya screeched. "He bruised my arm trying to get me *away* from here."

"What?" The Price of Fire roared in disbelief.

"Computer, Tonas, Admiral, Prince LightClan, Security Protocol 1258: Turn Command and Control to Security Officer Stern, STAT."

"Computer, Jonal, Admiral, Prince FireClan., Security Protocol 1258, affirm."

"Tonas, Admiral, Prince LightClan: Order Navigation to Saxon and Lunas. Communications to Saxon and Lunas, overseen by Security Officer Stern."

"Computer, Private Communiqué to Juraens from Muranskya. Put Stern in charge. Situation: Serious. Support Saxon and Lunas, Jonal out."

"Bridge, Jonal Admiral, Prince of FireClan, All Command and Control, Security and Communications will be overseen by Security

Officer Stern. Security Facilities are off limits to all Medical Officers, except Security Officer Stern."

*Anya, love, we must complete the ritual now.*

"Quarters concierge, record to log time and date stamp." Anya was spirited into the sleeping area.

*You belong to us. To me, to Tonas. Do not forget this again.*

Jonal spoke directly into her mind. Anya's mind whirled. They brought her straight to the bed. Their hands were all over. Jonal was at her back and Tonas was at her front. Tonas carefully removed the brooch at her left shoulder; allowing the toga-like blouse to bare her breasts. Jonal pulled a string at her waist, and the harem pants fell off her body in one piece. She was naked amid the silken covers between the two men she loved. Tonas placed her gently on her back, and put his knees inside her legs. Jonal knelt behind him. Jonal kissed Tonas's back, moving his lips up and down his spine. His square hands tugged at the leather vest which barely covered Tonas's chest, and slipped it down his arms.

Tonas bent over Anya, kissing and tonguing her sensitive ear and the place just under the lobe that made her shiver when he touched it. Moving down her jaw. Anya felt, rather than saw, Jonal loosen Tonas's trews. Jonal moved to her side, and Tonas slid his tongue from her face to his. Anya found her fingers in Jonal's trews, avidly attempting the laces. One pull, they were loose. Out popped Jonal in all his glory. Tonas remained between her legs, with Jonal just at her knee. As a resident physician, Anya had seen plenty of male equipment—these were stellar. She giggled. Stellar, by starlight. A bad pun. She had no idea what to say, so she didn't speak at all. Although her mind burst with words not her own.

*Soft, magnificent, Pa Mici, please, yield.*

She had no idea what more she could yield; she was giving them all. She studied their need. Tentatively, she stroked Tonas. He was long and curved—thick. Jonal was thicker and a little shorter. Her hands seemed to move of their own volition. She grabbed the two cocks, squeezing them together and rubbing them against one another. They began to leak. She had no idea what to do, no textbook or instructional CD, so she watched their faces and cleared her mind to hear and feel them. She took one hand and spread the leaking liquid from the slits over the jutting heads. Her other hand she used to move in a steady rhythm up and down. She swiped the index finger of her left hand across the two heads, gathering their juice. Smearing their combined juices on her lips, she let

her small, pink tongue taste. The reaction from her men was explosive. Jonal kissed her mouth, penetrating, exploring the recesses, biting her lips and trailing a chain of kisses to the nape of her neck. He bit down hard, sucking a mark. She shook with the intensity of the pleasure.

Tonas moved down to her breasts. One hand tweaked and twisted, fondled, while his lips and teeth bit and sucked. Her nipples were scarlet, turgid. She moaned in need. "I want you both, now. How?"

"Shush, Pa Mici, let us care for you in this, and now in all things you wish."

Jonal was at her back. His hands slid over her skin until even the slightest movement brought fire. His mouth licked and bit her shoulders, down her spine. His tongue trailed the back of her knees; his strong, blunt fingers massaged her calves. Her chest heaved. She gasped with pain or pleasure; she couldn't discern the difference. Tonas murmured sweet phrases into her skin. He seemed to delight in her scent. He sniffed at her pulse points, behind her ears, at the top of her breasts, her collarbones. He teased with his tongue. Tonas's touch was different from Jonal's. Jonal made her shake; Tonas let her fly. He played with her breasts, weighing each in his sure hands. Squeezing, tracing, nipping, and blowing on her aureole, and watching in fascination as her nipples peaked and hardened for him. She was delirious with pleasure.

As Tonas worked his way down her body, Jonal palmed, petted, and lapped his way back up. He stopped at her ass, his hands molding and shaping the perfect globes, a pure, soft, feminine version of the hard-muscled gluts of their masculinity. He licked from the base of her spine to the crease, spreading it with his fingers, and diving for the perfect pink rosette with his tongue. Anya started and began to pull away.

*Settle Pa Mici. Here in this room, everything is permitted, everything is worshiped and given its due.*

She immediately relaxed as if she had been waiting for his permission. His tongue whirled around the opening, and then up to the rosette of her anus. His fingers stroked through the red hair that covered her pubis.

*One day, Pa Mici, you will take us both.* Jonal's deep basso reverberated through her psyche, as his moistened fingers circled the rosette in a sensual spiral. *And you will scream with delight.*

*Miraculously, she believed him. Mind-to-mind there were no lies.*

Tonas moved his hand down her stomach in tracing patterns. Each stroke sensitized her skin further, and lifted Anya higher. By the time his

fingers entwined with Jonal's on her mound, Anya's mind was ready to escape her body. They were almost to the point where they could start the ritual. In order to meld their souls, their minds needed to push through to the astral plane.

Tonas lingered between her legs, kissing Jonal's beloved face while they explored the crevices of her sweet entrance. They did not break their kiss, but together, lips and tongues moved down to taste her. Her vulva was high with a pronounced bone. The outer lips were full and firm, accentuated by the slight protrusion of the inner lips at the top of the crease. Her pubic hair was trimmed to a neat triangle above the entrance. The lips themselves were hairless. Two sets of fingers spread the outer lips. The fem pleasure button was in its place, modestly covered by the little hood of fem foreskin. It stood up from the stimulation. The inner lips were purple and engorged, ready for the invasion of her sweet vaginal canal. A tongue on each side, sliding along the inner creases, one at the channel, one gently licking and sucking the clitoral hood, sent spirals of need to her channel. Anya's hips rotated and pushed toward the sensation.

Jonal and Tonas each lay their head on the side of Anya's thighs. Their fingers explored the outer and inner labia of their fem's gift as they explored each other's mouths. Closer and closer, they moved their beloved fem along the road to joining. It had to be exactly right for the ritual to go unquestioned. Each Warrior lifted their fingers from Anya's labia and lapped Anya's cream from each other's fingers. One finger turned to two, slowly stretching her entrance. The thin, translucent membrane of her hymen was visible to their eyes. A gift they neither sought, nor expected, but received with reverence. Three fingers each stretched the entrance; now they could penetrate without blood. They worked her flesh, taking her up, with the hard pulsing of their fingers.

Anya screamed and, chanting their names, begging them to do whatever it took. She delivered herself to them. "Please take me, take all of me, please..Jonal, Tonas, I need you. I want you. I love you, my Warriors." Their need reverberated in her head until she no longer cared whose thoughts she carried. A chorus rang in the air around them.

*My Light, Firefly, Pa Mici, Pa Channa, My Love, My Life...*

Jonal and Tonas moved along her body. They met in a three-way kiss, tongues flying, lips bruised. She was reaching, striving to reach a goal that was almost in her grasp.

*Anya, she heard, You must wet our cocks. It makes the penetration easier. It was a harsh whisper of need in her mind.*

*A small kernel of doubt crept in. Will it hurt?*

*Trust your Mates, Pa Mici. We will never hurt you.*

With that reassurance, she opened her mouth to receive them, reading exactly what was necessary from their heart to hers. She took each cock in turn. Sucking deep, rolling her tongue over the top, tasting the liquid from the slit. She marveled at the matching rings and played, twisting, and turning until more of the precious fluid flowed from each slit. She spread the pre-cum, along with fluid from her mouth, and some she cupped from her own dripping channel, to make sure her lovers had as much natural lubrication as they needed. They shuddered. Tonas held his organ tight around the base to keep from spilling. He moved down between her knees. Jonal moved behind him, his fingers flexing and enlarging Tonas's pucker. The natural lubricant produced by the secondary sperm valve, helped loosen the tight sphincter muscle. Tonas pushed out against his fingers.

The need, the love, and longing washed over them in waves. Tonas positioned himself over Anya, Jonal over Tonas. Jonal penetrated the welcoming rosette of Tonas's ass.

*So tight, oh Goddess, you are so tight, My Light.*

Tonas felt a spasm of pain and then, past the second set of muscles, a stretch and burning sensation. Goddess, he was full. Jonal was where he needed him most. He pushed back. With Jonal's forward stroke, Tonas penetrated Anya.

*Ahhhhh, oh please, yes, don't stop, please, harder.* Anya's cries of pleasure, both verbal and psychic, brought Tonas and Jonal higher.

Jonal whispered words in Tonas's ear, stroked his back, and slammed his hips, so that his sac bounced against his beloved. *Oh, My Light, for ten years I've waited for this moment. Waited to be yours, I've loved you for so long. I yearned to worship at the temple of your soul.*

*To Anya, our Pa Mici, our Pa Channa, we cherish you, we envelope you in our love. Yield to us your soul, your love, your trust, to our keeping, as we give ours to you – to love, to honor and cherish, from this moment until all the stars go black and we go forth into the afterlife still together, still bonded to one another. A Triad true to the Sacred Three and the Goddess who oversee us all.*

Anya flew into a blaze of passion, her body shook, and she felt everything. She felt whole, yet the word seemed too small to describe the sensation of the joining. She gathered her Warriors into her arms and

called out their names. As if in a trance, she watched as three translucent, epherial, globes—one blue, one red, and one green, merged into a single six-sided starburst.

Tonas felt his balls draw up, and saw his soul merge with Anya and Jonal, as the seizure hit. Jonal, came last—the strength of the Triad. The roles assigned were given only at this moment of the first joining. Anya was the heart, Tonas the soul and conscience, and Jonal, the strength and guardian of their home. The three collapsed into the sheer, golden sheets. Saying nothing aloud, but sharing everything in their minds, hearts, and souls. They opened doors to places both dim and bright. There would be arguments, but never would a Triad have lies amidst them. The Ritual of Penetration was complete.

\*\*\*\*

Jonal returned from the cleansing area carrying a soft washing cloth and a basin. He washed the tender lips of Anya's pubis, taking care to hold the warm compress against both her inner and outter lips to ease any swelling that might ensue. Kissing her gently, he moved to Tonas. Carefully, Jonal wiped the semen from between his crease and down his leg. Wickedly, he cleaned Tonas's cock with long laps of his tongue and kisses. His tongue snaked up and around the heavy gold guiche ring.

*Firefly, are you coming back to bed?* his loves chorused. *Because, if you continue to do that, Firefly, Tonas teased, I am not responsible for the consequences.*

*One moment, Pa Mici, Tonas, haven't you forgotten something?"* Jonal looked over to the huge dresser while casually fingering and pulling at the ring.

With a quick kiss to Anya, Tonas vaulted over her, fingering a flower on the tree design. A door to a hidden compartment popped, and Tonas reached inward. A red lacquered and gilded box, bedecked with silver and golden ribbons, appeared in his hand. Jonal curled up against Anya from behind, while Tonas placed the box on her stomach.

*Open,* her lovers appealed. The ribbons hid a latch; the box opened at her touch. Nestled inside on a bed of quilted silk sat a single cuff crafted of twined branches of yellow, white, and red gold encircled by a matching arm band.

*It's unique, so precious; it's us, isn't it? When did you have this made? Where does it go?* Anya blushed a bit at the last.



Where do you think it goes, love?" Jonal asked, with that naughty eyebrow rising to his forehead.

Tonas removed the small cuff from its box. *When Jonal and I first loved, it was under the branches of the Tierest tree. After, we celebrated our Bond with the matching rings and arm bracelets.*

Jonal picked up. *We were second lieutenants, and not receiving many credits. On Sarran, everything needed is available, no one goes without. But most of it is replicated, computer-made from interchangeable nano parts. There is land aplenty. We build houses in days. We reserve credits for things of the heart, things designed and crafted by hand, patterns designed by artisan, not by machine. When we saw this arm bracelet and matching labia cuff, we knew that it belonged to our fem. We spent every credit we had on the cuff, bracelets, and the two rings.*

*Pa Channa, watching your bright blue eyes as you opened the package, was worth that and more, our love. Tonas reverently spread her labia lip, while Jonal snapped on the cuff. Anya felt a slight pinch. She didn't make a sound; it just felt right.*

*Come down beside me, my Princes. Let us sleep for a while, before the world intrudes.*

## *Chapter Ten*

*Fasten your seat belts. It's going to be a bumpy night.*  
--Betty Davis in *All About Eve*

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B115*  
*Earth Calendar: June 25th, early afternoon*

Dr. Bane looked up from the holo as he heard the whoosh of the medical bay's double panels. Hospitals all looked alike. Humanoids had, for ages, associated white and any kind of polished metal with sterility and cleanliness, no matter how many times science proved disease was bacterial, viral, or genetic in nature. Sarrans were no different. Even though they were capable of instant manufacture of medical supplies in any color, they invariably produced white. Computers did most of the routine, diagnostic work. Computer-driven lasers precisioned at an atomic scale did surgery, although surgery was rare. Only in combat triage or in research, did a physician get to engage in hands-on medicine.

Genetic research, Bane's specialty, had not been a popular field of study until the Ipz, which had changed the Sarran prejudice against genetic manipulation, at least at the viral level. It was only when genetics researchers worked with infectious disease specialists, that a vaccine and antidote had been found. Bane had been a minor player in the research team that solved the puzzle, but his participation had won him a berth on Brightstar. He intended to ensure himself a brilliant future.

Bane's real interests lay in the prohibited field of mass-humanoid genetic exploitation. While others had been searching the forbidden

research documents of the past to find clues to making an antidote to the plague, Bane searched the histories for techniques used to create the forerunners of today's Sarran Warriors and fems.

Sarrans were physically superior to most of the humanoid inhabitants in the galaxy. Bane believed that Sarran superiority came about when genetic engineers selected for overall perfection, rather than specialization. One disaster, the reduced number of fems born, had caused the Elders to forbid further large scale tampering with Sarran genetic material. Now, there were no Sarran fems. Bane, and others, felt that it was past time to rethink the issue. He was aware that some of the psi patterns that produced the Bond were becoming stronger over the cycles. The Elder library opened to researchers, only after the tragedy of Ipz led to some interesting hypothesis in light of scientific advances made over the millennium.

If Bane could produce Sarran-type Warriors with similar psi patterns for the Galactic Alliance, the Alliance would not have to rely on the Sarran fleet. There were some factions of the Alliance who thought that this would have been the eventual outcome of the Ipz incident—Sarran genes mixed into the humanoid pool, making them no longer exclusive. They didn't know the secret.

It was the Histories that lead him to the truth. There really was no high moral ground the Sarrans staked out on purity of the human line, it was the Bond that scared them shitless. Mixing the Sarran genes with any of the enhanced variety, weakened the Sarran prototype and made it recessive. If the Sarran genes were mixed with enhanced genes, the Sarran genetic prototype melted into the galactic gene pool, making it near impossible to recreate.

However, the Sarrans and their Alliance supporters had a primitive planet with an original, *pure* genome as a source of fems with an acceptable, traceable lineage. Since Earth was on the list of potential Alliance candidates, and located in a sector where the Zyptz had not, as yet, ventured, the proposal put an end to the Codex ban on genetic manipulation.

The solution was a real blow to the plans of the Anti-Sarran faction of the Alliance for a number of reasons. The first was, the Sarrans remained in control of the fleet and law enforcement on Alliance Planets. The Sarran Codex was strict and gave little wiggle-room for war profiteers, drug lords, pirates, slavers, and the like. As any youngling knew, scarce commodities produced the highest profits. The second was, especially

for the young hotheads with freedom emblazoned on their foreheads, Sarrans retained their genetic superiority, and superiority wasn't *fair*.

Bane had used his research time to come up with a solution that would make him rich. As to its affect on the Sarrans or the Alliance, he really didn't give a flying fuck, to use one of Mark's more elegant turns of prose.

Bane intended using genetic manipulation to make any humanoid a Warrior, thus eliminating the Sarran monopoly and making Bane a very rich man with well-connected friends in very high places. He planned to make all of his Warriors sterile, thereby creating his lab as the sole source for Warriors outside of the Sarrans. Just the idea of leaving Sarran behind got his cock hard, beating them at their own game was orgasmic.

Bane was not so lost in thought that he dismissed the door. He knew it wasn't Mark. Mark was safely ensconced in the security office off the Bridge. It wasn't a Medic. Once the new fems were processed and placed, the medical team had dispersed throughout the ship. They manned clinic and counseling stations that were set up to facilitate the fems' acclimatization to Sarran society, and to help them cope with their sudden entrance into a Galactic, rather than planet, bound governance. That left Flagen. Flagen was a distraction and an inconvenience that he could no longer afford, despite brotherhood and shared shame. Flagen was becoming a problem, not only to Bane, but also to the people who employed him. Bane had been informed that if he didn't put an end to Flagen's disturbances, they would, and not nicely.

"Bane!" Flagen shouted, as he entered the lab.

He kept his own voice mild in tone, not wanting to ignite an immediate conflagration. "I wasn't expecting you," Bane said.

"Obviously." Flagen sneered, pulling up a stool next to Bane's. "I left your Bonded down in the mess, where he threatened me away from my twin brother. Is that how it is now, Bane, he rules the roost? Strange, as I remember it, you always had trouble submitting—to our fathers, to rules, to the truth." Flagen's eyes shifted over to the holo that had his brother's complete attention.

"That's a model of the viral antidote, but there are changes, there and there." Flagen pointed to the three-dimensional representation of genetic code that seemed to float and spin.

"My specialty is Combat Surgery, but even I recognize the profile of that virus. What do those changes represent?" Flagen's tone leaped from sneering and accusatory, to foreboding. "Has there been news of the

Zyptz? Are they readying another virus?" Flagen reached across to grab Bane right through the holograph. "What are you up to this time, Bane? Since we last spoke on Sarran, your performance as enthralled lover has been absorbing, but out of character. As your twin, I would have sensed a true Bond. The Earthen is arrogant, but that is no justification for a fraudulent claim."

"Let me loose, Flagen. We're not offspring, trying to piss squares." Bane's expression swept from haughty to mild amusement. "You have an objection to my hypothetical duplicity?"

"It depends on the explanation," countered Flagen. "I have expected an accounting for over a tide that you haven't offered. It has become necessary for me to know, necessary enough to find out by any means. You are usually more forthcoming regarding your schemes. You want my silence, buy it. One way or another, you will tell me what you are doing, right now."

Bane looked down and away. He had to be cautious here; any suggestion of perjury would incense rather than mollify.

"What you see is a different strain of the vaccine and antidote. It is a variant of the ampoule used for the Rites of Dissolution. This variant could have enabled Sarran WarriorPairs to procreate with any humanoid female. I've experimented with it for two cycles. It will also turn any humanoid of suitable gender and latent psi potential, into a Sarran capable of withstanding Sarran Warrior Training, promulgating offspring, and achieving almost full psychic connection without a Bond." Bane neglected to mention that further research could produce Sarran-like clones. Clones that wouldn't need a WarriorPair or a fem, bred as Warriors for the Alliance or anyone else that had enough credit to purchase one.

"Without a Bond?" Flagen asked. His brother sat on the stool looking stupefied.

"Yes, my dear twin, everything you ever dreamed of is within your grasp and in my hand. I'll have plenty of credit, but it isn't credit I wanted. On Sarran, being ennobled ensures income and influence, power and prestige. As you know, dear brother, either you make your bones by your twenty-ninth cycle, or you don't. Our dear fathers, the Dukes, didn't even bother to confer the courtesy title of Marquisate to either of us. You wanted to own a prince, brother. I wanted to be one. This formula should have made me a prince. Don't you understand? My project, my life's work, pushed aside in favor of an ill-concocted mission

to retrieve fems from an obscure and barbaric planet. All this sacrifice performed in service of a Bond that is antiquated and unnecessary in the modern universe. I have a contact on ship and in the Alliance. Trust me, brother, and both of us will no longer live in deprivation. Issue your challenge. I hold the ampoule. You get the fem and the prince. I get your silence until I'm done with my negotiation. Everyone wins."

\*\*\*\*

"Yes, Bane, everyone wins, now," Flagen agreed.

To himself he added, *But eventually someone loses, and that person is never you.*

"I have business elsewhere. I assume you will go to Saxon and Lunas. Three to four times should see me on the Bridge."

Flagen sat in silence, stock-still. He closed his eyes. They came, as always, visions of scenes, images that both fascinated and repelled. It was ten short cycles ago, the first rising of Planting, sacred to Zanita, Goddess of Light. He was floating and in love. He had waited until this rising to pursue the Warrior he viewed as his BondMate. Though separated by their Triad for years, he and his twin managed to communicate. Bane claimed he hadn't Stirred, because Flagen would have felt it as his twin. It never occurred to Flagen to doubt his own conclusion.

His cock, dead and silent for phases, perked at the first sight of his Tonas. This was love, what else could it be. They spent time together. They shared a class at the Academy. Flagen helped him study. His beloved was golden, with a strong face and eyes of dark jade. His brow furrowed when solving a problem. They were both compulsively neat, even of disposition. Aside from the fact that every time his beloved appeared, his cock jumped almost out of his trows, their relationship was that of best friends. It was as he had always imagined love to be, solid, passionate, but quietly so. He had waited all through Barren to speak. He strolled along the wooded paths to their usual study area in the temperate phases.

The Tierest tree was in the middle of the Academy campus. The Elders claimed that Tierest trees were the oldest living things on the planet. The grove on campus held dozens of trees, their sweet fruit comprising a meal for untold generations of young Warriors skipping mess to study or play. He had play in mind today.

Tierest leaves were shaped like teardrops, their color the green of gurgling water over mossy stones at forest center. Tierest trees had only three branches, and from the branches stretched the vines. The tendrils sent tiny shards out to the sun. The shard grew thick, but never branched. Singly, they left the tree, wrapping and draping the branches, creating a woven canvas of living awning. Sarran was the Tierest tree. The branches were akin to the Triad, in which only the combination of all three could produce fruit. Tierest flowers opened in early Planting. The slight, sucre candy blush was visible at the base of the buds. The flowers were white with a deep pink center said to resemble the passages forbidden to all but Triads.

Flagen's shank leaked a bit at the direction of his thoughts. His golden Warrior and he would be beneath the Tierest tree. He would greet his beloved, and pull him to his chest. Their kiss would rival lightening strikes. Flagen's cock filled. He became so hard, his trews were tight, and his balls began to ache. He fell to his knees, to the rear of an evergreen brumby bush.

He waited, the bush giving him cover to stroke his shank through his trews, preparing and building his heat. He spotted Tonas in the distance, and was just about to call out, when a second Warrior appeared. The other Warrior grabbed Tonas, and drew him close. Flagen waited for his golden man to protest. He was ready to run to the rescue, if necessary. The stranger kissed Flagen's would-be lover and Tonas... kissed the stranger back. Flagen drew closer, still under the cover of the branches. He couldn't believe what he saw. The dark one held Tonas in his grip, his mouth open and moving over Flagen's beloved. His hands caressed what only Flagen should touch. Flagen's brumby bush provided adequate cover and a line of sight between the floral spikes. The Warriors were insane for each other. They clawed at each other's trews, tore at their vests. The dark one dared to place bite marks on Tonas golden skin.

"Jonal, I need...I want, you." In that moment, Tonas condemned Flagen to the flames of everlasting torment. But Flagen was mesmerized, and couldn't look away. Tonas tongued the other's lobe, kissed, and bit down his neck. Flagen watched Tonas become bewitched by the dark one. Bane had bewitched Flagen, but he would rescue Tonas before it was too late.

*It was sex, mere animal magnetism,* Flagen rationalized, even as his hand cupped his balls through the trews. The dark one was whispering

now. Although he was no more than fifteen tet away, Flagen couldn't hear, but he could imagine the dark, dangerous promises of despicable, dirty things. The idea of his golden Tonas rubbing and mouthing this dark stranger, made him nauseous. Flagen came in his trews that rising.

Now, he looked around – white harsh light, sterile and clean. He had come in his trews, again, as he had then and so many times since.

He hadn't rescued Tonas. Flagen was no fool. Tonas was content with Jonal, but Flagen knew it was only because Tonas had never experienced what could have been between them. He would show him. Flagen wanted Tonas, and planned to get him, in a just challenge. Bane had made him doubtful all those cycles ago. But Bane's schemes and machinations would no longer hinder Flagen. He would get Tonas and Anya, not because of Bane and his traitorous ties, but because Tonas and Anya belonged to him.

Bane and his perversions had taken away Flagen's noble birthright. His assertions of knowledge beyond his ken had cost Flagen his lover. But he had one chance, and one chance only, to regain all he had lost, and Bane was not going to interfere this time. Flagen would help Bane, but on his terms. No one had ever rescued him from Bane. It was time he rescued himself.

A rustling noise, followed by a series of sneezes, came from underneath the gurney. He grabbed a battle dressing and stuffed it down his trews, cleaning most of the mess. *Enough...you sick slug*, Flagen gave himself a mental kick.

"Choolowlysit, choosit."

*That was another sneeze. Snark dung, who was here? Banging sewer scum*, he bent down, with his knees on the floor, and looked beneath the gurney. Four feline eyes, two grey blue, and two copper, glared back. "You banging beasts," Flagen felt around the floor for something, anything, he could use to shoo the damned beasts away.

"Hiss, grrrrl." One of them gouged his arm, while the other streaked across the room. The other stood his ground, daring Flagen to hurt him.

"Squat there now, Beast. You'll be mine soon enough, and then we'll see who out ranks who." Curling his upper lip, Flagen clenched his teeth, pushing out air. "SSSS." Satisfied, he stalked out of the room, leaving the Beast to his own devices.

\*\*\*\*



The modest space humbled the politician, but the Warrior inside recalled other such lowly places where lack of space led to a loving tangle of arms, legs, mouths, and cocks. He and TeBron had experienced an early BondStir, and mated at only twelve risings. They clung to each other through the harsh Sarran Warrior training at the Academy. When they graduated at seventeen, they were both still pups and had yet to fill out the promise of their own bones. They found their fem, formed their Triad, and became the youngest WarriorPair to cross over to Elder Council.

TeZarron was a Prince by birth and claim, TeBron, by claim and Bond. He was FireClan, TeBron, the LightClan. TeNara was their princess, their fem and heart, mother of offspring Nafer, a tad of six, and Nissie—their sweet Nissie. They lost TeNara and their femspring Nissie, who would have had fourteen cycles that Harvest. Now they worked for Nafer, to give him the dream that for them, was colder than the ice in a comet's tail. TeBron had Nafer while he did his government work. They agreed that these missions were so important, that nothing, not even their Bond, could come before them, not if Nafer was ever to have a chance. They sterilized lust and evacuated passion. Missions numbed the pain. The glacial desert of together burned like dry ice.

TeZarron liked the Beast. His own off-the-scale hi-psi enabled him to breach barriers and read the Beast's pictograms. No one else on board Brightstar came near his ability, with the sole exception of his guard, Juraens and possibly, the Earthen, Stern, who had no clue to his own talent. TeZarron erected impenetrable psi barriers, yet on this mission an incessant dissonance hammered on his psyche, a haunting melody a note or two off key. If he drew the aura-wheel of pattern in his mind, he could hone in the frequency, and access the thoughts. He refused. He had a mission, and all thought must focus there. Stern would be told and trained on Sarran, and any other dissonance dealt with there. Now, he needed harmony.

An implanted device chirped deep inside his auditory canal. It operated over the far reaches of space, where psi was not always a reliable means of communication. The device ennobled his TeBron and despite their current impasse, booked his direct attention. "Zarron," He heard a faint call. It had been three risings since they last touched minds. Each rendered a pull in a fabric sorely rent by the loss of TeNara and Nissie. He heard Bron's breath and his eyes teared. He—they—had

gotten through three cycles on ice alone their emotions held frozen in time. Why when he needed all his skill and focus, was there a melt?

"Dragon," the funny name rolled off his Dearest's tongue with the ease and the primitive lust of twenty risings passed. "I feel, an artifact, an echo, out there near you. Nafer, the cub feels it, too. We'll be at Ulna. Come home to us, my Dragon. We've spent too much time in the Barren Phase. I's time for Planting. You and the cub are my life."

"As you are mine," TeZarron choked. "There is a song, but I can't tune it yet. Things here need to be done. Then, Dearest, I'll come home."

TeZarron heard the click indicating communication terminated. He felt the Earthen cats approach, accompanied by Juraens. He wrested his mind backward to chill. Five son and the illusion of Chief Kassan, displaced TeZarron. Juraens stepped into main bay. TeZarron placed a blanking 50-lo perimeter psi shield that few could maintain. It was difficult to hold his concentration after such an emotional wave, but necessary.

"Chief," Juraens said with a laugh. He had turned his head and realized that he led a small parade. Tigger and the Duchess were close on his heels.

Unlike the Earthen, Sarran had never had pets, and were unused to tracking intelligent and independent movement from anything but offspring. On Brightstar there were no offspring. No one looked down. It was a security breach that TeZarron thought Stern, would notice, once he was truly aware that the beasts were sentient. He needed to tell Juraens about the beasts. Something else, not the pets or the buzz, percolated down, sifting through layers in his mind.

"Report." TeZarron signaled his guard to speak freely.

"Tonas and Jonal called the situation serious. They gave command and control to Stern, and asked that Saxon and Lunas coordinate through him. They believe I'm the Alliance representative. They are loyal; I'd stake my life on that, sir."

"You may be, major, you may be."

"Sir, permission to continue."

"Granted."

"The BondStir, Bane claims the Earthen, Mark Stern."

"TeZarron held up his palm, momentarily silencing his aide and guardian. "The Bond goes where it will."

"It's not real, sir. Bane's Bond with the Earthen Stern is flawed," Juraens argued.

"And you know this, how?" TeZarron asked, non-pulsed. Juraens did not argue, made no excuse, was the perfect Warrior. He waited.

"Because he's mine, sir," Juraens replied, his voice stressed with suppressed emotion. "Because he's mine."

Bane and Juraens had both heard Stern. If Bane, Juraens and he, himself heard Stern, that classified Stern as a Hi-Psi. There were only four living Hi-Psi on Sarran: Juraens, TeBron, himself, and their offspring, Nafer. TeZarron was still pushing the limits of one of his talents—illusion—making his face into Chief Kazan's on this mission. It was a simple application of coaxing the brain to look away and see who they thought they should. Juraens would not make an error over something as serious as his own BondMate. Why was Stern claimed by Bane, if he belonged with Juraens? That was an interesting question that had direct implications for their current mission. It could only mean that Bane, not Flagen, was the second traitor.

Chief Kassan had been secretly ousted as a conspirator on Sarran, and TeZarron had taken his place. The conspirators never met face-to-face outside of regular duties. All contact had been blind. He knew it was one of the twins even before Juraens did. Now it remained to bait the third. In all, if Stern was Juraens Bonded, there was an extraordinarily beneficial side benefit to the Sarran clans. The evolutionary leap in psi would reap instant rewards in the next generation, as it had with Nissie and Nafer. The facts finally filtered down and hit dirt.

Aloud TeZarron said, "And so, my friend, you have found your BondMate in the doctor? Stern does, indeed, cut as wide a swath as the Admirals' implied. Do you know his history, Juraens?"

"I know he was with one of the Earth Government's security agencies, and later with their lone organizational attempt at world accord, the United Nations. It was with the United Nations that the Admirals' managed to strike an accord upholding honor, unlike the treaty offered by the first agreement with the USA. From all reports, and from my personal observation, Stern is a fine man. He will make a great Warrior, one with superb medical skills. Jonal and Tonas have already offered him citizenship, based on his contributions, rather than association with Bane." TeZarron noted the manner in which Juraens spat Bane's name, as if he chewed on something foul.

"If there is to be a Tribunal over Tonas and the Earthen Doctor Anya, you might as well throw your hat in the ring for Stern. You are aware that as a Hi-Psi, you are able to hear most others, unless you shield. Are

you sure you are not making an error just because you can also hear him? I would not see you hurt, Juraens."

"I'm sure, sir," answered Juraens. "By this time, I would hope to know the difference between *eavesdropping*, *lust*, and a *true Bond*," Juraens mind voice smacked TeZarron with ferocity.

"If that is so, you have a challenge to issue. I'll be on the Bridge, if you need me, or intervention becomes necessary," TeZarron responded.

TeZarron glanced at the old-fashioned timekeeper he kept on his wall. It was exactly four risings to dock. A loud buzz on a tightly-held frequency heard, only by those Sarrans whose psychic ability approached chart levels eight or above, sounded in both his and Juraens ears. TeBron lifted TeZarron and Juraens memory blocks remotely. With the signal, Juraens' need was brought sharply into focus. He all but ran to the door.

TeZarron sighed. It took great psi capacity to ignore a BondMate while undercover. Juraens was not the first of the psi Warriors to Bond on mission. Sarran WarriorPairs knew that each would help his Bonded complete a mission. Only dire or deadly circumstances excused delay. Sarrans were not cruel. Newly-formed BondMates held top priority for extraction and replacement on mission. However, that was impossible in space, under deep cover. Juraens had held out for over two tides, feeling his Mate, but avoiding his Mate's presence. He had suffered, and had no idea why he suffered so severely. It was time. They knew as much of the enemy as they could learn from stealth, now was the time for action.

TeZarron felt a sharp claw and a simultaneous brain nudge. Goddess, the Beast was sending him information. He needed to get to the Bridge now. As he headed for the door, he could have sworn the cat smiled.

\*\*\*\*

Mark Stern sat before the viewer, scanning security images. He was particularly interested in viewing access to the Admirals' Quarters. Since the Beast's discovery of the bug, a few risings ago, he spent most of his time trying to pin down suspects. The list was short. Other than the Admirals and the Beast, only Saxon, Lunas, Bane and he, had entered the StarRoom since their departure from Earth. He had no access to alien tech. That left three suspects, one of which was his lover, Bane. It didn't look good. He had set the computer to silence to facilitate concentration.

He became aware of the message light on the console at the same moment he heard the frantic knock.

"Stern, Mark, Medical Officer, Chief of Security. Open."

Both Lunas and Saxon stood on the other side, and entered his office immediately.

"Saxon, Commander, engage silence protocol, security office. Override Code 1258."

"What the fuck is happening, Saxon?" Mark growled.

"We have a Security Protocol from the Admirals' Quarters," Lunas answered. "Lunas, Commander, Second Key, Security Protocol 1258."

The baritone voice of the isolated security system spoke: "Pulling up Protocol 1258. Date: 9435.B115; Location, Command Corridor. 11:35 times."

A holo image of the empty corridor outside the Admirals' Quarters appeared. He heard the whoosh of the transport unit doors, followed by footsteps in the background. Halfway down the corridor, Bane and Anya emerged from the lift. It appeared as if Bane was attempting to pull Anya away from Quarters, rather than toward them. Jonal opened the quarter's door and after thanking Bane, took Anya inside. Bane turned away, hurrying down the corridor. The aspect changed and the next image showed Anya speaking to Jonal and Tonas. Mark spoke in a flat, almost lifeless tone. "Override privacy screen for audio, use Security Protocol 1258."

Mark turned to Saxon and spoke, "Will that give me the audio?"

"Yes, Doctor." Saxon replied.

Mark knew what Anya was saying to Jonal and Tonas, but he had to hear it. "Raise the volume of the audio, now."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, why are you thanking that chowder head? He bruised my arm trying to get me away from here." Mark heard aloud the words that christened him ten times a fool. And he had asked the traitor to take a message. He had given his friend, who counted on his protection, to an enemy that would have kidnapped her or worse, given the opportunity. Mark slammed his fist on the console. He couldn't torture himself with his failings now; he had a serious security breach.

"God damn son of a bitch," Mark cursed aloud. Bless the foresight of the partial mind block. Bane was their traitor.

Mark turned and addressed the waiting commanders. "Do you have any suggestions on how to play this one?"

"Override Code 1258 gives access to the entire ship's log, including any security entries made by the Admirals. You now have sole access. I believe anything after the time mentioned might be personal," Lunas answered.

"I believe that Lunas and I should be seen minding the store, Stern. It's better they don't know what information we have."

"You are, of course, correct, Commander. Dismissed, gentlemen," Mark replied, his voice grim.

"Computer, Medical Lab monitor, Override Code 1258. Follow that with any communications from Admirals' Quarters to Crew Quarters from 9435.B115, 11:15 times forward to present."

Mark knew he was playing for time. He had to give Jonal and Tonas time to complete the ritual. "Security to Bridge. Override 1258: Access to Bridge is forbidden until further notice. All entrances to and from the Bridge are to be monitored. Notice to this console upon approach."

*Sometimes, he thought, life was pretty shitty. He had to keep his false lover in a standoff, while his three best friends screwed their brains out.* Mark Stern was not generally an introspective man. He took life as it came and wrestled it down to his liking. This time, however, his ego had finally outrun his commonsense. He didn't have to Bond to Bane to take this journey. Morgan offered him the ride, an offer seconded by the Admirals, no strings. However, Mark's ego had needed stroking and with Bane literally falling at his feet, he hadn't looked beyond the obvious. He had told Jonal that he couldn't, in good conscience, clear Bane of suspicion. Yet he hadn't followed his own advice. There was no going back. He was now, physically, a Sarran male, who, as a former Earthen, might never have a BondMate. Mark had thrown the dice and crapped out. He had done right by his country and the Sarrans, but failed himself, and almost failed his friends.

Fifteen mots later, he sensed three Sarran approaching the Bridge. Bane and Flagen approached on screen from the main corridor. The third was Juraens, just as he had expected. The Admirals had notified the Sarran. Juraens stood outside the separate, seldom-used commander's entry, but did not move to enter. Mark couldn't wait for the Sarran equivalent of Homeland Security. He had to act.

He spoke to Saxon and Lunas using 1258, the isolated security channel now fully operative, "Gentlemen, we're on."

## *Chapter Eleven*

*Men are not prisoners of fate, but only prisoners of their own minds.*  
--Franklin D. Roosevelt

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B115*  
*Earth Calendar: July 25th, mid-afternoon*

The panels of the door to the small security office opened and Stern stepped onto the Bridge. Bane and Flagen staked positions outside the door and demanded immediate access. Stern nodded to Lunas.

"1258 Protocol override, Bridge Access only." In tune to the staccato rhythm of his leashed anger, the locking mechanisms that sealed the access panels clicked closed, and the passageway from commons corridor to the Bridge resumed function.

"Why is the Bridge sealed from access by authorized medical personnel?" demanded Bane.

"Security authorized closure, Dr. Bane," Lunas shot back. "As security is in command, I followed orders."

"Mark, I'm so sorry," Bane soothed. "Commanders, I apologize for my undue haste. You can understand my concern as our Bond is recent. When the Bridge went silent..."

"Quiet, Bane." Mark gripped the edge of the communications console. Lt. Septis edged away. "Septis," Mark snapped, "resume station. Does no one follow orders on this sardine can?" Mark muttered, and began to rub his head. He moved away from the console and leaned against the commander's chair, gripping the back and steadying himself. Waves of

continuous heat rippled around his body. It was almost more than he could stand. This sensation was what Jonal and Tonas had described. This was a BondStir, a pale imitation of what he felt before with Bane. Who here caused this in him? He refused to be this helpless or open to anyone, ever again. If there is a God, it is not Bane. *I saw the holo myself. Bane said it wasn't real.*

He attempted to steady his voice. "Saxon, please, some water. Lunas, find out what Medical is after."

"Mark, you can..." Bane stuttered.

"I said to shut up, Bane. Talk to Lunas."

"I don't believe Bane has anything to say, Dr. Stern. Commanders Lunas and Saxon." Flagen stepped out from behind his brother and addressed the others. His back was straight and his face set. "My brother accompanied me for a small show of familial support. Commanders, I must beg for your indulgence. Under normal circumstances, I would bring this matter before an Elder Tribunal. But as there is no Tribunal aboard and the matter is urgent..."

"Dr. Flagen, if this matter is of such import as to warrant a Tribunal, I must alert Admirals Jonal and Tonas," Lunas deflected.

"Let me get to the point, Commander," Flagen inserted. "I invoke my right under Sarran Codex, to challenge Admiral Jonal for my BondMate, Admiral Tonas, and the Fem Anya of EarthClan."

"Aren't you about ten cycles too late for that laptard to hunt, Dr. Flagen?" Commander Saxon sniggered.

"Commander Saxon," Mark roared, "on my Bridge you will show respect for your fellow officers. Continue, Flagen."

Flagen's voice dripped ice. "In my reading of the Codex, there was no article that limited a challenge to a particular timeframe, unless there were offspring. As I have information from Princess Anya that the Rite of Penetration is not complete, it is my duty as a Sarran Warrior, to issue a challenge to a weaker, thus fraudulent, Bond. Warriors, the Codex demands my challenge answered, and the parties involved separated, until a Tribunal can convene. As there are two medical officers other than myself on board, I assume that my brother would recuse himself, but Dr. Stern should be up to administering the drug. Since Admirals Jonal and Tonas are subjects in the filing, according to regulations, Commanders, you both have seats on the Tribunal. The third choice is mine. I would like to request that be Communications Officer Septis."



Mark thought, *"And we now open door number three. Yet Septis had the all-important access to Communication. Shit.* It had become difficult to stand erect. The sexual pull was making Mark's knees weak. His determined resistance produced nausea. He took deep, cleansing breaths.

"I have brought the Challenge kit with me," Bane inserted smoothly. "We can take care of this awful business now and be done with it, if Lt. Septis is willing. We need Security to fetch the Admirals and Doctor Forrest."

"Dr. Flagen," Saxon turned, deliberately showing his back to Bane. "Dr. Stern has been appointed Chief of Security by the Admirals, and his appointment verified by an Alliance Representative."

"You will have to present your case to him," Lunas finished.

"Dr. Stern is my brother-in-Bond. I do not feel it would be an honorable act to ask him to make such a decision," Flagen answered.

Mark noticed that Bane turned to Flagen with a look of total stupefaction on his face.

"But that would leave no medical officer to oversee the challenge. If you put off the challenge, brother, the fem might gestate, and you would forfeit," stuttered an obviously stunned and out-maneuvered Bane.

The sight of Bane so outdone by the brother he held in such derision, was the only event in Caesar's circus that gave Mark hope that there was a way out of this potential explosion.

The Secondary doors to the Bridge area opened without fanfare. Mark watched as the two bodies entered what he now thought of as the arena. Caesar, those of us about to die, salute you. Christ, it's becoming difficult to keep standing. He felt another hit to his gut. His shaft was on fire, and now his testicles burned. Mark sank into one of the command chairs.

"Identify yourselves, Warriors, Security Protocol 1258. Computer complete ID scan to verify." He barely managed to give the command loud enough for the Bridge to record and repeat.

*All will be well soon, love. Just trust a while longer.*

Mark roared back with all the mental push he could muster, *Bane, get out of my head, and my body, you sick fuck.*

Mark turned his head toward the door. Juraens, he was expecting, but who stood in the shadow?

*Bane is not in your head, Mark. Bane is nothing. Never was.*

Mark looked around, attempting to locate the source of the new mind voice. His face remained impassive, but he felt sweat collecting,

plastering his hair to his scalp and trickling down his back, settling in the crease of his ass. He felt heat in his armpits, and moisture collected in the hair surrounding his cock and sac.

Mark had been a top operative. His government associations began at the tender age of nine, and continued until he had been able to force the issue just before his tenure at Manhattan General. Mark knew he had psychic talent. He also knew it wasn't as latent as advertised to those onboard Brightstar, save Jonal and Tonas. Bane recognized Mark as telepathic, but Bane supposedly had been his BondMate, which would account for the telepathic link. Now someone else was fucking around in his head. He'd had enough of that on Earth. One of the reasons he got on this skyboat was to free himself of that level of scrutiny. He figured that on Sarran, his abilities would not make him any different from other Sarrans. He had looked forward to life-Mates, offspring. *Fuck Bane.*

*There are only two beings who will ever fuck you again, love – me and our fem, when we find her.*

"Juraens, Elder Council, Psi Security, Identity Scan under Protocol 1258."

"Identified."

"There," said Bane, with a hint of smug satisfaction. "Juraens' presence solves our dilemma. As Psi Security, he is qualified to administer the challenge and oversee the proceedings. I have a kit already prepared, so matters can proceed, if the Commanders and Lt. Septis are willing."

"I may be qualified to administer the Challenge, Dr. Bane, but I refuse," Juraens stated unequivocally. Mark watched the Sarrans, and fought to keep his mind free of the new intruder. He tried reasoning with him. *Look, I need all of my faculties right now. Give this up, and I swear I'll deal with you later.*

*You will deal with me later.* The mind voice oozed testosterone, dominance, and tenderness at the same time. It drove Mark nuts. The haze eased.

Commander Saxon addressed Juraens. "Officer Juraens, this is an unusual situation. As much as I agree that this is neither the time nor place for a Tribunal, the Codex dictates that these circumstances give Flagen a hearing within a rising." Saxon's words came to an immediate halt, and his eyes opened wide as he looked beyond Juraens.

"I believe I am qualified to head a Tribunal, Dr. Bane." The new Sarran Warrior said, stepping out.

Mark was done with the bullshit. "Who are you? What are you doing on the Bridge?" Mark demanded. "And why have you lurked in the shadows, despite the fact that you arrived with Officer Juraens near the beginning of this farce?"

"High Prince TeZarron, Lord..."

Mark watched as Bane tripped over himself in obeisance. He shook his head in self-disgust. *How could I have gone there?*

*Love, they drugged you. You couldn't know the difference between what you felt and a real Bond. Bane drugged you almost as soon as you came aboard.*

*Who are you? Mark screamed. "Get out of my head!"* For an instant, he let his iron control slip, and rested his head against the back of the chair. He opened his eyes and Saxon was addressing the Chief. It felt as if he had acquired double vision, Chief Kassan, a barrel-chested humanoid with huge arms, was superimposed over a Sarran Warrior of indeterminate age and aristocratic bearing. *This is the incognito Elder with the offspring, who had enough psi to employ suggestive illusions. He had the talent, but he's not the one making my knees quake."*

*You're right, love, it isn't TeZarron. He is the youngest Elder on the Council and BondMate to TeBron. Hi-Psi count, literally off the chart. Only four talents like his on Sarran. Now with you, there are five. And only I can make your knees quake.*

*Look, just tell me who the fuck you are. I feel you in this room.* His icy control spent; Mark longed to give it all up to this Sarran, and he didn't even know who he was. Mark gripped the chair until his knuckles were white. The mental hoops through which his mind had leaped took only parsecs. He hadn't missed a line of dialog from the drama on deck.

"Why certainly, Lord. I'll just get my kit..." Bane tempered to TeZarron.

*TeZarron doesn't seem to buy that,* Mark mused. His repugnance for his former Bonded revved up with each word Bane uttered.

"That will not be necessary, Dr. Bane. I have my own," TeZarron answered.

"Why wait," Bane persisted. "You could use my kit, and my brother's case would suffer no prejudice from lost or gained opportunities to complete the Ritual." Bane slithered closer to Mark's chair. Mark tried to push up and away from the command console. His mind shouted in revulsion. *I will not have him near me.*

Juraens closed the distance between Mark and Bane, placing his face inches from Bane's, and using his greater height as an advantage. "Your

kit will be confiscated, Dr. Bane, so no one can tamper with it or switch it for Lord, High Prince TeZarron's. As for you, you are meeting my challenge for my Bonded, Mark Stern."

Another wave of dizziness passed over Mark. "You? Juraens," Mark whispered. The Admirals had enormous respect and confidence in this Warrior, but at this point, he would trust his fate to no one but himself.

"Lord High Prince TeZarron," Mark spoke in a firm, but hoarse voice. "I wish to ask for the Rite of Dissolution." Mark suddenly lost his voice, and the last part of his plea was silent.

*And you will remain silent on this issue until you obey. Codex has been invoked. Speak to this at the Tribunal, not before. You are strong, Mark, but I am well trained and for the moment, at least, stronger."*

Mark felt Juraens willing him to silence. The heat and the overwhelming feelings of malaise began to subside as soon as Juraens broke into his mind. Mark continued, "Since Drs Flagen and Bane are both challenged, I would propose that the Medical Bay become my temporary Quarters with no access, save my own."

"Wait a son..." Bane shouted. "This new challenge is a ploy by the Admirals' cronies to enable them to conveniently overlook my brother's request. Officer Juraens still holds my brother responsible for a trivial, ancient incident. My brother, though cruelly beset, was innocent. Officer Juraens did not accept judgment. Here, he uses his friendship with the Admirals as revenge. I might also remind those present, that Dr. Stern injected the contents of the vial into his own vein, and became fully Sarran as a result. He recognized and accepted our Bond. There are no grounds for this outrage. Mark, for Goddess' sake, tell them."

"Rape of a femspring is not trivial, no matter how ancient a matter, even if unproven," Juraens said. "There was enough evidence for your fathers to pull you out of lineage and deny you the courtesy title of Marquisate. As it happens, Bane, I have no issues with Flagen. I never suspected Flagen of the rape and murder of a femspring of only six risings. I knew it was you. You set him up." Juraens visibly trembled, his hands clenched. Mark could read his body language. If he didn't separate them now, Bane would be dead in an eye blink.

"Juraens," the officer stopped and turned at the sound of Mark's voice. Juraens was just as vulnerable to Mark, as Mark was to him.

Mark spoke aloud to TeZarron, Juraens, and Bane. "Gentlemen, both Admirals Jonal and Tonas noted in their respective logs, that the circumstances under which the vial was administered were not ideal.

There were no other Warriors present, nor was there a witness. I think we need to follow the Codex, so that there are no future questions."

Bane moved as if to grab Mark and protest. Juraens countered by stepping in front of Mark.

"Dr. Bane, cease!" TeZarron commanded. He looked at Bane with apparent disgust. "Legally, I could just declare the Bond void and allow both you and Juraens to court Dr. Stern. I am being considerate of the Bond you claim to enjoy by letting Juraens challenge it, instead of declaring it null. Do you understand me?" TeZarron's voice thundered.

"Yes, Lord," answered Bane, his voice dark and saturnine.

"Juraens, wait in Security until I give you leave," TeZarron ordered.

"Yes, my Lord," murmured Juraens.

"We are four risings out from Sarran. I want all of this cleared up before we land. In consideration of Dr. Flagen, you will move Dr. Anya Forrest of EarthClan, to suitable Quarters with chaperonage. Since we will be short medical staff because of these proceedings, Doctor Forrester may resume her profession, if she so desires."

"And what of Tonas," asked Flagen. "With a pending challenge, would you leave Tonas with a BondMate who has been challenged, Lord High Prince?"

"Yes, Dr. Flagen, I will. As Commanders Saxon and Lunas must serve on the Tribunal, someone needs, as noted by Dr. Stern, to take charge of this bucket. It is their bucket, so I'm putting them in back in charge. They have been together for ten cycles, Dr. Flagen. Certainly one more night will not cause you undue dislocation. The matter is closed."

"A word Lord?" Mark asked.

"Go ahead," TeZarron said.

"Might I suggest, sir, that Anya be placed with Syn."

"Syn, Dr. Stern? You refer to that somewhat archaic, Earthen notion, that humanoid behavior is rewarded or punished by inhuman means?" TeZarron asked with one raised autocratic brow.

Mark laughed, almost at ease for the first time since viewing the security holo. "No, High Prince TeZarron. Cynthia Sinclair, an Earthen fem with the nickname of Syn. Fem Sinclair has a feline companion, Duchess, a pure white, longhaired beast. If you are familiar with Dr. Forrester's Tigger, you may have also noticed The Duchess. The Chief had a fondness for the two of them."

"It shall be as you say, Dr. Stern. Gentlemen, the Tribunal of Dukes Saxon and Lunas and Baron Septis, will convene at 09:00 tines to begin to

review evidence. I will state for the record, that I would prefer this matter be resolved without resort to drugging any of the Earthen involved." TeZarron began to bark out orders.

"Dr. Stern, call your Security Second to organize a party to remove Dr. Forrest from Admirals Quarters. I will accompany that party, as I imagine it will take a position of my weight to accomplish that feat. I will give you one tine to organize that party for me." Mark watched as TeZarron turned to Bane and Flagen.

"A tine, High Lord..." Bane's protest died a sudden death as the High Prince's face contorted in anger. He and Flagen saluted and left the Bridge. With Bane removed from the area, Mark's breath came a bit easier. Although still in the throes of what he now recognized as true BondStir, the burning pain had left once Juraens made his declaration.

"Permission to leave the Bridge, sir." Mark intended to use some of the tine's reprieve that TeZarron had given him to warn Jonal and Tonas what they faced. The WarriorPair were stalwart friends in this new environment and he would help them, using any means necessary.

"A moment of your time, Stern." TeZarron laid his hand on Mark's arm, thus preventing any exit. TeZarron led Mark toward the small security office Mark left an eternity ago. They stopped at the door.

"Juraens is waiting in Security for you on my order. I wish you to give him fifteen mots of your time."

"Is that honorable, High Prince, given the circumstances?" Marks prior thoughts of his friend's pain infused his question with more sarcasm than he intended.

"Mark, you are now a Sarran but long before you became one of us, you were a Warrior, a silent Warrior. You served your time in much the same manner as Officer Juraens and I have served, in cold, dark places, away from the light of family and friends, and most of all, away from the comfort of love, because you couldn't afford it. On Sarran, usually that burden is lessened because it is a burden shared. This is the first mission I have ever undertaken without my Bonded, TeBron. He stays with Nafer, our offspring. TeBron and I lost our fem and our femspring to the Ipz. There was a reason for the partial block back in your Central Park. We are engaged in a battle for our existence, Not just Sarran existence, but the existence of the humanoid genetic type—thinking sentient *individuals*, rather than swarms. You must know what is at stake here."

"I could have been more fully briefed, sir, and permitted to accompany you without the Bonding. To allow Bane that kind of entree

into both my psyche and my personal space, while letting me believe it was real, was a dishonorable act that is unworthy of your race, Sir." Mark emphasized the Sir with all the contempt he could spill into one word. "I am aware I agreed to the block, but I didn't give anyone permission to screw with my emotions."

"Morgan told me you were a rogue. He didn't approve of you. He said you wouldn't blindly follow orders, and you thought too much. Fortunately for you, Stern, Sarran needs more Warriors like you, not less. Warriors who think are Warriors to whom honor is real and glory is secondary to justice. I'm going to remove that block now. You are here on your own insistence. You volunteered for this duty, Dr. Stern. It is your right to reconsider your position once we remove the block. Sarran needs you and so does your BondMate. As I said, you are Hi-Psi, untrained, but the potential for greatness is there. To join in a true mating with someone as honorable as Juraens, would enrich both your life and the lives of all around you. May I place my forehead against yours and my hands to your skull?"

"Yes, Lord," Mark said, abashed at his lack of control. He centered himself, using techniques he had picked up while stationed in the Far East. TeZarron pulled Mark to him and placed his forehead against Mark's own. Large hands circled his skull and applied intense pressure, but TeZarron wielded it as precisely as he used a surgeon's scalpel. Mark felt the slip, a knot came undone. He sank back into the chair. Like the cascades of a raging river, memories churned around him, loosening heretofore sunken and solid rocks, now carried in a cleansing flood, leaving bare the truth below.

It struck him now. The scene played out before his eyes. At the hospital, he had been attracted to Bane, physically, that much was true. When he agreed to accompany the Sarrans, it was not Bane that drew him. The night of the evacuation, he had sensed more from the Sarran entourage. He recollected the voices in his head, first one and then many. Mark thought at the time that he was losing his mind. Since he had left his parents' custody for the governments', he had never heard another mind-voice. The others enrolled in the program could only send or receive pictures and impressions. Once he realized he was different, even among the unique, Mark was quick to hide any further progression of his abilities. It was the conscious realization that the voices he heard in the ER the night of the evacuation were actual conversation and not his imaginings that put him on the Bridge of the Brightstar.

Mark chose freely. Yes, he had blacked out on the floor of Manhattan General ER's ambulance bays. He had fainted from the overwhelming tide of emotional need and sexual heat caused by the arrival of his true mate, Juraens. When he awoke, Juraens was at his side. They had only a few short tines together to cement a rather fragile Bond—the first in history cemented between Sarran and an off worlder. They Bonded, in form and fact, with TeZarron as witness. In those few tines, Mark and Juraens spoke mind-to-mind. The meld was so strong, that Mark became aware of the import of the Sarran mission to the survival of humanoids. It was Mark's idea to use himself as bait. A non-Sarran humanoid with an off-chart psi rating would tempt traitors as quick as beer-lured slugs. Anti-Sarran Council, Zyptz collaborators, and Sarran traitors would drown in a vat of their own brew like the slugs they imitated.

The plan appealed to the maverick in Mark, but it required the block. Juraens had argued against the plan. However, when consulted, TeZarron had agreed that the chances for success would increase exponentially with Mark's participation. Juraens, with the example of TeZarron's sacrifices, did as honor required and acceded. His last sight of his lover and BondMate of only seven hours was Juraens taking his hand and turning it to kiss his wrist at the pulse.

Juraens had said, "Please, my love, try to remember this and not hate me when it's done. I would forbid the use of you and kidnap you away from them all, if only it wouldn't damage my honor in your sight." The tent flap shut as Juraens left, and Mark felt more empty and alone than he had since he left his family behind twenty-six years before.

Sometime later, he woke up for what he now knew was the second time. He remembered his head felt cleaved in two. Robert James Morgan, a man Mark wished he had never met, appeared at the side of his stretcher.

"You passed out, son."

"I'm aware of that. Too much information, delivered too quickly," Mark answered.

The flat eyes of the man who headed the United States Military Research Projects on psychic phenomena peered back at Mark like he was an insect on a pin. He hadn't acknowledged Morgan at Manhattan General and did not intend to play games with him now. "Yes, they're telepathic," Mark answered the unspoken question in Morgan's eyes.

"You're going back with them." Morgan stated this as fact. "Don't get your ass in a crank, Mark. I have approval from the highest level."



Morgan chuckled, "Since you were nine-years-old, you always got that look on your kisser when you were about to get ornery. Just listen to what the man has to say. You know you already decided to go. It wouldn't hurt to show a little loyalty to the government that fed, clothed, and raised you."

"I owe you nothing. I owe this government nothing. You found me, took me away from my home and educated me for a purpose—yours. I worked my ass off for the government from the time I was nine. I participated in all of your experiments and later, worked the field. No more, Morgan. Made the movie, bought the tee shirt. There are no sequels. Done."

"General Morgan, may we have a few mots with Dr. Stern?"

It was at that moment in the instant replay of memory, that the inherent weakness in his grand scheme hit Mark full force. Initially, Mark was unaware of the true nature of a WarriorBond. In the last few times, he learned that losing Juraens would cut out his heart; by his agreement to the mind block, he condemned both himself and Juraens to a hellish half-life. If they were separated and the block remained, they would lose their minds.

TeZarron was the only person outside of his BondMate who could verify the true nature of Juraens relationship. Mark's mind played back his supposed initial Security Briefing with Jonal and TeZarron. They discussed the Ipz, the Plague, and their reservations about Bane. He gave them his fully informed consent to the block. He had embraced the chance of a new life away from Morgan and his cohorts, and a future with Juraens. He longed for the life where he could settle and be just one of many who had talent. The Military controlled Mark by using those he loved as collateral against his good behavior. When his parents had finally passed, he left the agencies and vowed never to give them ammunition to use against him again. Once the block formed, Mark's agile mind used logic to fill in the blanks.

He thought it had only taken Morgan to make up his mind, and when Bane came straight to his side as soon as Mark had recovered; he saw it as a bit of a sexual bonus. He saw clearly now, that Juraens was the reason he felt no compulsion for completion with Bane. His feelings for Bane were complex. He was protective, like an older brother, and unbeknownst to all but he and his would-be lover, they had kissed, petted a bit, but never so much as exchanged fluids. Between them, there was always a reason why it wasn't time. Now he knew why.

Mark's head cleared, situated wholly in the present. He broke away from TeZarron. "You were there with Juraens and me. You were our witness. And since we've been on board, I've scarcely seen him. He's deliberately avoided me, hasn't he? You always knew Bane was a liar. And you knew, because of my Bond with Juraens, that Bane would not be able to violate me. Jonal warned me. He said that I wouldn't be able to control my reaction if the Bond was real. And here, on deck, I couldn't. Yet Juraens has for tides. How?"

"He knew you were his mate, but could not remember the joining. He stayed as far away from you as possible. I didn't know, either. I passed the information on to Sarran to TeBron, where it would remain safe should something happen to me, and then blanketed the information with shields that could only be breached by a specific combination of a psi enhanced wave frequency devices. I would not have let either of you attempt this hoax without such backup. You have executed your plan with honor and integrity, despite great personal cost."

TeZarron continued, "I know how they raised you, and what you had to fight to become a healer, instead of a destroyer. You have used your gifts with Sarran Honor, even when there was no Codex to guide your way. Unlike Bane. Yes, he is our traitor. Juraens prevented you from denouncing him, because we have not yet smoked out his third. The first was Chief Kassan, the man whose place I've taken since I came aboard. With the evidence on the holo feed, we now have Bane, and with the help of the Tribunal, we will ferret out the third."

"No need to ferret much, Lord. The third is Septis. I've suspected it since we left. I've been investigating the communications anomalies. He's the only officer capable of adjusting the frequencies. He is also the only candidate that would have been able to pick up the short-range signals of the Zyptz bug, and rebroadcast them to what I suspect is a Shadow Ship. I can't find the ship, sir. I've been reaching out with my psi for three risings. They have some sort of stealth device that shields from psi as well as instruments."

"What of Flagen, sir?" asked Mark.

"Flagen is a tragic enigma; but not a traitor. Things will go as they must. But I wouldn't worry about Jonal and Tonas. Their Bond is strong." TeZarron pointed to the Security Office. "Don't keep Juraens waiting. He's waited long enough."

Mark turned and walked to the command console. The panels to Security opened. Juraens sat at Mark's desk, his head resting in his hand.

"Beloved..." Mark whispered.

## *Chapter Twelve*

*The most commons of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief occupation of mankind.*

-- HL Mencken

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B115-16*

*Earth Calendar: July 25th evening, July 26th after midnight*

Tonas was sated and comfortable. His Firefly lay at his left, as Anya did on his right. They were asleep, but he lingered in the half-light of afterglow. Thank the Goddess they persevered. Joining was glorious; it was more than what they promised. As tortuous as the Ipz attack had been on the WarriorPairs without a fem, Tonas now knew that it could not begin to approach the wrenching agony of losing one of a Triad. The idea of being somehow less to Jonal when they Bonded with Anya, had torn him apart. Now that he knew Triad, without Jonal he would have no strength, without Anya, no heart.

If he ever lost them both, his soul would shrivel and waste away. There would be no death, just nothingness. He could see now why some others after the Ipz attack, demanded to be spaced. Tonas sighed and nestled under his Firefly's shoulder, pulling Anya along closer to his own body. The feel of Jonal's hot length inside his channel was indescribable. Once breached, his outer muscle opened the channel, and clenched on the hot, thick cock of his Bonded. The stretch and burn combined with his own shaft encased in the soft, tight, and wet warmth of Anya, had enveloped him, swallowed him up, and made him over.

The connection was new and bright, yet still fragile. He wished they were home on Sarran. Since the Ipz, his ambitions were muted. He eschewed politics, and the status of Elder and Alliance member. He wanted home—a place designed to comfort and sustain his BondMates, and protect the magic they had together. Tonas thought they made an offspring tonight, or perhaps, Goddess willing, a femspring. He read the yearning in their Anya that met with their own. If desire begot offspring, Anya would bear young in eighteen tides. He would have to check with Mark to find the gestation period of Earthen fem. Sarran fem bore young in one hundred eighty risings. He hoped it didn't take longer. His Firefly was not long on patience, although he had been so much better since Anya. I have been so much better since Anya. I don't obsess as often as I did. Jonal was right. I sometimes do tend to over-think. With a small sigh, he settled down again, his back to Jonal's broad chest, and Anya's head tucked under his shoulder. His eyes closed.

Tonas could not tell whether mots or tines had passed, when he felt a series of taps from a small hammer on his skull. He tried to burrow down beneath the golden bedding. He didn't escape. The pressure escalated, and the hammer grew needles. Tonas, in his half-sleep state, had entertained visions of Anya and Jonal's lips caressing his stiff member. He had dreamed of lubricating himself in Anya's juices and using them to penetrate his Firefly, while their Anya sucked Jonal to completion. He had been on the verge of shaping his long-fingered hands down soft curves, and over hard valleys of the two very different bodies presented in convenient nudity on either side.

Again, the needles—sharper in intensity, digging. *What...the Beast It had to be the Goddess-be-damned Beast.* No, he was not getting up. He knew it was Jonal's turn to feed him.

Tonas shook the veil of sleep from his brain, opened his eyes, and found the Beast staring, nose in his face. One huge paw was on his head, claws partially extended. He received a persistent impression of being in close proximity to peril. It was an impression he couldn't shake. Tonas reached up, placed a gentle hand on Jonal's shoulder, and exerted light pressure. It was a method they developed during the war to signify impending action. The signal caused a visceral response in his Bonded. Jonal was immediately awake and aware.

*The Beast is sending mind pictures of danger. I see Mark and another in the corridor. We must dress and waken Anya, now.*

The quarters' security system flashed—a holo appeared. Mark Stern stood in the command corridor accompanied. Behind him stood Psi Security Officer Juraens, in close, as if protecting Mark's back. Tonas watched Juraens as his eyes scanned and rescanned the area. From Mark, Tonas felt the energy of urgency beating as a pulsar about to go nova.

Mark was loud and abrupt. "Override privacy, Protocol 1258. Jonal, Tonas, open the fucking door. You have forty-five mots till all hell breaks loose."

Tonas's mind was drowning in discordant images when Security arrived forty-five mots to the parsec after Mark and Juraens came to give warning. It had taken everything that was Sarran in him, and in his Firefly, to give Anya up—even for those few times they would be apart. It was only Mark's possession of the holo, and Juraens assurance of TeZarron's goodwill, that convinced he and Jonal to abide by honor and the Codex. Beside Mark and Juraens's example, he and Jonal could do no less.

Juraens and Mark had communicated the situation to them in less than a few parsecs. They did it by mind-link, and the backlash for those who were not Hi-Psi was excruciating. However, it had given them time to prepare Anya and do a complete security sweep. Juraens and Mark had checked thoroughly for listening devices with Tigger before the Security Party arrived. Mark suggested, and Jonal agreed, that the Beast's hearing might detect a frequency they missed. Tonas had no idea how Mark would react when he found that Tigger was almost sentient, and certainly psychic. He wasn't sure how he felt about it, but he knew it was fact.

Jonal, of necessity, had kept his temper on a tight leash while the Security Party stood in the corridor awaiting Anya and Tigger. Flagen's appearance to oversee and ensure that Anya was taken to other Quarters, sent Jonal past fire to incendiary. TeZarron had ordered Flagen confined to Quarters for the affront to his own honor, and Anya left in silence with Tigger in tow.

Flagen's confinement did nothing to mollify Jonal, and his Firefly had resumed his habit of pacing the StarTable. The peace and quiet strength Channa brought to their lives seemed to leech out into the cold dead of space with every moment they were apart. The Bond was fragile. Tonas and Jonal were both afraid it would break if stressed.

"Why weren't we briefed? The whole of this mission stank as laptard piss. When we begin to behave as they do, we become them." Jonal straightened a chair.

"They did what they must to preserve the government and the Alliance," Tonas answered, his brow furrowed.

"What government were the Elders preserving? Sarran's or the Galactic Alliance's corrupt and inept consolidation? We knew even before we set out, that some of the Alliance's families were engaged in illegal trade with the Zyptz, despite sanctions. Black Market profiteering in weapons of mass destruction, fuck! The Zyptz knew our genetic code only because it was stolen and sold to them by one of our own," Jonal roared. "Who do we trust? Outside of the Earthen, anyone on this fucking ship is suspect."

"You like Mark's Earthen cuss word," Tonas tried to tease, as he gradually tried to herd Jonal around the StarChamber to a chair.

"What?" Jonal snapped back.

"Fuck—the word fuck. I don't see why it is considered a profanity, since the activity itself brings so much pleasure," Tonas said.

"Fuck your attempt to pacify, Tonas. I refuse to give up this rage. Flagen has hung around the fringes of our lives for too fucking long. I have borne this, knowing that you are mine and that none could take you from me. Now, ten cycles after the claim, he comes to destroy. We were not the enemy, Tonas. TeZarron, the Elders, this deception, the farce of a Tribunal—it is not prudent or safe. We expose our weaknesses to the enemy. They played with Mark and Juraens' *Bond*. They risk our Bond with Anya to pacify Flagen. Why is there all of this effort to capture Lt. Septis? Here is a man of no family, doing his time in the military; an older officer for his grade, borderline promotable, scheduled to muster out at the end of this tour. And this man,—this ordinary man—is so difficult to prosecute. This does not make sense, Tonas. Again, they are not telling us what is going on here. I want to know who Septis is, where he came from, and whose side in this bloody mess he is on—today at least."

"Security, you heard Admiral Jonal, go. Obtain some assistance from Commanders Saxon and Lunas, and give them complete access to all of the private ship's logs to get the job done. Tonas, Admiral, Prince LightClan."

"Yes, Jonal, I agree," Tonas continued. "There is a stink to this, but TeZarron is Hi-Psi as well as Elder. If he held back, there is reason. If you

and I now trust only Mark, who does Mark trust? He told us he trusted Juraens and TeZarron, can we do less?" Tonas spoke in low, careful tones. His Firefly was on a hair-trigger. If he went off, the fire might burn out of control.

Tonas sat at the Star Jonal down at the table, still listening.

"It is the stench of secrets around us that fan my flames. That and Flagen, the bile hits my throat at the sound of his name. The slime-bellied bottom feeder hung, scheming, in the periphery, always just below your level of notice, but never below mine. So many times, we were almost mis-assigned—unthinkable for a BondedPair. I would investigate, and Flagen was there. Close, but never close enough to prove. If I had trouble with a position, it was always him, or one of his cronies, at the root. Others warned me, many times, to *take care* of my rival, to use the position and influence gained by my own sweat to ensure he never crossed your path, or littered mine with his debris. I could have had him put in an isolated slime-pit port on a planet so obscure, so alien he wouldn't have remembered his name or origin. But, I chose honor. What has honor bought me? Now they have Anya and would take you. And for all the loyalty to Sarran, to honor, I could lose..." Jonal grabbed a chair by the back and flung it violently across the room. He fell to his knees, pounding first the table, then the floor. His arms went to cover his head. Silent mental cries of anguish, desperation, and a soul-wrenching despair tore through Tonas's consciousness. Jonal's body shook, tremors traveling from above to below, his grief almost unbearable. His body slumped to the floor. Every ounce of Jonal's legendary strength streamed out to Anya, leaving him weak as a whisper.

Tonas strode around to where Jonal sat and slid down, placing his long arms around Jonal's shoulders and lifting him into his lap. He drew him close and rocked gently. *I say to you, dearest Firefly, what you said to me not so long ago. You will never lose us. No matter what else befalls, I will not let them take either Anya or me from you, even if that means I must see to Flagen's death myself. I swear this to you, my love, on my Clan, on our Triad. We will not be separated by anything other than death itself.*" He grabbed Jonal and pulled him toward the sleeping chamber, shedding their trews as they moved.

Jonal clung to Tonas's hand and followed. They tumbled down onto the bedding, Jonal's head to Tonas's heart. Tonas stroked the dark curls,



then lifted his lover away from his chest, and placed him with gentle care, his stomach on the sheet.

*Tonight is for you, my Firefly. For this I have waited ten years, and I will no longer be denied.* Tonas's hands moved in long, circular motions down his lover's back, kneading away the tension, stroke by stroke, muscle by muscle. His experienced hands knew just where to push, how much pressure to exert. Jonal's body was mapped out in Tonas's mind, each reaction and location, pleasure or pain, cataloged and labeled to be pulled out and used later, to force greater arousal, flooding Jonal with more heat, more desire, more need. He would use every one of them tonight.

When the tension left and Jonal's muscles unclenched, Tonas began to seduce. His wet tongue outlined the shell of Jonal's ear. He moved the ebony curls aside, and tongued down the nape of his neck, drawing circles and swirls with his saliva. He reached the curve where neck met shoulder and bit down. He felt the pleasure shoot through his lover, shared the rush of blood surging, cannonballing through Jonal's veins straight to his now thick pulsing shank. Jonal began to broadcast. Waves of lust, love and need, interspersed with demands of more, harder, higher.

Tonas refused to hurry. Not this time—a first of its kind. He bit, sucked, and licked his way down to the area below, the place forbidden before. But Anya had given them leave. Anya had blessed them with her love and acceptance, and now finally, he could seal the covenant made beneath the Tierest tree ten cycles before. His long fingers caressed the high cheeks of Jonal's ass. The lightest of touches in that place set his lover to shivers. He increased the pressure of his embrace. Each stroke he made hit the muscles deeper, moving in opposing circles, graduated motions opening the crease to reveal the puckered rosette that would receive him. His own cock leaked copiously. Tonas allowed it to spill down the crease, knowing that the nature of Sarra pre-cum would lubricate his lover to open without pain. He followed the trail of moisture with his tongue. Swirling down the edge of the crack, licking and teasing.

Jonal moaned the sounds familiar. The feelings intensified, magnified with every wet swipe. Each Warrior fed the other, their lust spiraling—wound tight and moving higher. Tonas refused to give over to it. He clung to his control. Moving down, he sucked and bit the bridge between Jonal's ass and sac, pulling on the ring, and using the intense sensation

produced as a distraction, while he adroitly shifted Jonal onto his back. He forced Jonal's knees to bend, and pushed them open, almost kicking the legs apart. Tonas grabbed a bolster from the top of the bed and shoved it under the small of Jonal's back, exposing both cock and ass to his satisfaction. Tonas seized a hunk of hair and pulled his Firefly's hot mouth to his own. The carnality of their kiss, combined with the grind of shank against shank, all but pushed Tonas over the edge. He pulled away.

Jonal cried an overwhelming presence in his psyche, *My Light, please, let me...oh Goddess.*

*No, Firefly. Not yet, not this way tonight. Wait, my precious love.* Tonas's brow clenched in concentration, as he placed a psi ring round the cock pressed up against his own.

*Fuck, fuck fuck.* His Firefly was delirious with pleasure. His teeth nettled Jonal's skin, small, stinging kisses coupled with quick sharp bites down to the brown nubs that crested the beautifully formed and sculpted pecs, earned from cycles of military training. Here he stopped. He sucked and pulled with his teeth, feeling along with his lover, the pleasure-pain of the sensation. His fingers rolled the other nipple to a tight, hot bead, and then closed, squeezing the nub in a vise-like grip, until it burned. Turning, his tongue laved the abused nipple, licking and sucking until the pain became indistinguishable from the pleasure. Jonal's body jerked in frantic motion, begging for release. Tonas denied them both, keeping a portion of his senses apart and pointed toward his goal.

His tongue flowed over Jonal's skin like a river with tides and eddies flowing inexorably toward the sea. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep both his and Jonal's cocks from spurting. His chest heaved with the effort it took to maintain that kind of control. Mouthing and licking, he drove on down the hollow of the groin, back to the wondrous mounds clenched tight in anticipation. Both cocks now dribbled a continuous flow of lubricating nectar.

Jonal gasped. His voice was harsh and low in mind. *How do you want me?*

*I want to see you as I enter you, Firefly. I want you to know that you are mine, always mine. That no other but our fem will have what she and I give to you, and what you give to us. This is fact, it will never change.*

With that thought, he moved his tongue to taste, to savor the essence of his Firefly. He fashioned his tongue into a spear, and impaled the

puckered rosette. Tonas enticed and provoked. Hand shaking, he stroked Jonal's cock while he licked and sucked, gathering the moisture and coating his fingers. He inserted one, replacing his probing tongue with the long index finger of his right hand. Jonal balked, now uncontrollable. His balls blue with both pleasure and pain. Both Warriors were near the point of no return.

*Now, My Light, now...please now.*

Tonas pulled his finger and attempted to spread more pre-cum around and into Jonal's channel, but a firm hand grabbed his wrist, no longer able to lie compliant. *Now!* Jonal demanded.

He lined up his throbbing cock with Jonal's ready hole, and pushed. Jonal's hips had moved up to meet him. He felt the sphincter muscle pop, and then grab his member, squeezing his cock in joyous welcome. He felt his lover's heat for the very first time. Tonas was inside his Firefly. He thrust, and thrust again, harder, his mind releasing the psychic hold on his and his lover's release. Mindless, he pushed, Jonal meeting him stroke for stroke. And then came culmination. Together, they flew in sensation so enthralling, so rapturous, they were as one with the universe. Though they had believed they knew each other's hearts, it was only now, with the circle complete, that reassurances became unnecessary. Love a certainty. They lay replete in each other's arms.

*She was with us, you know, My Light, Jonal's mind whispered.*

*I know. She always is and always will be. Sleep now, my Firefly. Tonight we loved. Tomorrow, we war.*

\*\*\*\*

Tigger didn't like being carried; but Anya's grip on his coat was tight. She was stressed and hurting. Tonas and Jonal had little time to explain the circumstances of the separation. Mark told her he would come by and explain in a few tines. Anya hated being treated like *the girl*. She heard Jonal go near-ballistic when he spotted Flagen at the edge of the Security Party. *Now there's an oxymoron*, Anya thought. *I don't feel too secure, and this is no party I want to attend.*

The Sarran seemed to have taken to cats. They had a hard time with the concept of pets—animals kept with no purpose other than entertainment, but once the concept was grasped, they all wanted one of their own. From what she had been told, Anya was taking temporary shelter with Cynthia “Syn” Sinclair, the only other woman on board with

a pet. Syn kept a white Persian, known as the Duchess. Duchess, as Tigger, had freedom of the ship. Tigger and Duchess had charmed the crew. The cats served as ambassadors for the Earthen fem to those few Sarran who had been either disinclined or neutral on the Elder's decision to mate WarriorPairs with Earthen women.

The Sarran Warriors admired the loyalty and ferocity both Tigger and Duchess had displayed in protection of their companions. The feline personality's basic refusal to grovel and beg also appealed to a culture built on strength and honor. Anya had heard a mess chef comment on Beast's intelligence when Tigger had waited until the chef was busy elsewhere, claimed his prize, and was licking his paws upon the mess chef's return. Strategy, tactic, mission accomplished, then bravery in the face of the enemy. To a Sarran, a cat made a perfect companion.

The parade marched into the transport lift. The one called TeZarron stepped aside and let her enter, followed by the rest of her escort. Anya stroked Tigger's ears with her fingers. She reached under his chin and nuzzled the area just to the side of his whiskers.

Anya always fussed over Tigger when she was agitated. Somehow, it calmed her nerves. He was heavy and difficult to carry, but she held on to him for dear life. Until she was reunited with Jonal and Tonas, he was all she had.

She wondered how life could be so capricious, giving her the love and security she had always craved with such poignant desperation, then taking it away after a few short risings. She continued to pet Tigger as the transport doors opened with a whoosh.

"This way, Princess," TeZarron tapped her elbow, steering her down another long corridor. The door panels seemed closer together here than they were in the section of Brightstar off the Command Bridge. Anya surmised they were in the section of the ship that housed single crewmembers, perhaps the enlisted men, although she knew nothing of Sarran military rankings.

She studied TeZarron, the man to whom Tonas and Jonal deferred to as High Prince and Elder Lord. He looked to be about forty, by her guess—six or seven cycles their senior. His hair was a deep chestnut brown, very long and straight. He had high cheekbones, and his skin was the deep olive tone of an Earthen from the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet his eyes were unexpectedly greenish-gray, with an almost imperceptible slant. She wondered if he was FireClan or LightClan. If he was the fire, he had it hidden under dry ice. She

remembered from medical school that dry ice could burn. His aristocratic courtesy was inherent; the characteristic warmth of the Sarran Warrior toward fems was not. As an empath, her ability to do things with her gift was slight. However, using her empathic ability to read the emotional state of those around her had been her survival mechanism of choice. This man did not read. Her slight poke came upon a barrier of nothingness.

They approached panels halfway down the corridor from the transport. The panels opened in an instant, and out stepped the physical reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe.

"I know," the vision snapped, "deal with it." The Marilyn clone turned her back and waved the small party into the room.

TeZarron looked as if he had been struck dumb. He turned and bowed slightly from the waist. "Fem Sinclair. I apologize for the haste and the necessity of the intrusion. Anya will not need your hospitality for more than a rising. I beg for your tolerance and understanding."

The blonde ignored TeZarron and reached around to Anya. "Hi, Cynthia Sinclair, Syn, for short. Welcome. Second bunk is on that side. I'll help you get settled."

Anya was fascinated. Syn had totally ignored TeZarron, but Anya felt the tether. TeZarron bowed slightly again in her direction, and then Anya's.

"Princess Anya, if you need anything, please do not hesitate to contact the Bridge; Fem Sinclair." With that and one more bow, he left the room.

"Am I crazy, or did this joint just triple in size when Mr. High and Mighty left?" Syn commented to Anya caustically.

"He certainly is a presence," Anya answered. "I'm Dr. Anya Forrest, former resident doctor in pediatrics at Manhattan General Hospital in New York City. This *Princess* is their invention. I'm an orphan who got lucky with a college scholarship."

"Nice to meet you, Doc. I'm Cynthia Sinclair, former prostitute, Philadelphia Center City gutters." Anya observed Syn tightening her shoulders waiting for Anya to make a remark.

Anya replied, raising an eyebrow, "I might be mistaken, but white Persians don't generally populate the gutters of Philly."

"Caught me, huh? You don't seem to be one of those snots, but I couldn't be sure," Syn said casually. "I had to let you know how it was

up front." The violet eyes with lashes that swept her checks, looked down, as if she were waiting for Anya's recriminations.

"How did it happen?" Anya asked.

"Like most things—accidentally. I was from one of the Main-Line families, over bred to shut up, look good, and marry well. I didn't fit the mold of country club princess." She looked down disparagingly at her lush curves. "This is not Ann Taylor or Laura Ashley. It's Fredericks of Hollywood, and no matter how prim and proper I was, I still looked like a hooker. Platinum hair with dark lashes and brows, combined with C+ cups, don't equal Main-Line chic. From the time I was ten, I was told to *tone it down*." Syn shrugged, her breasts pushed against the plain white blouse, the buttons ready to pop. She spoke to Anya as she moved around the room, efficiently unpacking the few things Anya had taken from Quarters.

"Nothing ever fit me, top too big, waist too small, ass too round. My hair was wispy and refused to be properly constrained. When I dressed up, I looked like a high-class whore. When I dressed down, I looked like a streetwalker. In my freshman year, one of my father's friends cornered me in the study and started feeling me up. My father walked in and that was that. I was officially a slut. One of his country club cronies couldn't have been a child molester. Father started smacking me around. He said I was an embarrassment to the family and to the community in which I was raised. Therefore, it was perfectly fine for him to come home after a Sunday golf outing with the boys, eighteen holes and seven vodka martinis, to take me into his study, try to fondle my breasts, and finger my cunt, then beat the living shit out of me because he said I provoked him. I got sick of pancake makeup to hide the bruises I got while he derided me for temptation and whoring around. Of course, most of my bruises came trying to prevent him from making me into a whore. I was still technically a virgin when I left.

"In my sophomore year, I decided, why bother; might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. I booked with this guy, Osco, he was my dealer. I used to get through it, you know? I went to Philly and disappeared. Started out with a chicken shit habit and ended up with King Kong."

"I'm familiar with the term," Anya said.

"I forgot you were a doc." Syn's voice chilled.

"Yeah, a doctor, but also, an orphan. I didn't use, but had friends who did. Even helped a few detox outside of the approved system," Anya replied, as if just stating the facts.

"After a while, Osco said I had to earn my keep. So, I hooked for a bit, but didn't like it. I told him, if he loved me, he wouldn't make me. He told me that I was a piece of white trash, only good for pushing pussy and floating."

Anya considered Syn as she continued her vocabulary, a peculiar mixture of Bryn Mawr and Street Slang. She knew from her work as a pediatrician, that income did not determine a parent's predictction to abusive behavior. She also recognized Syn as a survivor. Anya's eyes had never left Syn's face.

"...wound up dumped in the street. I found a shelter and did the deal cold. They helped me get on my feet. They called my parents, who swore I was dead. They had the certificate all made out, nice and neat."

"Damn," Anya said, as she shook her head. "God damn. What did you do?"

"Jonesy, a social worker at the shelter gave me a DNA test and got a court order. I signed an agreement that, in return for living expenses and college, I wouldn't darken their door or file charges of abuse. I stayed on at the shelter, went to Temple, and wound up with a degree in social work, running the shelter, until all of this. One of the bitches on board is the daughter of my father's *friend*. He told his family *in confidence* what a whore I was, so that his own daughter wouldn't be tainted," Syn finished. She looked at Anya in defiance, expecting her contempt, and conceding to it without a struggle.

Anya held out her arms and Syn flew right into them. *These bitches are not going to get away with this.* "Don't worry about those bitches, Syn. I have a little pull around here. Jonal and Tonas are not happy if I'm not happy." And with that enigmatic statement, Anya planned, for the first time in her life, to take advantage of position.

"Why? Why would you help me? Why would they?" Bright, watery violet eyes with sparkling gold streaks stared at ice blue ones, begging to be understood.

"Because I'm theirs. I'm also an empath. Don't panic. I don't read minds, I just sense feelings. It's stronger now, since I mated. If you lied, I'd know." Anya smiled, "You are a cat person. Sarrans consider cats special. The cats protect us, ergo, we're special. Besides, cats are picky. They don't stay with bitches; they smell too much like dogs."

Syn giggled in response, and the two beasts jumped into their owners' laps and purred. A tentative friendship and alliance had been forged.

They sat back, and relaxed into the strange and comfortable silence of old acquaintance. Anya felt that she and Syn fit each other like well-worn shoes. When the question came, it flowed out toward her as if the conversation had a lull of only a few minutes.

Syn looked up from The Duchess, directing her violet eyes to meet Anya's. "What is it like, Anya, to do it with someone you love? I've done it in defiance, I've done it for drugs, I've done it for survival, but never for love. Please, tell me."

Anya leaned forward, and a disturbed Tigger jumped to the floor. "I'm a pediatrician—a scientist—not a poet. How do I describe that which has no description? Wait." Anya shivered with heat. In that instant she was with Tonas and Jonal, riding their whirlwind. She grabbed Syn's hand and said, "Like this..."



## *Chapter Thirteen*

*Let me have men about me that are fat,  
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights.  
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;  
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.*  
--William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, scene 2

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B1116  
Earth Calendar: July 26th after midnight*

Bane's tread was soft, yet it still echoed across the vehicle docking chamber; an empty storage bay inhabited by the lightslips, used by Sarran scouts and Psi Security. The docking bay doors had not opened since the Ipz attack. Upon assumption of command, the Admirals sealed the bay. A major design flaw noted, it shared a wall with the Engineering Section near the jump engines. It would have been all too easy to ram the wall. As it was, it remained under guard.

It had taken tides of determined effort to map an alternate entry, bypassing security through the ship's skeletal structure, to put Bane's boots on the grill-plated deck. His contact had his own methods, and he kept them to himself. Sarran intrigue survived by using two techniques, isolation and ignorance. Although the Codex forbade using psi to read without explicit consent—Bonds and Bonding being the single exception—Bane trusted no one to play by the rules. He hadn't. Reading without consent was one of the six major taboos on the planet. It was the

only one he could not, had not, broken. Not out of honor, Bane cared naught for honor or Sarran.

He had raped and murdered a femspring, then skewered the evidence to point to his innocent brother. Flagen had to be psi-scanned to prove his innocence. After that, he was never the same, no longer the favored son. Bane violated the femspring, because she seemed to favor his brother. His brother would never have what he, himself, could not.

His fathers knew early, that he wasn't quite *right*. Their Triad, his fathers, and their fem, had separated him from his brother at an early age, afraid he would damage his brother. They never managed to do the job. Flagen always reached out to Bane sooner or later.

He reached out instinctively, because deep inside he knew that they shared a very grave sin, an abomination that was an accident of birth. They were BondMates. Flagen could not put a word to the way he felt about Bane, his emotional center was badly scarred; but Bane knew. He had even researched the syndrome. The answer was to separate the afflicted offspring as soon as possible. His fathers, in their egotism, had waited too long.

Bane knew that the fathers planned to give the Marquisate to Flagen, and he wasn't about to let that happen. He knew that someone would be probed for the femspring's violation and murder, he had merely made sure it wasn't him. He knew Flagen, the honorable fool, would insist on the probe, and he calculated the exact odds against and for his desired result. A damaged Flagen could not inherit.

Flagen was a powerful telepath, but damaged by the mind probe. He was too unstable to explore the paths of the delicate neurosurgery he longed to study. He would never win his own nobility, which suited Bane nicely; and by his *evidence*, he guaranteed that the fathers would not bestow the family title in that direction. It was he who suggested to his brother that Flagen's study partner, Tonas, was his BondMate, and encouraged his confused brother in that notion at every occasion. He also arranged for all of Jonal and Tonas's close calls, so that no suspicion would ever fall his way, and he could play at his brother's friend and yet never be of any help to Flagen.

He pretended a BondStir with Mark Stern just to fuck with Earthen's mind until his clients expressed an interest. Then he became interested enough to go digging.

Treason was his final insult to the culture that bore him. Yet, the sixth taboo remained unbreached. Bane could not psi another's mind because

his psi was so low, it was near null. Mark's ability to send and receive from Bane was possible, because Mark had powerful psi, possibly off the chart. Bane recognized that the rising they met because of his experience with Flagen. Mark projected with such intensity; that Bane, even with limited ability, was able to receive. His clients dug deep and found Mark's Earthen records. Mark was the prize. His formula, plus Mark's genetic material, would gain Bane his own planet, and plenty of humanoid flesh to run the place, catering to his more *exotic* tastes. Mark said the Earthen code for Bondage and Discipline was safe, sane, and consensual. Bane threw back his head and laughed out loud. Mark would be his to use hereafter; safe, sane, and consensual would be three words his boy would never hear again.

Bane knew this was his last hurrah. The humans had a science that the Sarran had forsaken. It was Psychiatry. He read Mark's medical texts and found a pointedly accurate description of his psyche. His profile labeled him a sociopath, potential serial killer. He knew the Earthen psychiatrists would come eventually — there were probably some aboard. They wouldn't be able to resist an entire planet suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and it would be, along with the cats and the fems, one of Earth's only exportable commodities.

Bane wrote "sociopath/psychopath" large across his records. Once the Sarrans gained exposure to Earthen Sciences, his time loomed short. And yes, Bane agreed he missed some essential part of being a Sarran or, for that matter, a human. He arrived broken, and deemed himself irreparable.

The rustling scrape of boot on metal brought Bane to attention. Septis appeared almost as a phantasm from the forsaken stairwell to the command corridor. Bane wasted no effort on civility. Each Warrior knew what brought him to this place. It was something that was neither asked, articulated, or acknowledged. It made things simple. There was no need for a traitor to hide his contempt for the other's corruption, as opposed to their own noble reasons. Bane knew he had no noble reasons, just unrelenting greed and an overwhelming need to punish his betters. He knew his one redeeming trait was his honesty with himself, and that was the only virtue he thought necessary for survival. He crossed the grid, meeting Septis halfway.

"They come?"

"Aye, they come. Next rising. Ten tines. Diversion in Engineering, boarding on Bridge. Transport through here," Septis answered. "You have the formula?"

"Not playing that game. They get it with me and unlimited access to the genetic material of an off-chart psi. I get to play with the original; they get to take pieces as necessary. Just so they leave him alive enough to play with." Bane winked, and Septis turned a putrid shade of chartreuse.

"You are one sick fucker."

"Ah, the good doctor strikes again. Every Sarran Warrior has taken to that crude, guttural word. It doesn't offend me, Septis. I am a sick fucker. I revel in it. You will bring him to me, here. A warrant will be issued for me Juraens will see to that. They will come. You make sure Mark is with you; or I will turn on you, and on our benefactor, and become a hero to my own kind. I can't lose here, Septis. I've had too long to stack the deck in my favor."

Bane moved around Septis to access the space. "Let us see about setting up the diversion. Zyptz material is crude, and developed for six appendages. A blow of this magnitude requires four hands to set up, using Zyptz triggers. I don't like this enforced camaraderie any more than you do. If given better materials, it wouldn't be necessary."

"You are hardly in a position to complain about materials, Bane. Every trace of explosive made in the humanoid zone is tagged and tracked. Diverted war materials are difficult to obtain. Our Alliance contact gave us enough to do the job. Any more was waste.

"Our Alliance Contact controls almost every smuggling ring in four sectors. Plus, he controlled the transportation of munitions during the war. He did this on the cheap. His generous nature had better be more forthcoming in the future," Bane warned.

"Where do you get your information, Bane? No one in our group knows which member of Alliance heads the resistance," Septis shot back.

"Resistance, my blow hole. You think this is a noble cause? That by enabling the humanoid sector to create Sarrans, all will be equal in our very own version of paradise? Ah... Septis, my fellow conspirator, you are here for noble reasons, I take it. If only our planet would share Warrior blood, truly join with other humanoids, the galaxy would be a better place and so forth. You fool. You've been reading Earthen literature, Utopia, Marx, or was it some Sarran fables from one of the times we almost obliterated all life on the planet? Was it the first, maybe

the second? True equality exists only in fiction. The only place any equality exists, in fact, is on Sarran; and on Sarran its only place is in the Codex. The Codex, my stupid friend, is the only thing that is ever applied equally anywhere in this Goddess-forsaken universe. As for the rest, cream rises to the top of skim," Bane shrugged.

"It is the natural order of things. I am skim, not cream, on Sarran, and I do not rise. So, I steal the cream and make it mine for my own purpose. I have no care for what comes, only now. You care about what comes, and yet the beer your *noblesse oblige* brews will endanger humanoid existence. And you think I'm excrement? Your bunch will bring about the end of humanoid civilization, leaving it to ten thousand cycles hence for the rabble of backwaters like the Earthen to rebuild. If they survive, now that we have so conveniently pointed the Zyptz in their direction. Lord High Black Marketeer, and Slaver or Savior, had better be generous. I traded to him the only part left of a blackened soul to get this far."

"Our Alliance Contact will be, once you give him the means. Now let's set the Goddess-be-damned charges and get out of here," Septis returned with a moue of distaste. "I have yet to seed the Bridge, and it must blow during the hearing."

"A true believer." Bane shook his head.

"Hisssssssssssss." The sound made both jump. Bane peered into the shadows, and a pair of slanted, golden eyes peered back.

"It's the Beast. Pay no heed. Mark says it is a lower Earthen form of life, of low intelligence. It forms an attachment to any humanoid that provides food and shelter, as long as it can come and go as it pleases. It does manage to go anywhere it wishes. It also has remarkable bone structure and flexibility." Bane observed the Beast for a son as he held a coated lead for Septis.

The Beast moved in and out of the few, dull halos of illumination. Without warning, there he was between Bane's legs, pushing. Bane moved his boot, shaking the Beast, and sliding him toward Septis. The Beast sidled up to Sepsis' trews, ass in the air. A horrific smell—sulfurous, amniotic, piss—rose up from the trews. Septis sprang away.

"What did he do to my trews?" Septis demanded through gritted teeth.

Bane's thin lips lifted in true amusement. This was turning out to be a very good rising.

## *The Sarran Plague*

"He pissed on you, Septis. Are you so refined, you can't recognize piss when you smell it?" With that, Bane turned, leaving both Tigger and Septis to their own devices.

\*\*\*\*

Mark Stern combed through the Sarran libraries. He did not trust the fates to separate him from Bane. Now that the block was released, his one overwhelming emotion, other than those feelings set aside for Juraens, was absolute terror. He feared Bane in a way he had feared no man before. Bane's aura hung about his own as if a cancer ate away at his soul.

Mark knew Bane was a desperate, dangerous, man. However, Mark sensed that Bane was more dangerous to him, than to any other being on this vessel. Despite reassurances from TeZarron, and a psi shield from Juraens, Mark smoldered in his own misery by a plan of his design. He needed his beloved, but was prohibited physical contact prior to the hearing. His brain jumped about, unable to settle and concentrate. He knew what he needed, what he had not found necessary, since his agency days. It was the only thing that took him to that center of peace deep inside his brain and provided the stillness that allowed him to focus enough to push all the voices away.

The system rang, reprogrammed as an Earthen doorbell. He looked up. Mark refused to be startled by the abrupt interruption of speech during research. The bell allowed his thoughts to refocus before he had to reply.

"Yes?"

The panels parted and revealed Juraens, clad only in his maroon leather trews, flicking a medium weight, suede-like flogger from right wrist to left palm. Mark's eyebrow cocked as he anticipated the heat. He rose and crossed to Juraens to examine the bitch. It looked to be about twenty some tresses, of maybe seventeen inches each. This baby would sting. The handle held a double braid in dark maroon and black, with black knots, and a short loop that was attached to a D ring on Juraens's trews. Mark tried to control the intensity of his inevitable, inescapably fierce arousal.

"How did you know?" Mark asked simply.

"You are angry and unsettled, and need centering. I know, Treasured, because I am your BondMate."

"It's not often..."

"But it is, at times, necessary for all of us who are off chart," Juraens said.

"You understand."

"Yes, my own. As your Bonded, it is my job. As your lover, it is my pleasure."

Mark untied the drawstring of the bottom half of his replicated scrubs. He knelt before his Beloved in presentation. He heard the whistled call of the tails just before the blow. Juraens arm was measured. The weight of the blows steadily increased, pushing his mind out of his body. He imagined Juraen's cock in his mouth, or better still, in his tight ass. But alas, if he embraced his new culture, that was forbidden until Triad. Until then, they had this. His shank was hard. He flew higher than he ever had.

Juraens shouted one word, "Come."

Mark shot across the lab onto the wall. He sank into a heap. When he woke, he found himself on his cot, Juraens arms holding him tightly. Juraens kept stroking his hair and arms. He had tended to his back while Mark slept.

"Beloved, I needed that," Mark sighed into Juraens's shoulder.

"I also needed. I needed to mark you as mine. I didn't know, but I was in such fear whenever you and Bane appeared together. There is something evil there," Juraens replied.

"I learned on Earth, that evil exists, even if there is no devil." Mark pulled Juraens closer and closed his eyes.

Sometime later, tired, sated, and a bit sore, Mark awoke to an overpowering smell, so strong it saturated every fiber in the chamber. Juraens leaped to the fore, placing himself between Mark and the entrance. When he was sure there was no immediate threat, he looked back at Mark, canting his head.

*The stench? Juraens asked mind-to-mind.*

*That, Beloved, is the stench of pure, unadulterated, cat piss. Since you claim the Beast is sentient, I would say he sent a message. It is up to us to find out what he is trying to say.*

\*\*\*\*

*Sarran Calendar: 9435.B116 9:00 trine  
Earth Calendar: July 26th, 9:00 am*

The Bridge was tranquil—too quiet. The familiar hum of muted voices and electronics did nothing to calm the unease in the pit of Jonal's belly. Some of it was the imminent Tribunal. He expected and accepted that, but there was something else.

Jonal had a prenatal sense of danger, a type of military clairvoyance that had ameliorated more than one battle during the Zyptz war from defeat to salvageable and, more often, from salvageable to outright victorious. One lesson drilled into both his and Jonal's heads during their risings as cadets, was that battles were won before they were fought. Everything was timing and preparation. Both he and Tonas were aware that security for this outing had been compromised before they had left Sarran. It was one of the reasons they had relied so heavily on Mark Stern. Now, with all of High Command on Brightstar participating in the Tribunal, it didn't take the *buzz* in his head to tell him to shore up defenses.

Tonas had left for the hearing. His blood was necessary for the ampoule. Septis was with the board, as were Saxon and Lunas. Third-tier command officers were on deck to take the helm, communications, and weaponry, for the brief time that all of the high command would be absent. Jonal didn't think it would be enough. Despite the escort of the rest of the fleet, the fems were quartered on Brightstar, putting everything the Sarrans had to lose in one place.

Jonal, going with his gut, made a decision. "Ensign."

"Yes, Admiral Prince, sir." The man was flustered. Jonal hid his smile under a cough.

"Hail the Captains of Redmoon, Bluemoon, and Whitemoon cruisers. Get them on the private command channel, triple scrambled in tertiary code. I'll take it in the StarRoom."

"Yes sir. Right away sir." The ensign saluted. Jonal nodded in return; and traversed the Bridge over to the StarRoom.

The doors parted, and Jonal crossed to the closest of the two command and control stations.

"Ensign, do I have my line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. That will be all for the moment," Jonal responded.

"Command Codes: zero, one, one, four; Section Three, Color Red; Private Communication Security Level Red Magma Red, Gentlemen." Three voices came alive and acknowledged his hail. There were no



holographic images, nor recording devices permitted at this degree of security.

"As you are aware, there are proceedings being held on Brightstar today concerning myself and Admiral Tonas. Due to the delicate nature of the proceeding; Commanders Saxon and Lunas were both tapped for Tribunal. This leaves Brightstar in a vulnerable position for a period of five to six times today. With the fems aboard, this is an unnecessary risk. I want all of your experienced seconds on the Brightstar within the time. Leave only a skeleton crew on your vessels, Gentlemen. As you know, the prize is here."

Jonal continued, "The Bridge must be fail-safe. Engineering, and the Crew decks where the fems are housed, must be defended to the last Warrior. I want as many as you have. I apologize for the necessity of this request. I believe they will attempt entry through the old lightslip dock. There is a stairwell there to the Bridge. Have men posted on that stairwell, at the entrance to the StarRoom and Quarters."

"Captain Kavack of Redmoon, as the most senior Captain, I am giving you temporary command of the Fleet beginning at 09:30 times, until such time as you are relieved by either myself, Admiral Tonas, or any combination of Commanders Saxon and Lunas, Psi-Security Officer Juraens, or High Lord Prince TeZarron. Any questions?"

"Kavack here, sir. We have TeZarron in Fleet?"

"Yes, Kavack. That is need-to-know information only. Jonal out."

Satisfied that he had done his best to cover bases, as Mark was wont to say, Jonal departed the StarRoom and headed for the Tribunal.

\*\*\*\*

The Brightstar Hearing Room smelled both new and dusty, like a new car too long in the dealer's lot. Jonal and Tonas ran a tight ship. The Brightstar crew imbibed a bit, kicked up a ruckus in port now and then, but seldom required any disciplinary action other than a confinement to Quarters, or a night in the brig to dry out. Jonal's arrival coincided with TeZarron's, and the Elder viewed the room with a simultaneous sneeze and grimace of distaste.

"It doesn't get much use, High Lord. I apologize for neglecting to send crew to freshen up." Jonal marked the obvious lack of minimal preparation. "I'll call down to Maintenance; we have 30 mots until the scheduled start."

"Your mind roils, Admiral." No apology necessary."

With a small grimace of distaste, TeZarron waved his hand over the chamber. Jonal watched as the dust dissipated. He had forgotten that TeZarron was telekinetic. His mind had blanked quite a number of things this half rising.

"Maintenance is not necessary. We need a few pitchers of water and some vessels for each of the claimants. The computer will provide the rest," TeZarron said.

Septis, Saxon, and Lunas' entry made a rumble. Jonal shook himself out of the fog and into a mode of steely determination. Mark and Juraens escorted Anya, who held a very disgruntled Tigger. Tonas pulled up immediately behind them. The last to enter the room was his nemesis, Flagen. Flagen looked confident, and that made Jonal's hot blood boil. Flagen attempted speech to communicate with both Tonas and Anya, and only Mark's hand at his shoulder stopped Jonal from hurling himself across the room to break Flagen's fat neck once and for all.

The Tribunal participants took their places. The hearing would begin.

*Wait a mot*, Jonal thought. *Where is Bane?* A heavy, ominous feeling clutched at his gut.

TeZarron began. "As Dr. Bane is delayed, we should begin the procedure with the first claim. Dr. Flagen, you may begin."

Jonal heard himself object to Flagen giving the first testament.

Mark shouted, *Pay attention*, directly into Jonal's mind, but his mindspeech was not working.

Jonal heard Saxon and Lunas's voices as background static. His muscles went taut and his head reeled as he felt the jaws of a steel band encase his temple. He jacked up his head as he heard Mark's voice. Jonal's eyes remained unfocused. The Tribunal viewed the holograph; he knew the testimony was crucial. He turned to Tonas, who sat across the room. He concentrated all of his energy to pull out the words from his brain. Someone or something had set a psi trap.

"Tonas, bomb, here," Jonal finally managed to say.

He heard TeZarron give orders. "Juraens, Mark, escort the Princess to Quarters. Saxon, Lunas, to the Bridge. Tonas, to Engineering." The room emptied, leaving him with Flagen and TeZarron.

"Jonal, when Flagen gave evidence against Bane, Septis fled. I have to find him. Can you tell me anymore about the attack?"

Jonal forced the words from his throat, they came out hard and quick like spit.

"Blockage, Psi-block; specific to clairvoyance. Must have prior knowledge. Imminent. Ship. Read me, sssir."

TeZarron answered, "I can't do that, Admiral. I don't know what kind of lock is in place, and I have no intention of ruining one of the finest military minds of this generation."

"Put prec-cautions in p-p-place, Bridge." Jonal stuttered to get it out, although the more resistance he applied, the easier it became.

"I'm aware," TeZarron answered. "You'll get a commendation for this, if we manage to get out of here without getting our asses wiped. Can you get that toad scum, Flagen, to the Brig without inflicting damage?"

\*\*\*\*

"TeZarron, they are about to hit Engineering."

TeZarron stopped and turned to Jonal, with the immediate realization that the young Admiral had pushed through the mind lock.

"Tonas, evacuate Engineering near lightslip wall!" Jonal shouted.

"Engineering Report, Alpha Alert, imminent boarding..." He began shouting more orders as additional snippets of his clairvoyance seeped through the mind lock.

"Saxon, Lunas, report from the Bridge. You have additional Warriors, fucking use them!"

"Anya, Mark, get to the Med Bays. Expect a large influx of casualties."

Jonal turned and paced back to the dais.

"Juraens," he snapped into the communicator. "Find Septis and haul his ass to the Brig. We'll deal with him later." Tonas was the planner, Jonal, the crisis manager. This was a crisis. There was no doubt Jonal was in charge.

"High Lord, could I presume on you to check the bays?"

"Yes, Admiral, immediately. I presume you go to the Fems?" TeZarron replied.

"Yes, High Lord. Dr. Flagen, you're with me." Jonal strode to the back of the room.

"Communications, Jonal here: Sir, Yes sir. Ensign, just get me Kavack." *Goddess the ensign was barely out of short pants, too young to handle a Coms Deck in the middle of a Hot Zone.*

"Kavack here, Admiral."

"Damage report."

"The explosions were internal to Brightstar, sir. There was no incoming."

"Kavack, watch our ass. I expect visitors."

"Aye, sir."

"Saxon, Lunas, report," Jonal barked.

"Stern gave us the Beast to sniff out explosives. One was hidden in the Communications Console, another two in Quarters. All are now disarmed, Zyptz manufacture, if I am not mistaken, sir. The Beast isn't yowling, so I think we found the lot. Security is still doing a sweep, but the men have more faith in that animal's whiskers than all our tech. It's pissing Security off, sir."

"Let them do their job, Commander."

"The explosion was confined to the empty cargo bay adjacent to the jump engines. It was a small device with more boom than bite, sir."

"I expect it was a diversion. Keep us at High Alert, Saxon, Jonal out."

"High Lord, may I have an update on the bays? Are we leaking air?"

"Maintenance is on it Jonal," TeZarron replied. "They are sealing the area. Comb the ship. This is but the prelude."

"There is something lurking out there, High Lord. I'm not sure who, but they're there and waiting."

There was no time. No warning. The Brightstar shook as if a fault line had ruptured around them. Flagen fell forward, pulling Jonal with him as he rolled under a heavy table to avoid falling debris. It was as if the ship shook for tines instead of sons. Warnings shrilled. Lights blinked; but the emergency lighting did not engage, the too familiar sounds of impending engagement pounded Jonal's senses. He listened. *Not the main engines*, Jonal thought as he waited. Flagen said nothing. It was as if the man had gone mute.

*One, two.* Jonal counted in his head. At three, he grabbed an emergency comm from his pocket, he snapped, "Saxon, where?" He already knew. It was the reason he hadn't moved immediately on the hit. He felt it.

"Just coming in now, sir. Engineering. Causalities are heavy. Sir, Admiral Tonas has been hit." Jonal felt Flagen's indrawn breath as keenly as his own.

"I'm on my way. On my orders, get Anya out of Medical and to Quarters. Have Dr. Stern set up Triage. All available med tech to engineering. Check with Juraens on the status of his search for Lt. Septis,

and with the men from Blue, White, and Red Moons. Coordinate outside defenses with Captain Kavack. I'm going for the fems, then Engineering. The comm line is open. Put it in full data transmission mode."

"I'm going with you." Jonal almost jumped at the sound of Flagen's voice. "I'm a combat certified physician. Anya is good, but not trained in trauma. You will need my services. I am no traitor. I have already proven that. Please."

The please had cost Flagen. Cost him enough that Jonal knew he could trust him—with this at least.

"Yes," Jonal said, "you have. I had intended to take you from the time of the first explosion. We leave now. Take my back."

Flagen returned Jonal's offering with one of his own. "And you mine, for now."

Jonal nodded. "For now. Go."

If Engineering was hit, power would fluctuate. He opened the power supply next to the door and used the emergency pry to open the panels.

"We take the stairs and cross decking, I won't be caught mid-transport."

Flagen followed. Two decks down they hit the Crew Quarters housing the single fems. It was bedlam. The Warriors from the Moonships tried to move the fems in order using cadet marching commands. It had produced frightened, angry fems. Jonal's eyes swept over the crowd. He spotted the one named Syn with her fem beast, The Duchess. He trusted the instincts of the feline.

"Fem Sinclair," Jonal's voice reverberated throughout the corridor. The fems went silent. "I'm putting you in charge of this group. Get them in some sort of order to do what the Warriors ask of them, for their safety. Tell them they wouldn't be happy if they were snatched by the Zyptz."

"I won't be ordered about by a whore."

Jonal turned and stared at the black haired, blue-eyed fem who had defied a direct order during combat. "And you are?" The crew backed away from Jonal and the fem as soon as Jonal's jaw began to tic.

"I am Madeline Dixon-Howard." She paused, as if she expected some special recognition. "And she," the fem waved languidly at Fem Sinclair, "is nothing but a street whore, and I don't take orders from street whores."

Jonal stared back in disbelief. He roared, "Fem, on the Brightstar you are whatever I say you are. "Warriors," he barked as two stepped up

immediately, "two of you take this dimwitted excuse for a fem down to the Brig to cool her heels. I have no time to deal with her now."

With difficulty, Jonal took hold of his temper. "Moonship Warriors, these Fems are the Mission. They are the sole reason for this fleet, and essential to our continued existence. You will control this situation and guard them as your honor demands. The Fem Sinclair will assist. I hope I am clear."

"Aye, Admiral," answered a young ensign from Whitemoon.

Jonal was halfway down the corridor when he stopped mid-stride.

*A little harsh, aren't we?* Tonas whispered into his mind.

*You sound weak. I know you are injured. Do not hide from me. I was frantic, I couldn't hear you.* Jonal snapped back.

*Hush, my Firefly. It's shrapnel, in the knee. I'll need a trauma doc, but I'm in no danger,* Tonas replied.

*Flagen is with me. We are on our way down,* Jonal stated.

*You and Flagen, together. Firefly you amaze me.*

*For you, I would travel with the Zyptz Queen. Save your strength, My Light. I'm coming.*

"Sir...Admiral," he heard the Fem Syn's voice. She had followed him down the hallway. He stopped. Now that he knew the extent of Tonas's injury, he had a moment.

"My apologies, Fem Sinclair. I am Admiral Jonal. My BondMate is Admiral Tonas and our Fem is Dr. Anya Forrest. She spoke well of you. My Bonded and I respect our Anya and value her judgment. When I saw you, I knew I could leave the matter in your capable hands, and continue on to take care of the ship's business."

"Sir, I will do whatever is best to help the women here. Please, about Maddy. She is young and was told some things by her family that..." Jonal held up his finger and gently touched her lip as Syn faltered.

Jonal needed to move quickly. He mindspoke, *No need to explain, Fem Syn. Because of Anya, I will oblige you this once in the matter of young Fem Dixon-Howard. However, we are in a dangerous situation. I must protect you and the others. I cannot do this if you are scattered throughout the Brightstar. If she does not stay put, I cannot guarantee her safety. She would not like life as a slave of the Zyptz.*

Jonal smiled and bowed politely, continuing on his way as Fem Sinclair ran to take up her duties.

"Admiral," Flagen asked. "Tonas's injury?"

"Bad, but not critical – shrapnel in the knee," Jonal replied.

"We need to get down there, so the knee doesn't lock up." Flagen's eyebrows drew together in thought. "The young one will see the Zyptz, no matter what you do."

"I know," Jonal sighed. "I have only a touch of Precog, but she has that destiny writ large."

\*\*\*\*

The second blast sent Mark to his knees. The two Sarran guards had Anya protected beneath their bulk, before he had the chance to shout out warning. The cacophony of sirens and whistles keened. Lights dimmed, then regained full wattage. Mark's backup communicator vibrated in synchrony with those of the WarriorGuards. The expected conversation was a no-brainer. Anya was to be protected at all costs. The Sarran's continued existence depended upon the safe arrival of these women from Earth, and until a BondMate was chosen by a Council HighLord, Anya, as Princess, was chief amongst them.

"Stern, here." Tonas was hit; Mark was not prepared for the grinding in his gut.

"Anya, the guards will take you to Quarters. Tonas was wounded in the blast, the Emergency Bays will be overrun, and they are taking him to meet you there." Her pale face turned ashen. She grabbed the chair by the research holo, her tight grip visibly raising the blue veins against the white of her knuckles.

"Jonal?" she asked.

"Safe. On his way to Tonas. Flagen is with him. He's actually a fine trauma surgeon." Mark's lips upturned in a forced smile that could be mistaken for a grimace.

"And you?" Anya continued.

"To Engineering to help with the wounded. The damage came from internal sabotage, although I wouldn't rule out attack. Go now, Anya. Jonal has enough on his plate without worry for you," Mark chided.

She left with her escort. Mark realized he was a bit less tense, that was her intent. He pulled a cart from storage and stacked what would be necessary for Triage if the replicators went down. His actions were quick, but precise. He made note that in the future, trauma carts would be supplied and staged in pre-determined locations throughout the ship. Sarran medical treatment was far superior to Earth's in all areas save one, trauma care.

He calculated that with the Zyptz on their ass that would soon change. He also expected that most of the Sarrans were suffering from Post Traumatic Stress. The next group of women from Earth should include a boatload of psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric social workers. His hands kept busy as his thoughts raced. He threw in several Marine Medical Corpsman Assault Packs or Medbags, surplus from the Iraqi War. He opened one and examined the contents, spreading the various packets over the stretcher. The Medbags were a sop to Morgan's conscience; in case Alien medicine didn't do for the ladies. Sarran medicine did just fine.

The only injuries the Sarrans didn't treat more efficiently than their Earthen cousins, were those caused by the wrong end of a weapon. Earth was a violent society, even when its governments were at peace. Sarrans were Warriors, but not violent by nature. All of their physical and mental acuities and abilities were honed for defense. There were, in essence, Universal Peacekeepers until the Zyptz Attack.



## *Chapter Fourteen*

*Mine honor is my life; both grow in one; take honor from me and my life is done.*  
--William Shakespeare

*Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435.B1116 11:00 Trine*  
*Earth Calendar: July 26th 11:00 am*

The assault happened in slow motion. Mark felt hot breath on his neck, then something jammed over his eyes, nose, and mouth. Someone held his arms. The cloth was wet—he didn't recognize the smell. It had to be a drug. Mark twisted, trying to butt his head against the chin of his attacker. He felt a tie go around his wrists.

"He should be out. That dose would fell two Warriors." Mark recognized the voice. It wasn't one he would forget soon.

"Bane," he spat. "You're crazy to be in here. This is one of the first places they will look."

"Worried about me, my Bonded?" Bane replied.

"Bane, get what we need and let's get out of here. Where are the ampoules?" The second voice. Mark recognized it from earlier this morning—it was Septis. Sure as shit, he was the traitor.

"Remember, Septis, the deal was he comes with us," Bane answered.

"That was the bargain before all hell broke loose. How do you expect us to get him out of here if he's kicking and screaming?" Septis snapped. "The drug was supposed to knock him out."

"Their physiology is slightly different. It may take a little longer," Bane replied with dead calm. It hit Mark then. Bane was a true sociopath,

and that made him immune to any argument. If he let Bane take him, he would be as good as dead.

"So, my love, you see how it is? They need your DNA. But I need you so much more. I'll only let them take a little at a time. I need to have some of you left." Bane turned to Septis. "The extra ampoules are in the cold unit. I warn you now. You and they have nothing without taking us, the two of us, with you. The rest of the formula is incubated in my former Bonded's blood. It was in the little cocktail I gave him when we tested our Bond. I am the only one who knows how to extract the exact proteins, in the precise order and amount, to mix with the ampoule. If you insist on leaving Stern behind, it's on your head, Septis. I hear that the Alliance Representative is not kind to those who fail him."

"So, Bane, I'm your only ticket out?" Mark asked, fighting the affect of the drug.

Bane's ego was working against him. While he was spouting, Mark had backed up, inching his way to the stretcher. The Medbag he examined, had a surgical instrument set, including a scalpel—small enough to cut his bindings without notice, but sharp enough to do deadly damage to his tormentor. He knew Septis would run if Bane went down. There was no percentage in Septis remaining behind. Therefore, that meant all he had to worry about was Bane. That was enough. Mark had been in Iraq and Africa during the genocidal wars. He had seen torture and its victims—their blank faces and empty eyes. He had been taught to withstand pain and, in fact, a certain level of pain brought him focus. The images that poured from Bane's mind into his head made him scared, scared and sick. It had only been a few mots since Anya had left with the Warrior Guards. To Mark, it seemed like a few lifetimes.

*Treasured.* Mark's whole body jumped from the feel of Juraens's presence in his mind.

*Don't answer me. Your link with Bane is still operational. That is why he did not attend the hearing. I know he is there; I can feel your fear. I'm on my way. I will get to you. I swear. Use your mind against him. The surgical knife, use your mind to coax it toward you. Concentrate on the knife. Feel it move from the stretcher into your hand. Know that it will.*

Mark had no experience with telekinetics, but he believed in Juraens. He focused. The small scalpel moved a millimeter. Mark inched closer to the stretcher. Without practice, he needed to shorten the range between his objective and his focus. He would try the mind thing once more. If he failed, he'd do it in James Bond fashion—stealth. His eyes were covered,

so Mark decided it would look a bit better and get him closer to the stretcher, if he staggered a bit. Bane expected this drug to make him woozy enough to cooperate. Maybe he'd buy into the act. Mark forced himself to stumble and recover.

"Getting a little shaky there, dear. Is it the drug, or are you looking forward to our time together, and beside yourself with joy?" Bane asked with a snicker.

"Sarcasm doesn't look well on you, Bane. You're entirely too smug to pull it off," Mark hissed.

"Are you losing your much-vaunted control, my love?"

Mark felt the difference, the slight change in airflow, as Bane turned away to speak to Septis. Mark didn't attempt to hear what was said. He poured all of his concentration on extracting the scalpel from the top of the Medbag. He sensed movement. It was slight, but it moved. Mark dug deep, trying to repeat what he had done. Juraens had told him to coax, to be conscious of the movement. He pulled back and called it to him. It fell, smack into his right hand. He had the binding tie free in less than ten seconds. He was going to go for Bane.

*Wait, Treasured. I'm just outside. I don't want to lose you. Wait until I give the signal. On the count of three. One, two, three.*

The door flew open, Bane leaped to the stretcher to pin Mark and take him hostage. He didn't count on the scalpel. Mark swung around and drew the scalpel across Bane's face. Bane roared in fury. Septis ran out the side, two Psi Warriors followed. Juraens took hold of Bane by the neck and twisted. The sound of a spinal bone cracking echoed through the room. Mark grabbed the cloth from his head, rising slowly from the floor. He limped over to where Bane lie broken. His body finally reacted to the drug. He crouched down over Bane and looked up at Juraens.

"He's dead."

"Obviously." Juraens shrugged.

"We should have kept him for questioning," Mark said.

"Question him? His honor was besmirched. He held nothing worth hearing."

Mark shook his head. "Beloved, I believe I've been tapped to teach you Sarrans what to do when the other guys don't play fair."

\*\*\*\*

Tonas leaned against a titanium column with his legs stretched in front on the grid flooring. The cold metal pulled heat from his body, causing tremors. A medic removed the pieces of shrapnel from his knee and thigh. He realized the wound needed proper cleansing and stitches. However, Tonas demanded that Warriors with more threatening injuries be treated first. Jonal and Flagen were on their way. He could hold out until they arrived. The wounds still bled sluggishly through the gauze pads. His leg throbbed. He had fallen into a light doze. A sharp, abrupt stab to his right thigh opened his eyes to Jonal's beloved face. The tic in his cheek and clench of his jaw gave away his anger as well as his worry.

"You said it wasn't bad," Jonal hissed through his teeth.

"It isn't life threatening," Tonas replied. "Firefly, it is a flesh wound, deep, but not..."

"You could have lost the leg," Jonal argued. "Flagen numbed it and is doing surgery, right here on the deck, to save it. Dammit. If we had delayed but a few mots more..." Jonal tightened the rein on his reeling emotions. "There was also a high risk of infection. Fuck, Tonas. As the Co-Commander of this fleet, you owe our Warriors. You owe them your life. That means you are obligated to stay alive for them, so that you can make the decisions that keep them alive. I'm no good without you. If you don't take care, they lose us both. And Anya, what of our Anya?"

"I'm sorry, Firefly," Tonas soothed.

"Don't you soothe me, Tonas. I need your mind, and I won't have that if you are under a surgeon's knife."

A fem's voice resounded in both their minds. *Stop arguing you two morons, and bring him up here so I can take care of him. You are wasting time.*

Jonal took the bright blond head against his broad chest and suppressed a sob. "You better be sorry, My Light, or I'll booby trap your crutch."

Tonas's smile came as more of a grimace, but the attempt brought Jonal some relief.

Anya's answer was *Stupid men!*

"Flagen, progress?" Jonal asked.

"I've cleaned the debris and cauterized the wound. I need one of those surgical kits Stern brought with him to ensure Tonas doesn't come out of this with a permanent limp. I'll get a stretcher." Flagen rose from his knees as Jonal's comm unit vibrated.

Tonas listened as Jonal answered the comm. He lurked in his Bonded's mind and was ready for the blue tint of rage on Jonal's skin.

"Easy, Firefly. Call Flagen over and tell him. Please do it kindly. He went up against his brother today, and I think it hurt him to do it," Tonas said.

"I'm not an ogre, My Light. Flagen is fine with me, so long as he has relinquished any claims to you or Anya. He has your stretcher. We'll tell him together."

Flagen and a corpsman made short work getting Tonas secured on the stretcher.

"This isn't necessary. Give me some support and I can walk to the transport," Tonas said through gritted teeth.

"Get on the cart. If you don't stay off that leg, you'll lose the use of it," snapped Flagen.

"Stop behaving as an offspring," Jonal growled in sync.

"Flagen," Tonas began in a tentative tone.

"I know, Tonas. Bane's dead. I felt it on the way over here," Flagen responded. "I didn't realize what had happened back then until last night. I owe both of you an explanation. I've read it happens sometimes with fraternal twins when one is Hi-Psi and the other is low or null. Bane was my BondMate. It was an abomination. I begged my fathers to send me away from it, from him. I was wrong, it was cowardly to run. I left him to deal with it on his own. Perhaps if I had stayed, he would not have warped so badly.

"I was fortunate, the honored son. My fathers paid for a permanent mind lock. Some years later, when I came back home, the femspring was murdered, and all the evidence pointed to me. I knew who set me up, but to save my brother and salvage my honor, I begged to be scanned. The mind lock was a family secret. I didn't even remember I had it. It was too late for the fathers to intervene. I was...damaged. Later, Bane was able to complete the Bond without my consent, and in doing so, he manipulated me into a mental breakdown. I felt like I no longer had a tether. The fathers cut me off in disgust. He was all I had left.

"He used me ever since, even convincing me I had a bond with Tonas, when all it was and would ever be, was a solid friendship. Something popped last night. My block disappeared and I knew what I had to do.

"I apologize, Jonal, for being too willing to believe a lie. I owe you that much. The other crimes of which I stand accused, I swear I had no knowledge of what he did. But ignorance is no excuse. As for Bane, he

was destined to flame out. He was flawed from the beginning." Flagen stopped speaking and closed his eyes, holding himself together.

"Can we do..." Jonal spoke up, placing his hand on Flagen's shoulder.

"There is nothing to be done now, but to get Tonas's ass onto the transport, and to Anya to fuss over. I'll see him to Quarters and return to help out here. I'm sure you have duty. That is, if you trust me to do this for you both," Flagen answered with dignity.

Tonas watched Jonal and hoped that he would give Flagen back this bit of trust. Tonas knew Flagen, and knew what this whole affair had cost the very private man.

"You take him," Jonal replied. "This way he doesn't sneak out from under a doctor's care. Make sure Anya knows he's not to put weight on the leg."

Tonas and Flagen both smiled. Tonas laughed and said, "Jonal, I think she'd know. She is a doctor."

Jonal blushed, and took out his comm. He yelled, "Bridge, report," as Flagen wheeled Tonas toward transport.

\*\*\*\*

Tonas braced himself as transport came to a rough stop. The power system was in flux since engineering took the hit. The backup systems were functional and the main system had returned, however, intermittent power surges caused spot outages. Flagen drove the stretcher with expertise. They headed down the corridor to the Quarters where Anya and the Beast were waiting. The lighting dimmed for the third time.

"Use the manual override to gain entry," Tonas told Flagen. "Anya knows we are coming." Just to be certain, Tonas pulled the comm unit. He patched into shipboard communications and connected to Quarters. "Anya," he said.

"Tonas, is that you? Are you Okay?"

"OK?" Tonas asked puzzled.

Flagen touched his shoulder. "OK is American slang for fine."

"Yes, Anya, OK. We are in the corridor approaching Quarters. Please open the entrance. Flagen is here. He'll help me to the slumber chamber."

"Opening the entry now," Anya replied. Tonas could see her petite frame down the end of the corridor standing by the door, waving her hand.

"She is a feisty fem," Flagen commented. "Is she hard to handle?"

"No one handles Anya. She doesn't take well to handling. Fems are wonderful, but unpredictable. Earthen Fems are even more so. You grapple with the cultural differential, as well as the chromosomal issues. It's challenging, a constant balancing act." Here Tonas stopped and his face lit up. "Anya's smile is worth the frustration. We are well pleased. The Goddess is good to us."

Anya came running down the corridor and began to examine Tonas, even as Flagen pushed the stretcher toward home. The gleeful fem was replaced in a flash by the expert physician. She shot Flagen a litany of questions. Tonas allowed himself to close his eyes.

"Tonas, you need to help us get you onto the bed." Tonas opened his eyes. Anya was speaking to him. He looked around, he was in Quarters. Flagen and Anya were standing over him, and it was obvious they needed his cooperation. Anya spoke again. "Tonas, stay still. We are going to shift you over to the bed using the sheet. When you get into the bed, we'll turn you and remove the stained bedding. On the count of three. One...two...three."

"Aghhha," Tonas groaned. He needed a painkiller and some stims to help Jonal take care of the ship. "Flagen, leave Anya painkillers and stim shots. I have to be able to function if I'm needed."

"Like hell you will, Tonas. I am your doctor as well as your wife, and you are staying in that bed where you belong," Anya said in a take-no-prisoners tone.

"Flagen, that's an order. Leave the med sticks." Tonas turned to Anya. "Pa Channa, I know you are frightened to see me wounded. We are at war, in the middle of a crisis. My honor demands that duty precedes comfort. The painkillers and stims are precautionary. I will not use them unless it is absolutely necessary."

"You promise?" Anya questioned.

Tonas grinned. His tough physician had a femspring pout that pushed her lower lip out. When she was anxious or needy, she worried the lip with her teeth, just as she did now. "It will be OK, Anya. I promise."

"Tonas?" Flagen interrupted. "I need to get back to Engineering. I need to use your unit to comm the Admiral and see if he needs me to bring anything down."

"Keep it, Flagen. Anya has a unit in Quarters. We will only need one."

Flagen turned to leave the room. A loud merrrrrow and a flying leap heralded Tigger's entrance to the slumber chamber. Flagen, startled, moved closer to the bed. Tigger jumped up and nonchalantly strolled across the golden sheet to a position where he could observe Flagen, Anya, and Tonas. He picked up his paw and began to wash, taking the time to dig between the pads and pull at the nails, unveiling sharpened sheaths.

Flagen reached for the comm. Tonas handed it over and Flagen headed again toward the door. Tigger hissed. Flagen stopped in his tracks. Flustered, he turned to Anya.

"Your Beast has never been one of my proponents."

Tigger jumped down from the bed and placed himself between Flagen and the door. Stepping closer to Flagen, he purred around his legs. When Flagen attempted to leave the room, Tigger hissed. Flagen looked at Tonas and said, "Stern is wrong. This beast is sentient. What is he trying to tell me?"

"Not to leave, you idiot!"

Tonas sat up abruptly, pushing pillows and sheets out of the way.

"I heard that," Tonas said.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, so did I."

Flagen stood still and asked in a forthright manner, "What did it say?"

Tonas looked at Flagen, his expression incredulous. "It was obvious. It said something. It was directed to me. What did it say?" Flagen sighed in obvious exasperation. "The fact that it mindspeaks is not as important as the fact that it broke its silence right now. What the Beast is saying has to be vital to our mission. What did it say?"

"Tigger said that you shouldn't leave Quarters," Tonas replied. The beating he took in engineering must have affected his thought process because for once, Flagen was right. How the Beast communicated was not as important as why. The Quarter's lights dimmed. He heard metal scraping metal. "Anya, hand me those painkillers and stims; we're being boarded. Flagen, get Jonal on the comm unit."

"Anya, you and I are going to the StarRoom." Tonas took a stim stick out of Anya's shaking hands and stuck his calf and thigh. "Replicate a hard cast for this leg, Flagen. I'll speak to Jonal." Tonas then injected one of the painsticks. Flagen handed him the comm.

"Tonas here. Has the Bridge reported? Fuck. Anya, take Tigger and move to the Storage Area. Place yourself behind the boxes from your



apartment. Flagen, we need to guard the doors to Quarters until Jonal makes it up from Engineering. Ready, on my signal. Go."

Anya grabbed Tigger and scampered through the dressing area and into the small storage space.

Flagen ran back to the chamber holding a plasticene cast molded to custom fit Tonas's leg and provide his wound with support, while allowing him joint flexibility. While Tonas affixed the cast to his leg, Flagen built a barrier between the living area and the entrances to the storage area. He made the pathway difficult for a Zyptz soldier to transverse; but easy for a slightly built Earthen fem.

Tonas stood, his leg held his weight. He felt, rather than saw, Tigger at his feet. The Beast moved with stealth toward the doors to the Bridge. Tonas reached for the laser safe, withdrawing several weapons; checking their settings. Space battles were, of necessity, fought with less powerful weapons. You couldn't blast away at your opponent without damaging your ship and rendering it unable to support life. Weapons needed to be calibrated to the smallest possible target so as not to damage the ship and risk life support systems.

It was frustrating, because the lower laser setting was not as effective against the insectoid shell of the enemy soldier. You needed to aim for the soft underbelly. It took overwhelming force to outgun and overcome the Zyptz, and that was something he didn't possess at the moment. The comm unit vibrated against his thigh.

"Tonas here." He motioned to Flagen and tapped the comm unit. "Jonal, Bridge reports twenty Zyptz came up by way of the lightship cargo bay. Four got through, two in the corridor, two in the StarRoom. Can you hold the position until we can reinforce?"

"I'll have to, Firefly. I can't leave you alone. You don't behave without me to curb you."

Jonal forced a laugh and answered, "Tell Flagen I'm counting on him to keep you and Anya safe."

"I'll do my damn best, sir," Flagen answered, before Tonas could speak.

A blast shot through the door. It shook the room and sent Tonas's comm unit to skate across the floor. Flagen pushed Tonas behind a barrier and placed himself between the lounge and the corridor. The comm unit lay out in the open. Flagen crouched low, below the line of fire, and reached for the comm. He aimed at the StarRoom door and picked off the first of the four.

"Tonas, you OK?" Flagen shouted.

Tonas didn't have an opportunity to answer before a second hot blast came in from the Command Corridor. It came in long and low. It hit Flagen in the gut and sent him reeling to the floor. The wound was large and gaping. Flagen shoved a pain stick in his thigh and two more into his side. He did a quick flip from his back onto his stomach, and got off two high-powered shots, eliminating the two from the corridor. He reached for the comm and gasped.

"Tonas, catch." With the last of his strength, he tossed the comm unit to Tonas and heaved his body to block the threshold between the StarRoom and the Lounge, leaving a trail that traced his route.

The fourth Zyptz pushed through the StarRoom door, tossing Flagen's body aside.

Tonas retreated to the Sleeping Chamber. He attempted mind-speech. He didn't want to give away his position. He cursed under his breath as he heard a second Zyptz join the first, this one from the corridor. He grimaced in pain as he dragged his body toward Anya and the small storage area.

*Jonal, how close are you? Flagen fried two before they took him down. Anya and I are trapped with Tigger in small storage.*

*Fuck, not close enough. Do you have weapons?*

Tonas eyeballed the storage unit. *Limited*, he sent back to Jonal, his mind-speech tight.

*Let me see what I can rouse from the Bridge.*

"Saxon, Lunas, report," Jonal bellowed into the comm.

"We still have two of the twenty that beamed in, the Moonships' Warriors are battling on the lightslip stairs," Lunas replied.

"As soon as the Bridge is secure, send relief to Admiral Tonas. He is alone in Quarters with Princess Anya holding off two. They are holed up in the small storage, between the kitchen and her dressing room," Jonal said.

"We're there as soon as we can cut loose, Admiral. You have to do both, Lunas."

*Tonas, you're going to have to hold this for us for ten mots. You can do this, for us, for Anya?*

*I'll fucking try, Firefly, I'll try.*

\*\*\*\*

Mark was able to convey the whole of what he learned from Bane to TeZarron on a piggyback mind link through Juraens on his Psi Link.

Mark began, *Engineering is a diversion. The target is the Bridge and Quarters. They want the fems and control of the ship.*

Juraens added, *They also want Mark's DNA. It seems Bane put his formulae inside Mark's DNA. Bane is dead. It is no longer a concern. The Bridge is in major trouble, and Tonas and Anya are trapped in Quarters with no defense.*

TeZarron ordered, *Meet me in the escape corridor behind the lightslip stairs. We've got to relieve the Bridge.*

Mark used the comm unit to Jonal. *TeZarron is sending reinforcements to the Bridge with an ETA of five mots.*

TeZarron met them in the escape corridor almost instantaneously. He brought them to a door secreted behind the stairway. They climbed the stairs, willing the sounds of the dying to slow. They circled around the back of the Zyptz, and to Mark's stupefaction, began to mow the Zyptz down with their psi.

*What the fuck did you just do?* Mark asked.

*We exterminated an infestation,* TeZarron replied. *We have a few with the talent, thank the Goddess, and those of us who have it can only use it in circumstances where a defeat is untenable. It is in you, Mark Stern. You have the honor to control it.*

It took four mots to reach the Bridge. They could not use the psi again in front of witnesses, and most of their psi energy would need time to recoup. Here, the battle was physical. Here, Mark was at home.

\*\*\*\*

Tonas and Anya could hear the Zyptz tossing the Quarters, they were looking for something.

Tigger nosed at one of the boxes containing Anya's belongings. She hissed at him. "Quiet, you'll get us killed."

*Ant-Roach spray, NOW!*

Without thinking, Anya responded to the command and grabbed "the bomb. She had several cans. She didn't have much of a problem since she got Tigger, but she picked up a can every so often, just in case. She shoved one at Tonas, placed his finger on the trigger, and said, "Spray this."

*What? Are you losing it, Pa Channa?*

## *The Sarran Plague*

*The cat says use the spray. Has he been wrong yet?*

Tonas grabbed the can. His laser was useless in such a small space. If this gave them a few nanoseconds, it would be enough. It would have to be.

*Anya, My Light, I love you both. I even like the Beast, just so you know.*

They heard the Zyptz shoving the barricades from both sides of the small room.

*Tonas, we are in the corridor, hold them off. One nanosecond and we'll have them.*

The Zyptz broke through simultaneously. Anya started spraying the foul stuff like a madwoman. Tonas followed her lead. It seemed to slow them down. He got off a single shot from his laser and winged one. Anya kept spraying.

From out of nowhere, Tigger leapt into the air, claws extended, fangs exposed. He tore into the belly of the injured Zyptz. Anya continued to spray and Tonas joined her. Just as the cans ran out of juice, Jonal arrived with Mark, Juraens, and TeZarron.

The second Zyptz fell, but remained alive. Tigger casually clawed out its belly and moved over to his dish, dipping his claws in water as if in distaste.

\*\*\*\*

TeZarron shouted to Jonal, "Get Anya and Tonas out of here, this chemical is not safe for living things."

The remainder of the rescue party remained to do a mop up.

Later, back in the Medical Lab, Juraens and Mark lay in each other's arms and spoke about the day.

"You never told me you were dealing with roaches," Mark said to Juraens.

Juraens shrugged. "We call them Zyptz."

"The ones are earth are not the size of a humanoid. I need to think about this." In an eye blink, Mark the Warrior became Dr. Mark Stern, the scientist.

Juraens watched his BondMate in wonder, pulling Mark closer, he sent, "*Beloved, the Goddess has kissed my hand. Somewhere lies our fem, and she must be as magnificent as you.*"

Anya, Jonal, and Tonas found refuge in the Command Quarters of the White Moonship. Single Warriors protected those in Triad, and no Triad

was lost to the enemy. There were, however, many casualties. The Brightstar would be mourning its dead. Yet, the mission was a success, all of the fems survived.

Brightstar and the Fleet limped into Sarran space without fanfare.

Casualties were the first transported to the surface. They were followed by the WarriorPairs in Triad. Single Warriors followed their Bonded brethren. The fems disembarked, followed by command.

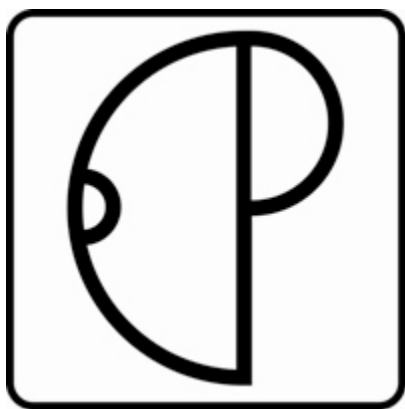
The high-pitched voice of his offspring hit TeZarron's ear as soon as his foot hit Sarran soil.

"Pappy, you brought my new mommy, over there." Nafer pointed in the direction of the fems. Then Nafer turned and ran to a startled Anya, who reached to pick him up.

"You are my Mommy's friend, and you have a baby in your belly."

Tigger looked up at Nafer and purred. *Don't worry kit, we'll bring back lots and lots of kittens from Earth for you to play with*

And so it went...Earth was to become the Sarran sole-source contractor for practioners of the Science of Psychiatry; *special* cats and fems with a pioneering spirit.



## *About the Author*

**AC Katt** was born in the Greenwich Village section of New York City; the only child of older parents. Summers were spent eating ice cream in Washington Square Park; playing in the fountain and listening to the bongo drums and folk guitars until the family bought a house in New Jersey when she was ten.

After the move, AC found boxes and boxes of novels in the garage and that was it, she became a bibliophile and so she has remained. She now lives in New Mexico with her husband and a superior cat, who rules the roost. She started to write when her husband limited her book budget and she had to make up her own stories.

*Available now from Eternal Press*

# *Spam*

*by Paul Mann*

Edwin, a socially awkward college student and quintessential computer nerd, has an experience with Spam that is truly out of this world. His unusual adventure with an annoying Spam E-mail leads him to reassess his take on computers and life in general.

"DID YOU EVER ASK YOURSELF-is my penis large enough?"

Edwin stared with disbelief at the Spam message flickering across his monitor.

"How could this happen to my computer?" irritated, he tapped at his keyboard with frustration. "Only last week I tweaked this code in my Spam-Killer program to eliminate emails such as this," he mumbled to himself as he remembered how his peers regarded him.

Often, his fellow college students informed him on an all too regular basis, that he was a regular gold-plated computer geek. So how had this piece of shit squeezed through his extensive defenses?

Highlighting the offending e-mail, he hit the delete button only to receive his next surprise. Instead of, "Do not collect \$200 as you go pass Go, but go directly to Trash," emanating with a metallic voice, from his computer's speakers. He heard, "Thank you for opening me." Immediately the email flowered onto the screen of his monitor, pulsating with a brightly colored well-designed presentation.

*Available now from Eternal Press*

# *I Wish I Might*

*by Jocelyn Modo*

Calixte knew Indus might let her people die. Still, Bevan's chances at succeeding had to be better with her than without. She entered the private spaceport belonging to her family, where Bevan was speaking with a technician. Silently, she pulled a flight suit off the pegged wall and stealthily made her way to the ship. She waited until the tech opened the ship's side door and then softly stepped up the plank and into the ship without attracting anyone's notice. She found a quick hiding place in the back, behind a large pack of supplies, where she crouched, waiting. Bevan entered and powered up the ship. They were off the ground in seconds. The proximity alarm sounded, and she could hear Bevan's curses from the front of the ship. She tried to ignore the chaos and focus on pulling on the borrowed flight suit, but she was shaking so badly she couldn't get her feet into the legs of the suit.

Peeking from her hiding place, she could see the ship's view-screen fill with Uriga battleships. The ship shook with the passing of missiles. . .

His tongue moved along the seam of her mouth, soft but persistent. She parted her lips and the kiss deepened. His hand moved to cup her left breast and her eyes opened at the feel of his thumb abrading her nipple. She shot up in bed, slamming her forehead into his, and simultaneously biting down on his tongue. He jumped out of bed with a curse. She closed her eyes, lowered her head to the pillow, and counted to ten, hoping when she opened them again the room would stop swimming.



That man, her husband, had a head made of stone. She opened her eyes and groaned. No, still swimming.

"Calixte, are you well?"

She turned her blurred vision on his face and found that looking so far up just made her dizzy, so she focused lower on his body. His stomach appeared rock hard as well. She'd never seen a stomach so flat and hard. She looked down lower and blushed. He was hard all over.

"Calixte?"

"Yes, yes I'll be fine."

He climbed back into bed and knelt over her. "What happened?"

She examined his head and to her dismay found a large red mark marring his forehead.

"I'm sorry," she said as she smoothed her fingers over the mark, hoping it wouldn't bruise. "I panicked."

His brow furrowed. "I thought we had moved past panicking."

She blushed and looked away. Gods, she hadn't stopped embarrassing herself in front of him since she first exited the ship.

"Calixte." He leaned lower to kiss her injured forehead. "It's all right. I was nervous as well, remember?"

If that - this is what he called being nervous, then what had she been doing?

"I wasn't panicking about you . . . us . . . I saw the suns."

"The suns caused you to panic?"

"The time. Each hour we spend here is an hour lost on Cephium. My people fight for their lives while I . . . while I," she stammered, "while I enjoy your company."

He insinuated himself between her thighs. "It takes time to amass an army, my wife. Why shouldn't you enjoy my company while we wait?"

Entering her, he kissed her lips. She sighed. Gods, but he felt good. She gripped his biceps as he slowly began to move in and out of her. The soreness that remained after their first time decreased to the point that she hardly noticed it any more, and she'd told this to him. Still, he made love to her gently, kissing her softly, petting her lightly, watching her face for signs of discomfort. It seemed doubtful that he could be as inexperienced as he claimed, but when she'd said as much, he'd only thanked her and continued in his lovemaking.

*Available now from Eternal Press*

# *The Draconis & The Stallion*

*By Laura Elliott*

Seductress - Hot, spicy romance, detailed love scenes, graphic description of body parts, and vivid descriptions of intercourse.

Think it's tough finding the right guy? Try having red eyes and a spiked tail.

When an escaped Draconis starts turning houses into kindling, Wing is ordered to track him down. With her spiked tail, flame-resistant skin, and ability to breathe fire, she's got the right tools for the job.

She's not the only one on the hunt - bullets fly when a military commando, Stallion, mistakes her for the pyro. Wing must convince him to stop trying to kill her and combine forces to catch the rampaging Draconis. But she gets a little more than she bargained for when the very sexy, very armed human male agrees.

You'll need flame resistant skin of your own when you read this red hot romance.

Hot, hot and even hotter. Wow, Annie's flames are not the only things burning up the pages in this book. Laura Elliott has created a new species and new way to set the sheets on fire.

- Enchanting Reviews -