

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

SEA OF PEARLS



ELAINE
LOWE

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Sea of Pearls

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Edited by Helen Woodall.

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SEA OF PEARLS

Elaine Lowe

Dedication

To the authors who inspire me and the love that is my muse.

Author's Note

The pearl is a wonder of our world. Created in years rather than eras, pearls are marvels of lustrous elegance, alluring in their shifting iridescence. Legends surround the beauty of the pearl. They are the tears of angels or mermaids, or conceived in the brains of dragons to represent profound wisdom.

Many creatures can make pearls, not just the oyster. The conch snail, the cobra and even the elephant are said to make pearls. A tiny particle like a grain of sand causes an irritation and layers of simple calcium carbonate and horn-like conchiolin are laid down to form nacre. The smooth surface of the pearl protects the animal from harm but the beautiful luster is an accidental joy for the human lucky enough to find the pearl.

The pearl is beauty from adversity.

Chapter One

The Lure

She moved a long graceful arm from over her head of white blonde hair, shielding blue eyes from the light of the star Lithos. The sun was warm here on the shores of Lake Silith. The soft sound of lapping waves against the new shoreline was surprisingly soothing. In fact, this entire trip had been restful, filling her with a relaxation she hadn't felt in decades.

Maybe it was good to have a complete mental breakdown once and a while.

After all, Ivani Gorl had made it to the grand age of two hundred and eighty-nine. It was about time she broke. Frankly, it felt good not giving a damn about much of anything. It was quite a change.

Her intense eyes searched across the shores of the lake, searching for prey even as she swore to herself the inner huntress was sleeping. The soft gray water sparkled in the orange sunlight wherever there was a break in a fine mist that hung a few feet over the water. The lake was slowly and surely evaporating into the thin atmosphere of Lithos I. That was supposedly why she'd come here, after all.

Instead, she was looking for the man who had appeared every day for the last week. There was the slightest change in the sound of the water. It wasn't anything so garish as a splash. He was much too graceful for that. But now she knew that somewhere in the immensity of Lake Silith was the sexiest man she'd seen in decades.

A predatory smile lit up her face. She almost let out a purr. A flash of blue flickered in the corner of her eye and she turned her head back toward the water. In the hovering mist, she could see the strong arc of blue-gray flesh. His back and thighs were just as hard and magnificent as she had remembered. She'd been watching him for several days, deciding whether or not to take action.

From the table by the side of her priceless rakkawood chaise, she poured the finest sun-protecting oil from the decadent merchants of Rdani III. The smell of sandalwood and citarose oil filled the air as she smoothed the oil over her pale skin. It was a trial having the palest skin on Lithos, so thin and translucent it was like alabaster. Of course, her symbiotes could easily repair any damage but it was easy enough to coat herself with sunscreen and spare her symbiotes the extra work. It was also a very effective method of showing off the shape of her completely nude body to the man who was trying to convince her that he wasn't watching her.

Normally she wore a sheer robe to protect her skin and cover her body but nudity was perfectly acceptable and suited her purposes today. She had to admit, it was a sensuous experience to pour warm oil in her pale hands and pay exquisite attention to herself. It was something she had grown more used to doing now that she'd given up her ambitions. And truth to tell, she felt better. Her hair was shinier, softer than it had been, her enforced relaxation had allowed her symbiotes the time to renew her completely. Her skin was still the palest cream but it again had a rosy undertone from exercise and time spent under the Lithian sun. She'd even put on a tiny amount of weight in all the right places, giving her body a look of ripe fullness. When she'd caught sight of herself in the mirror of her suite this morning, she'd been almost shocked at how she looked. As if she'd lost a century of worry and strain. Hard to believe a mere month in the tropics of her home planet could cure decades of stress.

But there was something about this place. The sway of the trees, the rippling of the water. It soothed her like nowhere else. Silith offered seclusion, its dry, thin air and intense heat normally unpopular with even the hardy Lithians. She wondered if the novelty of the larger lake would bring more of a crowd. At the moment, there were no guests but the swimmer and herself.

Maybe her attraction to this place took root because she'd seen it move and then thrive in the face of adversity. She'd overseen the initial disaster relief, when the massive rains following the aggressive actions of the ship DMTR had played havoc

with Lithos I's weather. Rain unlike any that Lithos I had ever known had pummeled the tropical ring of the habitable zone, filling Lake Silith past anything recorded from the last ten thousand years. The small hotel, known simply as Retreat, had been flooded out. She herself had come out as a representative of the board of the HLL Conglomerate. The finest of symbiote stone workers had coaxed to life the foundations of the whitewashed adobe building and it had slowly flowed over the water to its new location like a great and beautiful swan from ancient earth. The vision of that great work filled her anew with wonder at what and who she was and how great a gift it was to be a Lithian.

She inhaled deeply, ruefully reflecting on her own stupidity. The bickering on the Board had been fierce and unsettled the entire company. When Irav Tok finally came back with DMTR, all the crew with newly acquired symbiotes needed help to adjust to their new part-time home. She'd been cruel and dismissive of the lot. She didn't really have anything against non-Lithians but watching the hard, unemotional former Petrov, the man she'd craved for his body and his power for close to a century, bill and coo with his visibly pregnant Phytos mate made her as mad as hell. Ivani had wanted him, possibly even as the father of her body heir. But seeing him with Doctor Prospera — the weedpelt thief who he'd introduced by the archaic term of "wife" — had made her bile rise. She'd been blinded by her own pride and the following months she'd acted like a complete fool. Spitting rhetoric and poison, she'd tried every dirty trick in the book to win the election to become Petrov and shove her policies in Irav's face. She'd deserved the hell that had come next.

She'd come to Retreat after the vote which had denied her the position of Petrov. Losing her grip on sanity, she'd given up her position on the board. She'd thought she'd lost everything but being here reminded her that might not be the case. Now, she needed to remember what it was to be just a woman, rather than a great and powerful member of HLL.

She stood and smoothed the oil over her long legs, drawing slow, sensuous circles on her skin. Then up and over her hips, around the curves of her ass and making small circles over the center of her lower back with each hand, causing her breasts to be thrust out and sway with the motion. She grinned as she finally heard a true splash coming from the lake.

He was definitely watching now. She drew her hands over her ribs and cupped her breasts, rubbing them with the oil in obvious contentment. A few more passes of her hands over her neck, her shoulders and down her arms and she was suitably protected from the sun. Almost unbearably aroused she finally decided it was time for a swim.

Stepping out from the awning that had dimmed the brightness of the Lithos star, Ivani blinked for a moment at the eerie beauty of Lake Silith. There were still stands of trees that had been enveloped by the rising water and stone formations that were still tall and imposing rather than eroded by water. Lake Silith was now a new and strange phenomenon, something novel on a planet that seemed destined to remain unchanging. Lithos I was as locked into routine as the planet was locked to the star, sunside always facing the bright, life-giving heat and blackside a cold wasteland of endless night. It was nice to know that change was possible.

The lake was surprisingly cool but it felt good against her heated skin. The contrast made her all the more aware of the waters slipping over her ankles, her knees, her thighs. She submerged until the clear waters crested just at her breasts, the shell-pink tips of her nipples bobbing slightly as the heavy gravity of Lithos I was countered by the caress of the silky liquid.

She wondered where he was. Far enough out into the water to be encased in the hovering mist, she'd entered another world. She knew she was alone at Retreat except for the couple who ran the hotel and this one other guest. A member of the crew of DMTR, unlike all the other weedpelts who had descended on to Lithos I in the last two months and caused a social stir, this newcomer was different. He wasn't a Phytos and

he'd hidden away here at Retreat rather than discover the rest of Lithos I as his crewmates had. He was a cetalean.

She'd never been with a cetalean. They were notoriously elusive, few ever leaving their watery homeworld of Mdina V. In all of her sexual exploits when she was a mere ninety or a hundred, she'd never had the opportunity to make love with a dolphin man. Ivani almost salivated at the chance to rectify her lack of experience.

She only knew his name because the innkeeper, Ruska Minol, had mentioned it when Ivani had first arrived. Mr. Garom Sesh had barely been civil the one or two times they passed each other in the hallways but she'd taken in the firm muscles and the subtle signs of strength in him and been reluctantly impressed. She also knew instantly from the sheen of his skin and the distinctive mottled blue-gray color that he was a cetalean.

He was out there, somewhere, circling around her either in wariness or stalking her as though she was his prey. She was both hunter and hunted. She wasn't sure which role she enjoyed more. The heat that suffused her blood was welcome, raw sensation very different from the apathy that had claimed her for weeks. She knew she was almost ready to look for a new course for her life.

However, at this moment the only thing that interested her was the gentle motion of the water against her skin, the nibbling of the tiny native fish against her toes. Then there was that prickle along the back of her neck and the knowledge that there was a dark shape, circling around her slowly, still keeping its distance. There was the smallest tinge of fear in her—though she could swim, she was not an expert. Deep in her gut, the visceral intensity of that fear made her incredibly excited.

Well, if I've come out here to offer myself like a common tralc, I might as well get on with it. She started by cupping her breasts, rubbing her thumbs over her nipples and simply enjoying the mild wickedness of fondling herself so blatantly in a public place. Down over her ribs and the planes of her stomach, she caressed her own skin in small circles, drawing out the inevitable descent of her fingers toward the center of her pleasure.

As she drew closer to her goal, he came nearer. He didn't bother to break the surface for air, instead constantly circling, tighter and tighter until she could see his form in the water and feel his eyes upon her. Her feet parted slightly on the gravel lake bottom. One hand returned to her breasts and she scraped a manicured nail over her hardened nipple and the other hand moved over her hip and finally brushed the parted lips of her pussy. She closed her eyes against the swirling mist surrounding her and bit her lip, relishing the luxuriant pleasure of stroking her clit as this stranger watched her.

The water swirled against her legs and she smiled, knowing he was very, very close now. She thrust a finger into her sheath, tensing her muscles against the intrusion and savoring the tightness of her passage. It had been far, far too long.

She drew tighter and tighter circles over her clit, searching for friction that was impossible in the water, hovering on the very edge of fulfillment. Then she felt his touch. Strong hands closed over her ankles. Victory was hers and it tasted very, very sweet.

But he didn't rise up out of the water, asking to claim his reward for finally breaking the ice between them. No, nothing so straightforward. Instead, his hands drew small teasing circles over the skin of her legs and by the time he'd gotten to her thighs, his lips, teeth and tongue followed.

Sheer willpower and the buoyancy of the water were the only things keeping her upright. The slow drag of his tongue over the sensitive skin of the backs of her knees made her moan softly. He circled around her kissing and licking, biting and sucking until she thought she would come the instant he got anywhere near her clit.

Her hands searched blindly until they found his head, her fingers surging into the short crop of fine, dark blond hair. He turned his face into her palm and pressed an open-mouthed kiss there, an incredibly intimate and endearing act. Suddenly, this wasn't just some random encounter between strangers. She knew that she wanted to get this man to talk to her, to uncover his secrets behind that silent exterior.

Then his sure fingers found her clit and she couldn't think about much at all. She was shocked when she felt her hips buck against his hand, her body no longer completely in her control. The swooping sensation in her stomach at such a loss only seemed to heighten her pleasure.

Two fingers thrust into her sheath without warning and she screamed in pleasure, setting a nearby flock of lithbirds flapping into the sky in alarm. She felt like she was about to lose her footing and go under, the only thing keeping her erect the slow drag and pull of those fingers within her, the subtle webbing between his fingers stimulating her folds as he thrust with those digits and stroked his thumb over her nub. Her grip on his hair must have been painful but he made no attempt to escape.

When he drew his hand away from her she went so far as to whimper, then hoped that he could not have heard such a small sound from underwater. But he had no intention of letting her go so easily. His hands encompassed her ass, pulling her forward and his long tongue slid into the channel his fingers had abandoned, the rough texture and strength of his tongue beyond anything she could recall in her vast experience. She relaxed completely, dropping back into the water and half floating as he held her up, wrapping her legs over his shoulder as he drank from her. He lapped at her core and sucked her clit into his mouth, nipping at her folds with sharp teeth that held her on the edge between fear and rapture.

Finally, he concentrated on tight hard circles around and over her clit, increasing the speed and intensity until her thighs shook in spasms and she lost all sense of herself to the pleasure spiking through her.

He let her come down slowly, swirling his tongue through her folds to trigger tiny aftershocks as she returned from her dazed state to one of semi-consciousness. When he drew back, she was almost afraid he would just swim away, leaving her pleased but by no means fulfilled.

When he broke the surface, she was still as weak as a babe and shocked by her vulnerability. More than happy to see his face, she was not at all prepared for the feral

possession in his eyes, eyes that went from the deepest black for underwater vision to having steel gray irises in the air. He gave her a pleased but somehow fierce smile. She wondered if she had ever really been the one in control, or if he had been luring her in for the last week.

Sharp, aquiline features, eyes that could cut through any attempt to deceive, teeth just a little bit sharper than other *sapiens* subspecies. Was the model for the cetalean breed truly the friendly dolphin, or instead the predatory shark?

But his lips were most definitely human. Full and blushing just a slight touch of pink, she knew he was definitely aroused. He pulled her up to him and claimed her lips in a kiss. She could taste herself on his tongue, along with the sweet, metallic flavor of Lake Silith. She ran a tongue over those dangerous teeth and shuddered in pleasure as he sucked her tongue into his mouth.

Her legs came up to wrap around his firm ass and she could feel the hard bump of his sex against her pelvis. He was still restrained by his webbing and by the way he squirmed it had to be uncomfortable when he was aroused. She ground herself against his hips and thrust her tongue back into his mouth, showing in no uncertain terms that she wanted him inside her as soon as possible.

He got her message. Their balance shifted as his legs became unsealed and he stood firm on the bottom of the lake on his legs. His hands gripped her ass again and she felt his cock erupt from its webbed encasement, eagerly surging against her pussy and seeking entrance. She gave the slightest moan, shocked at how large he was given the level of confinement he must have had in the cetalean leg webbing.

"You want this." It was a statement, not really a question, and the growl of his voice against her ear was raw and tender, all at the same time.

"Yesss..." It came out as a hiss and turned into a long sigh as he slid inside. Damn but it had been a long time. And her symbiotes prevented her from losing her shape, no matter how hard she had tried to lose herself in hard living when she was younger. She was tight and he was far from small and it was so, so good.

Every inch of him caused a cascade of sensation in her, his pulsing cock within her more satisfying than she would have anticipated. At the first stroke, she was barely clinging to awareness, raking her fingers over his back and letting him move her with those large hands and firm grip. She slid over his length and despite lesser friction in the water, it felt like every nerve was quivering with sensation.

When slow wasn't enough, she felt the years of her experience flood back. She locked her lithe legs around his back and tightened the walls of the sheath, though there was not much room to tighten anything at all, he filled her so thoroughly. But the groan elicited made her grin anyway. She was far too close and she didn't want to let him have the upper hand completely.

She gripped his triceps, long fingernails digging into his thick skin and he flinched with mild pain, breaking their exquisite rhythm enough for her to take command. Flexing her thighs, she sped up, demanding his thrusts and her counter-thrusts begin a frantic race to fulfillment. The pounding force of his cock within her focused her on nothing but the sensation of being filled, faster and faster until she didn't care anymore who was driving the pace.

When the wave crashed and she screamed again, she was unprepared for the depth of his roar or the immense gush of fluid that erupted from him, sending her back to the peak, drawing out her pleasure for long minutes of floating in the crystalline sky. When she came back to herself, she was on her back, floating in shallower water with her legs still wrapped around his waist, his eyes still consuming her with quiet, mysterious intensity. There was nothing and everything to say but she was too exhausted to decide which path to take.

He made the decision, slowly moving out of the water with purposeful and silent strides. He carried her back to her room and then he stayed, stroking her hair back from her face, while she fell into a deep, contented sleep.

When she woke up he was gone—and from the looks of her bed he'd not even rested next to her. She should be grateful—it was the best sex she'd had in more years

than she cared to admit and there were no messy complications to deal with after the fact. But she didn't feel terrible grateful, she felt rather lost.

She inhaled deeply, sure she must still carry the cetalean's scent—she could feel the copious evidence of their coupling sticky on her thighs, despite the act being finished in water. She brushed a hand against her thigh, touching the evidence of their mutual satisfaction. There was something stuck there—something hard. Slightly disturbed, she plucked at the granules, bringing one up to look at it closely.

It was remarkably stiff and the filtered light from the window struck the milky white surface of the pebble, giving it a shimmering iridescence. Every Lithian knows the value of gemstones, even the ones that don't occur naturally on Lithos I. For all of its miraculous crops that made garnets and rubies, aquamarines and turquoise, there was not a plant or a creature that manufactured a perfect pearl. She brought the thing up to her teeth, rubbing it to feel the distinctive roughness and tasted herself and him merged together.

It was a pearl. A beautiful, natural pearl, created in a ridiculously short time. It was completely ludicrous! She'd never heard of a massive pearl trade from Mdina V and the number of sexual jokes that would come from this would be so astounding there was no way that tales would not have spread from one end of the galaxy to the other.

She wondered how much semen a cetalean was typically capable of producing. Plucking a total of twelve irregularly shaped pearls from her folds and the skin of her thighs, she laughed. If she hadn't already been outrageously wealthy, this would have been a fortune. The man was certainly capable of massive eruptions! She actually giggled, wondering if she would drown while sucking him off, or choke on a string of pearls.

Either cetaleans were normally highly prolific in this regard, or it had been some time since Garom Sesh had been intimate with anyone, even his own right hand. That knowledge made her feel just a bit better. Perhaps she was still more conqueror than conquered. Rolling the pearls between her hands, she considered the future for the first

time in weeks. Having fought her way through that stiff resolve toward the passionate animal beneath, Ivani wondered if it was worth another foray into the unknown to uncover what else the man could do.

Chapter Two

The Twitch

Garom Sesh leaned against the smooth stone wall of the hallway and tried to look nonchalant.

It didn't come easily.

But pacing back and forth in front of her door, waiting to ask her to dinner, didn't really make him look great either.

How long did the woman need to sleep, anyway? Am I really that good? He grinned smugly at the thought.

For a man who hadn't had sex in decades, he hadn't done too badly. His new body was a hell of a lot less creaky now, that was for certain. That was one thing he couldn't hold against the little buggers sharing his body—it was damn fine to feel a woman pulse around your cock and scream in pleasure.

He'd been watching her for a week, shocked at his body's uncontrollable attraction. He'd gotten hard the first time he'd glimpsed her backside in a diaphanous gown as she pass him in the hall. When he'd seen her sunbathing in a tiny little coverall later in the day, he'd had to swim way out into the lake and jack off like a hormonal juvenile, his brain consumed with thoughts of all that glowing pale skin and those firm little breasts with those perfect ripe nipples. She'd looked like a damn queen, able to take control of any pod on Mdina even if she couldn't swim a single stroke.

He'd acted like the cantankerous, brusque old man he had been once, not that long ago. He'd barely spoken to her and tried to avoid her presence, wondering when his uncontrollable lust would cause him to bend her over the closest furniture. He convinced himself he'd imagined the interest in her eyes, the alteration of her smell. He

didn't trust his nose in air. The dance of sex was a lot simpler in the water, where the subtle scent of pheromones was unmistakable.

But he couldn't stop watching her. Immersed in the sweet, slightly metallic-flavored waters of the lake, he watched her. Every day she laid out in the sun, usually in a thin, clinging garment of Ralian silk that merely teased the imagination rather than hid her lithe body. At night, he lay in the large bathtub in his suite and dreamed of swimming with her, fucking her until she was screaming, shaking. He woke every damn morning with his cock hard enough to impale marble.

When she arrived at her favorite spot today, without a book, a datapad, or a single stitch of clothing, he'd almost bounded up onto the beach to drag her into the water like some ancient monster myth. He swam across the mist-laden lake, peeking out in silence to observe her erotic performance watching as she covered her body in fragrant oils. They may have made her feel sexy, and he certainly didn't mind the scent, but all he really wanted in his nostrils was the scent of her pussy as he licked her folds and nuzzled her clit with his nose.

There was something about this woman. Something raw and wild that needed to be unleashed from the cage of her control. She stirred his blood like no one ever had. Was it this new youth of his? Or was it her?

When he watched her wading into the water, he'd known exactly what she wanted. He could have swum up and taken her hard, immediately, but it had been so much more rewarding to watch as she offered herself to him. She was magnificent, from the tips of her rosy toes to her glossy white blonde hair. He was not sure he'd ever be able to forget her taste, or sate his craving for it.

It was ridiculous to have this depth of feeling for a lander. He should just get his meal on a tray and choke down whatever heavy slop the landers called food. What he wouldn't give for a dozen succulent little fadashrimp. Raw, straight out of their shells, or simmered in oil and arlac root—their light sweetness would be welcome after a diet of vat protein and strange Lithian vegetables. He could imagine a table piled high with

the best of Mdinan delicacies and the sounds of bliss his woman would make while she savored each bite. He could practically taste the juice on her lips, the sounds of pleasure as he moved down that long graceful neck to suck those tempting nipples...

Fuck! He was rock hard again and the loose trousers he wore as his only clothing did nothing to hide his erection. *Why the hell isn't she coming out of there! She has to eat sometime!* He began to pace again and scratched absentmindedly at his closed gill slits, coming away again with those tiny, iridescent, sandy grains that had plagued him from the moment he'd begun his temporary residence here at Retreat.

The water was silky and wild – frankly it was fantastic. It had been difficult for him to admit after he'd bitched and moaned loudly to everyone who would listen about being tied to this planet, especially Matrissa and her giant Lithan mate. Irav Tok had been surprisingly decent and helpful once Garom had learned to appreciate his contemplative moods and quiet wit. Irav had been the one to tell him about Lake Silith. It almost compensated Garom for the loss of a chance with Matrissa. Dr. Prospera had always had a kind word and a bit of conversation for the ornery old hydrologist he had been.

But Tok and Matrissa were obviously well matched and she was happy – and very pregnant. He didn't want to bother her with a silly little complaint that he was getting weird deposits in his gill slits.

He itched like crazy! Every damn time he was out of the water. Inside the water, he felt fantastic. This water felt somehow – new. He knew the lake had been reborn after that idiot Jov's ridiculous cloud-cover attack – and it counted as one of the few lasting benefits from weeks of darkness and heavy rainfall on a planet that rarely had any rain at all and knew no darkness.

The rest of the crew of DMTR had worked diligently to repair the miraculous but fragile ecosystem. But his own personal mission was not as clear cut.

Water was a very precious resource on Lithos I and the newly enlarged Lake Silith was a political hot button – both for the new and old residents. He'd been a hydrologist

for a hundred and thirty years and had been to natural bodies of water on a thousand worlds. It was his job to ascertain whether this new lake was a threat to Lithos I, or if the water from the cloud cover could safely be kept in the lake.

It helped that Lake Silith was a tropical paradise instead of an icy arctic tundra. He was having a wonderful vacation, which stemmed his anger over not having a choice in becoming a part-time resident on this hunk of dry rock.

Ivani Gorl was the other benefit to this place. *If she ever decided to come out of her room.*

He banged his back into the rock wall in frustration, then flinched as that action drove whatever was irritating his gill slits even deeper. *A shirt might have been a good idea after all.* He'd thrown on loose trousers hours ago, once he'd paced back and forth in his room long enough. He wanted to see her again. Hell, he wanted to be inside her again.

But instead he was standing in this hallway like a lovesick swain. If it wasn't so pathetic he would laugh at himself. And after laughing his head off, he could itch some more! *Dammit but this was annoying.* Cetalean biology was often full of surprises when stuck in a lander environment but he'd never heard of the gills that allowed him to breathe underwater producing hard lumps like this! He scratched again, managing to come away with another tiny pebble. He really needed to run a full enzymatic workup of that water, pronto.

It was in this rather undignified pose she found him, his hand bent around his back, a grimace on his face as he scratched once more at his gill flaps. The door he'd been staring at for the better part of an hour slid open, revealing Ivani looking a bit bemused.

His cock swelled just at the sight of her, tall and alluring in a lavender dress that started as a thin strap around her graceful neck and fell to her ankles in soft folds that seemed to simultaneously conceal and reveal every luscious cetar of her body. Her pale skin glowed with rosy undertones and all he could remember was the bright pink of her cheeks after she'd come hard. If he could make it his mission in life to get this woman to blush, he'd try his damndest. But she was so sophisticated, he thought it unlikely.

Given the lifespan of Lithians, he wondered how old she really was. Maybe not that much younger than he was.

“Mr. Sesh, I...it’s good to see you.” She seemed not as completely composed. *Good.*

“Ivani.” *I’ve been inside the woman, dammit. I think we’re past the stage for surnames.*
“Can I escort you to dinner?”

She smiled again and her blue eyes went from calculating to reflect a glimpse of honest pleasure. He held out an arm and she placed her hand on his elbow with a light touch. A mildly awkward silence followed them down the hall toward the cozy dining room of Retreat but he hoped to rectify that soon. He just had to figure out something to say.

* * * * *

It was hard for him to adjust to a beautiful polished marble table that created, apparently of its own will, shallow wells to act as plates for the diners as they sat down. Still, he managed to act nonchalant. He was especially grateful that the fashion on Lithos I was to eat with the hands rather than a complex series of utensils or, gods-forbid, chopsticks. His fingers could manipulate the finest of electronics and filter tubing, not to mention do a reasonable job caressing the most delicate parts of a woman, but the recessed webbing between his digits made him look like a fool while trying to eat with a pair of sticks.

Fingers were much sexier. He watched Ivani’s long, elegant fingers as she washed her hands in a fingerbowl the innkeeper had left. The man returned with their order with efficiency and she thanked him with grace. Garom observed the curve of her neck and strands of hair escaping her artful twist and he probably sounded quite rude when he was late echoing his own thanks. Looking down to the table, he was utterly surprised to find an Earth fish on his plate, grouper if he remembered correctly. He’d ordered the special of the day, but he hadn’t expected anything like this. Raw and paired with nothing but local herbs and a citrus dressing, it looked incredible. He bared

his sharp teeth in gastronomic glee. Then he grinned sheepishly as Ivani let out a bright laugh in response.

“You see, we are not completely without civilization on this little ‘lack water’, Mr. Sesh.”

“Garom, please. And I know Lithos is highly sophisticated, given its wealth. But not every planet has aquaculture, no matter its savvy.” He could have been less forthright but he just couldn’t keep the sneer out of his tone. He couldn’t imagine life without water and its seductive wonders.

She seemed more amused than offended and gave him a wry little smile. “We probably value our water more than most, Garom. We have our little hideaways under crylic shields and those with an interest in fish or other liquid denizens number in the tens of thousands. With a population of half a million people on Lithos, water is quite a passion of ours.”

“Do you have a passion for things that swim then?” he blurted out, curious as to her opinions on any subject. The double entendre was quite accidental but the resulting blush made him long to throw her over his shoulder and carry her back into the lake and teach her all the glories of underwater satisfaction.

She plucked a morsel from her plate and popped the bit of succulent white fish into her mouth. Licking her lips with slow thoroughness, she finally answered. “I love the water, Garom. But I do not keep things trapped in tiny pens at my estate. I’d much rather come here and observe things that swim in their natural state.”

Fuck, now I’m so hard I don’t think there’s any blood left in my brain. His webs itched to deploy, his longing for the water so profound it ached. He wanted to be wet. He wanted to get her thoroughly wet. Then he wanted to plunge into her wet heat again and again until both of them were aching and completely spent.

He swallowed thickly and took a bite of his meal, trying to let the bright and spicy flavors of the sea pull his mind away from his cock but the deliciousness only reminded him of what he wanted for dessert. Her taste on his tongue once again.

"How do you like our expanded Lake Silith, Mr. Sesh?"

"Mr. Sesh?" He frowned. He thought they had been getting along rather well. To return to such formality was not a good sign.

A smile played about those pink lips again. "I'm asking your professional opinion on this matter. Garom."

"Oh," he said, almost slapping himself for sounding stupid. *Damn this was difficult.* He'd forgotten most of what he'd known about how landers did this dance of courtship. He'd been with DMTR for fifty of his one hundred and eighty standard years. Before the whole pirate plague, he'd been accustoming himself to the slow breakdown of his body. Not many cetaleans lived past two hundred, especially not those who spurned tradition and ventured offworld to swim in the seas of a thousand different planets.

Comfortable with his existence as the mysterious and grumpy hydrologist of DMTR, he'd been the master of his own world of massive water tanks and biofilters. He lived and breathed most of the time in those waters and he'd been the first hit by the damned water-borne plague. At death's door and not exactly at peace with it, he'd fallen into a coma. When he'd woken up weeks later in the body of a healthy fifty year old and told he was sharing his body with a bunch of silicon symbiotes, he was irrationally angry. He'd never been given much of a choice. He would now be required to spend a good chunk of what looked to be a much-extended life on a rock with no ocean to speak of!

At least he could try not to sound like a total cretin. His brain still functioned. No reason to lapse into total silence just because his control was thin as Ralian thread. *Pull yourself together, old man!*

"Lake Silith has three possible futures, from what I can get from the Tessnet news."

She wrinkled her nose, something he thought was oddly adorable—a word he never would have associated with her. "Go on, I'd like to hear your take on the debate."

Her tone was tight and clipped. She must have sat through one too many HLL Board meetings of late.

She certainly was a mystery. He'd heard nothing but bad things about the woman since landing on Lithos I. He'd been told she was a racist bitch so cold she'd freeze off a man's cock. But he'd seen very direct evidence to the contrary. True enough, she kept herself under rigid control but when she let loose she was hot enough to singe.

Shaking himself from his silence, he tried to sum up his thoughts regarding the lake coherently. "One—you actively drain the lake."

She snorted in response and it was his turn to smile again. For all her touted political savvy, she had a very difficult time masking her true opinions.

"Two—you could let heat and the thin atmosphere evaporate the lake back to where it was."

She nodded, familiar with that position. "How long would that take?"

He'd already run the calculations within hours of arriving at Retreat. "One standard year, three months and sixteen days. Give or take a week."

Her mouth dropped and then clacked shut. "You work fast!"

He leered at her, "I do when I'm interested."

She rolled her eyes at him but chuckled—a low laugh that made his cock throb. "But so short a time, truly?"

He shrugged. "It's not the natural order here. The water is 'borrowed' from your blackside. But the atmo is too thin to support a large body of water—especially when it's freshwater. The third option would be to try to artificially retain the water with a pressure screen or evap recycle system."

She worried her lower lip with white even teeth. "That sounds very artificial." She had finished her fish and began to daintily lick her fingers clean while lost in thought. It was a full minute before enough blood returned to his brain for him to formulate a response.

"Artificial...yes, yes. It would have to be. There's no simple solution for enacting such a large change to an ecosystem."

Suddenly he was overwhelmed by sharp pain in his gill slits and a hand flew up to his ribs before any discipline could prevent it. His action drew her attention and the pain must have been reflected on his face, as her ice blue eyes were full of concern.

"It's nothing." He tried to reassure her but she looked unconvinced. "It's just some peculiarity of the lake water. It's happened all week but it hasn't gotten worse. If I let the water dry on my gill slits, it forms little pebbles. Some kind of strange enzymatic thing. I'll ask Dr. Prospera about it when I get the chance."

She wrinkled her nose again and took a deep swig of her wine. Her expression was considerably colder as she sniffed, "She won't know what they are."

Puzzled, he wondered at the hostility in her tone. "Why not?" Again the wrinkled nose. "Wait...it's probably true that she won't know without some research. Cetalean biology is a bit oddball in the universe after all."

She gave him a brilliant smile. He noted to himself not to mention one woman while trying to seduce another. *It's amazing the rules a man forgets in his old age.*

"I may not know all the details of your unique biology," the look she was giving him gave him every indication that she'd very much like to remedy that, "but I do know gemstones."

His own brow wrinkled in sudden confusion.

She took pity on him and pulled out of some hidden pocket in her skirt a larger version of the pebbles he'd been digging out of his sensitive flesh for weeks. Raising an eyebrow, he didn't get to ask where it had come from before she barreled on. "They're pearls."

"A pearl?" he practically snorted.

"You are familiar with the item then?" She could be incredibly imperious when she had no patience.

"Yes, quite. My birth pod farmed mussels on Mdina. We saw a lot of low-quality pearls. These form far, far too quickly to be pearls."

She grinned in the feral delight of a queen of capitalism. "The composition and appearance are consistent with nacre, with calcium carbonate and conchiolin in the right proportions." She held the oddly shaped bead to the orange light streaming in through the windows. The light refracted from the surface in soft patterns of every color. "Even if they are not true pearls in the classic sense, they could be marketed as such."

What, does she have a mineral analysis kit in her room? Oh, this was Lithos I...yeah, she probably did have a mineral analysis kit in her room. "So where did that one come from exactly? I've never found anything so large in...ow..." he flinched again and, not bothering to try to hide it anymore, tried to scratch at one gill slit on his back. It was impossible to get to and it had been bothering him all night.

If he hadn't been so distracted, he would have noticed the hint of pink staining her ivory skin in response to his question. "How about you come up to my room and I help you dig out those stray pebbles, eh?"

He grinned. "I promise you can keep any of these things you can get out of me."

She bit her lip, then threw back her head and laughed. "I assure you I will have a great deal of fun making many, many more."

Chapter Three

The Catch

She didn't give a damn about the pearls. It was interesting but she had enough money to buy the DMTR three times over. She didn't need petty cash from some novel baubles. But she was definitely interested in the man who produced these particular gems. Especially when it seemed that such a talent was a complete surprise.

Wiping the corners of her mouth daintily with her napkin, she tried not to appear too impatient as she rose from her seat. But she was embarrassingly eager. So eager she hoped she hadn't ruined her dress from the wetness seeping through her folds. She'd like to strip him of those temptingly loose pants and inspect every ceter of fascinating slick skin. To a Lithian, the soft gray and blue of his complexion was not so different from many of their own native hues—but there was a fascinating texture to that skin that begged to be touched, rubbed, licked. She wanted to feel him wrap around her, feel him pound into her from above, behind, any way at all.

It was a new feeling. Usually, she tired of an encounter rapidly, losing interest almost before the act was completed. It was the hunt, the seduction, the foreplay that she loved. But this time, she longed for the feel of him inside her, the frantic pulsing chaos of the act and the soaring pleasure of climax. She wanted to feel him, not any random man, woman or sexual aid.

And she wanted to feel it now.

Fortunately, for all his apparent youth—although she supposed he was old enough for a non-Lithian—he was also wise. He didn't ask many questions but followed her lead, his long legs and huge feet surprisingly graceful on land, even with the heavier gravity of Lithos I.

Passing through the gauzy curtains separating the dining room from the main hall, she swore she heard the innkeeper mutter from the kitchens, "About time!"

Once, she might have been outraged at such commentary. Now, she was simply amused. All attempts at suave restraint suddenly seemed rather silly and just before she reached the first stair, she reached out and grabbed Garom's hand. He stopped for a moment and smiled, his pointed teeth in a broad grin making him look simultaneously dangerous and boyish.

Ivani forgot exactly how they got to his room. He attacked her on the stairs, kissing her so hard their teeth clacked together and her toes curled hard. She'd felt his hand on her neck, plucking at the string of her sarong and part of her wanted him to rip it off her. She'd backed up the hall until they'd reached his door, closer than her own. The door was open and they were blissfully alone inside and then he really did rip her dress off. The memory was better than the dress anyway.

His mouth was hot on her nipples and his short stiff hair tickled the palms of her hands as she clasped his head to her breasts. One hand brushed down the long length of his back, in search of the waistband of those damn teasing pants, when she brushed against a flap of skin and he flinched, shivering against her. He'd sucked her nipple into his mouth even harder, pricking her ever so slightly with those teeth.

Was it pleasure or pain? She'd seen him scratching at his back—oh! These must be gill slits! She knew cetaceans could breathe underwater—she'd been the benefactor of such thorough underwater treatment when he'd made her come with the slow, sure drag of his tongue on her clit. Those gills must be incredibly sensitive to touch. She didn't want to hurt him but her curiosity got the better of her and she swirled a finger lightly against the raised skin, barely touching the pink edge that marked the separation that would open underwater.

He pulled away from her, pinning her with a gaze hot enough to melt diamonds, then devoured her other nipple, making her womb ache with sharp want. His fingers

traced up her thighs and then he was stroking her pussy lightly, so lightly it was practically torture.

She got the message. She spread her hands out on his back, running her fingers over his closed gills and letting her nails drag along the skin from mid back to under his arms. He writhed, moaning against her nipple and sucking hard in response. She fell to her knees, bringing him with her on to the Hyvanian carpet on the floor.

His hand found her slit again and she arched into his hand. His lips moved up her chest, nipping softly before pressing open-mouthed kisses to the length of her neck, dragging his teeth along her skin until she was so sensitized she felt a breath of air would make her explode.

Trying to hold on a bit longer, she focused on the fact that now she had much better access to the full extent of his uniquely sensitive flesh. Her hands spread across the broad expanse of his back, tracing his ribs with the lightest of touches. Every so often, he gave a low deep rumble that made her bones shake and she would twitch as his thumb swept over her clit and his fingers teased her with a slow, maddening thrust.

She increased the pressure she applied and he increased the speed of his fingers and moved to lavish attention on the other side of her neck. His other hand pinched her nipple hard and so her nails raked across his gill slits until he growled savagely. Then he was pushing her down, her supersensitized skin feeling the caress of every fiber of the carpet against her back and the scorching heat of his thighs between hers. Poised at her entrance, he thrust inside, his eyes glazing with satisfaction before he finally looked into her eyes for permission.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, her hips high off the ground as he gripped her waist. She'd thought that his large feet and hands were merely an adaptation for efficient swimming but the impressive size of the cock that hit her cervix and filled her to bursting meant that he was just simply big in every way.

An impatient twitch of her hips and he slid out and back in, thrusting in a delicious way as her muscles clung to him, trying to keep him inside as long as possible. Never

before had the push and pull of a cock within her made her relish every moment. She didn't know whether she had changed, or if he just fit her, mentally and physically, better than any other man.

In a shockingly short amount of time, she felt herself rising, holding her breath and searching for that convulsion of sensation that seemed to be the next thrust away. He looked like some ancient god of the sea hovering above her, his biceps flaring as he gripped her ass and pulled her against him so damn hard. His eyes were incredibly dark now, almost midnight blue—like the deepest ocean. His chest was truly impressive and the slight flare of those gill slits as he breathed hard and fast satisfied her deepest urges.

She loved the different, the interesting, the original. Sowing her wild oats had been a very thorough experience but when her heritage and her home planet had called, she'd returned and spent the better part of the last one hundred and fifty years a slave to duty and company spreadsheets.

Now, when some wild oats came swimming up to her, she was damn well going to enjoy planting them deep.

Held on the very edge of orgasm, she almost screamed in frustration as he slowed down, pulling almost all the way out of her and then slamming back in to the hilt. It was fantastic and terrible. She could feel every nerve send shivers up her spinal cord. Her thighs gripped him with immense pressure and her muscles shook. Her feet pressed against his back, trying to force him back in, driving him to pick up the pace and bring them both to climax.

He laughed, a smug laugh that made her want to hit him. She growled, tucked in her tailbone and clenched hard at his next thrust, holding him inside with enough force that he practically whimpered. She knew a trick or two as well.

"You asked for it!" he muttered under his breath. Falling onto his elbows, she wrapped her arms under his armpits and held on to his shoulders, pulling down and

trying to force him within her with arms and legs and every muscle she could bring to bear. He decided it was time to oblige her.

He pounded her into the floor, giving her the rough fucking that she hadn't even known she wanted. He knew the exact edge of recklessness and he knew she wasn't some delicate porcelain statue. Even if she did bruise, her symbiotes wouldn't let her suffer for long.

She began to scream—full throated and powerful exultations to the vast heavens. She was losing herself in the rapid thrusts, the near-violence of merging into one being. Every ceter of her skin wanted to be melded with his and he wanted the same. His hands fisted in her hair, his lips captured her mouth until she could barely breathe for his searing kisses.

The sharp snaps of his hips were pushing her past the point of bearing. She lost track of when she crossed over into orgasm but in the middle a sense of awe took over. It went on and on, shuddering through her in purple-white brilliance, until the only thing keeping her from floating was the hard heavy bulk of her lover.

As he spurted inside her he gave a deep echoing groan, profound and utterly unique in her experience. She could feel it in her bones, every part of her resonating with his almost musical ecstasy. The sound seemed to mirror her internal quivering, the aftershocks of her orgasm as his pushed her back into the peak of pleasure.

The next thing she was aware of, she was on the soft Ralian silk sheets of his bed, encased in powerful arms. She felt small, sheltered. Almost cherished. When she felt the tears flowing down her cheeks, she simply closed her eyes and willed herself back into sleep. She didn't want to have to think while so very open and raw.

The rise and fall of his chest against her back lulled her into sleep. She dreamed of wading along a beach beside a vast ocean but the skies overhead were as familiar as the back of her hand, with the moons of Sobek and Morig performing their dance under the orange Lithian sun. A sleek body arched playfully in the gentle waves of an impossible sea, luring her into the water with erotic promises.

* * * * *

Ivani woke with a start and the noise that reached her was practically deafening. Garom Sesh snored. Loudly.

Ah, I suppose I could live with it, he does have other redeeming features. He did look rather fetching and boyish in his sleep, his face relaxed and the powerful muscles of his back and ass on flagrant display. Snoring aside, she wouldn't mind waking up to such a sight every morning.

She started again, realizing the ramifications of her train of thought. *What the hell am I thinking? Hell, I can count on one hand the number of times I've fallen asleep with a man in my room and two of them are with him!*

Pushing the thought aside, she decided to escape into the comfortable realm of sensuality rather than emotionality. She sat up, aching in wonderful places. After a long, indulgent stretch with her eyes closed, she noticed that the snoring seemed to have abated slightly, only to return full force once she looked at him. His eyes were closed, his surprisingly long lashes resting on his cheeks. He looked content and peaceful and her heart gave an unfamiliar lurch. Dammit, she didn't want to think about this yet!

She swung a leg over him, kneeling over his upper thighs, the firm globes of his ass pressing against her pelvis with tantalizing warmth. She was wide open and despite the thorough fucking she'd just had, she heartily wished he was facing her and she could slide down on to his cock and have her way with him.

Perhaps in a few minutes. First, she had to wake the lazy jlak up.

She started with that glorious ass, rubbing her hands in slow, firm circles over the generous musculature. His skin was warm and almost slippery, as though he had just climbed fresh and warm from the shower. When she moved down, her thumbs dangerously close to the back of his scrotum, the rhythm of his snoring became very uneven.

Ah...thinks he can keep me working when he's wide awake?

Taking her hands away, she both felt and heard his body groan in rebellion. He was actually rather cute and she took pity on him. He had worked her hard and he must feel it. She knew he'd been the most affected by that pirate plague on the DMTR. The physicians HLL had sent up to the ship had not been sure he would make it, even with symbiotes.

Now he was in top physical shape. But a little tender loving care would be appreciated. Working her thumbs and knuckles up his spine, she felt taxed ligaments melt under her touch. She moved upwards, mounting his ass and becoming increasingly aroused as those muscles tensed and relaxed under her ministrations, rubbing her pussy in delightful ways. Her body began to undulate, looking to increase friction. The tensing of his buttocks became increasingly rhythmic and when she let out the smallest of moans, he chuckled.

Ok buddy, you asked for it!

She blatantly attacked his back, poking and prodding unmercifully. He grunted but seemed to take the punishment well. Easing up when she got to his gill slits, she noticed a tiny bump on the edge of the skin flaps, close to the ending at his spine. She ran a fingernail over it and he whimpered – which was strangely sexy.

“Gods, can you get it?” his voice was hoarse and pleading and she liked having him begging her for something. She could definitely foresee a bit of bondage play in their future.

Their future? Enough with the thinking. “Get what?”

“The pebble...pearl...whatever the hell you want to call it! It's been there for hours and it's driving me crazy. I can't get at it. Please? I'll do anything!”

“Anything?” she laughed low and lifted the slit of skin, uncovering the specialized tissue underneath, which was a masterpiece of thousand of years of genetic engineering. The ability to supplement oxygen needs with gills allowed the cetaleans to stay underwater for up to an hour at a time, making their watery world a perfect home. But she was glad this particular cetalean had chosen to explore the universe. She

removed the offending particle, a tiny oval pearl that was a luminescent pale peach. It was remarkably lovely.

She placed it on the pillow next to his head and resumed the slow massage, moving over those gills with feather-light touches that made him writhe under her. "Do you get these after every swim?"

"Oh...yes....get what?" he was definitely distracted. She bent over him, allowing the tips of her erect nipples to brush along his sensitized back as she whispered in his ear.

"Do you make pearls after every swim?"

He moved to try to catch her lips in a kiss but she pulled away, returning to her self-appointed task of masseuse. Working on his powerful shoulders she waited for her answer.

"No. I think I'd go mad otherwise. But if I let the lake water dry on my skin, then it happens. I usually shower directly after coming in. Oh...a bit to the left, please."

She started working on the knot in his shoulder and worried her lip as facts marched through her mind. It was true that she'd awoken with no pearls sticking to her thighs—but she had taken a shower before going down to dinner. So whatever this effect was, it required the prolonged contact between the water of Lake Silith, air and certain kinds of fluids from Garom—be it semen or otherwise. She wondered if there was any use for the reaction, short of making pretty baubles in unpredictable shapes and interesting dirty jokes.

There was only one way to find out.

"I know what I want," she announced.

He chuckled again, one hand darting up behind his back to where she straddled him. With a stroke of her engorged clit, he stated, "I bet you know what you want."

"In return for removing the pearl that so plagued you, I wish to go for a swim!"

She hopped off his back and stooped to pick up the remains of her dress while he groaned in displeasure.

“Do you know how many landers ask to go for a swim with a cetalean? I didn’t think you were that stereotypical.”

She rose up, fixing him with a piercing glare that brooked no argument. “So, you’d better make it a non-stereotypical swim then.”

And she walked out of the room, as naked as can be, the scent of sex still clinging to her skin. He really had no choice but to follow.

Chapter Four

The Release

He hadn't slept dry more than a handful of times in his entire life. He'd picked his hotel room specifically for the capacious size of the tub, as there were no suitable places to sleep wet in Lake Silith itself. But he'd actually fallen asleep with Ivani and he didn't even have the excuse of being in her room instead of his. He'd just wanted to fall asleep at her side. He'd been tired, yes, but she'd fallen asleep before he had. Choosing to sleep at her side had been the hardest and yet the easiest decision he'd had to make in a while.

He'd had the choice of life or death wrenched from him during the plague and it had been a while since he'd felt comfortable in his skin, especially in his newly young skin. He'd come to Lake Silith to investigate but he'd also come to find solitude and reassess what he wanted to do with his life, now that he was virtually chained to this dry planet.

How would he know that a bossy, brassy, sexy as hell Lithian would manage to disturb his solitude, make him think of the future with a keen interest he hadn't felt in decades and make him think that this planet had a hell of a lot to offer? Fuck, he hadn't had more than a couple of conversations with the woman but their bodies meshed like he'd never thought a cetalean and a lander ever could.

Currently, she was winning an impromptu race to the shore of the lake and she waded in without the usual lander flinch at cool water. The native fish were taking advantage of their newly enlarged playground and even the few fronds of something resembling algae seemed to be reaching for the sunlight with ease despite the increased depth of the lake. It would be very sad to see the lake slowly shrink back to its former size, for right now it seemed truly a haven, both for him and for the native life forms.

He extended his webs, though encasing his half-hard cock was damn uncomfortable. His legs locked into a tail and his hands became fins. He followed her gliding swim toward the deeper parts of the lake.

It was like a mythic tale. Some ancient monstrous god carrying away his maidenly bride to his home under the sea. Only the monster couldn't wait to begin the debauchery.

Fortunately, the maiden in question was eager to be ravished. For a lander, she swam reasonably well but couldn't hope to compete with his engineered grace. Unlike many landers, who grew easily annoyed as a cetalean literally swam circles around them, Ivani understood when competition was pointless and simply watched him with hot eyes that made cock ache.

He wanted to take her here, as his mate. They might make fools of themselves with experimentation but she was the type to laugh it off as adventure rather than be offended. The growing pressure in his groin was unbearable and he finally retracted the webbing protecting his genitals and let the water sooth his throbbing flesh. He'd rather let her do any soothing. *Soon enough.*

She dived under the water, ostensibly aiming toward an interesting rock formation. The movement of her arms was awkward as it was in any lander but he couldn't help but appreciate the bouncing of her breasts and the flexing of her buttocks as she kicked away. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer.

He twined around her like a vine, moving from her back to her front, pressing light kisses along her spine, her shoulder, the side of her breast. She stopped swimming and tried to stay in place for his games but even in the heavier gravity here, her buoyancy pulled her upward. He wrapped his arms around her, giving her an open-mouthed kiss underwater, feeding her just enough air that she could lose herself in the kiss rather than succumb to the panic that most landers get without diving gear.

She was impressively passionate and he could scent no panic, only pleasure as her hands ran toward the cock he'd let out of confinement. He understood her trust in him

and he vowed to be worthy of it. Still, air would be good for both of them—and they didn't need to be submerged to have a damn good time.

Holding tight to her hips, he glided them easily to the surface with powerful strokes of his fused tail-legs. Once she had gotten a good gasp of air, she took control of their kiss, stroking his tongue with hers and pulling his lower lip between her teeth. He kept them afloat with small movements of his tail and laid her atop him, her legs floating behind her. Suddenly, she pulled back, giving him an evil grin. She moved her legs to straddle him and like a bucking bronco it took him a solid minute to get the balance right so he could keep them at the surface with some semblance of stability. Her thighs had an iron grip on his hips and her pussy was sliding over his balls as his cock poked her in the lower abdomen with every move of his tail.

Her hands were clutching his shoulders as she held on for dear life. He'd have marks from her nails the next day! His hands held her hips and he picked her up, moving her over him until his cock finally slid inside her heat and they both let out long sighs of relief.

Now, the image was complete—the sea monster ravishing the maiden in the briny deep. Or as she swiveled her hips and encouraged him to move with faster and faster strokes of his tail, the sea monster was being ravaged by the bride. He didn't mind being ravished in the least.

Her balance was extraordinary, he briefly wondered if she'd ever taken up horse riding in her past. She certainly had an excellent seat. Soon he was playing with her, bucking under her until they were practically flying under the water and she was screaming in her pleasure, coming hard around him. He let her come down, barely twitching his tail to allow her to rest. But before long the gentle motion brought her back to full passion and she was moaning for him to "Move, damn it!" He stroked his web-sheathed fingers over her clit and she shuddered, clenching around him so hard that he could hold in his climax no longer. He came with a shuddering sonic call,

announcing his pleasure to the world in tones so low no lander would ever be able to hear.

Fortunately, instinct had guided him toward the shallows or they both might have been at risk of drowning. She rolled off him with a smile of contentment and he would have been happy to float at her side for a blissful hour or two, just talking about everything and nothing and staring up at the deep blue of the Lithian sky.

Ivani apparently had other ideas. She stood on the lake bottom and was doing something with her hands under the water that looked remarkably similar to her movements earlier the day before. It looked like she was intent on pleasuring herself.

She still wasn't satisfied? His pride was a bit ruffled as he thought he turned in a reasonably impressive performance. However, if she needed more...

Already he was marshalling his resources, sure that he could find the energy to satisfy this woman—even if he died in the process. It would at least be a glorious death.

He swam up behind her, wrapping his arms around her ribs and cupping her breasts, nuzzling the side of her neck and nipping with his sharp teeth.

She merely laughed with exhaustion. “Hey there, lover boy, not so fast. My thighs are still shaking...you’re not the most gentle of mounts.” Bringing her hands to the surface, she cupped some water within them, slightly above the surface of the lake. She stared intently at it and he couldn’t help but do the same.

The liquid she held was distinctly different from the lake water. It had a mildly opalescent sheen—almost like...

“I know I don’t produce that much cum.”

She snorted and he grinned at the crack in her queenly façade. She arched an eyebrow at him and her ice blue eyes were filled with a spark of mischief. “No, you don’t—though in my opinion you are quite impressive on...many fronts. But this is just a little of your semen in a lot of lake water. I’m performing an experiment of sorts. I suppose I could have just asked you to spit in my hands but this seemed a much more

interesting way of getting a sample.” She returned to studying the liquid she held tight in her hands. “Can you stick a finger in it? Check the viscosity?”

Ah—suddenly things started to make sense. He was a hydrologist, after all, and this wasn’t just ordinary lake water anymore. She wanted the opinion of an expert, so he would give it. Swimming in front of her to get a better look, he touched the surface of the liquid and felt the slightest increase in the resistance of the surface. Underneath that, the water didn’t feel appreciably different.

“The surface tension has definitely changed. But the fluid itself seems very similar.”

She nodded, a wrinkle appearing in her brow as she thought. “And you haven’t had any problems breathing with your gills underwater?”

“None. Actually, the water is really superior in gas exchange—it’s almost easier to breath. The only problems occur when I’m out in the air and my skin dries off.” His own mind was whirling, trying to keep up with this brilliant woman. There was something about the water, maybe a native bacteria or algae that was reacting with some cetalean-specific enzyme in his body. He’d figured that out after only a couple of days. And it was true that air seemed to be the catalyst for an extraordinary transformation—after all, he apparently could now produce his own jewels.

But what did this all mean? What was she thinking?

“Think it might work?” she smiled at him, a mixture of challenge and honest hope that took his breath away. *Infinity, she was breathtaking.*

Could this system actually retain the water in the lake? The question popped fully formed into his mind—the culmination of all of his brain processes finally getting enough blood back into his head from his cock. Could the addition of some cetean enzyme into the delicate balance of Lake Silith result in the lake maintaining its current size? Would the lake be damaged? The life forms jeopardized?

“I’ll have to run a lot of experiments.” He spoke before thinking through exactly what that sounded like.

But she still grinned. "And I'd love to help you get enough...samples for your many experiments." He actually blushed. Damn, he would certainly enjoy her methods of acquiring samples of his enzymes.

Now she laughed at his visible reaction to her words. Her laugh made his cock twitch again. Hell, it was good to be young again! She seemed to have a similar reaction, as she let loose the water she had held and instead wrapped her hands around his powerful biceps, leaning in to kiss his neck and breathe warm air against his skin as she whispered near his ear. "But as I have no intention of recruiting an assistant to replace my particular job in all this sample collecting, I'm afraid we're going to have to find a good xenobiologist to isolate the right enzyme and set up a bioreactor for production."

Other complications leapt to mind, even as he felt her smooth foot curl around the base of his tail, trying to bring their hips into alignment for further exploration.

"Uh... What about approval? What about environmental impact?"

"You let me deal with the Board. Your job, Mr. Expert Hydrologist, is to try to discover if dispersing this enzyme would harm the lake and how much of the water we could retain if the harm is minimal."

She was so damn sexy in full boardroom mode, especially with that little wrinkle in her brow showing up again.

"Yes, ma'am."

Suddenly she threw back her head and laughed with complete abandon and he couldn't help but dive into her cleavage, licking and sucking the beautiful nipples that had bounced to the surface.

"Can't get enough of me, young man? Want to do some more experimenting? Or am I just a fling for sowing those wild oats?" Her hands slipped down to grab his ass and pull him closer. He was already releasing his webbing to allow him to stand with her on the lake bottom, hopefully to repeat their first encounter.

Young man? “Love, I’m a hundred and eighty. I’m either in this for the long haul, or I’m an old fool.”

She laughed again, a bright sparkle in her eyes that made him grab her ass and force her to wrap her legs around his thighs for balance. His cock teased her folds and he could feel her shudder in response to the implied promise. “Garom, I’m going to be two hundred and ninety in a few weeks. To me, you are a young thing.”

His eyes bugged out for a moment but he seemed to take it in his stride. Life had definitely taken an incredible turn for him, be it the whim of Infinity or divine providence. He was a lucky, lucky man. He slid inside the tight confines of her sheath and sighed in satisfaction. “My dear, you don’t feel a day over fifty-two.”

Again, her laughter rang out over the silken waters, soon to be followed by their combined moans of pleasure.

He was definitely a lucky, lucky man.

Epilogue

Ivani stood up from her chair and stretched her arms over her head, trying to work out the kinks from this last sleep cycle. After two months of sleeping in a bathtub, with a hunk of prime man as a pillow, one would think her back would cease to complain. Ah well, tonight she could luxuriate in the wonders of the mattress in their room. Too bad Garom still snored whenever he slept dry. But he usually left her so exhausted she could sleep through typhoon.

She purred at the memories. Two solid months of excellent sex did wonders for a woman's outlook on life. Garom Sesh had a cock that pushed her to the limits and beyond. And if she thought about his talented tongue she'd have to give up on the mountain of red tape she was currently cutting through and go find the man to relieve the persistent ache between her thighs.

Nope. Too late. Forms could wait. Abandoning the workpad on the table in front of her, she walked toward the lake, breathing in the smell of rippling water and sunshine. She'd never felt more at home than she did here. It almost frightened her. She was thinking about home, even family, and she'd gotten more real work done than she had in decades. Instead of using her considerable brainpower and connections to maneuver for position, she'd marshaled the resources and inspections to save the beautiful lake that stretched out before her to the horizon. The opalescent sheen on the waves was breathtaking.

Not far from shore, Garom surfaced with a dazzling smile and looked at her with blatant appraisal. Her nipples tightened against the sheer gauze dress she wore. Her pussy grew wet and ready. He was metras from shore but she was awaiting the plunge of his cock deep into her. She laughed at her own desperation.

The sunbathers arrayed on the pebble-strewn beach stared at her for a moment and watched as she stripped off the gown and walked out into the cool glistening water. Though she didn't mind an audience, Garom had yet to lose a certain prudishness that she found secretly endearing. Tourism at Lake Silith was booming and they had to find new secret hideaways to fulfill a need for privacy.

Garom twined around her in the water as she swam, the silky slide of his warm flesh against her cool skin heightening her arousal. And he knew it too—she could tell from the smug smile.

“Done with your survey for the day, fishman?” she asked between strokes.

He nodded his assent while he sculled next to her with easy grace, barely working while she began to feel the slow burn of effort in her arms and legs. She could almost be angry with him for making her feel like a clumsy clod, but his body was such a thing of beauty and his cock was jutting up to salute her, bobbing enticingly as his hips thrust to move his tail.

“All the fish populations are doing very well. Algae mats are stable and in good condition. Heck, even the insects we were worried about seem to be buzzing along happily. If I didn't know better, I would say that Lithos I was just waiting around for us to add this enzyme to the ecosystem. This lake just seems too perfect to not be here.” There was just passion in his voice. He'd found a calling here just as much as she had.

When their tiny island hideaway came within sight, she was more than ready to stop the torture of trying to swim while all the blood in her body was throbbing in her pussy, leaving her lower lips parted and her clit aching every time she kicked her legs.

She ran up onto the shore while Garom was still shifting from tail to legs and threw herself down into the hammock they'd strung up between two small stonepalm trees. Ivani herself had coaxed the trees to grow small hooks for them, a feat that shocked Garom. The hammock swung back and forth from her exuberant mounting and Ivani realized just how perfect this place was for them. The hammock was suspended in the

air, where neither Lithian or cetalean had an advantage. They were both equally vulnerable and equally awkward.

Garom stopped the swaying motion and climbed in next to her. She stared up into the rich blue sky framed between the gray-blue fronds of the stonepalms. "It's beautiful here, isn't it?"

"The view is beautiful, yes."

She turned her face toward his and he wasn't looking at the clear sky or the dazzling lake. He was looking at her face and one of his hands hovered over her breast, as though waiting for permission. She really had to teach him to stop hesitating. She stripped off the bracelets she'd worn on each arm and prepared for battle.

With a quick twist she was on top of him and grabbed both his hands in hers and yanked them above his head. As the hammock swung violently, she slapped one bracelet around his wrists and the rope holding up the hammock before spinning around to plant her knees on either side of his ribs and wrestle his flailing legs and bind them to the other end.

Then she looked over her shoulder at his intense frown. "Look what I've caught in my net!" She grinned at him and he rolled his eyes.

"What the hell did I do to deserve this?"

"You've been working too hard lately and this is your punishment."

His eyebrow arched in disbelief. "I've been working too hard! Ha! You've been up to your beautiful eyeballs in work. Last night I had to resort to crawling under your desk and between your knees. I was sucking your clit by the time you realized I was even there."

She pouted. "Well, it still took us quite a while to make it to the tub, much less go to sleep." Maybe fucking in that desk chair was what had made her back ache so much this morning. She pursed her lips, looking for a new rationale for having him at her mercy. "Well, you are still the younger man. It's your job to be the fun and carefree member of this relationship."

He barked in laughter, but stopped abruptly as she bent over his weeping cock and licked the very tip. She held her pussy just out of reach and he grunted in frustration when he couldn't taste her. She sat back down on his chest, then ran her fingers gently over his gill slits and watched in avid interest as his cock jumped in response, his hips thrusting against his will, sending the hammock on a wild dance again.

"See, you've been a naughty boy – so enjoy your punishment."

He groaned and she dug her nails into his gill silts and bent to swallow his cock. He sucked in a great gasp of air.

"Whatever you say, old woman."

She ran her tongue around the head and scraped her teeth over the glans, causing him to hiss again. She wrapped a hand around the base and sucked the head hard, then paused to look between their bodies at Garom, who was straining his neck to try to get closer and closer to her throbbing clit bouncing in front of his face.

"Uh, uh, uh. Not yet. You're my catch and I decide what you get to do and when." She focused back on licking the pre-cum off the engorged tip, swirling her tongue over and through the slit. Then she took him in as far as he would go, making him buck under her like a wild mentrabeast. Alternating gripping him in her hands and swallowing him until he bumped into the back of her throat and made her see stars, she had him on the edge of climax all too soon.

But he was fighting her, fighting the orgasm. He didn't want to make it so easy for her, not when she'd trapped him so thoroughly. A man had to retain his dignity somehow. She released his cock with a pop and sucked on one finger, then returned to his cock before he could realize what he had in mind. His legs were locked together, so she cupped his balls in one hand and snuck the other around the straining curve of his ass.

When she pressed that slick finger into his ass, he wriggled against his bonds and arched high. But when he finally let her in to stroke that magic spot within, his cock swelled in her mouth and he came in a gush of salty fluid that she drank with gusto.

Satisfied with her conquest, she was completely unprepared when his hands gripped her hips and he hauled her back, his tongue thrusting into her pussy with ravenous hunger. Surprise made the sensations all the stronger and as his thumb flicked over her aching clit and his tongue lapped at the opening of her sheath she shivered in orgasm within just a few sweet minutes.

By the time she was capable of rational thought, he'd jumped out of the hammock and stood firm on the sand while she was suspended sideways in the hammock. He held her knees high under his arms and his already hard cock was pressing into her as she hung almost upside down. The tables were turned and she was at his mercy now.

"How? How did you get the electromag cuffs off? They are keyed into my genetic signature!"

His large hands slide down to cup her ass as he rammed into her. On the downstroke, she felt an electric shock shoot up her spine and she screamed in awed pleasure-pain.

He grinned at her. "Cetaleans have a couple of genes borrowed from electric eels. Comes in handy once and a while, doesn't it?"

He pinched a nipple between finger and thumb and sent a jolt through her that already had her on the edge of an epic climax. When she felt his fingers trail over her abdomen toward her clit she didn't know whether she was shivering in anticipation or fear. But the light buzz of his thumb on her clit was just exactly enough to send her over the edge and she clenched her eyes shut and screamed her ecstasy to the moons above. The pulsing rush of his orgasm extended her own, leaving her quivering and unable to catch her breath.

He cradled her in his arms when he fell into the hammock next to her, their feet dragging in the warm sand as they lay content in their cocoon. It would have been a wonderful, lazy way to spend an afternoon.

But it was not to be. In front of them, the water erupted from its glistening pearl sheen into a solid beam of blue light, rising up into the sky over their heads. Both of

them were befuddled from the intensity of their encounter, but Ivani knew that this was no natural phenomena. As Garom stared into the sky with squinted eyes, she followed the path of the light as it swept across the lake.

"That is a scanning beam," she stated unequivocally.

Garom nodded and pointed upward, "And it's coming from orbit."

"Damn it, why are Tessnet implants illegal again? I need to see the satellite scan!" She was practically screaming as she ran toward the water, only to have Garom catch her and swing her on to his back as though she weighed nothing.

"You don't want to go mad, do you? And let me drive, love. I'll get us there faster."

She hung on to his shoulders for dear life as he dived into the water, the webs covering his legs coalescing beneath her. He sprinted across the lake faster than she could have dreamed of swimming herself and had her on the beach and running toward Retreat before she would have made it halfway to shore.

What they discovered over the next hours was disturbing. Mardon Kaen, the Board of Directors' Information Engineer tracked down the stealth ship speeding out of the system. The refraction off the lake had revealed the ship and so Lithos I had a warning. The Qsakian Syndicate was interested in the Lithos System. A hostile takeover by the biggest organized criminal outfit in the galaxy was a fate every planet feared more than their sun going nova.

Once, Ivani Gorl might have fled on the first ship outbound, hoping to ride out the coming storm. Now, she – they – would stay and fight, keeping watch for the arrival of the Qsakians. They'd both found something too precious here to abandon. They would be ready.

About the Author

Elaine Lowe is a work-at-home mom in Silicon Valley, California. Of her many part-time jobs, her favorite one by far is writing. She has a background in biotech, but she has branched out into the demanding world of home management, toddler entertainment, transcription, envelope stuffing and of course, writing romantic and erotic fiction.

A love of history, magic and romance combines to inspire a lot of her writing. That and her wonderful husband, who is a fantastic sounding board, support system and research consultant. He really enjoys research. And so does she.

Look for upcoming novels involving forces of nature, a touch of magic, and the idea that sensuality is not specific to any particular time period.

Elaine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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