



KATHLEEN SCOTT

SOLARION
HEAT

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Kathleen Scott

Dedication

To all those who dream of perpetual summers.

Chapter One

Klaxons screamed overhead. Red lights flashed warnings of impending disaster as the shuttlecraft came in low and hot over Solarion's surface. Heat tiles had melted and blown off during entry into the atmosphere and destabilized the protective shielding around the ship's hull.

Kara Zaire held onto the safety harness that crisscrossed over her chest. Landings were never her favorite things, but bumpy ones like this had her wishing she'd never left home to explore distant solar systems as a Runner.

The shuttle shook as if every rivet and bolt were going to explode from the seams that held the craft together. Kara prayed it would hold a few moments longer.

"Brace yourselves!" The command came just before the ship hit the ground, jarring the eight-member crew and causing Kara to bite the inside of her cheek.

Blood ran over her tongue. Not a good start to a mission already plagued with both desperation and controversy.

They skidded to a halt, throwing a fan of dirt and debris across the front view grid. The pilot cursed at her obstructed view. No one attempted to correct the anatomical impossibility of her invective. Kara felt pretty sure they were all thinking the same words—she most certainly was.

"Everyone all right?" Mission commander, Jonah Cash, unbuckled himself from the safety harness and unfolded his tall, muscular frame from the seat.

The crew all confirmed their fitness to continue the mission. All but Kara. She looked Cash in the eye and wiped the blood from her mouth. She'd be damned before she would let him know she was hurt, even in a minor way.

"Visionary?" He had taken to using her title and job description rather than her name. Kara decided it was a way to keep her separate from the rest of the team members, whom he addressed by their surnames as happened in most military or state operations.

People like Jonah Cash would never be open-minded enough to understand the strong psychic link she shared with all organic and some inorganic matter. If an object

could conduct energy, Kara could read it, and that innate ability scared some people and made them distrust her. Cash in particular.

Cash frowned and moved to stand over her like a disapproving parent. He wiped some blood away from her lip with the pad of his thumb. “I asked if you’re all right.”

She had no doubt he didn’t like her, but there were some moments when she’d catch him looking at her as if his interest might go beyond mere contempt. Like now.

Kara only nodded. If she talked the cut in her mouth would probably break open again. He turned his hand and brushed a knuckle along the corner of her mouth. The action sent an arrow of longing from lips to hips. He held her gaze a second longer, then looked away.

Cash motioned to the team. “Gear up.”

Axis, the pilot, turned from where she and her co-pilot, Bentley, were busy running scans of the shuttle’s diagnostic programs. “We’ve lost communications with the *Glacier*.”

Kara watched as Cash tightened his fist. It was the only sign that his temper boiled near the surface. “Try to reestablish while we scout the area.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Will you be able to repair the damage to the tiles, or will we need to have communications up to call a rescue party?”

“I don’t know the answer to that yet, sir. I’ll know more when we run the full spectrum analysis.”

Cash nodded in acknowledgment of her assessment and continued to gear up for a foray into the oppressive heat of Solarion’s Stanza Plains.



Heat from the twin Solarion suns beat down like a supernova on the six-member advance team as they traversed the open plains in search of much-needed resources. Advanced technology on their ship could only glean generalities of what lay beneath the planet’s surface, but not exact amounts or location. Plus, machines couldn’t report back

to the High Command the feasibility of people adapting to life on Solarion. So far her professional opinion was that the High Command had made a gross miscalculation in selecting Solarion as their number one choice for relocation.

Kara stopped in her tracks and pulled a handkerchief from her uniform pocket. Even with the environmental conditioning the team had undergone before leaving their icy planet of Cimirion, the heat still had the power to overcome her. It affected her talent and made it hard to read her surroundings.

“Snap to, Visionary.” Cash’s voice came over her headset and rattled her sensitive ears. Even without the microphone she would have heard him. Satellites floating light years from the planet could have heard that command.

From the outset, Cash had made no bones about the fact he found her peculiar skills suspect. However, the HC had placed her on the team, and he hadn’t been able to dissuade them from their decision. Not that he hadn’t tried.

She tied the handkerchief around her forehead and caught up with the rest of the team as they rounded a small outcropping of dead trees. There wasn’t much life on this side of the planet. Early scans had shown the area to have the greatest concentration of those resources needed to sustain life, but Kara wasn’t quite as sure.

Planets gave off energy, as did all living things. The patterns and wavelengths could be seen and read by empathic talents such as Kara possessed, but there was something wrong. Solarion gave off no discernable energy, at least not anything she could read. The only thing she heard in the psychic channel was a constant static.

She raised her hand to shield her eyes as she gazed at the two glowing orbs hanging in the bright blue sky. Usually suns gave off an enormous amount of energy. The sound could best be described as a voice holding out a pure, perfect note on the musical register. Twin suns would sound like a duet. Each voice tempered by distance and size. These suns gave off a deafening silence that worried her in no small measure.

She started moving again and as she walked by the trees she held out her hand and ran it down the smooth surface. The bark had been shorn off and the inner layer of the

tree exposed. From the look and feel of it, high winds and abrasive sand or acid rain had eaten away at the trees.

Opening her mind, she took a deep breath and tried to connect with the trees, but got nothing. A vast blank slate filled her vision.

“Quit hugging trees and get your ass moving.”

Kara ground her back teeth together, causing her injured cheek to smart. She picked up her pace. The man had about as much tact as a rampaging glacial bear. “Yes, sir.”

The team stood at the base of a small hill in a semi-circle. They all looked over at her as if she were some loathsome tagalong on their vacation getaway. She’d been on many missions as a visionary, but she’d never come across such clear contempt from those she worked with. Of course they were all hand selected by Cash so most likely were his regular crew. She, being the outsider, had to prove her worth, and so far the planet couldn’t or wouldn’t cooperate with her.

If Cash continued to undermine her legitimacy for being on the team, she’d file a formal complaint with the HC. This mission meant the survival of their people, and having a team leader who thwarted her efforts to find a suitable planet for relocation could not be tolerated on any level.

“We’re going to split up into three two-person teams.” Cash pointed to the northern end of the plains. “Lowe and Dylan. Head north. Christo and Ramsey. East. Visionary, you’re with me.” He adjusted the volume on his earpiece. “Keep in constant radio contact. If you find anything of interest flag it and we’ll investigate at length tomorrow. We meet at the ship before the second sun sets.”

The rest of the team dispersed in their designated directions. Kara watched while Cash pulled out his canteen and took a quick mouthful of water. He swished it around his cheeks before swallowing.

“What have you found so far?” He replaced the canteen in the strap on his belt and rested his hands on his hips as if in preemptive challenge to what her answer might be.

“If I were blindfolded and brought to this planet, I would think it had died a long time ago.”

A deep frown pulled his dark brows into a V. His startling blue eyes were hidden behind a pair of wraparound sunshades that did nothing but reflect Kara's image back to her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I can't hear anything. The only reason I know the suns are shining is because I can feel their heat. But they're as silent as space itself."

He let out a string of creative expletives and turned away. "Why didn't you tell me this before I sent the others off into the plains?"

"Why didn't you ask for my professional assessment before making that decision, sir?"

He shook his head and picked up the pace. "Doesn't make much difference, I guess. This is a fool's errand."

Reluctantly, Kara had to agree with that assessment. The thought of relocating to a planet she couldn't hear disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. But one thing was for certain: their civilization could no longer continue to survive on Cimirion.

Worldwide climatic changes had covered the planet in an icy crust in only a few short decades. Scientists couldn't pinpoint the exact reason for the sudden shift in mean temperatures, but all agreed it appeared to be getting worse every season.

Seasons. They'd had nothing but perpetual winter for the past twenty years. Kara could barely remember the springs and summers of her childhood. Looking around her, she wondered what the HC had been thinking to want to take an entire population from a world of arctic blasts and hypothermia to one of perpetual summer and heat stroke.

Kara lengthened her stride as she caught up to Cash. She hung back a few steps just to admire the view. She might not like him as a team leader, but all that arrogance sure came in a tight, hard package. Briefly an image of spreading protective oil over his entire body flooded her mind and brought her up short. Just how long had she been without a man?

The heat had to be getting to her. Normally, the tall, dark and arrogant type didn't thrill her in the least. However, Cash hid something, she was almost sure of it. In addition to discovering why the planet hadn't spoken to her yet, she also wanted to uncover some

of her sexy and untouchable team leader's secrets. The prospect of which would be truly fascinating.

Chapter Two

Jonah stopped in his tracks. Even with his back turned he could feel the weight of her stare on him. He knew having her on his team would be a challenge, what with her odd psychic talents and all. But did she have to be so damned beautiful?

He'd fought like a trapped mountain cat to get her off his team. There was something deeply sensual about a woman who could put her hand on the side of a tree and *hear* the images it presented to her. Of course he'd never admit that in public.

Over his shoulder he could see her divert her gaze from his ass and look elsewhere. Who was she trying to fool? She'd been checking him out. He had to use every ounce of his discipline to not call her on it.

Focus. He needed to stay focused on the mission objectives. Imagining how many different ways he wanted to pleasure the little psychic wouldn't accomplish any of those goals. Only his personal ones.

"Keep up, Visionary, or I'll think you don't want to be alone with me."

He couldn't read her eyes behind her shades, but he could tell by the set of her mouth she hadn't liked his comment. Good. If she stayed angry with him, he'd be less likely to cross that line and do something stupid like sticking his tongue down her throat.

The thought alone made him want to moan.

He turned away from her so she wouldn't see the stirrings of desire in his pants and started for what looked like a tree line in the distance.

"If you see something you want to touch, let me know." A reluctant smile curled his mouth at his wit. He felt that same heavy gaze on him as he moved.

"You'll be the first person I inform, sir."

They continued for another mile before she asked him to stop. He watched as she dug a small retractable rod from her pack and bent over a lone flowering plant about a

meter high. The white velvet-like petals and jade leaves looked out of place on the barren plain. It was a small miracle the thing not only grew but survived.

“What are you doing?”

She stroked the center of the flower. Sharp spikes ejected from the base of the flower as the petals snapped shut. “Carnivorous. Sometimes beauty can be very deadly, sir.”

“I’ll remember that in future.”

With the hunting mechanism triggered, she ran her hand down the stem and over the leaves in a gentle caress that invited steamy images into his mind.

“Read anything?”

She shook her head and straightened up again. “If this plant knows anything, it’s not talking.”

“How did you know it was carnivorous?”

“I didn’t. The only things I know about this planet and its indigenous species are what I’ve read in the reports compiled by the observational drones, which tells me exactly nothing about the plant life here.” She left the rod out and started walking again, making him follow her. “And not being able to get a reading from the energy patterns makes me inclined to believe Solarion is not going to be a hospitable place to live, despite having the same atmospheric composition as Cimirion.”

“Any ideas why you can’t read the environment?” Because her hocus-pocus talent was a sham? He refrained from saying the words though they burned the roof of his mouth.

“There has to be some reasonable explanation. Look around you. The area might be desolate, but there are signs of life everywhere. If there’s life, there’s energy. It’s not possible that I can’t hear it unless there are structures within the planet’s make up that naturally dampen my ability.”

“Which makes your talent useless to us.”

She planted the rod in the ground and leaned her weight on it. “In this case, yes. But it may only be something in this area alone. I don’t want to admit defeat until I’ve covered a bigger region and tried to read the organic matter there.”

Well, he had to give her marks for determination. “So, what do you want to do?”

“I want to take samples back to the ship and see if I can read them in an enclosed environment. Maybe the hull of the shuttle can shield whatever interference is blocking the energy flow.”

“You want to take any piece of your buddy over there?” He pointed at the flower that had reopened its deceptively inviting petals.

“Only some of the leaves. I would hate to be accused of bringing a murderous plant on board ship. It wouldn’t look good in the report if it started eating members of the crew, sir.”

The way she delivered the line he couldn’t be sure if she was serious or had a morbid sense of humor. He didn’t ask.

She swung her pack off her shoulder and held it out for him to hold. Suddenly he felt like a belabored husband on a shopping excursion to the exclusive shops on Redding-Tate V.

With the pack open, she pulled out protective gloves, a couple metal containers, and a small penknife.

Once again she tripped the petals to protect herself from the long jagged spikes, then bent to cut a few of the leaves from the side of the plant.

“Dammit!” She stood and shook her finger. Blood dripped from the tip of her glove to the ground.

Hands visibly shaking, she pulled off the glove and flipped her canteen from her belt loop.

“Give that here.” Cash didn’t give her the chance to countermand his order. He took the canteen from her, held her hand in one of his and poured water over the injury with the other. The way she shook, she’d end up pouring it all over the ground.

He held her slightly behind him and to the side and could feel the gentle brush of her breasts against the back of his arm whenever she took a breath. The firm fullness of them distracted him up until the point he realized her breath came much too quickly and sounded too ragged for the situation.

He turned to her, taking in her sudden pallor. “Kara?”

“Neurotoxin.”

“What?” *Oh, fuck!*

He set her gently down on a rock, holding her hand toward the ground. She gripped her uninjured hand around her forearm to help stop the flow of poison through her system, but from the looks of it she was too late. “Stay with me.”

“Multipurpose...anti-venom...in my bag.”

He rifled through the bag until he found a bright orange pack with several pre-filled syringes inside. Every Runner who did advanced exploration knew the basics of field medicine. With expert precision he administered the anti-venom and waited for a moment to see if her symptoms appeared to improve.

The fast-acting drug began to take effect and her breathing evened out. So did Cash’s. He’d never been so close to panic in his life. It had all happened so fast, and she had been so careful to take precautions against injury.

He sat on the ground next to her and slid his arm around her shoulders. “Feeling better, Visionary?”

“I’ll live.”

“Glad to hear it. Fifteen years in the field and I’ve never lost a team member yet. I’d hate like all the icy hells to have you be the first.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you get rid of me that easily.” Color began to return to her cheeks and she started to stand, but fell back on her bottom. “Maybe I’ll sit a few more minutes.”

He had to hand it to her, she was a tough little number. All those lovely curves of hers hid a core of pure steel. Grudging admiration for the psychic unfurled in his chest—right before he tamped it down again.

Mission first. Mission first. The words needed to be his personal mantra. Seeing her so vulnerable, and yet remain capable and clear-headed enough to participate in her own treatment had him thinking all kinds of hot thoughts he ought not to be having in the middle of an operation.

“Do you want me to call back to the shuttle for the buggy?”

She shook her head. Blonde hair shone like spun gold under the dual suns. “And have you hold that over my head? Not on your life, sir.”

He let the smile he’d held back curl the side of his mouth. “When we’re out here alone, you can call me Cash.”

She frowned at him. “Don’t feel you have to be nice because I made a rookie mistake and cut my finger.”

As she started to stand again, he moved with her, holding her arm until she could balance herself. “What? No mention of the toxin?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve gotten hit with it. It’s just one of the many hazards of my calling.”

Cash didn’t let go of her arm. Her skin was softer than he had imagined possible. It drove him crazy wondering if she was as smooth and soft all over.

Her head snapped up and she gave a small gasp. His thoughts must have brushed up against her talent. He was, after all, as organic as it came. And the thoughts swirling in his mind as he touched her were nothing short of a cosmic explosion.

Chapter Three

The remainder of the day was spent gathering samples close to the spot where she'd gotten hit with the toxin and those on the trail back to the shuttle. Kara had assured Cash more than once that she was fit to finish the trek to the tree line in the near horizon, but he had refused to take her there.

Truth told, she had offered more to show him her go-to attitude than a pressing need to collect samples. She would, however, make him take her back there tomorrow. The anti-venom had side effects of its own and they were multiplied tenfold in the oppressive heat of the plains. Her only thought at present was to get to the shuttle and lie on her bunk.

Cash stayed beside her the entire march back. Probably afraid she'd pass out and he'd have to pick her up and carry her. Not while she still breathed and had conscious thought. That humiliation would be one she'd never live down. Though in all honesty, he had been gentle and even slightly charming while he cared for her.

Without the ability to read the plants she couldn't be sure of their properties, but had to work as if every object meant her harm. She looked down at the cut on her finger. Such a tiny matter to cause so much trouble, but big enough to get what amounted to a lethal dose of toxin. Kara had no doubt if she had been alone, or hadn't had the anti-venom with her, the dose from that small wedge of the plant would have been fatal.

Something definitely to keep in mind and take back to the botanists on Cimirion. She hadn't been affected as she brushed her hand over the leaves or stem, so it wasn't secreted, but contained within the venous structure.

"You're quiet. Should I be worried?"

"I'm not feeling ill again, if that's what you're wondering." She liked it better when he was telling her to move her ass. This considerate side of him had her feeling things she

hadn't expected during those early training days when he'd been relentlessly condescending.

"Glad to hear it. We'll have a hard day tomorrow."

She looked up as smoke began to curl up out of the shuttle not a hundred meters from them. "Not as hard as tonight will be."

"Come on!" He took off at a run, arms and legs pumping as he picked up speed.

Axis came out of the ship as they reached the vessel, her hand over her mouth. A wracking cough exploded from her lungs.

Bentley followed her out, rubbing his face with a towel. His uniform smoldered in places. Soot smeared his face and neck. He raised his hand. "It's out. It'll stink in there for a while, but it's still livable."

Cash's body language changed as he lugged the pack off his back and headed into the shuttle. His wide shoulders squared off as if he were going into battle. Hands clenched at his side.

Kara followed him into the command deck, where he stopped and glared at the control panel. The sunshades were no longer on his eyes, and the cold angry stare could have put the fire out, had it not been so already.

The sharp tang of burnt circuitry and wire hung in the air. A vaporous cloud of ozone permeated every area of the ship. Cash gave her a slow look. "I think you might be right. This planet doesn't want us here."

He didn't seem the type to jump to conclusions, but she'd seen men turn superstitious over lesser things than near-crash landings, venomous flowers and control-panel fires.

"Axis! Get in here. Now!"

The tone was so sharp Kara flinched before she could check herself. Cash flicked a glance her way. He jerked his head to the bunks. "Go lay down before you fall down."

"I'm fine..."

"It was an order, not a request."

Kara squared her shoulders. She should have never let her guard down. Never let him see her as a person. “Yes, sir.”

Well, the reprieve was nice while it lasted, but it looked like she was back to being just one of the crew. Not that she expected anything different, but... Well, never mind. It would do no good to pretend he really had a softer side. It had only been the heat getting to him. Or maybe just the fact he was afraid she would actually die out there and ruin his perfect return record.

She closed the metal door separating the bridge from the sleeping quarters. If Axis was about to get her ass chewed for the fire, Kara didn’t want to hear it.

Taking the lower bunk, she laid her pack at her feet and pulled out a few of the containers. It would be a good time to check her theory since none of the other crew members had made it back and she had the sleeping quarters to herself.

She pulled out a bundle of coarse grass, picked near the outcropping of dead trees. Closing her eyes tightly, Kara concentrated on the energy patterns inherent in the blades and felt an instant, tingling connection.

Grasses had an odd, tinny sound to them, and their images tended to be very flat and skewed. There wasn’t much she could learn from the grass about the plains around it other than the rainfalls, growing seasons and droughts. It was nothing that an observational drone wouldn’t be able to tell her, but it was reassuring to know she could connect to some plant life on Solarion.

Encouraged by her findings, she pulled out the other samples and spread them out across the bed. Now the serious work would begin.

Chapter Four

“The *Glacier* will be in orbit in two common days. No sooner.”

Cash regarded the pilot with poorly concealed disdain. “Did you at least get word to them before the fire destroyed the panel?”

“I sent a distress call, but I never made direct audio contact with them.” At least Axis sounded apologetic.

“Does *anything* work now?”

She looked at him as if he’d grown a second head. “I was a little busy putting out the fire to check.”

“You and Bentley get to work on it. I’m going to hit the lav.” He turned and headed for the shower. He needed to unwind some and think instead of react.

As he passed by the door to the bunks, he could hear movement inside. The breath caught in his lungs and refused to come out. He lifted his hand to the latch and almost went inside, just to see her, but refrained. This uncontrolled passion he had for the visionary would prove deadly if he didn’t get a handle on it. But then again, maybe if he acted on it, he could purge it from his system and move on.

He’d fought the feelings for so long they had become second nature.

Grabbing the latch, he swung the door open and found Kara not in her bunk but sitting on the floor with a twig pressed between her palms. A low sensual hum came from deep in her throat. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and deep.

It only took a few beats before her eyes flew open and she looked up at him. Those incredible green slanted eyes of hers blinked a few times as if trying to place him, before she came back into herself.

“I thought I told you to rest?” That wasn’t what he wanted to say, but he felt it was probably safest. He really wanted to tell her that she made him crazy. That he could die a

happy man if she ever caressed him the way she did those damn plants of hers. That he wanted to bury his cock inside her and never leave.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve had a breakthrough.”

He stepped inside the bunk room and closed the door behind him, sealing them in alone. Immediately he was aware of everything about her: the quick pulse at her throat, the way her breath hitched, and the way her uniform shirt cupped her breasts. Hard nipples pressed against the tan fabric and made him hunger to free them.

Concentration fled. What did she say? Something about a breakthrough? He was having one himself at the moment...or was it a breakdown?

He took a deep breath and tried to regain control. His body had already betrayed him and grown painfully hard. There didn’t seem to be enough air in the room.

“What kind of breakthrough?” Even to his ears, his voice sounded deeper, almost a caress.

Kara licked her lips and looked up at him, all big eyes and wanton mouth. “I...I managed to connect to the samples.”

A smile curled his lips up. “Finally some good news.”

That expressive gaze of hers lowered to his mouth, and he lost it.

Cash sank to his knees in front of her. For months he’d denied himself the taste of her. No more. There was no way he could go another second and not know what it felt like to touch her. He cradled her face in his hands and took her lips.

Gods, she was hot and sweet.

Her hands snaked up his chest and pulled him closer. Their lips ground together and their tongues stroked each other. She moaned and arched against him, pressing her breasts against his chest.

It wasn’t enough.

He wanted to feel her skin to skin. The uniforms that separated them were too much. He pulled on the tail of her shirt tucked into her uniform pants.

With her shirt free, Cash ran his hands up her back, reveling in the feel of her. “I’ve never felt anything like your skin. You’re so soft.” He brought his hands forward to cup

her breasts. Her head fell back and she arched again, letting her breasts fill his palms completely. He had to see them. Take them into his mouth and suckle those hard little peaks.

He ran his thumb around her nipple, teasing her.

A knock sounded on the door. “Cash?”

Reality crashed back down on him like a meteorite. He let his hands slide from Kara very slowly. The passion in her eyes hadn’t dimmed any, so he leaned over and gave her a few deep kisses.

Another knock. “Cash?”

Though it pained him to do it, he moved away from her and took a seat on a bunk across the room. “Enter.”

The door opened and Bentley stuck his head in. His eyes narrowed as he gazed from Kara sitting on the floor, surrounded by plant samples and the sound of labored breathing, to Cash who sat bent over, resting his forearms on his knees.

“You wanted something?” Cash prompted the co-pilot, who wore a guilty expression on his hound-dog face.

Bentley shook his head. “Yeah. The board’s fried. Useless.”

Cash hung his head and swiped a hand down his face. The only highlight of the entire shit day so far had been that brief hot interlude with Kara. He chanced a glance at her, but she refused to look at him.

Dammit. He hoped she didn’t get all formal on him again. His palms still tingled where they’d held her breasts.

He chafed his hands on his uniform pants and stood, hoping like mad that the outline of his erection wasn’t too visible. He’d hate for Bentley to start flapping his lips about the possibility that Cash and the visionary were about to have wild sex when they should have been working.

As team leader he needed to set an example for the crew. As he followed Bentley out of the bunk room, Cash looked back over his shoulder at Kara. The interruption hadn’t dimmed his desire for her. It only put it on hold.



Cash closed the door behind him, leaving Kara on the floor surrounded by her cuttings. With a gaze to the panel in speculation, she picked up the stick she'd been holding when Cash had entered the room.

Softly at first, but then with more resonance, the energy patterns emerged and swirled around in her head. No, the sounds hadn't been a construct of her imagination. She heard them and felt them—could taste them on her tongue. Why then had they stopped so abruptly when Cash entered the room?

Did her theory hold water?

With the bunk room door open and the outer portal up, the blocks she'd encountered on the plain had nothing to stop them from disrupting the flow inside the shuttle. Now, with the door closed, energy moved as nature intended. Or at least the nature she knew. But it hadn't returned again.

Until now.

The reasons why would require some investigation. If she discovered where the shield originated or how it worked, she could then determine measures to counteract it, thus eliminating the reservations she had for the relocation to Solarion.

Instead of taking the nap she needed, Kara placed a few of the samples in their containers and shoved them into her pack. There would be no sleep until she solved at least part of the mystery.

Quiet, as not to call attention to herself, she slipped out of the bunk room and past the bridge to the outer portal. As she exited the ship, Lowe and Dylan came back, carrying what looked like the bones of some large animal.

She met them halfway and pointed at what she assumed was a femur. "Can I borrow that for a moment?"

Both men stared at her in a suspicious manner as Lowe handed the thighbone over. "Knock yourself out." He pulled off his shades and rubbed a dark hand over his forehead.

It was the first overt sign of higher life forms they'd seen since landing. All day she had battled the constant onslaught of curious bugs, but not seen any wildlife. However, that didn't mean much. The noise and smell of their landing could have very easily sent any creatures out roaming the plains for cover.

Dylan glanced around the immediate area. "Where's Cash?"

"On the bridge. There's been a fire." They both swung their gazes to the shuttle then back to her. She shook her head at them. "I don't know how it started. Cash and I were about a hundred meters out when Axis and a whole lot of smoke came out of the ship. Looks electrical."

Lowe hit his buddy in the gut with a backhand. "Come on, let's go see if we can help."

They started away when Dylan turned back to her. "Where are you going?"

"To work on an experiment."

Neither of them said anything more as they headed into the shuttle. They probably figured it would be better to leave her to her own devices than to stand around gabbing with her. After all, that had been the longest conversation she'd ever had with them. Usually they didn't pay her any attention at all, as if she were so insignificant she didn't deserve to even be seen.

Not that it mattered to her.

The life of a visionary was often singular in nature. Isolated.

But for a brief moment today she hadn't been alone.

Tingles spread down her body, tightening her nipples at the remembered feel of Cash's hands on her. She tightened her grip on the bone and moved deeper into the fading light of the second sun's descent.

The area around the disabled shuttle was covered in a thick layer of cracked dirt. Every so often, tufts of desert grass braved the heat and sun to wend their way through the cracks in the ground. Judging from the formation of the plain and the top layer of soil it looked as if they'd landed in what had once been a lakebed. A dry lake and animal bones were not positive signs of making the planet habitable by the Cimirions.

She found a spot that looked relatively soft and sat with her knees up and feet planted shoulder width apart. Bones were the best kind of matter in which to glean information. Holding just one piece in her hand made it possible to extract the entire life of the person or animal the bone came from. Lowe and Dylan had made a great find when they stumbled across these beauties. So many of the questions she had could be answered, if they would only talk to her.

She picked up the bone, cupping her hands around either end. Centered and focused, she closed her eyes and bowed her head, concentrating on the organic matter still locked within the marrow.

Pain exploded along her flank. Sharp teeth bit into her flesh. Claws gouged to hold her fast. The last moments of the animal's life shifted over her senses like a panorama of survival. The animal had been *artiodactyls*, an order of large herbivorous mammal. It had been taken down by a predator while grazing on the plains.

The fact she could connect so fully to the bone came as small comfort when experiencing the animal's pain as if it happened to her. But it did prove that it wasn't the region or the planet that blocked her ability.

A brief ripple of awareness skimmed over the surface of the channel. Christo and Ramsey talked in low tones as they came closer to the ship. She didn't break contact with the bone to listen in on their conversation, but traced back further in the animal's life, trying to find the migration patterns and food sources.

"Visionary!"

She much preferred hearing her name roll off his tongue than the barked command of her title. Kara opened her eyes and noted more time had passed than she thought. Darkness filled the area, total and resolute.

She stood, brushed the dirt from her pants then picked up her pack. A flashlight beam swung in an arc around the outside of the ship. "Visionary!"

Shaking her head, she moved to meet him halfway. "Over here, sir."

The light came around, hitting her square in the face. She threw up a hand, but not before bright orbs burst against her retinas. “Damn.” The word came out as a whispered epithet along with some colorfully immoral genealogy of her team leader.

“Are you all right?”

“I will be when I get my sight back, sir.”

“Not sir.” He lowered his voice and stepped in front of her. “We’re alone out here.”

“Very well—Cash.” She started around him, but he slid his hand around her arm. Long masculine fingers and a callused palm contrasted with the smooth inside of her upper arm. Awareness unfurled like a flag, proclaiming her conquered by him.

He pulled her flush against his hard chest and spoke against her temple. “When I went back to the bunk room and didn’t see you, I got worried.”

Involuntarily, her eyes slid shut. His breath felt warm and gentle on her skin. Between their clothes, she could feel the strong beat of his heart pick up pace. “I wanted to test a theory.”

He ran open lips down the side of her face until their lips met. The kiss dragged her under as wave after wave of hot bliss moved through her body. The gentle movement of his hips brought his thick erection brushing against her side. A moan tore from her throat. She wanted to feel the heat and length of him inside her, stretching her wide. She wanted all of him.

Much too soon, he pulled away. “Tell me about your theory inside. We don’t know the dangers of this planet at night. I don’t want to take a chance and stay out here longer than necessary.”

“I agree. Those bones came from the kill of a large predator, not the result of hunger or thirst.” She moved away from him and began the walk back to the shuttle.

Lights shone from inside, and the ramp remained down.

“So you were able to connect with the bone?”

“Yes.” Until the moment he’d moved out into the night to look for her.

The thought made her stop in her tracks.

“What is it?”

Not knowing quite how to approach the subject or her suspicions, she started walking again. “What’s the game plan for tomorrow? Are we all moving together, or spreading out again?”

“I’m sending Dylan and Lowe to collect readings in the areas where the highest concentration of minerals were found. Christo and Ramsey are going to scout locations for a base camp for when the *Glacier* arrives.”

“And us?”

He took her hand in his and squeezed it. “We look for the water the drones claimed was on this rock.”

“If the High Command has their way, we’ll be calling *this rock* home before long.”

He gave a gruff laugh. “Would you build a house and settle here, or stay in the Runners and take your luck on a ship somewhere?”

The question surprised her coming from him. Men, hardened soldiers like himself especially, didn’t usually discuss the need to put down roots on any one planet. They tended to sow their seeds on many.

“If I knew my children and my grandchildren would have good productive lives here, I would.”

They came into the circle of light by the shuttle ramp. Cash dropped her hand and hurried her through the portal, closing the night and the unknown outside.

She hadn’t a chance to ask him what he thought of staying planet side. But she wondered long into the night why he’d asked her opinion.

Chapter Five

The buggy coasted along the open plain toward the tree line. There were possible water sources along the ridge where the plains gave way to the foothills of the Illusion Mountains. Since Kara and Cash had the most terrain to cover, it made sense they would take the four-wheeled conveyance rather than hike as they had the day before.

Kara sat in the navigation seat and typed in a command on the magnifying screen then surveyed the distant scenery. “Cash, look at this.”

He brought the buggy to a stop and leaned over the console to look at the screen. “What the hells is that? It’s moving.”

She pointed to a white outline almost completely obscured by dark spots that moved in frantic swirls. “I think that’s the carnivorous plant we encountered yesterday. And those look like some kind of insect.”

“Are they attacking the plant?” Cash frowned over his sunglasses. “Could the toxin be a source of food for them?”

“Doubtful. Can we get closer? I want to see what’s going on.”

Without a word he put the buggy in gear and started for the area where they had seen the plant. As they neared it, Kara kept her watchful gaze on the screen. The industrious insects were about five centimeters long, with a hard shell and segmented thorax.

The greatest number of beetles was concentrated about a meter from the plant where they fought over something imbedded in the soil. Those unfortunate enough to wander near the plant in their over-zealous attempt to get whatever worked them into such a frenzy were shot full of toxin from the long venomous spikes.

“What could they be after?” Kara looked away from the screen long enough to take up the high-powered binoculars from the floorboard.

Cash brought the buggy to a halt. “Animal droppings. A small rodent carcass. Could be anything.”

“Well, we already have proof that there’s a definite food chain established so the beetles would have some place in the order.” She stepped out of the buggy with the binoculars in hand.

“Don’t get too close.” Cash’s warning came just as Kara got a clear shot of the ground in dispute. Some of the beetles burrowed under the top layer of soil trying to get at whatever was underneath. She hit the record button to download the images to the data device on her belt.

She adjusted the focus and brought the image in closer. “Do you remember exactly where I was when I cut my finger?”

Cash grabbed her arm and hauled her away from the spot. “Right where most of the activity is. That’s what you’re getting at, isn’t it?”

She let him guide her back to the buggy.

Her mind churned with the possibilities. Carnivorous plants and blood-eating beetles. So far Solarion wasn’t a very hospitable planet. It was rough and hard, hot and unforgiving. Cimiron could be brutal with her high winds and deep snow, but species that had not been able to adapt to the climatic changes had long since died out. Kara wasn’t so sure a civilization used to living unhindered by anything other than the extreme elements would be able to survive in an environment where something that looked as innocuous as a flower or beetle could kill or thrive on blood.

She strapped herself back in the navigation seat and studied the landscape around them. There was no denying Solarion had an untamed beauty about it, but there would have to be a lot of work done to educate Cimirions on how to live harmoniously in their new home.

“I don’t think we were in danger. They were feeding on the blood that dropped on the ground, acting as scavengers. If they fed on live hosts we would have been swarmed as soon as they sensed us.” For good measure she took a few more shots of the site before they pulled away.

Cash raised a brow at her. “But you can’t guarantee that.”

“No. Nor would I.”

Wind whipped as the buggy picked up speed. Errant strands of Kara's hair came loose from her braid and blew in her face. She tried to tuck them behind her ears, but they wouldn't stay.

Cash ran his hand down her hair then massaged her neck. "I know you're careful, but I don't want to take a chance with you." He rubbed a few more times before moving his hand to her cheek for a tender caress.

Kara pressed his hand to her face then turned in her seat to look at him. Jonah Cash was something of an enigma to her. Once stern and cold, since coming to Solarion his passionate nature had come fully to the surface.

She wanted to know why the change in his attitude, but didn't know quite what to say. Their mission had to take precedence over any relationship developing between them. But Kara had to be honest with herself in that getting closer to Cash was an overwhelming temptation. First she had to discover why it was she couldn't hear energy patterns with him in the vicinity.

"I have a few things I want to try today. We can do it while we look for water, so it won't put us behind schedule."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "For a moment there I thought you wanted to finish what we started in the bunk room yesterday."

Her face burned and it wasn't from the blazing suns. She took a deep steadying breath. "I do."

A low groan that she felt more than heard came from Cash. "That's good, because I'd hate to be in this alone."

No. He wasn't alone. Far from it. At the moment she would follow wherever he led.

They arrived at the dense woods just as the first sun reached zenith. Trees swayed in a gentle breeze, and birds with calls she'd never heard before filled the day with song.

Somehow she had to devise a way for Cash to go off alone so she could put her theory to another test. Twice now, he'd interrupted the flow of energy during a reading. She had to do another test to ensure it wasn't coincidence that had her imagining Cash as a talent powerful enough to block the sound of dual suns and the impression made on

bone during a violent kill. Ability like that was too rare to let go without further investigation. And hands-on experiments were the best kind.

“Stay close.” He took his pulse cannon from the holster and moved in front of her.

Now, how was she supposed to stay close if she wanted to conduct another test? She placed her hand in the middle of his back, and where she should have felt an instant psychic connection she ran up against a thick defensive wall.

“We can cover more territory if we split up. You said so yourself when you divided us into teams of two.”

“That was before I got the image in my head of beetles eating your blood.”

His words made her stop. What did he mean by that? “Look, I need to collect more samples to be sure of a theory I’m working on. It’ll go much faster if we work independently.” She moved closer to him, brushing her breasts against the firm heat of his chest. “The faster we work the sooner we get to *finish*.”

His gaze fell to her lips. “I need to keep you safe so we can *finish*.”

Unable to resist, she leaned forward and brushed her mouth against his. “Please.”

A spark struck like a flash fire, and Cash pulled her tightly to him. He devoured her mouth in hungry possession before setting her away. “I’m going to get locked in the brig for this.”

She smiled and mouthed a low *thank you* before giving him a final kiss. “We’ll keep it simple. Collect a few leaves, some bark, and any dropped feathers you find.”

He held out his hand. “Give me some gloves and a couple of those containers.”

She dug in her pack and gave him the supplies then started away from him.

“Kara.”

She turned back around. Sunlight came through the trees, painting him in a dappled light. Her breath stopped at the sight. “Yes?”

“Be careful, and stay in contact with me.”

“You too, sir.” She smiled impishly and began to hike up the side of a small hill to a stand of trees.

Even from that vantage point she couldn't see very far due to the thick foliage. She climbed up onto a series of steps formed by layers of slate that appeared to have tumbled out of the hillside during a seismic event. Branches, bound with vines of ivy, dipped low over the ledge. Kara reached up and spread her hands over the greenery, feeling the energy of both tree and vine as they meshed together. The ivy drove roots into the bark and held onto the trees like a clinging lover.

It took time to forage in the collective memory of both vine and tree. If she concentrated hard she could separate out the sounds. The tree had a deeper resonant quality. The ivy played a counterpoint, almost a lilting harmony to the tree's song.

She stood still as the wind rustled the leaves, changing the tune slightly. Images moved through her mind, flashing in a pictorial history of the forest's growth. A good sense of Solarion's wildlife filled her. For the most part it differed very little from the pre-Ice-Age order on Cimirion.

Over the soothing sound of forest music, came a low steady hum. It held neither peace nor serenity. A deep penetrating intensity burrowed into Kara's consciousness, forcing her eyes to open and take in her surroundings.

Above her on the rock ledge, stood the same lethal predator that had taken down the herd animal. Unable to stop herself, Kara took in a deep gasp then stood paralyzed by fear.

Golden eyes watched her. The animal crouched low to the ground, muscles bunched, preparing to attack.

"Kara?" Cash's voice came over the headset in response to her gasp.

Caught in the large feline's lethal gaze, she couldn't bring herself to answer. There was no doubt in her mind that on Solarion this beautiful but deadly killer stood at the very top of the food chain.

"Kara, answer me."

Adrenaline pumped into her system with volcanic strength. She couldn't even bring herself to lower her hands from where they touched the tree. Any sudden move from her

could be read as a flight maneuver and the cat would be on her, tearing at her flesh like it had the *artiodactyls*'.

Heavy breathing came through the headset. The sound of cracking branches and violent rustle of foliage moved closer as Cash came up behind her. The energy from the tree cut off abruptly, but she kept her hands on the trunk

"Fuck!"

"Don't move, Cash." The words were slightly garbled in that she tried not to move her lips when she spoke.

"Forget that." He raised his pulse emitter and shot at the branches above the cat. One of the smaller ones broke under the impact and fell in front of the animal, startling it into retreat.

As it crashed through the forest away from them, Kara took a deep breath and turned to Cash, her legs feeling like gelatinous globs. She braced her back against the tree and hung her head in relief.

With his free hand, he pulled her forward to him. "Are you all right?"

Kara could only nod.

"Come on, baby, speak to me." He buried his face in her hair, kissing her head.

She let out a shaky breath. "I'm fine. He didn't get any closer to me than that."

"And he's not going to either." Cash put his arm around her and herded her back down the hill. "Do you have enough information now?"

His sudden arrival to her rescue confirmed her earlier assumptions. Somehow Cash could block the energy flows of organic and inorganic materials. Now she only needed to figure out how and why, and get him to take down the natural shields so the energy of the planet could flow uninterrupted. If not, he could do great damage to the environment and never even realize it.

"Most of it, but I still have a couple of questions I need answered."

"Well, you can answer them as we hunt for that water source." He stopped and turned to her. "No more splitting up. Don't even ask, because it's not going to happen."

Kara grasped Cash's arm where it came around her and brought him closer to her body. "The next part of my experiment will include you directly, so I have no intention of getting too far away from you."

The look he gave her said it all: he didn't like it a bit.

Chapter Six

Cash had never been so scared in all his life, and he'd been in some pretty rough spots since joining the Runners. Wild thoughts took flight in his mind. If he'd come up the hill and seen that damn big cat ripping into Kara's tender flesh he would have done much worse than just scared it off.

Kara walked slightly in front of him, one hand on her own weapon, the other holding the electronic dowsing rod. She had insisted on taking it from him. What was wrong with her talent? Water was a huge source of energy. By rights she didn't need a dowsing wand, electronic or otherwise. She'd been having problems reading energy since they'd landed.

A low steady beep emanated from the instrument. They were definitely on the right track. Then he heard it. Rushing water. They were near a river or waterfall. Rapids maybe. Either way, they had found an above-ground water source.

Kara stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. The power of her smile thrust heat straight down to his groin. The woman had no idea how out of his head he was over her. She probably thought his feelings were only a passing infatuation, but that assumption would be dead wrong. Though uncomfortable when he learned he'd have a visionary on his team, all those doubts had become secondary the first time he saw her. Desire had exploded like a thousand suns in his chest. Her gentle nature combined with her steely resolve had only made her more irresistible to him.

He stood for a moment, captured by her beauty and his own inability to control his feelings for her. When he finally pulled himself together again, he cleared his throat. "Let's test it for purity and then see where it leads."

Thick branches covered the area, making the river invisible behind bright green leaves. Kara pushed back a heavy veil of fronds and stepped through. Cash followed her in and opened his eyes wide in amazement.

Behind the veil lay paradise.

Water fell from a ledge high above their heads and collected in a pool. There had to be a small underground runoff, but from where he stood he couldn't determine where. A rocky arch created a grotto behind the waterfall. A circular shelf, free from vegetation, made a rim around the water, giving it the appearance of a manmade swimming pool.

"It's amazing." Kara leaned down and stuck the wand into the water, letting the current flow over it. Cash watched as she flipped the screen up and read it. "It's good. Purer than the water we have on the shuttle."

She stood and turned to him. "Now, about my experiment?"

"What about it?" The gleam in her eyes had a feral quality that he didn't mind in the least. They had found water, after all, and were alone. The only thing that made him uneasy was the possible reappearance of the cat. "I'll help you with whatever you need."

"Glad to hear it." She moved closer, her hand skimming over his pecs in a torturous perusal.

"What do you want me to do?" If she didn't stop her leisurely assessment, he was liable to lay her out on the rocks and make love to her. He stopped her hand by pressing it under his, against his heart.

His gaze strayed to her lips. By all the gods, her mouth looked like the best kind of sin.

"Open your mind to me." The words were a breath against his skin.

He laughed at the absurdity of her request. "What?"

"Open your mind. Relax and let your energy flow free." Her free hand stroked his forehead and her expression became soft and dreamy like it did when he'd watched her read leaves.

"Do you want to read me?"

"Yes."

His favorite fantasy was about to come true and he couldn't help the bubble of panic that boiled over in his gut, even as her touch attempted to soothe him.

Reading his anxiety correctly, she leaned forward and spoke against his mouth. “I promise to be gentle. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He was the one supposed to be protecting her, not the other way around. “You don’t know what you’re getting into, Kara.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

His breath hitched as she continued to caress him. Heat radiated from her palms, lighting brush fires as they moved over him. Her hand wandered up to his neck and began to unbutton his uniform shirt in a slow descent.

“You’re charting dangerous territory.”

“I want you naked.”

“I will if you will.” He lifted his hands and began to unfasten her shirt as well. She didn’t stop him.

Creamy flesh showed in the expanding V as he continued to remove her clothes. His concentration was so absolute he didn’t at first recognize a high sweet note of sound that gently penetrated his mind. Without conscious thought, he blocked off the tone and ran a hand over the tops of her breasts.

“Open to me, Cash. You almost had it.”

He pulled her shirt down her arms and let it fall to the ground. His followed suit and they stood chest to chest. His gaze couldn’t drink her in fast enough. Her breasts were full, with the prettiest pink nipples he’d ever seen. Tenderly as his callused palms allowed, he cupped her breasts in his hands. They were firm and heavy. Perfect.

Kara placed her hands over his and pushed them away. “Not yet. We’re experimenting on you. Not me.”

“You’re driving me crazy here.”

She gave him a lopsided smile. “Cooperate and you’ll be able to touch me all you want.”

He was already hard as the rocks that surrounded them. How much more torture could he take? “All right, but I’m going to have my revenge.”

A throaty laugh was her only response.

She grasped his utility belt and unclasped it, lowering it slowly to the ground. Then she unfastened his fly, taking his pants and underwear down as she moved into a crouch.

Her mouth sat level with his cock. Warm breath swirled over the head, causing it to jerk in reaction. Without words she removed his boots and socks so he could step out of his pants. He didn't waste time.

"Lie down." The command came as gently as her feather-light touch down the length of him.

A moan tore from his throat.

There was no way in all the hells he'd refuse her order. She had him under her spell.

She picked up their shirts, rolled them into a ball and stuck them under his head. "Now, I want you to completely relax. Take a few slow, deep breaths in and out."

She had to be joking. How was he supposed to relax when he was lying on a rock, bare-assed naked, watching her amazing breasts bounce as she moved above him?

"And close your eyes."

"No. I want to see you, too. Take off the rest of your clothes, or I'm not doing anything else." He made his voice as low and commanding as he could but it was difficult to talk when all he wanted to do was feel.

At first he didn't think she would play along, but to his surprise she flipped off her boots and removed her socks, then stood. As if to torture him beyond endurance, she untied the waist of her pants and let them fall down to puddle at her ankles.

Delicate panties covered her mound, but were so sheer he could clearly see the tawny triangle of hair between her slender thighs.

Her gaze locked on his as she slid her index fingers under the band and started moving them down her legs. Rounded hips rocked back and forth as she worked, driving Cash to a sitting position in expectation.

He'd always known she'd be gorgeous, but the sight of her standing naked in the richness of their surroundings completely stole his breath.

"Will you do everything I ask of you?" She knelt next to him, her hands resting on his shoulders.

“Oh, yeah.” He pressed his lips to hers, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her to him.

The kiss detonated all along his nerve endings like shooting stars. Sweat beaded on his skin. Between the heat of the Solarion suns and the passion burning through his veins, Cash fought to hold his body from going supernova.

Her tongue slid in velvety softness along his. The woman was a natural-born kisser. She poured her whole body and soul into the act, as if that alone could bring completion to her.

Much too soon she pulled away from him. Her breath panted out and fanned his face as she stood suspended an arm’s distance from him. “You’re making me lose focus.”

“Welcome to the club. I haven’t been able to focus since you were assigned to the team.”

“That’s because you’re spending all your energy and concentration on shields.”

Cash frowned.

Kara ran a finger between his brows. “Relax. I promise it won’t hurt.”

He wasn’t so sure about that.

She gave him a gentle shove so he would lie back down then crawled to kneel at the top of his head. Starting at his forehead, she began with a slow stroke of her thumbs, rubbing in a hypnotic manner. Her fingers were barely a whisper of sensation at his temples.

From a distance, a high sweet note in perfect pitch resonated through his body. His first reaction was to reject the sound, but trust in Kara’s strength allowed him just a tiny sliver of acceptance. Hesitating a bit, he let his mind take hold of the energy and reel it in.

Kara moaned low in his ear as she bent over him. Her breasts brushed against his face. Too aroused to resist the temptation, he ran his tongue over her hard nipples then pulled each into his mouth in turn.

Her hands preceded her mouth as she moved down his body, leaning her torso over his face. He let his tongue taste her skin as she worked her way down him. With each inch she gained, a new note pierced his consciousness, until an entire choir sang in his

body. The notes tore through him, heightening his excitement until he teetered on the very edge of control.

She spread her legs as she dipped lower on him. The sweet, musky fragrance of female desire invaded his senses, adding to the symphony. He brought his arms around her hips and sank his tongue into her liquid heat. Wet female lips parted, opening her sex to his hungry mouth. No woman had ever tasted so good.

Kara stalled over him. Her thighs spread a little wider, giving him unlimited access. He flicked his tongue over her clit and felt the tremors shimmer down the length of her. Her hips rocked back and forth over his mouth, telling him where she wanted his tongue next. He obliged, delving deep into her and tasting her fully.

More. He wanted more.

The loving turned from gentle strokes of his tongue to ravenous tugs with lips and teeth. Above him, Kara sobbed and undulated faster. Her hands and mouth never stopped their torturous pursuit of his body. Then she was there where he needed her most, taking his painfully hard cock into the warm wetness of her mouth. One hand wrapped around his length, pumping him as she sucked.

His hips bowed up in reaction. Thoughts temporarily scattered to the winds. Her other delicate hand began to massage his balls as she continued to work him with her lips and tongue.

Cash was torn. If she kept up the steady assault, he wouldn't last much longer. But it felt too good to make her stop. The reality of Kara was beyond all the fantasies he'd had of her during the long months of training.

But it still wasn't enough.

He held her hips firmly and rolled them over, then flipped so he faced her. He licked her off his lips. She stared up at him, green eyes glowing with heat and something more.

All around him, the forest, water and suns played an energy symphony. It was her doing. She made it possible.

She held out her arms for him and all his barriers tumbled.

He settled between her thighs and pushed into her. This first time he didn't want to rush the experience, but savored every inch as he sank deeper into the molten heat of Kara. Gods of Mercy, she was like the suns themselves. It was like being caught in a nuclear fist, she was so tight and hot.

Her gaze stayed locked to his. He couldn't look away from her if he tried. She'd trapped him in her power, both body and mind.

She arched up into him, sending him even deeper. And he was lost.

Control splintered. He shifted his arm under her leg and lifted it up, then began to move hard and fast.

Musical images filled his brain. Everything that Kara experienced bounced back to him in sight and sound. The beauty of the experience overwhelmed, threatening to consume him whole. And yet, he pushed the pace.

Her inner muscles squeezed him like a vice. Her back arched off the rock and a frantic moan dripped from her lips. "Jonah."

The intimate way she said his name as she shook with the power of her orgasm ripped him open.

The terrible cacophony he'd hid from his entire life melded into a complete orchestra, conducted by the gentle hand of the woman he loved. He let the music of her wash over him.

And fell.

Chapter Seven

Volcanic eruptions could never be as hot as the feel of Cash coming inside her. Kara looked up into his face as his eyes slid shut. An expression of sublime peace smoothed out the lines of concentration as he slowed his pace.

The entire area swelled with the energy that flowed around them. How could Cash have lived his life in denial of his visionary soul? How could the Runners not have noted his talent and trained him to open the channels he'd kept locked away? Someone along the way had to have noticed the shields he kept in place.

She lifted a hand and ran it down the side of his face. His eyes opened. Hot pools of blue stared back at her like the heart of a flame.

He lowered his mouth and kissed her with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes.

"Are you going to tell me the results of your test?" He spoke against her skin as he placed tiny kisses over her face and down her neck.

"It was a total success."

"Mmm. Glad to hear it." He pulled out of her and rolled to his feet. "Come on, let's make use of that waterfall and clean up before looking for the source of the spring."

Kara allowed him to help her to her feet. Muscles she hadn't used in a while screamed with the sweet pain of Cash's lovemaking.

They skirted the waterfall and stood in the grotto, bathing in the soft spray.

Cash backed her up to the wall. His hands linked around her neck, thumbs massaging her throat. "You're so beautiful."

"So are you."

The baths were put on hold as Cash leaned into her. His thick, heavy erection prodded her in the stomach. "I want you again."

That much was evident. She smiled up at him. "Well, you did allow me to use you for a test subject."

“Let me know if you ever need those particular services again. I’ll be more than happy to volunteer.”

“I’ll definitely keep you in mind.”

Then there was no more talk as he lifted her up, bracing her on the solid wall behind her, and entered her again.

Kara locked her legs around him and thrust downward.

She was sore from their first round, but wanted nothing more than to have him so deep they were one body. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she began to piston herself up and down his shaft in a quick counterpoint to Cash’s movements.

He let out a long moan and gripped her fast. “Come for me, baby.”

The friction of his coarse hair against her clit brought her to the breaking point. He’d get his wish soon, but not yet. It felt way too good to let it end. Nothing had ever felt quite as good as having Cash right where he belonged.

She took her hands from his shoulders and braced herself against the cave wall, arching her back to expose her delicate folds more readily to him. A lopsided grin brought the corner of his mouth up. He slid one hand around her, and pressed a thumb to her, zeroing in on the exact spot where she needed attention.

Tremors poured through her. Muscles far inside her contracted over the hard length of his cock as he pumped.

Cash barely let her finish coming before he lowered her from the wall and guided her to the cave floor. He bent over behind her, pushing into her like a wild animal. He lifted her backside higher then ran a firm hand over the globes of her cheeks. Each pass of his palm brought him closer to her center, until he ran a finger around the rim of her anus.

“Jonah.”

“I’m here.”

Oh, he was there all right. She backed up, letting him know with her body how much she loved his touch. How much she craved for him to take that next step—to shoot her into the atmosphere.

He leaned over her back, nipping the sensitive flesh at the nape of her neck. As he bent, he pressed his finger into her ass. Every nerve ending pulsed in blinding pleasure as another orgasm ripped through her

Ecstasy rose to a crescendo, echoing off the grotto walls as their combined voices gave triumphant shouts to their bliss.

Hot breath fanned over her neck as Cash wound his arms around her waist, bringing her flush against his chest. Though the air in the cave was cooler than the humid day outside, sweat ran down their bodies, fusing their skin from shoulders to feet.

Moments passed as they lay on the stone floor, neither willing to break the afterglow with words.

It took some time to peel herself from Cash's sweet embrace. But they had work to do and if they didn't finish they'd be stuck in the forest after the last sun fell.

Kara reached behind her and moved her hand up and down Cash's flank. "We need to get moving."

He kissed her ear. "I know."

"You don't want to though."

"No." He squeezed her. "Why would I want to go back to the shuttle where we have to behave ourselves and I can't make love to you whenever I want?"

She rolled in the circle of his arms. "Just think, in a few weeks, barring any unforeseen complications, reinforcements will be here, and we won't be living in such close confines."

How they would be living she really wasn't sure, only that she didn't want what they'd started to end when the next wave of Runners landed. Chances were they would be so busy putting down stakes and exploring the land they wouldn't have much time to be together. The very idea left an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. Plus, they had more important matters to discuss.

She brushed his dark hair from where it fell across his forehead. It probably wasn't the optimal time to bring it up, but she feared if she waited she'd not get the chance to later. "Why do you work so hard to suppress your talent?"

The barrier was immediate and solid. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. You’re a visionary.”

He shook his head and rolled to his feet. “No, I’m not.”

“Why are you denying it? Didn’t you think I’d know?”

He shook his head and stepped under the waterfall’s spray. “Drop it.”

His voice had turned hard, icy.

Hearing him speak that way after the intimacies they’d shared ripped her heart out. Cold that had nothing to do with ambient temperature coursed through her veins. She rubbed her arms and turned her body slightly away from him, waiting for him to finish rinsing off before she stepped under the spray.

“Kara?”

She held up her hand to him to stop any words he’d say. “I can follow orders, sir.”

She didn’t turn to look at him but heard a muttered “dammit” come from his direction. The wet slap of feet on stone moved away from her. She peeked over her shoulder and could see him walking to their clothes.

What’s his problem?

Was it good enough to fuck a visionary, but not to be one? Had she read everything wrong between them? Was it just physical desire that drove him, and not something deeper?

She chafed at her arms then stood under the spray, hoping the water would clean away her pain.



Kara was just strapping on her utility belt when two vessels screamed by overhead, breaking through the atmosphere. She stood and cupped her hand to her eyes, blocking out part of the second sun’s glow.

From where she stood it looked like a shuttle and a troop transport vessel. The High Command hadn’t even waited for her recommendation before bringing the next wave

planet side. Something big had to have happened on Cimirion for them to push up the timetable by months.

“Let’s move, Kara.”

“Yes, sir.”

They abandoned their quest to find the spring’s source and hurried back the way they came. Cash set a brutal pace that Kara was hard pressed to keep up with, but she did. There was no way she’d let him accuse her of falling behind or slowing them down.

A visionary she might be, but first and foremost she was a soldier in the Runners. She’d trained in the common army with the rest of the troops and knew the limits of her own body. They had almost reached those limits.

The heat bore down, relentless and unforgiving. Syrupy humidity filled her lungs when she breathed. A branch snapped back in her face, stinging her cheek hard enough to draw blood.

She wiped at the cut and kept going.

They came out of the forest over a hundred meters from where they’d entered. The last leg to the buggy was done in a sprint.

Kara got in and strapped herself to the seat, after slinging her pack to the floor.

“You’re cut.” Cash started to wipe at her cheek, but she batted his hand away.

“It’s fine, sir.”

“Don’t be like that, Kara. You don’t understand.”

She turned to him, her arms braced against the seat. He would not read any angry body language from her. “I think I do. We need to get back and find out why the troop transport’s here instead of just a rescue shuttle.”

He stared at her for a bit longer before putting the buggy into gear and speeding off across the plain.

They arrived as the troops began to disembark.

“Visionary, attend me. Cash, go find the rest of your crew.” The order was yelled from a short balding man with dueling sabers over a rising sun on the top right breast of

his shirt. It was the insignia of a second tier general—a position one step beneath the High Command.

Kara got out of the buggy and placed her hand over her chest in salute. He returned the gesture and pulled her away for a private conference.

“You’re being reassigned to Tevis III, effective immediately. There are colonization efforts underway even now. Grab your gear and report to the shuttle. We’ll leave when you board.”

Questions spiraled through her head but none came from her mouth. It wasn’t her place to have commands explained to her, especially when they were given by a man of such high rank. She did what her duty bade and saluted once more, then hurried to collect what gear she’d left in the bunk room.

He’d finally done it. Cash had managed to remove her from the team. The wheels of bureaucracy moved slowly, but when they made their decisions they executed them with all haste.

Chapter Eight

Cash hadn't seen Kara since they'd returned to the shuttle and she'd been called away by the general. They still had so much to talk about. So much to work out. The uneasiness in his gut wouldn't quiet until they spoke.

He'd found his crew and sped across the desert. As they neared the site he noticed something was out of place. The second shuttle was gone. Only the transport vessel and the damaged ship remained in the area. Perhaps they'd only come to drop off mechanics to fix the first shuttle and did not originate from the same place as the transport. The *Glacier* would be in orbit in another day so maybe she'd sent the repair shuttle.

The commander's aid-to-camp met them as they arrived and directed them to a temporary shelter, set up as a command post.

"Where's the visionary? She'll need to sit in on this conference." Cash stood at the doorway, not wanting to go inside until he found Kara and spoke to her.

The aid looked up from where he set information disks at each seat. "She's been reassigned. The general took her to Tevis III with him."

Unbearable pain clenched his heart. He tried not to react to the news. Didn't want the others to see his weakness for Kara. His hands bit into the metal doorframe. He forced himself to take a seat and participate in a meeting that had lost all meaning for him.

What would be the purpose of living on Solarion if Kara was half a galaxy away? And she'd left not knowing the depth of his love, or the reasons he hid a talent he'd shunned his entire life.

He inserted the information disk into his reader and pulled up the files for the meeting. Half the population of Cimirion was going to relocate to Tevis III. The planet was much smaller than Solarion and orbited around a single sun. The climate there was definitely more hospitable, but the entire population would not fit, and the resources were much fewer in number. The High Command had agreed to let the people settle where

they wanted when only a few short days ago they had maintained an adamant stance to keep the civilization together.

Now he had only to wonder if Kara would remain there, or if she would do what she said and return to Solarion and the heat.



Kara stared at the communications screen. Words deserted her. What was she supposed to say to him? She wasn't even sure how he really felt about her. Longing pooled in the pit of her being. If she lived to be a thousand she'd never feel again the way she had in Cash's arms.

She had never made love to another visionary before, even an untrained one. And now she knew all the experiences she missed by not doing so. But she didn't want another man. She wanted Jonah Cash.

She'd been on Tevis III for over a week. The news coming to and from the planet was delayed due to solar flares. Messages sometimes got garbled or misdirected. It had been a communications nightmare for the first few days. Now that they were running efficiently again, Kara had no idea how to breach the gulf with Cash.

She hadn't been allowed to say goodbye to him.

She flipped off the panel without ever saying a word. Maybe the words would come if she didn't think on them so hard.

"Hey, Visionary," a familiar voice called from across the room.

Kara looked up and smiled at Axis as she came to sit by her. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be stuck on Solarion indefinitely."

"I've been posted here along with Ramsey. Looks like Cash's team got split up."

Hope bloomed. Maybe she'd been wrong. "He must not have liked that."

"Believe me. After you got reassigned, I was glad to get out of there. Cash has been in a foul mood ever since you left."

Suddenly, all the words she wanted to say, all the words that had lived in her heart came bubbling up to the surface. She turned on the panel again to put the words to a communiqué and jumped back in horror as the entire grid went black.

She beat an angry fist against the panel. Damned solar flares. Now, she'd have to wait until she got leave before going to see Cash in person.

Chapter Nine

Weeks turned to months. The boiling suns never relinquished their hold on the land. Machines had been brought and drilling began, along with the building of a solid infrastructure. Cash labored under the heat, setting boards to a home situated in the forest near the grotto.

No word came from Kara, only reports she'd relayed via the command council. The population had divided, some staying on the more hospitable planet of Tevis III. It looked as if Kara had decided to stay there as well.

He swallowed down the lump of emptiness.

It shouldn't have ended that way.

So many times he'd begun a message then deleted it, afraid she'd tell him she had found another man. One who understood and accepted her talents.

He leaned on the wall and wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

"Kind of big for a single man." The soft voice raised hairs on his neck and set his heart to beating triple time.

Cash turned around and drank her in, not believing she was there with him. Or was it the heat playing tricks with his mind?

Her gaze strayed from the shell of the house to him. "What are you going to do with so much house, sir?"

"You can call me Cash. We're alone." He had to touch her, discover if she was real. He stalked to her, enjoying the way her eyes got all soft and hot the closer he came.

"I've missed you, Cash."

"You didn't contact me. I thought you were still angry."

A ghost of a smile haunted the corner of her sexy mouth. "Communication devices work two ways, you know. You never even sent a message with Axis."

“You left without saying goodbye.” He ran his hand down her smooth cheek and reveled in the way she closed her eyes to his touch.

“The general didn’t give me a chance.”

“And after?”

Her lips parted and Cash no longer cared why she hadn’t contacted him, only that she was here, standing at the front door of a house he’d thought he built for her in vain. He took her mouth, tasting the love and passion on her lips, sealing his fate.

Music swam in his head. No, he couldn’t accept her like this. Not without telling her the truth. He pulled away, kissing the corners of her mouth. “Let me explain why I got so scared when you called me a visionary.”

“Don’t you want to show me around your house first?”

He shook his head. “I need to tell you. I’ve kept this inside since the day you left.”

“Do you love me?” She ran her hand over the back of his head, holding fast as she gazed up at him.

“So much I can’t breathe sometimes.”

“Then tell me anything you want.” She folded her arms under her breasts and leaned against a bare wooden beam.

The first sun dipped beyond the horizon, painting the hills in reds and golds. It backlit Kara, making her shine like a goddess. “My mother was an untrained talent. The sounds so loud that sometimes she would sit in a corner and rock herself, the pain was so great. I watched helplessly as she went slowly into madness. I didn’t want to be like her.”

Kara touched his face. He pressed her hand to his cheek. “I’m sorry, Cash.”

“I learned to block the sounds. To block everything out and keep people at a distance. Until you.”

Her smile turned radiant. “You were the reason I couldn’t hear the energy. Your blocks are so strong they even shielded the signals from the suns. You have to learn to live with your talent, not suppress it.”

“And who’s going to show me?” He stepped closer again, confident in what her answer would be. It was there in her eyes.

“Well, me of course. Do you think I want to give any other visionary a chance to teach you with the special methods I employ?”

The memory of which had him hard in an instant. “No, ma’am.”

She laughed. “Good. Because I want to give you a very slow and thorough evaluation.”

He raised his hands and started to unbutton his shirt. “Might as well start now.”

“I agree. No time like the present.”

“I do love you, Kara.”

She stepped closer and put her arms around his neck, her lips pressed to his. “I love you, too. Now, open to me.”

He did, and let the sounds of Kara fill him. And it was the hottest, most passionate song he’d ever heard.

About the Author

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Now Available

Dragon Tamer

An assassin can't afford a conscience. It's bad for business.

The Assassin Journals: Hunter

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Ex-soldier turned assassin Gage Brassan is having a very bad year. First, an unwelcome attack of conscience has him switching targets at the last moment, which doesn't sit too well with the criminal organization that hired him. Then an old girlfriend's betrayal and a trip to prison stir up memories of his military past and a promise left unfulfilled.

Tortured by his haunted past and hunted by the organization he betrayed, Gage seeks the truth behind the execution of the elite military patrol he once commanded. With the help of Jak, a Rigian street kid, and Joanna, the sister of an old army buddy, Gage follows the blood trail from the war-torn Androsian system to the highest echelons of the Galactic Security Force to the corrupt halls of the Rigian People's Palace.

On the run, unsure whom he can trust, he struggles with a growing attraction to Joanna while trying to protect his estranged father from the personal fallout of a life gone wrong.

He knows the answers are out there. The trick will be living long enough to find them.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Assassin Journals: Hunter*:

I woke to darkness and the certain knowledge that I was in very deep shit.

Light crept in under the door of the windowless room, and I heard muffled voices outside. I sat up slowly, closing my eyes against the pain in my head and shoulders.

Someone had sold me out.

Probably the waitress in the bar.

I really was going to have to stop trusting women like that. The odds were pretty good that Jak the Rigian Rat Boy rotted in the alley along with the garbage while the barmaid spent his cash.

I listened through the pain in my head, trying to figure out where they'd taken me, but the voices outside the door weren't dropping many hints. I could only assume the Guilds had elected themselves a new Grand Poobah, and I was at the top of his shit list.

Shouldn't I be dead?

The heat and stale air in my windowless cell weren't doing much to help alleviate my headache. I heard the sound of a lock rattling and looked up as the door opened. Skinny Sorrellian stood over me with a canteen that he tossed on the floor in front of me. I thought about asking him where I was, but he didn't look like he was in the mood for conversation. He shut and locked the door without speaking. I opened the canteen and sniffed, then took a tentative sip. Water.

Another hour or so passed and I dozed, jerking awake when the lock rattled again. Skinny Sorrellian was back.

"Get up," he said. "The master will see you now."

I got to my feet, and he led me from the room. I wouldn't want to keep the master waiting.

I was led into a large, spacious room, furnished with expensive Terran antiques and hand-blown Lyrian crystal. A log fire burned in a black marble fireplace; above it hung a watercolor painted by a renowned Rigian master, five hundred years dead. A massive rosewood desk sat in the center of the room and a man stood before the French doors leading to a stone flagged terrace. Rigian, older, gray streaked his yellow hair. He didn't turn as I was brought in, just continued staring across the darkening lawn.

"You disappoint me, Hunter," he said at last. "Is there no honor at all among murderers and thieves?"

I didn't reply and he turned to face me. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you."

"Do I know you?"

"My name is Artur Melardis. I am the Guild Master. I believe you were acquainted with my predecessor. You seemed to have no trouble at all taking the money he paid you to eliminate our esteemed president."

I shrugged. "My shot went astray. Sometimes it happens."

“An interesting argument. It is not often that an assassin pleads incompetence. You took the Guild’s money and reneged on your contract. A rather substantial sum provided in good faith with the expectation of results. There are those within our organization who scream for your head, but I believe that would be...unproductive. You owe us a death.”

“Who did you have in mind this time? Delaren? Again?”

“Master Delaren is learning, to his frustration, that attempting to transform a system like ours is rather like trying to bail a sinking ship with a thimble—a valiant attempt, but in the end, an exercise in futility. He has made some modest gains, I will admit. Members of the civilian security patrol are less inclined to accept Guild direction, and financial benefit. The general population does not fear us as they once did. These things are inconvenient, but will be overcome with time. His constitutional amendments, however, are making potential business associates nervous. Several have already canceled rather lucrative contracts. This I cannot allow. Since you are directly responsible for inflicting him upon us, it is only right that you correct your mistake. Kill him, and your debt to the Guilds will be cleared.”

There had to be more to it than that. They’d never make it that easy.

“I don’t suppose refusing is an option.”

“Unfortunately, no.” Melardis moved to the desk and switched on the com-link. “Bring in the boy.”

He looked back to me. “Equally unfortunate is the fact that we find ourselves unable to trust your word. Once burned, you understand.”

The door behind me opened, and Skinny Sorrellian came in carrying Jak the Rat. The boy’s hands were bound, and an angry, purple bruise decorated his left cheek. Skinny Sorrellian dumped him on the carpet at my feet.

“A friend of yours, I believe.”

I kept my face carefully neutral as I looked from the boy back to the man behind the desk.

“Let him go; he’s no threat to you.”

“I am afraid that is not possible. He is our guarantee of your good conduct. Once Master Delaren is dead, we will release him to you, and you both may be on your way.”

They'd release us all right. Into death.

"You will spend tonight as my guest. In the morning Oren will drive you back to the city. I expect to hear of our esteemed president's death within the month. Otherwise, I fear your young friend will meet an unfortunate end."

Skinny Sorrellian picked Jak up and tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of flour. He drew his weapon and motioned for me to leave the room ahead of him, passing Jak off to a man standing guard outside the door. A nudge in the back with his blaster told me he expected me to precede him down the hallway. I glanced back in time to see the other guard carry Jak through a doorway at the end of the corridor.

Fuck.

I knew I shouldn't have come back here.

There's life out there, and it's hungry for sex.

Starbound

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Held captive aboard the *Starbound* in the depths of interstellar space, a group of humans is ruled by alien sexual predators called the Napau who have one inviolable law: *Love one, love all*. Far from a decree of benign romantic freedom, this law serves a sinister purpose: To keep the humans from fixating on each other, leaving their bodies free to be used by the Napau as sexual slaves.

Jerod and Erlinn defy the Napau by falling in love, and take rebellion one step further by planning to marry. Quick to retaliate, the Napau summon Jerod to the Temple of Eros to serve their sexual pleasures, tearing the lovers apart.

Desperate, Erlinn turns to Jerod's friend Kev for help in freeing Jerod and continuing the rebellion he started. Kev joins forces with her, risking his budding relationship with his own lover, Gem. But soon Kev and Gem must reunite to save the Napau's next victim: Erlinn.

Entrapped in the web of the Napau's lust, the four lovers must overcome possession, distrust and jealousy and act as one to discover the secret that could free humanity for all time.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Starbound*:

Erlinn stared up into the troubled eyes of the man she loved. Jerod was keeping something from her. She had no doubt of that. Whatever it was, he was too stubborn to tell her—or too proud, most likely.

She watched his hands stroking her body, each caress sending hot rivers of pleasure rippling along her skin. He had strong hands, with long, agile fingers. His caresses made her tremble with pleasure. His touch was tender and yet demanding. She could barely comprehend that soon another consciousness would move those hands over her.

Horror, thick as a black cloud, threatened to engulf her. Fighting back a wave of nausea, she took a long, deep breath and focused on the mural on the far wall. Naked men

and women, their bodies tangled together in erotic postures, mocked her. Their distorted faces twisted in unholy passion. She searched her mind for another question. At least the questions kept the terror at bay. “When I wake up, will that be the end of my service to the Napau?”

Jerod’s hand tightened on her knee, his fingers digging into her flesh. “I can’t say. Sometimes when the gods choose, they use the person for only a night. Other times something about that person catches their fancy. If that happens, they may keep you here for a week or even a month.”

A week, a month...with him, this man she loved, but not with him. She wondered if she could stand it, or if her sanity might shatter.

“But never longer than that,” he finished, once more looking away from her. A muscle jumped in his cheek and his free hand clenched into a fist.

His anguish frightened her. If they would forget what was to come once they were possessed, why did he have this terrible fear in his eyes? Something had hurt him, leaving a deep and bitter wound.

Leaning closer, Erlinn studied the features she knew so well. She wanted to comb her fingers through his silky hair, to stroke his brow and comfort him like a child. But instinctively she knew he’d never accept her comfort. Shame burned in his eyes, the shame of a man who felt helpless to protect the woman he loved.

She shook her head, forcing those thoughts away. She had to learn more about the Napau while she could. “They lose interest in us quickly?”

Jerod glanced upward and then her way, his brows drawn into a stern line. Erlinn bent her head in a slight nod of acknowledgement. The prickling she’d felt before remained, like a scratchy blanket against her skin. He was warning her that the Napau were hovering invisible, listening to their every word.

“These beings are evolved beyond anything we can comprehend,” he said, a measure of calm returning to his voice. “When they aren’t on board this ship, they spread out like a wave of light floating between the stars. We can’t imagine the delights of the realm they inhabit. When they come on the starship, they compress their energy to an inconceivable extent in order to become visible to us.”

“Is it painful for them?”

“Not painful, no, but the idea of compressing their energy forms had never occurred to them before they tried to communicate with us.” A light sparked in Jerod’s eyes, reminding Erlinn of his old enthusiasm whenever he encountered a new idea. “The first time they did it, they realized it created a totally new experience for them. Essentially, they discovered the material realm.”

Erlinn lifted her brows. “How did you learn this?”

“Nicion told me. Before our starship arrived, they had no idea there were other living beings in the universe, much less creatures such as us, made of flesh and blood. We fascinate them. They soon learned that they could override our minds with their energy, possess our bodies and experience the physical world. They hunger for it, although after a night of passion, they must return to their true home between the stars.”

She let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. At least this ordeal wouldn’t last forever.

“We’re blessed by the interest the Napau take in us and our starship,” Jerod continued, rolling his eyes heavenward in a silent warning. “When the command androids ran amuck, the ship would have been lost if not for the Napau. We owe them whatever pleasures they desire.”

Erlinn lowered her head and hugged her arms across her chest. Once she’d believed in the fairness of that bargain. She’d been willing to loan her body to the gods as a payment for the things they did for humanity. Entering the temple, though, had shattered the last few remnants of her faith. She could only fear what was to come.

Shivering, she lifted her head again and sought Jerod’s eyes. She wanted to tell him that she still loved him, to tell him that she would welcome his touch, even if his body moved by the will of an alien being. As if sensing her thoughts, he gave her a sharp glance and lifted a finger.

The gesture might have been a trigger, for suddenly the air around her pulsed with a raw burst of energy. A breeze stirred the fine hairs on her arms, although this room lay in the heart of the temple where no breeze could blow. Her skin prickled and her ears caught the barest hint of a low hum of sound. At the foot of the bed, a ball of light broke the

darkness and grew swiftly brighter. For the briefest second, as it flared immeasurably bright, Erlinn threw up a hand to shield her eyes.

Two Napau emerged out of the blinding brilliance, their energy bodies shaped into luminous ovals, with outspread wings of pure light.

“Greetings, Jerod. Greetings, Erlinn.” The oddly lifeless voice of one of the beings echoed as if it spoke from some infinite space.

The sudden radiance that flooded every corner of the room illuminated Jerod’s face, throwing the new lines around his mouth into shadow. He nodded. His features had become a mask, void of emotion. Rising to his feet, he made a slight bow. “Greetings, Liayun. Greetings, Nicion. The female is eager to serve you.”

“She is lovely.” The star-bright being called Nicion turned toward her. Two blazing points of flame burned in the depths of the light in an eerie imitation of human eyes. “I cannot decide whether I want to wear her body or use yours, Jerod, so that I can experience the pleasure of fucking her.”

The cold, impersonal words sent a shiver of horror racing down Erlinn’s spine. She dug her fingers into the soft mattress. The overwhelming light seemed to beat against her and caress every pore of her bare skin.

On the tropical island paradise of Cambry, a ghastly, flesh-eating blight is killing the dragons and threatening prime hatching grounds.

Dragon Tamer

© 2007 Kathleen Scott

Desperate to protect his beloved creatures, hatchery director Darion Archer calls on the International Field Marshall service to help investigate the outbreak and see an end to this blight. When beautiful IFM agent Serrah Gayle arrives, he is unprepared for his attraction to her—and for the fact that she has a fear of dragons.

Serrah has double trouble, fighting her fear of dragons and her attraction to their sexy keeper. Yet to save these legendary creatures, she must face down that fear and draw on the power of Darion's love.

They can only hope it is not too late.

I Dream of Dragons II

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Dragon Tamer*:

Serrah stood with her back to the door, taking a few calming breaths. The damn dragons were inside her head. Their pain and agony reached far into her soul and shook her at the very foundations.

How could the tamers have stood to have another consciousness inside their brain, speaking with them as if the words were part of their own thoughts? No wonder they had been forced to seek refuge on another world. Abilities such as that were not to be trusted. She didn't even trust herself with them. But then her father had made damn sure she never wanted to explore those voices in her head. Fear had made an excellent deterrent.

Well, there would be no rest until the dragons finished their mourning. The song shot through her nervous system like molten rock, filling in the spaces then hardening until she became heavy all over. Her heart was a dead weight in her chest.

She pushed off from the door and began to unpack her communications system. There was a lot of information she'd not been able to dig through before they'd made the settlement. Walking and trying to read the handheld had not been easy on their trek to Calusia and she'd been forced to give up the search. Now there was no reason not to continue.

It took very little time before Serrah sat at her comm station and found the information on Cambrian exports. Dragon scales were a very hot commodity both on world and off. Most industries owed much of their product to some form of refined dragon scales. The uses were many and vast, from textiles to pharmaceuticals. The question was: Which industry would benefit the most from manufacturing without the use of dragon scales as a base?

The truth of the matter was that everything made from a scale base could have natural elements taken out and substituted for synthetic ones. The products produced may not be as cheap to the consumer, but would the overall manufacturing costs be lower? The other question burning through her mind was which industry had the biggest profit margin. Chances were the money trail would lead to the source of the dragon attacks. If they didn't prove to be a naturally occurring virus, that is. But Serrah doubted it. She could smell a conspiracy a continent away. And this one smelled like a shit pot full of creds.

A knock at the door interrupted her line of thought.

An inexplicable thrill moved down her spine. Archer had returned with her snack and the files. She didn't know which of the three excited her more—seeing the handsome director again, getting to eat, or reading the physiologist's report.

She opened the door and Archer thrust a basket of fruit and bottled water into her hands. He moved by her and closed the door. With hand still braced against it, he said without preamble, "The reports are missing from both electronic and hard copy files."

Her appetite took another detour as she processed the unlikely words. She set the fruit basket on the bedside table and crossed her arms over her chest. "What else is missing and who has access to those files besides yourself?"

He paced around her room in agitation. “I didn’t notice anything, but then I only looked for those particular files. As far as access, I’m the only one—besides my office manager, Mercia. But I don’t know why she’d take them. Look, if my staff had asked for them, I would have granted the request. There was nothing in them that needed to stay hidden.”

Serrah jumped on that bit of information. “Did someone ask and you’ve just forgotten?”

“No. I remember putting the hard copies into the cabinet. I never went back in there afterward.” He stopped by her comm station and glanced at the screen. “Pharmaceuticals.”

“What’s that?” She moved to stand beside him as they both looked at the screen.

“The majority of sloughed dragon scales go to manufacture pharmaceuticals.”

And what bigger industry was there than that of maintaining health on this and other worlds? “I’ll start there.”

She turned to him, taking in the bleak expression in his lagoon eyes. “I suggest you contact the physiologist and have him send you another copy of that report. I can wait a few days to read it.”

The man struggled with some big issues within his small community. If he hadn’t misplaced the files, that meant someone close to him had taken them so he couldn’t share them with anyone outside, which meant there had to be something in them that was significant regardless of findings to the contrary. Quite the mystery.

Serrah raised her hand and cupped his cheek in her palm. “I know this is difficult for you, but I’m glad you told me. It means someone’s working from the inside and if they’re here, I can find them for you. We *can* stop this.”

His pupils dilated and he pressed closer to her hand. Only then did Serrah realize how intimately she’d touched him. When she tried to pull her hand away, Archer captured it in his own. “I know. I don’t doubt your capability, Agent Gayle. Not for a moment.”

She gave him a hesitant smile. “Call me Serrah.”

“Then call me Darion.”

Warmth rushed from her core to her limbs. She repeated his name in her mind. Silently rolled it around on her tongue, liking the way it tasted.

Whoa. Way off topic. She needed to concentrate on the case and what it meant to all of society should the dragons become extinct. A very real and depressing possibility.

Darion moved closer. His wide, solid chest touched her breasts. Her nipples tightened at the contact. He brushed a thumb at the corner of her eye. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think it’s something you’d want to hear.”

Those unfathomable eyes of his grew dark with what she thought was desire. “Try me.”

“I was only contemplating the ramifications of the dragons’ extinction.”

He blew out a breath and stepped away from her, breaking the moment. “I live with that worry all day, every day.”

She could tell by his body language—the weary set of his broad shoulders, the sorrowful expression, the clenched hands—that working with the dragons wasn’t just a career for him, but a labor of love. It was the same with her. Putting criminals behind a prison force-shield was what gave her a reason to wake in the morning.

“I promise you, I won’t stop until I find the person or persons responsible for this.”

“The dragons are very lucky to have you on their side.” A slight smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

She returned it, but then grew stern. “Also know that no matter who took the files from your office, I will go after them without hesitation, regardless of their relationship to you, whether they be father, brother, mother, sister or lover...”

Darion turned back to her and placed a gentle hand on her lips. “I have no one here that’s so close to me, but thank you for the warning.”

Words stuck in her throat at the penetrating look he gave her. It was as if he believed the harder he gazed into her eyes, the more he could uncover about her. But that was impossible. She’d never been able to communicate telepathically with humans. Only the dragons, and then just enough for one to tell her she was pretty. If she could hear Darion’s thoughts, she wondered if they would be the same as that long ago dragon.

But then it didn't matter because her eyes slid shut as his mouth descended on hers. His lips were warm and gentle. His hands cradled her face as delicately as if he held a dragon egg.

The taste of him slammed into her. Her entire chest wanted to expand with emotion. She brushed against him, letting the hard ridge of her nipples touch him, letting him know what she was incapable of saying.

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