



Alien Penetration

By

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Chapter One

Exhilaration swelled within Simone as she crossed the parking lot and sensed the almost electric excitement that seemed to vibrate the very air around her. It was more than the deep bass that pulsed rhythmically through the pavement beneath her feet and made its way all the way up through the soles of her shoes and inside of her. It was more than the song, although she realized as she drew closer to the nightclub that it was a favorite and the tempo made her heart thump a little harder, made her feel suddenly as if she was moving to the rhythm she found so appealing. Every step, every pulse of her heart, even the sway of her body seemed to synchronize with the rhythm, seemed transformed into dance, but it was only a manifestation of the joy surging through her, not the cause of it.

She felt as giddy as a teenager on her first night of freedom, looking forward to her first taste of the nightlife, when her entire life lay before her as one great adventure she couldn't wait to experience.

She was looking forward to meeting up with her friends and discovering what the 'special treat' was that they'd thought up to surprise her with for her birthday, but there was nothing particularly special about the birthday itself. In point of fact, she'd begun to dread each anniversary that marked her as another year older, another year past her peak 'freshness date'. If not for the card she'd received in the mail, she thought it was more likely that she would be looking forward to her night with more dread than anticipation. Very likely she would've been trying to think of a way to wiggle off the hook and stay home to mope.

The unthinkable had happened, though—she hoped.

She'd tried to tamp the almost hysterical thrill that had swamped her when she'd finally gotten over the shock of the card. She'd tried not to allow hope to take hold, to brace herself for bad news, and had failed miserably.

Tomorrow, her heart might be broken, but tonight she was going to allow herself to believe because she couldn't prevent it.

Sharon and Denise were standing in the doorway waiting for her, she discovered, drinks in hand and a buzz already going if their behavior was any indication. The minute they spied her, they started jumping up and down, screaming and giggling, as if *they* were teenagers when it was as far behind them as it was her. In point of fact, both of them were 'settled' and had been for several years at least. In the real world, Sharon was a mother of three—two of which were already in school, or at least pre-school. Denise only had one chick so far, but she'd given her husband notice that 'they' would be pregnant again before the end of the year. She didn't want too much of an age difference between her children.

Maybe they were going through their second childhood, Simone thought ruefully, trying to tamp the heat of embarrassment in her cheeks as she waved back at them?

Both women surged forward, breaking the line going in and pointing her out, reminding the cashier that they'd already paid her cover charge. The cashier turned to

look at her and motioned her forward.

Glancing apologetically at the people in line around her, Simone inched around them and held out her hand for the man at the door to stamp it.

Sharon and Denise grabbed her the minute he'd finished and dragged her through the door and inside the nightclub. The noise hit her like a physical blow. The club was rocking and filled, Simone thought a little worriedly, past the legal capacity. Was it typical of the place, she wondered? Or was something special on the agenda for the night?

Talking ninety miles an hour, her two friends plowed their way through the crowd, dragging her behind them. She had no idea what their destination was or what they were saying since she could only catch a word now and then over the buzz of conversations around her and the blaring music. Nothing of any real significance, she was sure, but she smiled and nodded whenever they glanced at her.

It had been a while since she'd been in a bar—several years, although she wasn't in the mood to figure it up. She couldn't see that things had changed much ... except that she and her friends seemed to fit more into the 'older' crowd instead of the younger crowd that made up the vast majority of partiers as they once had.

The cloud of smoke floating nearly the ceiling was absent, too, she noted unhappily, immediately feeling the pull for a shot of nicotine just because she knew she couldn't have it.

She'd always been out of sync with the world, she thought ruefully, but she'd made up her mind to quit like everyone else had or was trying to do these days.

And the world was going to be like Eden when all the smokers were gone, she thought sarcastically, and no one would ever be sick again!

She banished her smokers' rant from her mind with an effort, pushing the urge to rush outside and smoke one back at the same time and forced a smile to her lips when she saw that Sharon and Denise had led her to an elevated area in the very back of the club. Embarrassment flooded her all over again when she saw they'd decorated the area set aside for her party. Carla, Meg, and Shelly, friendly acquaintances from work, bounded up from the benches around the picnic style table and bounced enthusiastically when she arrived, screaming, "Yeah! The birthday girl!"

Oh god! How long had they been waiting, she wondered?

"Now we can par-ty!"

Simone couldn't help but chuckle. "Y'all look like you've already been partying!"

They all looked at each other blankly a moment and burst out laughing. Sharon signaled frantically for a waitress. "You're two jell-shots and one mixed drink behind us! You'll have to catch up!"

Discomfort and reluctance flickered through Simone, but after a moment she dismissed it. She hadn't planned on getting drunk, but her friends had gone to a lot of trouble. She didn't want to be a party-pooper!

Shrugging, she took the two jell-shots Sharon paid for and downed them, then ordered a slow-gin fizz. The shots hit her nearly empty stomach like a volcanic explosion. A wave of dizziness rolled over her within seconds. The 'girls' laughed uproariously when she wobbled in her seat and grabbed the edges of the table. "My god! What was in that?"

“Absolute devastation!” Denise shot back at her, laughing. “Knocked you on your ass!”

Duh! It felt like her eyeballs were rolling around in her head independently. “Oh yeah,” she agreed, chuckling.

“Alrighty, then! Before we all get too snocked to figure out who brought what, you have to do the unwrapping thing!”

“Oh, you didn’t!” Simone exclaimed. She’d noticed the pile of gifts on the table immediately, of course, but she’d thought it was just there for decoration.

“Shut up and open them!” Sharon ordered her, grabbing one from the pile and shoving it at her. “This is from me.”

A bizarre sense of unreality swept over her, but Simone grinned at her long time friend and tore at the package with slightly exaggerated enthusiasm for her friend’s benefit. Two tiny pieces of fabric joined with long, thin straps fell out on the table. It was cherry red—whatever it was. Simone stared at it blankly.

Sharon uttered a snorting, crow of a laugh and snatched it up to display it. “Swim suit!”

“Where’s the rest of it?” Simone asked, struggling with a mixture of horror and amusement.

Sharon ‘modeled’ it for them, holding the itsy bitsy top over her breasts and then swinging the even briefer bottom by one finger. “This is it!”

“I’m not wearing that—anywhere!” Simone said, laughing.

“Yes, you are!” Sharon and Denise both exclaimed in a singsong chorus, wearing almost identical conspiratorial grins.

Her drink arrived. Denise threw a bill on the tray before Simone could drag money out to pay. “Nope! Birthday girl doesn’t pay—until we run out of money, anyway!”

More than a little uncomfortable, Simone smiled and thanked them, taking a fortifying sip before she picked up the next package and looked at it suspiciously. She already had a hell of a buzz from the two shots, but she wasn’t nearly toasted enough that it didn’t occur to her that her ‘gifts’ were probably going to get progressively more embarrassing.

She wouldn’t have worried about it if she *had* been toasted, or if she could’ve convinced herself that no one else would notice. Her friends were making such a fuss, though, that they were attracting attention despite the fact that the place was packed and noisy enough no one should have paid them the least attention.

It was all in fun, she chided herself, and it wasn’t as if she actually knew anybody except her friends. Like them think what they liked!

Shrugging inwardly, she braced herself and opened the next package. She hadn’t adequately braced herself, she realized. A wave of shocked horror went through her when she saw the larger-than-life—she wasn’t going to *believe* the thing was life-sized!—penis drop to the table.

“This little jewel is called ‘black beauty’,” Meg crowed proudly, holding it up for display on the palm of her hand for all to see and adding as she turned it on, “I put the batteries in.”

It didn’t just vibrate! The damned thing *danced*! Simone gaped at it in horrified fascination while the ‘girls’ went wild, giggling like teenagers and screaming with

laughter.

Simone could feel her face flashing like a neon sign. She covered her mouth, but she couldn't help but laugh. "Oh ... my ... god! Put that thing down before anybody sees it!"

Too late! She could hear snickers from all around them—mostly female.

She wasn't surprised the men found it less than amusing considering it was probably ten inches long from the vibrating 'balls' to the tip, at least, and as thick as her wrist! Leaping from her seat, she made a grab for it.

Meg laughed and tossed it to Shelly. Shelley screamed, bounced it in her hands a few times and dropped it. It began to 'crawl' across the table like an inchworm toward Denise. Uttering a horrified laugh, Denise batted it across the table toward Sharon. Sharon studied it wide-eyed, as if it was a serpent inching toward her.

Grabbing it at last, Simone shoved it under the wrapping paper, blindly searching it with her hands for the off switch.

"Look! She likes it! She's petting it!" Carla said with a slightly drunken giggle.

"Shut up!" Simone said, laughing. "How do you turn the damned thing off?"

Relieved when she finally found the switch and the dildo stopped its little dance, Simone settled back in her seat, trying to recover her tattered dignity.

"Have another sip of your drink," Sharon advised. "Next!"

Groaning, Simone decided to take her advice. Some 'don't give a damn' was exactly what she needed. She'd just taken a deep sip of her drink, however, when the damned dildo started vibrating again, shaking the wrapping paper tent she'd formed over it. She almost strangled on her drink.

"Oh my god! It's alive!" Sharon announced at the top of her lungs.

Everyone jumped up and dove for it at once. Sharon beat it with the string bikini she'd brought, Carla swatted it with a piece of wrapping paper, and Shelly slapped at it with her hand.

"Hey! Cut it out! You'll hurt him!" Meg said, grabbing it and 'cuddling' it against her cheek. "Poor baby!" She sat it down on the table and shook her finger at it. "Bad boy! Behave yourself!"

Taking their cue from Meg, the others started behaving as it was a puppy. Simone covered her face with her hands. When she finally peeked between her fingers she discovered they'd set it in the middle of the table like a centerpiece and draped the string bikini over it.

"Now mine!" Shelly demanded, springing to her feet and grabbing another package.

"I need another shot before I tackle it," Simone announced ruefully, glancing around for the waitress.

Her mind went completely blank when she spied a trio of men who'd just reached the bar across from her and turned in her direction to prop their elbows on the bar behind them. Her heart leapt in her chest and stilled painfully.

The first actual thought that filtered through the shock was that they looked like they'd just stepped off of a movie set. All three of them were wearing black leather boots and pants—black cowboy hats and dark t-shirts that molded itself as lovingly to every rippling muscle down their broad chests and washboard abs as the leather pants did their lean, muscular legs, cupping some very impressive packages. All three had long, straight

black hair that fell well past their broad shoulders and hard, angular faces.

It was deeply disappointing that the light was so ambient that it cast as much of them in shadow as it highlighted.

Indians dressed like cowboys? Wait! That wasn't PC anymore. Native Americans dressed like cowboys?

Beyond the black hair and their swarthy complexions she didn't even know why it had popped into her mind that they were Native Americans. They could've been Spanish or Asian. Asian seemed more likely and yet, unless the boots and cowboy hats were really deceptive, they looked exceptionally tall to belong to either race—easily six foot, every one of them.

Or maybe they really were cowboys, just plain old, home grown white boys with dark tans? From the circuit? Their muscular arms almost seemed disproportionately large—clearly they used them *a lot* to have such well developed arms.

“Oh *my* god! Would you look at that?” someone breathed in an awed voice that finally broke the trance that had held Simone.

Feeling as if she was waking from a dream, Simone glanced around the table.

It was hard to say which of her friends had uttered the remark. All of them were gaping at the three strangers, lounging as coolly with their elbows propped on the bar behind them as if they were completely unaware of the attention they'd attracted.

Wondering if she'd been gaping at them with that same vacuous look on her face, afraid she had been, Simone searched a little frantically for a distraction and finally remembered she'd been looking for the waitress.

She discovered her, staring at the same three men.

At least half the women in the bar were. It was almost as if the moment they strolled in half the place had gone into suspended animation—the female half! The men hadn't failed to notice them, either because the women had completely forgotten where they were or because they practically oozed testosterone and the animosity in their contemptuous glances was almost palpable.

She had to say one thing for the cowboys, the guys must have balls the size of bowling balls to take that kind of perusal and keep their cool.

Or maybe they were just *that* used to having so many women all but drooling over them? And that many men contemplating murder?

That thought certainly didn't come as an epiphany. She couldn't really tell much about the faces beyond the squared jaws and the forceful chins but, with bodies like theirs, they'd have to look really scary to ward off females.

“Shelly!” she finally prompted.

Shelly turned to look at her blankly, looked down at her extended hands, and then at the package she was holding. “Oh!” She shook her head.

It seemed to bring them all out of their trances. Looking vaguely embarrassed, their enthusiasm a little forced, they clapped merrily as Simone took the gift. Acutely conscious of the men even though she knew it wasn't likely they'd even noticed her or her friends, Simone tore one corner playfully and peered in at it. She was glad she had. She looked up at Shelly accusingly.

Shelly laughed. “It isn't what you think it is. It's candy!”

“What kind of candy?” Denise demanded.

Simone sent her a look. She didn't believe for a moment they didn't all know

what was in the packages. She didn't finish opening the candy penis sculpture. Instead, she passed it around the table. Everyone peeked in at it, looked shocked for a split second and then started laughing.

"What flavor is it?"

"White chocolate, what else?"

"Is this a hint?" Simone demanded when she opened the next and saw it was a lacy thong with a transparent matching top. "What's the theme? Enjoy it while you've got it?"

They all laughed and nodded.

Oh yeah! Make me feel good that the next milestone coming up is going to be thirty, Simone thought wryly.

She was relieved when she finally got to the end of the unwrapping—until Sharon took the cake out. Thankfully, it only had three candles for health, wealth, and happiness, otherwise the club owners might've had to call the fire department.

She'd been working hard to ignore the men at the bar, but she was keenly aware of them in a way that made her skin prickle all over and she finally yielded to the impulse to glance at them again, hoping to get a better look.

It threw her into a minor panic to discover they seemed to be looking directly at her. Instinctively, she turned to look behind her to see who they might be watching. Surprised when she discovered the table behind her was now empty, she looked toward the bar again in confusion.

The one in the middle smiled faintly and then glanced at his companions.

It was extremely disturbing that that sent a thrill all the way to her toes when she wasn't even really certain the guy had been looking at her. Trying to shake the hope/suspicion that he might be interested, she determinedly focused on the conversation her friends were trying to carry on. She had the distinct feeling, though, that they hadn't been able to dismiss the cowboy hunks any more easily than she had.

Despite the fact that one or the other ordered another round as soon as they noticed the drinks were getting low, there was a noticeable tension in them that hadn't been there before they'd noticed the tall, dark strangers.

She grinned at her friends as the music was abruptly lowered and the dimmed lights brightened. "This *was* really special! Thanks, everybody!"

Sharon laughed and snatched up the bikini she'd given her. "Oh, this isn't the 'special' part!"

Simone frowned but turned to look when she pointed to the dance floor. It was already beginning to clear as a man took up a microphone and announced it was time for the 'grand event'. Simone glanced at Sharon questioningly and then back toward the announcer and discovered the club bouncers were busy taking up the flooring. Beneath the dance floor, she discovered when they'd removed the boards and the bracing, was a mud pit.

The man announced the first two 'contestants'. A spotlight moved to illuminate two women dressed in bikinis and Simone's belly did a flip-flop.

"We're next!" Sharon exclaimed, bouncing up and down excitedly.

"Oh no! NO!"

"Aw, come on! Don't be such a wuss! It'll be fun!"

"Rolling around in the mud while everybody watches my cellulite jiggle?"

Simone asked dryly.

Everybody burst out laughing as if she'd told a joke. "I'm not joking!"

"When's the last time you got to play in mud?"

"I *never* played in mud!" Simone retorted tartly.

"Well, then, there's no time like the present! A few more years and they'll think you're senile if you try it!"

"Ha! Ha! You're so funny! I'm not that drunk!"

Sharon turned and yelled for the waitress. "Bring us another round of jell-shots!"

"I cannot *get* that drunk!"

"Ok, tell you what—we'll watch for a little bit and if you still don't want to"

"We'll shove you in!" Shelly announced.

Simone shook her head at them, but she stood as they did to watch. The guys in the bar, of course, had begun hooting and cheering almost deafeningly as soon as the first two contestants were announced. The moment they climbed into the mud pit, the crowd went wild. In spite of her reluctance, Simone couldn't help but laugh until her sides hurt. The mud was so slick they spent more time sliding down in it than actually 'wrestling'.

They seemed to be fairly evenly matched. Neither one actually managed to pin the other. It was beginning to look like it might turn into a hair pulling fight when the 'referees' stepped in and dragged both of them out.

To Simone's horror, Sharon hadn't been joking. The next contestants announced were Sharon and Simone. The spotlights hit the floor beside the announcer and then, moved around the bar. Sharon stood up on the bench and yelled, "She says she isn't drunk enough yet!"

Everybody laughed uproariously and the announcer moved to the next to contestants.

"Please? Pretty please? Come on, Simone!"

Simone rolled her eyes. "Where's your bikini?"

Sharon grabbed her bag and dragged it out triumphantly. "That's not a bikini!"

Sharon shrugged. "Bob won't let me have one. It's the skimpiest thing I had."

"Awwwww," everyone at the table chorused sadly.

Sharon tried a puppy dog look.

"All right!" Simone said, yielding to peer pressure with a laugh. "It's a good thing for you that I decided to shave for the occasion!"

That was what came of having an exhibitionist for a friend, Simone thought with a mixture of amusement and irritation as they made their way to the changing room. She was more than a little horrified when she looked down at herself, but someone had been wise enough not to put mirrors in the rooms.

Sharon was toasted and completely in her element anyway. The minute the spotlight hit her, she went through a series of weightlifter poses, flexing her muscles for the screaming crowd. Simone merely plunked her hands on her hips.

The mud, she discovered was a lot colder and slimier than she'd expected. She made a face as she stepped into the bog at her corner. The referee slogged to the middle and summoned them. Taking a deep breath, Simone picked her way carefully. Sharon stumbled to the middle and flattened the referee.

Simone was laughing so hard she was too weak to help her friend up but between her and the referee they finally got her on her feet. Sharon immediately threw her arms

up in a victory pose.

“Contestant, Sharon has taken out the referee!”

“Sha-ron! Sha-ron! Sha-ron!” their friends chanted, inciting the entire bar into a chant.

“Ok! Now you have to wrestle the other contestant!” the announcer said with a laugh.

Sharon, a born ham, assumed a sumo stance.

Shrugging, Simone also bent down. She wasn't sure of what came over her, but the moment Sharon charged her, self-defense class took over. Grabbing Sharon, she pitched her over her hip. Sharon hit the mud flat of her back and began to sink. “Oh god! Sharon! Are you ok?” Simone gasped, dropping to her knees.

Sharon blinked at her. “What happened? Did I fall down?”

The referee counted her out before she managed to get back on her feet, then grabbed Simone's arm and announced her as the winner.

“Si-mone! Si-mone!”

“Well that was fun!” Sharon said a little drunkenly as Simone tried to help her out.

“You're sure you're ok?” Simone asked uneasily.

The announcer grabbed her before she could make her escape with Sharon.

“Hey! You won! You have to take on the next challenger.”

“Oh no!”

Sharon sat down on the edge of the mud pit. “Don't be a wimp. Go whip her ass, Simone!”

Simone was still trying to think of a graceful way to decline when the new contestant climbed into the pit. She turned, took one look at the girl and tried to climb over Sharon and the announcer. They dragged her back amidst the laughter of the audience.

Simone really didn't want to wrestle anymore and she especially didn't want to wrestle the woman who clearly meant business if the expression on her face was any indication. Sure, the prize was a hundred bucks! But she didn't feel like getting twisted into a pretzel for a hundred bucks! The woman was a half a head taller and at least twenty or thirty pounds heavier!

Somehow, she found herself facing off with the woman—Donna—however.

When the referee blew his whistle, the woman charged her with a feral snarl. Simone leapt out of the way and slogged around in a circle when she discovered the mud was too thick to allow her to outrun the woman. Stopping abruptly in her tracks, the woman whirled and leapt at her again. Simone didn't manage to completely elude her that time. Donna grabbed her and they both slammed into the mud.

That time, Simone summoned her self-defense lessons for the simple reason that the woman seemed determined to shove her under the mud and hold her there. They rolled several times. All Simone really wanted was to get loose, but every time their grips slipped, the woman found a new hold and finally pinned her on her back in spite of all she could do. Heaving, Simone discovered, didn't do any good. The woman definitely had weight on her side. The moment Donna started to get up, however, she saw her chance. Drawing her knees up, she planted her feet against the woman's belly, grabbed a firm grip on her shoulders and pitched the woman in a somersault over her.

She landed flat on her back as Sharon had. Simone wasn't about to let her get up and charge her again, though. She rolled over and rushed to plant her knees on Donna's arms before she could get up, holding her until the referee finally called it.

Huffing for breath, she got up.

Donna was a sore loser ... or she'd wanted that hundred dollars a lot worse than Simone had. She crawled up as the referee was holding Simone's arm up as the victor, uttered a growl and charged. Simone snatched her arm free. Grabbing Donna's outstretched arm, she used the woman's own momentum to flip her onto her back again. That time when she hit the mud, two of the bouncers joined them, grabbing her as she got up. The crowd was booing. Simone's friends were screaming, "Kick her ass!"

Simone's shoulders slumped as they dragged the woman out and led her away. She was so tired it took all she could do to make it to the side of the pit. She paused there, trying to gather the strength to climb out. A male hand was extended to her as she planted her palms on the edge. She looked up instinctively in appreciation. The smile died on her lips.

Chapter Two

Simone recognized everything right up to the black cowboy hat, still tilted over his eyes and hiding them in shadow. The part of his face that she could see sent a jolt through her, though, made her belly go weightless. He grasped her beneath her arms without waiting for her to take his offer and stood, pulling her from the mud as he straightened and setting her firmly on the floor. For several moments more, she stood staring up at him trance-like. She wasn't certain she could've broken the spell then except that he tipped his head down to look at her, reminding her that she was mostly naked and covered in mud ... and she discovered she'd planted her muddy hands on his shoulders when he'd helped her out.

Grimacing, she tried to brush the mud off, but it only seemed to make things worse. "Sorry. Thanks!" she said uncomfortably and hurried toward Sharon.

The announcer grabbed her wrist before she could elude him and pronounced her the winner. She allowed him to detain her until he was finished with his spiel and finally, gratefully, escaped with Sharon to wash off in the back.

"Ooooh!" Sharon cooed. "One of the hunks o'burnin' love noticed you! Ain't you special!"

Simone chuckled. "Shut up, Sharon!"

"Did you give him your number?"

Simone rolled her eyes and turned on the shower—a camping style shower hooked up to a water hose. She and Sharon both screamed when the cold water hit them.

"Oh my god! I don't know if I can stand this!"

"Have to," Sharon said, her teeth chattering. "I've got mud in everything ... and I do mean everything. I can't go home like this! Bob will want to know what I was up to!"

Simone glanced at her. "He doesn't know you came here?"

"Of course he does!" Sharon exclaimed, but she didn't meet Simone's eyes.

"Alright, actually, I told him we were having a girl party at your place."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because he would've been pissed off I'd told him I wanted to come here!"

Sharon said reasonably.

"And he isn't going to be pissed off if you come home drunk?"

"Of course he will, but I already had my fun. It doesn't matter now. If I'd told him before, we would've had a fight about and it would've spoiled my fun. I think you should hit on that guy. He looked yummy."

"He looked *young*!" Simone retorted.

"Give me a break and don't start that 'I'm old' shit, alright? He has to be at least drinking age and that means *above* the legal age of consent."

"A little young for a meaningful relationship," Simone dryly.

"Sex can be meaningful!"

Simone uttered a dismissive chuckle. "Yeah, well you have to watch the young

ones. They don't worry about safe sex. They'll nail anything and that means they can be dangerous and I'm betting that one has so many carvings on his bedpost that it looks like termites got hold of it!"

"So tell him he can't have it without the overcoat!"

"Be real, Sharon! For gods sake! Every woman in that place was drooling over those guys. I'm thinking snowball's chance in hell about describes the odds. Anyway, I'm tired. I've had all the fun I can handle, and I have to work tomorrow."

Sharon sighed. "You'll be sor-ry."

"Probably." Simone chewed her lip, tempted to tell Sharon about the appointment card she'd gotten, and then decided against it. It they accepted her, then she'd tell Sharon. There was no point in telling her anything until she knew something herself.

It was a damned good reason to behave herself, though!

God! She would absolutely love to get her hands on a man like that!

"I need a cigarette."

"Damn it, Simone! You said you were quitting!"

"I am! I'm on my last pack—swear!"

"Right!"

"I mean it! This time I'm really quitting."

Sharon huffed but, thankfully, left it at that. "I guess I'll call a cab. I'm pretty tired, too. It was fun, though. Admit it!"

Simone, in the process of skimming into her jeans, looked up at Sharon and grinned. "It was fun—Ok, so wrestling that crazy woman wasn't so much fun, but the rest of it was."

Sharon grinned. "Maybe we'll try it against sometime, champ! You riding with me? I know you're too drunk to drive."

"Shit! I didn't think about that. Fine! I'll meet you out front after I've burned one."

Sharon rolled her eyes. "I'll gather up your goodies and call the cab. Be quick!"

Simone rolled her eyes that time but merely nodded. She supposed she could add her birthday presents to the collection she'd gotten the year before.

It was chilly outside with wet hair, Simone discovered, particularly when she'd had to rinse off in cold water to start with. It was still better than going back inside looking like a drowned rat!

And she did want a damned cigarette!

Pulling her pack out, she counted what she had left, reminded herself she was quitting and she wasn't going to keep risking buying cigarettes on the black market, and then lit one. Taking a deep drag, she blew it out and headed for her car. She could at least get out of the wind while she enjoyed one of her last, absolutely last, smokes.

The clock on her dash displayed 12:01. "Shit!" She was looking at probably an hour cab ride and then a real bath with soap and hot water. She was going to be lucky if she got to bed before 2:00! At least the nightcaps were going to make getting to sleep a breeze!

But then she was going to have to roll out at 6:00 if she had any hope of getting to work on time because she was going to have to take a taxi back to the club to collect her damned car!

Trying to ignore the little voice in the back of her head saying 'call in sick', she got out, locked the car and headed around the building to meet Sharon. She'd almost reached the corner of the building when a guy barreled in to her. She was so stunned, she didn't think she would've realized that he'd snatched her purse if not for the burn on her arm from the strap.

The shock didn't last more than a couple of seconds. It hit her almost instantly that the bastard was making off with her last twenty bucks, all of her identification ... and her last five cigarettes.

It was the cigarettes that did it. She darted after him, but he hadn't slowed down appreciably since he'd slammed into her and grabbed her purse. Cursing, she looked around for a weapon and spied a beer bottle. Snatching it up, she threw it at him as hard as she could, hoping to knock the bastard unconscious or at least hit him in the back.

She was probably the worst shot in the world. It didn't really surprise her when she saw that the trajectory of the bottle meant that it was probably going to completely miss him.

It did, but somehow, as it flew between his legs, he got tangled up by the neck of the bottle. He hit the pavement so hard, he slid almost a yard. Uttering a whoop of success, Simone charged toward him, leaned down to snatch her bag up, and walloped the hell out of him with it when he made a grab for her. "You bastard!"

"Bitch!" he yelled back at her, grabbing the strap and giving her a yank that nearly brought her to her knees.

That, unfortunately, was when she saw he'd whipped out a knife.

She would've let the bag go right then except, somehow, her wrist had gotten tangled in the strap. The faint scrape of a boot on the pavement didn't even register at first. Simone was too focused on trying to get away from the purse snatcher before he could stab her. An instant later she was surrounded by a virtual wall of flesh. The strain on her wrist vanished, and she was grasped bodily and set aside.

"Oh! You want some of this mother fucker?"

"No."

Simone sucked in her breath as the punk lunged at her rescuer. Everything happened so quickly after that that she barely grasped that there was a tussle before it was over. When the stranger stepped back, her attacker was lying on the pavement. Simone stared down at him blankly, disturbed by the odd angle of his head. Finally, she dragged her gaze from him and looked up at the man who'd helped her.

Her cowboy—she thought. It was dark, too dark to tell anything except that he was one of the cowboys. The other two, she discovered, were standing at the end of the car where the fight had ended.

Feeling oddly as if she was trapped in slow motion, she turned to look at the man next to her and saw that he was holding his hand out, palm up. As dim as the lighting was, she could see a slash across his palm and blood pooling. "Oh god! He cut you!"

He closed his palm and looked at her. "Are you injured?"

Simone shivered and looked at the man on the pavement again. "Is he alright?"

"He is dead."

Just like that. Completely without emotion. A wave of coldness washed over her. "You're ... sure?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"Yes."

She slammed into the car behind her when he reached for her. Scrambling away from him, she ran as fast as she could toward the front of the building where she knew there would be cops waiting to grab any drunks that tried to get in their cars. She didn't look back.

* * * *

Camryn watched her until she'd vanished from his sight and glanced at his cousin, Kael, and his brother, Ean. "She will notify the authorities."

Kael nodded. Striding toward the body, he pulled his particle gun from his pocket, set it to max and aimed it at the body. The smell of burning flesh rose in a cloud that surrounded them and seemed to hang in the air, but it only took a matter of moments to dispose of the remains and leave a thin layer of ash.

Watching him, Camryn pulled his communicator out and spoke into it. "Three to beam aboard."

He caught a glimpse of Simone and a man dressed in the garb of the authorities just before black out.

Irritation flickered through him when he was reassembled on the transport deck.

"Do you think he saw?" Kael asked.

Camryn considered it. "The beams of light, mayhap," he said dismissively. "They will not know what to make of that."

It still irritated him that they'd come close to being spotted in a situation that might have created problems. It was sloppy and they couldn't afford to be sloppy.

Ean and Kael fell into step behind him as he headed for his cabin and followed him inside. He frowned, vaguely annoyed, but dismissed it. "Can I offer you drinks?"

"That was ... unfortunate," Kael commented when he'd taken the vessel of *ambrose* his cousin offered.

"It was," Camryn agreed.

"It might have been better to have left her to handle the situation herself. She seems ... oddly adept at handling herself ... in a clumsy sort of way. These are strange beings." He shook his head. "She is one of the least desirable. You should not have risked exposure."

Camryn sent his cousin an assessing look. "I believe I will choose her."

Kael and Ean exchanged a sharp glance.

"I am not certain I understand your reasoning," Ean said after a moment. "I, myself, find her oddly appealing, but that is not necessary when the objective is to harvest breeders."

Kael looked at Ean in surprise. "You found her appealing? Her coloring is far too similar to the skeets. That is what you said before."

"She is not skeet," Ean responded tightly. "She is not as pale ... or as weak."

"You would be willing to risk having your only son look as if he might carry skeet blood? When even the hint of it could disgrace the House of Jakaar?"

Camryn's expression hardened but he tamped his temper with an effort. "They are not drak. Short of cloning, we will not have more than a handful of pure breeds for sons. I expect all of the breeders chosen will have some undesirable traits that they will pass to our sons, but we have decided they are acceptable as breeders—not the most desirable—but acceptable given our circumstances."

"There are others closer to ourselves," Kael said pointedly.

“And less accessible,” Camryn ground out. “We are fighting on two fronts, now. The High Council agreed that we could not afford to start another war—at this time. Discretion is the only way to avoid it.”

Kael shrugged. “Others that we have examined.”

Camryn narrowed his eyes at his cousin. “I will not debate this with you.”

Kael bowed and glanced at Ean. “You are prepared to accept his decision?”

“I am prepared to concede to Camryn’s judgment.”

“Because he is the heir and your brother? Or because you trust his judgment in this matter?”

“Because I trust his judgment in *all* matters,” Ean responded tightly.

Kael bowed again. “I believe I will continue to observe before I make my own decision.”

Ean glanced at his brother when Kale had left. Removing the hat he was still wearing, he moved to a chair and sprawled in it, crossing his long legs out before him and studying the toe of the miserably uncomfortable footwear he’d had to don to blend in with the natives. “Will I be forced to face you in the ring if I ask why?” he asked with a touch of amusement.

Camryn slid a narrow eyed glance at his brother. A faint, reluctant smile curled his lips after a moment, however. “I thought you trusted my judgment in all matters?”

Ean shrugged. “We are brothers. I would not take our cousin’s side before yours. In any case, I am content with your choice. I am merely curious.”

Camryn frowned. Moving to the chair opposite the one his brother had taken, he settled in it and removed his own hat. Instead of tossing it to the floor as Ean had, however, he studied it. “I have not yet figured out the purpose of this.”

“It hides our eyes from them—and the ears.”

Camryn sent him a look. “*Their* purpose.”

Ean grinned. There was very little he enjoyed more than annoying his brother. “For adornment?” he guessed.

“It is an odd sort of adornment that covers half the face and the hair.”

“We may have been misled,” Ean conceded. “I did not see any others wearing them—not in that place.”

“It is the custom for some of them, then,” he murmured. “They have a curious society. I confess, it baffles me.”

“You are not going to tell me,” Ean said a little irritably.

“It baffles me,” Camryn said sardonically. “I would tell you if I knew. I cannot quite put my finger on it, though.”

Ean grinned abruptly. “You cannot put your finger on any part of it. She is to be a breeder. We already have a concubine and a round dozen sexdroids.”

Camryn felt a flicker of anger at the comment. “There is no law that says we cannot have two concubines—beyond the law of supply and demand—or that a breeder cannot be touched once she has been bred,” Camryn said tightly.

“Ah! So that is behind the decision.”

Camryn flung his hat his brother’s head. A faint smile hovered around his lips, however. “Clever! I would not mind putting my finger on every part of her.” He sobered after a moment. “I would not allow that to cloud my judgment in so important a matter, however. I like her spirit. I would not mind seeing that in my son.”

“I confess, I found that to my liking, as well. What else?”

Camryn shook his head. “It is the ‘what else’ that eludes me. Instinct? I am not certain. All that I am certain of is that I want her to bear my son.”

Ean studied him for a long moment and finally nodded. “That is good enough for me. I trust your judgment, but I have always trusted your instincts more.” He grinned after a moment. “And I am certain I cannot trust my own in this case.”

* * * *

It had been a hellish day. The hangover from her night out was insignificant beside the nightmare the night had become. She thought it would have been traumatic enough if it had been a simple case of assault by the purse-snatcher. It had gone way beyond that, though, regardless of what the damned cops thought!

Between her shock and the alcohol pumping through her, she knew she hadn't been in full possession of her faculties, but she hadn't lost her mind! She knew what had happened, maybe not every detail, but she certainly hadn't imagined it. She had the bruises to prove she'd tangled with the purse-snatcher. She had *more* than bruised skin. There'd been trauma to the tendons and bones—nothing serious, but enough that she could hardly use her hand.

He *had* existed!

Sharon and Denise had wanted to put it down to the wrestling, but she knew damned well *that* hadn't happened during the mud wrestling contest.

What she wasn't completely certain of anymore was whether she'd been more of a victim than she'd been able to fully grasp at the time, or been intended to be. She only had the stranger's word for it that he'd killed the purse-snatcher, but she hadn't realized that until later. She'd thought he *looked* dead, but she hadn't checked.

Had they been in cahoots? Was the purse-snatching nothing but an attempt to lure her into a trap?

It seemed unbelievable, but it certainly wasn't any more unbelievable than what had actually happened—the body and the three strangers had all completely vanished in the short length of time it had taken her to run around the building and scream murder. It had taken maybe two seconds for the cops to react, but they'd beat her back around the building and there hadn't been a sign of the strange men or the body.

Cops! Fucking bastards! They'd threatened to throw her in the drunk tank!

Thankfully, Sharon and Denise had managed to talk them out of it and had taken her home. She supposed she should have appreciated the fact that the cops had pissed her off so thoroughly it had diverted her from dwelling on the incident—at least for a while.

The anger hadn't lasted nearly long enough, though. By the time she'd gotten home she was shaking so badly it had taken all she could do to convince Sharon and Denise to leave.

She hadn't wanted to be alone. She was scared shitless that the men would know, or figure out, where she lived. But she didn't think she could handle Sharon and Denise trying to convince her it hadn't happened without going off the deep end and lashing out at them.

She didn't understand how they could've disappeared so quickly and completely in such a small window of time. The cops had stopped the few cars leaving the lot at that time and searched them.

The only thing that made any sense at all was the possibility that her first impression had been wrong and the strangers hadn't rescued her by killing her assailant. She even began to wonder if they'd targeted her as soon as they'd spotted her. What other reason could they have had for their interest?

It bothered her almost as much that she couldn't completely accept that scenario when it seemed the most logical. The problem was that it seemed unlikely that they would've been so obvious about staring at her that any number of people might have noticed their interest. One of them had even *approached* her when she'd been in full view of just about everyone in the bar.

As brazen as some criminals were, it just didn't quite ring true.

She wasn't certain where that left her beyond scared shitless that she'd been a witness to a murder.

The alcohol in her system wasn't enough to put her out when she was wired with fear. Unfortunately, she was completely against drugs—except caffeine, nicotine, and the occasional alcohol binge. She didn't have anything in the house to help to tranquilize herself—no booze. Caffeine was the last thing she wanted and she'd chain smoked her last few cigarettes inside of an hour. She spent a while searching ashtrays for butts and finally went into her bathroom to search the medicine cabinet.

All she could find was some cold pills that were 'nighttime', which meant they'd make her drowsy. Of course, those suggested that it wasn't a good idea to take them with alcohol, but she was damned near stone cold sober by that time. She took a couple, barred every window and door and sat in the middle of her bed until it was dawn.

She was tempted to go into work despite the night she'd had, just so she could be around people, but she wasn't ready to collect her car and she knew she'd just end up screwing up everything she tried to do. In the end, she called in sick and slept fitfully for a few hours.

She'd calmed down enough by the time she woke up to remember her appointment. Satan himself couldn't have kept her from that appointment. That didn't mean she wasn't a complete nervous wreck when she retrieved her car, but she did it, even though she watched her rearview mirror all the way to the clinic for any sign that she was being followed.

"Oh god! I need nicotine!" she groaned shakily when she'd parked the car.

Scratching through her ashtray, she finally found a butt that looked like it still had a couple of drags left. The image of herself as a heroin or crack addict flickered through her mind, but she didn't care at the moment. She needed something to calm her nerves even if it was just a little.

When she was done with her appointment, she promised herself, she was going to see if she could track down the guy that sold black market cigarettes. Sharon had collected her reward the night before, but they'd been too upset to remember it—*she* certainly had. She only had twenty dollars in her pocket to last her until payday. She couldn't *afford* legal cigarettes. She wouldn't have money for gas to get to work!

The promise of cigarettes bolstered her. Her hands were still shaking, though, when she made her way inside and spoke to the receptionist. She'd arrived early for her appointment—damn it all! Finding a seat, she grabbed a magazine and began flipping through it, trying to find something to distract her.

She supposed it was rather like trying to diet while being pelted with radio, TV,

and magazine ads about food, food, food! Every damned cigarette ad in the fucking magazine caught her eye. She felt like throwing the damned thing across the waiting room. It took an effort to set it down as if she was a rational human being.

She chewed her fingernails down to the quick and finally got up to pace.

The doctors should be *castrated* for overbooking, she thought with an inward snarl! Just who the *fuck* did they think they were? God? They were so fucking important that people had to give up their lives to sit in their fucking waiting rooms just to get five minutes of their fucking time?

“Mrs. Beauchamp?”

The announcement jolted Simone from her internal diatribe. “Yes?” she responded politely, rushing over to the nurse like the hopeful supplicant she was.

“Come this way.”

Simone followed the woman, trying to dismiss her jitteriness and the anger that was the direct result of it. Images flickered through her mind, though, of leaping over the desk and choking the man to death if he'd only called her out here to dismiss her.

It was a good thing, she told herself, that she didn't carry anything that might be used as a deadly weapon. She wasn't certain that she could control herself if it turned out this was just more bad news—not after everything else.

She couldn't read anything into the cold expression of ‘professionalism’ the doctor treated her to when she entered his office.

“Please be seated.”

Her knees gave out. She plopped into the seat hard enough her tail bone hit the wooden support beneath the foam and the taste of blood filled her mouth. Her eyes stung, but she blinked, trying not to show that she was in pain.

He opened a folder on his desk and started reading it.

He couldn't have fucking read it while she was sitting in the fucking waiting room a god damn hour?

Simone curled her fingers into her pocket book hard enough it would've broken the nails if she'd had any left.

The doctor cleared his throat and fixed her with a look she found difficult to decipher. Maybe that was his rendition of sympathy? “As you know, I don't consider you an ideal candidate. Your finances aside Although, naturally, we'd be willing to work with you on that if you can, as you say, pay half up front.”

“I can I could! It's in savings.” It was, in fact, her life savings but what the hell was the point of having it if she couldn't have what she really wanted out of life? What point was there to life?

He nodded. “Your age isn't a factor in your favor either”

And just what the fuck did he think she could do about that?

“The smoking”

“I've quit! Swear to god! I had my last cigarette!”

“Well ... if we're going to do this I can't emphasize enough that this will be a dangerous undertaking and it is absolutely imperative that you take the best care of yourself that you can. Eat right. Exercise—keep your weight down.”

“I'll do it!”

“Very well, then. If you'll just take a seat in the waiting room again while we get set up”

If the man had suddenly stood up and punched her in the face, she wouldn't have been more stunned. A shock wave rolled over her. "Waiting room?" she finally managed to echo.

"Yes, for the procedure."

She stared at him, trying to assimilate what he was saying and coming up blank every time. "You're ... you're going to do the procedure *now*?"

He looked uncomfortable. She couldn't help but notice he refused to meet her gaze and in some dark corner of her mind, warning bells went off, but she was in no state to fully grasp what he was suggesting. She certainly wasn't in any state to try to decipher her instincts.

"You aren't getting any younger," he said in a strange voice.

Simone gaped at him in absolute disbelief, but he got up from his desk and hustled her out of his office and into the corridor before she could even begin to consider how to respond to the insult. She stood in the corridor for a few moments like a robot that had been switched off. Finally, dimly, his order to wait in the waiting room flickered through her mind and she looked around, trying to figure out which direction it was.

By the time she managed to find her way back to the waiting room, she was breathless with an imminent panic attack. Wilting weakly into a chair, she closed her eyes and focused on breathing slow deep breaths to calm herself. It was a losing battle. Every time she felt a lessening in the tension, a random thought would flicker through her mind and she'd tense up all over again.

She waited almost long enough for her nerves to stop jangling and was called to the back. Her belly knotted. The urge to whirl around and run beat at her with every step she took down the corridor.

You wanted this!

Run!

Why now?

Run!

I must have misunderstood.

Run!

Chapter Three

The nurse opened a door and stepped out of the way. “If you’ll just undress in there and put on this gown.”

The doctor couldn’t possibly have meant he was going to perform the *procedure*, Simone thought a little frantically! It was just wrong. She didn’t know what was going on, but she had to have come unhinged. She had an appointment for a consultation, not a procedure.

They wouldn’t do that, would they?

She hadn’t even *paid*!

She kept trying to work up an objection, but she couldn’t seem to think of a way to word it that wouldn’t make her look like an idiot if she’d misunderstood.

Maybe by procedure he’d meant they were going to take more ova and get them ready and then when she came back the next time they would implant them?

That actually sounded reasonable.

That procedure sucked a big hairy one, but there wasn’t actually anything she liked about the clinic except leaving it after she was done.

That explanation helped her to relax fractionally, however. She’d stopped shaking, anyway, when the nurse came in and helped her onto the table, pulling the gown up and spreading a sheet over her.

She’d never completely understood the sheet. Was it for her sake? Or to keep the doctor’s libido under control? Would he freak out if she was just sprawled naked on the table? Or did it offend his sense of decency to actually look at more than a few inches of naked skin at the time?

She wasn’t sure it helped her feelings all that much. The first thing he did when he came in was put her legs in stirrups and hoist them toward the ceiling, cocking her legs about as wide as she could comfortably part them. Her entire ass and pussy was fanning the breeze, for god’s sake!

Maybe she should just put the damned sheet over her head? At least then she wouldn’t have to look at him examining her as if she was a cadaver or a mannequin!

She watched the nurse and the doctor—mostly the nurse—bustle around the room as if she wasn’t lying on the damned table exposed.

* * * *

“She is frightened,” Kael observed in a low voice. “Do you think that she suspects?”

Neither Ean nor Camryn so much as glanced in his direction. The moment the doctor had positioned her for the procedure and then settled on the stool, blocking their view, they’d stepped to one side to find an unimpeded view and neither of them had so much as blinked since.

Irritation flickered through Kael. She was a breeder. Beyond that, one of the eggs being implanted in her was his. It was the sort of thing one wanted to witness, assuredly—for many reasons, but none of them included sexual arousal.

And yet he was aroused. Clearly neither Camryn nor Ean were going to be the least helpful as a distraction either, he thought in disgust.

Dismissing them, he trained his eyes on the back of the doctor's head, watching his movements as he prepared to transplant the fertilized embryos—one of which was his son.

He felt a wave of dizziness wash over him at the thought that was almost equal parts disbelief, fear, and exhilaration. A son.

He'd begun to doubt that he would live to see a son, much less have the chance to nurture him to manhood, to help to train him to his station as a warrior for the mighty empire of the drak. The vast responsibility that he was facing weighed on him nearly as heavily as the fear that he might still not see it come to fruition, that he might die in battle before the day came, that his son would not survive the journey in his mother's womb.

He swallowed convulsively several times, but he found that he couldn't retain his focus on the solemn event unfolding before him. His urges, inconvenient as they were, were not to be denied. His gaze strayed from the doctor to the smooth, slender legs and his mind strayed with them as images pelted him of her legs spread for him.

He shifted, trying to see what he'd gotten no more than a glimpse of.

The doctor had inserted some sort of shiny instrument inside of her, he discovered, spreading her channel so that he could see the bright light glinting on the moist, tender inner tissues. He gulped at the air that seemed to elude him, expanded his chest with an effort to draw in a shaky breath. He had not thought the female genitalia looked like that. Mayhap theirs was only similar to their women?

Or mayhap it was the instrument?

No doubt, he thought wryly, straining to get a better view.

He was still convinced that it was different from Lielani's. The color was not the same, but that was likely because the color of her skin all over was not the same, he told himself. *Hers* was a deep pink. Lielani's was also pink, but not so deep a pink and more brown, he decided.

Because she was drak and their skin was brown—mostly.

He couldn't decide if the tension he felt was entirely due to his arousal, because he was anxious about the procedure, or a combination of the two. He felt distinctly lightheaded, though, and began to wonder if he would shame himself by passing out.

Thankfully, the doctor finished and removed the instrument.

He managed to get one quick glimpse of her genitals as they normally were and then the doctor yanked the fucking sheet down, blocking his view.

In enraged him.

"It is done," Camryn said, his voice sounding strange enough it drew Kael's attention.

It made him feel a little better to see that both Camryn's and Ean's expressions were strained as his no doubt was. Camryn threaded a shaky hand through his hair, finger combing it away from his face. A few moments later, the doctor entered the room where they were waiting.

"It's done."

Camryn studied him coldly. "So we observed. You did not do anything you will regret?"

The doctor paled. "I implanted what you gave me! God forgive me!"

Camryn, Ean, and Kael exchanged a look, their lips flattened in almost identical lines of displeasure. "He did not strike you down, did he?" Camryn asked dryly.

The doctor chewed his lip. "You said when I'd done what you wanted you'd leave!"

Camryn arched a black eyebrow. "And you have done what we wanted? They are all ready?"

"Another ten and we'll be finished."

Camryn nodded. Pulling a syringe from his pocket, he held it out to the doctor. "Give her this and we will transport her."

The doctor's face turned gray. "This is a very delicate time. The embryos may self-abort. I can't guarantee that they won't—couldn't even if they were human."

"So you said," Kael said tightly. "Repeatedly. You do not have anything that you need to confess?"

"I haven't done anything! I swear it!"

"I believe I would prefer to place my faith in your desire to see the last of us. If we find that you have in any way compromised our breeders, we *will* be back."

"I haven't! Have your own physicians check them when you've taken them aboard!"

"Be certain that we will. I presume we can also trust that you will not discuss our business?"

"My god! Who in this world do you think would believe me? I'm ruined! You've taken half my patients! They'll trace it back to me and I can't even defend myself. They'd lock me away in an asylum—they probably will anyway!"

Camryn shrugged. "We have been as discreet as possible. The rest is up to you. Pull yourself together. There are ten more to be impregnated."

The doctor rubbed a hand over his face. "It's being done. My partners"

"Very well. I caution you again—pull yourself together and give her the sleeping draught I gave you and we are done."

The doctor nodded jerkily. Dropping the syringe in his pocket, he left the room again. There was a significant time lapse before he re-entered the room but he seemed in complete possession when he did.

Uneasiness flickered through Camryn, suspicion, but he dismissed it. The man was too fearful for his life already to consider harming Simone.

* * * *

Simone looked at the doctor when he came back in, wondering why she'd been told to wait. "Can I get dressed?"

"Shortly. I just wanted you to relax a few minutes—give them time to attach themselves. Keep in mind that it's important to relax and take it easy for a couple of days. Nothing strenuous—avoid stress as much as possible." He pulled the syringe out. "This is going to help with that."

Simone blinked at him. "I have to drive myself home."

"How far is that?" He frowned absently.

"An hour's drive."

He nodded. "You'll be fine. This shouldn't make you drowsy. It's just to help relax you."

She winced when he stabbed her with the needle. "Can I get dressed now?" she

asked as soon as he'd withdrawn it.

Pocketing the syringe, he patted her arm and moved around the table to remove her legs from the stirrups and settle them on the table. "Just lie still for a little bit longer and then we'll let you get dressed. Let's hope for success."

Simone stared at him a long moment and finally smiled tentatively. "They're really there?"

The doctor swallowed a little sickly. "They're really there," he confirmed.

Simone's smile widened and a soft laugh of happiness and disbelief escaped her. "I'm going to be a mother! How can I ever thank you enough?"

The doctor patted her hand. "Just take care of yourself."

"And the baby!"

The doctor nodded a little jerkily. "Could be more than one. I explained that to you. We always try to hedge our bets, just in case. I've planted three. With any luck at least one will make it."

Simone smiled with an effort. "I wouldn't mind three. Do you think it's girls or boys? Never mind! Don't tell me! I don't really care as long it's healthy." She paused. "I feel a little ... dizzy. Is that normal?"

The doctor smiled nervously. "Just close your eyes and rest for a few minutes. I'm sure it'll pass."

Simone closed her eyes when the doctor and the nurse had left, wondering abruptly if she should've told the doctor she'd gotten drunk the night before. Surely it was all out of her system by now, though?

Oddly, enough, she felt almost like she had the night before, heavy, dizzy. In a few moments, though, a curtain seemed to drop over her mind.

* * * *

Camryn stared at Simone's sleeping face, feeling an odd reluctance to touch her that he couldn't entirely understand, particularly, he thought wryly, when he'd been anxious to touch her only a matter of a few minutes before. Mayhap it was nothing more than the doctor's insistence that she should rest? The suggestion that moving her might in some way jeopardize the process?

Their own physicians had suggested no such thing. In fact, they'd been highly insulted when the decision was made to allow the physicians at the clinic to perform the implantations for the simple reason that they knew the human body best. They'd insisted that the differences were very minimal.

If they were wrong, they could well have a disaster on their hands, he thought uneasily, for they must count on their own physicians to deliver their sons.

The breeders were more than welcome to them, but no one wanted to be burdened with human males, physicians or not. In any case, even if there were slight differences, their physicians needed to become adept at caring for them, didn't they? Their sons would be half-human.

He shook the thought off and carefully scooped Simone's limp form from the table, ignoring both Ean and Kael, who'd offered to carry her themselves. He glanced at them coldly when he'd settled her against his chest. "She is carrying my heir," he reminded them.

Anger flickered through Kael, but he bit back the retort that trembled on his tongue. Camryn's heir took precedence over his own—or even Ean's.

It was one of the reasons he had initially considered using a different breeder. He ranked below both Camryn and Ean since he wasn't in the direct line of accession but he was still of higher rank than any of the others who had been selected to breed. He wanted his son to be of utmost importance—because he *was*, to him.

In the end, however, he had accepted what he hadn't wanted to accept before. Simone was his preference as a breeder, as well. He could not choose a breeder that was less than the best available for his only son.

Dismissing his pique with an effort, he took Simone's arm, dangling limply beside her, and settled it on her body.

He was actually surprised when neither Camryn nor Ean remarked on it. Camryn merely nodded to Ean and the three of them left the room and followed the corridor that led out of the rear of the fertility clinic. A shuttle awaited them. The transporters would have been more convenient and less likely to attract attention they didn't want, but no one wanted to risk transporting their sons in the particle transport when they were little more than a particle themselves at the moment.

When they'd moved up the ramp, Camryn paused. To Kael's surprise, instead of carrying her to the hold where they'd secured the other breeders, he turned and headed toward his private cabin.

Kael and Ean exchanged a questioning look.

Ean shrugged.

"She will be frightened if she awakens alone," Kael said as Camryn settled her on the bunk and spread a coverlet over her before he grasped the restraints and buckled her in.

"She is not likely to awaken."

"But if she should ..."

Camryn glanced at him. "This is safer and more comfortable."

He had a point and Kael still wrestled with the anxiety that she would awaken and be frightened. Was that any better for her in her delicate state?

"The hold is full nigh to bursting now," Camryn continued after a slight pause. "Their fighters chased us with the last transport. That is why I stepped up the retrieval. It has all very well to talk discretion by taking them a few at the time, but it has only attracted the attention of their military," he said wryly.

"Fuck!" Kael growled. "They are on to us?"

Camryn shook his head. "They have no idea who or what we are or what our intentions are. We have been monitoring their chatter, naturally. I think we must make this our last trip—for now. We have enough, anyway, for the men who've been chosen to breed at this time. No doubt they'll end up launching another mission at some point, but I think we are done here."

"We have room for the last ten the doctor mentioned?"

"We will make room. Go into the hold and check to see how many cots are left. If there is not enough room, we can put at least four in each of your cabins."

Kael and Ean glanced at one another. Kael could see that Ean didn't like being dismissed any more than he did, but it was something that needed to be done, he realized, not merely a ploy to be alone with her.

Nodding, he left to check the hold.

Camryn frowned when they'd left, his mind flickering briefly to the orders he'd

given the men, but he dismissed it. The High Council wasn't likely to be pleased, but it was his responsibility to see to the success of *this* mission—regardless of how it might effect future missions. In any case, he had a duty to his line, to the House of Jakaar, that superseded all but the authority of the Emperor himself—and *he* had his heir.

A pure breed, quite possibly the last there would ever be. Certainly one of the last.

He stared at Simone's sleeping face, trying to decide how he felt about that—the same as he'd felt before he'd left their star system for this one?

The deep anger that had been festering inside of him since he'd attained manhood had eased, he realized, the sense that his line would be no more, corrupted by the blood of alien beings his people had found to replace the breeders who could breed no more. The sense that he'd been cheated of his birthright.

He crouched beside her after a moment, lifting a hand to trace his fingers along one cheek. Her skin was as smooth as his own, softer than any he'd felt before. Her hair, he discovered when he lifted a strand to test it, was silky to his touch.

He realized he hadn't truly believed that they were so similar to his own race. He'd expected ... something else. He didn't know what he'd expected, but he knew he hadn't expected to find anything like Simone.

With her eyes closed, he could almost believe that she was one of them. Their eyes were strange. He wasn't certain that he could ever truly accustom himself to the pale eyes. As for the rest Regardless of what Kael had said, she did not look like the skeets—the round ears—except that she had round ears, he thought with a touch of amusement. Her skin was pale, true, but it had a warm glow about it that reminded him of their skin—except lighter. It was certainly not the ugly bluish color of the skeets. Nor was her hair as theirs was. It was silky, not coarse. There were pale streaks among the darker hair, but that, also, was different.

If he had known beforehand what to expect, he would've petitioned for a concubine, he thought with sudden anger that was followed almost immediately by an uncomfortable sense of guilt at the suspicion that his thoughts were disloyal to Lielani.

There was no law against having more than one concubine, however—he knew that!—and it wasn't as if he would turn his face from her. Lielani would know that as well as he, and she would accept In the old days, they'd had more—in the days when they'd had more women of their own kind.

He shook that thought. It was done and could not be undone, however much it angered him that the elders had shown so little forethought for the sons that would come after them. He found he wasn't even *as* angry as he'd been about it before, but he was furious that the scientists had not thought to mention that they were lovely creatures—and they would've known when they had been sent to study the species and ascertain whether it was a productive match for the drak.

He would've taken her as concubine for the House of Jakaar if he had known, if he'd been told, if he'd had the opportunity to petition the High Council.

Straightening abruptly as his anger returned, he studied her a moment more and strode from cabin. It was done. There was no profit in regret. At least he had her. It might be sheer torment if he discovered that the laws would not allow him to elevate her status from breeder to concubine, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to leave her behind. Once the thought had taken hold, it could not be shaken and, truthfully, he

hadn't tried particularly hard to do so.

* * * *

Awareness brought a profound sense of confusion. For a time, Simone lay with her eyes closed, struggling to figure out what the sounds were around her, why she felt so very strange and wondering if she was drifting in some sort of weird dream. Finally, she opened her eyes when the odd sensation and the even stranger sounds persisted. She felt perfectly blank when she did.

The ceiling above her looked like metal of some kind. Her brain, searching for a match to what her eyes perceived, connected with the thought that it looked like she imagined the inside of a tank would look. She followed the plating in an arc that brought a huge room into focus—beds, women.

Women who looked as confused as she was.

Her head pounded when she sat up and she put her hand to it to counter the throbbing pressure even as her mind began to scramble for explanations, memories.

The last thing she remembered was closing her eyes to rest on the table in the clinic, she realized. How could she be here? Where *was* here?

As if the same thoughts were running through the minds of the other women, she heard several of them voicing similar questions. Fear threaded their voices. It sent the blood rushing through her veins a little faster.

A chime sounded. Instantly quieting, Simone looked around with everyone else, seeking the source, trying to understand what it might mean. A robed man, she discovered, had entered the room. He strode to a raised platform and climbed the steps. When he'd reached a podium, he lifted his head and scanned the room. He lifted his hands. "Quiet, if you please."

The women who'd been talking agitatedly fell silent.

"I am Akule. I am a drak of Macedon of the worker class and it is my duty to help you to understand our customs so that you will be able to adjust to your new status and hopefully avoid punishment for ignorance of our laws."

He spoke with a strange accent—spoke English, Simone thought—but he might as well have been speaking gibberish. Absolutely nothing he said made sense.

"What's a drak?"

"Macedon?"

"What the fuck do you mean 'our new status'?"

"Quiet! You are never to speak to a male, any male, unless you are given permission to speak!"

"Maybe you didn't notice, dick-wad, but there's only one of you and there's a hell of a lot of us!"

The speaker—Akule—pinpointed the woman who'd threatened him with a hard look. As Simone watched, two men appeared—just appeared—out of thin air. They weren't dressed in robes as he was. They were wearing something like a jumpsuit. The moment they became solid, they looked at Akule. Akule pointed out the woman and they plowed their way through the other women. Each grasped her by one arm. They hauled her from the bed and marched back to the position where they'd appeared. And then all three disappeared.

There was a pregnant moment of silence, a collective gasp, and then bedlam ensued. Women leapt from the beds and began running in every direction, screaming

their heads off. Simone was too stunned to react at all until the stampeding herd was almost upon her. She leapt up on her bunk then, glanced around wildly for an escape route, and leapt to the next bed, and the bed after that, bounding away from the maddened pack. There was no way to completely escape them, she discovered. As soon as she ran out of beds to leap from and landed on the floor, she was pelted by the women running past her. She managed to make it to the wall without too much damage, however. Plastered against it, she watched the other women as they frantically searched for an exit, pounding on the panels with their fists when they didn't find a door.

A hissing sound brought her focus from the women to the ceiling. To her horror, she saw a fine mist forming a cloud just above their heads, slowly descending and, as it did, the women rushing around slowed, began to stumble and wobble on their feet. Too terrified to actually assimilate what was happening, Simone dropped to her knees and then to her stomach, trying to evade the encroaching mist. She discovered it was impossible, though. She felt it settle against her skin like cold fingers. She coughed as she inhaled it and then she lost consciousness.

Fear was the first emotion that swept through Simone when she rose toward consciousness, a nebulous uneasiness that failed to fully connect in her mind at first. Her eyes popped wide open the moment memory rose to the forefront, however.

She found herself staring up at the same ceiling she remembered when she'd woken before and a sense of déjà vu and disorientation swept over her. She'd been lying on the floor face down when she lost consciousness and yet she was in the bed.

And choking.

She lifted a hand to her throat and discovered the tightness there wasn't internal damage from the choking mist. Her hand settled on a metal collar. Panic erupted instantaneously. She'd never been able to bear having anything close around her neck and the snug fit of the collar made her feel as if she was suffocating. She clawed at it, trying to tear it off, whimpering when she discovered she couldn't.

She was so focused on struggling with the collar she didn't notice the men approaching her until she felt two hands settle on her arms. Her panic shifted then from the collar to the more immediate threat. She threw her weight backwards as they yanked at her. It didn't loosen their grips as she'd hoped, but it gave her the leverage to swing her hips and legs upward. She managed to catch both men full in the face—one with her foot, the other with her shin bone. Pain shot through both legs, but the men fell backward, losing their grip on her.

She drew her knees to her chest on the rebound from the kick. The moment her feet touched the mattress, she rolled from the bunk, shot to her feet, and took off running, weaving between the beds as she heard them gaining on her.

“Stop! Now!”

The bellowed order didn't come from behind her. Simone's head jerked instinctively toward the sound and she discovered a man had appeared in front of her. Screaming, she veered away, too mindless to think, too frightened to consider there was no way to escape. Someone caught her, slamming into her and manacled their arms around her. She screamed again. Lifting her foot and slamming it backwards, she caught his shin. He grunted in pain. His grip on her slackened, but even though she threw her weight against his hold, he managed to prevent her from slipping through his arms.

“Simone!”

She jerked at the sound of her name, whipping her head around to stare at the man who'd spoken it. She didn't immediately recognize the man striding toward her, but there was something vaguely familiar about his build, the way he walked The hard, angular face.

She sucked in a sharp breath when she finally lifted her gaze to his eyes.

They weren't human and neither were the pointed ears she could see protruding through his black, black hair.

She struggled to suck in a breath, felt the choking hold of the collar around her neck and felt herself falling into a deep, dark hole. Her entire body felt as if it was suddenly too heavy for her to hold herself up. She felt her knees buckle.

"I have her, Ean."

It was the same deep voice she'd heard call her name, but she didn't understand anything he'd said. She felt the arms holding her loosen, felt hands pulling at her and then a wave of dizziness as she was lifted up. The collar pinched as her head fell back limply. It took a great effort to lift her hand to it. "Can't breathe," she whispered.

A finger dug beneath the collar.

"You think it's too tight?"

"There's nothing wrong with the damned collar! I tested it myself. It's just that she isn't used to the weight," Camryn said grimly. He pulled her hand away when he'd settled her on her bunk again. "You have to wear it. You will grow accustomed to it."

"No."

"Yes."

She turned onto her side away from him, curling into a tight ball. The darkness that had descended on her began to recede, though, and she wished it back. She focused, trying to slip away from awareness, trying to escape the thing around her neck in that way if she couldn't escape it any other way. It was difficult to swallow, however, and every effort to swallow past the collar only increased her awareness of it and made it that much harder to escape. Trying to close her mind to the weight around her throat when she discovered she couldn't will herself into unconsciousness, she focused instead on trying to fight the panic.

A shiver went through her as her search to find something else to think about settled on the image of the man she could still feel crouched beside her bunk. Not a man, she reminded herself, not human. He couldn't be human, not with eyes like those—eyes as black as obsidian. Even the shape of his eyes wasn't entirely human, not like any human eyes she'd ever seen, at any rate—almond shaped, not Asian and certainly not Native American—no more than the ears were. They weren't freakishly different, but they *were* different.

And yet, it was almost more as if they were a different race than a different species. It was hard to grasp that they could look so different and so similar at the same time.

She wondered, now, why it hadn't occurred to her before that he wasn't 'quite' any race familiar to her—nothing about his face—but she knew her mind had simply tried to slip him into an identification known to her. Just like everyone else had. Everybody in the bar had noticed them. Everybody had stared at them and not one of them had realized they were staring at beings that weren't human.

Maybe the men had sensed it? Maybe that accounted, at least in part, for some of

the hostility she'd sensed from them?

She hadn't sensed it, though. None of the women had. She had looked at them and everything inside of her had felt want, desire.

She felt a little nauseated at the thought.

When she finally opened her eyes, she discovered that the other man, the one she'd kicked, had crouched down on the other side of the bed, facing her. The expression on his face lightened. "Are you hurt?"

She swallowed convulsively, but she couldn't find her voice. She couldn't seem to drag her gaze from his. A shiver raked its way down her spine and she twisted her head to see if the other man was still behind her.

He straightened to his full height as she did, staring down at her for a moment before his gaze shifted to the man still crouched beside her bunk. He tilted his head in a silent command. She glanced back in time to see him straighten and the two of them strode away. When they'd reached a spot near the podium, both of them vanished.

"You ok?"

Simone transferred her attention to the woman on the next bunk who'd spoken to her in a shaky whisper. "I don't think so," she said finally.

Chapter Four

“God! What I wouldn’t give for a cigarette!” Simone muttered, rocking slightly on her bunk where she sat, folded in upon herself.

“You couldn’t smoke in here anyway!”

“It would give all of us cancer!”

The comments, spoken from either side of her when Simone had been muttering to herself, drew both her attention from her misery and her wrath. “Tell me, have either of you *ever* had an opinion of your own?” she growled.

“It’s true! You hear it all the time!” the blond on her right snapped.

Simone rolled her eyes. “Duh! That’s exactly what I’m talking about! You don’t have an opinion of your own! You never question anything. You always accept whatever’s beat into your brain without question, without investigating it yourself!”

“Nut job,” the blond muttered under her breath. “Here goes another conspiracy theory!”

“Oh yeah?” Simone snapped. “Well, just how good is your memory? Because I’m wondering if you remember when they were pounding it into everybody that they could only have sex, if they had herpes, when they were free of outbreak? And now, when one out every five people *have* fucking herpes, they’ve completely reversed that. It doesn’t make you just a little fucking suspicious that they might be telling us shit when they don’t know what they’re talking about? That they might tell us what they think will be best for them and the hell with us? That they might use the media to fucking experiment with us?”

Neither woman said anything for several moments, obviously trying to remember. Finally, the brown haired woman on her left spoke. “You think cigarettes *aren’t* bad for you?” she asked in a neutral voice.

“Of course they are!” Simone snapped. “The question is, is it any worse than anything else? It doesn’t strike you as odd that the number of smokers has dropped steadily and cancer is still on the rise? *Living* is bad for you! The air, the dirt, the water, the food—everything inside our homes, everything in the places where we work and play—if there’s one damned thing that hasn’t been poisoned by the people that employ us I’d love to know what it is! If you don’t contribute in any way, shape, or form to the pollution that’s really causing everybody to get cancer, you *might* have the right to judge me. Otherwise, shut the *fuck* up!”

“Who the hell is *they*?”

“*Anybody* who has something to gain. Try using your brain for a change for something besides admiring yourself in the mirror!” Getting up, she stalked off with no particular destination in mind, but rather a need to work off some of her nervous energy. The craving for nicotine was still driving her up the wall but the lack of anything to focus on to steady her nerves was almost as bad. She didn’t have any fingernails left to bite. She’d been seriously contemplating starting on her toenails.

It occurred to her, if she could believe anything she’d heard, that it couldn’t have

been very long since she'd been taken if she still had enough nicotine in her system to feel like killing something. The bitch was right—and stupid anyway! She *was* nuts at the moment, which should've been a warning to steer clear. Baiting somebody on the edge was just asking for trouble.

The thought brought to mind the woman who'd heckled the drak, giving her something to do, however useless it might be. She began asking the women she passed if they knew the woman or had any idea what had happened to her. She'd almost worked her way all the way through the prison when she finally hit pay dirt.

"Who wants to know?"

Simone turned to look at the woman who'd spoken. She didn't have a very clear memory of the woman—just the incident itself—but the woman who'd spoken seemed vaguely familiar. "Was it you?"

"Why?"

Hostility! Simone sucked her lower lip, wondering whether to pursue her curiosity or retreat. "I just wondered if you were ok."

The woman looked her over. Her expression wasn't friendly. "So you can know whether you'll be alright or not? Don't bother to express concern. I know you don't give a shit! You're just glad it wasn't you and curious to know what'll happen if you step out of line."

Simone studied her uncomfortably. "There's something wrong with that?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry. They'll tell you," she responded sarcastically, but her hostility seemed to wane. "I'm Liz Carmichael. Used to be from New Jersey, and you are?"

The comment startled Simone. "New Jersey?" she echoed.

"Yeah, they shopped there, too."

Simone moved closer, holding out her hand. "I'm Simone Beauchamp," she said, giving it the French pronunciation 'booshay'.

Liz shook her hand. "Pretty. French?"

"Descent—and Indian—whoops! Native American! Cherokee, I think—and a little of this and that. I'm from Georgia."

"It makes you wonder if they just hit the states or collected breeders from all over. Guess they could have done that anyway shopping in the states. You talked to anybody else?"

Simone sighed. "Just the two bitches sitting on the bunks beside mine and lecturing me on the evils of smoking."

"You got one?" Liz asked hopefully.

Simone huffed. "No, damn it!"

Liz looked disappointed. "Why don't you sit down so I don't have to crane my neck?"

Simone settled at the foot of the bed. "You smoke, too?"

"Used to. I quit. I wouldn't mind taking it up again. Actually, I wouldn't mind getting bombed on something, but I don't suppose we're going to get the chance."

"What do you mean they collected breeders?" the woman on the next bunk asked uneasily.

Liz and Simone both turned to look at her. "I was informed that that's what our status is. That's what these fucking chokers are for—to identify us as breeders."

Simone wished she hadn't mentioned the damned collar! She'd almost gotten the hang of pretending it wasn't there.

"Define breeder!" another woman demanded. "You aren't saying they brought us here for fuck buddies?"

"That was my guess," Liz said dryly. "You'll no doubt be relieved to know you aren't worthy of receiving the dick—being human. No, when they said breeder, they *meant* breeder! You are now, officially, a cow for the draks of Macedon. Your job, whether you want it or not, is to *breed!*"

Simone and both of the other women gaped at her blankly.

"As in, they impregnated us to produce their off-spring and when we spit these out, they'll 're-seed' so we can do it for the next batch."

Horror slowly clawed its way up through Simone's shock. No fucking wonder Liz was so subdued!

"You mean to say they already did it?" one of the other women demanded, her voice vibrating with hysteria.

"You're saying they're going to *keep* us pregnant?" the other woman asked in horrified disbelief.

"You can't be serious!" Simone exclaimed.

Instead of commenting, Liz retreated into her own thoughts.

"Did they do it already?" the first woman demanded, leaning over to clutch Liz's arm.

Liz shoved her off. "Yes! That's what they told me, anyway. I've got five of Macedon's finest!"

Simone felt a panic attack coming on. She focused on her breathing to keep from hyperventilating—not that she would've minded passing out, but she was afraid of what might happen if she displayed signs of hysteria. Get a grip, she chanted to herself!

The first woman began blubbing. "It was supposed to be my husband's baby! Why would they do that?"

She couldn't *possibly* expect them to know!

"Obviously because they *needed* breeders!" Liz snapped. "I'm guessing they wore out the old ones!"

The second woman started blubbing. "I just wanted a baby! Why is this happening?"

Simone felt her own throat close, felt tears stinging her eyes and nose. She'd gotten in to this just because she wanted a baby? "You mean ... they did it at the clinic?"

Liz glanced at her. "You were going to fertility clinic?"

"I was."

"Me, too."

They fell silent for several moments. "Well, didn't we make it fucking convenient for them?" Liz snapped. "Walked right in like fucking sheep, gave them all of our personal information, and *paid* the bastards to run tests so they knew us right down to our DNA!"

Simone sniffed, frowning. "I can see that, but ... none of us would've been at a fertility clinic if we'd been able to have a baby without help. Why would they want us?"

"Because that's the way they do it there!" Liz snapped. "They don't like to take chances that they might not get what they want—boys."

Simone stared at her blankly. "They only want boys?"

"Sons."

Simone's jaw slid to half-mast. "Well! That's just plain *stupid*! No wonder they have to hunt breeders if the morons don't have girls!"

"I wouldn't advise pointing that out to them," Liz said. "These guys are *serious* chauvinistic pigs!"

"Oh god! Don't tell me you're a feminist! No wonder you were at the clinic!"

Liz trained a deadly eye on the woman. "If you want to keep your teeth, you might want to think about shutting the fuck up! I'm really not in the mood to listen to any prosing at the moment about a woman's place! Not when I've been listening to it out of *them* for two fucking days!"

"That's what they were doing?" Simone asked.

"They called it 'indoctrinating' me into the laws and customs of the 'people' of Macedon, which by that, they mean the men, and by indoctrinating they mean brainwashing."

"Conspiracy"

"I'm going to belt you in the mouth, bitch!" Liz growled.

"It's not worth it!" Simone said hurriedly. "They'll take you again!"

Liz studied her a moment and finally bounded off of the bunk and stalked off.

Simone watched her pace along the aisle next to the wall for several moments and finally got up to approach her when she thought she'd had time to get her temper under control.

Simone fell into step beside her and paced with her until she'd walked off some of her own nervousness. Liz looked at her when she finally took a seat on the floor with her back against the wall, paced two more laps and then settled beside her. "I take it you don't have a problem with feminists?"

Simone shrugged. "I believe our government has an obligation to treat every citizen equal, regardless of race, religion, sex—height, weight, etc., etc. I believe they have an obligation to enact laws enforcing equal rights."

Liz nodded. "It totally pisses me off when other women gang up on me just because I think I deserve to be treated without prejudice!"

"So, you aren't actually a feminist either?"

"No. I'm not actually 'in' to following anybody. I like to make my own decisions."

"This is so weird," Simone said after a time. "I can't seem to wrap my mind around it." She shivered, rubbing her arms.

"I'd like to think I'd lost my mind," Liz said almost conversationally.

"What else did they tell you?"

"Oh, don't worry! The dick-wad will be back to give everybody the low down! But, yeah, I think I got pretty much their entire fucking history. I'm sure you won't be amazed to learn that men in their society run everything and always have."

"No!" Simone said with feigned shock.

"Sounds familiar, huh?" Liz asked, smiling wanly. "Macedon, FYI, isn't their 'Father' world. Apparently, that caught the broad side of a planet killer meteor a while back."

Simone frowned thoughtfully. "And it killed more women than men?"

Liz's lips thinned. "Oh, no! They did that to themselves. Before the great

cataclysm, their world was like ours—so overpopulated they were well on their way to destroying it themselves. They passed a law that nobody could have more than one child and, naturally enough they decided, since men were running things, if they could only have one, then it had to be a son!”

“You know ... I think I heard they were doing that in India and Japan,” Simone said.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. I’m certainly not suggesting we’re better than they are. We just fucked up our world a different way.”

“So, this has been going on for a while and nobody noticed they were getting thin of women?” Simone guessed.

“Well—they didn’t know what marriage was, so I’m guessing they weren’t too worried about it when they should have been. They always just ‘begat’ on whatever female was handy. Anyway, I guess the ‘great disaster’, sometimes referred to as ‘the great extinction’, sort of preoccupied them for a while. They already had space technology. They’d already begun colonizing different worlds, and they managed to pick up some survivors from the ‘Father world’.

“But from what I understood, the draks have had a long, long history of warring with the other races from their world and they didn’t stop just because they lost the home planet. In fact, it sounds like it escalated the problem. They didn’t just become determined to make sure their own race made it. They seem pretty determined to make sure the others didn’t.”

“Well, that doesn’t make any damned sense! If they’ve been warring all this time, they must have lost a lot of men.”

“I’m sure—which probably aggravated the situation, making them *more* determined to produce more males for warring since they consider women less than dirt beneath their feet and useless for pretty much anything besides breeding.”

“Screwing?” Simone said a little doubtfully.

Liz shrugged. “I guess they don’t enjoy that as much as they enjoy killing each other. Different strokes for different folks, you know.”

Simone settled back to mull that information over. As disturbing as the idea was of having been stolen as sex slaves, it was almost more disturbing to realize they weren’t anything but cattle, as Liz had put it. No, it *was* more disturbing! They might have had some chance of at least some sort of favorable treatment if they were ‘sort of’ important. She didn’t think they were nearly as important as breeders—not if they meant to just breed them over and over and discard them when they became useless for that.

“They told you they’d implanted five?”

Liz looked like she might throw up for several moments. “No. That fucking coward of a doctor did—at *my* insistence, mind you! This was my second attempt. They implanted three the first time and I lost them all. It took me a while to save up the money for another attempt. I thought if I got more that I’d at least end up with one, but I won’t have any.”

Empathy made Simone’s chest tighten uncomfortably. “You will. They’ll just be half drak.”

Liz sniffed, chewing her lips for a moment. “You really don’t get it, do you? They really, really mean we’re just breeders. We get to help feed them, but we might not even actually get to do that ourselves considering how many they planted in each of us.

They might just milk us and give it to the babies. Why do you think I said we were cows? The thing is, they *aren't* ours. They belong to the men and *they* decide whether they think we're worthy of feeding their sons. Even if they allowed us to help take care of them, and that's an 'if', they're breeding warriors for their damned wars! They aren't going to allow us the chance to make them 'soft'. The boys begin their training when their father decides—usually around six but sometimes younger.

"We aren't even drak women so the chances are we won't get to see them at all. The chances are they'll be put in nurseries and tended by drak women—what few they have."

"Well! If they have women, why the hell don't they use their own!" Simone exclaimed furiously.

"They did. They only have a few that are still young enough to breed. You don't honestly think they would've bestowed their golden seed on *us* if they'd had other options? They didn't even *start* looking for alternatives until it finally filtered through their thick skulls that they were running low on women!"

Simone felt so battered by what she'd learned that she couldn't even find relief in tears. After sitting with Liz a while, she finally got up and returned to her bunk. Her 'neighbors' looked at her a little warily, but apparently decided not to push her buttons.

She was still staring at nothing in particular, thinking of nothing in particular, when Akule entered their prison and mounted the platform again. She didn't even notice him until he started speaking. She didn't listen either. She'd gotten the gist of it from Liz. It was accepting that she was having trouble with.

She caught some of it in spite of her efforts to close her mind to it. He literally laid out the laws and explained the drak class system so that they would understand how they were to behave and what they were allowed to do—which was pretty much nothing beyond breathing and breeding. It didn't come as any great surprise to learn that the warrior caste was at the top of the totem pole. What did surprise her was that it was a pyramid, although she supposed it shouldn't have. Breeders didn't have class status. Surprise! Surprise! Even the damned servant class—workers—were more important than they were.

The *babies* belonged to classes! As breeders, they were, sort of, lumped into the class that spawned the babies they were carrying. She wasn't certain what that meant beyond the housing. Apparently, they liked to keep their breeders close to hand so they could keep an eye on them, but they would be bumped to the next level—down—once they'd produced for the warrior class, and apparently all of them had been impregnated with the golden seed of the warriors!

Almost the scariest thing about the entire business was that their society was a fucking pyramid. The warriors were at the top, but not nearly as numerous as the next class down or the next.

She was pushing thirty! Hadn't they done any fucking research?

Either they hadn't or they just didn't care. None of the women they'd snatched were exactly prime because they'd selected most, if not all, of them from fertility clinics, which was the last hope of most of the women, who'd already tried everything else.

By the time Akule had finished his voice had been drowned by the wailing and furious screams of the women. Actually, she wasn't certain whether he'd finished or given up trying to be heard over the din, which had grown progressively louder the

longer he talked.

No one, she thought wryly, was accepting their fate stoically!

The men, guards, she supposed, appeared, but apparently they couldn't decide which woman or women to grab. The women who'd been screaming abuse promptly fell silent at their appearance, studying their hands as if they were 'good little girls' or looking around as if to say it wasn't them and they had no clue who it was. Finally, Akule and the guards departed. It took a while for anyone to notice, however.

The women had gathered in knots to rant or commiserate, according to their personality. Simone was on the point of seeking Liz out when there was an announcement that the women were to file to the bathing chamber.

Simone didn't know about the rest of them, but Nazi death camp instantly leapt into her mind. She didn't move.

No one else did either.

The power of the suspicious mind!

Apparently it took the draks, being unaccustomed to women having minds of their own, a little while to decide what to do about the rebellion. The women waited uneasily for retaliation. The moment a door opened at one end of their prison and a small army of drak warriors entered, the women began screaming and running around mindlessly.

Simone was certain they were warriors as opposed to the guards they'd seen before, which must have been more like cops.

She recognized the hard faced one in the front. A cold shiver raked down her spine when his gaze hit her like a laser.

"Simone!" he growled, lifting a hand and pointing toward the other end of the cell.

Simone blinked at him. She didn't move, however, until he took a threatening step toward her. When he did, she bounded out of her bunk and backed away.

"Now!" he growled.

She stared at him for a moment, but she realized fairly quickly that she didn't really want to find out what he might do if she refused. She lifted her chin at him. Assuming a 'Joan of Arc' pose, she turned and stalked toward the other end of the room.

That sustained her until a wide opening appeared at the other end. Her knees turned to water then and threatened to buckle. Showers, she told herself. They'd said bathe. *She* hadn't been screaming. Obviously, they were being monitored and the draks would know she hadn't created a disturbance. There wasn't any reason to hurt her. They wouldn't without a reason, she told herself.

She discovered the other women had buckled under the pressure of male dominance, too. It shouldn't have given her any comfort at all when she knew they were as helpless as she was, but the herd mentality ruled. As soon as she was comfortably surrounded by the other cows she became brave enough to continue.

To her vast relief, she discovered it *was* a bathing chamber—communal! A flicker of outrage went through her. This was almost worse than the damned toilet situation! At least there was a *little* privacy, a single wall that surrounded a half a dozen toilets that had been in almost constant use with so many women cramped together but something! Here, there was nothing but an open room with showerheads projecting from the wall—and not nearly enough of them. They had to strip—not that any of them had a damned thing on but the fucking gowns they'd been wearing when they were taken—and

stand under the showerheads in groups of three or four at the time, sharing the soap and the water. And some of the women still had to wait.

Simone was the first one in which, unfortunately, translated to also being the first one out. The warriors had apparently decided not to simply assume they'd do as they were told. The entire brigade was camped in the fucking door, watching. She stared back at them, shivering, her legs crossed, one hand over her thatch, the other across her breasts. The jerk that had bellowed at her lifted a hand and crooked his fingers at her in a 'come here' gesture.

She eyed him distrustfully. When he tensed as if he would come after her, though, she surged forward. He handed her a cloth that was about the size of a fucking band-aid and about as thick as toilet paper—she supposed to dry off with. She retreated into a corner to dry off in the little privacy it afforded. He followed her, standing over her until she'd dried the best she could and then handed her something that seemed to be made of the same material. She unfolded it and stared at it in confusion, unable to decide which was the back and which the front. It looked like a sack with arm and neck holes.

Sighing, she pulled it over her head. The armholes, she discovered to her dismay, were big enough her boobs could've fallen out of them. She folded her arms across her chest. "Satisfied?" she asked, staring stonily at the floor.

He stepped back. Taking it as a dismissal, she whirled away from him and stalked back into the other room. Unfortunately, she couldn't figure out which bunk was hers. She hadn't bothered to count the rows. All of the beds were usually occupied since there wasn't any place to sit besides the bunks or the floor.

She hadn't exactly hit it off with her nearest neighbors, either.

She decided to retreat to sit on the floor and wait until everybody came back and she could identify her spot. The tent-like gown she'd been given made her feel as if she'd been *given* a tent and made to stand inside of it naked. The only thing she could think to say for it was that it at least wasn't a wrap around.

Drawing her knees up under it, she wrapped her arms around them and settled her cheek on her knees, trying not to think. She'd begun to understand the lure of drugs although she'd always despised people that did them—except for nicotine, caffeine and alcohol.

Actually, she felt a healthy contempt for anybody that overdid alcohol, too, but she could certainly see the lure of not facing reality at the moment! Oh for the chance to drown her sorrows by drinking herself into a stupor—or popping a few 'don't give a damn' pills! Even a cigarette to soothe her jangling nerves would've been welcome.

Well, she decided, she couldn't borrow courage. She was going to have to find it within her if she could. They were all going to have to.

She discovered the following morning that not everyone agreed with that assessment. One of the women managed to hang herself. Another one had sawed her wrists open by rubbing them on the metal edges of the cots.

To say that the draks were pissed off that two of the women had figured out a way to escape them was an understatement!

Chapter Five

Unable to sleep, Simone was half awake when the women started screaming, alert enough that adrenaline instantly shot through her and brought her upright on the bunk and then surging off of it. She was still disoriented enough from sleep to be confused, regardless, and merely whipped around in a circle in search of the threat.

Akule and two of the peace keepers had appeared almost before Simone herself had reacted, although it wasn't until later that the significance of that hit her, but then she'd suspected all along that they were being monitored.

Not closely enough, apparently.

Akule and the guards apparently hadn't expected anything like they discovered. All three men abruptly halted in their tracks in shock for a handful of seconds and then one of the men spoke into his communicator. By the time the warriors arrived, most of the women were out of their beds and huddling together in frightened knots.

Ignoring them, the warriors immediately strode toward the scene. Several of them actually *ran*, which almost shocked Simone as much as the news that had begun to circulate that two of the women had killed themselves. After staring blankly at the women for several moments, Simone's personal nemesis straightened abruptly and scanned the room until he pinned her with his gaze.

She wasn't certain what that meant, but she melted behind the nearest group and peered around them to see what was happening. Her heart nearly stopped when he strode forward, pulling a wicked looking knife from a sheathe at his waist that she hadn't even noticed before. She didn't know what he was sawing at until he lifted the woman and she saw the sheet was still around her neck.

Several of the warriors pushed forward, trying to wrestle the woman from his grasp and then the entire group began to argue—about what, she didn't have a clue—but anger was a universal emotion. It wasn't difficult at all to understand that they were furious and arguing. The leader finally yielded the body to one of the men, but there was a similar situation transpiring almost directly beside them with another woman—also dead.

Simone had to wonder if they'd formed some sort of suicide pact—talked each other into escaping the only way they knew how. She didn't know the women. She hadn't even talked to them, but it seemed significant that they shared adjoining bunks.

The two dead women were born away after a few moments and then the warriors turned their wrath on the survivors. Either they didn't actually *want* the women to understand what they were saying, however, or they were too agitated themselves to realize they were speaking their own tongue.

It seemed pretty clear, regardless, that *they* were being blamed. She didn't know if the warriors were accusing them of having killed the women, or known about it and ignored it, but they were clearly furious with all of them. Abruptly, they stopped shouting and took action. The moment they surged toward the women, the women shrieked and ran—Simone with them, partly because she was also looking for an escape

and partly because she didn't have a choice. She was dragged along with the tide.

No one was the least bit relieved when the men attacked the beds instead of them. Simone began to fear that they'd only started on the inanimate objects and would progress to them when they'd finished destroying the room.

It became obvious after a few moments, however, that they weren't maddened with rage.

Well, they were, but they weren't simply destroying. Ripping the mattresses from the beds, they stripped them and tossed the mattresses on the floor and then seized the platforms, picked them up, and pitched them toward the far wall. The leader lifted his communicator and spoke into it and the tangled pile of bunks by the wall vanished.

He scanned the women huddled against the far wall. "Get in bed!"

Everyone simply stared at him.

"NOW!" he bellowed.

They moved en masse. Everyone still wanted to huddle together, but they were anxious to avoid the possibility of a physical confrontation—which seemed very possible given the way the warriors were glaring at them.

There was no way to tell which bed was which, naturally, so everyone simply dropped down onto the nearest available. No one wanted to go near the mattresses closest to the warriors, however, and when those were all that were left the women who hadn't managed to claim a bed scurried into bed with the other women. Simone was actually a little sorry she didn't end up with a companion herself. It was cold without any sort of covering and it would've been comforting to have company. It wasn't as if she could sleep anyway!

Drawing up into a tight knot inside her tent of a gown, she lay down facing the men, afraid to put her back to them. It appeared they'd expended their rage, however. They moved back to the wall.

They didn't leave.

Simone lay for what seemed like hours and finally dozed off. It seemed to her she'd barely dropped to sleep when a stir in the cell woke her. She sat up, blurry eyed but wary and looked around. Food, she discovered, was being brought out. She stared at the men and droids dully for a moment and finally lay back down again. She was too tired and too nauseated, she decided, to have any desire for food—particularly the food they'd been brought since they'd been taken. It was the next thing to tasteless.

She dozed off again. The food was gone when she awakened, but she discovered she didn't care. She didn't especially like the idea of using the facilities with the warriors standing guard, but she had to. She was more embarrassed when she came out, because she could feel them watching her.

Instead of returning to the mattress where she'd slept, she looked around for Liz. She was lying on a mattress, but Simone could see she wasn't asleep. After a brief internal debate, she approached the other woman. "Can I sit with you?"

Liz studied her a moment and finally sat up, making room.

"I feel like shit," she muttered.

"Nothing a cigarette and cup of coffee wouldn't cure," Simone said flippantly.

Liz considered it. "Of all the things I'm going to miss ..."

Simone swallowed with an effort. "Don't think about it," she advised. "I'm trying not to."

“So quit mentioning it!” Liz said irritably.

“Sorry.”

Liz shook her head. “You think they were thinking about that and that’s why they did it?” she asked after a few moments.

Simone considered it. “I’ve never actually understood what would make somebody do what they did. It’s just ... not natural, you know? I think about the only real instincts we still have is self-preservation. And either they didn’t, or they were just ... unbalanced.”

Liz shuddered. “It took determination to do it. I didn’t know them, but they didn’t *seem* that unbalanced. They seemed scared—like the rest of us.”

“I don’t even understand how they managed it, especially the woman that hanged herself. The choke collar alone should’ve prevented it and she had to have deliberately put all of her weight on her neck ... and then just lay there. You’re right. They had powerful motivation to do something like that.”

Liz made a sound of the disgust. “The other woman *rubbed* her wrists on the bunk until she cut the blood vessels. She had to work hard to do that.”

Simone studied her hands. “It’s a shame they didn’t put that determination to better use. They might’ve helped somebody else.”

“How? We’re fucked.”

“I don’t know,” Simone said honestly. “I just think if they were willing to give up their lives they could’ve used it to better advantage instead of just wasting it. Maybe killed Akule and screamed ‘freedom’ or something like that.”

“I’d like to kill the bastard,” Liz muttered.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that would actually do us any good. I’m not fond of him either, but he isn’t a lot better off than we are if what he said was true. He was born a worker and will die one—no incentive for self-improvement in *their* damned society!”

“Well, he doesn’t have to face one pregnancy and labor after another!” Liz snapped angrily. “*Being* pregnant is miserable enough!”

“So I’ve heard,” Simone said dully. “I was actually looking forward to it ... before.”

“No, you weren’t! No woman in her right mind looks forward to nine months of misery with hours of agony at the end! You were looking forward to having a baby.”

Simone thought that over. “You’re right. I just figured it was worth it to be miserable for nine months and go through hell to have one. It really isn’t going to be worth it, though, is it? There’s no payoff.”

“*That’s* what they were thinking when they killed themselves,” Liz said emphatically. “They were thinking about how much they’d wanted a baby and everything they’d gone through to have one and that they were never going to. They were just facing going through the misery over and over.”

Simone closed her eyes, rocking herself. She’d been trying so hard *not* to think about it. It angered her that Liz had rubbed it in her face when she’d worked to pretend it wasn’t going to happen. “Well, I’m not in favor of just giving up and accepting, damn it! There has to be something we could do!”

“I’m all ears,” Liz said sardonically.

“They’ve got laws,” Simone said finally. “That means they have authority and they have court—or something like that. Maybe we could use their own laws to our

advantage?"

"What are you, a lawyer?"

"A paralegal," Simone said a little apologetically. "It's sort of like being a nurse—you do all the leg work and the doctors get all the money and all the glory."

"And all the enemies," Liz pointed out. "Just about everybody that's had any kind of run-in with a lawyer hates lawyers, but you never hear them ranting about paralegals."

Simone stared at her a moment and chuckled. "I'd never thought about it that way. See! A silver lining!"

"Maybe, but you don't know anything about their laws."

"So? I could learn."

"I have to infer from that that you weren't listening when we were informed that we were not allowed to learn their language? Or high speak, as dick-wad referred to it."

Simone frowned. "I'd forgotten, but maybe high speak is different from the rest of their language?"

"Maybe," Liz said doubtfully, "but I think you're wrong. And even if you aren't, you're talking about learning an entire language well enough to understand legal stuff. *I* can't understand legal speak and I was born into an English speaking family! I'll be dead and buried, and you probably will be, too, long before you can figure it out. I don't think I could survive very many pregnancies, especially multiple births. I'm thirty-two already."

Simone gaped at her. "And the doctor was willing to do the procedure?" she demanded, somewhat indignantly. "I just turned twenty-nine and the doctor I was seeing acted like I had one foot in the grave already!"

"Money makes the world go-round. Don't you think for a moment that you can't compromise their 'principles' with the right amount of money," Liz said derisively. "Not that that matters now."

"Well, it's worth a shot. At least it's a possibility."

"Not much of one and I think it's a long shot."

"Actually, I'm pretty good at picking up languages—that's one of the reasons I decided to become a paralegal. I could understand the language."

"Well, it is almost like a foreign language, but ... I think it's dangerous," she said, lowering her voice. "I mean it, Simone. These people have no fucking sense of humor."

"Maybe. There's an old saying, though—know thine enemy. You can't fight if you don't know what you're up against."

"They might have something similar in their language," Liz dryly. "I've got a feeling that's exactly why it's forbidden to us."

One of the other women interrupted them. Crouching down in front of them, she glanced at the men standing guard over them. "We're going to have a hunger strike," she said quietly, adding when Liz and Simone stared at her blankly, "a peaceful protest."

Liz and Simone looked at one another and shrugged when the woman moved away. "I don't think they'll actually give a shit—considering we're lowly breeders—but I guess it wouldn't hurt to discover the limits of the chains."

"I'm not really hungry anyway," Simone said. "I guess I can stand missing another meal or two."

"You skipped breakfast, too?"

“I was more tired than hungry.”

“I guess that’s what gave them the idea. I still think it’s worse than useless. I doubt they’ll even notice, but it makes a statement if they do.”

They noticed. They didn’t let on that they had, but the hunger strike only actually lasted through a day and a half—or what passed for that on board the ship. They were brought food twice a day. Simone had skipped breakfast to sleep, but she discovered that most of the other women had also skipped breakfast. The warriors began to exchange questioning looks when the second meal arrived and none of the women got up. In fact, most of them made a pointed effort of ignoring it. They watched the servers bring out the food and then turned their backs on it.

Simone discovered that it was harder to sleep on an empty stomach than it had been without that misery added to all the rest, but she did finally dose off. She roused when she heard the servers entering the cell the following day but, remembering the strike, settled back down to sleep. She dozed much of the day, she supposed, because it didn’t seem much time at all had passed when she was roused again by the sound of the servers. She ignored that as she had the others until she began to hear a stir of alarm through the women. Wary, Simone peered through her lashes to see what was happening. The warriors, who’d stood guard over them since the suicides, had moved from the wall. They were wading through the sea of mattresses, examining the faces of the women and then grabbing first one and then another and dragging them to their feet. It was the gasps and whimpers and cries that had awakened her.

She scanned the men uneasily, trying to understand what was happening. Her nemesis spotted her at almost the same instant that she saw him. His face hardened with purpose. He strode straight toward her. Simone felt her eyes grow wider and wider the closer he came. He was almost upon her when her brain finally kicked in and she sprang up from the mattress. She didn’t try to run—although some of the women did—or scream. She couldn’t command her faculties enough to do either.

She flinched all over, however, when he shot a hand out and grasped her upper arm, instinctively ducking and throwing a hand up to ward off a blow if he was of a mind to sling one in her direction. He didn’t seem angry until she did that.

That, clearly, pissed him off, however. His lips tightened into a thin line. “Come.”

He didn’t wait to see if she would comply. He turned and hauled her behind him. She had to move her feet or fall flat. She actually did fall—over the mattress next to hers. He whirled in anger when he felt the jerk on her arm but, to her relief, he seemed to realize immediately that it wasn’t an attempt to fight him. He released his grip on her, watching her through narrowed eyes until she’d managed to get up. Instead of grasping her arm again, he pushed her in front of him.

Women weren’t actually supposed to speak unless they’d been invited to—especially not to anyone of the warrior class. That warning flickered through her mind before she opened her mouth, but she wasn’t about to go meekly without even protesting. “Where are we going? Where are you taking me?”

He sent her a look. “Did you listen to none of the instructions?” he asked coolly.

“No ... uh ... Yes.”

“You have decided they don’t pertain to you?”

Anger flickered to life. If she’d had any balls—or been stupid—she would’ve

informed him that she thought exactly that! She was an American, damn it! She didn't give a damn *where* they were, she was *still* an American! Instead of responding, however, she simply lifted her chin, folded her arms over her chest, and ignored him.

He settled a hand on her arm. It was bruised from his grip before and her fall. She couldn't help but wince, but she struggled to ignore that, too.

In silence, they left the cell and marched down a long, wide corridor. Despite her determination to maintain a posture as coldly impersonal as his, she couldn't resist the temptation to study what she could of the ship.

There was no sense in being stupid, she thought, just because she was pissed off. Not that she thought it was likely to do her any good to know anything about the ship, but one never knew when something might come in handy. She didn't think she could afford to ignore anything that had the potential of being useful.

She didn't actually acquire any useful information, unfortunately, beyond the fact that the ship was enormous. The corridor they were following seemed to go on for a mile or more, but he turned off after maybe a quarter of a mile and brought her to halt in front of a door. She discovered when it opened that it was an elevator.

It shot upwards so fast that when it stopped her knees buckled. Fortunately, he had a grip on her and kept her from sprawling out.

Liz was right. They didn't have a sense of humor! Anybody else would've at least cracked a smile. *He* looked like his face might crack if he tried it.

He also didn't give her a moment to recover. As soon as the door opened, he hauled her out and down another corridor. They arrived eventually in what was clearly intended as personal quarters. It was spacious, she thought, considering it was on a ship. Actually, she'd been in hotels that weren't nearly as spacious, or as luxurious, but it did remind her of a hotel room—minus windows.

He released her when he'd hauled her inside and paced away from her. Uncertain of what he had in mind, Simone stood where he'd left her, watching him warily, unable even to summon a look of defiance. He assumed a military stance and studied her coldly. "What are you about, woman?"

Simone blinked at him and decided to fall back on the old 'I'm too stupid to be guilty' routine. "I don't know what you mean."

The mask of cold aloofness disintegrated. Rage replaced it. "You are carrying my son! Are you trying to kill him as the others did the babes entrusted to their care?"

Simone felt the blood leave her face at the accusation. "No! I wouldn't do that!" she gasped, horrified that he would even suggest that she would kill an infant—*her* baby!

Some of his anger seemed to abate. "You believe that you can harm yourself and not harm my son?"

Truthfully, she hadn't even grasped that she was really and truly pregnant. She certainly hadn't considered that it might be his, although she supposed she should've realized that he must have some reason to focus on her. She felt her face heat guiltily at the his accusation. "I don't even know that I am pregnant," she said finally.

"You are. I witnessed the implantation."

Simone's jaw dropped. "You *watched!*" she growled, abruptly furious. "How *dare* you ...!"

He closed the distance between them so fast she didn't even have time to call him a son-of-a-bitch, thrusting his face threateningly toward hers. "I am prince heir of the

House of Jakaar!" he growled. "You question my right to witness the implantation of *my* heir?"

Unnerved as she was, Simone knew she would've backed down if she'd had any sense at all. Instead, she narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't give a fuck who you are in your world!" she growled, punching a finger against his chest. "This body is *mine*! No one—not you, not the President of the United States of America, not your king or emperor or whatever the fuck he calls himself—not even *God* has the right to examine me or touch me—or implant their damned seed in me!—without my permission!"

He looked absolutely stunned for a split second. "You are a breeder ...!"

Simone stamped her foot. "I am not! I'm Simone Beauchamp! I'm an American citizen! I have rights, by damn! I'm a free woman and you can't make me a slave! I won't let you! I'll fight you with my last breath if I have to!"

He studied her through narrowed eyes for several moments and finally lifted his head to look over hers. Feeling the hairs on the back of her neck prickle, Simone turned her head to look.

He hadn't just been faking her off. There were two more draks behind her. If she wasn't mistaken, the same two who'd accompanied him on that never to be sufficiently regretted night she'd gone to the bar.

"*You were right. She does have spirit, Camyrn,*" Kael murmured sardonically.

Camryn glared at him. "*Do not encourage her defiance, Kael!*" he growled.

Kael shrugged. "*She cannot understand me.*"

"*She may well understand your demeanor, however.*"

Kael scowled ferociously. "*Is this better?*"

Ean cleared his throat, whirled on his heel, and left abruptly.

"*Coward!*" Kael called after him. "*Come back and watch Camryn deal with our defiant little breeder.*"

"*Fuck you!*" Camryn growled. "*You deal with her, then, if you think you have some notion of how to go about it! I cannot beat her! She is clearly not easily intimidated when she is as well aware that I cannot punish her as I am.*"

Kael fixed her with a hard look and switched to her language. "You have not eaten in two days. You carry my son as well as his. To deprive yourself is to deprive him and I will not allow it. Will you eat? Or shall I help you to eat?" he asked grimly.

Simone studied him uneasily. "I wasn't trying to hurt the baby—babies—whatever either of think."

"Why did you refuse to eat then?" Kael asked tightly.

"To make you understand that I'm a person the same as you are. You wouldn't have chosen us to carry your babies if you hadn't known we were intelligent beings. How could you think it's right to take us against our will?"

Kael's lips thinned. "We are warriors of Macedon. In conquest, might is always right."

Simone narrowed her eyes at him, but she'd had enough time to calm down and consider her precarious situation. It seemed pointless to try to argue with him anyway when he was clearly a damned barbarian, with a caveman mentality, regardless of how advanced they were technologically. When he stepped back and gestured for her to precede him, she merely stalked past him wordlessly. She discovered the other drak had retreated into a dining area. There was a dish of food sitting on the small table.

Since it was obviously meant for her, she sat down and picked up the eating utensil. They watched her suspiciously for several moments, making it difficult to swallow, but finally dismissed her and began to talk to one another. She flicked a surreptitious glance at them each time she heard a different speaker. Their voices were all very deep and very similar, but she discovered she could tell the difference, particularly in the way they spoke. One, the mean one, had a precise clipped way of speaking. The bastard who'd threatened to shove the food down her throat had almost a drawl to his voice. The last, who seemed to be the youngest of the three, tended to put a good deal of animation in the way he spoke and she frequently noticed almost a vibration in his voice of amusement, although she never managed to catch a smile.

The mean one was Camryn, she finally decided after listening to them several minutes, the beast Kael, and the youngest Ean.

They were talking about her, she realized. She had no idea what, exactly, they were discussing, but the very fact that they deliberately refused to look in her direction and yet seemed completely aware of her, suggested it even if not for the confrontation they'd just had.

It made her stomach knot since she couldn't help but wonder if they were discussing what to do in retaliation for her defiance. Clearly, Camryn wasn't accustomed to *anyone* defying him, let alone a female!

"It's so bizarre to think I'm carrying your babies when we never ... uh ... met or anything," she murmured after a moment. "I mean really met. Of course, I did sign up for a donor, but I wouldn't ever have met him."

She discovered when she picked up her glass to drink that all three men were staring at her as if she'd grown another head. She shrugged. "I'm just saying, it's weird. We don't do it like that. We either do 'it' or we get a donor and don't know who they are, usually the other way."

Camryn frowned, staring at her in exasperation. "For an intelligent species, you appear to have a great deal of difficulty understanding. A breeder may not speak to a warrior unless she is invited to do so."

Simone looked down at her plate, but she couldn't prevent a smile from curling her lips. "I'm just talking to myself. Warriors shouldn't hear breeders talking, should they?"

She slid a glance at them under her lashes to see how they were taking that. Ean was chewing his lower lip. Kael was looking at her as if he wondered if she was completely off her rocker and Camryn looked like he was going to explode. After a moment, the three of them vacated the dining area.

Simone's shoulders slumped. A tremor of weakness went through her in the aftermath of their confrontation. It occurred to her that Kael might be right. She might've gone off the deep end. She had no idea what she was dealing with, but she did know that they were absolutely ruthless and that they considered her less than nothing—considered their *own* women less than nothing—almost to the point of extinction.

What had made her fly into a rage and tell Camryn what she thought of him?

Temporary insanity? Or was it ongoing?

She'd felt threatened, she realized. It had brought out her fight or flight instincts and, unfortunately, instead of retreating as she should have, she'd exploded. She was lucky he hadn't slain her on the spot. She thought he might have if he hadn't been so

taken by surprise.

She didn't know that he would've, but why hesitate when he was clearly born and bred to kill and to consider women of no importance?

She wasn't worth the time it would take to choke the life out of her?

It was beneath him?

None of the above, she realized. She was carrying his son and nothing was more important to him than his heir. Did that mean he actually *felt* something for the baby? Or was it merely the fundamental need every creature seemed to have to procreate?

They were damned cold blooded, as far as she could see, which should bring her survival instincts to the fore and keep them there. It would be dangerous, she was sure, to become complacent that they wouldn't do anything to her because of the babies. They'd made it clear that she was replaceable. It might be inconvenient to them to have to find another breeder, but that was all it would be to them.

Having had time to consider her folly, she wasn't in any great hurry to finish and leave the table. Since it also occurred to her that they hadn't given her 'permission' and she'd already pushed their buttons more than she should've, she decided to stay where she was. Her ass and her legs grew numb from sitting. She shifted around a few times, trying to get the feeling back, but it didn't particularly help.

Worse, she began to feel the need to empty her bladder.

After a very few minutes, she began to regret that she'd drank all of the water.

She'd begun to think she was going to be forced to behave 'defiantly' again when Camryn appeared around the partition. "Come."

Relieved, she got up and followed him a little stiffly. "The facilities are there," he said, pointing. "And you will sleep there."

Simone followed the direction he'd pointed out and shifted uneasily when she saw he was pointing to the only bed she'd seen since she'd come in. She'd already opened her mouth to ask him where he was planning on sleeping when she met his gaze. She closed her mouth and headed into the facilities.

It was like the one in the cell—except much nicer—and not particularly complicated—which was a relief. The men, she discovered when she left the bathroom, had sprawled in the chairs in the living area of the cabin. Wondering if she was going to have company in the bed, she climbed in, settled with her back to them and resolutely closed her eyes. She lay awake for a long while, listening intently to the murmur of their voices until it finally faded to a drone and then nothingness.

Chapter Six

"I am not certain this was the wisest thing to do," Kael murmured, studying Simone's form beneath the coverlet. "Allowing a breeder to sleep in your bed?"

"I do not expect she will taint it," Camryn said tartly.

Kael's lips tightened with anger. "I was not suggesting she would. It deviates so drastically from what is ever allowed, however, that it is ... disquieting. She will not learn the ways of our people if she is allowed such a thing—to sleep in the bed of a prince of the Empire?"

Camryn found it disquieting himself, although he had no intention of admitting it. Even Lielani had never slept in his bed. He visited her apartment when he felt the need. She had never set foot in his private quarters. No female had. Not that that was any fucking surprise, he thought with disgust, when it was impossible to find an unclaimed female on Macedon. "If you have a better suggestion for preventing them from destroying themselves and our future with them, I am anxious to hear it," he growled. "Would you prefer to return to Macedon empty-handed?"

"She said she had not meant to harm our sons," Ean said quietly. "I believe her."

"You think it is better that she gave them no thought at all?" Kael demanded.

"They are nothing to her. We cannot expect them to be. The gods damned scientists! You would have thought that they would have taken the time to consider whether these beings were truly suited to us beyond the gods damned science!"

"We do not know that they are not suited to us!" Camryn snapped angrily.

Kael and Ean both gaped at him.

"Did my ears deceive me? Did I not hear the woman have the audacity to inform you that you had no right to her? I would almost think she was deranged to challenge a warrior of Macedon—you in particular—if not for the fact that I suspect you were right. She knows we are in no position to punish her for her treason!" Kael growled.

Camryn shook his head and rose to stretch. "In her mind, it is not treason, because she has not accepted that she is no longer an American—that she belongs to us."

"The question is, can she accept?"

Camryn glanced at Kael. "You doubt it?"

Kael glanced at Ean. "What do you think?"

Ean grimaced. "I do not think I am suited to the challenge of training her. I thought I would laugh at the look on Camryn's face when she flew into a rage because he had witnessed the implantation. I do not think I will tell her that I did, also."

Camryn's expression lightened. He allowed a faint smile to flicker across his lips before he thought better of it. "I confess, I had not considered that I might be the recipient of her spirit. I was thinking only that I would have a stronger son for having sprung from her loins. I do not know what to do with these women—Simone in particular. They are not at all like our own."

"Our women know their place and they have been taught our ways since birth," Kael said pointedly. "That is exactly my concern. I do not think they lack the

intelligence to learn, but they may well be impossible to train when they have clearly been allowed to believe they are equals.”

Camryn frowned, feeling a wave of uneasiness. He might have thought Simone’s defiance almost as amusing as it was shocking and infuriating, but the elders wouldn’t. “Akule must put forth a greater effort to make them understand that their behavior will not be tolerated, regardless of their status as breeders. The High Council will not be amused. They will see them punished until they have broken their defiance, regardless of the cost to us—and the others who are now hopeful that they, too, will have sons.”

* * * *

“That was ... disturbing,” Liz muttered when she met up with Simone in the cell a week later.

Simone managed a sound of agreement, but she was shakier after spending the week in the same cabin with her donors than she had been when she’d arrived—mostly because she’d had an entire week to contemplate what she’d done and the possible consequences. She *had* to have been suffering from temporary insanity, she decided. She’d behaved as if they were human, treated them as she would’ve anybody on Earth who’d overstepped their bounds.

It had occurred to her that she could’ve found herself in any number of situations *on* Earth, with *men* from Earth where that sort of thing could’ve gotten her killed or, at the very least beat half to death.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

“What did your donors do to you to get you to eat?”

Simone shifted uncomfortably and finally sighed. “Reminded me that hurting myself could hurt the babies,” she muttered finally. “And threatened to force feed me. Actually, it wasn’t the threat so much as the reminder. I caved like the wimp I am deep down, but, honestly, I just hadn’t considered it. I don’t *feel* pregnant. It’s not like I forgot I had the procedure, you know, but it just isn’t real to me yet. I don’t honestly think they would be affected so early in the pregnancy, but it did occur to me that it *might* be enough to make me lose them.”

“Ah—the old guilt trip!” Liz released an irritated huff. “I guess I got pretty much the same. I was too unnerved to meet up with all five donors to even *consider* balking. I mean—talk about being ganged up on!”

Simone grimaced. “United we stand, divided we fall. I doubt anybody else did any better.”

“I still think we made our point. Of course, I think Sheila and Diane made an even stronger point when they offed themselves.”

Simone glanced at her in surprise. “I didn’t even know their names,” she said guiltily.

“I didn’t either—I still don’t know if that was actually their names, but everybody felt so guilty about not being more supportive that they went round and round until they finally found somebody who *thought* she remembered that that was their names. Some of the women want to get together and offer up prayers for them—you know, a wake.”

“Oh, I am so *not* in to religion! Besides, we didn’t even know them. How are we going to offer up anything?”

Liz looked at her in surprise and disapproval. “You don’t believe in Jesus?”

“I don’t like anybody trying to shove their own beliefs and opinions off on me—

case in point,” she said, nodding toward the guards along the wall. “What happened to god anyway? Nobody ever mentions him anymore—just Jesus.”

She could see Liz working up a spiel to convert her.

“Never mind! That was just rhetorical. I’ve heard it all over and over. I grew up in the Bible belt! Let’s join the others and try to think of something positive we can say.”

They gathered in a circle as far from their alien watchers as they could. The woman that she supposed had organized the wake got up, introduced herself, made a short speech and then led everyone in a prayer. Simone’s mind wandered while several others took turns praying out loud.

Not surprisingly, the guards were curious but she thought it was more from suspicion that they were up to something other than what it appeared. Then again, maybe they had no religion and they couldn’t figure out what was going on. It was disturbing that they looked so human. Actually, it was inconvenient. If they’d looked completely different it might have scared her shitless, but there would’ve been no way for her mind to play tricks on her. She wouldn’t have to continually remind herself that they weren’t and that she was dealing with dangerous, completely unknown entities.

She wouldn’t have screwed up so badly and cursed Camryn out.

Quite aside from the fact that she’d taken a risk she should’ve known better than to try, she wasn’t sure letting them know just how ingrained their sense of freedom was was the best of ideas. When you were weaker than your opponent, and knew it, or outnumbered—and they were both—it was never a good idea to lay all of your cards on the table up front.

There’d never been any hope of escape for them. If these men had been slavers on Earth, they probably wouldn’t have had a chance in hell of escaping. Very few women did, and *their* situation was even less hopeful. They were being hauled off to an entirely different world.

She considered that and wondered if there was any possibility that they could at least escape captivity once there. They weren’t going to get to go home. She didn’t see any possibility of that, but, maybe, they could escape being slaves. They could call it any damned thing they wanted to, but that was what they had in mind.

Like Liz, she doubted they could find anything like a legal loophole to use. She wasn’t ready to pat herself on the back just because she’d managed to figure out her donors’ names. She hadn’t been able to get a clue beyond that of what the conversation was about. She didn’t think she was just being conceited about being able to pick up languages pretty easily. The problem was, she hadn’t ever faced a concerted effort to keep her from learning a language. She’d had teachers in school and she’d known or met people afterwards that were willing to help her gain a firmer grasp on the French and Spanish she’d learned. Could she learn without any help at all? She doubted it. She was willing to try. She meant to try, but she didn’t have much faith in herself. She couldn’t blame Liz for not having any.

So that was two very slim possibilities of hope for them.

Simply accepting it as something that couldn’t be changed wasn’t an option. It was a death sentence, would be for most of them—a horrible one. She might not have been pregnant before—actually it was *because* she hadn’t been able to get pregnant—but she’d done a lot of studying on the subject. Babies were parasites, plain and simple, and they took what they needed regardless of the mother’s needs. That wasn’t necessarily a

problem under a doctor's care because women were able to allow their bodies to rest and recover, but it could be and it certainly would be for them if the draks meant to use them as they'd said. She didn't see any reason to doubt that. It was hard to accept that they could consider intelligent beings so insignificant as to use them in such a way, but she supposed humans were as bad in their own way—certainly historically speaking.

And it didn't matter. Looking at it with optimum hope, they could expect to have their health completely ruined with one pregnancy after another. At the opposite end of the spectrum, they could expect to die during a pregnancy or labor from having their bodies so depleted by the infants that they had organ failure. Historically, more women had probably died from childbirth than anything else. Certainly before birth control had been invented it wasn't at all uncommon. The poor women who'd had the misfortune of being born before modern medicine had often had one baby after another and died before they reached the end of their childbearing years.

As desperately as she'd wanted a baby, she couldn't think of anything that was much more nightmarish than the prospect of being constantly pregnant.

And that didn't even take mental health into consideration. The hormonal fluctuations could drive them insane.

No, she couldn't just lay down and accept!

Someone nudged her, distracting her from her thoughts and she discovered everybody was looking at her expectantly.

"Get up and say something," Liz prompted.

Simone frowned at her. She was about to refuse when she abruptly changed her mind. She stood up and looked at the women around her. "I felt guilty to realize that I was so focused on my own fears that I hadn't given a thought to anyone else. I still feel guilty, but I don't believe its wrong to consider your own survival more important than the survival of a stranger—anyone except, maybe the people you love. It *was* wrong in the sense that we depend on one another for survival, or should be able to. United we stand, divided we fall!"

Liz stared at her as if she'd lost her mind when she sat back down. "What the hell was that?"

"You told me to say something!" Simone said indignantly.

"That it's alright to be selfish?"

"Exactly *why* is it wrong? Because everybody says it is? The only reason people say that is because they know *they* have a better chance if everybody sticks together! They're still being selfish." She didn't especially like the condemnation in Liz's expression. "Why don't you think about it before you decide I'm being a bitch and completely selfish, huh? I don't want anything to happen to you. I wouldn't wish it on you, and I'd certainly try to help if I could. If it came right down to it and one of us had to die, though, would you rather it was me? Or you?"

Liz reddened.

"That's what I thought!"

She got up again. "Look! All I'm saying is that I'm sorry for them, but it was damned selfish of them to do what they did! They copped out and left us to take the heat! It could've gotten us into a lot more trouble than it did and besides that, we all have a better chance if we try to stick together and help each other. It's us against them! And there aren't nearly as much of us as it is!"

“Oh! That was better,” Liz muttered.

Several of the other women turned and glared at her. “That wasn’t nice!” one of the women said.

“Oh yeah? Well I didn’t *murder* my babies because I was too big of a coward to face adversity! How many babies did they take with them?” Simone growled.

“They aren’t *our* babies! They’re theirs! And *they* are aliens!”

“Yours might be, but these are *my* babies. They might think they’re theirs, but they’re not! They’re mine! I worked my ass off to pay for these babies, and I’m not fucking giving them up! It’s a mother’s *job* to protect her babies! I’m going to protect mine, by whatever means necessary. *You* wimp out if that’s the best you can do, but I’m an American, by damn, and I intend to act like one! And I’m a woman and by god, that doesn’t make me a weakling! And I’m going to be a mother and that makes me as fucking dangerous to any threat to my babies as a grizzly bear!”

“Exactly what do you think you can do? We’re outnumbered here! And we’re out-muscled! And we’re out-trained!” one of the other women snapped.

“We’re women. I can’t think of anybody that’s more experienced or better at getting what they want by sneak attack! Beyond that, we’re Americans! It’s in our blood. If our ancestors hadn’t learned how to conduct guerrilla warfare from the Indians, we’d still have a Queen instead of a president!”

“Native Americans,” someone nearby corrected her.

“Are you?”

“No.”

“Well my great grandmother was full-blooded Cherokee, so mind your own damned business! I’ll call *us* Indians if I want to!”

“So ... what do you have in mind?”

Simone blinked. She’d been so busy running off at the mouth and expressing her opinions she hadn’t realized that she’d caught the attention of all the women and they’d gathered closer. “Uh ... You mean a plan?”

“Yeah. What do you think we should do?”

Dismay filled Simone. She was all hot air. She enjoyed expressing her opinion and the more radical it was, the better, because she just liked being able to say what she thought. She realized from the looks on their faces, though, that they were looking for hope. They were hoping for something they could do that wouldn’t leave them feeling so helpless. It occurred to her after some desperate scrambling that there was no way to make a plan until and unless they knew more than they did. Only an idiot tried to make plans without information. “Know the enemy,” she said finally. “We can’t do anything, or make any kind of plan until we know more. We’ll have to focus on discovering any weaknesses before we can use them against them.”

“You will find no weaknesses,” Camryn said directly behind her.

Simone flinched all over, grimacing. When she opened her eyes, she discovered all of the women were gaping at a spot directly behind her with expressions of absolute horror. Goosebumps erupted all over her. “He’s right behind me, isn’t he?” she asked Liz in a low whisper.

Liz swallowed audibly. “The really big really mean one?”

Simone nodded.

“Yeah.”

Simone turned and allowed her gaze to crawl all the way up his length until her neck cramped from tilting her head back. She smiled at him weakly. “What did you say?”

He bent down, grasped her arms and hauled her to her feet. Retaining a grip on one arm, he marched her across the cell toward the door. Simone threw a glance over her shoulder at the other women as he dragged her out the door. They’d scattered, forming smaller groups.

Camryn didn’t say anything until they’d reached the cabin. Once they had, he pushed her toward a chair and then paced away from her when she wilted into it. She eyed him worriedly, wondering if he was trying to gain control of his temper or just trying to decide how to kill her. It didn’t make her feel any better that when he finally turned to her he stopped a good two yards away and clasped his hands behind his back.

“Is it your intention to try to get these women killed?” he growled finally.

Simone felt her heart surge painfully against her chest wall. She figured it was mostly a rhetorical question, though, and she didn’t bother to answer, mostly because she was trying to remember everything she’d said and figure out how much he’d heard.

She supposed the last of it was damning enough. Fuck! What were they going to do now? How could they sneak attack when she’d opened her big mouth and ruined any chance of it?

His lips tightened. “You had no trouble speaking only a moment ago!”

“I thought it was a rhetorical question,” she muttered, clasping her hands together in her lap. “You know, like when your parents are lecturing you? They don’t really expect an answer. They just want to browbeat you.”

She’d thrown him with that. She could tell by the change in his expression that he was trying to figure out what she was talking about—and, of course, he couldn’t! He wasn’t human and they didn’t *have* parents! Unfortunately, she couldn’t comfort herself that he didn’t have a very firm grasp on English. He might speak with a thick accent, but he didn’t seem to have any trouble talking or understanding—not the language, anyway. The customs, some of the concepts—maybe even some of the slang—but she decided she couldn’t pin her hopes on the possibility that he’d failed to understand her.

He leaned toward her. “Have I mistaken your intelligence?”

Simone blinked at him. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

His lips tightened.

“I wasn’t supposed to answer that one?” Simone guessed.

“Woman!” he roared. “Do you grasp that you now belong to the people of Macedon? That your life is entirely in our hands?”

Simone recoiled when he bellowed at her, feeling the color flee from her face, but it wasn’t exactly news to her. She had known that already. There was a vast chasm, she reflected, between knowing and accepting, though. “Yes,” she said in a quavering voice.

“What you have done out there is treason against the people of Macedon!”

Simone chewed her lip. “I think you might have the wrong definition of treason.”

“Shut up, Simone!”

“Yes, but . . .”

She began blinking very rapidly when he surged toward her and grasped her arms as if he would yank her from the chair. Instead, he merely gripped them. “I am the only thing that stands between you and death at this moment,” he growled. “Some allowance

will be made for your ignorance until you have had time to be taught our ways, but there is a limit to my tolerance. If I catch you trying to incite rebellion in the other women again, I will have no choice but to take steps to put a stop to it. Do you understand me?"

Simone's chin wobbled with incipient tears—mostly from sheer terror, but resentment found its way past the fear. She swallowed convulsively a couple of times, tempted to inform him that him and his damned people had already passed a death sentence on them. The only difference that she could see was when and how and whether it was their own choice or not. Upon consideration, she thought she'd told them enough.

In any case, there was a lot to be said for putting off even the inevitable when it was a case of die—or die. Most people, even on death row, or with a terminal disease, were willing to endure just about anything to put it off a little while longer and for the chance to escape it altogether and she realized she wasn't any different.

She didn't *want* to die. She wanted to live. She wanted to raise her sons. And that was the crux of it. If they were going to take her babies, what did she really have to live for?

She felt nauseated with the fear of trying to save herself and possibly bringing death that much faster, but she found she just couldn't give up. "I think I understand you very well," she said coldly. "We have monsters on *my* world that don't look like monsters."

He looked shocked and then furious. He released her abruptly. "As long as you understand me," he muttered after a moment. "You belong to Macedon. Any act against Macedon is an act of treason and the penalty is death. You will not be spared only because you carry my heir."

She was going to have to research their capital punishment, she thought vaguely. If it was really bad, they might want to figure out a backup plan to avoid it if worse came to worse. The draks certainly weren't going to be 'humane' when they weren't human! The question was, how barbaric were their execution practices?

"You will stay here until I am convinced that you will not immediately begin to start trouble again when I send you back to stay with the other breeders."

* * * *

Camryn was so unsettled when he stalked from the cabin that he felt downright nauseated. He tried to convince himself for a while that it was fury. The woman was adept at arousing that! When he'd found a quiet corner of the recreation room and settled to brood over the confrontation, however, he found his mind going over and over the way she'd looked at him when she'd called him a monster and every time the memory repeated he felt a little more ill.

She hadn't looked at him like that before. Even when she'd first discovered that he was drak, and not human as she was, she hadn't looked at him like *that*! It had scared her and he hadn't particularly liked that, but it hadn't been an unexpected reaction. His own reaction when he'd seen his first human had been an unpleasant jolt. It was understandable that hers would be when she was doubly threatened—encountering a different species and being captive of that strange and different being.

That was still a far cry from the admiration he'd seen in her eyes when they had first met face to face, and troubling, but he'd been able to convince himself that she would grow accustomed to the differences as he had.

He scrubbed his hand over his face, trying to wipe away the memory. He

couldn't banish it any more than he could dismiss the sense, almost of fear, that he had crossed a barrier, and it had closed behind him, and he would never be able to breach it again.

She had forced him to it, he thought angrily! He had had no notion that any female creature could be so willful! *Their* women did not have that trait! They were quiet and gentle creatures! Malleable! She was not a man, gods damn it! He couldn't challenge her, beat sense in to her, or at least a healthy dose of fear! She was too fragile! He would almost think her completely witless to keep challenging him when she had to know she had nothing to back up that mouth of hers except that he knew she was as nimble minded as any opponent he'd ever faced on the battlefield!

Was there *no* way to make her understand that he was restrained by an unwillingness to harm her? That the others would not have that restraint?

He was afraid he could not and he realized abruptly that was a part of the fear churning in his belly. He had glimpsed steel in her eyes—those strangely beautiful eyes that could look at him with such helplessness, that made him feel a desperate need to protect her had hardened like stone when he'd told her she would die if she continued.

She wasn't fearless—because she wasn't stupid! She *knew* what she was doing.

He dug his fingers into his hair, massaging his skull where a headache had begun to pound. He'd begun to suspect that he wasn't going to be able to inspire enough fear in her to convince her that it was the only way she was going to survive—to bend before they broke her.

And they would, if he failed to control her. The breeders had value to him and the other warriors like him who wanted sons of their own. However, traditionally, they had no value, and it was the elders who were in power, the same men who'd brought them to this pass, gods damn them!

They were not entirely to blame. He knew that. The traditions went back generations, but they were the only ones living to blame. And beyond that, they had been completely cognizant of the impending disaster—they and *their* fathers—and they had still been careless and completely irresponsible of their sons' birthright! Beyond sending out a search for a compatible species, they had not gone one step further even when they had discovered the beings of Earth.

They had had to go before the council and demand that something be done and listened to them argue over the destruction of their race by tainting it with the blood of these alien beings! As if *they* had not already destroyed all possibility of keeping their lines pure unless they simply accepted extinction!

The elders would leap at the opportunity to dispose of the breeders they'd found! One breath that the women would be unmanageable, that they would not bow to the traditions of the drak, and they would destroy them! The council had been looking for any excuse to refuse the mission before they had even left.

Mayhap that wasn't entirely fair, he decided. They were at war with the skeets of L'andal and the flurs of Bandedko over the resources of Kylo. To pull a ship from the front lines, and some of their best warriors, was the next thing to insane. But, as they had argued, could they really afford to lose their best warriors and have no sons to replace them? Who were they fighting for? They had very little to gain from the war themselves and no sons to gain from their efforts.

And they would *still* have no sons if Simone continued as she had begun!

He sent his brother and his cousin an unwelcome glare when they settled across from him. Neither of them paid it any attention.

He was losing the respect of his peers because he could not control his woman! His breeder, he reminded himself, so disconcerted that he'd thought of her in terms of a concubine that it decimated his anger.

"You are regretting the choice?" Kael asked unerringly.

Camryn narrowed his eyes at his cousin. "I cannot imagine why you would think that," he said tightly.

"The men are talking," Ean said uneasily. "If anything that has happened here should get back to the council, we will be undone!"

"They have as much to lose as we do," Camryn retorted. "They will keep their mouths shut."

"It will not matter one way or the other if we cannot do something with Simone."

Camryn flicked a look at Kael. "I spoke with her. I impressed upon her that her behavior would not be tolerated."

"Yes, so we saw," Kael said dryly. "If I am not mistaken, she is even now cowering in the corner of your cabin—plotting mischief."

Camryn closed his eyes, seeking patience. "You do not know that."

"No. I do not know that, but I would guess it from the look she gave both of us! What the hell did you say to her that she looks at us now as monsters, and with burning hate?"

Camryn swallowed a little sickly. "That she would die if she tried to stir up a revolt."

Ean and Kael exchanged a look.

"Why did you tell her that? There has never been a breeder executed for treason!" Ean said angrily.

"Because there has never been one who instigated revolt!" Camryn growled.

"They will not go that far," Kael said uneasily. "They are angry, and frightened, and they are accustomed to their own world. They are still women. They are still weak and well aware of it. They will not fight ... long."

"Mayhap you should review the vids of their little discussion?" Camryn said dryly. "The women are angry, frightened, and dangerous because they are afraid of what will happen to them on our world. Did it not seem the least bit shocking to discover that two of their number were so unwilling to accept that they killed themselves? Do you think those who did not are any more willing to accept ... because I think they are girding themselves to fight."

"They are not fools!" Kael snapped. "They must know that they cannot win such a battle!"

Camryn grunted. "You and I know that. *They* apparently aren't convinced ... and there is where the danger lies."

"Mayhap we should try to reason with them?"

Camryn and Kael both turned to look at Ean as if he'd lost his mind.

"They are breeders!" Kael spat in disgust.

"They are *women!*" Camryn snapped, outraged at the suggestion. "You are suggesting we ... *negotiate* peace?"

Ean reddened. "What is it that you plan to do, then?"

“I will keep her in my cabin and keep a close watch on her until I am certain she has had time to consider the consequences and then I will return her to the hold with the others,” he said decisively.

Ean and Kael looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. “She is a breeder!” they said at once.

“You can not keep her in your cabin!” Kael added. “The elders would stand on their heads if they learned you had broken tradition and done such an unheard of thing! They would instantly have her executed for corruption and you locked away for treatment!”

Camryn narrowed his eyes at both of them. “They will not hear of it if I am successful! She is the instigator! If I can impress it upon her that they have no choice but to comply, then the others will follow her. Even if I cannot, if she is not there to stir them up, the others will behave and do as they are told.”

* * * *

Simone was too unnerved for a long while after Camryn had left to do much besides go over and over what he'd said. She discovered, though, that that wasn't a bad thing. He'd given her the key to recovering her mistake.

She had to convince him that he'd completely cowed her. They all had to convince the arrogant assholes that they'd browbeat them into submission! They were going to have to put forth a show of reluctance at first, she thought, if they wanted to be convincing, but she doubted it was going to take a lot to convince them. They were so damned arrogant already that they were sure that women were nothing but spineless weaklings.

It wasn't a tactic she hadn't tried before. Of course, that had been with her boyfriends, but the draks were still males. It should work on them for the same reason it worked on the men of Earth—arrogance. It blinded them to the possibility that they might not be ruling the roost as they thought.

The draks could bluster and bellow, stomp around and threaten, and thoroughly show their asses, and when they'd worn themselves out, and convinced themselves the women wouldn't *dare* to defy them, *they* would do what they damned well pleased!

Chapter Seven

If there'd ever been a time when Simone desperately needed something to calm her nerves, this was certainly it! The urge for a cigarette was nearly painful and for a little while she couldn't think of anything else and she began to wonder if her craving wasn't at least partly responsible for some of her irrational behavior.

Maybe, she decided. There was no getting around the fact that she wasn't quite herself.

Or it could be the situation.

Or it could be her hormones, she realized. She would've begun to have changes right away, wouldn't she, if the procedure had taken? Nothing drastic, maybe not enough of a change to feel it.

The almost idle search for why she'd almost begun to feel like someone else calmed her when her thoughts shifted to the possibility that she really was pregnant. She'd had no concept of time since she'd been taken. She had no idea how long she'd slept after the doctor had given her the shot—long enough to be transported from the clinic to the ship, but that told her nothing. They had some sort of particle transporter. They could pop in and out in little more than the blink of an eye—although they seemed disinclined to transport *them* that way. There were no clocks. There were no windows and there wouldn't have been a sunrise or sunset to tell her anyway. She only had her internal clock and the stress she'd been under since she'd first awakened had thrown that completely off kilter.

Two weeks? Three? Had it been long enough that she could count on the fact that her little eggs were firmly planted? Or was her body even now gathering itself to reject them?

She supposed she shouldn't have called her baby's father a monster. It had been an impulse and it had been a direct hit. She'd seen that in his expression and in his eyes when he'd recovered enough try to hide it. She'd been glad it had seemed to penetrate his thick skull at that moment, but it hadn't taken long for guilt to begin to chip away at her complacency.

It wasn't fair to blame him for the failings of his entire race. He was the product of it—just like she was the product of her own society—except she *knew* he hadn't chosen. She'd been given every opportunity to make up her mind, make her own decisions, even the freedom to reject any part of her own society that she didn't agree with. He'd been trained to be what he was from birth. How could he possibly think any differently when no one, apparently, ever questioned the fucked up society they had?

Or if they did, they were probably dealt with very swiftly.

The worst of it was, she really *did* understand. He wasn't threatening to harm her himself. He was trying to make her understand that his people would—because he didn't want her to take his son with her if she went down. She could understand that. She didn't like the idea either, but she wanted her sons to have what *she* had had—choices. Maybe they wouldn't want to be warriors like their fathers were. Maybe they would, but

she wanted them to have the chance to decide. She didn't want them to be taught that she was nothing, unimportant beyond her biology and her ability to produce more warriors.

Beyond that, she wanted them. She wanted to be able to hold her sons in her arms and teach them love by giving them love.

It was no wonder that Camryn was so cold and unfeeling—all of them!

The thought gave her a pang. He was so handsome! Kael and Ean, too! She wished things were different—wished *they* were—wished they didn't have to be enemies. If they hadn't been taught to believe the things they had, if they'd even had mothers to temper the hardness, what might they have been like then?

Not that it mattered, she told herself. They weren't capable of tenderness or love, however much she might wish they were.

She wasn't even certain they were capable of passion beyond a desire to slaughter and maim. If they were, they weren't tempted to waste it on her. She was surprised Camryn had even deigned to touch her at all.

Of course, that was yet another one of those 'forbidden' things. Breeders didn't even rank on their damned totem pole. They fell somewhere around animal, beast of burden—not even pet. She didn't think it was actually a law, but the warrior class did not fraternize with breeders. It was looked down upon for them even to lower themselves to consort with the middle class. She wasn't forbidden to have sex, not completely anyway. According to Akule, and assuming she wanted to, as long as she was pregnant and not near term, she could indulge. Indiscriminate breeding was absolutely forbidden, but if she was bred and couldn't get pregnant, she could have a lover, or lovers. He'd actually suggested that they should be 'generous' with themselves.

She'd had the feeling the bastard was hinting, but he could fucking hint all he wanted to. She didn't think any of the women were desperate enough to let that snake crawl in their bed!

She couldn't even see any possibility that any of them would find a *useful* lover when nothing but the worker class would consort with them and they were the next thing to dirt themselves.

She dismissed it. She didn't *want* a lover.

Well, despite her conflicting feelings of hostility toward them, she might have been willing if any of her babies' fathers had been interested, but they weren't and that being the case, she thought she could manage doing without.

She'd managed to calm herself down when Akule entered the cabin and settled to lecturing her about her place in the drak society. She didn't know if it was intended as part of her chastisement or not, but it certainly *was* punishment. It wasn't bad enough that he went into excruciating details on every little thing, but he droned when he talked until it was all she could do not to fall asleep.

She listened until she was tired of listening, and then she got up, moved to a corner and sat down with her back to him.

He went silent, clearly thrown totally off kilter.

"You can not escape merely by not listening," he said finally.

Maybe not, but she didn't want to hear it anymore. "Just how many times do you think you need to repeat that canned speech? Until we memorize it like you have?"

She heard him crouch behind her. "Until you accept that this is the way things are and you cannot change them."

Well! There was no changing a damned thing if *somebody* didn't have the balls to try! Maybe he was right, but they'd never know unless they did try and she wanted to know they couldn't change things before she threw up her hands and gave up.

"It is not the life you had, but it is not a hard life. You will not be expected to labor. You will be provided with comfort. You will have the freedom to come and go from the apartment assigned to you. You will have the freedom to seek your friends and spend the days with them You may take lovers if you desire to ease the loneliness."

Simone turned her head to look at him at that. Oh, it sounded like utopia alright! She didn't have to work for a living. She could just be a slug and lie around all the time, getting bigger and bigger, and then produce her litter and start over!

Maybe that would appeal to some people. She'd met some lazy individuals in her time and she thought that might be right up their alley, but it sounded like hell to her. She wouldn't have to worry about having babies—litters—until she'd worn her body out! She would be out of her mind from sheer boredom in no time at all.

She didn't especially *like* working, but she liked the things it gave her and part of that was a sense of accomplishment, a sense of importance in the world, the feeling that she *might* make a difference—to somebody.

She thought she could even bear the life they had planned for her if they'd only let her keep her babies. It would be enough to be a mother. That would be a full time job and one she'd love to have.

Nothing could compensate her for having to give up her children.

How could they not understand that when they'd gone to such great lengths to have children themselves?

"If you understood anything about me you wouldn't think that there was anything in what you've said to appeal to me at all. I had all of that before—except the not working part—and more! I had self-respect and the respect of my peers because I was worth something, because I pulled my weight and did my part. I had people who cared about me. I had a chance to have a family of my own. You took that away from me. You think you can offer me *less*, take everything else, and I'll be happy? That I should be satisfied?"

"You had no man."

Simone rolled her eyes. "And that devastated me, I can tell you! I had plenty of men, by god! I didn't have a man at the time because I didn't want one!"

Alright, that wasn't strictly true, but it was close enough. She didn't have one because she hadn't met one she wanted to keep—even for a little while—but that was beside the point! And it wasn't a damned selling point for Macedon! Jeez! If she hadn't found a man on Earth she could live with, what were the odds she would on Macedon? When they were such arrogant assholes! Anyway, he was talking lover. She could pick one of those up pretty much any night of the week if she'd been so inclined! It wasn't as if Earth men were prone to turning down a free piece of ass!

He looked disconcerted, but then his face hardened with determination. "I would be your lover. It does not bother me that you are a breeder."

An unpleasant jolt went through her, followed by anger at the comment about the status *they* had hung on her!

Apparently, he took her speechlessness as consideration—or maybe he just didn't notice the glint in her eyes because he was staring at her damned boobs!

"I know your language well and I would be willing to learn your customs so that I would be a good lover. Beyond that, there are things that I could give you that you would not be given, or be able to get for yourself."

Simone planted her palms against his chest to keep him at arm's length as he settled his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. She wasn't certain if it was a good thing or a bad thing that the men decided to return at that moment. She was still trying to decide whether it was against one of their damned laws to shove him on his ass when the door opened. It caught both her attention and Akule's.

Camryn, not surprisingly, was in the lead since it appeared to be his cabin. His gaze swept the room and settled on the two of them in the corner. He looked perfectly blank for a handful of seconds and then his gaze flickered over them and moved back to her face.

And then he went into some sort of transition. His face darkened and twisted into a feral mask even before a roar of pure rage emerged from his chest that made Simone's hair stand on end.

A jolt went through her. She felt her eyes widen and her mouth drop open. Her mind went chaotic, but she snatched her hands back guiltily.

Kael and Ean caught hold of him, thankfully, as he surged forward, but the image of a vicious Rottweiler on a flimsy leash flashed through her mind.

Akule shot to his feet. "She is bred! There no law that she cannot take a lover!"

It didn't seem to appease Camryn—or either of the others, for that matter. She discovered that, although they were holding Camryn determinedly, Kael and Ean looked almost as enraged as Camryn. She felt uselessly along the wall in a mindless instinct to flee.

"*Out!*" Kael snarled. "*You cannot fuck her in the prince's quarters whether she is agreeable or not!*"

"*She is only just bred!*" Ean snapped.

Akule bowed shakily and inched his way around the men who hadn't advanced much further than the aperture—thankfully.

Camryn shrugged Ean and Kael off when Akule scraped past him and strode briskly down the corridor, rounding on her the moment Akule had disappeared. Simone managed to unglue her eyes from him long enough to search for a possible retreat.

"Did you offer to take him as your lover?" Camryn asked through his teeth.

Simone had just managed to pick her lower jaw up. At that, it sagged again, this time in disbelief. "I didn't!" she gasped.

"*It is not forbidden, Camryn,*" Kael said in a low voice. "*Think what you are doing!*"

"*It is forbidden in my apartment!*" Camryn snarled, whirling on his cousin furiously.

"*You have the right to object to that,*" Kael said, "*but if you had attacked him he could have brought charges before the council!*"

"*I am not concerned about charges from the likes of that putan! He overstepped his bounds petitioning her in my quarters!*"

"*And your anger is completely out of proportion to such a minor infraction! The council would think that you had interest in her that you should not have, Camryn! She would suffer for that. Not you!*"

Camryn scrubbed a shaking hand over his face. *“As Ean pointed out, she is just bred—only a matter of weeks! She cannot take a lover yet, not when it might jeopardize the implants!”*

“The collar protects them,” Kael said pointedly. *“He knows it has already been placed—everyone knows! That would not hold water as an argument and well you know it!”*

Camryn turned and looked at Simone. He did not dare approach her, however, not even as close as he had before. “Go into the bedchamber, Simone,” he said finally, struggling to keep the anger still boiling inside of him from his voice.

Thankfully, for once she did not argue with him. She bounded up and raced into the other room. Ean closed the door.

“I would ask you if you had lost your mind,” Kael finally said when he’d dropped into one of the chairs, “except that I think I have lost mine, too. This is dangerous, Camryn. By the gods! If you cannot show more restraint we will all be undone!”

“You of all people should not lecture me on restraint!” Camryn snapped.

Kael glared at him but finally shrugged. “In this instance, I have more. I at least do not go about calling her Simone! You could not expose yourself more glaringly!”

Camryn reddened uncomfortably. “I had not realized it,” he muttered.

“Because that is how you think of her in your mind ... and you cannot afford to. You know this!”

“Think of her? Or think of her as Simone?” Camryn asked tiredly.

“Either,” Ean responded angrily. “You are as dangerous to her as she is to herself!”

Camryn threaded his fingers through his hair. “I will petition the council to take her as concubine.”

Kael and Ean exchanged a look. “They will not allow that. You know they will not, Camryn. If she was one of our own, they would not. Asking when she is not even drak is likely to doom not only her, but all of the others. They were not disposed even to allow us to take them as breeders.”

Camryn surged to his feet furiously. “Then the laws need to be changed! *They* had concubines! Not much choice, granted, but still they had some possibility. We do not! And our sons will not! They will cling to the old ways until there is no mighty drak empire! Until there is no one!”

“It would wound Lielani to hear you say such things,” Ean said quietly.

Camryn glanced at him sharply. “She will not hear,” he said tightly.

“She will if you go to the council,” Kael pointed out. “They have changed nothing in a thousand years. They have known that this day would come a hundred years and done nothing to stop it or even to slow it. It was a great victory even to convince them to concede us as much as they have. They will bend no further. You cannot convince her to accept if you will not.”

“You have accepted?” Camryn asked tightly.

Kael’s expression hardened. “No. I just do not think this is a battle that we can win. And I know also that we are liable to lose what we have gained. I do not want to risk that. I want to know that I will have a son. I know it is bad luck to think of death when we go into battle, but I cannot put it from my mind when I have no son and know that my line dies with me.”

"I am not certain it matters," Ean said tiredly. "She is angry now. She will hate us all when the babes are taken from her. I do not think she would consider becoming our concubine even if the council allowed it."

"We cannot know that when we cannot even ask!" Camryn snapped.

Ean looked at him for a long moment. "I watched the vids, Camryn. They want the babes. That is why they are determined to fight us every step. They do not want to give them up."

"Well they cannot have them!" Kael exploded. "They are *our* sons!"

Camryn studied his brother and his cousin thoughtfully. "There is a way that we can keep her with us—for now. It will buy us time to try to make a change. It may also appease her."

Ean and Kael both turned to stare at him.

Camryn turned to pace, thinking.

Kael and Ean watched him for several moments, growing more and more impatient.

"Do you mean to tell us?" Kael demanded finally.

"She carries the heirs of the House of Jakaar," he said finally. "It has not been done very often, but it has been done. We can insist that she be quartered in the palace so that our own physicians can care for her. The babes will need to be cared for when they are borne. There is no reason why she could not be their caregiver ... until it is time for them to begin their training."

Kael frowned, considering it. "They will want her bred again within a year ... certainly no more than a year. The others will begin to demand a breeder, you can be certain, as soon as they have delivered ours if they are not already in process of petitioning. That is not much time for any sort of petition and you can be certain that if you try what you have in mind that they will drag that out until we are old and gray," he ended dryly, "And that is only if they will agree to consider it at all. It is far more likely that they will see her and her people as a threat to our traditions and take steps to prevent it."

"Do you think that she will be satisfied if she is given seven summers with them?"

Camryn frowned. "They will not be babes. She should not object. We cannot allow her more."

"We cannot promise her that much!" Kael said. "You have not thought this out, Camryn! There is nothing to say that the next to breed will not also demand to house her while they await the birth of their sons! Even our rank will not prevent that!"

"If we are successful in our petition, however, she will no longer be a breeder," Ean said.

"Except that that is unlikely!" Kael snapped. "And certainly not likely within the space of no more than a year. We will not be there to see it through. We are very likely to be sent to the front again as soon as we return. We can file a petition, but it will merely sit there until we are allowed leave to return and that may not be before the birth of the babes ... if then."

"Then we must convince your father to aid us."

Kael stared at him as if he had grown two heads. "*My* father? By the gods, Camryn! He is the worst traditionalist of the lot! He is more likely to have heart failure

and expire!”

“Our father cannot when he is acting head of the council!”

“And he would not if he could!” Ean put in.

Camryn settled heavily into a chair at last. “We can try. If he fails us, we will have to find someone else.”

Kael sat forward in his chair and dropped his face into his hands. “I think this will all fall apart on us, Camryn,” he muttered. “Too many know that we are keeping her here. They may not say anything if there is no further interference when we reach Macedon, but Akule has developed an interest in her. If he wants her half as much as we do, he will not be silent. And I would not bet one *pikan* that it will stop there if the other warriors get wind of it.”

“You are that concerned about rumors that will go no further than the worker class?”

“In this instance, yes! Because it will go higher, Camryn. It will reach the council, very likely before we could push forward any petition at all.”

Camryn flicked a look at Ean.

“I will watch him myself,” Ean said. “I am not sure I agree with Kael, but I see no sense in risking it.”

* * * *

“Simone! Simone! Si-mone!” the women began to chant the moment she stepped inside the cell with Camryn and they noticed her.

“*That certainly worked well,*” Kael said tightly. “*They were not as vocal in their rebellion before we removed her.*”

Camryn hesitated and finally released her. She flicked a glance at him and the others and strode briskly away, which prompted the women to begin cheering.

“Well,” Ean said, “*I think we can cease to worry that any others will harm themselves. They are more likely to slit our throats in our sleep than their own.*”

“*They are not barbarians and they are women,*” Camryn growled irritably. “*Do not be absurd!*”

Ean threw him a look and then exchanged a significant glance with Kael. “*Do not tell me that you still believe that they are the gentle creatures that we are accustomed to!*”

“*Of course they are!*” Camryn said irritably. “*And Simone is the sweetest, most gentle of all.*”

* * * *

“Well, it looks like they still have their balls,” Liz commented by way of greeting. Simone shrugged. “They wouldn’t sleep any where around me.”

“That’s just a crying shame!”

Simone sighed. Actually, she thought it was. It had been almost as hellish pinned up in such close confines with them as it had been when they weren’t there and she’d had nothing but her thoughts for company. Thankfully, Akule hadn’t approached her again.

Not that he didn’t stare holes in her when he came for his daily brainwashing session!

The women surrounding her began pelting her with questions as soon as they’d finished welcoming her back, but Simone shook her head, motioning toward the guards with her eyes. “Sorry, I’m tired. We can talk later.”

They were disappointed, some of them angry, but then they hadn't caught the eyeball signal. They drifted away and Simone and Liz moved to Liz's bunk and settled.

"We were really hoping for some kind of news," Liz said neutrally. "I think everybody's mostly just bored stupid."

Simone nodded, picking at the covering on the bare mattress. "I get the impression that we're being monitored," she said quietly. "I don't know how good the equipment is, but I imagine it's at least as sensitive as anything we have."

Liz's eyes widened.

"I've been thinking a lot about the last guy I dated," Simone said in a more conversational voice. Liz looked at her blankly and Simone felt impatience flicker through her. She'd given a lot of thought to how she could get the message across without giving them away like she had before, but trying to hint through correlation was the only thing she'd come up with. Liz was smart. She'd figured she would catch on very quickly. She just hoped she hadn't been wrong because she didn't know how to get it across if that didn't work.

She forced a fake chuckle. "We fought *all* the time—nothing physical, mind you, but a lot of hell raising. He was a real control freak."

Pausing, she studied Liz to see if she'd caught that and saw to her relief that Liz was looking thoughtful. "Anyway, there was just no dealing with the jerk. It seemed like every time I wanted to do something, he didn't want to and he didn't want me to. The minute I said anything, he'd immediately object and then we'd have a huge argument. I let him browbeat me for a while—until I got tired of it. Then, when we'd argue, I'd wait until he decided he'd bullied me in to giving him his way and I'd go and do it anyway. Of course, if he found out, he was mad as hell, but as long as I let him *think* he was running everything he was happy and things were peaceful."

Liz sat frowning thoughtfully at her feet for several moments. "Why don't you rest? I think I'll go chat with some of the girls."

Relieved, hopeful that Liz really had caught the message, Simone made a production of yawning and stretching and then lay down on the mattress when Liz left, closing her eyes. For a little while, she listened to the snatches of conversation she could hear around her, but it didn't take long for her mind to complete the circuit back to her latest stay in Camryn's cabin. She still didn't understand what had happened, and it bothered her that she hadn't been able to figure it out.

If she'd had a better grasp of their language, she might've been able to understand it. Unfortunately, despite her bragging and her own confidence, she hadn't made much headway in learning the drak language. It also didn't help that she didn't seem to understand the rules and laws of the drak as well as she'd thought she did. She supposed she'd tuned Akule out more than she'd realized.

And yet, Akule had just propositioned her. She would've thought that he'd lied and it wasn't alright, except that she distinctly remembered that part of the lecture from the many times he'd recited it before. All of the draks seemed to understand English. If Akule had been misleading them the entire time, surely some of them would've noticed?

She'd finally decided that it had only *seemed* to her that the argument had something to do with her, but that explanation hadn't helped her to dismiss it—mostly because the guys had acted so strangely around her afterwards—starting with sending her to the bedroom and shutting the door.

They'd never seemed to concern themselves with whether she was in the room or not because they knew she couldn't understand them. Mostly, they either completely ignored the fact that she was in the room, or they pretended to, and she'd begun to think that they were just pretending she wasn't there most of the time. She couldn't quite put her finger on why she thought that. It was like—electric vibes or something.

Then again, she couldn't be sure that it wasn't all in her head, that she didn't just feel like they were conscious of her because she was so aware of them.

The chances were, she thought wryly, that it was just a form of conceit. She was hypersensitive about them and she'd transferred her own feelings to them. In all honesty, which was a great pity, she couldn't think of a single reason why they'd focus on her unless it was just because they weren't used to having women invade their space and felt like she was an intruder.

She would've liked to believe that that little episode was all about jealousy, that they found her as attractive as she did them, but they sure as hell hadn't given her any reason to believe that. None of them would come closer than three feet of her except Camryn when he was bullying her and even then he pretty much kept her at arm's length. There weren't any 'accidental' brushes. She hadn't encountered any sizzling looks. She couldn't even honestly say that they avoided coming near her because they were afraid they just wouldn't be able to trust themselves!

The thought almost made her laugh. Self-control didn't seem to be a problem for them. The outburst she'd witnessed was, in fact, her first indication that they *might* have any kind of anger management issues.

She shuddered at the memory. She supposed that was the main reason she hadn't been able to get it out of her mind. Camryn had scared the pure shit out of her, almost literally, and it made her vastly uneasy that she didn't know what had set him off—so she could avoid it, whatever it was.

One thing was certain, she hadn't had a bit of trouble acting subdued and cowed after that little episode! Because it wasn't acting. She *was* cowed. If she'd had any idea Camryn was capable of that kind of rage before that she wouldn't have been playing with fire!

With any of them! Camryn had totally dominated her mind at the time, caught her full focus, but despite the fact that Kael and Ean were grappling with him, trying to hold him back, they'd looked nearly as furious. In retrospect, it had almost been more like they were wrestling over which of them was going to get to her—or Akule—first.

That was another big question mark in her mind—whether she'd been the target or Akule. She thought it was Akule, but then again, the moment Akule had left, Camryn had focused on her. She hadn't even been able to remember what he'd asked her at first. It had been the next day before she'd managed to jog it loose—something about taking Akule as her lover.

That was what had led her to the interesting possibility that it was a fit of jealousy. Unfortunately, she hadn't been able to convince herself that it was when he hadn't tried to get in her pants himself—before or since.

She had to conclude that she or they had broken one of the 'golden rules' of the fucking draks. It was good to know that they tended to react very violently to any breach of conduct. Camryn had warned her, of course, but that wasn't the same thing as experiencing—not by a long shot.

It had made her rethink their situation. Were they really prepared, she wondered, to deal with the consequences of rebellion? She didn't think they were. She didn't know if she could gather up enough spine to face the possibility of Camryn in a rage multiplied by hundreds of them.

Try to tell the others, she wondered? Or try to keep them occupied, allow them to think they were going to make a difference?

She didn't want to get them killed. She knew they weren't really following her so much as she'd managed to strike a chord in them, but she also knew they'd been holding all of it inside until she'd encouraged them to let it spill out—which still made her responsible.

They couldn't do anything now anyway. They couldn't really reach the men to try to persuade them and it probably wouldn't do any good if they could. They appeared to be powerful men, but they weren't the leaders. Camryn, from what she'd understood, was the mission leader and/or the big boss of the ship, but that didn't mean he had a lot of influence beyond the ship.

Of course, he'd seemed pretty damned cocky about his position when he'd informed her that he was a prince, but then she was just a lowly breeder to him. That was enough to set up his back whether he was somebody really important among his people or not. They might have princes running out their ears.

Chapter Eight

Simone's knees still felt like water when she was ordered to unfasten her restraints and get up. She stood shakily like everyone else and followed the herd to the opening in the side of the shuttle. She was almost afraid to breathe when she reached it and stared around blankly at the scene that seemed at once nightmarish and unreal at the same time.

A nudge from behind got her feet moving and she focused on trying to keep from falling down and rolling to the bottom of the steeply slanted off-ramp. Several dozen women had emerged before her and they stood in a tight, frightened knot at the bottom of the ramp. She joined them, searching for Liz, wrestling with the weightless sense of fear in her belly.

The knot of women eddied as others joined them, but no one did more than shuffle out of the way when pushed. They were all too stunned and frightened to move from the spot without being driven from it.

Simone clutched at Liz with relief when she'd finally joined the group. Bolstered by the false sense of security it gave her to have contact with someone else, she lifted her head and looked around again.

The city looked like something an artist might imagine a future city to look like, but certainly not like anything she'd seen in reality. She supposed, in a way, it might almost have been a city on Earth at least in the sense that it looked old and well used, cramped, congested with traffic. There were tall buildings—in fact from where she was standing she couldn't see a single one that looked to be less than four or five stories tall—but no towering skyscrapers, she supposed because the city was contained beneath a dome.

The dome was transparent. She glimpsed a sky dark with boiling clouds, the peak of a mountain in the distance, the green of a jungle.

"This way," Akule ordered them, motioning with his hands for them to follow him.

Everyone simply stared at him reluctantly for several moments. Finally, when it sank in that they didn't have a choice, a few of the women moved hesitantly to follow. It was enough to get everyone else going. They trailed him along a city street, craning their necks to stare up at the buildings they passed, unabashedly gawking because they were too stunned to worry about how it might look to anyone observing them.

It was ironic, Simone reflected, that people spent so much of their time worrying about what other people thought of them when most everyone was exactly like they were—unaware of anything but their own concerns.

She realized when she could finally focus on anything besides the strange design of the buildings that most of the traffic through the city was foot traffic and a hundred percent of it was men.

Wondering if she just hadn't recognized the women, she became more focused in her search. She still didn't see any women, but one thing did become obvious. She

hadn't really understood how rigid their class system was.

They segregated themselves even on the street.

She might not have noticed except for the fact that the warrior class had a sidewalk entirely to themselves. They were easily recognizable by the uniforms they wore, but she thought she would've been able to guess who they were by their bearing alone.

The other sidewalk was far more congested. The men on that side wore their hair lobbed off at the shoulders and, not surprisingly, they didn't wear uniforms. Their clothing varied fairly widely in color and design, but it was consistent in the fact they seemed to favor one piece suits similar to the uniforms and all of them wore a sort of shawl-like robe, open on the sides and in the front, collar-less.

The street where they were walking was the most congested of all and clearly the domain of the rabble—and robots. They passed a number of strange looking mechanical marvels that seemed to be completely autonomous. If anyone was controlling them, at any rate, she didn't see any sign of it.

She'd begun to feel like she was hiking on a mountain when Akule finally brought the group to a halt and directed them into a building. The first floor appeared to be a single room—fairly vast. They were ordered into a single file line and Akule left them to approach a man sitting at a desk. Bowing at the hip, he set some sort of device on the desk that looked similar to a PDA. After bowing again, he turned on his heel and left.

Simone, trying to avoid eye contact if he happened to glance in her direction, leaned close to Liz, who was in front of her. "What do you think they're doing now?"

Liz shrugged. "Processing."

Simone had thought as much. She was just uneasy about what processing entailed.

They seemed efficient enough, but in no great rush. The line moved at a crawl. Simone was as tired of standing by the time she reached the desk as she had been of sitting when the shuttle had finally landed. The man didn't glance at her. He reached for her hand and settled it on a scanner. "Put your chin on the device and keep your eyes open," he intoned in a bored voice.

Simone looked at the device a little uneasily. She'd thought it was some sort of camera. He looked up at her impatiently when she didn't move. "You are holding up processing!"

Feeling her belly tighten with tension, she moved, settling her chin in the cup clearly designed for it. Light flashed in her eye before she even had the chance to blink. She was still trying to blink away the dark spot in her vision when the man grasped her wrist again. That time he shoved her hand into a device roughly the size and shape of a rural mailbox and tightened his hold on her forearm. She discovered why in the next instant. The smell of burning flesh reached her nostrils before she felt the burn. Sucking in a sharp breath, she snatched at her hand. He released her, settling in his seat again.

Simone gaped at the laser tattoo on her arm in shock.

"Follow the line," he said dismissively.

She glanced at Liz and moved away, surreptitiously blowing on the burn, which was still stinging. She was even more unnerved about what to expect at the next station, however.

She was sent to stand behind something that reminded her of an x-ray. It unsettled her even more, but unlike the previous experience, she hadn't noticed any of the women reacting badly to it and she finally decided that it must not be painful like the tattoo.

A man stepped up to her after a moment, pushed her hair out of the way and plugged a wire into the collar around her neck. Her belly clenched, but she didn't feel anything when he'd walked back to some sort of machine and punched buttons. She studied the wire and the machine and finally decided he was downloading some kind of information from the collar. She'd thought it was nothing but a symbol of slavery! It hadn't occurred to her that it was a monitoring device.

Curious to know what it had recorded, she waited a little expectantly for several moments and finally realized that he wasn't going to tell her even if he knew what he was downloading. Her focus on that almost resulted in her missing the purpose of the thing she was standing behind. She caught a brief glimpse of a video display that showed three tiny lumps of flesh attached to the wall of her womb and then she was told to move.

She'd already reached the last stop before it dawned on her that she'd seen her babies. A rush of excitement went through her. She glanced back, struggling with the urge to run back and ask them to let her see.

"Second floor. Apartment five."

Simone dragged her attention back to the man. "What?"

He looked up at her, his lips tightening. "Second floor. Apartment five."

She was more or less pushed toward the elevator by the flow of traffic and found herself in the cubicle with Liz. "What floor are you on?"

Liz blinked, turning to look at her. "I saw them," she said, swallowing convulsively.

Simone felt her own stomach take flight. "I didn't really get more than a glimpse of mine. I was so worried about the damned laser I was focused on the guy plugging me in to the computer."

Fortunately, someone had their wits about them and had punched the button. The cubicle stopped and the doors opened. Simone and Liz were halfway out before they realized it had stopped on the first. They leapt back on just before the doors closed.

When it stopped again, they got off and looked around. It looked closer to a hotel than anything else that came to mind, a long corridor with numbered doors running the length.

The door wasn't locked—didn't seem to have one. It was marked with a recognizable number five, however, and Simone went in. The similarity to a hotel vanished. It looked a lot more like a prison cell than a hotel, even a humble one, except that it appeared to be clean.

There was a toilet, lavatory, and shower in one corner, separated from the main room by a short wall. The bed was a narrow bunk like the one she'd had on the ship, but it at least had some sort of bedding and a pillow—sort of. She stood in the middle of her 'apartment' and turned in a circle.

Her throat tightened abruptly. In spite of everything, she realized she still hadn't fully grasped her situation—until now. Sniffing, she looked down at her arm, realizing finally that she'd been tagged, bar-coded.

She didn't suppose it was worse than being in a prison on Earth, but she wasn't

familiar with prisons on Earth, damn it! She hadn't done anything to deserve this!

Crying wasn't going to change anything, she told herself fiercely, but she flopped on the bed and cried anyway until she was too exhausted to cry anymore.

* * *

Camryn tensed all over when he emerged from the shuttle and looked around and saw that the women were being led away. He'd already clambered down the gangplank before it sank in that he couldn't afford to behave like a madman if he wanted to have any hope of moving Simone to the palace.

Kael's cursing finally drew him from his attempt to pinpoint Simone in the wad of women moving away from them.

"Gods damn it to hell!" Kael growled. "The fucking bastards were very quick to collect them when they did not want us to go after them at all!"

Camryn touched his arm and shook his head in warning when he caught a glimpse of his father's secretary marching purposefully toward them. They exchanged the sharp nod protocol demanded.

"Prince Camryn! Your father sends his greetings and his pleasure that you have returned safely and successfully from your mission. You and your men are to report for duty at dawn. You are to deploy to the mines of Kylo."

When he'd left, Camryn glanced around at the grim faces of the men surrounding him. "You heard him. Attend whatever business you have pending and report back here at dawn."

"Fuck!" Ean growled when the men had dispersed and he, Camryn, and Kael had turned toward the palace. "What do we do now?"

Camryn was too furious to speak, too enraged to think if it came to that. "I will speak to our father," he said finally.

Ean nodded, cast a glance back toward the city, and finally tried to dismiss Simone from his mind when he saw there was no longer any sign of any of the women. She wouldn't come to any harm if she did have to stay in the barracks for a while, he told himself. She would be safe. She was smart. She wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the babies, regardless of how unhappy she was about her situation.

He would still have felt far better if they could have made arrangements to keep her out of trouble while they were off planet, if they could've seen to it that she was safe inside the palace. He didn't have much faith that Camryn would be able to convince their father to take care of it for them, though, and it continued to trouble him despite his efforts to dismiss it.

He finally acknowledged once they reached the palace that it wasn't entirely due to anxiety about her welfare that he could still feel anger simmering inside of him any more than that was why Camryn and Kael were so furious. Housing her in the palace would certainly prevent her from rabbleroxing and keep her out of trouble in that sense, but it would also remove her from the temptation of the other men.

When he had bathed and gathered up his gear he headed for Lielani's apartments. Kael, he discovered, had beat him. They were eyeing one another furiously when Lielani opened the door. She gasped in surprised pleasure. "My dear hearts! You have been away so long I almost think my eyes deceive me!"

Some of the tension went out of both men. Ean dove for her, lifting her up in an exuberant embrace and nuzzling his face against her neck. "I have missed you also,

dearling!” he murmured against her neck.

She chuckled, hugged him back and then wiggled loose to embrace Kael. A worried frown creased her brows when he clutched at her almost desperately, squeezing her so hard she flinched. Backing away from him when he released her, she caught his hand and Ean's and drew both of them into her apartment. “You must tell me all about your adventure, but first,” she threw a smiling glance at each of them, “you must show me how much you missed me.”

Both men chuckled a little uncomfortably but neither of them balked when she continued across her sitting room, headed for the bedroom. She didn't release their hands until she'd reached the bed. When she did, she lifted her hands to unfasten her robe and allowed it to float gracefully to the floor and then climbed up onto the bed.

Ean and Kael exchanged a rueful glance. “You are a naughty woman,” Kael said with a chuckle. “You mean to entertain us both at once?”

She smiled at him saucily. “And why not? You are both here. There's no need for either to wait when I can see you are both in need. The bed is wide enough for three ... and I have holes enough for three also,” she said chuckling.

“Does that mean you intend to wait for Camryn?”

She smiled. “It means that you have choices. Who wants to come inside of me?” she asked when she'd settled on the bed.

Ean and Kael both rose at the question and she chuckled again when she'd studied their erections. “Goodness! Both serpents are waving at me. Well, then, it is only fair that you both have what you desire when you have only just returned from a dangerous mission. Shall I close my eyes and pick which is first?” she asked playfully.

Ean and Kael glanced at one another, shrugged, and began stripping while Lielani lay on her side watching them. She sighed deeply when they were naked. “You two are more beautiful each time I see you!”

They dove at her. She rolled away, laughing when Kael succeeded in pinning her to the bed beneath him. “You are more beautiful each time I see you,” he murmured, nuzzling his face against her neck.

Lielani stroked his hair, but sadness had crept into her. “I wish with all my heart that that was true, dear heart, but it is only your love that sees beauty when it faded long ago.”

He lifted his head to look at her questioningly and she smiled at him. “I cannot do what both of you want in this position.”

He eased away from her and glanced at Ean uneasily. She caught the glance and regretted the impulse that had distressed them when she could tell that they were distressed already. She knew how to distract them, however. Rolling onto her belly, she pushed herself onto her knees and took Ean's shaft in her hands. Guilt welled in her when she found that his proud soldier had softened, but it responded with renewed need when she began to stroke him. When she sensed the tension in him had shifted from worry to pleasurable tension, she wiggled her ass at Kael. “Are you only going to watch?”

He slapped one cheek of her ass playfully, grinning at her. “You are serious?”

She narrowed her eyes at him in amusement. “Do not tell me such fine soldiers cannot stand at attention twice?”

Kael chuckled ruefully. “I don't know about Ean's, but I am certain mine could

stand to attention that many times and more.”

Ean made a rude gesture at him, but he was far too focused on Lielani's magic touch to rouse to anger. Kael watched her stroke and suckle Ean's cock for several moments and found he was too impatient to wait. On his knees between her legs, he spread the cheeks of her ass and stroked her slit. Pleasure brought him to hard tension when he felt her welcoming moisture, but it wasn't the pretty brown lips of Lielani's sex that flickered through his mind when he penetrated her and closed his eyes in ecstasy as he felt her flesh closing around his.

His cock jerked threateningly almost before he had fully entered her and he paused, grinding his teeth, struggling to contain his seed. It was a losing battle from the moment his body and mind betrayed him and Simone's image rose to his mind. He could manage no more than a handful of jerky strokes before he felt his body gathering to explode and had to pull free of her to spill his seed.

He leaned against her, huffing for breath, grunting as the spasms continued until he'd emptied himself. Finally, he gathered himself and dropped limply beside her on his back, dropping a forearm across his eyes as guilt and embarrassment warred within him.

Lielani drew Ean's cock deeply into her mouth and suckled him until he ceased to convulse in release. Weary with the effort, she sank to the bed to rest, pleased that she had given both of them pleasure and yet disturbed that they had both come so quickly that it had scarcely required any effort on her part.

Then again, she'd sensed something in both of them from the moment they'd arrived that sent waves of alarm through her. There was nothing unusual in the fact that they'd sought her almost as soon as they'd returned. They always did that. The server droids that met those particular needs when they were on a mission, only relieved them of their semen. It didn't satisfy their need to feel a real woman beneath them.

There had been almost a sense of desperation in both of them, though, that had never been there before and she felt, right or wrong, that something was bothering them, deeply. It brought out a sense of urgency within her to soothe them if she could, to take away whatever it was that was bothering them, but she knew, whatever it was, they were unlikely to tell her.

When they were younger they would confess their worries, seek the sort of comfort she wanted to give them now, but it had been many years since any of them had felt the sort of hurt that only a woman could soothe, wounds to the soul. She knew better than to ask. It would only make them close themselves off more tightly, drive them from her bed.

Instead, she stroked Kael's chest. “You are not worn out already when you were boasting only a few moments ago that you were randy enough for several rounds?”

He chuckled dutifully, but she heard no real humor in it, only echoes of the pain she couldn't entirely understand. He rolled over and kissed her belly. “You are too tired.”

She smiled at the questioning lilt in his voice. “Tired? I believe I might just be able to hold still and allow you to do the work one more time.”

He chuckled more easily that time. “You promised me your mouth,” he reminded her.

She sat up and turned her ass to Ean, brushing her lips along Kael's hard belly until she was nudging his flaccid member. That disturbed more than anything else, but,

feeling him tense, she took him in her mouth before he could roll away. She tasted herself on him, which wasn't nearly as pleasant to her as his flesh, but she decided it was worth it when she felt his member rise proud and strong in her mouth.

She was a little disappointed that Ean didn't take her offer to ease himself on her again—and worried. He stroked her ass and her cleft, as if trying to arouse himself and then merely got out of the bed and left. It took her longer to bring Kael off than she'd expected, as well.

It was some relief when he curled up next to her afterward, but it didn't completely allay her worry about them. She was a little hurt, too, she admitted, but more because she felt as if she'd failed them when they needed her.

"It was very bad?" she asked tentatively after a few moments.

He stiffened, as she'd known he would but after a moment, he seemed to relax fractionally. "There was no real danger on this mission—unless we were caught—and we had been ordered to see to it that we got in and out without detection."

Lielani digested that. The problem hadn't been that they'd failed in any way, then, or lost men. She thought he would have said that and she hadn't heard that there were any casualties. She always listened to the reports, fearful that the day would come when she lost one of them. "There were no near misses, then," she said finally. "You are all far too skilled at what you do."

The night at the place where they had followed Simone popped into Kael's mind, but they hadn't been nearly close enough to call it a near miss. A near miss would have been *almost* getting shot. Although, since it had been pounded into them that they were to use the utmost discretion, it certainly hadn't been pleasant that they had almost been seen in a situation that would have compromised their mission. "No." He hesitated. "I will have a son," he said finally.

Lielani felt both a thrill of happiness and a twinge of sadness. "I rejoice for you, dearest heart! I did not doubt that you would find the breeder that you needed."

He tensed fractionally. She didn't think she would've noticed if she hadn't been holding him, but she knew she'd found the source of his distress. "He is faring well?"

Kael swallowed a little convulsively. "I have not had the report since she was examined. I think so. Mayhap they will tell us before we leave at dawn."

Distress filled her but no surprise. "They are sending you back to the fight straight away, then?"

"We had expected as much," he said neutrally.

She didn't think that accounted for the distress she'd felt in both men. There was no eagerness for battle in them as there had been when they were younger, but she did not recall a time when they had been particularly concerned either.

It was something about his son—she thought. He'd seemed thrilled to tell her the news. She'd heard it in his voice, pride, excitement—and something else. "What are these aliens like?" she asked after a moment.

He sat up abruptly and slid to the edge of the bed. "I should go. Camryn will want to see you before we leave."

She allowed the question to drop. "Why did he not come with you and Ean?"

"He had to report to the prince."

"Oh."

Kael slipped his legs into his uniform but paused instead of standing to pull it on.

“We had thought to keep the breeder here in the palace until she delivers,” he said after a moment. “She is carrying our sons. Our physician is better than the state physician.”

Lielani hesitated. “You are right. When you are gone, I will see if I cannot persuade your father and the prince that it will be much better if she is here so that we can make certain that you have strong, healthy sons.”

Kael’s shoulders slumped. He didn’t look at her. “I would be more easy in mind,” he said finally.

Lielani stroked his back. “Then I will make a nuisance of myself until they bring her here.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder and finally twisted around to gather her into his arms, burrowing his face against her neck. “I love you, Lani,” he murmured.

She stroked his hair. “I know, dear heart. I love you, as well.”

“I will not wake you when I leave. It will be too early,” he murmured when he’d finally pulled away.

He would not need to. She would not sleep knowing they were going to the fight at dawn and she would be watching them go, as always, trying to convince herself that it would not be the last time.

When he’d gone, she got up and freshened the bed for Camryn and went into her bath to freshen herself. She found him in her sitting room, his head in his hands. She jolted to a halt when she saw him, her heart contracting in empathy. She’d never seen him in such a pose of defeat and it disturbed far more even than what she’d sensed in Ean and Kael.

He heard her. Lifting his head, he surged to his feet and moved to her, gathering her close and holding her tightly. “I have missed you, Lielani.”

She held him, stroking his back. “I have missed you also, my handsome prince.”

He lifted his head, offering her a crooked smile at the oft repeated phrase. “You look well,” he said when he’d scanned her face.

“Because I am better now that you are back and safe.”

He grimaced. “Not long this time.”

“I know,” she responded, pulling from his arms and taking his hand. “But we have a few hours.”

He released a pent up breath. “You are tired. You’ve already entertained Ean and Kael.”

She smiled at him lovingly. “I am never too tired for a delicious desert.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed to push off his boots when she’d settled on it but, to her surprise, he merely rolled toward her when he had, burrowing his face against her breasts, holding her. She stroked his hair, wondering if it was all he wanted of her—a bosom on which to rest his head.

Abruptly, an image of him as the child he’d once been rose in her mind, but she didn’t feel the discomfort she once had. Instead, she felt warmth flow through her that he still found comfort in her. It had seemed a little strange to her then. She remembered him—them—from when they were very small—remembered their wide-eyed curiosity and their fear when they’d first come to the palace from the nursery. So many memories! Then they’d ceased to come to play in her garden and seek her for comfort from their tears and when she’d seen them again they were awkward youths, hungry for a woman’s touch, and uncomfortable because of it.

And she'd felt a little awkward and uncomfortable herself, but she'd set it aside to give them what they needed and, in time, they'd grown together, grown comfortable as lovers and learned how to please each other.

In truth, most of her pleasure was derived entirely from pleasing them, from holding them to her and knowing she'd eased their minds of worry for a little while and their bodies from their manly needs. But that gave her far more lasting pleasure than the pleasures of the flesh.

He stirred after a little bit, moving from one breast to the other and pulling at her nipples with his mouth. Warmth inundated her. Her body responded easily to his practiced touch and she felt the pleasurable tension that had been absent when she'd attended Kael's and Ean's needs grow as his urgency seemed to increase.

Pulling away for a moment, he shrugged the upper section of his uniform off and dove at her again, finding every patch of flesh that was most sensitive with his mouth and teasing her until she began to feel as desperate as the desperation she sensed in him. He didn't bother removing his uniform completely. Refusing to be distracted from his goal even for a moment, he shoved his uniform to his hips when he'd positioned himself between her thighs and drove into her in almost frantic haste.

She curled her legs around his buttocks, pulling him to her as he pumped frenziedly, matching his pace the best she could. He shuddered, jerked and began to withdraw.

She tightened her hold on him. "Don't! Give me your seed," she whispered. "No one will ever know."

He hesitated. She felt his need like a living thing. Tightening her legs around him, she clenched her inner muscles around his cock.

He groaned as if wounded, shuddered, and then began to drive into her feverishly, jerking and uttering choked breaths as his body expelled his seed. She felt own body convulse in bliss as she received it, squeezed her eyes tightly to savor it even as sorrow crept in to her that his seed would find no welcome, no lonely little egg waiting to receive it.

"I should not have done that," he muttered against her neck when he'd caught his breath.

She stroked his back. "No one will ever know save me, dearest, and I will never tell."

He dragged in a shaky breath. "And me."

She caressed his back. "You will not feel guilty, Camryn. You know it cannot matter with me."

He sighed. "I'd begun to think I would not see you this time around," he murmured when he'd rolled off of her, abruptly discomfited that he'd used her to assuage his pain when he hadn't truly wanted *her*, that he'd allowed Simone to fill his mind because he desired her to the point of madness and could not have her. It was unfair to Lielani and yet he had no idea whether Lielani truly welcomed him rutting her or not, he realized in surprise, no idea whether she desired him or not. She had never had any more choices than he had. He loved her. He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't, but he'd never desired *her* ... only the release she gave him so generously, the feel of her soft, womanly body. He hadn't realized it until he'd felt true desire for one woman, not just any woman.

Lielani rolled to her side to snuggle closer, her mind immediately connecting the comment with her conversation with Kael. "You did not argue with your father?"

He grunted. "You of all people should know there is no arguing with the man," he said wryly.

"I never argue with him," she said teasingly.

"Because there is no more point in it than beating your head against a wall," he growled, anger rising with surprising speed in his voice. He sucked in a deep breath. "I am sorry. I do not want to distress you."

Lielani hesitated. "I am not distressed at so small a display of temper. It upsets me that you are troubled—especially on the eve of your leave taking."

Camryn struggled to dismiss it. In truth, he had no reason to be angry—It wasn't *reasonable* to be angry when things had transpired exactly as one expected them to. He had known that they would come for Simone with all the others because there was no way to request that they be allowed to keep her in their care before they had landed.

And yet it had because he'd convinced himself that he could somehow prevent it.

It wasn't reasonable to be so furious with his father when he had reacted to the request exactly as he had known he would. He'd looked surprised, vaguely offended, suspicious, and then he had dismissed it and her as if it was nothing of any consequence, as if *she* was of no importance, and said that he would consider it.

He released an irritated breath. "I had hoped I would have more time," he muttered finally.

Time for what? To see to it that his breeder was sheltered in the palace? This was curious, and very disturbing. It seemed to go far beyond anxiety over his son and that could only mean that his anxiety was because of the breeder herself.

She tried to distract his mind with another bout of lovemaking, but he rolled away from her.

"I've yet to get my affairs in order and my gear," he said, refusing to look at her as he straightened his uniform. He pulled her into his arms and rocked her slightly when he'd sat down to pull his boots on again. "I will see you when I have leave to return."

She stopped him when he reached the door of her bedchamber. "I will try to persuade your father."

He threw a surprised look at her over his shoulder. She could see the question in his eyes, but he merely nodded and left.

Settling back, she stared at the ceiling for a long while, thinking, and finally got up and freshened the bed and went to bathe again. When she'd finished drying, she merely pulled her robe on and passed through her bedchamber and sitting room and let herself out onto the balcony.

Her thoughts weren't particularly pleasant ones. Unaccustomed anger churned inside of her. She examined it with almost detached curiosity and finally realized exactly why she was angry and what she needed to do.

When she heard the stir that told her they were leaving, she rose and moved to the edge of the balcony. In the first faint flow of dawn, she watched them striding confidently off to battle as she had so many times before. There were only three now. Not so long ago there had been four—before Kael's brother, Arion, had fallen and returned no more. When she could no longer see them, she went back into her bedroom to weep and to pray to the gods that she would see them return, whole, and healthy.

Chapter Nine

Simone moped until she was tired of moping and anger and resentment began to supplant the deep depression that had descended over her. Getting up, she went to wash her face. Upon consideration, she discarded the sack dress and climbed into the shower. The hot water was a welcome surprise. She'd more than half suspected they wouldn't think it necessary to provide that much comfort.

When it had eased some of her tension, she climbed out, looked for something to dry off with, and discovered a stack of small towels. She wasn't certain of what the material was—much the same as the sack and the bedclothes—but it was surprisingly absorbent. She eyed the gown on the floor with distaste when she was dry and decided to look to see if she'd also been provided with a change of clothing. It wasn't a long search. She could almost touch every fucking wall in her 'apartment'.

There was a stack of sack-gowns, identical in every way to the one she'd been wearing, on a shelf beneath the bunk. The urge to scream in frustration hit her and she uttered every curse word she'd ever heard—twice, with vehemence. Heaving a calming breath when she'd run out of steam, she jerked the gown over her head and plopped on the bed again.

The light that filtered through the tiny window above her bed waned and, as it did, the room began to glow with artificial illumination. It caught her attention and she lifted her head to search for the source just as she heard an odd tone. Cocking her head, she listened for it again, wondering if it was the elevator. Of course it wasn't the tinny 'ding' she was used to, but then she wasn't going to find anything she was used to here.

When she didn't hear it again, she finally climbed from the bed and moved to the door. She hesitated, but she hadn't noticed a lock and, in any case, she remembered that Akule had told them they were free to move about as much as they liked.

Considering the entire city was beneath a dome, *now* she knew why!

She discovered when she'd opened the door to look out that women up and down the corridor had also opened their doors curiously.

"Any idea what that was?" Liz asked her.

Simone shrugged. "No one said anything to me but stand, walk, stop, stick it out!" she said dryly.

"It must mean something," said a woman down the corridor. "It wasn't music."

"It's dusk," Simone said after a moment. "Maybe its feeding time for the monkeys?"

"Cows," Liz corrected her. "I'm hungry. Let's go see."

When they reached the first floor, they discovered the desks and equipment had been cleared away. Furniture had been brought in. A few padded chairs and a couple of couches had been lined up along the wall with almost military precision. Most of the room, however, had been taken up with dining chairs and tables. Along one wall, food was served buffet style.

Liz approached the buffet. When she reached it, the man waiting to serve

grabbed a plate, slapped a glob of food on it and passed it down to the next man.

Clearly, they weren't exactly thrilled that they'd been assigned to feed the cows.

Tamping the mixture of hurt and anger that aroused in her, Simone followed Liz to the end and took the plate held out to her. "Thank you," she murmured automatically.

The man sent her a startled look and she felt her face heat. Turning away, she followed Liz to find a table.

She wasn't certain why Liz decided to look around—all the damned tables and chairs looked uncomfortable—but she finally settled in a chair against the far wall from the buffet.

"So ... how's your apartment?" Liz asked glumly, studying the globs of food on her plate and sniffing at it suspiciously.

"Beautiful!" Simone said sarcastically. "And I have such a gorgeous view ... of the alley."

"Sounds like my view. At least it doesn't have bars over it."

"Pollyanna!" Simone griped.

Liz snorted. "Nobody's ever accused me of being an optimist before."

"I wonder what this looked like before it was cooked?"

"I don't want to know. Don't talk about it, damn it! I'm hungry."

Simone took an experimental taste of each item and sighed. "This is the best diet ever!"

"The green stuff isn't too bad. It didn't trigger my gag reflex anyway."

"Jeez! You really are an optimist!" Simone said, laughing.

Liz grinned at her.

"Can I sit here?" a woman asked. "If you can think of anything funny, I want to hear it!"

Within a few moments their table had filled and most of the other tables. It was so crowded once everyone had sat down that it was hard to get between the tables. "Do you get the feeling that they hadn't expected so many of us?"

"Yeah, I got that feeling as soon as we were packed into that cell on the ship like sardines. I just figured they were being assholes, though."

"Now that we're here and there's nobody to hear, I don't suppose anybody has managed to formulate any plans?"

Simone glanced significantly at the servers. It startled her to meet the gaze of one of them—the one she'd thanked. She looked away with an effort. "I don't think they'd bother to monitor us here like they did on the ship," she said in a low voice, "but I'd still rather not take a chance on it."

"Besides, we haven't been here five minutes," Liz pointed out.

"Are you sure?" someone down the table asked. "It seems like days already."

"Well brace yourself. Short of hopping a ship back toward Earth, I think we'll be here a while."

"I think we need to make a concerted effort not to think, or talk, about Earth. I don't think it would be productive and I do think it'll just depress the hell out of everybody," Simone said. "It depressed me, anyway."

"I don't know, if memories are all we're going to have"

She supposed she could see the woman's point and yet putting things from her mind that bothered her had always worked better for her. Given time, she could pull

them out and look at them with more distance and less pain. "I'm Simone," she said, introducing herself.

They made introductions around the table, but Simone was doubtful she was going to remember half of their names more than five minutes. Faces, she was good with. Names ... she had to work on.

It seemed vitally important, suddenly, to make that effort when the draks seemed determined to remove their identities. "My best friend back home was named Sharon," she told the woman who'd spoken.

"I thought we weren't going to talk about Earth?" Liz said.

Simone shrugged, trying to dismiss the misery that had rose in her the moment she'd mentioned her friend. "I don't think it'll help, but if everybody wants to"

"It's supposed to be therapeutic to talk about things and not keep them bottled up," Patsy volunteered.

Simone stirred her food. "I don't know if I have enough sheets to handle a lot of therapy."

"I know what you mean. I cried when I saw my 'apartment', too. I had a beautiful place back home. I'd just bought the damned thing, too!"

"My apartment wasn't much," Simone admitted, "but the bathroom was bigger than that closet. I'm glad I'm not claustrophobic."

They complained for a while and compared everything they'd had to what they'd been 'given'. When they sat so long that they were beginning to get numb from the waist down, they got up and looked around for a place to dispose of their dishes. A robot popped out of a segment of the wall, raced toward them, and snatched the plates from their hands, stuffing them in a mouth-like opening.

Liz screamed when the thing grabbed at her plate, dropping it on the floor. Another, smaller robot shot out of the wall, scooped the mess up, even wiped it down and then disappeared again, all while they stood gaping.

Shivering, Liz rubbed her arms. "Creepy little bastards!"

"Shall we retire to the large salon, ladies, or the small salon upstairs?" Sharon asked.

"Let's gather in the 'large salon', why don't we? I'm not in any hurry to rush back to my cell," Simone suggested.

When they'd rearranged it into a more comfortable conversation area, they settled and talked about whatever popped into their minds until they were sure the men had left.

"They're gone," Liz said abruptly.

Simone glanced around, just to be sure. "I have to tell you before we start anything that this could be the most dangerous thing any of you have ever done. This isn't a game and these people aren't playing around. So if anyone doesn't want to get involved, don't. Just stay out of it and those who want to try to find a way will do it."

She looked around at all the women who'd gathered and noticed a lot of them were shifting uncomfortably.

"Nobody is going to be judgmental," she added. "I'd far rather you leave if you're too scared and you don't want to than for someone to get involved that will get us caught."

"You're saying you aren't scared?" someone from the back asked.

"None of us are stupid. We're all scared. Tag along and do a little scouting if

you'd rather and then, if it looks like something you can't do, just bow out. We don't even know if there *is* anything we can do about our situation. But I for one want to know there isn't before I give up and accept this for the rest of my life.

"Just think about it for now. Nobody has to make a quick decision. I'm in favor of going out in the morning and looking around just to see what we see. So if anybody else wants to go we'll meet down here in the morning."

* * * *

Simone hadn't realized until she settled on her narrow bunk that she'd gotten used to the sounds so many people made when they were sleeping, or tossing and turning, or snoring. She hadn't been able to sleep except fitfully on the ship because she was used to being alone and now that she was alone again, she lay staring at the ceiling, trying to command herself to relax enough to sleep.

It didn't help to close her eyes either. Closing her eyes just set her mind to churning thoughts.

Camryn, Kael, and Ean were predominant, unfortunately. She hadn't seen them since they'd returned her to the cell. She'd hoped she might catch a glimpse of them when they were all herded out and loaded onto the shuttles, but she hadn't.

She wondered where they were, and what they doing, and if she had crossed their minds once since she'd convinced them she was going to be a good little slave and behave herself.

Probably not, and she wished she could dismiss them from her mind, but they were like yo-yos. Every time she dismissed them, they came back.

She managed to focus for a little while on trying to discover some way to save herself from the horrible thing that had happened to her, but there wasn't much food for that kind of thought.

She hadn't learned much of anything about their language and that was going to make it damned hard to learn anything about their laws—laws that might help them. Akule had spent most of his time explaining the laws that prohibited them from doing much besides breathing.

That was helpful, but not the kind of help she needed.

It was probably a dead end, anyway, she thought morosely.

* * * *

It was disturbing in an indefinable way to suddenly find that she was a nonentity, Simone thought as they walked the city streets. It was almost like becoming invisible, or finding out you were a ghost when you hadn't realized you'd died. "At least Akule didn't lie to us," she remarked dryly. "We can go anywhere we like, alright. It's like we don't exist."

Liz made a sound that was neither agreement or disagreement.

"Hmmp!" Sharon snorted. "Don't you believe it. They're just *pretending* we don't exist because its bad form to notice. We haven't passed one male of *any* class that hasn't cut his eyes to watch us. I've almost been tempted to do something childish. You know—like in England? The Royal Guard at the palace isn't ever supposed to acknowledge anyone? So all the tourists walk up to them and make faces at them to try to get a reaction."

Simone stared at her a moment and started laughing. "Actually, it sounds like fun! I haven't done anything totally childish in a long time!"

Liz looked doubtful. "You think we should?"

Simone considered it. "I wasn't paying a lot of attention to the lectures. Did they say anything about disrupting the peace?"

"I don't see how making faces at them would disrupt the peace," Sharon argued.

"I don't see how it could either. I was just wondering how far we could take it," Simone replied. "At the very least, assuming they wouldn't punish us some way for it, it would improve morale. I have to tell you mine is about as low as it can go right now."

"Oh, what the hell?" Liz muttered, staring at the warriors on the 'high' side of the street until she caught one's eye and then scrunching up her face and sticking her tongue out.

He almost missed a step, allowing his head to swivel toward them for a split second before he realized what he was doing. Simone and Sharon laughed until they nearly peed themselves. Their laughter, they discovered, was nearly as distracting to the males on both sides of the street—all around them—as the tongue incident.

"I guess they aren't used to people laughing," Sharon observed.

"*That* isn't making a face!" Simone said when she'd caught her breath. "*This* is making a face!"

Sharon and Liz both looked horrified when she used her fingers to stretch her face out of shape, making a pig nose, evil eyes, and a clown mouth. Two of the warriors collided on the sidewalk.

The women bit their lips, snickering. When the men had recovered themselves and moved on, they laughed until they hurt.

"Oh, I feel better!" Simone said with relief.

Liz sighed. "It's not going to last."

Simone followed the direction of her gaze and stared at the first unobstructed view they'd had of the world beyond the dome, feeling the bottom fall out of her stomach. Naturally enough, none of the thick tangle of vegetation they could see looked even vaguely recognizable beyond being green—or mostly green. It looked as if the jungle came right up to the dome on the outside, however.

She swallowed a little convulsively and tipped her head back, but she couldn't see anything but the wall of jungle. Turning, she looked around at the buildings. "Let's see if we can find a higher spot to look. Maybe we can see something?"

"There's no way to tell what the buildings are for," Sharon said doubtfully.

"They might all be apartments and not public buildings."

"Well, we'll just try and see, why don't we?"

There was a fucking guard at the door of every single one they tried who looked down his nose at them and informed them that breeders weren't allowed inside. Frustrated, Simone finally demanded of the last they tried to know where they *were* allowed. "The breeder barracks," he responded coldly.

"You know what? Fuck you! Does that translate, dick-wad?"

The man gaped at her in disbelief and dawning fury, but she whirled and stalked off before he could think of a of come-back. Liz and Sharon, looking uneasy, followed her.

"What now?"

"Well, hell! We can't just cave in at the first little road block!" Simone muttered, studying the buildings. "They must have rear exits, right? Stairs?"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to try to sneak in," Sharon said worriedly.

"It isn't like we're going to do anything but take a look," Simone said reasonably. "We'll sneak in and just go right up the stairs. They use the elevators. If we can get to the stairs we probably won't see a soul."

Liz flopped her gown. "I'm not sure I could run in this thing. Besides, we'd look like a fucking ship under sail with them flapping around us!"

"Good point!" Simone muttered, looking down at her own speculatively.

"There's yards of extra material, though." Bending down, she caught the back hem and brought it up between her legs, trying to figure out how she could wrap and tie it in place.

"Oh my god! Simone! Don't do that here!" Liz gasped.

"Why not?" Simone demanded irritably.

"Because you'll start a riot!"

Simone glanced up at her sharply and then whipped a look around them. Her heart slammed into her chest wall when she discovered she'd literally stopped traffic. There must have been a hundred men around them on the streets and all of them looked as if they'd been abruptly switched off. They were staring at her legs with glassy eyes as if they'd never seen legs before. She dropped the hem guiltily.

They blinked, looked as if they'd awakened from a coma and had no idea where they were for several moments, and then their faces tightened and they strode away.

"Uh oh," Sharon said uneasily. "I think you're in trouble."

"Thanks!" Simone snapped.

"Hey! It wasn't me that decided to wave my twat at them!"

"I wasn't waving my twat, damn it!" Simone said indignantly. "It didn't seem to bother them when we were buck ass naked in the damned showers on the ship!"

"Where were you?" Liz demanded. "They had *exactly* the same reaction—except they all saluted and these guys were too stunned to salute! Or I was too scared to notice. I think we should leave very quietly and head back to the barracks. I'm sure we all look alike to them and anyway I think they were too focused on your legs to remember what your face looks like."

Simone didn't want to give up on the idea of getting a better view beyond the dome, but, as little as she wanted to admit it, she was worried about repercussions. "We'll do this another day."

The small hope she'd held out that Liz was right and they wouldn't recognize her or that the incident wouldn't be reported, or it would be dismissed, vanished when they finally made it back to the breeder barracks. There were hard faced guards waiting in front of the building.

Simone's bowels nearly turned to water, but there was no escape. The moment the men spotted her, they marched directly toward her and caught her arms. "You are detained and are to be brought before the High Council!"

* * * *

It took all Simone could do to remain on her feet when the guards finally let go of her. She wanted to run, but she knew damned well her knees would give out and dump her in the floor.

She hadn't expected to be taken straight to the court! She'd thought she would be thrown in a jail cell to give her time to get more scared than she was already, but apparently they weren't in favor of that type of torture. Or, they were just very efficient

and they didn't have a lot of 'crime' to deal with because their own citizens were too fucking well brainwashed to consider doing anything unacceptable.

There was a tall, older man at the desk in the office where she found herself, but he didn't really look old enough to be considered an 'elder' and she began to wonder if he actually *was* one of the council elders despite the blinding display of metals on his uniform. She shifted uneasily when the door closed behind her and he continued to ignore her.

And continued to ignore her.

Realizing that he was either so engrossed in his work that he'd dismissed her from his mind as soon as she'd been deposited on his doorstep or he was trying to play mind games with her, she forced herself to relax. After studying him for some moments, she turned her attention to the room. Bookshelves lined one wall and on them she saw what looked like scrolls and books—ancient looking records, but she was almost certain that was what they were. The temptation to sidle a little closer and see if that was really what they were hit her.

She flicked a look back at the man to see if he was still too preoccupied to notice and discovered he was looking directly at her.

Her heart nearly stopped in her chest when she met his full gaze. It might almost have been Camryn she was staring at if not for the lines on his face that told his maturity and the silver streaks of hair at his temples.

"You are charged with disrupting the peace," he said coldly.

Simone stared at him.

"Speak!" he growled after a moment.

Simone blinked. "What do you want me to say?"

He looked taken aback and then outraged. "You have no remorse?"

Simone gaped at him. "Excuse you? I didn't do anything. Why would I have remorse?"

He surged up from his chair. "Silence!"

She sidled a little closer to the door, deciding not to point out to him that he'd demanded she speak in the first place. Clearly, reason wasn't their strong suit.

"You are confined to the barracks for a period of five days for disrupting the peace and for disrespect!"

Damn it! She'd wanted to try to sneak into one of the buildings the next day. She was going to have to wait an entire damned week to do it?

Like father like son! It seemed assholes beget assholes!

"Thank you, Your Highness!" she said tightly, using the term of respect she'd been instructed to use in addressing him. "May I go now?"

He looked like he wanted to take exception to her tone, but he merely waved a hand at her.

"Asshole!" she muttered under her breath.

She thought he was going to have an aneurism. Turning on her heel quickly, she headed for the door. To her relief, it opened as she reached it.

Arrek glared at the closed door long after she'd departed. *This* was the creature his son expected him to house in the palace, he thought angrily?

* * * *

Despite the cooling unit on the back of his suit, Camryn felt as if he was melting

and the sweat trickling down his back, from beneath his arms, and down his chest to his balls was sheer torment. Squinting his eyes against the glaring sun, he surveyed the sky for any sign of imminent attack and then scanned the rocky landscape. Kael and Ean should have been back from patrolling the outer perimeter by now, he thought absently, moving to the shadow of a boulder to get out of the direct sun.

Breathing was difficult and, not for the first time, he wondered if anything on the gods damned planet was really worth what they'd paid in lives for the fucking mine—over a hundred casualties already and less than a ton of ore mined. The thought brought his attention to the miners he could see moving in and out of the shaft and he wondered if they were as fucking miserable as he was or if it was cooler inside the mountain.

Of course the majority of their losses had been miners and he supposed the council didn't really count them as much of a loss.

Maybe he wouldn't have either a few months ago, but then he wouldn't have even looked at them a few months ago, not as people, not as individuals. He wouldn't have wondered what they thought about their lot in life. They had been born to labor at such things just as he had been born to lay his life down if necessary for the greater glory of Macedon—for things he didn't give a fuck about.

They wouldn't either, he thought, because they didn't even benefit beyond being fed and housed for their trouble. It wasn't much of a reward considering they got the dregs, the minimum, the least desirable.

Except they got the breeders as lovers.

The thought brought Simone's image into his mind and with it a dizzying wave of thirst, hunger, need—anger.

His communicator came to life abruptly with a burst of static that nearly deafened him. The fucking planet, he thought furiously! It fucked with all of their gods damned equipment.

"Camryn!"

It was Kael's voice and the urgency in it jumpstarted Camryn's heart.

"Kael?"

"We're coming your way and we've got about a fucking battalion of skeets on our heels!"

Camryn tensed instantly and moved away from the boulder. "Incoming!" he bellowed, not bothering with the nearly useless communicators. "On your three! Take your positions!"

Waiting until he saw the men scatter and flatten themselves on the ground, he scanned the landscape for cover for himself and discovered the miners, apparently, hadn't even heard him. "Take cover, you fucking morons!" he roared at them.

The miners stopped and gaped at him. Waving an arm at them, he bounded toward the rocky ledge where most of the other men had lined up and propped their weapons. "We've got men in front! Hold your fire until they're in!"

Kael, he discovered, hadn't been exaggerating. There was a full battalion of skeets racing behind Kael's scouting party, screaming like banshees and firing wildly. Kael had his arm around Ean, but it was hard to say which of them was helping which. Ean was swinging one leg and Kael had blood running down the side of his uniform. They weren't the only ones injured either. All of the men in the patrol looked to be wounded. They must have walked right in to the fucking skeets.

“Gods damn it!” he growled under his breath, trying to decide whether he should send somebody out to help the injured or not.

“Give them some cover fire!” he roared abruptly, finding a target and firing his laser rifle in short bursts.

To his relief, as soon as they cut loose, the skeets began to drop back, giving Kael and his men a little distance. A few tense minutes later, the scouts poured over the line, hitting the hard ground and then scrambling back toward the ledge for cover.

“Medic!” Kael bellowed.

“Somebody try to raise the ship and get us some reinforcements down here!”

Camryn yelled over the noise. “We’re going to be fighting hand to hand any minute!”

“We could fall back to the mine,” Ean said a little breathlessly, his voice strained.

Camryn spared a glance at him and then the mine. “We’d be trapped.”

“I’m not sure we’re going to have a lot of choices,” Kael grunted. “I don’t think we’re going to get any reinforcements. The solar flares have created a communications blackout.”

“Fuck!” Camryn snarled, firing a half a dozen more blasts and then ducking down to check the power level on his rifle. “I’m low. Weapons check!”

As the men called out their ammunition levels, Camryn’s expression grew more and more grim. An image of Simone flickered through his mind, but he shook it off. He couldn’t do her any good if he was dead—maybe not even if he lived through this—but certainly not if they took him back in a bag.

Bad luck, he reminded himself, surveying the terrain a little desperately. The position they were holding was their only vantage point, however. With the men and weapons he had, there was no way in hell they were going to hold off a full fucking battalion for long. Worse, if the enemy decided to outflank them they were going to be dead men.

“Keep trying to hail the ship, but prepare to move,” he said grimly.

Chapter Ten

“Half of them don’t even speak English!” Colleen objected. “What good is it going to do to have a protest when they don’t even know what it’s about?”

Actually, Simone reflected, a lot more of them could speak and understand at least a little English than she’d expected. “So they’ll ask the ones that do speak and understand. They’ll at least be curious! They can’t ignore us.”

“I think it’s a bad idea,” Liz volunteered.

Sharon, who’d suggested it, glared at her. “It’s worked before! At the very least it draws people’s attention to something they might not have noticed before.”

“It worked on Earth—in the U.S.—but that’s because everybody there believes in freedom. Once they realize some people’s rights are being trampled on, they become more open minded. These people wrote the book on blind obedience!”

“Look! What’s the worst they can do? Ignore us? They’re doing that already. We have think of a way to show them that we aren’t nonentities! We’re people and we demand to be treated like people!”

“We could be imprisoned in the barracks like Simone was for disturbing the peace, or a real prison,” Liz said helpfully.

Sharon sent her an irritated look. “Ok—show of hands! Everyone that is willing to take part in the protest, raise your hand.”

Only about a third of the women raised their hands.

Sharon sat down angrily.

Simone stood up. “What’s the matter with all of you? My god! Even if they confine us for a few weeks, what the hell is that? We were confined in the damned hold of the ship longer than that! Just what is it that’s so fucking great here that you’re afraid of losing it?”

Most of the women glared at her. One near the back shouted. “Maybe we just aren’t that anxious to die!”

“All Sharon has suggested is that we march down the street singing a protest song and chanting. Yes, it’ll disturb the peace and they’ll send the guards to round us up and we’ll be confined, but I can’t think of a single reason for them to attack us!”

“I can. Have you seen what the men do to women in some of those Muslim countries?”

“Thanks, Liz!”

“You’re welcome.”

“If we all stick together we stand a better chance all the way around. They might just ignore a handful of women, but you all want this as much as we do! How right is it for you to cringe in a corner and let somebody else fight for something you want?”

Sharon stood up again. “Look! We have deniability here. We can march and sing and chant and when they stop it, and I know they will, we can just say it’s like a religious custom for us, right?”

“I think they studied the culture at least a little while they were learning the

language. That might not hold water,” Liz offered.

“And it might! We don’t know it wouldn’t. They can’t have spent a hell of a lot of time studying the culture or they would’ve known we weren’t cut out for this!”

“Alright,” Simone said tiredly. “Those of you who want to do this, meet us down here after breakfast in the morning.”

“You don’t mean to tell me you’re going to do it anyway?” Liz demanded.

Simone frowned at her. “I don’t know about you, but I’m still fighting for my babies—not just for myself. Yes, I’m going to do it if I have to march down the damned street by myself!”

“I’m with you,” Sharon said.

Simone’s shoulders slumped with relief. “Good! Now, what are going to chant? It needs to be something short and catchy. We aren’t going to be able to march all the way around without passing out if its like a speech, and anyway it needs to grab their attention.”

“I don’t know. I was thinking about alternating with some of those oldies—you know from the women’s liberation era?”

Simone frowned. “I don’t know the lyrics of any of them.”

“So? We make them up as we go along.”

“Liberation is a good theme,” Liz offered.

“I don’t think these people even know what being free is,” Karen said dryly.

“They think they’re free. That’s almost as sad for them as it is for us and that’s what’s really scary about doing this. They’ve stuck with their traditions in spite of the fact that it’s just about completely destroyed their society. Why would they listen to us?”

Simone felt a dip in her enthusiasm. She dismissed it. “Maybe you’re right, but we have to try ... or just give up. I’m not ready to give up when we haven’t even made an attempt. We don’t know that they won’t listen. How are we ever going to find out if there are people out there that hate the way things are as much as we do unless we give them a chance to see that things can be different?”

“You think some of them might actually join us?” Liz asked doubtfully.

“Why not? You think the worker class is happy about being stuck where they are because that’s where they were born?”

“You’re talking about revolution!”

Simone stared at Karen blankly. “What did you think we were talking about?”

“Hey!” someone shouted. “That reminds me of this old song by a foreign group. We could sing that. ‘You say you want a revo’”

“No!” Sharon, Simone, and Liz all said at the same time.

“The idea is to make this a peaceful protest—to get them to start thinking differently, not to start a civil war! We’re doing this to protect our rights as women and mothers—*for* our children. Violence isn’t the way to save what we want and even hinting at revolution is a very, very bad idea when it could trigger just that.”

Liz studied Sharon and Simone doubtfully. “Well, a peaceful change might be what you have in mind, but don’t be surprised if we get fireworks.”

* * * *

Simone was wound so tightly when she returned to her apartment, all she could think about was taking a long, hot shower to unwind. It was just as well that she was distracted by her thoughts. Otherwise she might have missed opportunity when it

knocked.

When she'd let herself in and turned from closing the door, she found a drak male standing against the far wall. Her eyes rounded. She sucked in a sharp breath.

He surged toward her but his expression wasn't threatening. It was almost as panicked as her own. "No! No scream! No hurt, womens! Just talk."

He stopped when she held out her arm in a 'stop' gesture. "Who are you?"

His brow furrowed, but she could see he was thoughtful, not angry. When his brow cleared, he pointed downward. "Serve foots." He made an eating gesture.

Simone folded her lips together as it suddenly sank in that he was one of the men who served their food—the one she'd thanked the first day, she realized. And his English was terrible. "Food."

He looked at her blankly.

She held up her foot. "This is a foot. You serve the *food*."

He reddened. "Not good your speak," he admitted.

"No kidding?" She studied him for the first time and realized he didn't look like much more than a kid—maybe eighteen or twenty. Apparently, they didn't grow them small, though. He was slender, muscular and still probably around six feet tall. "Why are you here?"

He looked distressed. "Want to hear."

Uneasiness flickered through Simone. "Hear what?"

His brow furrowed. He touched his chest. "My Zev. No speak no good your talk. Understand better. Want to ... learn your world. Say what is like."

Some of her uneasiness waned, but she couldn't decide whether he was just curious about Earth or he had some reason for wanting to know beyond the curiosity. "I'm not sure you should really be here."

"S alright, you say. Am worker. Can be your lover."

"Oh! Whoa! You said you wanted to talk."

He studied her speculatively and finally smiled slowly. "Talk after?"

It was a surprisingly seductive smile. Simone felt her heart execute a little flip-flop. "You're a little young to be trying to put moves on me! Have you got any idea how old I am?"

He looked a little taken aback. "You very young, very beautiful. Zev like be your lover."

"Mmm. Thanks, but I'm not the market right now. I'm really kind of tired."

He nodded. "Walk tomorrow. Protest."

Simone had been on the point of opening her door and shoving him out. That sent alarms through her. She sent him a wide-eyed look. "What?"

"Zev no say to anyone."

Simone was beginning to get severely impatient with his broken English. It was giving her a headache and what was more, she was beginning to suspect that the idiot thought he was going to blackmail her into having sex with him. He must have been better at reading expressions than he was at speaking English.

"Want to hear talk—to learn. You no want Zev for lover, is alright. Sad, but alright. You talk, yes?"

It dawned on Simone abruptly that Zev might just be trying to tell her that he was a convert. At the very least, he was clearly intrigued by the stories he'd overheard them

telling each other about Earth.

Was there danger in taking him as his word, though? What if he was—like a spy?

She considered that and finally decided that it just didn't seem very likely. He was from the lowest class and they were pretty much non-entities, too. Of course, they were also the only ones who could interact with the breeders, but she still couldn't quite picture the possibility that *they* were important enough to warrant such a thing.

"You just want to talk?" she asked.

Reluctance flickered across his face, but he nodded. "No like Zev?"

"I don't know you."

"Get to know as lover," he said a little hopefully.

"No!"

Anger flickered in his eyes, but he apparently gave up. "Later. Get to know, then lovers, yes?"

"Oh for gods sake! If fucking is all you've got on your mind you're barking up the wrong tree!"

"Not all on mind." He shrugged, grinning a little sheepishly. "Mostly. Never did. Would like to."

Simone blinked at him. She was on the point of asking him if he'd just said what she'd thought he had when it occurred to her that that might encourage him. It also occurred to her that there weren't a hell of a lot of women available and she was probably right—he was a virgin. The possibility was strangely appealing. He was a nice looking boy, but she wasn't sure she could think of him as being anything but a boy and that made her uncomfortable.

Given his focus on screwing, she was pretty sure it wasn't a good idea to invite him to hang around. Unfortunately, given the fact that he knew at least some of their plans, booting him out without trying to discover his views *also* didn't seem like a good idea.

Releasing an irritated huff, she finally nodded. "You can stay as long as it's just to talk—and just for a little while. Alright?"

He nodded. Simone headed for her bed to sit down. Zev apparently decided to head toward the door. They did the 'I can't get by you' dance for a moment and finally managed to break the impasse and switch places. Simone settled at the head of the bed with her back against the wall. "What do you want to know?"

He frowned. "Not like Macedon?"

Simone snorted. "No, not at all." She thought that over. "Well, I suppose maybe a little. We don't have classes like you do here—exactly. At home it's got more to do with money. Of course, nobody is allowed to treat people differently because of their income. They do, but it isn't supported by laws or encouraged, so it isn't as open as it is here. And, of course, there is the racial thing—but that isn't supported by laws or encouraged either. It isn't part of the system, if you know what I mean, and people aren't really stuck. Not that it's easy to move up in the world if you're born poor, or get to be rich if you're born in the middle class—or come from a poor family, but you can if you're smart enough, determined enough, and you manage to catch a break here and there."

He looked excited for the first time since he'd suggested he could be her lover. "Dis! Yes! Zev no want to be worker. Born worker, die worker. If have son, he

worker.” He considered that. “No have son because Zev worker. No have concubine. No fuck. No woman.”

Simone felt a welling of pity but anger, too. “Well duh! Just how long is going to take you people to figure out why you don’t have any women? No one ever talks about anything but sons! My god! Is it *that* hard to figure out? You have to have daughters if you want to have women!”

He reddened with anger. “Can have only one! No son, no line!”

Simone glared back at him. “No daughters, no sons! *Somebody* has to compromise! I don’t understand the one child rule anyway! I got the short version of the history of the drak. I know the home planet, where the drak originated, was overpopulated and laws were passed for population control, but that ceased to be an issue when the planet was destroyed. Why haven’t the laws been changed?”

He frowned. “Happen once. Happen again. Macedon bad place. Not like home world. Important to control population—more important. Less ... things.”

Less things? They made all sorts of things. Their technology in many areas was way more advanced than on Earth—certainly in space travel. She considered that and added robotics—probably weaponry. It was a little backwards, however, in the areas that would have been developed for women—because women weren’t important and now they just about didn’t have any.

“Things to make—stuff! Food.”

“Resources?”

He looked at her blankly.

She tried again. “Water, air, minerals?”

He thought about it and nodded. “Resources. Yes. These things to make other things. We fight all time the skeets, the flurs, the meres—old enemies—from Father World. Drak found Kylo for resources. They found, want to fight to take.”

Simone stared at him as it dawned on her that he was talking about the other races from their home world. They’d split up, found new worlds and found them lacking in what they needed and started a new war over the resources of the planet they’d located that had what they wanted.

Abruptly, she felt a wave of cold wash over her. This was why the warrior class was the highest, the most important. Was that also why she hadn’t even caught a glimpse of Camryn, Kael, or Ean? “They’re fighting now?”

He nodded. “Yes. Fighting now. Stop for a time, but start again.”

“Why can’t they just share what there is?” Simone asked in dismay.

He looked at her as if she’d lost her mind. “With enemies?”

Simone’s lips tightened. “They wouldn’t be enemies, then.”

“Yes. Always—on Father world, too. Different.”

Simone blinked at him. “But ... I’m different.”

“Yes. Have nice tings there,” he said, studying her boobs. “And very nice there.”

“Could you get your mind off of sex?”

“No,” he said, grinning.

Simone couldn’t help but chuckle. “Are you really interested? Or are you just pretending to be interested because you’re hoping to get sex?”

He considered that in frowning intensity. “Interested. Want different. Want make change tings—so Zev can have woman and son, and then son have woman.” He

frowned. "Zev want be other class, not worker class."

Simone narrowed her eyes thoughtfully.

He squirmed. "Hoping for sex, too."

She folded her lips. "I'll say this for you! You're persistent! You've definitely got drive—sex drive! I don't know about anything else."

His face hardened. "Brave. Strong. Not warrior, but still not weak. You talk me. I talk others. The warriors, the middle class—treat us like breeders. No look. Like we not here."

"They'd notice quickly enough if you were gone," she said dryly.

He frowned. "No place go. Five more cities on Macedon. But all same."

Simone sighed inwardly. "It's called a strike."

"Fight?"

She shook her head. "Fighting just makes enemies. It makes more hate. I suppose sometimes its necessary, but it isn't the best solution to any problem. You heard what we were planning to do?"

He nodded. "Walk, sing, chant protest," he said a little doubtfully. "Won't change tings."

"Maybe, maybe not. The point is that one person may be strong, but many people are stronger. In a strike, everyone would get together and agree not to do whatever it is they do—say, for a day. You'd have to talk to a lot of people and those people would have to agree to do the same thing at the same time. Then, all workers stop and nothing gets done. Suddenly, you're important. You see what I'm saying? They can't ignore you. They can't pretend you don't exist. Then, once you've gotten their attention, you have power. Then you say to the others that you want the chance to get an education and become something else—or whatever it is that you want."

He stared at her so blankly for so long that she thought he hadn't gotten it at all. Slowly, he smiled. It broadened until he was grinning. "Yes! I see this!"

Simone grinned back at him. "You think you could talk all of the workers into striking?"

"No."

Simone felt her excitement deflate. "No?"

He shrugged. "Some, maybe. Could try. Old men, no like ... different. No like ... trouble. Young men, maybe. Not many young men."

"Do you want to try?"

"Yes, if it mayhap change tings. Will try. Tell them, different your Father world."

Simone smiled thinly. "We call it *Mother* Earth—giver of life."

He looked shocked. "Mother?"

"I know that's a radical concept, but try to start thinking in terms of including women in the picture. We have a lot to offer besides sex."

His brows lifted. His dark eyes gleamed. "More sex?"

She gaped at him a moment before it dawned on her that he was trying to joke. "Very funny!"

He chuckled. "Zev go. Tomorrow, Zev watch."

"Zev?"

He paused at the door and looked back questioningly.

“Be careful.”

He studied her for a moment. “Yes. Be careful.”

She wasn't certain if he was advising her or agreeing. “Work on your English. I can't speak your language and it's really hard to understand you.”

He grinned a little sheepishly. “Zev try.”

“I'll try.”

He looked a question.

“I'll try—not Zev try.”

He nodded. “I'll try.” He hesitated. “Simone sure no want fuck Zev?”

She threw her pillow at him. He looked shocked when it hit him in the face, but he grinned when she started laughing. Bending down, he picked it up and threw it back at her, laughing when it hit her hard enough to bowl her over.

“Cute kid,” Simon muttered, settling more comfortably on the bed when he'd left. It was hard to be excited about his suggestion that he would work on convincing some of the drak's to protest when he seemed so doubtful that he could make a difference, but he was awfully young—or he looked it anyway.

Uneasiness hovered at the back of her mind, anyway, and had since he'd talked about the fighting. It hadn't seemed unreasonable that she hadn't seen even one of the guys since she'd arrived. It wasn't as if she walked the streets constantly and it *was* a city. Now she couldn't help but worry, though, that she hadn't seen any of them because they had been shipped out to fight.

Anger flickered through her—and wasn't it typical that they were sent to fight and possibly die over ‘things’? So maybe whatever they were fighting for was important, maybe it was essential to life, but if it was like the wars fought over oil on Earth—instead of making a push to find an alternative—well it wasn't worth losing what might possibly be the best and brightest of a generation! Or was it even worse? Like Vietnam? When nobody had ever really figured out what the war was for? When thousands upon thousands of young men had died, or been maimed for life, or become mentally unstable from the things they'd experienced?

She didn't want to think about it, didn't want to think that they could be dead and she wouldn't even know it. Her throat closed at the thought. She shouldn't be upset about it, she told herself. She wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them! It wasn't as if there was, or had ever been, anything between them.

Except they were the fathers of her babies. She hadn't realized that she felt any sort of ties to them when they'd only been donors, but she did. She cared. Maybe they were assholes, but they were still her babies' fathers.

And really, she didn't think they were total assholes. She was sure they had some redeeming qualities. She hadn't seen them, but she was still convinced they did.

Giving up on just being able to compose herself and go to sleep after a while, she got up and took the hot shower she'd promised herself and finally relaxed enough to drift off. She was still heavy eyed with lack of sleep when she went downstairs the following morning, however.

Zev was at his station. He smiled at her broadly, but the best she could manage in return was a half-hearted effort. He frowned worriedly, watching her as she moved to the table.

“Now what've you done to upset your admirer?” Liz asked when she sat down.

Simone looked at her in surprise. "Zev?"

Liz blinked at her. "You know his name?"

"The server who always gives us our plates?"

"Yeah, that one—the one that always looks at you like he wants you for dinner," Liz said dryly.

Simone felt her face heat. "He's just a kid."

"I think he's got all the equipment and he wants to use it," Liz retorted dryly.

"Anyway, I don't think they have a very good concept of our ages. I haven't gotten so many 'I want to fuck your brains out' looks since I was twenty. And I'm talking everything from kids that look like they should still be diapers to grandpas."

"Well, considering we seem to be just about the only pussy in town," Sharon offered wryly, "I guess that makes us beauty queens even if none of us are 'fresh' anymore."

"Hey! I'm only twenty-seven, damn it!" Karen put in.

"I rest my case!"

Karen glared at her.

"Any idea how many plan to join us?" Simone asked.

"None," Sharon replied. "Anybody think of a good slogan to chant?"

Simone sighed. "I was talking to Zev last night. He just about scared the pee out of me! He was waiting in my room."

"And I can guess what he had in mind!" Liz chirped.

Simone couldn't help but smile. "Actually, he did, but he said we could talk first and fuck later. Turns out, he isn't very happy with the status quo around here. He's been listening to us talk about home and it sounds grand to him."

"It would—not that it isn't a hell of a lot better than this place, but it isn't like we don't have social issues, too."

"Didn't have social issues. We have plenty of social issues here."

"Anyway," Simone redirected the conversation, "he feels rebellious. He's going to talk to the worker class and see if he can pump them up to strike."

"Oh my god!" Liz exclaimed. "You're kidding?"

"Really?"

Simone shrugged. "He isn't very confident that he can convince them, but he wants to try."

"But ... that's wonderful!"

Simone frowned. "I hope he doesn't get in trouble."

The other women exchanged looks. "Haven't you been preaching change? That we can't expect not to have *any* trouble at all?"

"I don't preach!" Simone said indignantly. "I guess you're right, though. It's just ... he's so young."

"And we aren't?"

"Oh! You know what I mean! Besides, he isn't a breeder. *We* at least know that it's unlikely that they'd do anything to us that might endanger their precious stock!"

"Yes, but that still doesn't put us in a position of power to make changes."

"Not much. I'm not sure he can help, either, but at least he's willing to try."

"Hopeful of a reward?" Liz asked.

"I didn't offer, if that's what you're asking."

“Don’t get pissy! I wasn’t suggesting that, although”

“What?”

“Well, you said he wanted to because he wanted a chance at a better life.”

“Yeah?”

“Well—I haven’t said anything before because I know it won’t be well received, but the pussy thing—it’s in short supply and high demand. It might not be a bad idea to take on lovers since that’s one thing not forbidden.”

“And use that to convince them?” Sharon asked with distaste.

Liz sent her an annoyed look. “It’s a weapon and we don’t have a lot of weapons!” she said pointedly.

“She’s right,” Simone said. “There’s no point in being squeamish about it. They’re using us and if we gave them sex they’d still be using us. I don’t see that it’s that underhanded to try to barter with it.”

All of the women around her gave her a look.

“Fine! Nobody’s saying you have to or even asking. Liz just pointed out that it could be used if anybody wanted to. And before you get all high and mighty about it, consider how many times you’ve already done that! Used sex to put your guy in a better mood to get something you wanted. At least this would benefit a lot of people.”

“*And* you’d get laid! Don’t forget that benefit!” Liz said pointedly. “I don’t know about rest of you, but I’m starting to feel a little deprived. Maybe it’s the hormones?”

Sharon frowned. “It doesn’t seem right to do that when we’re pregnant by somebody else.”

“Like you’re *likely* to get a piece of that action!” Liz snapped. “They’re too good for us! We won’t be getting any of *that* dick!”

“*Must* we discuss dick when I’m trying to eat ... this sausage thing?”

Simone burst out laughing. She studied the ‘sausage thing’ on her plate for a moment and finally picked it up between her fingers. Pushing the tip in her mouth, she sucked on it experimentally.

Even Liz reddened. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Just testing the waters,” Simone said innocently, slowly pushing the meat-like substance in and out of her mouth.

All of the women around her slid a glance toward the buffet table and snickered when they discovered that half the men had noticed Simone’s play and were staring at her slack faced. They winced when she finally took a bite off the end. “Not bad.”

Liz shook her head. “That’s probably about the most dangerous thing you’ve done since we got here!”

Simone sighed. “Actually, I think what we’re about to do is. Everybody ready?”

“We still don’t have a slogan!” Sharon pointed out.

“I say we go with ‘mother’s rights’ or ‘women’s rights’,” Simone replied.

“How about ‘we’re people, too!’?”

Simone shrugged. “We’ll alternate.”

Chapter Eleven

Simone felt a surge of excitement and hope when she discovered that most of the women had decided to join them after all. When she, Sharon, and Liz had trooped outside and into the street to wait to see if anybody at all was going to join them, the other women followed them, pouring out of the building in a stream that was far more impressive than the handful that she'd expected. One of the women had even made a banner out of her bed linens. It read 'FREEDOM'!

"Alright, ladies! Let's do this right!" she said loudly enough to be heard by all. They formed up by fours, linking arms. Two volunteers moved to the front and stretched the banner between them so that it was prominently displayed and could be read—if there was anyone who read English.

They'd caught a good bit of attention even forming up.

She could see the women were already getting nervous. Leaving Liz, Sharon, and Colleen, she started with a song she'd remembered that had always lifted her spirits, made her feel strong as a woman and powerful, not helpless and hopeless.

*I am woman, hear me roar!
In numbers too big to ignore!
No one's ever going to keep me down again!*

Thankfully, a handful of the women also knew the lyrics, or enough to fake it. When they began singing it, she returned to the front and linked arms with Liz and they began their march.

* * * *

Camryn stood at rigid attention while he listened to the council berate him over his failure, but it had begun to wear on him. No amount of discipline or determination served to close his mind from the pain after standing so many hours and once it managed to slip past his control, it enveloped him. A cold sweat broke from his pores and he began to feel lightheaded.

Blinking the sweat from his eyes, he struggled to follow the discussion despite the fact that it had become so redundant that it was clear they meant the harangue itself as part of his punishment for losing the mine.

Ordering his men to retreat.

It didn't seem to occur to them that they would *still* have lost the mine if *they* had died there.

He supposed they just didn't give a fuck. It was honorable to die—dishonorable to live if one failed.

It infuriated him that they'd called him back without giving him the chance to redeem himself. They could have retaken the gods damned mine once they had reinforcements if the council, in their infinite wisdom, hadn't immediately called them back upon receiving the news.

That wasn't acceptable, apparently. It also wasn't forgivable, despite the fact that their communications had failed them and they'd been overrun.

He'd begun to think he might further disgrace himself by fainting when he heard something, dimly, in the distance. Frowning, he tuned out the drone of the council member's voice, trying to pick up the strange noise he could hear.

Slowly, it became louder, ceased to be noise as he began to hear it more clearly.

Singing—women's voices. His heart thudded uncomfortably in his chest. A sense almost of wonder filled him for several moments. He'd never heard anything like it. Women—many women—singing!

Oh my fucking gods!

The thought had barely formed in his mind when the council member, also hearing it, abruptly fell silent. The entire council room fell silent.

Camryn discovered his mind had turned to pure mush. He couldn't think what to do, couldn't think of any way to avert disaster.

Bowing abruptly, he begged pardon of the council members, whirled on his heel and strode rapidly toward the exit. Kael and Ean, seated near the back with what was left of the men who'd abandoned mine fifteen to the enemy, leapt up and hobbled after him.

* * * *

Lielani had been pacing her sitting room worriedly since the men had been called before the council to answer charges of treason, terrified of what the outcome might be, sick at heart that such unreasonable charges had been launched against them at all.

They'd tried! They'd fought! It wasn't *right* to call them treasonous because they hadn't succeeded!

They might at *least* have had the decency to give them time to heal!

Not *one* had returned hale! It had been all she could do not to weep over them when she'd seen they were wounded, healing, but pale and weak from their injuries.

She was *so* angry with their fathers! She didn't *care* about appearances! If they could not show some leniency toward their own sons, what was the point of their power on the council? And how could they worry about their positions when it was their sons!

Stupid men! Stupid, stupid men, she thought furiously!

Her poor babies! They should be in bed, not trying to defend themselves from their own people!

She was struggling with her anger and her tears when she heard a sound that penetrated her misery. Voices raised in song! Women's voices? A sense almost of wonder filled her. She hadn't heard anything like it since she'd been a child herself and even then

Drawn to discover exactly what it was she was hearing, she went out onto her balcony and looked out over the city. She saw them immediately. Breeders by their clothing and the metal collars around throats that glinted in the sunlight, linked arm and arm, singing—though she didn't understand the words.

It was the alien women, she realized immediately, instantly feeling swamped with guilt.

She'd failed Camryn, and Kael, and Ean. She'd thought when she'd promised them that she would try to convince Arrek to bring their breeder into his household that she could. She might have if the silly child hadn't pulled such a stunt!

Shocking! Unbelievable!

She'd laughed herself silly.

Arrek hadn't found it the least bit amusing, unfortunately. He'd been enraged at the woman's arrogance.

She'd been intrigued, tried to imagine what an arrogant woman would be like.

Like the men?

That seemed unlikely. Arrek had called her a fool.

"But, Arrek," she'd said placatingly. "She is a woman."

He'd looked at her suspiciously. "Yes."

Lielani had shrugged. "You have always said that women were like children. They needed the guidance of a man. You should bring her here so that she can benefit from your guidance."

"A breeder! In the palace?"

Lielani sought patience. "It was sometimes done in the old days," she pointed out. "She is carrying your grandsons. If she is a fool and arrogant, wouldn't it be better to watch over her than to allow her to do anything else foolish? What if she is not wise enough to care for herself as she should? What if the sons of your sons suffered as a consequence?"

Arrek had studied her for so long that she'd felt both hopeful and uneasy, and then he had dismissed it. "In the old days the breeders were good drak women—not these creatures! The Empire will see to the care of the infants. The rabble is jealous enough. Favoring my own sons would only cause more dissent."

And he would certainly not consider doing that, Lielani thought angrily!

The women stopped singing, drawing her attention back to them and began to shout something instead. She listened intently, but she hadn't learned their language. She had no idea what it was they were shouting.

Something that disturbed the men, certainly.

Or were they only staring because they had never seen so many women in one place? She had not seen so many herself and she had many years behind her.

It made her chest swell with some indefinable emotion. She thought it was sorrow. There would never again be so many drak women as she saw now. What must their world be like that they felt confident enough to march in the streets and shout and sing, she wondered?

Admiration filled her, hopefulness, and then worry chased them both away. The woman would be there, she realized, the woman her dearest warriors could not chase from their minds, the woman they loved with such painful desperation.

The urge filled her to rush down and beg them to go back, to remember their place, to accept that they were only women and they could not do such things, but, of course she didn't because she was only a woman herself.

* * * *

"We're people, too! Women have rights! We're people, too! Women have rights!" Simone shouted with the others as they reached the end of the street they'd been following and turned onto another.

They were certainly attracting attention! She had the feeling that their protest wasn't being well received—the men they'd passed had stopped. Most of them had simply gaped or glared, some had shouted after them, but they'd drowned them out. Then again, she hadn't expected the protest to be well received. She'd known it would

probably make more people—men—angry than it would convert—which was probably around zero, but the point was to show them that they weren't just going to lie down and take it. The draks couldn't pretend that they weren't there, or that they were content to be used.

Uneasiness flickered through her, though, when she saw warriors racing from one of the buildings they were approaching. Her heart executed a nosedive. She switched from the chant to the song again, fearing their protest was about to end—possibly in an uncomfortable confrontation.

She knew it absolutely when she heard her name called.

And heart still went crazy with the thrill of adrenaline that shot through her. She whipped her head around.

“Camryn!” she breathed when she met his gaze.

He was furious, of course. Everything about her seemed to inspire him to anger.

Kael and Ean looked furious, as well.

She smiled and waved at them and threw them a kiss.

Hear me roar, In numbers too big to ignore!

No one's ever going to keep me down

It was too much to hope that would stun them enough that she could escape, although she could see that it had set them back on their heels. Liz and Sharon looked at her worriedly.

She'd almost begun to think they were going to make it to the next turn when she heard them pounding behind them. Wincing, she refused to glance toward the sidewalk.

It didn't do any good, unfortunately.

Camryn, Kael, and Ean stalked from the sidewalk and cut directly in front of them, forming a wall.

She stopped and the entire brigade of marchers stopped behind her.

Camryn looked furious—pale, shaken, ill. If she hadn't noticed that, she might have said something she shouldn't have.

Well, she did. “Oh my god! Camryn! What happened?”

She saw something flicker in his eyes.

He shook his head. “Go back to the barracks, Simone. Take all of them back. Now!”

She lifted her chin at him. Some of her bravado abandoned her when she glanced at Kael and Ean and saw that they looked ill themselves—and still as furious as Camryn was.

“We're going. We're just going to march this way.”

“Now!” Camryn said with emphasis. “You've created enough of a disturbance.”

Her lips tightened. “Good! We're people, too! Women have rights!”

“Women have rights?” someone close by bellowed in disbelief.

Simone felt a little weak in the knees when she saw who it was—the same asshole that had confined her for a week! “Thank you! I appreciate the fact that you acknowledged that,” she said a little shakily. “I think we'll go back now.”

The bastard looked like he might pass out. “Guards!” he bellowed. “Escort these breeders back to the barracks and see to it that none of them leave.”

The women behind them had bunched up in fear as the men began to surround them, but apparently some of them had become emboldened by the march.

“We aren’t *breeders*, you bastard! We’re women and we have names!”

“Coward! You’re too afraid of women to treat them like equals because you *know* you aren’t our equals!”

“We aren’t *half* as strong as you and your bullies, but we’ve got more balls!”

“Who died and made you god, you son-of-a-bitch? What gives you the right to take us from our homes and treat us like this?”

Simone glanced uneasily at the men and turned to the women. “You’re right! They’re bullies, but we agreed to have a peaceful protest, ladies! Let’s go back to the prison!”

To her relief, the women turned and began to march back. They began to chant again, too, louder than before. Simone’s belly was churning with uneasiness, but she linked arms with Liz and Sharon again, and chanted and sang with everyone else. She’d almost begun to hope that she was going to escape and could cower in her cell and quiver for a while when the guards stopped her line again, broke the grip they had on one another, and marched her back toward the building Camryn had emerged from.

* * * *

The charges of treason were dropped. Camryn wasn’t certain if it was because the women had so completely rattled the council that they were far more interested in ranting over the behavior of the breeders than the debacle on Kylo or not, but he was afraid that was it. His father called him into his private chambers as soon as the men charged had been dismissed.

Struggling to gird himself when he’d felt ill before he’d discovered what Simone had done, Camryn bowed respectfully and followed his father.

“This behavior will not be tolerated!” Arrek bellowed the moment the door had closed behind them. “It is an outrage! If any man had *dared* to call me a coward ...!”

Camryn met his father’s gaze with a hard one of his own. “Yes?”

Arrek had the grace to look discomfited. “I did not bring the charges against you!”

Camryn ground his teeth. “Nor support me.”

“It was the council’s decision,” Arrek ground out. “Examples have to be made. Failure cannot be rewarded. The honor of the House of Jakaar is at stake!”

Camryn felt his face heat with anger. “I regret, father, that you feel that way, but I see no honor in dying uselessly. If my dying might have resulted in a victory for Macedon, I would have been willing to die. If I had been allowed to complete the mission assigned to me, according to my judgment in matters of war, I would have re-taken the mine once we had the weapons to do so and the men it would’ve taken.”

“It would have risked the lives of far more men to re-take the mine than it would have to *hold* the mine!”

Camryn clenched his teeth. “Except we did not *have* that manpower because we had no warning that the enemy was advancing in such numbers and no way to communicate with the ship to drop the men and weapons we needed!”

They glared at one another for several moments and Arrek finally settled at his desk, waving a hand dismissively. “That is settled. You and the men responsible are relieved of duty until further notice.”

“Disgraced, you mean,” Camryn growled.

“It is appropriate punishment and far less than any of you deserve!”

Camryn drew in a shaky breath and lifted his head to glare at the ceiling.

“At ease! Sit down before you fall!” Arrek said testily.

“I prefer to stand, thank you, Your Highness.”

“I want to discuss these ... creatures you’ve brought among us,” Arrek said after a moment.

Camryn ground his teeth.

“The one you called by name—Simone. This is the one that you asked me to house in the palace.”

It wasn’t a question and Camryn didn’t bother to answer. He knew full well that his father had already looked over the data and knew it was Simone who carried his son. He wanted to demand to know why so simple a request had been ignored, but he knew it would only emphasize her importance to him and that could be dangerous to her.

“I was considering the request,” he continued after a moment, “when she was brought before me for displaying herself publicly and creating a disturbance.”

Camryn shot him a look of surprise in spite of his determination to remain aloof. “I beg your pardon?”

“She displayed her body—her legs to be precise—which nearly caused a riot.”

Camryn felt his face heat with anger—jealousy to be more exact. “The people of her culture do not see this as shameful. It was not a part of the material taught to them by Akule. She had no way of knowing that it was unacceptable.”

“The women, you mean?”

“The people. We saw as many men who went about in public partially dressed as women. They often go without their chests covered—if the weather is hot.”

“The women?” Arrek demanded, outraged.

“The men,” Camryn said tightly.

“I’ve no interest in the men.”

“I also had no interest in the men. I was pointing out that their customs are different.”

“It was Akule’s task to make certain they completely understood *our* customs so that they would fit in.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to point out that breeders didn’t have a place in their culture beyond their biological function. He stopped himself with the reflection that his father knew gods damned well they didn’t and would merely see the comment as provocation and an excuse to punish Simone in some way.

“I have grave doubts that they will fit in,” Arrek added after a moment.

“It is unjust to expect them to adjust in a matter of weeks. Their culture is entirely different from ours. Our women, when we had them, were reared to expect no more.”

“You no longer count Lielani as a woman?”

Camryn’s lips tightened. “I beg pardon. I should have said, when we had women capable of breeding.”

Arrek studied him for a long moment and spoke into his communicator. “Bring the breeder in.”

A jolt went through Camryn. He did his best to hide his reaction but he could see

from the satisfaction on his father's face that he'd failed.

He refused to look at Simone when she was escorted in, but he almost thought he could feel her in every pore, felt dizzy from the effort to inhale the faint scent of her.

"Your arrogance has made me curious," Arrek said, addressing Simone. "You are under the impression that you are equal to a man?"

Simone studied him for several moments, certain the old bastard had something nasty in mind. "I'm not under the impression," she said finally. "I know I am."

Camryn closed his eyes. He should have known she wouldn't have the sense of self-preservation to keep her tongue between her teeth.

"Give her your weapon, Camryn."

Camryn looked at his father in stunned disbelief. "I beg your pardon?"

"Give her your sidearm."

Camryn felt a cold sweat pop from his pores. Reluctantly, he removed his sidearm and presented it to Simone.

"I am your enemy," Arrek said coldly. "Shoot me."

Simone stared at him a moment and looked down at the pistol. "I've never fired one of these," she said uneasily.

"Show her."

Camryn was growing more and more uneasy. "*There is a point to this, father?*"

"They seem to believe they have more balls than we do. I want her to see that she doesn't. That she is not the equal of a drak—although she may well be equal to the men on her world."

Camryn wasn't convinced that she didn't have the balls. "*I don't think this is wise*"

Arrek studied him coldly. "*You dare lecture me on wisdom?*"

Camryn's lips tightened. Turning to Simone he pointed out the firing mechanism. She looked at him. "He's your father?"

Camryn nodded.

Simone lifted the pistol and fired a stream just above his left shoulder that was close enough it left a burn. "Shit! I never could aim worth a damn! Let me try again," she said coldly.

It took Arrek a few moments to recover. "As you see. You do not have the nerves of a man—or the coordination. Women cannot kill, even to defend themselves against an enemy."

"If you weren't Camryn's father, and I'd thought for one moment that it would've done any good, I assure you I could have blown your head off and I would've slept just fine. In fact, I'd sleep better!"

"Give me the weapon, Simone."

Simone placed it in his palm.

"You are dismissed," Arrek said coldly. He exploded the moment the door had closed behind her. "She is *not* a woman! I do not know what sort of creature she is, but certainly not entirely female. You are certain their species *has* a male and a female and they are not both? I must say that you have shown a poor choice in breeders with that one!"

"I beg to differ, father. She has exactly the qualities that I wish for in a son."

"Well, you are a fool! And she is a troublemaker!"

“She will not make trouble if she is housed in the palace. The women are more prone to behave ... unbecomingly when they are allowed to support one another.”

“I am more tempted to dispose of the lot of them and search for females that are more like our own.”

Fear almost froze Camryn, knocked the breath from him. Wild thoughts of seizing the women and a ship of the Empire to carry them to safety slammed against a block wall of certainty that there was no place to take them. That impossibility sent his mind in search of a way he might realistically prevent catastrophe, however. “These women carry the sons of some of the most powerful men in the Empire,” he managed after a long moment. “They are suitable in every way for breeding sons. You are not going to convince them that they would be better off with weaker women to carry their sons anymore than you can convince me of it.”

Arrek studied him for a long moment and finally looked away. “I will have to consider the situation carefully.”

* * * *

Simone thought she might faint. What had possessed her to actually point the thing at him and fire? She was lucky she *hadn't* blown his head off. True, she'd been a *little* better at aiming a gun than she was at throwing things, but still so god awful at it that she'd finally given up shooting practice.

She hadn't thought there was any chance of even accidentally shooting him, she realized, but his contemptuous attitude had set her back up. Rage and hate had carried her through the demonstration of her 'marksmanship' but she'd already begun to suspect that it hadn't served her well. The realization of just how badly she'd wanted to move the sight of the pistol to the center of the bastard's forehead almost made her throw up. That was nothing compared to how she felt once it began to sink in that she'd fallen into the bastard's trap, however.

He'd wanted to know if there was any possibility that they could make her and the other women conform to their ideal of what a woman should be and she'd proven to him just how unlikely that was.

She'd been too frightened, too unsettled all the way around to have her wits about her. It didn't matter that she'd expected the draks to react to their protest pretty much as they had. It was still frightening and demoralizing.

She might have coped better than she had, though, if not for the encounter with the men—*her* men. They hadn't just looked pale and stricken because of what she'd done, though she was too preoccupied with her own situation for her mind to piece together the clues at first. They'd looked ill because they *were* ill. She knew that had to be it. She knew that had to be why they were here instead of off warring—they'd been wounded in battle, wounded badly enough to be sent back to recover, which, to her mind, meant very badly.

It hadn't taken long for her mind to leap from that conclusion to the certainty that it confirmed her fears from before—that they'd nearly been killed and she'd had no idea that they were even in danger.

She was so distressed over those thoughts that she wasn't even aware of her surroundings. It wasn't until they reached a door that led into a building that she switched focus long enough to note the details of the structure she was entering. A jolt went through her the moment she didn't recognize it. She jerked against the hands

holding her arms instinctively then. “Where are you taking me?” she demanded when the two men merely tightened their hold and jerked her across the threshold.

Neither man responded, but she didn't know whether it was because they couldn't understand her or if they intentionally ignored her. She struggled against them, trying to brace her feet against the floor. She gave up on that tactic very quickly, tried to make them think she'd completely given up and then abruptly dropped her entire weight against their holds. She almost succeeded in breaking both men's grip on her and for a moment they tussled on the floor. She managed to kick both of them, but it wasn't solid strikes that might actually have helped. The glancing blows just thoroughly pissed both of them off and they were far rougher when they got her on her feet again, bruising her arms and jerking at her until she began to feel like a ragdoll. They dragged her down a flight of stone stairs, scraping and bruising her shins across three or four steps before she managed to get her feet under her.

When they reached the lower level, they marched her down a narrow corridor and finally stopped and unlocked a door, shoved her inside hard enough she lost her balance and sprawled out, and slammed the door behind her, locking it again. She lay where she'd landed for several moments, assessing the damage. Finally, grunting from the pain, she levered herself up and looked around the dim room.

It was clearly a jail cell as opposed to the jail-like cells she'd been in from the time she'd been captured. There was a narrow cot pretty much like the ones she'd had before and nothing else except a crude toilet and a miniscule water bowl and faucet. The room was filthy, but more in the sense of disuse, with layers of dust that had mixed with the dampness to make slime, than from a lot of use and no cleaning between occupants.

She hadn't noticed any sounds to indicate there was anyone else in the other cells.

At first, it relieved her a little. She thought it meant that the other women must not have ended up in jail as she had. As the hours crept by, however, she began to realize that she hadn't been thrown into a prison—she wouldn't have been completely alone if that was the case. There would've been other prisoners, she was sure, and she began to wonder if she hadn't been buried alive, thrown into a place where no one would ever find her or hear her screams for help.

She'd passed from hunger to a headache from lack of food before she heard any sound at all that wasn't the scurrying of some sort of rodents or insects. She didn't know whether to acknowledge the surge of hope that shot through her or brace herself for something worse, but she listened intently as the footsteps drew closer and closer until they paused just outside her cell. There was a scrape along the floor, like something sliding, and then the footsteps retreated.

She bounded off of the cot when she saw the plate on the floor and raced to the door. “Wait! Where am I? How long will I be here? Hello?”

Only her own voice echoed back to her. Her shoulders slumped and she turned away from the door in time to see a rodent racing toward her food. She screamed. Startled, the animal bounced off the floor, whirled, and ran the other way. Surging toward the plate, she snatched it up and raced to the bunk, bounding on top of the mattress and wedging herself into the corner. For a few moments, despite her hunger, she couldn't focus on anything but watching for the monster that was sharing her cell, but finally, when it didn't come out again, she ate.

The food was cold and worse than anything she'd had before, but she ate as much

as she could. She set the plate on the edge of her bunk when she couldn't force any more down without puking. She didn't want to get off of the bunk, but when it occurred to her that the food she'd left might draw the animal out, might encourage it to try to climb onto the bunk with her, she leapt off the bunk with it. She was on the point of shoving it back through the same hole that had been used to deliver it when she thought about the hours she'd waited to be fed. On second thought, she scurried over to the tiny water bowl, used her palm to catch water and drank a few handfuls, and then set the plate on top and raced back to the bunk.

She began to wish she'd blown that bastard's head off after all as she huddled on the bunk, staring around the floor in a constant vigil for any sign of the beast. She knew he was behind her imprisonment.

Did Camryn know, she wondered? And if he did, could he do anything about it? Would he?

She frowned, trying to decide whether she knew him well enough to understand how he might react, what he might do. She'd never managed to pick up more than a few words of their language, but she'd studied the interaction between him and Kael and Ean. Oddly enough, she hadn't seen that they were very different from their human counterparts. They argued—mostly about her, she suspected—but she'd seen them joke with one another. Usually, it was Ean who said something that brought a lightening of their harsh expressions, a gleam of amusement to their eyes, but sometimes it was Camryn, sometimes Kael.

In a way, she thought she knew him better than any man she'd ever known. She knew their culture. She had a very firm idea of what his childhood had been like and everything he'd done since, which, she thought, gave her a clearer picture of his molding into an adult and hinted at his motivations, the driving force behind the way he behaved. She'd often heard them speak of someone they called Lielani and had finally concluded that she was the woman in their lives, although she wasn't certain what role she played in their lives. As far as she knew the draks only allowed the infants to stay with the mothers until they no longer needed their mother's milk—unless it was just *them* that the draks had an aversion to leaving their sons with.

Was she a lover they shared?

The jealousy she'd felt before when she'd concluded that was probably the case became more pronounced. She just hadn't recognized her anger about it as jealousy before. And how ludicrous was it to feel such a thing? Lielani had undoubtedly been with them a very long time before *she* had come into the picture—and she never really had. *She* felt attached to them because she was carrying their babies, she supposed, felt as if the joining of their DNA in the baby they'd made together had somehow linked them, but they didn't necessarily feel that way. In fact, it occurred to her that they'd have no reason to feel anything at all considering their society and their own upbringing.

The exercise pushed her into a deeper depression. None of them had ever handled her as roughly as the guards that had brought her to her prison even though she thought she'd provoked them more. She knew that was probably more because of the babies than her and yet, against all reason, she'd still felt like *she* mattered to them. That misconception, or self-deception, had led her down the road to bonding as surely as the knowledge that they'd fathered her babies. How she felt didn't really matter, though. It was their feelings toward her that might or might not make a difference to her well being

and, unfortunately, she couldn't convince herself that they gave a damn about her.

She still didn't believe they'd had a hand in her imprisonment and she still believed they would do everything in their power to free her, but she also knew she'd made a mortal enemy of Camryn's and Ean's father. He might've been willing to dismiss her before, but she'd seen the look in his eyes when she'd made it clear she wouldn't have hesitated to kill him if she'd thought it would change things for the better. She shouldn't have shown her hand. She should've worked harder to present herself as a weak minded and cowardly female. She'd made so many absolutely stupid mistakes because she was too emotional, too cocky because she'd grown up believing she was an equal and that being an American protected her like a magical talisman.

Maybe it would have on Earth—she was no longer as certain of that as she'd once been—but it was nothing to these people and she'd been stupid, stupid, *stupid* to let that cloud her judgment! They all had. They'd been so sure their little march would just be dismissed as nothing more than a bunch of silly women misbehaving. She just hoped to god their little march of independence wasn't going to get them all killed.

Chapter Twelve

“Get out of the way, woman!” Kael ground out in a voice that brooked no argument.

Jolted when Kael had never looked at her that way, never used such a tone with her, Lielani moved away from the door she'd been physically barring and bowed her head respectfully.

Kael hesitated, as if he might say something to her and then pushed past her without a word. Camryn was sleeping, but he felt no compunction about shaking him awake. Impatience and fear flooded him, however, when Camryn opened his eyes and looked at him without recognition.

“We cannot find her, Camryn!”

Camryn's gaze sharpened abruptly and he surged upward, letting out a hiss of pain as he did. “Simone?”

“Yes, Simone!” Kael said impatiently. “She has vanished. The prince, your father, insists that the breeder is well cared for and we need have no anxiety for our sons.”

Camryn swallowed audibly, searching his mind for some clue of how long she might have been missing. When he failed to summon the information, he focused on Kael again. “How long?”

“Since the trial—a week!”

“Gods damn it, Kael!”

Kael winced. “You collapsed when you returned to the palace! You were unconscious for half that time, drugged insensible. We did not even learn that she had been taken to the prince's chambers until yesterday! That fucking bastard had the city guard around the breeder barracks to make everyone believe they were there as he had commanded. No one knew that he had disposed of them until Ean managed to slip inside last eve and discovered that none of the women were there. The gods only know when or how he did it—unless he used the particle transporter and I can not believe he had the sanction of the physicians for that! It unnerves me more to think he might have ignored their health and the babes' health to that extent, though. If it is true, it is a clear indication that he has no compunction about endangering them and our sons, that he is completely focused on ‘winning’ what he perceives as a battle of wills and wits!”

Camryn paled. “You do not think he ...?” He swallowed convulsively, unable to bring himself to finish.

Kael turned pale, as well. “I cannot believe he would be that stupid! The warriors are already near to rioting. Those with sons and those who had hoped to breed upon them in the next breeding season had gathered at the barracks as soon as they heard they'd been confined. When we discovered we'd been lied to, that the women weren't even there, I thought they would tear the High Council apart!

“The wily old bastard was ready for us, though. He'd barricaded the council chambers three deep with city guards heavily armed against us. We have been taking the

city apart ever since searching for them.”

“Help me up,” Camryn demanded, struggling to remove the monitoring probes from his arms.

Kael planted a hand on his chest instead. “Lielani will have my hide if you climb out of bed and collapse again—and you cannot do Simone any good if you are dead!”

Camryn’s face hardened. “I am not likely to die! If I have been here a week, then it is by father’s design—to keep me insensible and give him time to do what he had no doubt planned to do all along without interference from me!”

“You are certain?” Kael asked doubtfully.

“I was recovered well enough to stand on my feet for the trial,” Camryn growled.

“Because you are a stubborn bastard and was too proud to face your accusers from a chair! You will not convince me that way!”

Camryn lapsed back against his pillows. “I had a touch of fever and the wounds were burning from the strain, but no more than that. Gods damn it! I am so weak! This is no way for a warrior to recover!”

“I will help you to your quarters,” Kael said after a moment, “but no further. They cannot drug you there if you bar them from the room. You can help us best by thinking where he might have had the women moved. You know him and the way his mind works better than anyone.”

Camryn ground his teeth when Kael helped him to his feet, tightening his hold on Kael until the darkness that had swarmed over him retreated. “He is not in this alone,” he said a little breathlessly. “The council did not want to bring them here at all. You can be certain that they resented the pressure we put upon them to allow it and that they were all waiting and hoping for an excuse to do what they have done.

“Gods damn it! If Simone had only *tried* to behave with a little more circumspection!”

“You are a fool if you thought she would behave any differently than she did, Camryn! You willfully chose her knowing that she was nothing at all like our women! It was her confidence and her ability and willingness to defend herself that drew you to her to start with—as it did Ean and me! You cannot blame her for being what she is when you chose her for that reason!”

Camryn didn’t respond. In truth, it took his entire focus to negotiate the steps between the infirmary and his quarters. He was too exhausted once they’d made it even to argue when Kael helped him to his bed.

“You are right,” he muttered dizzily when he’d settled. “It is my fault if anything has happened to her. I should have left her there ... where she belonged.”

“You cannot take the entire blame for yourself,” Kael snapped. “She had already been marked for selection. If you and I and Ean had not chosen to breed her, she *still* would have been taken. The only difference would have been that she would not be ours and I would not have accepted that. Ean would not. You will no doubt want to meet me in the training yard when you are able, but I confess I meant to have her. I was only trying to convince you and Ean to choose another.”

Camryn managed to glare at him. “You must have learned that nasty trick from your father!”

Kael shrugged but his face hardened. “And he learned from *your* father.”

Camryn closed his eyes. “I bear no love for the man,” he said angrily. “I do not

even respect him any longer. You will not insult me by saying you despise him as much as I do. And I am as big a fool as he! I should have tried to reason with her instead of behaving like my father and trying to cow her into submission, instead of treating her as if she was a silly, willful child who did not know better!

“It will do her no good, or us, to rail about what we should have done now! Where do you think he would have put her?”

Camryn struggled to collect his thoughts. “Where have you not looked?” he asked finally.

Frustration filled Kael. It had been riding him, and the fear that Arrek had had the women killed and disposed of them, until he knew his mind was of little use to him. “I do not know! We have searched almost the entire city!”

“Then go and see if you can discover if he had them transported to one of the other cities.”

Kael felt as if he might throw up. Had they wasted precious time taking Cryssis apart when she was in one of the other cities? And how much time more would it take to search the others? Could they even count on finding them at all when Arrek could simply order them moved any time they came close to discovering them?

Nodding jerkily, he left Camryn, taking care to lock the door behind him. No one, save him and Ean knew the code—not even the servants. Mayhap Camryn would recover both his strength and his wits without interference and join the search.

* * * *

Simone had stopped rushing to the door when her caretaker brought food—once a day—she thought. There was no window in her prison, no way to be certain other than the fact that hunger was always gnawing at her stomach long before she saw food and it felt as if many hours passed between time. By her reckoning, she'd been in the cell a week when the caretaker didn't merely shove the food through the slot and disappear again. She heard a key rattle in the lock.

It sent a jolt of fear through her.

“Simone?”

Relief flooded her when she recognized Zev's voice. “Zev?”

“It is I,” he said, pushing the door open cautiously.

Simone bounded off of the bunk and flew across the room to hug him impulsively. He wrapped his arms around her a little awkwardly in return, but she felt his discomfort when she burst into tears. Struggling to contain them, sniffing, she pulled away and looked at him.

“I have dropped most of the food I brought,” he said in a chiding voice.

Simone felt it on her back, saw it on the floor, and burst into tears again. Snatching the plate from his hand, she moved to the bunk and scooped what was left from the plate with her fingers. She'd gulped most of it down before she realized it had taste—that it was far better than what she'd had since she'd been there. She felt like crying all over again for the food she'd lost in her impulsive need to feel the touch of another being.

Zev, she discovered, had followed her. He stood by the bunk, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. The look he sent her when she licked the plate embarrassed her. She handed it back to him. He stared at it a long moment and set it down on the edge of her bunk. “I would have come sooner,” he said apologetically, “but

it took a while to discover where you were and then longer to convince them to allow me to serve you.”

Simone stared at him with a touch of wonder. “You’ve learned English so well!”

He grinned, blushing. “I sneaked into the learning center and used the teaching machines.”

She had to wonder what sort of teaching machines they had for him to have learned so well so quickly, but she doubted there was much point in asking. “How long have I been here?”

“It is one week by your way of counting.”

She’d thought as much. “Only a week?” she asked glumly.

“May I sit and talk?”

“Oh yes! Please! I haven’t had anybody to talk to since they brought me here! I’d begun to think I was going to go crazy down here all alone!”

“There are others here,” he said. “They are confined as you are, far away from one another so that they believe they are completely alone.”

Simone searched her mind. “Solitary confinement,” she said angrily, wondering who else was in the prison and how they were doing. “Liz? Sharon?”

“I regret—I do not know the names of the others. “One of those you used to sit with.”

Simone frowned, disappointed. It would’ve helped her feelings just to think of being close to her friends. Guilt smote her almost immediately. She should be hoping they weren’t having to deal with what she was! “How many of the women did they throw in jail?”

“All. They are scattered, though. Some here, some in the palaces of the other princes.”

Simone gaped at him. “I’m in a palace?”

Zev nodded. “The House of Jakaar. This part was once the only part of it—when Macedon was first colonized. Later it was used as a prison but that was also very long ago, which is why no one thought of this place.”

Simone’s heart sank. She swallowed convulsively a few times. “Does ... do you think that Camryn knows?”

He stared at her with shock. “You are speaking of Prince Camryn?”

“Yes.”

He looked awed and disturbed. “Gods! You speak of the prince as if he is ... of no more importance than I am! They allow that on your Earth?”

“We don’t have princes where I’m from. Does he know?”

“He was on his death bed, we heard, when you were brought here. I do not think so.”

Simone felt like she might faint or burst into tears again. “Oh my god! Is he ... alright?”

“He lives. It is hard to get news ... now, when there is so much unrest, but I heard that he was recovering.”

Simone was so focused on clinging to the hope that it was true and Camryn was alright that it took her several moments to register the rest of what he’d said. “Unrest?”

A gleam of excitement lit his eyes. “Revolution!”

“Oh my god! You aren’t serious?”

Some of his excitement waned. "In truth not, but it was a near thing and the city, indeed the Empire, awaits only a spark to set it off! There was much unrest before, which is why the council finally allowed the mission to take you and the others captive. That pacified everyone for a time. No one was completely satisfied, but when you and the others were brought, they at least felt that they would have some chance to have sons of their own and mayhap even a woman. We were all told after the march that the women had been confined to the barracks, which we expected. It made everyone angry, but they were certain none would come to harm. When the warriors discovered that they had been tricked, however, and that all of the women had been taken away and hidden, they were furious! They stormed the council chambers!"

Simone stared at him wide-eyed and speechless. "What happened?" she asked breathlessly.

"A great deal of shouting, threatening, and struggling, but little else. The High Council had anticipated trouble. They had called upon the city guards to keep the peace. They were heavily armed and the warriors were not. The warriors were told that you were all being punished for your behavior by being confined but you were well cared for and their sons would not come to harm so they turned away.

"They did not return to their quarters, however, as I am sure the council believed they would. They had been lied to once already. They did not believe anything the High Council said. They have been rampaging all over the city since, breaking in doors and destroying things in their search.

"And now I see that they were right!" he finished angrily. "They *were* lied to! This is no fit place for an animal! And you would not have been so hungry if they were feeding you and caring for you as they should! You may be certain that I will make it known!"

Simone couldn't help it. She was so deeply grateful that he'd found her and that she would get to leave the horrible place that she surged toward him again, throwing herself into his arms regardless of her welcome—or the lack of it. "Promise?" she asked a little tearfully, burrowing her face against his chest. "I don't think I can stand much more of this!"

He surprised her by embracing her more readily than he had before, tightening his hold on her. She felt his hand settle on the back of her head and drift downward. "If I knew how to fight, I would kill them myself for what they have done!" he said fiercely.

His sentiment comforted her and at the same time made anxiety flutter in her chest. She didn't want him to get hurt because of her! "Just get me out of here," she whispered, pulling away to study his face anxiously. "Don't do anything that could get you hurt. I don't want anything to happen to you."

He swallowed convulsively and leaned closer as if mesmerized by the movement of her lips. She knew he wanted to kiss her. She knew she shouldn't allow it, let alone encourage it, but she'd been so alone! She'd never felt anything as horrible as the silence that had surrounded her. When he nuzzled his face against hers, she turned her head to meet his lips in mute appeal for more comfort.

He had no inkling of how to kiss! He rubbed his lips across hers with painful pressure and went back to nuzzling her face with his, lifting shaking hands to grasp her head.

She wasn't ready to give up! "Not like that," she murmured. "Let me show you

how we kiss.”

“Kiss?”

“Make love with our mouths.”

He gulped, pelted her face with a rush of breath. “Show me.”

The scrape of soles on the stones outside the cell made both of them jerk apart in sudden fear and whip their heads to look at the door Zev had left ajar.

Simone felt as if the air had been punched from her lungs when the door was shoved abruptly and so hard it slammed back against the stone and bounced. Camryn stood in the door.

A horrible sense of déjà vu swept over Simone directly behind the thrill that went through her when she recognized him. “Camryn!” she whispered.

The blank look on his face contorted with rage. “Get away from her, gutter rat!” he roared, surging into the cell and lifting Zev bodily from her bunk.

“Don’t hurt him, Camryn! Please!” Simone screamed, bounding up from the bunk and trying to pry Camryn’s hands off of Zev. “He’s a friend! Please don’t hurt him! He found me! He brought me food! He was just trying to help me!”

Something she said or did finally seemed to penetrate his rage. He looked at Zev for a moment as if he was tempted to break him in half despite her pleas and then looked at her.

“Did you take him as your lover?” he bellowed. “Did you?”

“He hasn’t touched me! I swear to god, Camryn! I didn’t even kiss him!”

He shook Zev and finally dropped him on the floor. Zev scrambled to his feet and fled. Panting for breath, Simone pressed a hand to her runaway heart, her shoulders slumping slightly with relief.

It only lasted until Camryn backed her against the wall, planting his palms on the wall on either side of her and she saw that he was still furious. “I didn’t touch him ... let him do anything!” she gasped.

Camryn’s face twisted, abruptly shifting from a mask of rage to pain. “Do not ... give yourself to him.” He closed his eyes, leaning into her, and pressed his forehead against hers. “Take me, Simone,” he said harshly, swallowing audibly. “Take me into your bed.” He rolled his head, brushing his cheek along hers and then turned his face to drag his lips along her cheek and then her lips. “Take me into your arms. Take me into your body. I cannot bear this torment anymore. Give me surcease before I go completely mad.”

Simone gazed at Camryn’s face, unable even to drag in a breath of air. Dizziness swept over her. “You want me?” she managed to whisper.

“I have wanted you so long I am a shell from the hunger. I cannot think, Simone,” he said harshly. “Do not expect it of me. Show me the kiss you offered him. Teach *me*. Make love to *me* with your mouth as you offered him.”

An avalanche of heat fell over her, surged through her as a wild tidal wave of want and need. She was totally confused about their customs—she’d understood that she couldn’t take a lover outside of the lower class and that no one from Camryn’s class would lower themselves to touch her even if she was stupid enough to ask—but she wasn’t confused at all about what she wanted. She’d coveted him since the first time she’d seen him in the nightclub. She lifted her hands to his hard cheeks, lifted her mouth to his and coasted her lips along his hard mouth, pressed to them with tender pressure,

and then explored his wonderful lips with the stroke of her tongue. His lips parted. A heavy breath laden with his scent invaded her as she sucked in a breath in response. Her entire body abruptly felt almost too heavy to stand.

She slipped her hands through his hair, lacing her fingers behind his head to draw him closer as she sought more of him, pushing her tongue into his mouth. She felt the jolt that went through him, but she'd done little more than explore the faint roughness of his tongue with her own when he seized control of the kiss. He pressed her to the wall with the weight of his body, locked one around her waist to hold her, and opened his lips over hers, thrusting his tongue boldly into her mouth.

The taste of him exploded on her taste buds. She sucked in a sharp breath in delight, pulling his scent deeper into her. It rocked her, almost literally. She clutched at him more tightly as her universe tilted on its axis, setting her adrift in an oddly buoyant current that lifted her up and then allowed her to sink over and over until she felt drunk, too lightheaded and heavy to keep her knees locked. He bent one knee, pressing it between her thighs as her knees gave out and she lifted the leg opposite his, curling it around him to draw her hips closer to his. Jolts that were almost electric spread outward from her clit and up through her as she rocked against his muscled thigh, trying to counter the pressure that was swiftly building to an ache in her lower body.

His large hand settled on her leg, found its way beneath her gown and coasted along her thigh. He broke for a sharp draft of air and tilted his head to find a new angle before locking his lips to hers again. His questing hand closed on her hip, found her waist, coasted up her ribs and settled beneath a heavy breast for a moment while he sought a new connection of their mouths, gasping, sucking at her lips.

He felt so good, so wonderful! She shifted her own hold on him, grasping at him in her urgency, trying to pull him closer, desperate to press her aching breasts to his hard chest, to move against his erection. He shifted the hand beneath her breast higher, thrumming her erect nipple with his thumb, and she uttered a hum of appreciation in her throat.

"Camryn!" she gasped when he broke from her lips again. "Come inside me now!"

He pressed his forehead to hers, gasping hoarsely, and abruptly caught her buttocks in both hands, hoisting her upward. Eagerly she shifted her hold on him, coiling both legs around his hips and locking her ankles together. She locked her arms around his shoulders in a like manner, arching to rub her sex along his shaft. It sent ripples of pleasure through her, made the walls of her sex clench in a kneading motion of anticipation.

Camryn's hands tightened on her buttocks. He ground his teeth, countering her thrusts for several moments in a motion that was almost as tortuous as it was pleasurable as he slid her along his thick shaft. Her clit began to thrum a warning of imminent release that echoed inside of her. She made a sound of distress, trying to hold her release back and yet unable to bring herself to avoid the pleasure he was offering.

Abruptly, he shifted one arm to support her buttocks and slid a hand between them to tear at his clothes until he'd removed the barrier. She felt his heated flesh as he guided his cock along her cleft and squeezed her eyes tightly as she felt the thick, silky knob of flesh that was the head of his cock force its way into the mouth of her sex. Her body clutched at his frantically, almost as if it was trying to grip his cock and pull him

inside.

She tightened her hold on him, panting, trying to force her body to relax and accept him as he sawed shallowly in and out of her, trying to gather enough moisture to penetrate her fully. A long, low groan of pleasure eased from her as began to claim her channel and she felt the delicious stretch of her muscles to accommodate his thick shaft.

He paused for a long moment when he'd penetrated her as deeply as he could go, nuzzling his face against hers until she turned her face to match her lips to his. He shook, groaned into her mouth when he'd thrust his tongue inside her mouth and she sucked at it.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he gulped a lungful of air and lifted her, pressing down on her hips the moment his flesh slid to the opening of her body and plunging deeply again. Simone felt her body begin to clamor for release with the next upward thrust and began trying to move with him, her mind completely focused on the rush that went through her with each passing of his flesh along her inner walls.

She held her breath, panting when she couldn't hold it any longer, uttering mindless sounds of pleasure, whimpering as her climax continued to tease her. When it burst upon her, it was so intense she groaned at the hard quakes rippling along her channel, felt a rush of goosebumps break all over her. She settled her mouth on the strong column of his neck, sucking at the flesh frantically to silence the urge to cry out.

Camryn shuddered, jerking all over as his body seized and began to pump a hot stream of semen into her. A breathless grunt was forced from him with each spasm. He held her for long moments afterwards, curling his hips to eject more when he could find no more.

Her legs felt like rubber when he finally eased from her and allowed her to regain her feet. She drooped against the wall behind her. He slumped heavily against her, trying to catch his breath. Finally, he pulled away, cupping her face in his hands, stroking her cheeks, a look in his eyes that made her heart thump heavily in her chest.

His gaze flickered over her face after a moment, though, and a frown drew his dark brows together. The frown deepened as he leaned away to look at her more keenly.

He shifted his hold, stroking his thumbs along her hollow cheeks. Fury slowly gathering in his eyes, he backed away from her and lifted her arms to examine them.

"I will kill him," he growled abruptly.

The vow shook Simone from her euphoria. "What?"

He stared at her for a long moment and then pulled her almost roughly against his length. Turning his head, he surveyed the cell. When Simone pulled away from him to look at his face, she saw his eyes moving assessingly, the flicker of thoughts. "I cannot leave you here," he muttered.

"There are others. Zev told me. He'd been looking for ... us." She faltered on the last word when Camryn's gaze zeroed in on her sharply again.

"How many?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

He frowned. "They will have to stay a little longer."

Simone felt her chin wobble. "We will?"

"They. I am not leaving you here another moment. I will get you to a safe place and make arrangements for them."

"Where are you taking me?"

His lips tightened and she realized immediately that he didn't know where to take her. Somehow, she'd gotten it into her head that he'd come to release her—been sent, or at least been given permission. “You'll be in trouble if you take me.”

“Do I look like I give a fuck?” he growled. “Come on.”

He caught her arm and led her from the cell, closing the door and locking it with the key Zev had left in it. He strode quickly down the passage she'd been brought down before—at least she'd thought it was. Evidently, it was a different direction from the one she'd come down. She kept thinking they'd reach the stairs the guards had dragged her down. Instead, the passage ended at another that crossed and went off in either direction at a ninety degree angle. She lost track of the turns after that and wondered how he could possibly know where he was going. He seemed to. His stride was rapid and unfaltering. She began to pant with the effort to keep up.

It seemed to penetrate his abstraction and he glanced down at her. Pulling her close against his side, he brushed his lips along the top of her head. “Not much further, dear heart.”

Warmth tingled through her, drawing her lips upward in a smile. He'd called her dear heart!

He brought her to a set of stone stairs at last, but she saw that they spiraled upward instead of angling down as the other stairs had. Slipping his hand into hers, he led her upward but paused at the top. “Wait here,” he said in a voice so low she barely caught it.

Fear instantly squeezed at her heart, but she nodded.

He pressed his ear to the panel for several moments and finally opened it and stepped out. The door closed behind him. Simone looked around uneasily. The stairs, like the entire area, was lit by a faint, odd sort of glow that almost seemed to come from the stones themselves. She didn't see any sign of anything that looked like a fixture to produce artificial illumination. The view looking down the spiral stairs was dizzying. Trying not to think about the possibility of having to race down them, she pressed her back more firmly against the wall and focused on the door. Her heart leapt in fright when it opened.

Camryn stepped in, swirled something dark around her, and caught her around the shoulders. “Quickly now.”

He didn't have to tell her twice! She would've run when they stepped out into a wide corridor if he hadn't been holding her. He strode swiftly enough along it, however, that she had to jog to keep up. With her first step, her bare feet slapped against the stone almost like a handclap. She was careful to run the remainder of the distance on the balls of her feet.

Camryn paused at a door, keyed a code into the panel beside it and whisked her inside when the door opened.

It was a vast room, almost more like an open apartment. At one end, chairs and short couches were arranged in an informal conversational grouping. At the other, a massive bed dominated most of the space, although there were a couple of tables and tall chests with drawers. Everything seemed to be made of a dark, glossy material. She couldn't tell if it was natural fibers, like wood, or manufactured.

“You'll be safe enough here for the time being,” Camryn said, more as if he was speaking to himself than to her. “No one has the entry code but me, Kael, and Ean.”

He turned to look at her. "I have to go. I have to see what I can arrange for the others."

Simone tried not to show how very much that disturbed her, but she felt abandoned and frightened and, from the look on his face, she didn't do a very good job of hiding it. He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her almost painfully tightly. "You'll be safe here. I promise." He eased his hold after a moment and pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tipping her head up so that she had to meet his gaze. "Just to be on the safe side, if you hear the code being entered, hide. Don't come out unless you're certain it is me or Kael or Ean." He paused, frowning. "Ean's in Muersin, I think. Me or Kael, then. Understand?"

She nodded.

He bent his head and covered her lips, kissing her lingeringly, long enough to dredge embers of warmth through her. His lips were curled upward when she managed to open her eyes. "I like this."

She smiled back at him a little dreamily. "What?"

"This little mouth. Kissing. I could make love to your mouth endlessly."

Releasing a gusty breath, he set her away reluctantly. "I must see to the others. Take your ease. You are welcome to anything that I have to offer."

She turned and watched him as he strode from the room, listening as he keyed the lock behind him. Looking down, she saw he'd draped a dark cloak over her. Dismay filled her when she'd removed the cloak and saw the condition of her gown.

She felt her face heat remembering the way they'd made love with such wild abandon. She'd done her best to try to maintain a semblance of cleanliness, but it was hard to do much bathing with a tea cup and keep an eye out for four legged monsters at the same time. She hadn't had soap, just the tiny basin to hold water to splash on herself, and her gown looked like she'd used it to mop the filthy cell.

He hadn't seemed to notice or mind, but it still discomfited her. After glancing around, she saw an open door that looked like a likely possibility of a bathroom. Discovering it was, she pulled the filthy gown off, dropped it on the floor and moved to the showering unit. Her belly, she saw to her surprise, had begun to swell noticeably with the growing babies—except she *hadn't* noticed it before. She *might* have if she'd been given clothing that touched her anywhere but at the shoulders, but then again she'd had plenty to distract her. She'd been too afraid and too focused on what might happen to her to notice. She smiled down at the mound, cupping it. "I made love to your daddy," she murmured, feeling her blood heat at the memory, feeling a different sort of warmth invade her, as well. It made her chest feel tight.

Anxiety arose, dissipating the brief sense of happiness. Camryn had sneaked her from the dungeon into his apartment. How was he going to get the others out? Zev had said all of them had been imprisoned. There were nearly a hundred women all told. He couldn't sneak them all into his room! Even if only a quarter of them had disappeared into the dungeon below the palace that was still an awful lot of people to hide.

And what good would that do, really? How long could they stay in hiding?

Chapter Thirteen

“I knew that it was mistake to allow the men to bring alien women upon our soil!” Arrek muttered. “I was against it from the start and see what has come of it!”

Lielani studied him worriedly as he paced back and forth across her sitting room. She wanted to know more, but she knew better than to probe him with questions. He’d come to her because he wanted to vent his frustrations as he commonly did. She need only be patient and, eventually, she would have the entire tale.

Unless he took the notion to lead her into the bedchamber to ease himself on her in that manner—which he did as often as not.

She hoped not. She was still angry with him about what he’d done to Camryn—to Kael and Ean, as well, but mostly to Camryn. He hadn’t been well enough to be dragged through a hearing—even if it had been warranted, and she would never believe that it was. She did not know anything about war beyond the nightmare it was to wait in fear to learn if the ones she loved would come back broken, or not come back at all. She knew Camryn well, though. He was stronger in many ways than his father. If he had failed then it was because there was no way to succeed. He had certainly not failed from any weaknesses within himself. He *had* no weaknesses that she had ever seen, not even the weakness of enjoying the killing, a sickness which some developed when they had been in as many conflicts as Camryn had. He was strong, brave, intelligent, skilled in the art of war, and a man of honor.

As far as she was concerned the very fact that he’d been so grievously wounded was proof enough that he had done all that was possible even if she hadn’t known him well enough to know that he had.

She did not care any less about Kael or Ean—or believe they had failed in any way. She knew them to be good men, as strong and brave, honorable and intelligent as Camryn, though she had heard it said that Camryn was a true leader and that both Kael and Ean possessed a fatal flaw that made them less suitable for leadership. Ean was too prone to get caught up in his own private fight and lose sight of the battle and objective as a whole and Kael often fought more with his temper than his wits. She had simply not been quite as angry on their behalf because both of them had been well enough to defend themselves. Camryn had not been and, as their leader, he had been forced not only to defend himself for his decisions, but to defend his men for acting upon his orders.

“The warriors had the audacity to threaten the High Council!” Arrek continued, jerking Lielani back to his ranting. It startled her so much she forgot her determination to keep quiet and wait to see if he would tell her all.

“What?”

Arrek turned to look at her. “Yes, shocking! It has never happened before! Never!”

Lielani’s mind churned, her fears divided between fathers and sons. “There was ... an attack?” she gasped.

He grunted. “Nay! I had anticipated that they would not be pleased when they

had already created such a disturbance to go after the ... *disgusting* creatures they have used as breeders! When I heard they had discovered that we had removed the breeders, I called in the city guard to protect the council chambers!"

Lielani blinked at him in confusion. "Oh. I had not heard"

His lips tightened. "I do not know how you could have failed to hear, even here! Those ... *creatures*," he spat, "had made a disgraceful display of themselves, marching, chanting the most absurd demands! *Demands*, mind you! Breeders! *Females*! As if they had more than a handful of brain cells between the lot of them! And I can not imagine what would've given them the notion to begin with—except they have no discipline, no morals, no decency about them and none of the normal female graces or sensibilities!"

"That ... *creature* that Camryn selected for the House of Jakaar that looks distressingly like a round ear—She *has* round ears, mind you!—is some sort of male/female cross! I am convinced of it. When I bade Camryn hand her a weapon, she fired it! *At me!* Spoke to me as coldly as any killer that she would have blown my head off if I were not Camryn's father! What true female, I ask you, could do something like that?"

Lielani could not even find her voice. She stared at Arrek in horror, which seemed to appease him.

He smiled grimly. "It was enough to convince me that they were completely unsuitable."

"Oh!" Lielani said, dismayed. Nay, beyond dismayed! He could not mean that he had done something to their sons! No babes? None? What had he done? Her chin quivered in spite of all she could do. "You have not ... Arrek! You would not do anything to the babes?"

His expression softened slightly. He moved to her and settled beside her, gathering her in his arms. "Of course not!" he said gruffly. "Do not weep, Lielani! I must tell you that I have grave misgivings of the spawn of such creatures, but I have seen to it that they are confined where they cannot create any more disturbances. When the babes are born will be soon enough to dispose of them. No doubt it will be a trial to us to have half breeds to deal with, but they can be trained."

"You will get your chance to coddle the little half-breeds! You may be certain of that!"

Lielani swallowed her tears with an effort, relieved beyond measure to know he was not the monster she had feared for several moments that he'd become. He was not far from it, though, she thought sadly if he could condemn the women so easily only because they were different. "Surely, in time, the breeders will learn our ways and behave?"

"They do not have the gentleness of our women, Lielani," he murmured soothingly. "I know how soft-hearted you are—I have always loved you for it—but they are hopeless—as arrogant as if they were born men! That creature that Camryn is so smitten with had the audacity to inform me that she *knew* that she was the equal of any man!"

"Camryn is smitten with her?" she asked quietly.

He snorted. "I am as certain as I can be—and Kael and Ean, as well! Young fools! I do not believe that I was ever such a fool! Nay, Camryn is not himself," Arrek

affirmed. "When she is gone, he will regain his sense of responsibility." He stopped, frowning angrily as another thought occurred to him. "He addressed her by name, as if she was an equal! In public, mind you! I was mortified! After his disgrace in battle—and I do not mind telling you that I suspect that creature is behind that, as well!—one would think that he would be more inclined to tread lightly. Instead, he raced from the Council Chambers, in the midst of the proceedings, only to rescue her from her folly!"

Lielani digested that, trying to decide how she felt about it. "She is behind all of the trouble that we have been having?"

He grunted. "I suppose it's understandable ... to an extent. She is young and has a womanly body, despite her attitude." He thought it over. "She is not hard on the eyes, although, as I said, she reminds me far too much of the round ears—the skeets."

"They are a blue-skinned race?"

"Nay. Her skin is pale, but it is almost golden. Her eyes are strange—very light and very large, for she has a small oval face."

"The hair is colorless?"

"Nay—there are light streaks in it, but mostly it is like the color of our skin—mayhap a little lighter."

Lielani laid her hand on his thigh, stroking it almost absently. "You are tense, Your Highness, from the many troubles of these past days."

"It is not over yet, but I believe we have taken the steps to put down the unrest. Given time, the warriors will cease to rampage around the Empire in search of them and remember their duties. We may have to discipline a few to bring the others in line."

"It is good that you took such swift, decisive steps to bring peace," Lielani murmured.

Arrek smiled at her and lifted her hand to brush his lips along her palm. "You always give me peace, Lani. Come."

She rose gracefully and followed him to her bedchamber.

When he'd finished and gone, she went back into her sitting room to ponder everything he'd told her. It was like trying to fit the pieces of a puzzle together. Arrek never simply told her the news. He spilled forth the heart of his displeasure first and then, sometimes, she would get the rest of the puzzle, the events leading up to whatever had angered him and the steps he'd taken to resolve the problem.

It dawned her after a little while why she felt so hollow inside.

Arrek was jealous of his son, Camryn. She thought she'd always known that he was. She'd excused it because she knew that it bothered him that he was no longer fit to be a warrior. It was difficult growing old, having to accept that you could not longer do the things you'd once done so easily.

What made her feel truly ill, though, was the realization that he was jealous of the woman Camryn had brought back with him. He desired her. He didn't want to admit, mayhap even to himself, that he did, but he hated her because he wanted her and he knew that she wanted Camryn as much as Camryn wanted her. Mayhap he hated himself for his desire, hated her because she made him feel it, because in his mind she was not worthy of consideration.

The mighty House of Jakaar—*her* house was falling down around her ears, mayhap even her world was crumbling. Nay, there was no *mayhap* about that. It *was* crumbling. It had been falling slowly into decay for generations. The women from Earth

had been their last hope, the last chance to redeem any part of themselves, the Empire they'd built, their civilization—their race.

And it seemed this one woman would destroy it all!

Fear and anger churned in her. She couldn't simply cower in her apartment and let everyone and everything she'd ever known and loved be destroyed. She *had* to do something. She'd never thought that she was brave, but she knew she had to find strength and determination within herself, somehow, to save those she loved.

* * * *

Simone was trying to rub her hair dry when she heard the distinctive sound of the keypad being punched. Her eyes widened in horror. She knew it couldn't be Camryn, not so soon. She hadn't even *looked* for a place to hide! Throwing a panicked look around the bathroom, she sailed out of the door and dove for the bed, scrambling under it.

The door opened and closed again. Covering her mouth with both hands, Simone studied the black boots that crossed the room, paused, turned first one way and then another.

“Simone?”

The voice sounded familiar, but her heart was thundering in her ears so loudly she wasn't certain. She *was* sure it wasn't Camryn.

Easing to the edge of the bed, she was about to peer out when she saw the man turn abruptly and head straight toward the bed. Kael's face appeared about three inches from her nose. She stared at him for a split second in wide-eyed horror before recognition dawned. Relieved, she inched out from under the bed.

Before she could do more than get to her knees, he caught her in a tight embrace that made several bones along her spine pop ominously, burrowing his face against her breasts. “Gods! I could not believe it when Camryn said he had found you! Here! When we had searched the city and moved on to begin searching the others! Thank the gods he thought of the old prison beneath the palace! I'd forgotten it.”

Kael's embrace thoroughly rattled Simone, not the least because she was keenly aware of her nakedness in a completely sensual way because she'd always been acutely aware of her attraction to him. She had never believed that any of them were responsible for her imprisonment. They'd made it very clear how important their sons were to them, but it had also seemed clear that she meant nothing to them herself. She was a necessary evil because they needed her body, her womb, to carry and nurture their sons.

It didn't help that she was still more than a little off kilter and confused about what had happened between her and Camryn. Akule had made it clear that she could take as many lovers as she wanted as long as she was already bred and there was no danger of an 'accidental' pregnancy. He'd seemed to imply that it was expected, in point of fact, and that she—all of the women—should be generous with their favors, but she couldn't look higher than his class and she'd seen nothing in Kael's demeanor toward her to suggest he even thought of her as a woman, let alone wanted her. Neither Camryn nor Ean had seemed to suggest it, for that matter—not by word or look. They'd taken great care, in point of fact, never to get close enough for even an accidental touch.

She'd thought that was because of their rigid class system. She was beneath them and they not only hadn't been tempted to touch her, but they'd been repelled at the idea. She hadn't considered, before, that they might've avoided coming near her because they were trying to avoid temptation—because that implied they were afraid they would have

trouble controlling themselves and she just couldn't grasp the possibility that they might want her enough to worry about it.

And yet Camryn had said just that—that he'd wanted her desperately, but he'd been struggling with his belief system, maybe even worried about what might happen to her if anyone noticed interest in her his culture found unacceptable.

It was almost more unnerving that Kael's touch was less lover-like and more like someone who truly cared about her, who'd been worried sick and needed to feel the reassurance of holding a loved one. Even the things he said seemed to imply that.

But was it her? Or was it profound relief that he'd found his son safe and sound?

It mattered, a lot. She was glad his son meant so much to him, but she wanted, had always wanted, to matter to him, too. Was it safe to assume she did? At least a little? Or would he be brought instantly back to a sense of wrongness at her touch? Would it remind him that she was beneath him?

She didn't know, but she found that, despite her uncertainty, she couldn't resist the temptation to touch him. She settled her hand a little tentatively on his head, stroking his hair soothingly.

He stirred at her touch, dragging in a deep breath and releasing it against her breasts. His heated breath instantly diverted her from the desire to sooth to sexual awareness again and discomfort wafted through her, sudden anxiety that she'd found herself in a situation, or might, and didn't know what to do.

Wouldn't Camryn fly into a rage if he discovered them together just as he had when he'd caught her with both Akule and Zev? Or would he?

That powerful a reaction was unnerving to say the least, but beyond that, she cared what Camryn thought about her. She cared about Camryn. She didn't want to lose him.

But did she *have* him, she wondered suddenly?

He'd said 'take me'. At the time, it had seemed a plea for acceptance—she still thought it was—but on what level?

As a lover, she realized abruptly. As sweet as it had been, as cherished as he'd made her feel, it really hadn't been any different than Akule's and Zev's propositions. Their protocols were rigid. She couldn't ask outright. Although she supposed it was acceptable to show interest, it wasn't acceptable for her to *ask* a man to be her lover. *They* had to ask and she had the option of declining if she wasn't interested. And if she did, they had to accept that decision. Despite their male dominated society, it wasn't considered acceptable to force themselves on a woman, to take. It had to be offered—because they'd just about eliminated the female half of the species and couldn't afford to rip up what they had left, she supposed.

Except men of Kael's class—like Camryn—weren't even supposed to acknowledge the existence of the lower orders. Camryn had suffered because he couldn't bring himself to ask before because he thought of her as beneath him.

It put an entirely different complexion on the situation—one that didn't make her at all happy. In fact, it made her feel just a little nauseated.

And angry. He didn't have the *right* to forbid her to take as many lovers as she wanted! That was just about the only damned right she had on this godforsaken world! That and breathing!

She was almost more angry with herself. She knew, deep down, she'd been

flattered by the show of jealousy—had interpreted his anger that way—and had believed it meant something. Clearly it did. He didn't want anybody messing with 'his' pussy, which only meant that he was more arrogant than any of the others, felt more superior, as if he was entitled to have one pussy all to himself while the 'riffraff' fought over sharing the other available pussy!

Her thoughts had made her angry enough that it was several moments before it even dawned on her that Kael had interpreted her stillness as acceptance. He'd widened his scope of interest from the valley between her breasts to nuzzling her breasts. Her nipples had reacted to his touch, forming into tight little buds as her blood surged into them. Her entire body had reacted. She felt her kegels clench as she looked down at his face, felt the tingling heaviness that told her her sex was already flushed with budding desire.

As she stared down at him, mesmerized, frozen by the lure of pleasure, he opened his mouth and caught the tip of one of her breasts, curling his tongue around the nipple and sucking on it lightly. A heated current flowed from her nipple to her womb, making it squeeze in reaction, exude moisture for his possession. "They are like Pinaberries—pink, firm on my tongue, and yet tender," he said huskily when he had plucked at each, making her belly shimmy and warmth flood her nether regions.

"Kael?" she said a little breathlessly, doubtfully.

"Yes, darling?" he responded absently, plucking at her nipples with his lips.

Simone swallowed convulsively, but his endearment melted the last of her reserve. She arched her back, offering him a better hold. He took it, sucked the nipple he'd been teasing with his lips into his mouth. Her belly clenched again at the sensation that shot straight through her and exploded in waves of delight in her womb.

As if he sensed he'd completely demolished her barriers, he abandoned the leisurely exploration that had had more of the feel of supplication than demand. He began to pull at her breasts more and more feverishly, tugging her under a lava flow. Her body heated toward eruption. Her mind melted under the onslaught, floated in a drugging pool of euphoria. Her head began to feel too heavy for her neck to hold it up.

She was dimly aware of the tug of his hands, moved at the command of them, but she had no inkling of his design until she felt his cockhead stretching the mouth of her sex. Her heart pounded erratically—with doubt, with anticipation—when she realized he'd dragged her astride his thighs.

He caught her hips. Pulling her slowly down onto his erection, he paused when he felt the strain and lifted her. The second time he drew her down, he'd gathered enough moisture to counter the resistance of her flesh—and still, his shaft was so thick she found herself panting with a mixture of uneasiness and excitement.

He ignored the strain that time, forcing her slowly, inexorably over his cock until she'd sheathed him completely. He coiled his arms tightly around her waist, holding himself deeply inside of her and pulling hungrily at her breasts until she felt herself teetering on the brink of eruption. She struggled against it, tried to close her mind to the exquisite feel of his thick flesh inside her and the suction of his mouth on her nipples. For a few moments, she kept it at bay, and then her wall crumbled. She gasped, groaned as her body began convulsing in release.

She was still spasming when he tilted her back until her head and shoulders were resting against the floor, shifted his own position and began to pump into her in deep,

hard thrusts that caught her as she drifted down toward repletion and shot her up toward the peak again. She groaned mindlessly, too caught up in what he was doing to her, made her feel, to have any awareness outside of the delightful friction of his cock and the building tension inside her. She couldn't even find the will to try to stave off her climax to enjoy it longer. She reached for it, struggled to capture it and uttered a keen cry when she caught it and her body exploded harder than before. He covered her mouth with his, absorbing her cries, groaning and shuddering as he found his own release.

She was too weak to move when her body finally stopped convulsing. Panting for breath, she lay limply, her eyes closed. Kael lifted his head after a moment, studying her face. Careful not to pull his flesh from hers, he shifted the two of them into a more comfortable position and began to saw slowly in and out of her.

"Don't tell me that didn't satisfy you," Simone muttered, still too lazy to lift her eyelids.

He chuckled huskily, lowering his head to nuzzle his face against her neck. "It did. It felt so good I think I want to stay forever."

Simone felt her lips curl at the image that popped into her mind. "It might be a little awkward trying to do things with me permanently mounted on your cock like a hood ornament."

He drew back sharply and looked at her face. "Gods, Simone! Unless you want me to fuck you until you are raw, you should not put such images in my mind."

She opened her eyes at that and looked at him.

He met her gaze for a long moment and then, reluctantly, withdrew his flesh from hers, hissing as he did. "I cannot guard you from here—though I'd like to. I don't think there is any danger, yet, that they'll think to look here for you, but it does not pay to make such assumptions."

He got to his feet and caught her hand to help her up.

Frowning, she headed into the bathroom to clean up when he looked down to adjust his clothing, brushing a little absently at the semen stains. That would teach him to fuck her with his uniform on!

She studied the dirty gown she'd left on the floor while she helped herself to Camryn's comb and raked the tangles from her hair. She wasn't about to put it back on, though. Finished with her hair, she strolled out into the main room, looked around for the cloak she'd discarded and draped it around her shoulders.

"I cannot keep my mind on what I should be thinking about if you are going to go around like that," Kael said dryly.

"Well, I don't have anything else except that sack I was wearing when they arrested me and it's filthy!"

Anger flickered across his face, but she wasn't sure whether her tone had prompted it or her circumstances. He strode to one of the chests, rifled through first one drawer and then another and finally pulled out a robe similar to those she'd seen the middle class draks wear. She discovered it wasn't open on the sides. Instead, it had long, flowing sleeves—and it swallowed her whole. It was a good six inches too long and the sleeves were at least that much longer than the tips of her fingers. The sleeves didn't roll well, either. They were too loose to make cuffs that would stay. She finally rolled the sleeves up to her elbows and used the crook of her arms to keep them up—which wasn't terribly comfortable. Sighing, she looked around and finally settled on one

of the short couches.

"I don't really understand the situation," she said after a few minutes.

Kael, who'd paced to stand staring out of one of the windows, glanced at her.

Maybe she wasn't supposed to talk to him, she thought wryly, just lie down and spread her legs? She was damned if she could see any benefit, to her, of taking them as lovers, though, if she still wasn't allowed to talk to them—or speak unless spoken to.

"You are a prisoner of the Empire. Camryn removed you without authorization."

"I'd guessed that. I just don't see how it's going to change anything."

Kael frowned, shaking his head. "In all honestly, I do not see that Camryn can do what he believes he can."

"And what is that?"

"He means to petition the High Council for permission to take you as concubine for the House of Jakaar."

Simone stared at him blankly, trying to jog her mind for the ramifications of that. It was an exercise in futility. Akule hadn't bothered to inform them of anything beyond their station. Beyond that, she'd been under the impression that they had a concubine.

"What's a concubine?"

He looked a little startled, but then he frowned thoughtfully. "You would be our lover, but it would be a more permanent arrangement. You would belong to the House of Jakaar, servicing only the men of our house."

Simone gaped at him. The men of the house? How many fucking men were there in the house?

"The men?"

"Yes. Arrek is prince and the head of the House. Bastain is my father—his brother—and then there is Camryn, Ean, and me."

Arrek? As in Arrek the bastard? She was supposed to spread her legs and let that pig fuck her?

Not that she thought she really needed to worry about it. He hated her. There was no way he would agree to let them keep her as a concubine. Instead of asking him what her options were or if she even had the option of refusing—he hadn't seemed to believe she did—she recalled that she'd thought there was already a woman in their life. "Lielani isn't your concubine?"

He sent her a startled look, then his expression became speculative. "How long have you understood our language?"

She didn't like his tone but, fortunately, she remembered it was forbidden for her to learn their language—not that she'd managed to pick up much! "I don't. It was easy enough to pick up on the names, though. I wouldn't have known yours—or Camryn's or Ean's except that I noticed you often addressed each other that way."

Kael frowned. He'd wondered that she knew their names, but he'd assumed she'd been told, that she'd asked. It was almost disconcerting to realize that she hadn't when he'd imagined it was proof of her interest in him.

It was more disturbing, however, to think that they hadn't been careful when they'd spoken around her because they'd been convinced she had no idea what they were saying.

"You do not want to make anyone suspect that you know our language even a little, particularly if Camryn's petition is refused. As a breeder, that knowledge is

forbidden to you. As our concubine, it would be acceptable for you to know—but only if Camryn can convince the council that they were wrong to consider that you were not of our caste.”

Indignation swelled in Simone. *That* was why she'd been given the dick? Not because they'd found her irresistible but because they'd managed to convince themselves that she was of a comparable class and therefore her lowly pussy wouldn't somehow taint their high caste dicks?

Alright, so they *were* very nice dicks and attached to lovely bodies—not that she'd gotten the chance to touch the bodies!—but how *arrogant* could they be!

Talk about a blow to the ego!

“There is no law that states we cannot have two concubines,” Kael said after a few moments. “No one does—many do not have even one—but there is no law against it.”

“Lielani should be thrilled.”

He frowned. “Lielani is drak. She knows her place.”

In the ditch?

Not that she'd mind it if Lielani took care of Arrek! But she had a bad feeling that Lielani wasn't going to be happy about sharing *her* men! And how could she help but consider it that way, regardless of what the men thought?

Maybe she'd be glad to have help *servicing* them, as Kael had so quaintly put it? It had to be wearing trying to keep up with five men—three of them young enough to want to fuck a lot!

Somehow, though, she found it difficult to believe that Lielani wouldn't instantly be jealous—maybe dangerously jealous.

It seemed to her that she was gathering a lot of very dangerous enemies very quickly and she hadn't even *done* anything!

Chapter Fourteen

It was hard to be tense and frightened, Simone discovered, when she'd been so thoroughly fucked and had come three times. Nothing could keep the boredom at bay, though, and she finally reached a point as time progressed where she was just plain bored senseless.

She'd stared at the bed a little longingly for a while but, despite what Camryn had said, she wasn't at all certain that she was welcome to his bed and she finally got as comfortable as she could on the couch.

Kael woke her a little later with food.

"I already ate," she muttered sleepily, finding a more comfortable position and settling again.

"When?"

"Regular time. Zev brought me something—I don't know. No windows."

"Once a day?"

"Don't know. Maybe. I think so."

"No gods damned wonder you've gotten so thin! Come on. Get up. Eat something."

Lovely! He'd said she was thin! Not that she was, but it was nice—except he hadn't said it like it was a compliment. She discovered she was hungry, though. It seemed like she'd been hungry from the time she'd been imprisoned, that she got just enough to eat to keep her hungry.

Shrugging off the urge to sleep, she sat up and took the plate he'd offered her. The discovery that it was the best food she'd had since she'd left the ship sharpened her interest. She ate more than she should've and she still couldn't hold all of it. She handed the plate back to Kael. He looked a little disconcerted, but he finished it.

Simone felt her face heat. "That was yours?" she asked in dismay.

He shrugged. "I couldn't bring two plates without looking suspicious." He grinned abruptly. "That should plump you up nicely."

"Thanks!" Simone said sourly. "I live to please!"

He studied her curiously. "I am pleased with you."

Feeling more than a little grouchy about being woke up even for food, Simone settled back instead of informing him, sarcastically, that of course that was of utmost importance to her.

"We did not really study your culture."

Simone cracked her eyelids. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

His expression tightened, but he apparently decided to ignore her tone. "What caste were you born to?"

Simone yawned. "We don't have classes—not like y'all do anyway."

"How is it different?"

"There's the rich, the super rich, the middle class, the lower middle class and the poor. It's about money—wealth, the things you own or can buy. The rich and super rich

tend to segregate themselves. But they do go 'slumming' and so do the people in the other classes. We don't do a lot of mixing between the classes, but it certainly isn't as rigid as it is here—we also mix races—which y'all don't—also not a lot, but it's against the law to discriminate against people that do. It still isn't widely acceptable, socially, privately, but it's still done and nobody can do anything about it without going to jail except disapprove."

"It is like that on Macedon."

"No it isn't. You hate the other races and try to wipe each other out, because they hate you, too. And the customs here are more rigid than our laws. Nobody mixes classes—and they're born to whatever their position, or caste, is. On Earth, in my country, there are rich and even super rich people that were born poor. Rich people that were born that way and waste their money and become poor. Middle class people that try to live like the rich and end up poor and middle class people that work hard and become rich. You don't *have* to be what you were born. You can change it."

"This seems ... chaotic. There is no order."

"It works for us ... pretty well."

"And you? What class were you?"

Simone sighed instead of trying to explain it all over again. Obviously, he couldn't really get past the class thing. "I don't know—lower middle class, I suppose. My family was. I was sort of working my way up to middle, middle class and hoping to hit upper middle."

He frowned. She had the feeling he wasn't particularly happy to discover she was middle class. "Your family was one class and you were another?" he asked doubtfully.

"I told you it was about money. My father was a cop. My mother ran a day care center. They made pretty good money, but since there were five of us, it didn't go that far."

"Five? Father, mother, you—that is three."

"Five kids. I've got two sisters and two brothers."

It irritated her that he didn't look as if he believed her and, once he began to accept the possibility, that he disapproved. "In ancient times we did this, also. In time, your people will discover what we did—that you cannot breed so indiscriminately. The world will grow too full to feed them all. What is mother?"

Simone opened her eyes completely at that. "The heart of the family—the primary care giver. The woman who gave birth to us and took care of us when we were children—and kept my father happy."

He nodded. "This is the same as Concubine."

Not really! It made her heart skip several beats, though, since it seemed to her that he was saying a concubine could have children and keep them. "The concubines have children?"

"No," he said flatly and got up, moving away.

She glared at his back. Well, if they didn't, then she didn't see any benefit in being a damned concubine!

Alright! Some benefit if it meant she got to have sex with Camryn, Kael, *and* Ean! But the down side was extremely unappealing. She might not have a problem with Kael's father—she hadn't met him—but she despised Camryn's! And she wouldn't get to keep her babies anyway!

Not that it mattered. She couldn't see that there was much likelihood that the High Council was going to allow them to take her as a concubine even if Camryn tried to argue that she was the same class, on her world, as he was on this one.

Despite her irritation, she discovered why she was so sleepy when she got up to head for the bathroom. It was dark outside. She struggled to remember if she'd noticed before if it was daylight or not when Camryn had moved her. She seemed to recall that it had been dusk. It certainly hadn't been bright out. She thought she would've noticed that.

So it was the middle of the night?

And Camryn still hadn't returned. It made her uneasy that something might have gone wrong, but there was no way to find out until and unless he came back with news. Eventually, despite her anxiety, she fell asleep again. She was roused from a deep sleep by the feel of arms slipped beneath her. She snuggled against the broad chest she came in contact with, but roused a little more when she was settled again, this time on something far more comfortable. Stretching, she rolled onto her side and curled into a ball.

She was already drifting away when someone rolled her to her back, shoved the robe she was wearing up to her arm pits and then pushed her knees up and spread her thighs. She tried to ignore it, tried to pretend she was too dead to the world to know what was going on, hopeful that might discourage him—whoever 'him' was.

It didn't. He wedged his hips between her thighs and plugged his cock into her hole, shoving her up the bed. Apparently not the least discouraged by that, he locked his arms around her, dug his toes in to the mattress and plowed his way inside in a series of teeth gritted lunges. It was impossible to pretend to sleep through *that!* She scrunched her eyes tightly, more from discomfort than any hope of playing dead.

He didn't seem particularly perturbed by that either. He pumped into her at a frantic pace and then came just about the time he'd stirred her interest. Vaguely disappointed, she sighed when he rolled off and curled onto her side again.

The bed dipped. Someone rolled her onto her belly, jerked her ass into the air and plowed into her. She recognized that cock. She was just relieved Camryn had left a deposit. She was fairly certain if he hadn't she would've experienced more than discomfort. As it was, it was still almost too much for that position. She was pretty sure she would've gotten friction burn on her face if he hadn't held on to her, and her pussy felt like it had been plowed by a battering ram.

Either the idiots thought they were being considerate by fucking the shit out of her and getting done quickly, or it didn't occur to them to worry too much about whether or not she was enjoying it. Kael finished faster than Camryn had! Her pussy was still clapping for more and asking 'wa—wa happened?' when he dismounted.

Releasing a long suffering sigh, she collapsed when he moved away.

"You should clean up," Camryn muttered sleepily.

"Later," she gritted out.

"Lielani always does."

Simone sat up with a jerk, snatched her pillow up, and swatted him with it. Rolling off the bed, she stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Camryn jerked the pillow off of his face, glaring, only to discover Simone was already at the bathroom door. He winced when she slammed it and turned to look at Kael

a little accusingly. Kael dragged his gaze from the door and met Camryn's look. "What?" he demanded indignantly. "I don't know why she's angry!"

Camryn considered it and finally shrugged it off and rolled onto his side.

Simone returned, crawled into his bed and settled.

"I cannot sleep with you in the bed. I will be awake and fucking all night."

Simone grabbed the pillow and beat him with it until he wrenched it out of her hands. Ignoring the furious glare he favored her with, she got off of the bed and stalked back to the couch.

Camryn sat up. "You have a nasty temper, woman!"

She made an obscene gesture at him, and then showed him her back.

She didn't even beg pardon for her behavior, he thought, outraged!

Settling back, he struggled to dismiss it and compose himself for sleep. It wasn't nearly as difficult as he'd thought it would be. Despite Simone's irrational and completely baffling behavior, he'd eased himself on her so thoroughly that he felt more relaxed and satisfied than he could recall ever feeling.

* * *

Simone discovered the following morning that Camryn and the other warriors had managed to sneak the breeders out of their prisons and hide them. They'd found twenty five in the palace of the Jakaar. Once they'd found them, they knew where to look for the others and had raided the other five palaces for the remaining women and hidden them away, as well.

He didn't exactly give her the information. She had to ask, which she resented since she felt like he should've known it was important to her to know the others were safe. He should have told her immediately since he'd woke her anyway to fuck.

She kept her resentment to herself since he was in a fairly foul mood when he first woke. Kael, who'd spent the night in a chair, wasn't a lot more communicative, but that was fine with Simone. She didn't particularly like her peace disturbed first thing in the morning anyway and the damned draks didn't have anything even vaguely similar to coffee.

Throwing her down on the bed and fucking her seemed to improve both of their moods, but since they left directly afterwards she didn't benefit much from it. They'd decided that keeping her hidden in Camryn's apartment was their best option for the time being. Admonishing her to listen for anyone at the keypad and hide if anyone did come in since they expected to be gone the entire day, they left looking downright cheerful.

Simone wasn't feeling especially cheerful herself. Beyond the lack of coffee to help her wake up, she'd had an interrupted night's sleep because of them, and she hadn't slept that well on the couch. They also hadn't spent a lot of time pleasing her while they'd been pleasing themselves.

Inconsiderate assholes!

Clearly, it was every man, or woman, for themselves around the palace. Which was probably typical, she decided after she'd brooded over it a while. It hadn't been until fairly recently, on Earth, that women had finally managed to pound it into—most—men's heads that they were a lot more likely to get sex if they gave when they did and there were still plenty around who hadn't gotten the memo.

She finally dismissed it as not being of tremendous importance—not at the moment anyway. From the looks of things she was going to get plenty of opportunities

to hit some high notes and Camryn and Kael had both thoroughly satisfied her the first time around. She was good.

She was bored out of her mind, though. There was absolutely nothing to do hidden away in Camryn's quarters all day but pace and stare at the walls and peek out the windows from time to time. Although Camryn and Kael had both warned her not to—actually forbidden it. They weren't there, though, and she figured if she was careful she wouldn't be seen.

She'd had a solid week to reflect on the repercussions of their peaceful march through the city and going over it again, by herself, wasn't that appealing. If she could've discussed it with the others and gotten their input, it wouldn't have seemed so stale, but she didn't even know where the others had been hidden.

Camryn had had a bowl of fruits and nuts delivered with the breakfast he'd ordered for him and Kael, which was to sustain her until dinner when they expected to return. She amused herself with nibbling much of the day, but she wasn't that crazy about any of their fruits or nuts so it wasn't highly entertaining.

She settled on the couch after exercising by pacing most of the day and thought about all the things she was missing—like TV, radio, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, brownies, cupcakes, donuts, etc. She'd avoided thinking about family and friends as she had since she'd been taken, knowing that would only depress the hell out of her. She discovered thinking about the other things depressed her almost as much, though.

Finally, she lay down to sleep to evade the boredom.

She was jerked out of a sound sleep by the sounds of the keypad. She might've been better off to remain where she was since the couch faced away from the door, but she was too mindless with sleep and sudden fear to think. She leapt to her feet and dashed toward the bathroom. She'd almost reached it when the door opened and someone stepped inside. She didn't catch more than a glance. She bounded through the doorway, looked around frantically and finally crawled into the cabinet under the sink.

She tried anyway. She hadn't managed to wiggle more than her head and upper torso under the narrow shelf when she heard the scrape of booted feet on the stone floor behind her. Ean crouched down, opened the other door and peered in at her.

She stared at him wide-eyed, but she felt faint at what the consequences might have been if it hadn't been Ean.

His lips curled upward. "You can come out now."

Feeling her face heat, Simone started trying to wiggle backwards out of the cabinet. He watched her until she'd managed to get her head and shoulders out of the cabinet and sit up.

"How did you get here?"

"Camryn found me—Actually, Zev found me and then Camryn found me and he sneaked me into his room to hide me."

"Who is Zev?"

Jeez! They were like identical triplets! Mention the guy's name and they immediately bristled like a cur dog! "A friend."

He still didn't look pleased, but he abruptly grabbed her up in an exuberant hug. Straightening, he whirled around with her. "You are safe! That is the important thing!"

Simone smiled at him tentatively. "Camryn didn't tell you?"

He frowned, but thoughtfully. "I suppose that is what that cryptic message was about," he said, more to himself than her.

"What message?"

"Return."

That was cryptic alright.

He nuzzled his face against her neck.

Uh oh!

Instead of setting her on her feet, he carried her into the bedroom and tossed her on the bed. She bounced. He dove for her, grinning when she rolled away and he landed on the bed beside her. "You will take me as your lover, yes?"

Ok, his line was almost as bad as Akule's!

She studied him thoughtfully. She didn't particularly want to fuck, but she also didn't want to piss him off. Beyond that, she'd accepted Camryn and Kael—because she'd been laboring under the stupid impression that they actually cared something about her—but that didn't matter. She had. If she'd accepted them because they were fathers of her babies, then it wasn't right to turn *him* away.

And it might well create friction that wouldn't be a good thing for any of them.

He was younger than the other two, she reminded herself.

"Only if you please me while I'm pleasing you," she said finally.

"I will please you," he said confidently. "I have a very big, nice dick."

"Yes, but do you know how to use it?"

He frowned, clearly outraged. "I stick it in and pump!"

"I need a little more than that," Simone said dryly.

"I will pump many times."

She considered that. If he could hold out a while, she might be able to get from zero to sixty before he crashed. "It'd be better with some warm up."

His anger vanished. He looked intrigued. "What do you want to do?"

Simone had never liked a lot of talk when she wanted action. She didn't think instructing was going to do anything for her libido. "Why don't I just demonstrate on you what I like? Then you can do it to me?"

He sat up and pulled his boots off, dropping them to the floor, and then tore out of his uniform so fast he was naked before she'd managed to get her robe off. Eagerness wasn't a good sign, she thought glumly, realizing that she might as well resign herself right then to another round of disappointment, pain, and sorrow.

Particularly since she could see he hadn't just been boasting about the dick. It looked bigger than Kael's, but she thought that might be a trick of the eyes. Kael was stockier than Ean.

Well, she'd find out soon enough whether she was going to need a pry bar to get it in or not.

He gave her the supremely confident male look when she finally dragged her gaze from his cock. "Nice," she said dryly, "But as you see, I haven't come yet."

He looked at her with a mixture of uncertainty and irritation, but she diverted him by straddling his hips. He caught her hips, curling his and plowing a furrow along her cleft. She pulled his hands loose and leaned over him. "First the kisses. Lots of kisses. All sorts of kisses and touches."

He looked like he couldn't decide whether she was being playful or serious.

When she tilted her head to meet his lips, he tilted his head, as well. Grabbing his face, she held him down and tilted her head in the other direction. She played with his lips for a time, plucking at them, sucking gently, and then moved across his face to his ear. Wondering, since their ears looked so different, if they were as sensitive as her own, she shrugged inwardly and explored his ear with her tongue.

He almost came up off the bed. His skin pebbled all over. A hard shudder went through him, but he held still whether he found it torment or pleasure. He was gasping hoarsely when Simone made her way to his mouth again and, despite her certainty that she wasn't going to find it particularly enjoyable, she discovered that she was already warming to her theme.

Settling her mouth firmly on his, she thrust her tongue into his mouth and explored. He sucked in a sharp breath and closed his mouth around her tongue, sucking at it hungrily. When she withdrew, he followed. Capturing her head with both hands, he explored her mouth with far more thoroughness than she'd explored his, sending waves of excitement through her that made her so dizzy she began to feel drunk.

He released her with great reluctance when she began trying to break the kiss, moving his hands from her head to her arms. She thought for several moments that he meant to end the teaching session and take control, but he surprised her. He lightened his grip on her when she began working her way down his throat with nibbling, sucking kisses. She stoked him in a massaging motion as she moved from one breast to the other, teasing his nipples with the tip of her tongue and then sucking at them.

He had a beautiful body. Without so much as a single stray hair, his skin was smooth and healthy, the muscles beneath hard and well defined. She explored all of them with her mouth and hands, working her way slowly down his body until she reached his cock.

She'd just taken it into her mouth to suck on it when they both heard the damned keypad tones. Ean jackknifed upright, grabbed the bedcover and dragged it over both of them, rolling on top of her.

She had the horrible feeling that her feet weren't covered.

"Gods damn it!" Ean snarled. *"You scared the hell out of me! What are you two doing back?"*

Camryn glared at him. *"This is my fucking quarters. The question is what are you doing in my fucking bed? And why the hell weren't you at the gods damned council meeting?"*

"She doesn't have her own bed!" Ean snapped. *"And I didn't know anything about a fucking council meeting!"*

"You're fucking her in my bed?" Camryn growled.

"We hadn't gotten to that yet! I just pointed out that she doesn't have her own!"

Rolling off of her, Ean threw the covers off. Exposed, Simone made a frantic search for the robe she'd discarded.

Camryn glared at both of them in disgust for several moments. *"Well, get done. I want to fuck her."*

Ean relaxed against the bed when Kael and Camryn strode to the sitting area. Simone looked at his cock, vaguely amazed that it was still erect, glanced at his face, and then peered toward the sitting area where Camryn and Kael had settled to talk.

Not that they were doing much talking. They seemed more intent on studying the

toes of their boots.

Simone sighed. Ean might not have lost his hard-on, but she'd lost hers.

He grasped his cock in one hand and waved it at her. She didn't know if it was a command or if he was trying to entice her. Sighing, realizing that Ean expected her to finish and they had as much privacy as they were going to get, she tried to focus on what she'd started. Fortunately, he didn't have nearly as much trouble getting back in to the mood.

She alternately stroked and sucked his cock until it jerked threateningly and he was writhing as if he was about to explode and then abandoned it and moved back up, teasing him as she had on the way down.

He seized her when she reached his throat again and flipped her onto her back. By the time he'd finished kissing her, she'd completely forgotten they weren't alone. He followed the map she'd paved for him faithfully and with exquisite attention to detail that had her gasping and moaning long before he caught her thighs and made a wish. She grabbed his head a little frantically when he found her clit and began tugging and pulling on it with his mouth, flicking it with tongue. He caught her wrists, disentangling her hands from his hair, and pinning them to the bed.

She reached maximum overload before he'd decided he was satisfied. "Ean! Stop! I'm going to come!" she gasped warningly.

He ignored the warning, continuing to pull at her until she was whimpering with the effort to keep from screaming. He found the mouth of her sex as he crawled up over her body, thrusting mostly ineffectually since her channel was still clenched tightly in ecstasy. He was nearly as desperate by that time as she'd been moments before, though. He clamped his arms around her and kept pumping until he'd driven his lance home. He'd barely touched bottom when she felt his cock jerk in a hard enough spasm to jar her from the inside. He uttered a choked cry against her throat, groaned, and kept pumping until he ran out of semen to pump into her and then seemed to deflate.

For many moments, he lay draped over her, huffing for breath.

"Done?"

He lifted his head and stared up at Camryn's uncompromising face blankly for a moment and finally nodded, rolling off of her and plastering his back against the bed.

Simone, still feeling like a ragdoll, groaned as Camryn took Ean's place. Any hope she'd had that he would finish quickly as he had the night before and go about his business died a quick death.

Apparently, Ean had put him on his metal. He wound her up like a clock in spite of every effort on her part to simply ignore him the best she could, refusing to stop until she had to grab the cover and stuff it into her mouth to keep from screaming.

She'd almost managed to catch her breath when Camryn got off of her and Kael took his place. She groaned. "Tired!" she protested weakly.

He rolled her onto her face, lifted her hips and plugged her from behind. At least, she thought wearily, he had plenty of lubrication. And it was bound to be fast.

He wasn't going to let her off the hook when the others had made her come! He reached beneath her, playing with her nipples at first and then pushed his hand between her legs and thrummed her clit until she came again and finally sought his own release.

Considerate bastards, she thought, exhausted beyond belief when he finally let her go! It was her last thought before she lapsed into a coma.

Someone nudged her toward consciousness. Simone struggled to lift her eyelids for a few moments and gave up.

“You should bathe and dress. We will have food soon.”

“Don’t care,” Simone muttered with a die-away air.

“Simone! Get up and get dressed. You cannot be lying on the bed when the food is delivered!”

She discovered she still couldn’t get her eyelids open more than a crack, but the threat of discovery galvanized her enough to roll over. She hit the floor so hard she thought at first lightning had struck her. “Thanks for breaking my fall,” she muttered.

“I did not expect you to roll off the bed,” Camryn said, a mixture of irritation and amusement in his voice. “Are you injured?”

She released a huff of breath. “Don’t know. Could be dead.”

He helped her up and aimed her at the bathroom door. She staggered toward it a little drunkenly and finally managed to shut the door. Turning the water on, she climbed into the shower and lay down on the floor, letting the warm water beat down on her while she drowsed. She supposed she might’ve actually dozed off. She woke up when someone turned the shower off and looked up at the men lined up along the side of the shower.

“*She has not drowned,*” Ean said, relieved.

“*Do you suppose she is ill?*” Camryn muttered worried.

“*She did not seem ill to me. Maybe she is only tired?*” Kael offered.

“*Why would she be tired?*” Camryn snapped. “*She has done nothing all day!*”

“*Well how the hell would I know that?*” Kael growled. “*She’s trying to sleep in the shower. She looks tired.*”

“*She needs food,*” Ean decided.

Camryn crouched down to help her up when he saw she was trying to get up. Looking around, he discovered Kael had gone to get a drying cloth and snatched it from his hands when he returned, flipping it around her and rubbing it over her briskly. “Do you need a physician?”

Simone stared at him blankly for several moments and then felt heat begin to creep into her cheeks. “I’m just tired.”

“*I told you!*” Kael said triumphantly.

Camryn and Ean glared at him.

“Come and eat,” Camryn said gruffly. “It will give you strength. No doubt it is the babies.”

Simone was inclined to dismiss that as ridiculous, but then she recalled that when she’d been researching pregnancy she’d read that a lot of women reported being very tired and wanting to sleep all the time, even in the first trimester.

Not that she thought that was what was wrong with her at the moment! She would’ve been fine if they’d let her sleep off her OD on sex! She wasn’t as young as they were—and *never* had that been more obvious! She didn’t have their resilience! She thought she would’ve been just fine, though, if they hadn’t decided to gang bang her!

The food did help. She was almost irritated that it did until she remembered she’d taken a nap in the shower. That appeased her somewhat and she listened idly to them talking while she finished her food.

She realized after a few moments that she could actually understand some of what

they were saying—something about the council and hiding her. “You know,” she said conversationally during a lull in their conversation, “you could always take me back down to the cell. I mean, it’s dark and dank, and the food sucked, but you wouldn’t get in trouble for hiding me, and I might actually be better off down there than getting fucked to death up here.”

She discovered when she looked up that all three of them were staring at her blankly.

Camryn frowned. “You cannot be fucked to death.”

She noticed there was a thread of doubt in his voice, however. “Can’t prove it by me,” she said dryly. “That little fuckathon was a near miss. If you can’t be a little more damned considerate of the fact that I’m not big and strong—or as *young* as you three are—and give me a little time to rest between times, I’m *sure* I’ll be better off in the damned dungeon! And if you don’t give a fuck whether *I* am or not, then consider the possibility that that much activity *might* not be the best thing for the babies!”

“Lielani often has done all three of us like that,” Kael said, an edge to his voice.

“Well then, god damn it, *let* Lielani handle it!”

All three of them got up abruptly and stalked out.

Simone’s sense of triumph lasted right up until it occurred to her that they might’ve just taken her at her word. She dismissed it with an effort. She didn’t like the idea that they might decide to go to Lielani, but she wasn’t up to entertaining them any more! She’d had more sex in the short time since she’d been ‘rescued’ than she’d had in the last ten years—maybe her entire life! She didn’t know how Lielani could handle it, but if she could, then she was the better woman and she deserved them!

Chapter Fifteen

Lielani studied the three men sprawled in the chairs around her sitting area like statues, scowling at her carpet as if it had a nasty stain on it. She was not certain what had brought them to her, but it was not what usually brought them.

At least, it was not what had brought them in the recent past. As she studied them, she saw that they were not just furious, they were troubled and for a few moments the hard warrior faces were transformed in her mind's eye into the youthful faces she had once known.

They had not come to her in so long merely because they were troubled that she could not decide whether she was warmed by it, or troubled herself. It was as impossible, now, to draw them out as it was their fathers, though. They might remind her of themselves when they were boys and not truly men yet, but they were not the boys they had once been. Battle had hardened them—just as it had hardened their fathers.

She hoped that it had not yet killed the hope, the exuberance for life as it had their fathers, but she could not be certain that the hardships had not.

"I am most pleased to see how well you have all recovered from your wounds," she said after a few moments. "They do not trouble you any longer?"

Camryn blinked several times and finally turned to look at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your wounds?"

He scowled. "I am healed."

"You are ... content?" Ean asked abruptly.

Lielani looked at him in surprise but finally smiled faintly. "Yes, I am content."

His frowned deepened instead of lightening. He leaned forward, settling his elbows on his knees. "This is the truth? You are not merely saying what you believe I want to hear?"

Surprise flickered through her again. Since he'd asked for honesty instead of the polite response she'd given him, she actually considered it. "I have grown accustomed to this life," she said finally. "I am content."

Camryn frowned. "But you weren't before?"

She hesitated. "Not always. Why do you ask?"

He shook his head instead of answering.

"Why were you not always content?" Kael demanded.

She sent him an uncomfortable look and retreated, bowing her head. "I misspoke. I beg pardon."

Uttering a frustrated growl, Kael surged to his feet. "You are not pardoned. I want to know!" he snapped.

"Stop it, Kael!" Ean snapped. "You're upsetting her."

Kael threaded his fingers through his hair and tugged at it in irritation, but he crossed the room to crouch at Lielani's knee. "I did not mean to upset you," he said, cupping her chin.

She smiled at him a little tremulously. "I know you did not."

He studied her face, searching his mind, but realized he could not remember the information he sought. "Did you breed?"

She paled. It seemed to take her a few moments to recover. "Long ago," she said finally.

"But you remember?"

Pain flickered across her face, but she struggled to hide it, realizing abruptly why they'd sought her out. "Yes." She hesitated. "It is not something a woman forgets."

"Were you with my father then?"

She studied his face for a long moment. "No. I was a breeder then. It was much as it is now with the women of the other world. When a female reached the maturity to breed, she was taken to the barracks set aside for them and lived among the other breeders until she could no longer breed, or was nearing the end, and then she was offered as a concubine."

It shouldn't have shocked him, but it did. He glanced at Camryn sharply.

"But you had lovers?" Camryn asked.

Lielani released a shattering breath of relief that they hadn't pursued that particularly painful part of her life. "Yes, of course—many. It was always a woman's duty to the Empire."

Camryn, Kael, and Ean exchanged a look of triumph.

"At one time?" Camryn asked.

She chuckled. "I am not certain what you are asking."

"As you have us?"

"Oh no! It was far too uncomfortable much of the time when I was breeding and I tired very easily and, of course, my main duty was to the ... to the ... babes." She struggled for composure for a moment, wondering how it could be that it was still so painful to her to remember after so many years. She managed a faltering smile. "I do not mind it at all now."

She could see from their expressions that they weren't particularly happy with the way she'd said that. "That is to say, I very much enjoy it now."

They went back to staring angrily at the carpet.

Lielani decided to get up and offer refreshment. She felt a need for a glass of *camry* herself. When she'd served them, she went back to the small refrigeration unit and poured a glass for herself, drinking it quickly. It soothed her rattled nerves. Pouring another portion smaller than the first, she returned and settled in her seat, feeling a little tipsy from the effects of the *camry* she'd drunk far more quickly than she should have.

"You are concerned about your breeder?" she asked a little vaguely.

Three heads jerked upward. They stared at her a long moment and then looked at one another questioningly.

Dismayed at her slip, Lielani took another sip of the *camry*. She forced a smile. "You are all so tense. You are certain you do not wish to join me in the bedchamber?"

Camryn got up and moved to her, pulling her from her seat and embracing her. "We must go before the council again on the morrow. Do not trouble yourself."

"Oh! It is no trouble, my sweet prince! It is a great pleasure to me!"

He nuzzled her neck. "To me also, dearest."

She clutched at him when he started to leave. "Camryn."

He looked at her questioningly.

"I ... I have been wanting to ask something of you."

He frowned. "What is it, dearest?"

Lielani chewed her lip, seeking courage, but she knew the *camry* had given her as much as she was likely to find. "A promise."

Wariness crept into his eyes. "Of what?"

She swallowed several times, trying to find her voice. "When my time comes, promise me that you will not consider *shinku*." She looked at Kael and Ean. "Any of you."

She discovered she suddenly had their undivided attention.

"Do not talk of such things!" Ean said angrily. "It is bad luck!"

"Are you ill?" Camryn demanded.

"No, no! I am not ill! I did not mean to cause you more worry than you have already! You must not think that. It is only ... I have far more years behind me than before me. It is something one thinks of when they reach my time in life."

"It is not something you should think of at all!" Kael said angrily. "What has brought this on if you are not ill?"

She shook her head in distress. "There is unrest. Any number of bad things could happen. I do not know! It is only something that I thought of and I realized that I wanted you to promise me you would not consider it."

Camryn shook his head angrily. "I do not want to discuss this, Lielani."

"Please?" she whispered when they moved to the door.

They stopped and turned to look at her. "I will send a physician to check you in the morning before I leave," Camryn said tightly.

"Gods!" Kael ground out angrily when they'd left. "I am going to my own apartment. I do not think I want the company of a woman tonight! They are *both* unbalanced!"

"She is upset about something!" Ean said tightly. "Do you think that she said that because she feels that we have not been attentive enough?"

Camryn halted abruptly. "She would not have noticed," he said uncomfortably, trying to remember when he'd last visited her.

"You are certain of that?" Kael asked. "I have not been to her since we first came back—from Earth."

Camryn and Ean both sent him a hard look, searching their own minds for the last time they'd been to Lielani's apartment.

"I was wounded!" Kael snapped. "She would not have thought anything of it!"

"When did you last go?" Camryn asked Ean.

He shrugged. "When we returned from Earth. We were sent off at once! And I was wounded, as well, when we returned from Kylo."

"Fuck!" Camryn glanced back at Lielani's door. "We cannot go back in now—not when we have already said we have no need. She will only be more suspicious. Ean, you must go tomorrow!"

"Why me?" Ean demanded indignantly. "You are her favorite. You should go."

Reluctance curled in Camryn's belly. "She will only start that gods damn argument again about *shinku* and I am not going to discuss that with her!"

Kael frowned. "We should all give her a few days to put that from her mind."

“She might put it from her mind more quickly if we fuck her senseless,” Ean said.

“That is a good notion!” Camryn agreed, pounding Ean on the shoulder. “You must go tomorrow and give her something else to think about!”

He strode away quickly, leaving Kael and Ean.

Simone was planted in the center of his bed when he reached his apartment and went in. She didn't so much as twitch when he entered and that increased his displeasure. “You are supposed to hide if anyone comes in!”

“I knew it was you.”

“How could you know it was me?” he demanded. “You have your back to the door!”

“I knew because you always stab the keys on the pad like you mean to punch them out.”

He couldn't think of an argument for that. Releasing a pent up breath of exasperation, he stalked to the bathing chamber to shower. Simone had rolled over and put her back to the door when he came out again.

He stared at her back, considering whether to point out to her that he was not accustomed to sharing his bed and finally dismissed the idea. He was tired. He did not particularly want to have another argument.

Moving around the bed, he climbed in.

Simone rolled over and put her back to him.

Camryn glared at the ceiling for a while, grinding his teeth, wondering how it was that she could manage to argue without opening her mouth. Finally, he put his back to her and composed himself for sleep. He would put another full day into arguing his case in the council chambers on the morrow, he reminded himself. He needed a clear head.

* * * *

Her hands were shaking so badly with fright, it took Lielani two tries to get the code keyed in correctly. To her vast relief, the lock disengaged on the second. Throwing a nervous glance around the empty corridor, she slipped inside and paused on the threshold to look around.

The sense of vast openness she felt glancing around the apartment surprised her, increased her tension. From the furnishings to the size of the apartment itself, it spoke of wealth and privilege, of a social rank far above her own, of royalty. The thought of being discovered there unnerved her so much she stood where she was for many long moments, struggling to find the determination that had brought her. Finally, she looked around again searchingly and then headed to the sitting area at one end of the main room. Her knees felt weak as she wilted into a chair, but she'd had many, many years to perfect a façade of calm poise. It was a woman's place in nature to project herself always as the perfect balance of their opposites, the male, to be the portrait of calmness, peace, gentleness, and generosity. It was something that had been drummed into her as far back as she could remember and it didn't abandon her now, when she felt like she needed it most.

When she had settled, folding her hands in her lap, she waited, listening to the faint sounds around her. Finally, when she had composed herself, when she realized that the woman would not show herself without prompting, she spoke. “You might as well come out. I know you are here ... Simone.”

Again she waited with what patience she could muster, trying to close her mind to

the possibility that Camryn might return and find her, an intruder in his private quarters where she was never allowed. She knew it was doubtful, but it was impossible to completely dismiss it. One could never truly count on anything in life except the unexpected.

"I would not have had the code to enter, or known that you were here if the prince had not told me," she said, trying again after a few moments.

She'd begun to think her ruse would fail when she heard a faint sound. It drew her gaze and she watched with a mixture of amusement and empathy as the woman crawled out from beneath the bed.

Her sight was not what it once had been and yet she could see clearly enough that the woman was wary of her—mayhap because she had expected her to be. After a few moments, she moved toward her and Lielani studied her as she approached, noting the natural grace of her movements, the completely unconscious seductiveness of her stride. As she drew close enough she ceased to be a blur and came into focus, Lielani felt her belly tighten, felt a pang of envy she had not expected to feel.

She had not really expected the breeder—Simone—to be such a lovely creature, she realized. The ugly things that Arrek had said had colored her perspective. She should have realized that there was a very good reason that Camryn, Kael, and Ean had become obsessed with her and, with a man, it was always what they saw. They were never inclined to search beneath the surface, not with a woman, to see if the lovely façade was no more than that.

She was so *young*, Lielani thought unhappily!

Simone settled in the chair opposite the woman with as much composure as she could manage, staring at her without any pretense that she wasn't measuring her. She discovered it was nearly impossible to guess her age. She was certainly a mature woman. She knew the woman must be older than her, but her face certainly wasn't heavily lined with age. Her hair was black without a sign of gray, her breasts still high enough and round enough that she could have passed for a younger woman than her face indicated.

It wasn't a particularly pretty face to Simone's mind, but then men had different perceptions of beauty than women did, and she couldn't deny it was an interesting face and projected a sweetness of disposition—whether she actually was or not.

"You're Lielani."

The statement startled her. Lielani wasn't certain whether to be pleased that the woman had heard of her or not, but she thought she was pleased. "You have heard of me?"

"I've heard them mention you." Simone tried to keep her voice neutral, but she suspected some of the resentment she felt slipped into her tone anyway. "Why are you here?"

Lielani studied her rival assessingly. "When they came to me last night they were so angry I thought it best to make certain that you were alright. I ... comforted them, of course, as I always have."

Simone recoiled almost physically from the calm statement. It had occurred to her until the woman said it how confident she'd been that they wouldn't immediately go to Lielani, whatever she'd said. How stupid was that? She hadn't realized she was conceited enough to be so stupid.

It was because she'd believed, regardless of what she'd told herself, that they

cared about her. It really was only about sex, though, and if she refused them

Except she hadn't! She *had* given them what they wanted and they'd *still* gone directly from her to Lielani! The bastards!

To spite her for being so hateful, she wondered? Or was it only that she'd been so stupid as to plant it in their minds?

Lielani watched the play of emotions across Simone's face until she was completely satisfied, until she began to feel guilty for her cruelty and finally relented. "I lied," she said quietly, "or at least implied a lie."

She almost felt worse at the painfully hopeful look Simone sent her. Frowning, she struggled to compose her thoughts. "It is a habit with them, I suppose, though they are grown men now—warriors of great note and well respected among our people. They have come to me for solace since they were first brought to the palace when they were no more than six summers. In time, the reasons for their distress changed and the comfort ceased to be someone to dry their tears and cheer them and became the need to expend themselves as men, but in a sense nothing really changed. I love them as they love me. I had to know that you were not the evil creature that Arrek has portrayed you to be. I needed to know that you would not harm them ... at least not intentionally, not out of malice."

Simone swallowed convulsively several times, trying to blink back the tears that had filled her eyes, struggling with a mixture of hurt and anger. "Now you're saying they didn't ... you didn't I'm supposed to believe that?"

Lielani smiled. "I have tricked you and now you have no trust." She shrugged. "You would not have trusted me anyway. I am drak even if I am a woman and you see us all as enemies, do you not?"

"I don't consider people that kidnap me as friends," she said tartly. "I've certainly not been treated as anything but a captive!"

Lielani frowned. "You have been treated as all women have always been treated by my people—no better, no worse." She thought it over. "Perhaps somewhat worse. It would be hard to say. No woman of Macedon would have dared to do the things that you have done. If they had, they would've been punished just as you have. The drak have far more important things to deal with than the silly concerns of women and no patience for it. They are taught from the time they first begin to understand anything about their world that females are only here for the purpose of breeding more drak warriors and to give comfort to the needs of men. Their very existence is owed only to those things they are useful for."

"How can you stand that?"

Lielani spread her hands. "We have never known anything else."

Simone digested that, trying to understand how it was even possible, but she supposed she had to consider that they were aliens. Their culture was entirely different. *They* were different. Maybe they'd never wondered what it was like to be free? "You don't, ever, feel any resentment? It doesn't make you angry to be treated like an animal when you know that there are plenty of things that you could do that are important?"

Lielani snorted. "You are asking if there isn't a spark of what you have in us? I cannot speak for anyone but myself, but yes. There have been many times I have felt resentment, though, mostly that was when I was young. Time has a way of defeating your spirit more surely even than the design of men. When I was very young, I ...

pretended to be what I am now, because it was expected of me—demanded. After a while, I became what I am—a hollow shell only waiting for them to fill me and give my existence purpose.”

Simone frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t suppose I’m in a position to judge. I’m ... not very brave. We’re ... protected where I come from, by the laws of the land, even by the changes in our society. It’s easy to forget it wasn’t always that way because there are so many of us that never had to fight for anything. Not that we don’t still work hard to be accepted, but we don’t have to work as hard as our mothers and grandmothers and great grandmothers did. We have rights they worked for and never got.”

Lielani nodded. “This is what you were chanting the day you turned our world upside down?”

Simone stared at her blankly. “I don’t know what you mean. You’re talking about the march?”

Lielani chuckled. “You are truly surprised? Is that not what you intended?”

“Of course! Well, not really. We didn’t want to start trouble. We just wanted them to realize we’re people, too. We have rights the same as they do.”

Lielani studied her. “Your world must be very different than ours if you are so naïve as to believe what you did was a simple thing that would not cause ‘trouble’. The men of Macedon have never been opposed by mere women, child. In truth, it did little to change their way of thinking—in a good way. It was rather more like kindling pushed beneath a caldron already nearing the boiling point.

“Our men have no one to blame but themselves. They have controlled everything throughout the history of our people. It’s no wonder they gave little thought to women in the scheme of things. They never have. It took many generations for them to bring us to the brink of extinction, and they still could not be bothered to consider that it was their blindness that was the heart of it. I am not certain they do now, but the anger and resentment have built in the last couple of generations because they could no longer ignore the pass they had brought themselves to.

“I was among the last generation of the drak women capable of bearing young. I was a breeder as you are until I could no longer breed and only then was I given as a concubine—when I was of no more use in providing sons. Arrek ... did not treat me well when I was given to the House of Jakaar as concubine. He resented the fact that he did not have a choice. There was one that he had chosen, that he had demanded, but the men who were in power then decided that it was only fair to divide us according to fate. He drew me and I do not believe that he has ever forgiven fate for thwarting him.”

Pity warred with disbelief even though Akule had told them enough that she’d had some notion of what had transpired with the draks of Macedon. Suspicion also flickered through her mind, wariness. She couldn’t help but wonder why Lielani had gone into such gruesome detail—or why she’d told her anything at all. “So what you’re saying is that Macedon was already ready to explode?”

Lielani shrugged. “I believe so. It is hard to say for certain. I do not go out in the world much. It is allowed, but ... I have never been comfortable doing so, walking among men when I can almost feel their eyes crawling over me.” She shuddered. “It is not polite to stare openly, and yet you cannot walk among them without being aware that you are only one among many of them. It makes one feel more small and insignificant, threatened in a way that is hard to describe.”

“Actually,” Simone said a little sourly, “I completely understand. It isn’t just being outnumbered so drastically. It’s knowing what they want, knowing that if they suddenly decided to take no one would stop them and nothing could save you.”

“And yet you and the others did.”

Simone studied her hands. “We were all scared. I don’t think any of us would’ve been able to get up the nerve to try it, except”

“Yes?” Lielani prompted.

Simone felt her chin wobble. “I want my babies! I’ve waited so long! I can’t give them up without a fight. I just can’t!”

Lielani felt her heart lurch. Before she could even attempt to seek composure, she felt her eyes fill with tears that overflowed and ran in scalding rivulets down her cheeks. “You cannot change that,” she said mournfully. “That is what *they* are fighting for—*their* sons. They have some hope of changing things—not much, but some—but you will have to fight them for the right to keep your sons and you will not win. You cannot.”

Simone felt the will to fight leave her, felt hopelessness consume her. She realized she’d never really thought she could win, but she’d hoped. Lielani had destroyed it with her own pain. If she hadn’t been able to keep her children when she was a drak, what possible chance did *they* have when they weren’t even draks?

Lielani drew in a shaky breath and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “The only thing that I have ever truly regretted in this life is that I shunned my babies to protect myself. I refused to look at them, to touch them, to feed them from my breasts because I knew that I would love them and it would break my heart when they took them. I could have had that much and I threw it away because I was weak and selfish. Be wiser than I was. Take what you can. It will not be much, but it will be something.”

She heaved a shaky breath. “I must go. It would anger them to find me here.”

Simone stopped her. “You don’t hate me,” she said curiously, wondering if that was because she was just that secure.

Lielani thought it over. “It is a very odd thing. When I first learned that they had found a place for breeders and they would go and capture them, I felt ... threatened and also relieved because I had worried who would give our young men their own sons. When I knew that they had been successful and you had come and were carrying a new generation of warriors, I felt the same—afraid, glad, sad, and hopeful. When Camryn, and Kael, and Ean came to me and I knew that they cared for you, I wanted to hate you, but I love them. I had wanted them to have the chance of sons, the chance of a concubine of their own. I am jealous. Beyond that, I am ... just confused, but I am relieved, having met you. I was more afraid that you were an evil creature and would bring harm to them than I am, or ever was, that you would take them from me because I finally understand that you cannot.

“The love they feel for me is mine. What they feel for you is yours. I would rather you and I were allies than enemies. I think, in a very real sense, we both want the same thing.”

Somehow, Simone doubted that, but since she wasn’t exactly sure of what Lielani wanted, it was hard to say. She could at least agree that it would be better to be allies than enemies, though. Lielani had far more sway, she was certain, with the men than she did—as hard as that was to swallow.

“You will not tell them I came?” Lielani asked hesitantly.

“God forbid!” Simone exclaimed. “They’d have a fit about that!”

Lielani smiled. “You know them well!” She paused again at the door. “I will not turn them away if they come to me for comfort. I never have. It is ... expected of me and I am too old now to struggle against our customs. Beyond that, I love them and I would not deny them for that reason alone.”

Anger flickered through Simone. Jealousy wasn’t a particularly rational emotion, but she knew Lielani had far more reason to feel it toward her than the other way around. She was the usurper, not Lielani. If *she* could be reasonable, then she needed to try to be reasonable herself. Particularly when the plain fact was that neither of them really had a choice.

Lielani had certainly shaken up her day and given her a great deal of food for thought.

She’d depressed the hell out of her, too, although she didn’t think that had been the objective. She didn’t know *what* Lielani’s goal had been, but she didn’t think that was it.

Or maybe it was. She’d spent most of the time explaining to her that *she* was trying to fight generations old traditions. That alone was enough to tell her that her situation was hopeless.

She realized that she’d allowed her hope to deceive her over and over, willfully refused to view the situation as an insurmountable mountain because she simply couldn’t accept that there was no way to win what she wanted.

Should she simply give up and accept, then? Take Lielani’s advice and bow to them so that they wouldn’t decide that she was completely unfit even to nurture her infants? If she convinced them that they’d completely cowed her, accepted, behaved just as she was expected to behave, they might let her get to know her sons well enough to die a little inside when they were taken.

Somehow, though, she didn’t think, at this point, that she could convince Arrek and he was truly an enemy.

Unless But could she stomach spreading her legs for him? Even for her babies?

Lielani hadn’t lied to her about Camryn’s objective, she knew. He and the others had been very frank about that, that their only interest was in seeing to it that she was housed with them so that they had her as their lover. How long would that last? Until she’d had her babies, and then what? Would she be moved to the next household that bred her? It seemed likely.

Unless Camryn convinced the council to allow them to keep her as a concubine, but then how would that work? They weren’t allowed to have more than one son. Lielani said that she’d bred until she couldn’t be. Akule had told them that was the fate that awaited them. She might not even be told who the fathers of the next batch of babies were. Somehow, she didn’t think that they would consider that any of her business and the only reason she knew this time was because of the circumstances.

So bowing down to them would give her almost nothing and fighting would mean she’d lose even that—because she couldn’t win.

And what about her sons? Who would give them sons? Who would they have to give them the modicum of comfort these people allowed themselves? Because it was clear that Lielani served them as more than a ‘thing’ to fuck—or she at least seemed to

believe that.

She wasn't so certain they loved Lielani. She wondered if they were capable of such a tender emotion when they'd never been taught it.

That wasn't strictly true, though, if Lielani hadn't lied. *She* had been there. And before her, their nurse mother—who might have been their real mother.

She lay down with a headache after a while, hoping to sleep it off. Instead, she lay dry eyed when she wanted to cry, and stared at nothing while her mind churned, searching, always searching for a loophole she might crawl through.

Was giving in the best way that she could fight for her sons? If she did that and they allowed her even a little time with them, she could give them love and the council might agree that it had been a good thing that she'd been brought to Macedon and send for more women for her sons.

So that those poor things could go through what she'd been put through and still faced? Was it ever right to set the needs of someone you loved above other people?

She was certain it wasn't and that she would be guilty the same as the draks were if her behavior contributed to more kidnappings, but she could salve her conscience with the reflection that it might not make any difference at all. It wasn't her decision, and it wasn't anything she could really stop.

Was there any possibility, she wondered, that she could manage even a small concession? A little bit of a compromise that would make life a little more bearable?

Chapter Sixteen

Lielani finally realized that waiting hopefully for any of the younger Jakaars to come to her was useless and it still took a great deal of effort to work up the nerve to confront them. If not for the fact that she was worried more about them than herself, she didn't think she could have managed even then.

Camryn was so intent on rushing directly to his apartment that he nearly bowled her over when she stepped out to intercept him.

"By the Gods, Lielani!" he growled, reaching automatically to catch her before she fell. "What are you doing skulking about the palace?"

It wasn't the opening she'd hoped for. "I ... needed to speak with you," she gasped.

Wariness instantly entered his eyes. "I have been busy, Lani. You know how it is to petition the council. At least, I do not suppose you do beyond what you have heard, but it is like battering at a stone wall with a feather! In any case, I told you I would not discuss ... *that* with you!"

Lielani blinked at him, trying to recall what it was that he expected her to remember. She wasn't happy when she did. It made her wonder if that was why he had been avoiding her. "It is not that ... at least, not precisely that. I just thought I should mention that Arrek and Bastian may notice that neither you, nor Kael or Ean, have been to see me and might remark upon it."

He stared at her blankly. "Why would they remark upon it? We are almost never here. They are more used to not having us in their way than they are of having us in their way."

"This is true," she said slowly. "And I am sure they must know that you and the others gather every night in your room to discuss the proceedings at council. I will not keep you."

Camryn stared after her uneasily when she'd left, trying to decide whether she'd been trying to warn him or if, as Ean suspected, it was yet another ploy for attention. It was enough, he finally decided, that *she* was suspicious. He did not think she would carry tales to their fathers, but could they really afford to place their faith in it?

Intercepting Kael and Ean, he told them they needed to speak in Kael's quarters.

Kael and Ean both looked at him with obvious irritation.

"But your quarters are just there!" Kael objected. "Let us go in and speak."

Camryn ground his teeth. He didn't believe his father had surveillance within the palace, but he could not be certain. "Yes, I know—inconvenient, but I wanted to borrow your ... uh ... new pistol and thought you might as well instruct me on the use before I try it out."

Kael and Ean exchanged a look, glanced a little longingly toward the door of his apartment, and finally, very reluctantly, went with him.

"What the fuck, Camryn? You know I don't have a new fucking pistol and what's more, if I did, I would not give it to you!"

“Lielani has noticed that we are always in my apartment when we are in the palace!” Camryn snapped. “*That* is why I wanted to meet here. I don’t give a damn about your pistol!”

They stared at him blankly. “You are certain?” Ean asked a little suspiciously.

“She told me to my face! Waylaid me in the corridor!”

“I do not know why she would think anything of it! We often do that ... don’t we?”

Camryn turned an accusing look on Ean. “You did not go to her as I told you to, did you?”

Ean blushed. “Gods damn it, Camryn! You know very well I didn’t! In any case, I am not under any obligation to take orders from you when we are on leave!”

“Well, you have made a mess of things!” Camryn snapped. “If you had gone as I said, she would not be suspicious now!”

“I would have missed my turn with Simone, gods damn it!”

Camryn thought it over. “Be that as it may, I think that we will have to be more careful if we do not wish to be found out. You and Kael are not invited to my apartment tonight. Mayhap tomorrow.”

“Now wait just a gods damned minute!” Kael snapped. “We are not allowed, but you are?”

“It is *my* apartment!”

“Then we will bring Simone here to my apartment, and I will stay here, and you two can go to your own.”

“Are you completely mad? We cannot stroll across the palace with her!”

“He has a point,” Ean said. “It would be much safer to move her from one to the other. I never thought it was a good idea to keep her in one place. It will make it too easy for them to find her. I think that we should move her every few days.”

“Exactly how do you propose doing that?” Camryn growled. “Shall we bring in a few transporter units so that we can beam her back and forth?”

Ean and Kael both scowled at him. “She is breeding. You know that is not advised.”

“I also know that it is not advisable to shuttle her from one end of the palace to the other when she will be exposed to unnecessary risk of capture. My solution is the only one that makes sense. I did not say that you could not come, only that we need to stagger the visits so as not to attract unwelcome attention—as we have now. You cannot be in such desperate need that you cannot contain yourself for a day or two!”

“I think the question in both our minds is will you contain yourself?” Kael asked tightly.

“What difference does that make?”

“A very great deal to Ean and me if we are sitting in our rooms with our dicks in our hands while you are sitting in yours with your dick in Simone!”

Camryn rolled his eyes. “Fine! I will not touch her.”

Kael studied him suspiciously. “You swear that you will keep your hands to yourself?”

“I swear it!”

* * * *

Simone knew she should’ve just counted her blessings when Kael and Ean didn’t

return with Camryn as they usually did. Since she'd displayed her nasty temper and told them to take themselves off to Lielani for all she cared, they'd been a little less demanding, a little more considerate. She'd been surprised even at that small concession, and gratified that she seemed to have gotten it through their thick skulls that it was just too much to expect her to accommodate all of them piling in on her one after the other.

It was a very small concession, though. They were still determined to have sex every day—maybe because they were afraid any minute they'd lose their sex toy. She didn't know, but she found it hard to believe they wanted *her* that badly, or that they needed sexual relief that often.

Camryn was generally first at the trough, falling on her almost as soon as they came in the door. Ean would wait until after they'd eaten and retired for bed and Kael woke her before they left in the mornings. Sometimes they switched around, just to keep her confused, but generally she could count on that order—and a few hours rest between.

Rest being the key word, since she didn't particularly sleep well in bed with Camryn and he had decided that that was where she *should* sleep instead of the couch. As he'd complained, he wasn't accustomed to sharing his bed and he was prone to throw some part of his body—leg or arm—across her during the night at least once and bludgeon her awake. Unfortunately, it woke him, too, and he played with her breasts, or stroked her clit until she grew tired of being teased and popped his hand. Then he would sulk about it until he fell asleep again.

It was a pattern that shouldn't have been easy for her to grow used to, and yet she discovered she had when Camryn appeared without the others. “Where are Kael and Ean?”

Camryn grunted, sprawling in one of the chairs instead of grabbing her immediately and heading for the bed. “We thought it best not to risk the possibility of drawing attention to you by piling into my apartment every night.”

“Oh.” That didn't explain why he'd suddenly lost interest, though. “So they won't be coming tonight?”

“No. It will only be you and I.” He favored her with a hungry look when she settled across from him that warmed her, but he didn't approach her.

“I guess that means I have the night off.”

He looked a question at her.

“No fucking tonight,” she bluntly.

He narrowed his eyes at her speculatively. “They would not see reason until I gave them my word that I would keep my hands to myself.”

“Oh.”

He laced his hands behind his head. “I did not swear that I would keep my mouth to myself or my cock,” he murmured, his lips curling up at one corner. “They are yours if you wish to play with them.”

A shiver worked its way down her back. She felt her belly clench, but she was actually glad she had the night off. “I'll give it some thought.”

“I have been giving it a great deal of thought. I have thought that if I had your pretty pink nipples in my mouth that I could suck them and roll them on my tongue until you began to make those little sounds of pleasure in your throat. I have thought of making love to your mouth with my mouth until we are both drunk from the taste of one another. I have thought about taking that little bud between your thighs in my mouth and

sucking it until you come,” he murmured in a low, deep, mesmerizing voice that seemed to resonate through her.

Heat climbed into her belly and lit a fire, sending shivers through her.

He studied her for a long moment and finally rose and stretched. “I am weary from arguing in council all day. I believe I will stretch out for a bit before dinner. I would not mind a massage if you are of a mind to be sweet.”

Simone watched him strip and lie down face first on the bed. She struggled for a few moments with the temptation to ignore him and finally got up and followed him. Pulling her robe off, she dropped it on the floor and climbed up. Planting a foot on either side of his hips, she settled her bare buttocks on his and leaned forward to rub his back. He *was* tense, she discovered. As muscular as his back was, as she stroked his back, she could feel that it wasn't merely the firmness of his flesh beneath her hands that she was used to but a bunching from strain or tension or both.

She kneaded his back with more pressure, working her way slowly from his tense neck down his spine to the curve at his lower back, massaged those muscles, and then worked her way upward again.

He had a beautiful back, but that wasn't surprising, she supposed. He had a beautiful everything. She'd even gotten used to his pointy ears.

In a way, his black eyes still bothered her, although they didn't unnerve her nearly as badly as they had when she'd first seen them. For someone used to being able to see emotions in the eyes, it was disturbing to look in his eyes and find fathomless pools that revealed nothing of his thoughts. That wouldn't have so bad if he'd been more prone to exposing his thoughts in other ways, but he very carefully kept them secreted away. Even when he was amused it was hard to tell unless she listened carefully to his voice and watched his face just as closely. Anger was the only emotion he was ever careless about displaying and as often as not he hid even that—which made him dangerous to the unwary.

She supposed it was a combination of training and their society, which distained emotionalism—to such a degree, apparently, that they'd all but wiped out their females. Maybe that wasn't part of their reasoning in preventing female births and treating the few women they had as they did, but she suspected that it was—contempt that women were more prone to be ruled by their emotions.

She thought Camryn had dozed off during her massage, but when she stopped, he shifted in a silent demand to turn over. She slid off of him, watching as he rolled onto his back. He placed his hands behind his head and studied her from beneath hooded eyes.

“You've sworn not to touch me?”

“Foolish of me,” he murmured.

She smiled faintly and settled lower to explore his chest. He hadn't really given her a chance to do so. He was always the aggressor, always in control and usually in too much of a hurry to allow her time to play.

He had scars she hadn't noticed before, some old, several that were still an angry pink from fresh healing. They disturbed her, not just because they marred sheer perfection but because they represented pain and the possibility of death. “Where did you get this?”

He looked surprised. “On Kylo. We were overrun by the skeets and disgraced ourselves by retreating,” he said wryly.

Simone sent him a sharp look. "How is that a disgrace? It's stupid to fight when you're outnumbered."

He studied her curiously. "You know nothing of war."

"No," Simone said a little testily, "but I have common sense. The idea of war is to win. Dying isn't winning."

His lifted his dark brows at her. "Curiously enough, I thought the same thing. The council did not agree."

"I'm sorry but the council doesn't have a very good track record, as far as I can see, for making good decisions."

"They sent us for you."

Anger flickered through her but then amusement took its place. She smiled faintly. "I rest my case."

"It was not their decision," he said after a moment. "We demanded it."

"Another point against them," she retorted. "You shouldn't have had to demand something that was that important to Macedon. It is the duty of those who rule to make decisions based on the needs of the whole, to do what is best for the majority, not to focus on their personal agenda."

"You have been studying our laws?" he asked curiously.

"I can't read your language, but I know wrong when I see it and when I hear it."

Deciding they were bound to reach the point of arguing if they continued, she leaned down to distract him, and herself, by exploring the flesh she'd been stroking with her lips. She kissed his scars, wishing he hadn't known such pain, wondering what he would be like if he hadn't. She explored his taut belly and male breasts, teasing his nipples until he was grinding his teeth.

"That feels ... strange."

"Not good?"

He considered it. "Strange."

Smiling, she moved to his throat, lightly gnawing and then bypassed his face and explored his ear with her tongue until he was breathing heavily. He lifted his face when she lifted her head, staring at her lips in demand until she settled them against his.

He almost reached for her to drag her back when she broke away. She gave him a look. "Give me your breasts," he demanded a little hoarsely.

She smiled faintly, feeling her belly clench in response. "In a minute," she promised. "I'm not done exploring."

She worked her way back down his body to his cock and teased the head with her tongue. It bobbed against her mouth. She grasped the thick shaft, studying it as she played with it. It didn't differ a great deal from a human man's cock, she decided, but she supposed a cock was a cock. Designed by nature for a specific purpose, there wasn't much need to vary. The head was slightly larger than the shaft, maybe a little more angular than what she accustomed to, but it felt wonderfully the same gliding along her channel.

She teased him until his hips were lifting off the bed in a silent demand for her to go down on him again each time she lifted her head, until he was gasping for breath, until he forgot himself and grabbed her for a moment before he snatched his hands back.

She stopped then, lifting her head to look at his face. "More?"

He swallowed convulsively. "Give me your breasts."

She moved back up, straddling his chest and lifting her breasts in her hands. "Which do you want?"

He lifted his head and latched onto the tip of one, catching her by surprise. Clenching his teeth on it threateningly, he lowered his head to the pillow. She gasped, following him, though she felt no real fear of pain.

He suckled first one and then the other until she was so drunk with need that she had to brace her arms to keep from crumpling on top of him. When he finally stopped, gasping for breath and strained upward to reach her mouth, she lowered her head and kissed him. She'd begun to move back to mount him when he stopped her.

"Let me kiss those lips first," he said hoarsely.

Shuddering, she paused on her knees. He slipped down. "Part the outer lips for me."

She reached down to comply, leaning over him. She almost came the moment his lips covered her clit and he sucked it into his mouth. A hard shudder raked her. She propped on one arm, dizzy, weak, relishing the jolts of pleasure that kept washing through her, building a dam within her that was rapidly reaching its limit. She pulled away abruptly when she felt the first threatening quakes of release.

"No! Give it to me!" he growled.

She found she couldn't resist the allure. She leaned forward again, parting her outer lips. Almost the moment he began tugging at her clit again, she went off. She groaned, shuddering, almost blacking out with the intensity of it, struggling to hold still for him until she couldn't stand it any longer.

She wanted to collapse and enjoy the dizzying aftershocks, but she slipped backwards again instead and carefully aligned her body with his, bearing down and lifting again until she'd managed to engulf his flesh. She rode him, struggling to meet his silent commands and move as he needed her to. Each time she settled fully against him, though, another spark shot from her clit and she found herself climbing toward a second release. Within a short space of time, she was more focused on achieving her own goal than giving him release.

There was no danger of failing him, apparently, thankfully. Just as her body began to convulse in a second climax, he uttered a choked groan and seized control, thrusting upward into her in shuddering, awkward strokes. She ground down against him, holding herself still until he finally ceased to pump into her and went limp, gasping hoarsely.

She leaned against her braced arms for a moment and finally sprawled across his chest. For several moments, she simply lay as limply as he was. It dawned on her after a moment, however, that it was an opportunity she hadn't had before. She nuzzled happily against his chest, placing light kisses where she pleased. He tensed slightly and she heard the movement of his head against the pillows as he looked down at her, but then he merely dropped his head to the pillow again.

"I do not think I can rise again so quickly."

Dimwit!

She sighed irritably. "I was loving on you, idiot!" she said testily, rolling off of him.

He caught her before she could scramble off the bed, dragging her back and caging her between his chest and an arm. His lips were curled faintly. "Then I will have

more.”

She gave him a dirty look.

“Please?”

She sent him a startled look. His expression was teasing, but it was a peace offering. Still a little miffed, she snuggled against him again anyway, enjoying being held in spite of the battle it had taken to get it.

Camryn stroked her back for a time, enjoying the way she felt curled against him. The impulse to tell her what he was trying to do smote him. He resisted it, unwilling to give her hope when he had settled nothing except in his mind, but finally yielded to it with the reflection that it would please her, he thought, to know that he wanted to do it. “If I am successful in my petition to keep you, I will see to it that you have the chance to coddle our babes.”

She pulled away to look at him.

“Mind you,” he said sternly, “only when they are babes. They are to be warriors and they must be trained. A poorly trained warrior is a dead man walking. But in that time, you will have other babes to coddle.”

“And when they’re taken, I won’t see them anymore, will I?”

He hesitated. “If it’s your wish, you will—in time. I cannot promise that, but we will see.”

Simone swallowed a little convulsively. It was more than she’d been led to believe she might possibly have. She didn’t want to spoil it, but it was important to her to know. “When they are taught to be warriors, will they also be taught that I’m nothing? Of no importance except for breeding and fucking?”

He was silent for several moments. “Warriors are taught to appreciate those things only a woman can provide.”

In other words, breeding and sex.

* * * *

Camryn knew they were in trouble when he noticed that the smug look of satisfaction had vanished from the faces of the council members. He felt it in his gut even before he’d consciously recognized it for what it was.

Arrek was nearly foaming at the mouth when he addressed them. “How *dare* you come before this council as petitioners for anything when you have committed the most criminal of acts?”

Camryn stiffened, felt the men next to him tense as he had. “What are we charged with?”

“Do not stand there and try to pretend you have no notion! The breeders have been released, taken without leave, and they have vanished! You have broken into the prisons and hidden them!”

Camryn’s belly tightened at the charge—he knew what the consequences were and they would not be pleasant—but he felt both relieved that his father had admitted they hadn’t found them and furious that they’d just discovered them missing. “You have taken the best of care of them, I see,” he roared furiously, “when they have been gone from those stinking cells where you placed them for nigh two weeks and you have only just discovered it!

“You have lied to us! You lied to us when you told us they would be confined to the barracks for a month when you fully intended the entire time to sneak them from the

barracks and bury them alive in the prisons that have not been used for the lowest criminal in a hundred years! You lied to us when you assured us that our breeders, and our sons, were receiving adequate care!

“How dare *you* stand in judgment on us when you should be charged with cruelty and crimes against the Empire for endangering the lives of our unborn sons!”

Arrek smiled at him grimly. “You admit to your crime!”

“I admit to *no* crime! The only ones who have committed a crime here is the men on the council!”

The spectators—primarily warriors who stood next in line to breed—began to bellow furiously. It was hard to say whether they were more furious about Arrek’s charges or Camryn’s, but they completely disrupted the proceedings until Arrek and the other council members ordered the guards stationed between them and the accused to throw them out and arrest all of the petitioners.

Even Camryn couldn’t believe they had the audacity to arrest and charge all of them when they had no way of knowing who had taken part in the release of the breeders. He discovered, however, that that was indeed the case. Three hundred warriors were arrested—him, Kael, and Ean among them—and imprisoned to await the council’s decision on punishment.

Without trial? Without even an attempt to discover who had taken part?

“He has lost his mind!” Camryn growled to no one in particular.

“He is in the highest company!” Kael retorted. “I have not seen that any of the other council elders even attempted to oppose him.”

“It will not take them long to find her,” Ean said uneasily.

Camryn’s expression hardened. He grasped the bars of the cell door as if he could rip them down and shook them, and then roared in frustration when he couldn’t. Moving away from the bars finally, he sprawled on the cot assigned to him. “I am almost more afraid of what will happen if they do not find her. She has little food and no way to get it if we are not there!”

“Gods! I had not thought of that!” Kael gasped, leaping from his own bunk and moving to the bars Camryn had just left. “We demand legal representation, gods damn it! It is the *law*, you fucking bastards! You cannot lock us away where we cannot defend ourselves and *also* deny us representation!”

The guards at the end of the cell block didn’t even turn around.

“We should have killed them instead of allowing them to march us into this fucking prison without resistance!”

Camryn sent him a look. “We would not be facing *more* charges if we had done that. They do not consider smashing faces and breaking bones not resisting.”

“Whose side are you on, gods damn it!” Kael snarled.

“Simone’s. She is the one who will suffer for every mistake that we make. Sit down and think instead of raging over it. We must figure out some way to get her moved so that she will be taken care of and they cannot lock her away again.”

Kael moved to his own bunk. “I do not see how we can do that from here—not when everyone else has also been locked up.”

“Only the warriors who have bred,” Ean pointed out. “What of those who came to witness the proceedings who are, or at least were, to be next to breed? They have a stake in this as well as we do.”

"I do not want them to have a stake in Simone!" Kael snapped. "If we send any of them, how can we trust that they will not simply hide her away for themselves?"

"I had not thought of that," Ean admitted. "Gods damn it! Is there no one that could be trusted?"

"I think we need to worry more now about seeing to it that she's safe," Camryn said. "If it only creates a new problem, then we will deal with that when we must."

"There is the problem that many are pissed off now that they know that we have had the breeders hidden away for nigh two weeks."

"And there are more who are pissed off to discover why we freed them," Camryn said pointedly. "They may not support us, but they are no more in favor of risking the health of the breeders than we are."

"The question is who to try and how to communicate with them," Kael said thoughtfully.

Camryn was wrestling with that very question when the sounds outside the cell finally penetrated his thoughts. He lifted his head, listening.

"It is just the servers bringing the trays," Kael said dismissively.

Camryn got up and moved to the door.

"I do not see how you can focus on food at the moment!" Ean said irritably.

Camryn sent him a look but returned his attention to the server he could just glimpse a few cells down. Impatience began to gnaw at him as he watched the man's slow progress. He bit back the urge to bellow at him, however. He could threaten the bastard if asking did not gain him what he wanted.

"You," he said when the man finally wheeled the cart within view, "by what name are you known?"

The man looked startled and glanced behind him.

"I am speaking to you, server."

"Dasyn," the man responded finally, "Your Highness."

"Do you know of one named Zev?"

The man frowned. "I know several."

"A wormy little bastard," Camryn said irritably, "about yeah high, skinny, mayhap seventeen annuals?"

The man looked more confused.

"He served at the breeder barracks," Camryn added as it dawned on him that that must have been where Simone had met him.

"Ah, that Zev."

"Can you carry a message to him for me?"

Dasyn looked surprised and suspicious. "What sort of message?"

"Tell him his friend needs help—the one he met when he was serving at the breeder barracks—and to come to me."

Dasyn looked doubtful. "Are you the one that tried to break him in half?"

"If I had *tried*, he would be broken," Camryn growled. "Tell him and when I am released, I will reward you."

"You are not likely to be released any time soon," Dasyn said. "They mean to hold you here until you have come to your senses—once they have used the lash to help you out with that."

"Still, I will be released. I will not forget."

Dasyn glanced back at the guard and took a tray, passing it to Camryn. "This is about the breeders, yes?"

Camryn hesitated. "Yes."

"There's places we can hide them where they won't be found for a while."

Warning bells went off in Camryn's head but, as he'd pointed out to the others, getting Simone to safety was the priority of the moment. "They are breeding. They will need a physician's care."

"I had figured that," Dasyn said dryly. "They will be gettin' round now, carryin' so many. If they are not moved soon, it will be harder."

"Send Zev to me. I will tell him what he needs to know. She will not trust anyone else, and I do not."

"Are you out of your mind?" Kael growled before the server had even moved beyond earshot.

"I *will* be out of my mind if I cannot convince myself she is safe. He is right! She is already getting awkward with the babes. She will not be able to run and hide and it worries me that we have been refused representation. They can keep us here indefinitely if they are of a mind to ignore the laws. I am more worried about what Arrek has in mind for them than I am the lower caste."

"I still do not like it!"

"I do not like it either, but Camryn is right. They will at least try to keep her safe. If our father gets hold of her again, he will put her back where she was, or mayhap even someplace worse, and hold her there until she has birthed the babes. That cannot be good for her or them. If we cannot protect her, I want to know that someone is trying to," Ean said tightly.

Chapter Seventeen

“I have had the most wonderful news!” Arrek said, grinning broadly as he strode across Lielani’s sitting room.

She settled weakly on her settee, clasping her hands tightly together nervously, but she managed a tremulous smile. “Oh? It will be good to hear wonderful news for a change!”

He frowned at her, but apparently he was in too good of a mood to be easily distracted from it. He dropped onto the seat beside her. “Our scientists have made a brilliant breakthrough!”

Lielani stared at him blankly. To her knowledge Arrek had never had any interest in any scientific breakthroughs unless it pertained to weaponry. “They have invented a new weapon?” she asked doubtfully.

He looked startled for a moment and then chuckled. “In a sense. I had not thought of it that way, but you are right! In a sense it is a weapon. It will bring an end to the disturbances that we have been having to deal with.”

Oh god! He was going to blow everyone up! It was not enough that his own sons were rotting in that stinking prison? That they had been publicly whipped within an inch of their lives, until their poor backs were a raw, bloody mess, and would never be the same? “It will?” she asked, dismayed.

He caught her hands beneath his. “This is truly good news, Lielani! I swear it! I know that you have been distressed about Camryn and Kael and Ean being imprisoned, but it cannot be helped. I cannot show favoritism, particularly when they are the leaders of this mess!

“Our scientists, however, have discovered that they can take the eggs of the alien women and destroy their DNA and replace it with the DNA of our own women! They can then be fertilized and placed within the wombs of our women.”

Lielani gaped at him in horror. “Us? We are to be used as breeders? Again?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “We will have no need for the half-breeds after all! These will be completely drak! Of course, we will need to keep the human breeders until we can harvest their eggs—and we will have to find those still in hiding—but the scientists have calculated that we should have enough for an entire new generation of draks! Everyone will have their son and they will cease to complain and make trouble!”

Lielani burst into tears. With the best will in the world, she could not contain her distress. She had always wondered what it would feel like when her cracked heart was finally completely shattered, and now she knew. She felt as if she was dying and, at the same time, fearful that she would not.

She had tried her best to convince herself that Arrek was not a monster, that he was a man disappointed by life and frustrated about his own limitations, but that there was some good in him. She had refused to believe that she had given her heart to a cold blooded monster, but he was. The things he had done to his sons! How could he contemplate *destroying* their sons on top of what he had already done? His own

grandsons? How could he consider destroying helpless women only because they were not drak?

She wept for Camryn for Kael and for Ean. They would be brokenhearted if they lost their sons. They would be broken men if they lost Simone, inconsolable! She wept for Simone and the other women who had been torn from their homes and the lives they had had to bring hope to her world, and she wept for herself. She could not face bringing more sons into the world and giving them up! She simply could not face it!

"Have you never loved me at all, Arrek?" she asked him in a small voice.

He looked shocked. "How could you ask that?" he demanded, gathering her into his arms. "I love you with all my heart, Lielani! It is a *gift* to you, for our beloved Macedon! Think what this means to our empire! A new generation of pure drak warriors! The finest in the universe! You are not ... pleased?"

Lielani felt a flicker of warning go through her at the question. She struggled to control her emotions, sniffing, but she couldn't hold back the tears that she'd dammed for so long. "I am weeping with joy!"

He held her, rocking her gently, expounding on his grand plan until she thought for a little bit that she might throw up. The urge finally usurped the tears, but she was almost sorry for it. He rose then and pulled her up with him, leading her into her bedchamber.

She had not had so much difficulty in trying to please, or pretend to be pleased, since she had first come to the palace and Arrek had railed about having to settle for her when he had wanted another. When he finally left, she went into her bathroom and threw up and then climbed into her shower and stayed there until the water began to run cold.

Simone, white and shaken, met her when she got out, wrapping a drying cloth around her. "He's as mad as a hatter," she muttered.

Lielani shook her head. "I would almost feel better if I believed that. He is just that callous and coldhearted. I have loved a man who never existed," she said sorrowfully. "I have made excuses for everything that he ever did, told myself lies, lies, lies!"

"We can't let him get away with it! What's he thinking? My god! You're too old—I'm sorry! I don't mean to be insulting."

"I *am* too old!" Lielani agreed angrily. "I am sorry that I am too old, but I know that I am. I do not think that I could endure breeding even one more time and I am certain that my heart could not take another loss! We are *all* too old! He has no right to expect such a thing when we have already given everything to Macedon!"

"Let me get you a glass of *camry*!" Simone said sympathetically when she'd helped Lielani sit down on her bed.

"Bring the bottle!"

Simone considered whether she should and finally took it. It wouldn't hurt Lielani to get dead drunk, all things considered. At least it might help her over the nasty shock.

Lielani clutched her hand when she returned. "I am afraid for you! Mayhap we should try to contact Zev and send you to hide with the others, after all? I know it was my idea to keep you here, and I thought it would be safe, but now I am not so certain."

Simone felt a coldness creep over her. "I want to stay here. He has to let them out eventually! It's been months!"

“Your men will want what is best for you and the babes, Simone. They were not happy that you decided to stay here with me.”

Simone smiled a little wryly. “They’ll have to get used to me the way I am.”

Lielani patted her cheek. “They love you the way you are.”

Simone sat with her until Lielani had drank herself into a stupor and finally left to pace the sitting room. She didn’t honestly have a clue of what to do. She couldn’t think. The things she’d overheard kept rambling around and around in her mind and producing such anger and fear and disbelief that it was impossible to think.

She was almost sorry Lielani had taught her their language, or at least helped her to perfect it well enough that she’d understood Arrek. She’d thought that it would be good to know what was going on. Now, she wasn’t so sure. Ignorance suddenly sounded like bliss compared to knowing what was planned and knowing there wasn’t a damned thing she could do about it.

She was tempted to tell Zev so that he could carry the news to the prison, but there wasn’t anything they could do. What was the point in worrying Camryn and Kael and Ean with it?

It wouldn’t hurt to tell Zev, though, she decided abruptly. The other women *needed* to know. The people hiding them needed to know.

None of them were much better off than the women Arrek’s guards had managed to find and seize before they could escape. They would be the first to die, but once he’d gotten rid of them he would be on the hunt for everyone else and it wouldn’t be that hard to find them once they’d given birth.

As far as she was concerned, regardless of what Lielani said or thought to the contrary, Arrek *was* crazy, but that certainly didn’t help them. If he was, the entire damned council was. They backed him whatever he decided to do—even the Emperor, himself, never opposed Arrek.

Of course, she strongly suspected that the Emperor was senile and had been for a while. He wasn’t much more than a puppet. It was Arrek’s Empire, and he seemed determined to destroy it before he went to his grave.

It was a pity that she hadn’t helped him get there faster while she’d had her chance. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to hurt Camryn by killing his father. Now, she wished she had regardless of the consequences.

Hindsight—and it didn’t help!

* * * *

Lielani woke with a headache, and yet she discovered that her mind was far more clear than it had ever been. Sometime during the night her subconscious mind had finally given her the answers that she’d tried so hard to avoid.

“I must go out,” she told Simone after they’d shared their meager breakfast—meager because she was afraid it might be noticed if she suddenly began to ask for twice the food she customarily did. It had been difficult for both of them. Poor Simone looked to be all eyes and belly, but she had some hope that she could finally bring an end to the tragedy that had been unfolding since long before Simone and the other women had been brought to Macedon.

She didn’t know anything else to do.

She still loved Arrek—beyond reason. Mayhap she was crazy herself, but she could not allow him to do what he meant to do if there was a way to stop him.

The walk to the House of Tridan was an ordeal in itself. Her meeting with Mirtan was even worse. They both wept and then composed themselves and left the palace, heading for the House of Lara. They discovered that it was unusual enough to see two concubines together that they attracted far more attention than they wanted. When they'd spoken to Sheena, the three of them split up and went to speak with the other concubines.

Simone was alarmed at Lielani's appearance when she finally returned. "You look terrible! Are you alright?" She paused and then asked fearfully, "Has something happened?"

Lielani waved her off. "I am just tired," she said a little breathlessly. "I have not walked so much in a very long time! I had forgotten how exhausting it was."

Simone eyed her suspiciously. "What have you been up to? Don't tell me you look so ill just from walking! You've been 'servicing' five men in this house. You should have a heart like a gorilla!"

Lielani reddened, but chuckled dutifully. "I am not familiar with that beast."

"It's sort of a cousin," Simone said, smiling. "A very hairy cousin. And I still want to know."

Lielani shook her head. "I drank far too much *camry* last night! You shouldn't have let me! My head is pounding today and I went to tell the news to the others—the other concubines—and it was ... difficult. I am worn out from that."

Simone nodded, relieved, realizing that should've occurred to her immediately. "Zev came by. He brought extra food. I told him. Don't worry! I told him not to tell Camryn and the others. It would just be something else for them to worry about that they couldn't do anything about, but the other women and the people sheltering them needed to be warned. They aren't warriors. They don't know how to fight. They'd be massacred if they tried to protect the women. They need to keep a close watch on things and move the women to someplace else if necessary."

Lielani still looked upset. "I hope they do not strike again—or decide to riot. The city is beginning to look like we are at war. And it only makes the council angrier. The worse everyone behaves, the more the council does to stir them up. I begin to think there will be no end to it—or that the end will be worse than everything is now."

Simone stroked her rounded belly. "Change is never easy—for anyone," she said finally. "We should've known better than to try. Not that I remember the riots we've had in our past, but I certainly knew about them. I just hadn't experienced it myself. I didn't realize just how bad things could get or that we would get everything so stirred up just because we wanted something they didn't want us to have."

Lielani studied her thoughtfully. "Don't regret what you have done, however it turns out. It needed to be done. It should have been done long ago. *We* should have done something. If we had tried, our world would not have come to this. If anyone is to blame, it is us—the women of Macedon. We allowed it to happen instead of trying to stop it."

Simone smiled wanly. "Maybe you didn't try because you were satisfied? There's nothing wrong with that."

Lielani thought it over. "I do not believe that I was ever satisfied. I accepted because I thought I could not make a difference. There is something wrong with accepting things that you *know* are wrong and doing nothing." She paused. "I have never really regretted very much in my life in spite of that. In their way, the men of this

House have been good to me and I grew to love them and became content.”

Simone grimaced. “Until I came along.”

Lielani smiled at her. “Yes, until you came along. Now, I have another regret. I regretted only the lost chance with my sons before. Now, I regret that I did not have a daughter.”

Simone thought she would cry for several moments. She finally managed to master it. “I don’t know what to say—I’m glad?” she asked jokingly.

“I did not say that to make you uncomfortable. I am glad that you came. I am glad that Camryn and Kael and Ean have you. They are *good* men, very good men! They deserve some happiness. And *you* are happiness to them so I could not regret your coming if it was only for their sake.”

It was deeply disturbing, Simone reflected later, that Lielani had all but told her what she meant to do and it had gone right over her head.

* * * *

Simone was *not* comfortable when Bastian and Arrek visited Lielani, not in any way, but she thought that being forced to be a voyeur was probably the worst of it. She didn’t think she would’ve enjoyed it if she’d actually wanted to see Arrek in action, but it was worse when she couldn’t stand the man.

She was rapidly outgrowing the hiding place Lielani had made for her besides that and it was miserably uncomfortable having to sit so long and remain motionless, knowing the slightest shift was liable to give her away.

Not that it took either man that long when they finally got down to business! But Lielani had, inadvertently, taught her a few things about entertaining. She always seemed to know just how to get them to talk, allowed them to unload on her about everything that had stressed them out during the day and when they’d finished, she knew how to soothe them. Coaxing them into the bedroom was the final act—not the main attraction. By the time she was done with them they both had sappy looks on their faces and were so relaxed they could barely make it out the door again.

If she hadn’t seen Lielani in action, she wouldn’t have believed anyone could tame that beast—Arrek. Bastian was almost as bad. Although she hadn’t had a personal run-in with him, he looked and sounded so much like Arrek she wondered if they were actually twins—and she hated him by proxy just for being like Arrek.

They rarely showed up at the same time on the same night, however, and when they did about a week after Arrek’s announcement it was a very unpleasant surprise that so thoroughly unnerved her that she didn’t have *time* to think about the fact that it was so unusual.

She’d raced to the hiding spot as soon as they heard the tapping at the keypad and had barely gotten inside the cabinet when the outer door opened. She was still trying to adjust everything for a long, miserable wait when she heard their voices and discovered both men had arrived.

Oh god! Not a three way!

Lielani bowed respectfully when the men entered, lifting her head to smile at them fleetingly before she turned and gestured for them to make themselves comfortable.

Arrek wasn’t happy and he didn’t attempt to hide his impatience. “What is this about?”

Lielani smiled nervously. “It is only that I have been thinking a very great deal

about the news you brought to me when last you visited and I thought that we should get together and celebrate.”

Bastian and Arrek both beamed at her.

“I knew you would be excited once you had had time to think it through,” Arrek said.

“It will seem good to have little warriors tearing about the place again after so many years,” Bastian agreed. “Arrek and I have actually been considering the possibility of breeding another son ourselves.”

“Truly?” Lielani gasped. “But ... the laws of reproduction ...?”

“We *are* the High Council,” Arrek said with a laugh. “We make the laws. I have been thinking they should have been adjusted long ago. It is not as if we can not build another city if the population requires it.”

“Arion is dead,” Bastian reminded her, and then added in irritation, “It was always considered of utmost importance that the leaders have at least two heirs when the life of a warrior is so uncertain. I have only one son now ... not but what I am strongly considering disowning him. I never favored Kael and you see how he has become. It seems to me that my instincts were right about him.”

“Which is what put me in mind of it,” Arrek said. “I have two, but they were wounded in the battle on Kylo. If they are both at risk, it seems important that I have another. Macedon cannot afford to lose its leaders.” He sobered. “In any case, I cannot continue to turn a blind eye to their behavior. I still have hope that their sojourn in prison will straighten them out, but they are not boys. They are men, and these things that they have done are not pranks. I fear that they have set themselves up as my enemies, and if I am right, then they are enemies of the Empire. I fear that it is only a matter of time before they cross the line and become true traitors to our people and I will not be able to stop the inevitable. It is difficult to reflect on such a thing, but it is my duty as a leader to face these things and take whatever steps necessary to protect the empire.”

“I had not considered what this new science might ... open to us in terms of opportunity,” Lielani said a little faintly. “Shall I bring you something to drink so that we can celebrate properly?”

“I will have a glass of *camry*,” Arrek said promptly.

“And you?”

“I am not feeling particularly celebratory,” Bastian said petulantly. “We still have not found the other breeders. With less than half, we cannot do what we have planned—unless we send a new mission to collect more of those creatures—or at the very least to harvest their eggs.”

“To soothe you then?” Lielani said a little hopefully, moving away before he could refuse again.

Her hands were shaking so badly by the time she'd poured their drinks that she decided to have a small one herself to settle her nerves. She was still on edge, though, when she returned to the sitting area, enough that her hands were still trembling. It was too much to hope that Arrek wouldn't notice.

He took the glass and grasped her hand. “Your hands are cold. Have you taken a chill?”

Lielani smiled at him a little shakily, trying to decide whether telling him she thought she might be coming down with something might convince him to leave. He had

always been particularly leery of illness of any kind. "I am just shaky with excitement," she said finally. "It seems ... so incredible that we have found such a wonderful scientific breakthrough in our darkest days!"

"A sign of the favor of the gods ... if one still believed in such nonsense!" Arrek agreed.

Bastian took his own glass. Despite his initial refusal, he tilted the glass up and swallowed the entire contents in one gulp. "Bring me another."

Lielani thought she would faint from sheer terror. She missed the glass when Bastian handed it to her and knelt quickly to pick it up. Arrek, she saw, was studying her assessingly when she rose.

He hadn't so much as taken a sip of his own drink and that terrified her more. *Nothing* was going as she had thought it would! "Would you like to finish yours so that I can get you another glass, as well?"

He seemed to consider it and lifted the glass to his lips. Instead of downing the contents as Bastian had, however, he merely took a long drought and set it down. "I do not think I should overindulge," he said, giving Bastian a disapproving look. "We are to review the prisoners' petitions tomorrow."

Lielani settled weakly on the couch next to him. "You will consider releasing Camryn and Kael and Ean?"

He picked his glass up and took another sip. "Theirs will not be reviewed for a while yet. I am disgraced by their behavior. I believe they should have time to consider the disgrace they have brought down upon me and the House of Jakaar!"

Lielani eyed his glass, wondering if he'd drunk enough. "It distresses me so!" she said hastily. "I have been so proud of them. I do not know what to think of their behavior of late!"

Arrek glared angrily at his feet. Lifting his glass, he emptied it and handed it to her absently. Relief filled her. Rising on shaky legs, she went back to pour them a fresh drink.

Bastian was already beginning to look uncomfortable when she returned. He was pulling at the neck of his robe. "Is it hot in here to you?"

"I am not hot," Arrek said.

Bastian was sweating. Arrek stared at him for a long moment and turned accusing eyes on Lielani. "What have you done?"

She took a step back. "What I needed to," she said with as much bravado as she could muster.

"What do mean, what you needed to do?" Bastian gasped, struggling for breath.

"I could not allow you do what you have planned to do. I love you both. I had thought that I would take the poison myself, that you would perform *shinku* when I died and that would save Macedon from you and your machinations. But then I realized that neither of you would follow me to the afterlife. You are too consumed with your hate to love me as I have loved you these many years."

Arrek stared at her in disbelief and horror. "You *poisoned* us?"

"I was told it would be quick and relatively painless," she said, whimpering with fear.

"You *traitor!* You *fucking bitch!* I will choke you to death with my own hands and see to it that you reach the afterlife first!" Arrek roared at her.

Simone, who'd been too horrified and frozen with disbelief to move up until that moment, scrambled out of her hiding place. Bastian, she saw, was already sinking toward oblivion, jerking and twitching in a way that made her stomach churn. Arrek had managed to heave himself off of the couch and catch Lielani. The two of them had fallen to the floor. Lielani was pinned beneath Arrek and he had both hands around her throat.

She was too petrified at the scene she discovered to move for several moments. Finally, when she saw Lielani clawing at Arrek's hands, she glanced around for something to use as a weapon. Grabbing a vase, she slammed it into the back of his skull.

His hold loosened. He sprawled on top of Lielani lifelessly.

"I think I killed him!" Simone gasped.

"I killed him," Lielani grunted in a hoarse whisper.

Galvanized by the reminder that Lielani was still trapped beneath him, Simone began struggling to shove him off of her. When she realized he was too heavy for her to lift, she sat down on the floor and used her legs. Between the two of them, they finally managed it, though Simone was too weak with both exertion and terror to get back up when they'd finally managed to push him off. Lielani didn't attempt to get up.

"Oh god! You're hurt! I need to get help!" she cried, rolling awkwardly to her knees and hovering over the other woman helplessly.

Lielani caught her hand in a surprisingly strong grip. "You need to go before we are found," she said shakily. "Go to Camryn's apartment and hide yourself."

"I can't leave you like this!"

"I am dying. You cannot help me. I took the poison, as well."

"Oh god! Oh god!" Simone wailed. "Why did you do that? There's got to be antidote! Let me help you into the bathroom to throw up."

"No. I am a stupid woman! I knew the only hope was to kill them and I could not face living without them. Just go. This is for the best." She smiled with an effort. "My sisters and I have redeemed ourselves."

* * * *

Camryn got off of his bunk with an effort and moved to the door of his cell when he heard the roar, trying to figure out, at first, what it was.

"What is that?" Kael asked, frowning as he, too, listened and tried to decipher it.

"Another riot," Camryn said after a moment.

Kael moved to the window, peering in first one direction and then moving to the other side to look out. "Gods!" he said hoarsely. "Camryn! They have lifted a death banner above the House of Tridan!"

Camryn turned so abruptly it pulled the barely healed skin along his back. Wincing at the burn, he hurried to look out of the window. "Lyan is dead," he said blankly. "He was young to die! I had not heard that he was ill."

A guard appeared abruptly at their cell door, his face ashen as he worked the lock with a shaking hand. "Your Highness! The prince, your father, is dead! The Emperor is dead! Prince Bastian, Lord Lyan—assassins have slain the entire High Council!"

Camryn and Kael looked at each other blankly. "Assassins?"

"We do not know what is happening! We had barely heard the news of one when there was another discovered. The entire city is in an uproar! You must come now! There is no one to bring order! We do not know what to do!"

Camryn glanced down at Ean. "Get a physician in here to attend my brother! His fever has risen again."

He saw that the city was indeed in an uproar when he and Kael were led out of the prison. The moment they appeared on the steps, however, the mob outside began to chant, "Prince Camryn! Prince Kael!"

Camryn and Kael both halted abruptly, glancing at one another as it slowly sank through their shock that their fathers were dead and they'd inherited their fathers' seats on the council.

Grim faced, Camryn turned to the crowd again and lifted his arms for silence. To his relief, they began to grow quieter immediately. "Return to your homes. We will find the assassins, but we can do so more swiftly if there is order in the city!"

They seemed more inclined, at first, to remain in the streets, held together by a strange mixture of fear, confusion, and rejoicing. Finally, however, they began to move off. As they began to disperse, he and Kael descended the steps. "Find the other council members," he told the guard who'd released them.

The man gaped at him. "They're dead."

"Their heirs, man!" he said impatiently. "Are there investigators on the scenes?"

"I ... I don't know," the guard stammered. "It was the servants who discovered the bodies and came out shouting it."

"Then make certain you get investigators to the scenes as quickly as possible!"

Bowing, the guard left.

Camryn and Kael strode as quickly as they could down the street to the palace of Jakaar. They discovered the household was in nearly as bad a state as the streets had been. The servants gathered in the main hall were shaken and white faced. "Who found them?" Camryn demanded.

An elderly servant lifted his arm timidly and Camryn pushed through the others to confront him. "Where did you find them?"

"In Lady Lielani's apartment," he said shakily. "She had told me ..."

"By the gods ... Lani!"

Camryn and Kael both whirled away from him and ran up the stairs and down the main corridor to Lielani's quarters. The sight that greeted them stopped both of them in their tracks.

"Gods! Lielani!"

Camryn reached her first, gathering her carefully in his arms. Her body was already cooling, however, and he could not convince himself that there was any hope. He sat back on his heels, cupping her head to his chest, struggling with the pain in his chest, the near impossibility of drawing in a breath.

"Is she ...?"

Camryn shook his head. "She is gone," he said blankly. "Why?"

"You should not move her, Camryn," Kael said after a moment. "The investigators have not gone over the scene."

Camryn glared at him, but after a few moments he lay her gently on the floor and glanced around. His father's body was lying awkwardly next to hers, twisted, as if he'd been turned over. Bastain was slumped in a chair.

Drawing his knees up, Camryn propped his arms on them and cradled his head. "I cannot wrap my head around his," he muttered. "Why Lani? She never hurt a soul!"

Why would anyone hurt her?"

"I do not know, but they will suffer the torment of the damned before they die!" Kael growled. "We need to lock down the city! They will escape if they have not done so already!"

"Go! See to it. I will stay until the investigators arrive."

He didn't have long to wait and yet it seemed time had stopped moving. As he sat staring at Lielani's face, berating himself for ignoring her when he could have spent more time with her, he noticed marks on her neck that he hadn't noticed before. He'd reached to brush her hair away from her throat to study the marks when he heard the sounds of an arrival and looked up to see one of the servants hurrying along the corridor with a handful of investigators.

The men paused in the doorway, bowing respectfully. "Your Highness—if you please?"

Camryn stared blankly at them for several moments before he realized he was sitting in the middle of the crime scene. He got up abruptly and moved to a corner to watch.

"Did you move anything?"

"I moved Lielani," he said.

"But not the prince?"

He shook his head. The investigator left him, moving about the apartment, studying everything very carefully. Another set his equipment down and began scanning the room with first one instrument and then another. After a while, he moved out of the apartment and stood outside, ignoring the pain in his back and leaning against the wall.

In truth, the wounds paled beside the other pain, the confusion, the anger.

Kael returned. "I've ordered the city locked down."

Camryn nodded.

"If you will pardon me, that is not necessary," the lead investigator informed them, obviously having overheard the discussion between them.

"How do you know that?" Camryn growled. "Unless there were many, it is possible that their foul crime was discovered before they could escape."

The man bowed. "This is our second scene tonight. It is the same as the last, with very little exceptions—and all the others I am convinced."

"What do you mean by that?"

He motioned them inside and pointed to three glasses lined up on a table. "Poison. Lady Lielani served them poison and then drank it herself. Just as Lady Killy served up poison to her men and ended her own life." He turned to look at them with a mixture of pity and anger. "The concubines conspired to kill the members of the High Council and then killed themselves to evade execution."

"That's a gods damned lie!" Camryn bellowed at him. "Lielani would not harm anyone! She loved them—little though I think the bastards deserved it!"

The man looked shocked, but he merely bowed. "I apologize. I understand that it is difficult to accept. I myself find it difficult, but there is no sign of an intruder. The servant said the apartment was locked when he reached it and we have ascertained that that was indeed the case. Prince Bastian was dead before he realized her treason," he said, gesturing to the body slumped in the chair, "or too far gone to attempt to avenge himself for her betrayal. Prince Arrek apparently did. His handprints are on her throat—"

as you can see from the bruising. From the disposition of the bodies and the things that have fallen to the floor, the repositioning of the couch and chair—there was clearly a tussle—between Prince Arrek and his concubine—no one else. And it cannot be avoided that most any *assassin* would have used a different weapon entirely—a blade or perhaps a pistol. She took advantage of their trust and served death to them in their drinks.”

Camryn was tempted to argue with him until it suddenly dawned on him that Lielani had been sheltering Simone. The blood drained from his face with the thought and sheer terror washed over him. Pushing past the man, he searched the apartment frantically. Kael, prompted by the look on Camryn’s face, followed him in the search. They exchanged a questioning look when they didn’t find any sign of her and then abruptly left the apartment and raced down the corridor to Camryn’s apartment.

They found her hiding on the floor of the shower. She looked up at them with wide, tear filled eyes and struggled to get up when she recognized them. “Camryn! Kael! Lielani ...!”

Camryn and Kael helped her get up and then Camryn scooped her up in his arms, held her in a near crushing embrace for several moments and then carried her into the bedchamber, settling her on his bed. “I know. Tell me what happened!”

Chapter Eighteen

Simone covered her face with her hands, trying to sort her memories and thoughts into order. Even now, though, when hours had passed, when she'd cried until she couldn't breathe, she didn't feel a great deal calmer than she had at the time. She would never have imagined Lielani would do anything like that! Never!

"I think ... I think I might've killed your father," she confessed, looking at Camryn in wide-eyed horror. "He was trying to strangle Lielani and I hit him on the head with a vase and then he just ... he just let go of her and he didn't move anymore."

She was sobbing by the time she'd finished her confession. To her surprise, Camryn pulled her to him and cradled her head against his chest, holding her until she'd calmed down enough to stop sobbing. She looked down at her hands when she finally pulled away, sniffing. A large hand appeared holding a small square of material.

She glanced up the arm, saw it was Kael and smiled a fleeting thanks, taking the offering and drying her face.

"You didn't kill him. Lielani poisoned him."

Simone nodded, but he hadn't been dead when she'd hit him.

"Start at the beginning."

"You mean tonight?" she asked. "She didn't just suddenly decide to do it. He ... he *drove* her to it!"

"Then start where you think it began," he prompted. "I need to understand this."

She looked at him and Kael, wondering abruptly where Ean was and how they'd gotten out of prison. Both of them were still wearing the clothing issued to prisoners. She set it aside. They weren't likely to tell her anything, especially at the moment.

Dragging in a shuddering breath, she told them about Arrek's plans and what Lielani had said afterwards. "She was heartsick already about what he'd done to the three of you—*all* the things he'd done. She was horrified that he was so coldblooded as to consider killing all of us when he was done with us—and killing our sons—*your* sons. She was afraid for me and the other women. And she couldn't face being used again as a breeder. She kept saying she was too old. She couldn't do it. She couldn't face giving up her babies again, that her heart couldn't take it.

"I should've paid more attention, but I knew she had every reason to be upset. *I* was upset. She ... got drunk on the *camry* and went to sleep and I thought she'd be alright.

"She went out the next day and she's hardly ever done that. She was gone all day I was worried that something had happened. She looked ... sick when she got back, but it didn't occur to me what she'd been doing. I *swear* it didn't! If I'd had any idea, I would've tried to talk to her out of it. I would've tried to stop her!

"That was about a week ago. She hadn't been quite the same since. I noticed. She would sit for hours and just stare. I thought she was just depressed and upset, though.

"Last night when Bastian and Arrek both showed up, I thought they'd just

decided to come at the same time until I heard Arrek say something about why had she invited both of them and I still just thought it was weird. But I could tell just from the way she was talking that she was upset or maybe afraid. I think maybe Arrek got suspicious, but I don't know. She asked if they wanted something to drink and Arrek said he did but Bastian didn't and she tried to talk Bastian into having a drink. I don't know what happened. I couldn't see anything, but then she seemed more agitated. I think Bastian must have drunk his first and that was what set it off. She realized the poison would start effecting him and Arrek would know what she'd done and maybe he hadn't drank his.

"Well, he couldn't have because when I ran in Bastian was already slumped down and Arrek He'd drank it, though. He demanded to know what she'd done and she told him she'd poisoned them. She said she'd thought at first that she would just poison herself and that they would do something ... shin-something, but she knew they were too coldblooded to care and follow her into the afterlife so she'd realized she had to poison them because they had to be stopped.

"I was so horrified I just couldn't move. I couldn't believe I'd heard what she'd said. Then Arrek started bellowing at her and said he'd see to it that she got to the afterlife first and I heard them fighting—physically. When I managed to get out of the cabinet where I was hiding and ran in, he had her down on the floor, choking her. And I ... picked up the vase and hit him on the head."

She looked up at Camryn and Kael worriedly when she'd finished, trying to decide whether they believed her or not and whether they thought she'd killed Arrek. She couldn't tell anything about their expressions. She thought they were too shocked and grieved to take it in.

"Lie down and rest," Camryn said finally. "There are ... things that must be done and now no one to see to it but us."

Simone looked at him curiously. There was something about the way he said it ... but he must be talking about funeral arrangements, she decided. "I didn't understand the shin-thing."

He glanced at her sharply, but he only patted her hand. "Rest."

She felt her chest tighten for their grief. "I'm so sorry ... about your fathers, and Lielani. I tried to help her, but she said it was too late. She said ... she loved them anyway and she couldn't bear to live without them."

He cupped her cheek. "Do not cry again. Lie down and rest."

She didn't think she could rest, but she could see that Camryn and Kael needed some time and some space. She lay down. "Where's Ean?"

"He will be alright—now. He has fever but I sent for a physician."

Anxiety flashed through her. It took an effort not to demand answers right away, but she told herself that he must not be too sick or Camryn and Kael would've been more worried.

Or maybe they just had too much to worry about at the moment?

She discovered the emotional upheaval had taken more out of her than she'd realized. Almost as soon as she settled more comfortably, despite everything, she began to drift off. Nightmares woke her, jerked her from sleep to conscious. She lay staring into the darkness and listening to the low drone of voices and finally realized that it was Camryn talking to someone.

Unwilling to allow them to know she was awake, she rolled over so that she could see and lifted her eyelids just enough to spot the small group of men in the sitting area. Camryn, Kael, and a couple of the others were looking directly at her, making it clear they'd noticed the movement. When she didn't move again, they returned to their conversation.

"We have gone back over each scene very carefully and we have found nothing to indicate that our first impressions were wrong. It seems very clear that there is no outside involvement. The concubines plotted to kill the councilors and executed their plan. I have found witnesses that saw them walking together and that saw each of them visit the Houses on the same day ... about a week ago. We are as certain as we can be that that is when and how they communicated with one another and that that is when the treasonous plot was hatched to murder the council members. What we have not determined is the motive."

Camryn nodded. "Close the cases."

"But we have not ascertained the motive!"

"And there will be no trial so it is immaterial, is it not? The assassins have taken their own lives!"

"We cannot be sure of that! Others might have been involved. The people will want to know," the man persisted. "They are in a state of shock that such a thing could have been done and they are distraught—if not over the councilors themselves, then over the bizarre behavior of the women and the loss of so many!"

"You are right. The Empire, not just the city, is in chaos. The sooner everyone is informed of what happened, the better, and then it must be dropped and focus shifted to other concerns. They are more worried about their future and the future of Macedon. Restoration of order will bring about peace far more quickly than a fruitless search for answers the concubines took with them to the grave!"

A frisson of fear wafted through Simone—and horror to discover that it wasn't just that Lielani had cracked under the strain and acted upon it. She hadn't dreamed it was only a part of a wide-spread plot!

And what would the repercussions be, she wondered abruptly? Would she be blamed, she wondered fearfully? Had they not believed her?

Of course they hadn't! Lielani had convinced everyone, even her, that she was the most gentle, loving person in the world, that she didn't have it in her to harm anyone. At the very least, she might be charged with conspiring, instigating mayhem!

There was no getting back to sleep after that! She more than half expected Camryn and Kael to confront her the moment the other men had left. Instead, they returned to the sitting room and settled again.

"Simone is not the only one who ignored the signs of warning," Camryn said after a little bit. "We ignored it. Lielani was thinking about what she did long before she did it."

"What are you talking about?" Kael demanded.

"Do you not think, now, that it is strange that Lielani begged us to promise her we would not consider *shinku* when she died? We were convinced that she was just begging for attention—and I suppose she was. It just was not what we thought. She was not ill. She was not thinking in terms of the natural order. She was contemplating killing herself in the hope that it would remove Arrek and Bastian from the council."

Kael frowned. "But ... that was months ago! So long as that?"

Camryn frowned, as well. "The troubles had already begun, then. Arrek had had the breeders arrested and thrown into the dungeons and the people were in riot searching for them, demanding their return. She was distressed that we had been charged with treason before that. It must have begun to seem to her that there would be no end of the violence and the arguments. I think then, though, she was only thinking about ending her own life and mayhap she did not go through with it because we would not promise her that we would not go with her. She believed then that removing our fathers would end the problems, though, and that if she could convince us to remain that we would make things better, that we would change things. We would then have the power to change things."

"What do you think that she expected us to change?"

Camryn shrugged. "I do not know. Mayhap, she only wanted to see to it that we got what we wanted—Simone. It seems clear, though—if we can rely upon what Simone said—that it was the prospect of becoming a breeder again that drove her ... to do what she did."

"You are certain that Simone did not give Lielani her own motives? She has fought against being a breeder from the first. Lielani *was* a breeder and a drak woman. She was very traditional. I cannot imagine her suddenly refusing to do her duty when she has never even complained to my knowledge. Unless she feared that death would be the result because of her age?"

"She was gentle and timid," Camryn said thoughtfully. "Mayhap you are right. She did not think that her health was good enough and she was shamed that she might fail her people. Or mayhap that was part of it. That still does not explain why she would decide to take Arrek and Bastian with her, unless *Shinku* has long been a part of our customs. Mayhap she thought that Arrek and Bastian did not love her enough to commit ritual suicide and follow her and that is why she took them with her?"

"That does not make sense!" Kael snapped. "*Shinku* is supposed to be the final act of love and devotion to one's concubine! It is a *choice*! She murdered them. That was not *shinku*!"

"No, and she knew it was not! I am saying that, mayhap, she felt they did not love her enough and thought they would shame her memory! She did not want or expect it of us because she knew that it was equally important that their heirs take their seats on the council, perhaps even because she did not love us as she did them. I cannot understand the workings of a woman's mind! I am a man!"

Silence fell between them for a while.

"Do you think that Simone is responsible in any way?" Kael asked finally.

"She admitted that she struck Arrek," Camryn said pointedly. "Beyond that, I could not say, and I see no reason to pursue it. He was dead already. It is clear he drank the poison. She saw him trying to strangle Lielani and tried to prevent it. I believe that and because I believe that I do not want to discuss it further—or hear of it again."

"I am more likely to applaud her bravery than to hold it against her," Kael said wryly, "but you are right. Others would only see it as proof that she was capable of things no woman should be capable of and I would not like her condemned for a trait that I admire in her. I was suggesting that she has been staying with Lielani months now. Mayhap she influenced Lielani's gentle, forgiving nature and infected her with her own

beliefs. That could be dangerous.”

“And it could be something that is already done and cannot be undone. It is our own fault that we were so arrogant that we believed we could wipe out their beliefs and replace them with our own. If they have instead infected our people with their beliefs, then it is because our people wanted to accept. Our generation was already looking to change the old ways because they have failed us. We *must* change to have a future. I think there are many who still refuse to see that, but there are more who realize that we have come to the end of the old ways and will die out if we do not change and they believed that before we brought the Earth women among us. I will not blame her for that either. If the old ways do not work, then we must have new ideas and figure out what changes will give us the future we want.”

He got up and stretched. “I am weary enough to drop and there is much still to do. Go to bed—check first to see if they have brought Ean and send word to me if he is worse. Otherwise, I intend to try to get some rest in the hope that I will be able to think a little more clearly tomorrow. I had not expected to be called upon to take my father’s place for many, many years. I am not prepared. I will have to learn my way.”

“Gods! I had not really thought of that!” He glanced toward the bed, hesitated, and then left.

Camryn went in to shower. Simone lay tensely, waiting, wondering if she could accept that she really wasn’t going to be blamed and find herself facing serious charges. She hadn’t been able to dismiss the fears when Camryn came out again, but it soothed her when he climbed into the bed beside her, curled his arm around her, and relaxed.

He wouldn’t hold her like that if he meant to order her head chopped off, would he? Then again, she wouldn’t have thought that Arrek could have been so tender with Lielani and tried to choke her to death. Of course, he had felt betrayed

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Simone didn’t think she completely relaxed after the murders. She was almost positive that Camryn didn’t know that she’d developed a working understanding of their language and therefore couldn’t have said what he had for her benefit. It was the ‘almost’ that was the problem, that made her worry he *hadn’t* decided not to pursue it, but had, maybe, said it to set some sort of trap for her. Overall, she thought he’d been a kind and considerate lover, but that didn’t mean she was safe, not if he felt that she’d betrayed him. In point of fact, people were prone to behave *more* violently toward those closest to them who turned on them. It added insult to injury. No one expected a stranger or an enemy to have any loyalty. If he thought she’d stabbed him in the back when he’d given her trust ... she didn’t even want to think what he might do to her.

She wished she hadn’t confessed to braining Arrek. It wasn’t something Camryn or Kael were likely to forget even if Camryn didn’t allow her to be charged for it, or charge her himself. At the very least, it fixed it firmly in their minds that she was fully capable of violence and that wasn’t a good thing.

Assuming, of course, she’d left room for doubt when she’d fired at his father before and told him how dearly she would’ve loved to have blown his head off.

One of the first acts of the new council was to release the breeders. Some of them were returned to the barracks to wait out the remainder of their term. Some, like her, were released to the custody of their babies’ fathers.

As soon as she was sure she wouldn’t get into trouble for it, she went to find Ean

and check on him. She was disturbed by his condition. He seemed horrified by hers.

“By the gods! Are you being fed at all? You have shrank until you are all belly!”

That was flattering! “Lielani was afraid to ask for more food. She thought it would be noticed and they’d find me. We had to split what she had.”

She was sorry she’d brought Lielani up. Ean’s face closed. “I cannot grasp that she is gone,” he muttered after a bit.

Simone could relate. She was having a hard time with it and she hadn’t even known Lielani that long. She reached impulsively for his hand, bringing it to her cheek. “I so terribly sorry for your loss. I know you loved her.”

For a moment, she thought he would throw off the offer of comfort. Instead, although he seemed a little startled at first, he tightened his hand on hers and pulled her to him. He uttered a hiss of pain when he’d drawn her close enough to burrow his face against her breasts, but his arms tightened around her waist when she tried to move away. She settled as comfortably as she could, stroking his head soothingly, taking care not to touch his back.

It made her belly clench when she saw the bandages and the dark stains where blood had seeped through. She couldn’t believe they had such barbaric practices! It was worse that his own father had ordered it, not commendable as the bastard had seemed to think. He sure as hell hadn’t put himself out that she could see to ‘play favorites’. In fact, it seemed to her that he was more inclined to treat his sons with less compassion than anyone else.

She felt Ean stir. His hand moved to the mound of her stomach. “They are kicking me,” he said, amusement threading his voice. “I do not think they approve.”

Simone felt her heart flutter. She’d felt both joy and deep depression when she’d first felt them move, love and fear. Camryn had promised to give her as much time with them as their customs allowed, but she thought that was only going to make it harder to let go. Beyond that, with everything that had happened and his suspicions, could she count on a promise that had been made before?

She couldn’t help but be gratified that Ean had acknowledged them, though. “I think you’re just crowding them a little. They kick and punch a lot harder when they’re angry.”

He lifted his head to look at her a little doubtfully. “You can tell that?”

“Not really. I’m guessing. It just seems like that must be it when they really get rambunctious. Maybe they’re playing together?”

He settled his palms on either side of her belly, as if he was measuring, frowning. “How many months?”

Simone lifted her brows. “Until they’re done?” she asked teasingly.

“It’s hard to say,” she said when he nodded. “I guess the physician might know, but I haven’t been checked in a long time and ... it’s been hard for me to keep up.”

He looked outraged. “You must be examined! You should have been in the care of a physician throughout! We cannot know if they are alright or if it is still permissible to fuck!”

Simone blinked at him in shock. “Ean!”

“I have not touched you in months! If you are past the time when it is permissible then I cannot and you will not be bred again for a year afterward and I cannot. My dick will fall off from disuse!”

She thought he'd said it with a mixture of teasing amusement and seriousness, but she wasn't sure. "You're not in any shape to fuck anyway," she said pointedly.

"I am if my dick will stand up, woman!" he said tightly.

"I think I should go," she said uneasily.

"I am bored out of my mind tied to this fucking bed! Stay."

She was bored herself when she wasn't being scared. She didn't particularly want to return to the quarters she'd been assigned. She wasn't actually certain she could find her apartment again if it came to that. She'd only been moved into it that morning by a servant and she'd left to find Ean almost as soon as he'd shown it to her.

She didn't think it was a good idea to continue to sit on his bed, though, when he obviously had fucking in mind.

He tightened his hold the moment she tried to get up, however. "Lay with me."

Bad idea! "It'll only make you more uncomfortable."

"You are not supposed to argue, you know," he said testily.

"I thought that only applied to a concubine?"

"It *applies* to females! Did you listen to nothing that Akule taught?"

Simone settled beside him. He seemed irritated but not really angry. "I tuned out the parts I totally disagreed with."

"Which parts?"

"Most of it."

His lips twitched. She could see he was struggling to keep from smiling. "Lielani . . ." He stopped abruptly, dropping his head to the pillow and covering his eyes with one forearm.

She swallowed a little convulsively, trying to ignore the little voice in her head that told her she was always going to be compared to Lielani and she was never going to stack up. Despite the twinge of hurt and jealousy, though, she felt his pain more and snuggled a little closer, trying to offer the comfort she thought he would allow. He moved his arm from beneath her head after a moment and curled it around her in welcome.

"Talk," he commanded after a few moments.

"About what?"

He sighed. "I do not know. Something to take my thoughts from my mind."

She searched her mind for any personal history she thought he might find amusing. Most of it, she was sure, didn't really 'translate' because, despite the fact that he understood English well, he didn't really understand the customs. He shifted down the bed after a little bit, very carefully pulled the opening of the arms of her gown toward the center of her chest, and exposed both of her breasts.

She'd wondered why they made the armholes so damned big!

"They are bigger," he murmured after he'd studied them and lightly explored them with his hands.

"Because I'm pregnant. They won't stay this way so don't get your hopes up."

He chuckled. "But I can enjoy them now," he pointed out.

Chop to the ego! She thought her damned breasts were as big as Lielani's had been, though. She didn't know why he was complaining! Of course, she didn't know that they'd been satisfied with Lielani's breasts either.

He wasn't content merely to stroke and massage them long. He lowered his head

and took a nipple into his mouth. She let out a hissing breath and he released it to look at her. "That hurt?"

"They're more tender now."

It didn't dissuade him, but he was more gentle when he covered the tip again. Her sex clenched tightly at the gentle tugging, flooding with moisture. She didn't particularly want to be aroused if she couldn't do anything about it!

Almost as if he'd read her mind, he released the flesh he'd been torturing. "We can pleasure each other without penetration," he murmured, moving to the twin of the first.

She wanted to protest, but it felt so good it was hard to muster a complaint. It had been a long time for her, too. She couldn't decide if he was being so careful with her because he was worried about putting her in labor or just because, but it didn't detract in any way from the heat he built inside her, didn't slow it to a gentle building. He had her so hot in a few moments she thought he could finish her off with his finger.

Instead he turned around on the bed, pushed her gown up and pushed her thighs apart. Immediately, excitement and anticipation leapt through her. She nearly came the moment he plucked at her clit with his mouth. Eager to reciprocate, she struggled to reach his cock, finally grasped it in her hand, and brought it to her mouth. He shuddered, began to lap at her more hungrily. It drove her own hunger skyward. Within a matter of moments they were both pulling and sucking at each other so feverishly that they began to convulse with release almost at the same time.

Simone felt a momentary hesitation when his come shot to the back of her throat, but when she managed to swallow it, it only seemed to feed a deep hunger to have it all. She sucked and pulled at him until the fountain ran dry and finally released him, panting for breath. They rolled apart, thoroughly spent.

And fell asleep.

It was a stir in the room that brought her from her stupor. Opening her eyes sleepily, she discovered that Camryn and Kael were standing by the bed, staring down at the two of them.

She couldn't tell anything about their expressions, but both men were frowning.

"*I see you are recovering,*" Camryn said dryly.

"*I did not penetrate her,*" Ean said a little defensively. "*I was not certain it was still alright to fuck her.*"

Camryn's frown deepened with speculation. "*I am not certain of that myself. We will need to have the physician look at her.*" He grinned abruptly. "*She is ours, however.*"

Ean's eyes widened. "*You convinced the council ...?*"

Kael grimaced. "*We are the council—two members now, at any rate.*"

Ean blinked in shock, sitting up as he considered that. "*The others did not oppose?*"

"*They did. We worked out a compromise, however.*"

"*What sort of compromise?*" Ean asked uneasily.

"*She is still breedable. They would not consider simply allowing us to take her as our concubine when that is the case and there are still not enough females. She is our concubine, but she will still be expected to breed for the others. It helped a great deal that the other concubines have agreed that they are willing to be bred with the new*

program.”

“Agreed?” Ean asked blankly. *“The agreed to allow it?”*

Camryn made a wry face. *“They came before the High Council and informed us that they were willing to do their duty to Macedon and breed ... but only in the event that the High Council agreed to their terms.”*

Ean was shocked and outraged and he didn't try to hide it. *“They made demands?”*

“Yes, demands. They said that they would only agree on the condition that their ‘sisters’ from Earth were protected from exploitation that would endanger them—overbreeding—and also demanded that they be allowed to breed daughters of Macedon. That their daughters would be theirs to rear just as the sons are given to their fathers.”

“And the council agreed to that?”

Camryn shrugged. *“They said that they were willing to take their lives and destroy any chance that Macedon would ever have another full-blooded drak if we did not.”*

“By the gods! They have all gone mad! Daughters? What of the warriors? All of them have not even had sons!”

“If this new process works, that will not be a problem,” Kael said, “particularly when they are able to produce for several at once ... and assuming they are able, physically, to manage at least two more breedings.”

“And the High Council simply folded and allowed women to tell them what to do?” Ean demanded, outraged.

Kael and Camryn both glared at him.

“Lielani and the other concubines proved to us that they had the will and the strength to follow up on their threats. They cannot be watched every hour of every day and we cannot afford to lose even one more woman if Macedon is to have a future,” Camryn said tightly.

“And the council members were still prepared to argue,” Kael put in. “Camryn completely set the council on its ear, however. He agreed and said that we would breed daughters on Simone and that, when the time was right for them, he would give one each to the Emperor, and to the Houses of Tridan and Lara as concubines. The Emperor, Lord Tidan and Lord Lara immediately switched their votes to our side. The others began to wrangle with one another over the possibility of producing daughters and trading for concubines for their sons and the petition was granted.”

Simone sat up abruptly. “You offered *our* daughters, who haven't even been conceived yet, to those men!” she gasped indignantly.

Camryn sent her a satisfied look. “I thought your insight too precise only to be insight! How long have you understood our language?”

Simone stared at him in wide-eyed fright. “Not long,” she said uneasily.

He smiled a little grimly. “When Lielani was teaching you, did she not also teach you the value of compromise?”

“I understood the concept before that,” Simone said a little stiffly.

“Good, because everyone will be expected to compromise. Change will not come swiftly or easily.”

Simone swallowed her anger with an effort. When she had, she realized that he'd offered to give her daughters, babies to love and rear. He'd also offered to allow her her

sons as long as possible. She wasn't completely satisfied but as he'd said—compromise. In any case, she had *years* to change things.

Daughters! She smiled at the thought, remembering her childhood.

Camryn settled on the bed and drew her into his arms. "I am trying to win your love and your acceptance, Simone. Is that not enough? That I am willing to try?"

Simone's heart fluttered with a surge of happiness. She met his gaze, breathless with hope. "And if you do, will you give your love and acceptance to me, too?"

"I have already given my heart to you, Simone."

"*We* have," Kael corrected him.

Simone looked up at him when he spoke and then turned to look at Ean. "Do not say you did not notice when we have been behaving like besotted fools!" he said a little testily.

Simone smiled at him. "It was actually hard to notice. I was too wrapped up in being besotted myself."

Chapter Nineteen

Uneasiness swept through Simone, but she knew that the moment she attempted to interfere in any way, or gave any indication that she wasn't happy about the matches in progress, she would be banished into the house. It was an unspoken agreement between them. Camryn and Kael would pretend they didn't notice she was watching as long as she didn't draw attention to herself or try to interfere with their training in any way.

She'd enjoyed watching Camryn and Kael—mostly. Wearing nothing but breechcloths, the sun gleaming on their beautifully sculpted bodies, they'd been sparring in the courtyard when she'd arrived and settled in an unobtrusive spot to watch them. There'd been a few unnerving moments when they were practicing at hand-to-hand combat, but overall she'd been fascinated—right up until Camryn and Kael had finished and called Trisan, Bastian, and Givon.

Ean was off on a mission and his son, Givon, had been training with his uncles so it was an uneven match—not that it wasn't anyway! They were barely six!

They were eager to impress the adults, however, and raced one another to the center of the court where Camryn and Kael were waiting.

Handing each a wooden practice sword, Camryn assumed a fighter's stance and began instructing the boys, encouraging them one moment and pointing out their weaknesses the next. Kael faced off against his own son, Bastian.

She hadn't been particularly happy that he'd decided he wanted to name his son after his father, but at least she hadn't hated his father as she had hated Arrek and neither Ean nor Camryn had wanted their sons named after *him*.

It soothed her anxieties as she watched them, she realized. True, it *was* warfare they were teaching them, but they were careful of the boys and she decided that, maybe, it was a good thing for them to learn to curb their natural aggressions and focus.

Bastian, unfortunately, had inherited his father's tendency to be easily angered when he was sparring. Within a few minutes, he'd made so many mistakes because he'd gotten angry that Kael had sent him to the sidelines to cool off. Givon shifted over to match off with Kael and acquitted himself nicely, despite his tendency to show off.

She wasn't certain if that was for her benefit because he'd noticed she was watching or it was something he had a problem with anyway, but she decided it might be best to take the girls inside.

That was when she discovered that Kylie had skipped over to Bastian when he was sent to the sidelines and the two were squabbling over his sword. "You are a girl! You cannot touch a warrior's sword!"

Kylie glared at him and snatched it from his hand. When he reached to snatch it back, she dropped the sword, grabbed his arm and tossed him to the ground in a hip throw.

Simone clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. Camryn's attention was caught by the incident, however, and as he whipped his head around to look, Trisan caught him hard enough in the stomach with his wooden sword that she heard him grunt

in pain.

She covered her face with her hand and then peered at him between her fingers. He was glaring at her and rubbing his stomach.

"Maybe I should train Kylie as my warrior and allow Bastian to stay home and tend hearth with the women!" Kael growled under his breath.

"Kael!" Simone said disapprovingly. She clapped her hands. "Girls! Inside, now!"

Kylie gave Bastian his sword back and scampered away before he could clobber her with it—thankfully.

"That is enough for now," Camryn said in a pained voice. "Put away the swords and you may practice your wrestling moves for a while."

Discovering the men had followed them inside, Simone went to the nursery to leave the girls before she headed to her own quarters. It unnerved her a little that Camryn and Kael continued to follow her, but she decided, if they weren't very displeased with her, that she might bring up the subject of the raids on her home planet again.

It seemed to her that every time she went into the city there were more Earth women and it just wasn't right! The official stance on the subject was that it was not sanctioned, but it was clear that, unofficially, the High Council was willing to turn a blind eye for the sake of peace. And there were too many men who still had no concubine for there *not* to be trouble when they knew damned well that they could snatch one in a raid on Earth if they could get their hands on a ship and round up a crew—which wasn't that difficult.

"You will have to leave the girls inside if you mean to sneak out to watch," Camryn said the moment they were inside of her apartment. "They should not watch. It distracts the boys."

"And it will unman them to have the girls tossing them about," Kael put it irritably.

"She's *your* daughter," Simone pointed out.

"And I want her to behave like a *lady* of Macedon, not a warrior!" he growled.

"Self defense is a good skill to have," Simone pointed out. "Think if we were attacked and raided by the flurs? Or the skeets? Or even the meres? Wouldn't you want her to have some possibility of fighting them off?"

"*That* day will never come," Kael said tightly.

"You don't know that. I understand they don't have a lot of women either. What if they decided they wanted yours?"

Camryn and Kael exchanged a long look.

Simone pretended she hadn't noticed.

"I need a shower," Camryn said, changing the subject abruptly. Grasping Simone's hand, he headed toward the bathroom. Kael followed. Slipping up behind her while Camryn adjusted the water and removed his breechcloth, he caught her gown and pulled it up over her head.

"I don't especially need a shower," Simone said, just to be difficult. "Now, if you want to talk about the raids on Earth"

"No!" Camryn and Kael said at almost the same time.

Camryn caught her wrist and pulled her into the shower with him.

"But ... Camryn! It's really getting out of hand! I see new women every time I

go into the city!"

"They are here," he said dismissively. "I will not send them back."

"There are not that many," Kael disputed. "Less than half the households have a concubine even now ... more like a quarter."

Simone let out a huff. "Yes, but it isn't right and it isn't Earth's job to supply you with women just because you don't have enough."

Camryn caught her waist and pulled her up against him. "Woman!" he growled, settling his forehead against hers. "You need to learn your place!"

She frowned at him. "And where is that?"

He tilted his head to match his lips to hers. "On the end of my cock," he murmured, grinning just before he silenced further protest with his mouth.

It was an effective distract and she was more than willing to allow herself to be diverted by his love play. He kissed her until she was dizzy. Kael closed in behind her, stroking her buttocks and nibbling along her shoulder while Camryn made love to her mouth with his tongue.

She was so breathless and dizzy when Camryn finally broke the kiss and caught her buttocks, lifting her up, that she only managed to lock her legs around his hips. She missed the attempt to curl her arms around his shoulders and fell backwards. Kael caught her, fondling her breasts and nuzzling the side of her neck. She looped her arms around his neck instead and turned her face for a kiss while Camryn guided his cock inside of her. When he'd seated himself deeply, Kael disentangled her arms from around his shoulders and moved in closer.

A thrill went through her. Encircling Camryn's neck with her arms, she held still as she felt Kael stroking her bud and then slowly inching his cock inside of her, panting for breath as she felt him stretching her. For a few moments, she felt uncomfortably full, and then Camryn slipped out, allowing Kael to fully penetrate her. The rhythm they set was wildly exciting, driving her upwards within moments from merely buzzing and ready to struggling to keep her climax at bay for a few moments longer.

"Sing if you want," Camryn gasped. "You are ours and there is no one to hear ... except us and it pleases me to hear your pleasure."

Too dizzy to think, Simone ceased struggling to contain the sounds of pleasure trying to explode from her. As her first climax hit her, she began to cry out in keen gasps of ecstasy. She barely touched down before she began to soar again. The second time she came was more glorious than the first, longer, harder. She was screaming when she hit the peak and nearly blacked out when she came down from it.

She was beginning to worry about hitting a third, but both men came almost simultaneously as she began to drift downward from her second peak.

Camryn kissed her gustily. "I will step up the patrols so that they have to work harder to steal their women. They will treasure them for the effort it takes to get them."

* * * *

Kylie wrinkled her nose. "What's that noise?"

The elder whose job it was to watch them, grinned at the three pale haired little girls gathered around the table coloring. "Your mommy is singing for your father and your uncle."

"She don't sing too good," Kylie observed.

Cob chuckled. "Your fathers love the way she sings."

“She’s gonna sing a lot when my daddy comes home,” Melanie said cheerfully. “She loves my daddy and he loves it when she sings.”

Kylie glared at her. “She loves my daddy, too! She just sang for him!”

“And my daddy,” Carly chirped. “She loves my daddy mostest. She just sings and sings for my daddy! He’s the most handsomest prince in the whole world!”

“My daddy’s the most handsomest prince in the Empire!” Melanie informed her sisters.

“That’s the same thing, isn’t it, Cob?” Kylie said, but she didn’t wait for a response. “My daddy’s the most handsomest prince in the whole universe! And that’s more than either of yours!”

The End

Read and excerpt from Kaitlyn O'Connor's

Children of Andromeda:

Lords of the Sea

By

Kaitlyn O'Connor

Chapter One

It was Mark who first noticed the blue glow coming from below. Cassia Pendell was lounging on the deck, more than half asleep and struggling with the exhaustion that seemed it would defy her will to stay awake. They'd headed out before daylight, though, and she was not only not used to being up and stirring about by five AM, she also wasn't used to diving.

As a first date, however, it was definitely unique. It had sounded like something that might be fun. As loathe as she was to admit it, though, she'd been impressed because it seemed like the sort of thing only the rich and famous might indulge in and it was that that had finally swayed her more than the belief that she'd actually enjoy it.

She'd met Mark on an internet dating/mating site. They'd been chatting for weeks before he'd suggested an actual meeting. She'd liked what she'd learned about him in the time they'd been internet dating, but she'd been leery. He was still a stranger. After all the horror stories she'd heard about women meeting psychopaths over the net, she'd been nervous as hell at the prospect of driving to a strange city to meet a man she really didn't know. When he'd suggested that they could go scuba diving with the diving club he belonged to she hadn't been a lot more enthusiastic, even though it removed the danger of being completely alone with him, mostly because she'd never done it before and she didn't like deep water. She hadn't wanted to tell him she was phobic about deep, natural bodies of water, though.

He was an amateur diving enthusiast. Exploring the ocean was his favorite pastime, something he did whenever he got the chance. If she couldn't dredge up some interest in it herself, she figured their relationship was doomed before it had really gotten started.

Truthfully, she'd almost called it off right then. She had absolutely no sense of adventure. She didn't like risks, and she especially didn't like taking them. She wasn't 'addicted' to the adrenaline rush of doing something wild and dangerous. She was allergic to it. She didn't like having the hell scared out of her, not when it entailed her taking part in it—watching from a safe distance was alright, but not participating. She preferred being comfortable and safe.

Deep down, she'd accepted right then that they were completely incompatible.

She'd refused to acknowledge it, though. She'd convinced herself that it was time she put in the effort to lighten up and live a little—past time, actually. She was nearly thirty two, close enough to feel the chill, anyway. Even if it turned out to be something she hated, she needed to at least give it a try.

She hadn't exactly hated it. She *had* hated getting up so damned early, but then she wasn't the only one in the group that didn't seem to be at their best that early in the day, or the only one who'd spent the time while the boat was en route to the chosen diving site sleeping. Mark hadn't seemed to take that in bad part, which was a plus in his column.

The boat was big enough and the gulf waters calm enough she hadn't gotten motion sickness or overly frightened. She still didn't like it, but she hadn't *dis*liked it.

Carl Smith, the man who'd founded the scuba diving club, had been patient in instructing her and had stressed safety, which she'd found soothed her uneasiness a great deal.

Despite the fact that she could tell Mark was anxious to strike out on his own, he'd also been patient and solicitous, which had earned him another mark in the good column. He'd 'forgotten' he was supposed to be baby-sitting her a couple of times and darted away, leaving her behind, and he'd also taken off into some dark, creepy places where she'd refused to follow a couple of times, but overall he'd been considerate.

She was still more inclined to think she was just getting used to the idea of deep water diving than actually beginning to like it, but she'd gotten over the first tremors of terror and was able to play off a token enthusiasm when everyone had settled in the boat to eat their lunch and discuss their experiences.

She thought that was mostly because she'd been certain it was over and they would be heading back after they'd eaten.

Mark had proposed they move on to another spot to dive, though—a minus in his column—and although everyone wasn't in total agreement, she was the only one who actually hadn't wanted to. Good manners had compelled her to join the group for a little while in the second dive, but she hadn't stayed down long and had returned to the boat long before the last of the divers had returned.

Mark had been the last.

Another minus in his column, especially when someone had pointed out that it was probably going to be dark before they made it back to the dock.

She suspected Mark thought it would be a good opportunity for a little romantic necking, that darkness would give him the chance to cuddle up, but she wasn't in the mood. She was exhausted. It was amazing how drained she felt from the little bit of actual swimming she'd done, but an inescapable fact, and beyond that she felt downright disgustingly sticky from both the water and the salt in the sea air. All she really wanted to do was bathe and collapse in the hotel room for a nice long nap.

She wasn't a sun worshipper, but she'd reached the point where she didn't think she could stand wearing the wet suit another moment. Peeling it off, she'd spread a thick towel on the deck, grabbed a life preserver to use as a pillow, and stretched out to pretend she was sunning when she actually only wanted to sleep.

Mark had obligingly slathered sun screen all over her, mostly, she thought, as an excuse to feel her up—not that she cared as long as it prevented her skin from turning lobster red. Since it had evolved into an erotic sort of massage, though, and had warmed

her even as it relaxed her aching muscles, she gave him another plus in the good column.

Unfortunately, that made the scales more or less even since he'd accumulated almost as many minuses throughout the day as pluses. She was drowsing, debating whether or not she was interested in taking the next step and 'test driving' him that night when he suddenly sat back and stiffened.

"Hey! Look at that!"

Cassie didn't even lift her head, despite the excitement she heard in his voice. Whatever it was, she wasn't interested.

"Carl! Do you see that?" he persisted, coming to his feet.

As she heard the rest of the diving party moving in their direction, curiosity finally penetrated her stupor of exhaustion and Cassie lifted her head to look around. She couldn't see anything from her position and was tempted to dismiss it again until she realized that everyone was craning to look into the distance. It was the look on their faces that finally sent a shaft of alarm through her. Pushing herself up onto her knees, she followed the direction of their gazes, more than half expecting to see a ship flying a pirate flag.

She thought, at first, that the glaring sun had dazzled her and it was just a trick of the eyes. Blinking, she slowly got to her feet. The mirage didn't disappear, though. After staring at the thick bank of clouds rolling toward them, she swiveled her head and scanned the horizon all the way around. Her heart began to thud dully in her chest.

"What would cause that?" she asked of no one in particular. "Is it a storm?"

Several moments passed while first one and then another speculated as to the cause of the phenomenon and then it finally dawned on Cassie that no one was looking at the same thing she was. Everyone was staring at the water. Turning, she peered at the water again and realized that a huge patch of ocean was glowing a strange, eerie blue.

"What is *that*?" she gasped.

Something in her voice must have finally penetrated Mark's absorption. He glanced at her, his expression questioning. "I don't know. Never seen anything like it."

"You think, maybe, it's just ... like sunlight reflecting off the clouds?" Cassie speculated hopefully

Mark frowned at her and then lifted his head to glance around as she had. "Shit!" he exclaimed abruptly, drawing everyone's attention to the bank of clouds that had ringed them. "What the hell!"

For several moments everyone babbled excitedly. Abruptly, Carl plowed his way through the group and headed for the controls. "Everyone get everything tied down. NOW! Get your life vests on! We've got a freak storm rolling in!"

Cassie bent over and scooped up the life vest she'd been cuddling and began to struggle into it. She had no idea what else might need doing, but she wasn't going anywhere until she had that on. She was still struggling with figuring out which loops went with which straps when Carl began to cuss loud and long. "The damned radio's dead! I can't get a call in to the coast guard!"

That announcement made everyone freeze.

"What do you mean the radio's dead?" Ben, one of the group demanded, anger edging his voice. "Didn't you check it out?"

"Of course I checked it out!" Carl yelled angrily. "What do you take me for? It was working fine when we left!"

"Maybe we're just out of range?" Shelley, one of the women, suggested uneasily.

"It's not picking up anything but static! *Somebody* should be close enough to pick up a mayday!"

"Why do we need to send out a mayday?" Cassie asked, trying to keep the hysteria out of her voice.

She didn't think she succeeded very well. As low as she'd pitched her voice, mostly because she was too breathless with sudden fear to manage much more than a whisper, the question brought everyone's attention to her.

"Just in case," Mark muttered after a moment.

"In case of what?" Cassie demanded.

"The instruments have gone haywire," Carl announced, dragging everyone's attention to him.

"Electrical storm?" Jimmy, another diver, suggested.

Cassie was about to dispute that when she noticed a jagged streak of light threading through the clouds advancing on them. Her heart seemed to leap into her throat to strangle her as she turned slowly to survey the cloud bank and saw similar streaks forking down to the water all the way around them.

"Let's just get the hell out of here!" Mark yelled.

"And go where?" Ben demanded. "You heard him. The instruments aren't working."

"So? We get clear of the storm, they'll work, and probably the radio, too, and we can call for help," Jimmy yelled back at him, seconding Mark's motion.

"We don't have enough fuel to wander around the gulf!" Carl, the doomsayer, announced. "We'll be dead in the water if we aren't careful. And what if the radio still doesn't work? We don't have enough food or water on board for more than a day. Unless one of you has a really good idea of which direction to go, I say we drop anchor and try to ride this out. Any direction we take, we'll be heading into the storm."

"But it's coming right toward us! We're not going to avoid it."

"Exactly my point—there doesn't seem to be any possibility of avoiding it. I'd rather not take the chance of getting lost. If we stay put, when it passes over us, we should at least be able to get our bearings and then, even if the radio and the instruments still don't work, we'll have a better chance of making landfall."

"How far are we from land?" Cassie asked.

Instead of ignoring her as they had before, several of the divers glanced at her and then turned to look at Carl questioningly. He shrugged. "The last time I checked about two hundred and fifty nautical miles."

Cassie felt anger surge through her. She hadn't liked the idea of sailing so far out they couldn't see land in any direction to begin with, but now it seemed even more insane to her. She, at least, hadn't known the potential for disaster. They *had* known and they'd still struck off for deep water as if it hadn't occurred to any of them that they were land dwellers.

With an effort, she tamped her anger. Everyone was already on edge. Arguing wasn't going to help anything. Apparently everyone else arrived at the same conclusion. After glaring with angry accusation at one another for a few moments, everyone found a spot to settle and watch the clouds. After a while, although her nerves were still stretched tauter than a barbed wire fence, Cassie noticed something else strange about the glowing

water and the bank of clouds.

"Is it just me, or does it seem to anyone else that the clouds aren't moving?" The strange light was becoming more and more pervasive, as well, and her skin was prickling, as if static electricity was rippling over her.

"I think she's right," Mark announced after studying the clouds for several minutes. "They don't look any closer to me either."

Carl shook his head. "I can't tell. It could just be a slow moving storm."

"It doesn't look like a storm, though," Cassie disputed. "I mean—I've never seen a storm when I was at sea. Maybe they look differently than they do on land, but—shouldn't they be dark? They're so white and fluffy they don't even look like storm clouds. The lightning looks weird, too. It's coming straight down."

"The sea," Mark said succinctly. "Water draws lightning."

Lovely! Why hadn't she thought about that? "Maybe it would be better to get inside?" she suggested uneasily.

Mark stared at her a long moment. A look passed between him and the others that she didn't like—at all. "If the lightning strikes get close, we will," he said finally.

Cassie studied his face and then the faces of the other divers. After a few moments it sank in that they preferred chancing the lightning to the possibility of being trapped inside if the boat sank.

An hour passed. Cassie was still on edge, but she discovered she couldn't maintain her fear. It was wearing her down. "This is so bizarre," she finally muttered. "I almost feel like time has stopped."

Linda, a woman who looked to be around thirty five, who should have had more sense than to consider going off on such a harebrained adventure, sent her a commiserating look. "It's the waiting."

Cassie shrugged. "Maybe, but I'm more inclined to think it's the 'nothing' that's happening. I guess my sense of depth perception could be off, but I don't think those clouds are moving any closer. I feel like I'm in a ... jar, or something."

The comment didn't pass unnoticed. The men exchanged that 'look' the one men always shared whenever they consider a woman had said something 'womanish'—which translated to farfetched and hysterical. Shelly and Linda, the only women in the group besides her, looked thoughtful, though.

"She's right," Linda finally seconded. "The clouds are ... boiling, but they don't look any closer—nor further away. Even if it's a slow moving storm it's been an hour and half. We *should* be able to discern some difference."

"So maybe it's just stalled," Carl said pointedly.

"Well, why is it that everything looks bluer? And why is it that I can feel my skin prickling if the storm isn't any closer?" Shelly put in.

Mark surged to his feet. "I'm going down to see if I can find out what's causing that glow."

"Don't be stupid!" Carl snapped. "What if the storm hits while you're down there?"

"I'll follow the anchor line!" Mark said angrily. "It's not going to take more than a few minutes to have a look. I'll come right back up."

"It's too risky," Carl pointed out.

"He's right, man," Ben and Jimmy agreed almost in the same breath.

"I'll spot you," David, the other man in the group, offered.

"You're both crazy!" Carl said angrily.

David shrugged. "Maybe, but this just sitting around is getting on my nerves. And I want to see what's causing the glow myself."

"What if it's like—gas?" Cassie asked, an edge of anger in her own voice. "I saw this special one time where they were speculating that the disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle were caused by a rise of methane gases that made the ships lose buoyancy. That's where we are, isn't it? In the Triangle?"

Mark gave her a look that she didn't like. "The boat isn't sinking," he said pointedly. "I think that blows that theory."

Carl shrugged. "We could be in the Triangle, but I don't believe in that crap."

The comment redirected Cassie's anger in his direction. "So how do you explain this weird phenomenon?"

"Yeah," Shelley agreed. "I mean, I've heard of freak storms, but this is seriously weirding me out!"

"All the more reason to check it out," Mark pointed out with a mixture of amusement and excitement. "Don't you think it would be cool as hell to be able to go back and explain the mystery?"

"No!" Cassie and Linda said almost in unison.

He gave them both a look that was a mixture of irritation and disgust. "Well, I do."

He reminded Cassie of a sullen little boy as he stalked off and began to put his gear on. Right up until that point, Cassie had given him a good many points for looks and intelligence. Not that he was even close to an Adonis, but he was above average in looks and built pretty good—now she knew why. It was from all the swimming. And he'd seemed to be pretty smart and to have a sense of humor that was somewhat compatible with her own.

Staring at him, she was pretty sure, now, this was going to prove to be a bust all the way around. The scales were way against him now. Even if they made it back to the dock without disaster overtaking them, she didn't think she wanted to go any further in pursuit of a relationship with him. She wasn't going to give him any points at all for brazen stupidity and, in her book, the threat of the storm was enough to cancel out any pluses he might have gotten for bravery. As improbable as it seemed that he could actually protect her if the storm struck, he should consider keeping her safe as top priority, not going off on an adventure in the teeth of death!

"Idiots!" Carl muttered as Mark and David went over the side and disappeared.

From the expressions of the other divers, it looked like most of them were in agreement. Jimmy looked a little torn, as if he wanted to join them but just couldn't get up the nerve.

Strike scuba diving enthusiasts, Cassie thought angrily—sky divers, mountain climbers, racing---If she met any other guys who 'loved' flirting with death she wasn't going to give them the time of day.

Too nervous to sit still any longer, Cassie got up to pace around the deck, staring at the clouds, glancing at her watch from time to time—which was how she finally realized time actually *had* stood still—as in, her watch had stopped. About fifteen minutes later, David emerged beside the boat.

“You’ve got to see this!” he announced in a voice edged with hysterical excitement. “There’s a whole city below us—honest to god! I think we’ve found Atlantis!”

Chapter Two

David's excitement was contagious.

Cassie didn't catch it.

The others did, however. When Mark surfaced a few moments later and added his description of the ruins they'd found below, there was a mad scramble to get their gear on. Even Carl, the eldest of the group, whom Cassie had considered the most reliable and sensible up until then, looked like a child who'd been promised a treat and feared it would be snatched away. He looked on as, one by one, the other divers leapt over the side and disappeared. Finally, he caved and began to put his own gear on.

"Hey!" Cassie exclaimed. "You're not going down, too?"

He sent her a look that was sheepish and at the same time determined. "You said yourself the storm was stalled. I won't be gone long."

"You're going to leave me here by myself?" she demanded incredulously.

He glared at her. "You'll be fine. I'm just going down for a quick look. The instruments are shot. We can't even be sure of the location—there won't be any coming back later for a look."

Cassie was still trying to reason with him when he leapt out of the boat and disappeared. Fear stole over her as she stared down at the water in dismay, watching until he completely disappeared from sight. How long she stood staring down into the water, muttering curses under her breath, she had no idea, but when she finally realized it wasn't doing anything for her sense of desertion, she eased away from the side of the boat and looked around worriedly.

It seemed the strange blue haze had become notably more pronounced. Shivering, Cassie looked around uneasily and finally went to get her wet suit, pulling it on again. "Idiots!" she grumbled, unnerved at the sound of her own voice even though she'd thought it would comfort her, make her feel less alone.

What was she going to do if they didn't come back? She didn't know the first thing about driving a boat! Not that it had looked all that difficult. She thought she could figure it out, but she had far less confidence that she could find land.

When she'd managed to get her wet suit on, she paced, gnawing at a finger nail, stopping every few moments to peer over the side in the hopes that at least one of the divers would surface. The longer she paced, the darker it grew. She stopped to stare at the strange clouds. Were they getting closer? Or did it just seem like they were?

Finally, she grabbed her tanks and put them on, struggling to remember Carl's instructions about the gauges. She didn't realize she'd come to the decision to go after them until she found herself standing on the diving platform.

They'd had plenty of damned time to look, though, she thought angrily! Surely she could convince someone to come back up?

She wasn't convinced that she could and she had no real desire to go down, but she realized she was more afraid of being alone than going down. Finally, she leapt into the water, adjusted her mask, and dipped below the surface.

She couldn't see a sign of anyone, but that was hardly surprising since she couldn't see the bottom and they were undoubtedly *on* the bottom. After a moment, when it seemed terror was going to completely consume her, she finally decided she would use the anchor line as a guide. She would go down, look for the others and if she didn't see anybody, she was going to come right back up. She wasn't going to take a chance on getting lost. She couldn't lose the boat if she stayed within reach of the anchor chain.

Fear dogged her all the way down. She considered turning back several times, but each time she did the fear of being alone on the boat superseded her fear of the ocean. She kept glancing at her gauges, carefully monitoring the amount of air in her tanks. She not only had no desire to cut it close and wait until she had just enough air to get back, she wasn't *going* to cut it close!

She'd reached the point where the fear of going deeper had begun to swing the balance when she saw something below her, regular shapes—like manmade structures—and irregular shapes that looked vaguely like people. Pausing, she peered toward them. The water was hazy and dark besides, but she decided that the shapes she'd caught a glimpse of must be the others. Feeling a tingling of relief, and still reluctant to let go of the chain she'd been following, she propelled herself deeper, glancing at the figures every few moments.

She'd just decided that what she'd seen wasn't the other divers when it finally dawned on her that the trembling she'd been dimly aware of for sometime wasn't actually *her* trembling.

Well, part of it was. It wasn't *all* coming from inside of her, though. Part of it was from the water surrounding her. Pausing in consternation, she tried to think what might be causing it. Nothing came to mind, and she dismissed it after a moment, unable to focus on anything beyond the need to find someone, turning in a slow circle to see if she could catch a glimpse of any of the others.

Either they were a lot further away than she thought they should be, or the visibility was a lot poorer than it seemed.

She checked her gauges again, debating whether she actually wanted to move away from the only landmark she had.

She could see the closest figure pretty clearly, though. Shouldn't she be able to spot the anchor chain if she could see that far?

Distances were really deceptive under water, though. She'd already discovered that.

Maybe she'd just take a quick look? Maybe, if she went over to the figure she could see the others?

Glancing down in search of something else to use to mark her bearings, she thought she saw a faint shimmy in the formations below her. But maybe it was just the odd waffling of the current? Or maybe it was just her? She was shivering, from the chill of the water now, not just nerves.

She'd come this far. She should at least make a push to find one of the others before giving up and returning alone, she decided.

She did *not* want to be stuck on that boat alone if the storm hit!

Trying to calm herself so that she wouldn't be sucking up more oxygen than she could afford, she glanced down one last time, trying to imprint the image below her on

her mind's eye, and finally let go of the anchor chain.

She was afraid to stare down as she swam toward the image, afraid she'd lose the advantage of that one point of reference. It took longer to reach it than she'd expected and the realization slowly dawned on her that she hadn't been mistaken. It *was* further away than it had seemed. As she neared it, though, she became more focused on the figure as she began to make out details she hadn't been able to before. She'd more than half suspected that it was nothing but a formation of rock that *appeared* to have been formed in the shape of a man.

It wasn't. It wasn't even in the shape of a man.

It was a sculpture of a merman.

Intrigued despite the fear inspired adrenaline still pumping through her, she swam closer. As she drew nearer, she discovered it wasn't just one sculpture. In the distance she could make out others. Awe began to supersede her fear.

David might have been stretching it to guess that they'd found Atlantis, but this was no illusion. It really was a sculpture, fashioned by the hand of man, not nature!

It was beautiful, she thought as she finally got close enough to see it really well!

It reminded her of Greek sculptures she'd seen in pictures and reproductions of those classic sculptures. She wasn't certain why it did unless it was because it so faithfully depicted a man—a merman—with such accuracy of detail.

It was life-sized, too—or maybe larger than life? As she reached it at last, she discovered the figure dwarfed her. If the sculptor had used an actual living man as a model, he'd been a big man, and beautifully formed! God! She hadn't seen a man built that impressive outside of bodybuilding magazines! His *back* was muscular! His arms, one of which was lifted to hold a lethal looking trident, were huge!

Surprise flickered through her as she allowed her gaze to follow the contours of his back down to the dolphin like tail. He had buttocks! Nice round ones! The fish part seemed to start around the tops of where his thighs would've been instead of at the waist as she would've expected.

That was odd! In every depiction she'd ever seen of merfolk, the upper torso was human and they were fish from the waist down.

It leapt into her mind to wonder what he looked like from the front.

Naughty, Cassie, she chided herself! But the thought had barely flashed through her mind when she pedaled forward to see if the statue was anatomically correct in every way.

Despite her suspicions, she was still startled when she discovered he *was* anatomically correct—sort of. The genitalia *definitely* didn't look Greek in origin. He might've been hung like a dolphin—she'd heard they were huge—but he definitely wasn't hung like any human male she'd ever seen and she damned sure hadn't ever seen a Greek statue with a dong like that!

Abruptly embarrassed at her focus, she jerked her head up and glanced around guilty. Unfortunately, she saw no sign of the other divers. Guilt gave way to consternation. She didn't know where they were, but she wasn't hanging around any longer! The urge to explore what looked to actually be the ruins of a city warred briefly with her chicken shit side, but the yellow streak won out. Almost with a sense of regret, she returned her attention to the statue again, allowing herself to briefly examine the beautifully sculpted torso and face.

She shouldn't have been surprised to discover the face was as beautiful as the rest of the sculpture—angular and manly, but with features so classically perfect 'beautiful' came to mind before handsome did—but she was.

Greek, she thought again, definitely Greek, though how the sculpture had ended up in this area of the world was a mystery destined never to be resolved. Even the merman's long hair seemed to be arranged in a style reminiscent of the height of the Greek era of enlightenment.

What she wouldn't give to be able to lug this thing home and just admire it!

Even the stone that had been used to sculpt it was unusual, had an almost pink tinge to it that made it look like living flesh—except for the tail. That was a pale, grayish-bluish looking stone, very close to the same color as a dolphin and she thought it likely that was what the sculptor had used as a model—a dolphin.

Shrugging the thoughts off, she allowed her gaze to sweep over the statue one more time before she checked her gauges again, feeling real regret when she saw she'd been under as long as she dared stay.

She just wished she'd thought to bring a camera.

But then she'd been scared shitless. She hadn't had anything on her mind but finding the others.

A shudder rippled through the water around her, this time far harder than anything she'd felt before. Her mind registered 'quake' even as she was pushed by the force of it against the statue. Pain shot through her as her face plate connected with the stone. Panic followed the pain. Placing her hands on the sculpture, she shoved away from it, glancing at it to see if she'd damaged it when she'd been slammed against it.

Her heart leapt into her throat when she saw the eyes were open.

They'd been closed before, hadn't they?

She would've noticed, she realized, if they'd been open.

The eyes, unfocused for a split second, abruptly focused and looked directly at her.

Cassie screamed. It emerged as a bubbling gurgle around her mouth piece and a cloud of bubbles.

Too panicked to even think about the anchor chain she'd followed down let alone to look for it, Cassie backstroked the closest approximation she could manage to a leap backwards and then shot toward the surface of the ocean, swimming for all she was worth.

She hadn't gone far when something clamped around one of her ankles. She was so blind with panic it took her several heartbeats to realize she was no longer making any progress toward the surface of the water and several more before it dawned on her that she was tethered. The discovery when she glanced down to see what she was snagged on, however, that it was the merman she'd been admiring only succeeded in bringing her fight or flight instincts to the foreground. She was incapable of anything even approaching logical thought.

Whirling, she commenced to hammering on his head, shoulders, and arms, trying to kick him with her free leg at the same time. The drag of the water on her arms and legs not only made her blows completely ineffectual, however, it drained her of any ability to even try to fight within moments.

The panic cost her more than that, although she was in no state of mind to realize

right away. Her swift, ragged breaths ate up her oxygen far more quickly than would've been the case if she hadn't been panicked.

He released his grip on her ankle as the fight drained out of her. Shooting upwards with no more than a slight flick of his tail, he grabbed her around the waist with one arm. With his free hand, he grasped her mask and ripped it off, dropping it as soon as he'd removed it. Cassie grabbed for the mask frantically as she saw it drifting downward. She whirled to stare at him in wide eyed horror as the mask disappeared.

His expression was stern. There was a glint of curiosity in his eyes, as well, though Cassie was in no state to interpret that look at the moment. The harsh set of his features was enough to reinforce her certainty that her life was in danger—that and the fact that he'd pulled her mask off. More than half fearing he'd rip her mouth piece off next, she recommenced her struggles, this time shoving at him instead of swinging.

Ignoring her attempts to pry herself from his grip, he dove, carrying her through the water at a dizzying speed. Cassie's terror hit a new peak as she dragged on the mouth piece and discovered she'd run out of air. Her fight this time was much more ferocious but of far shorter duration. As her lungs began to burn with the need to pull air into them, her struggles became weaker and weaker until she finally hung limply in his grip. She still managed a half hearted attempt to fight him as he pulled her mouth piece from her mouth, but she didn't even have enough strength left to try to fight him when he caught the back of her head with his free hand, fastened his mouth over hers, forced her lips apart and breathed into her mouth. She sucked in the air he gave her, wondering dimly if it was the shortage of air that sent a dizzying rush through her. She didn't know or care at that moment, the only thing that mattered to her was breathing. She ceased struggling and wrapped her arms and legs tightly around him, fighting now to recapture his mouth each time he lifted his head.

She didn't have a thought to spare for anything beyond the precious breaths he gave her each time the panic of drowning swept over her again. She was dimly aware that they were moving deeper and deeper and that cold was creeping into the marrow of her bones, but there was only one focus in her life and that was getting air.

The darkness that had been steadily encroaching, growing deeper and more profound, began to lighten after a time. Cassie had no idea when that happened, only that she became aware that she wasn't surrounded by darkness anymore. The merman slowed, paused for a few moments, and then moved forward again.

A great heaviness settled over her. Her skin, what was exposed, prickled with a sensation that seemed vaguely familiar—like air. Her mind refused to accept it, however, when it didn't make sense to her.

She held her breath, refusing to give in to the desperate urge to breathe. Blindly, she sought the merman's mouth again. She saw a gleam in his eyes as his head descended obligingly toward hers. When his mouth fastened over hers this time, however, it was far more than a sharing of air. His mouth clung to hers in a way that transformed it from resuscitation to kiss. Heat wafted through her as her body acknowledged the sensual nature of the touch before her brain caught on. She became acutely conscious of the taste of him even before he thrust his tongue into her mouth and raked it possessively over hers, exploring her mouth with a thoroughness that set her heart to hammering with something entirely different than fear.

She blinked up at him dizzily when he broke the contact and lifted his head to

look down at her. Heat and amusement both gleamed in his pale blue eyes as he stared down at her. His hard mouth curled slowly into what was almost a smile.

Then he opened it and said something completely incomprehensible to her.

She blinked, thrown into more confusion.

Lifting his arms, he caught her legs and peeled them off. Gravity, unimpeded by the buoyancy of salt water, dragged her legs downward. The sensation finally penetrated, and she looked down to see a bright mosaic floor beneath her feet—which still hovered several inches above the surface. His hands settled on her waist as she loosened her death grip on his neck and she slid down his hard frame.

She was in a room, she realized blankly, wondering a little wildly if she'd died or was just hallucinating. How?

“Get your hands off of her, fishman!”

Mark's voice snagged her attention, and Cassie's head swiveled automatically in the direction of the sound. Carl, Ben, and David were struggling to hold him, she saw in dismay. A shaft of guilt went through her, and Cassie pushed the merman's hands from her and moved away from him before it even occurred to her that she had no reason to feel guilty.

She glanced back at the merman when she'd put some distance between them, still too stunned by all that had happened to take everything in.

He was standing, though--on two legs.

Taking care not to allow her gaze to linger on his genitals, she swept her gaze upwards to his face again, puzzled. The face was the same. She'd imprinted that pretty solidly in her mind. But where was the merman's tail?

Shaking her head to try to clear away her confusion, she retreated to the far side of the room where she saw that the diving crew was grouped. Mark snagged her as she reached him, wrapping his arms around her possessively and glaring at the merman—naked man—over the top of her head.

It didn't occur to her to try to break his grip, but she twisted around to look at the man again.

Whatever amusement had been on his face, or that she'd thought she'd seen, was gone. His expression was hard now, his gaze speculative as it moved over Mark.

Without another word—not that she'd understood what he'd said before—he turned on his heel, strode to a doorway that looked like nothing so much as a wavering mirror—and stepped through.

Cassie felt her jaw slide to half mast.

He paused on the other side. As she watched, his legs *merged*, became the fish tail she'd seen before. Without glancing back, he flicked the tailfins and vanished from sight.

Slowly becoming aware that Mark was still holding her in a bruising grip, Cassie began to struggle to free herself. Reluctantly, he eased his hold on her, but he didn't release her completely. She pushed at him until he let go, putting some distance between them before she stopped. “What's going on here?”

Mark frowned at her. “That's what I'd like to know. What the hell were you doing *kissing* that fish?”

* * * *

Raen moved to the video display when he reached the observation room. Jadin,

who was already at the console studying the prisoners, glanced over at him and grinned. *What was that all about? I can not believe you, of all people, would deign to touch one of the primitives so intimately.*

Raen turned to look at his long time friend, studied him for a moment, and finally shrugged. *She is a land dweller. She needed air.*

Jadin eyed his friend skeptically but finally decided Raen's expression didn't welcome teasing. *They seem to have progressed quite a bit since I saw them last. How long do you suppose we were in stasis?*

Too long. I feel like hell. Do you know what brought us out?

You have not heard? Jadin asked in surprise, pleased to know he'd learned the news before his superior officer, a little puzzled, too, if it came to that. Raen wasn't just his superior officer, he was the head of the garrison. He should've been informed first, but then again he appeared to have been a little preoccupied with his prisoner, he thought wryly.

Raen frowned. *I assumed it was the breach in security, that they had tripped the alert when they came in. When I came around the woman was right in front of me and all the lights were on, the alarms blaring*

Jadin shrugged. *Maybe, but everyone is awakening, not just the sentinels.*

Raen dragged his attention from the woman with an effort and looked at Jadin, sensing he was bursting with excitement. *They have come?*

Jadin's face fell. *Damn it to hell! Who told you?*

Raen felt a smile tug at his lips. *No one. It was just a wild guess, he retorted dryly, based upon your comment that everyone is awakening. You are certain that is what it is?*

I heard it from Kadar. He said when he roused, the communications were open and they were trying to hail us.

Raen's expression turned wry. *And there were those who doubted the Mother world would send us succor in our hour of need!*

Jadin frowned. *You did not think they would? Why the hell did you agree to go into stasis if you did not think they would send help?*

Raen shrugged. *I am a sentinel. It is my duty to guard the citizens of Atlantis, not to question my superiors.*

Chapter Three

Cassie felt her color fluctuate madly at the accusation in Mark's voice. Guilt and resentment warred with embarrassment. "He's *not* a fish!" she said indignantly.

Mark's eyes narrowed. "Whatever the hell it is, *it ain't* a human," he said tightly.

Cassie had had time to wonder why her first impulse was to defend the merman. She didn't have time to analyze it, though, since Mark's next comment put her on the defensive. "I ran out of air. He was breathing for me. I'd have drowned if he hadn't."

"You wouldn't have nearly drowned if he hadn't grabbed you," Shelley pointed out.

Cassie turned to look at the woman huddled next to Linda against the wall.

"And that didn't look like he was breathing for you ... aside from the fact that he didn't *need* to once you got here."

Cassie turned a narrow eyed glare on Mark again, but she couldn't help the blush that rose to her cheeks. "I was still in a blind panic about not being able to breathe," she admitted reluctantly. "I didn't know he'd brought me to a place where I could breathe without his help."

She *had* realized it at about the same time it had dawned on her that he was kissing her, not breathing for her, but she saw no reason to admit that. Not that she felt like Mark had any right to question her in the first place! As far as she was concerned the *date* had ended the minute he'd abandoned her top side to go off exploring.

Glancing away from Mark, she saw the others were staring at her with varying degrees of accusation, and her temper erupted. "You needn't be looking at me so damned accusingly! I didn't get any of you into this mess! You got yourselves into it, and got me into it, too, I might add! I happen to be the only one here that isn't used to diving and I would very happily have stayed on the damned boat if all of you hadn't left me there by myself."

They had the grace to look away guiltily, but she was still angry that they behaved as if she was fraternizing with the enemy when she hadn't done anything but try to survive. Was it *her* fault the guy had taken advantage of her mindless panic? Why should she feel guilty that she'd actually enjoyed it?

Moving to the wall where the other women were seated, she put some distance between herself and the others and sat down. She still felt unaccountably weak from her ordeal and found herself struggling against the urge to burst into tears.

"What are we going to do now?" Shelley asked after a prolonged silence. "We can't stay here. We have to think of a way to get out."

"Hey!" Mark said nastily. "We're all open to suggestions! Unfortunately, none of us can breathe water like they do and they took the damned tanks."

Cassie looked up at him in surprise. Right up until he'd said that, she hadn't realized she'd been relieved of her tank, as well. Not that it mattered since the thing was empty, and she suspected theirs would've been close to empty, but she couldn't even remember when he'd taken it off of her. Truthfully, she'd been so mindless with terror

she couldn't remember much of anything from the moment she'd found the merman staring back at her when she'd pushed away from him.

Remembering the wave that had shoved her into him to begin with, though, brought her prior impressions back to mind. "Has anybody noticed the vibrations?" she asked uneasily.

Shelley gave her a look. "Yes, we've all noticed. Carl seems to think it might be the shocks of an underwater quake. That's why I want to get the hell out of here." She glanced around at the men. "One of the reasons, anyway."

Cassie frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think it's a quake."

Carl sent her an irritated look. "You a specialist?"

She glared at him at his tone. "It's been constant since I first noticed it," she said tightly. "Nothing I've ever heard about quakes seemed to point to the constant vibrations I've been feeling."

"She's got you there," Mark retorted. "Although I have to wonder how you noticed anything the way you were wrapped around that guy."

Cassie studied him for a long moment, wrestling with her temper. They were all scared and lashing out with their tempers and it wasn't helping matters at all. Nevertheless, she found his possessiveness too irritating to ignore. "Let's just get one thing straight right now, Mark Sanderson! Your possessive attitude has been duly noted and isn't appreciated! I do not belong to you. This was a date—a first date—and as far as I'm concerned it ended when you left me on that damned boat to go exploring, *knowing* we had a storm bearing down us! So I don't, definitely don't, feel like taking this shit from you about me being with that merman—like I ... enticed him or something!

"I thought he was a statue. I was looking at him and the next thing I knew he was looking back at me! I tried to get away, but he caught me—the same way you were all caught, I assume.

"Even if I *was* flirting with him—which I wasn't—it *still* wouldn't be any of your damned business!"

Mark reddened. "I guess this means 'every man for himself' then?"

"Oh, you really are an asshole!" Linda snapped. "I don't blame her for dumping you!"

"Up yours, Sanchez!" Mark snapped and stalked to the other side of the room.

"Fighting among ourselves isn't going to help anything," Carl put in. "We need to be constructive, people."

"Well, in the words of the asshole, we're all open to suggestions, great leader," David said testily. "I don't know how it went down for the rest of you, but I tangled with one of those things, and, as much as I hate to admit it, I don't think three of us could take *one* of them down. Then there's the little problem of no air. I could make it to the top, I think, but it would have to be a fast climb and we don't have anything on the boat for the bends."

Carl stared at him angrily for several moments and finally moved to settle against the wall like everyone else.

There were no furnishings in the room at all. After studying over that for a little while, Cassie finally decided that where ever they were the place wasn't a prison cell. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. She supposed it didn't actually make a hell of a lot of difference, but she felt better about it not being a prison cell until it

dawned on her that it was just one room and there was no place to relieve themselves if anybody had the need.

She wished she hadn't thought about it because the moment the 'suggestion' popped into her mind she noticed her bladder was beginning to get uncomfortable. "Do you think they'll keep us here long?" she asked no one in particular.

"I don't know why we're here at all," Shelly retorted. "How can we guess how long we'll be here when we don't know why?"

"Snooping," Jimmy said succinctly. "They're aliens and they caught us snooping around their ship and they're not going to let us go at all."

"Shit, Jimmy!" Carl snapped. "Don't start with that crap!"

"Well, what the hell do you think they are?" Jimmy demanded.

"This isn't a ship," Shelly said pointedly. "Look around. It's obviously a building."

"On the ocean floor?" David pointed out, his voice laced with skepticism.

"Don't tell me you agree with him," Linda demanded.

"They aren't human."

"Who says they aren't?" Cassie asked irritably. "Just because they don't look like any of the races we're familiar with doesn't mean they're not human."

"Oh! Come on, woman! You kiss that thing and now you think you know it's human?"

Cassie narrowed her eyes at Mark's comment. "Fine! Have it your way! I *kissed* him! He felt human, damn it! He tasted human! He kissed like a human—except better," she added nastily.

"Really?" Shelly asked, obviously intrigued. "They are ... gorgeous."

"She's lost her mind. They must be able to control minds or something," David growled savagely, pushing himself to his feet and stalking across the room to join Mark.

Shelley exchanged a long look with Cassie and finally shrugged. "I'm just saying"

"Just don't," Carl snapped. "We're in danger. Yes, I can see where you might think they look good—I'll concede that much—but they're *not* human and it would be really dangerous for you to think of them that way."

Linda stared at him speculatively for a moment. "You agree with Jimmy? You think they're aliens, too?"

He returned her look for a moment and finally shrugged irritably. "How the fuck would I know? All I do know is that they're not human ... Did anybody understand *anything* that thing said?"

"It sounded like Greek to me," David put in.

"Well, at least we can all agree on that," Carl said dryly. "It was Greek to me, too, but that ain't very helpful."

"Naw, man! I'm serious. It sounded like Greek."

That comment caught everyone's attention. "You can speak Greek?" Jimmy asked, obviously impressed.

David reddened. "I can't speak Greek, but I used to work for this Greek couple. They talked in their native tongue to each other all the time. What he said sounded a lot like that. I think it's Greek."

Carl rolled his eyes. "Well, even if it is, that isn't helpful worth a shit! *We* can't

speak Greek.”

Cassie thought that over. “Maybe Mark was right? Maybe this is Atlantis? I mean, the language—the architecture—doesn’t it seem like it has a strong Greek influence?”

“The Atlanteans were Atlanteans, not Greek. It was just the ancient Greeks that wrote about Atlantis.”

Cassie frowned. “So? This place still has a strong Greek influence. Doesn’t that suggest they had contact with them sometime in the past?”

Carl shrugged. “Maybe ... but I still don’t see anything helpful about that information, even if you’re right.”

“Maybe and maybe not, but it might mean they have some familiarity with other people that were around back then.”

David frowned. “Unless there were people around that were speaking English, I doubt it would matter if they had.”

“The Romans!” Cassie said pointedly. “They spoke Latin, and English is based on Latin, and so are the romance languages—like Spanish.”

Everyone turned to look at Linda. She stared back at them blankly for a moment and then with irritation. “I don’t speak Spanish.”

Shelly gaped at her. “How can you *not* speak Spanish when your name’s Sanchez?”

Linda glared at her. “Your last name’s German. Do you speak German?”

“No, but”

“I rest my case.”

* * * *

What language do you think they’re speaking? It doesn’t sound like anything I’m familiar with.

Raen shrugged. *Are you recording it?*

Jadin gave him an offended look. *Of course.*

Why not check to see if the computer has had any luck translating, then, instead of speculating?

Sending Raen an irritated glance, Jadin focused on the computer. *Translation? Still collating. Shall I play what I have decoded?* the computer responded.

Jadin threw a laughing glance at his friend when the computer translated the discussion about Raen’s ‘sharing air’ with the female called Cassie. Raen, however, did not look amused.

The one called Mark seems to think she is his woman, Raen commented.

Jadin eyed Raen speculatively and finally shrugged. *She does not seem to agree.*

Raen’s frown deepened. *I am not sure it was wise to leave them all together.*

Jadin tamped his amusement with an effort and shrugged off handedly. *It was the only room that was dry that we could pump air in to at such short notice. We will have to make other arrangements if we are to hold them long ... unless our people manage to raise the ship before they run out of air.*

Raen glanced at him sharply. *As far as we know they have done nothing more than wander into the city. Unless I find out otherwise, we will let them go long before air is an issue for them. Keep a close eye on them. I do not think they are stupid enough to try to leave, knowing how deep we are, but you never know with humans.*

Jadin nodded, knowing it was an order, not a request. *You do not want to stay a while longer and observe?* he asked, all innocence. *Unless I miss my guess, the one called Cassie is starting to feel a little uncomfortably warm. I am thinking she will be coming out of that strange suit she is wearing before long.*

Raen sent him an amused glance. *In mixed company? I doubt it. If anything they seem more inhibited about their bodies than they used to be.*

Jadin turned to watch him as he moved to the doorway of the observation room. *Where are you going?* he asked curiously.

Raen paused and turned to frown at Jadin but finally shrugged off his irritation. *They said 'ancient' Greeks. I am going to see if I can figure out just how gods bedamned long we have been down here waiting for the Mother world to send help.*

He stopped by communications on the way out to speak with Kadar. *Did no one think to turn the gods bedamned alert off? The vibrations are rattling my brain.*

Kadar glanced at him in surprise. *It is off. I turned it off myself.*

Raen sent him a perturbed look. *What is the source of the tremors then?*

The mother ship is probing for us, Kadar responded with a shrug.

They have found us, Raen retorted dryly as he headed out the door. *I feel it in my bones.*

Kadar stared after him blankly a moment and then chuckled. *Aye, I am feeling it in my bones, too. It will rattle my teeth from my head if they keep it up much longer.*

Struggling to ignore the sonic waves pelting him now that he knew the source and purpose of them, Raen headed for the nearest egress from the ship. The more distance he put between himself and the woman, he discovered, the less tense he felt. That realization didn't particularly please him.

Then again, he was irritated with himself anyway. He didn't know where the impulse had come from to kiss the woman, but he figured as impulses went it was probably one of the stupidest that had ever hit him.

He'd had no use for humans before the cataclysm that had sent their city to the bottom of the sea and divided their people—with nearly half of them abandoning ship to take their chances on living among the primitives—he saw no reason to feel any differently now only because they appeared somewhat more advanced than they had been.

Very likely those who'd chosen to live among them had been butchered by the gods bedamned savages—Kira, Omar, and Le were no doubt long dead and gone. He'd accepted that likelihood and the certainty that he would never see them again as soon as he'd discovered his brothers and his woman were missing and knew what they'd done. He could not abandon his post and go after them, though. The city had been in chaos from the moment the meteor shower struck, the citizens terrified, running around in a blind panic with no notion of where to go or what to do to save themselves. It had taken all he and his men could do to round them up and herd them into the stasis chambers before their floating city sank.

He supposed they'd counted on that when they'd decided to betray him.

Truthfully, he wasn't certain he would have gone after them if he could have—his brothers, maybe—Kira—he wasn't at all sure.

He supposed he would have felt compelled to if it had been possible. He had bonded with Kira's other chosen, had learned to look upon them as if they were true

brothers—not like his blood brother, but the ties had been strong.

Kira was another matter.

She'd long since killed the love he'd felt for her when they'd first joined. In truth, if it hadn't been for the fact that he'd decided she wasn't worth dying over, he thought he might have been more than a little tempted to strangle her.

The fury he'd felt when he'd discovered she'd aborted their child--*his* child—for no better reason than because she hadn't wanted to chance ruining her beautiful body rushed over him as if it had only been the day before that he'd discovered it.

For him, it had been little more than that—only a matter of days before the cataclysm when he'd gone into stasis. It didn't matter how long it had actually been. In his mind it was no more than that and it was still just as fresh and painful as if it had just happened.

She could've prevented the pregnancy if she hadn't wanted his child. There was no excuse for what she'd done—none. He knew it had been premeditated maliciousness on her part—all of it—getting pregnant to start with and then aborting it—all calculated to avenge herself against him for wrongs she'd imagined.

He'd been stupid enough when they'd first united to believe her possessiveness was a sign of her love for him. He'd been wrong. It was only a sign of possessiveness, a sense of ownership. She hadn't cared about him. She was incapable of caring about anyone but herself. She'd figured she owned him, though, and she'd watched him like a hawk, interpreting everything he did as a sign of faithlessness.

If he left their home because he couldn't stand to listen to her harping any longer and couldn't trust himself to keep his temper in check, he was fleeing to his mistress. If he was late in returning home because of his duties, he was with another woman. If he didn't want her because he was worn out from working twelve hours straight to earn enough credits to buy her the things she wanted, he had expended himself on some other woman.

He should have realized sooner that she wouldn't have been so quick to question his motives and morals if her own hadn't been questionable. By the time he'd realized that she was painting him with her own brush, though, doing what she constantly accused him of, she'd already lost the power to hurt him.

He hadn't loved her when she'd left. He wasn't even certain when he'd finally stopped loving her. He *was* certain of when he'd begun to hate her, though. That was when she'd informed him she'd aborted his child.

He shook his head, trying to shake the thoughts as he emerged from the ship at last and glanced around at the crumbling remains of what had once been a beautiful city. Slowly, it sank into his mind that it looked far worse than it had directly after the meteor had struck. All of the damage wasn't from that impact.

Time had done this.

Coldness swept over him as he moved through the ruins of the city and paused now and then to run a hand over the broken stones of a building, feeling the smoothed edges of the stones, rounded now when once the edges had been crisp and sharp. Hundreds of years, then, he realized, feeling stunned, disbelieving even though he knew it would have taken that for the ocean to smooth the stones.

Almost as soon as he made that connection, though, he noticed formations of coral had grown up around the perimeter of the ship.

A wave of nausea went through him as he stared at it, trying to convince himself that the ship had simply settled amongst the coral when it had sank.

For many moments, he simply stared at it. Finally, reluctantly, he moved toward the formations to study them.

He swallowed a little sickly once he had.

They had to have been in stasis closer to a thousand years—at the very least—not hundreds, he realized. They'd expected the possibility that it might be several hundred, but nothing like this.

His thoughts went to the woman he'd captured, or more specifically to the breathing unit she'd been wearing. It had been clumsy to his way of thinking, but the technology of creating such a thing, so that air breathers could move beneath sea . . .

He shook his head, wondering what other technology the humans had mastered while they had been sleeping.

Lifting his head, he stared toward the surface of the sea. None of them had been carrying weapons. Knowing the human propensity for violence, however, he returned to his stasis unit to retrieve his trident. He'd dropped his weapon when he'd gone after the woman.

A flicker of annoyance went through him.

He hadn't simply 'dropped' it, he acknowledged reluctantly. He'd tossed it aside. He still wasn't entirely certain why.

He hadn't needed it to subdue her, of course—there hadn't been a moment of doubt that there would be any contest of strength or speed between them—but that was beside the point. A sentinel, captain of the guard or not, did not simply decide to disarm himself when faced with a potential threat. She could have been a decoy sent to lead him from his post—or into an ambush.

He'd tossed it aside because he'd seen she was terrified and he hadn't wanted to frighten her more by waving the weapon in her face.

Mayhap the years in stasis had slowed his wits? Or scrambled them, he wondered in self-disgust?

He'd been born a soldier, had trained for it his entire life. He was still a man, but he had never been prone to allow a woman to distract him from his duty, however delightfully formed, however pretty.

And she was that.

He did not think he'd been thinking of any of that when he'd gone after her, though—not how appealing she was physically.

He'd been thinking about the look in her wide eyes.

He shook his head, trying to shake the thoughts as he propelled himself upwards, climbing steadily until he broke the surface. Images kept flickering through his mind, however.

She'd clung to him, he knew, from fear of drowning, sought the air she desperately needed, not offered her mouth to him. He knew that with the logical side of his mind, but the other part of himself, the side governed by instincts, persisted in interpreting those moments in an entirely different way.

She'd tasted—sweet. It wasn't just surprise to discover that that had sent a jolt through him the first time he'd covered her mouth to give her air. He'd told himself it was, but he had never been one for self-deception. He'd enjoyed the taste of her, the feel

of her clinging tightly to him.

That was why he'd been in no great hurry to leave her with the others.

That was why he'd taken advantage of her panic and kissed her instead of letting her go at once when he'd reached the room where they'd gathered the other human intruders.

He could lie to himself till doomsday about the instant attraction he'd felt for her, but he knew better.

No one had been more vocal about their distaste for and distrust of the natives of this world than he. It was beyond ironic that the first female to stir him deeply since Kira hailed from that tribe of man.

And the worst of it was, he recognized it for what it was because he'd been there before.

Trouble, deep trouble.

It was not the sort of connection that one could slough off with a few frantic couplings. It went soul deep. It was a physical recognition of the compatibility of potential mates.

It was almost worse that she seemed to recognize it, as well.

She'd certainly responded as if she had.

It was just as well they'd be gone soon and he would have no chance to make a fool out of himself, otherwise he was afraid he wouldn't be able to resist the pull.

The first lungful of air he sucked in as he broke the surface of the sea choked him, dragging his mind from the woman with a vengeance. His throat and lungs burned. He coughed for several minutes, expelling the water in painful gasps, wondering if it had just been so long he'd 'forgotten' how to breathe air instead of siphoning it from the water, or if there was something wrong with the air.

When the spasms finally passed, he filled his lungs more cautiously, tasting the air, testing it.

It tickled his lungs, and he had to struggle to tamp another fit of coughing.

It *was* the air, he decided. His memory wasn't faulty. However long it had actually been, despite the fact that the last time he'd breathed air it had been tainted with the ash and smoke of his burning city, he remembered what it had been like before—clean and sweet.

He didn't know what might have happened to the atmosphere, but something sure as hell had. Dismissing it when he'd mastered the urge to cough every time he breathed, he pushed himself high in the water and surveyed the surface. A small boat bobbed in the water a short distance away, and he swam toward it. Dipping beneath the surface when he reached it, he swam down a short space and then shot upward again with enough force to clear the water. Shifting forms as he lifted above the water, he landed with his feet braced slightly apart for balance on the rocking deck and looked around. The design of the boat didn't impress him. It looked little different than the boats he'd seen humans build long ago. The only real difference he could see at a glance was that the materials used to make it were no longer natural, it was far less aesthetically pleasing, and looked less comfortable, as well.

Striding toward the ladder that led up to the command console, he examined everything carefully and was a little more impressed. They'd mastered long range communications utilizing airwaves, discovered more accurate navigational methods—

electronic navigational means, at any rate.

When he'd finished examining the instruments and determined the propulsion method, he climbed down the ladder again and explored the remainder of the boat from bow to stern, searching for weapons and examining the personal items scattered about, and then climbed down the narrow ladder into the living area.

They didn't live on the boat. That much was almost immediately evident. From the remains of the food they'd eaten and the little he discovered in the cabin, he was almost certain they'd only occupied the vessel a matter of hours.

Which meant the boat was capable of a good bit of speed. It also meant they hadn't traveled far because he could see that, although the propulsion unit was capable of a good deal more speed than the forbearers of this type of vessel, it wasn't *that* fast.

They'd established their colony as far from the native barbarians as they could get and still have fairly quick access to any raw materials they might need from the land. From here, unless the continents had shifted drastically, they were hundreds of miles from land in any direction—a good deal more than from the known 'civilized' lands before the cataclysm.

He was certain the boat, regardless of its speed, didn't have the capability for that range.

The humans had undoubtedly crossed the ocean at some point and settled far closer than they'd been before, on the lands surrounding Atlantis.

Even without the evidence he'd already uncovered to suggest a very great deal of time had passed since the disaster, the fact that the humans had spread from shore to shore—moved in to settle *their* area of the globe—indicated a huge population growth.

They'd advanced both socially and technologically. There was nothing here, however, to make him think they'd closed the technological gap enough to represent a real threat to his people.

The question was, how would they feel, now, about sharing their world with the colonists of Atlantis? Would they be more receptive to aliens living among them? Or more hostile?

He frowned thoughtfully as he considered it and finally decided it seemed highly unlikely that they could possibly be more hostile.