

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

StarQuest 6 Best
Friends
Forever
KATE DOUGLAS

ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies®

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Best Friends Forever

ISBN 9781419923715

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Best Friends Forever Copyright © 2009 Kate Douglas

Edited by Raelene Gurlinsky

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book Publication June 2009

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

BEST FRIENDS FOREVER

Kate Douglas

Dedication

This story is lovingly dedicated to the memory of a lovely young lady.

Lara Anne Panches

10/4/1989 to 2/12/2009

You touched the hearts of more people in your short nineteen years on earth than
you could have ever imagined possible.

Prologue

In the twenty-second century, Earth is a world undergoing enormous change. With the population decimated by nuclear wars in the middle of the twenty-first century and almost annihilated by an alien invasion a few years later, humans have gone through an accelerated evolution that has resulted in many of them developing extrasensory talents. Telepaths, telekinetics and empaths are common, though it took a rebellion against the ruling World Federation to give those with extrasensory Talent the same rights as the rest of the population—a rebellion that was inspired by the first peaceful contact with a telepathic alien species.

Leonine people from Mirat, a distant planet with an advanced civilization where extrasensory abilities have long been the norm, have become powerful allies with humans. Joined in their quest to learn more of the mysteries of the universe, many humans and lions have also fallen in love and bonded as mates—and produced viable offspring with their parents’ same desire to travel among the stars.

Kefira, daughter of Mara Armand and Starship Captain, now Diplomat, Sander of Mirat, is the first child born of a human female and Miratan male. Tad Barton is the very human son of the World Federation’s former president—entirely human, though endowed with powerful extrasensory Talents. The best of friends as children, theirs is a rather unique tale...

Chapter One

Kefira Armand consulted her handheld for time and directions and looked once more at the imposing set of double doors ahead of her. Right place, right time, but what in the name of the Mother would the Council of Nine have to say to a lowly social services scholar?

She checked the line of her skinsuit, made certain there weren't any dust bunnies clinging to the tuft of fur at the end of her tail, brushed her dark mane back over her shoulders and, with a nod from the sentry, pushed the heavy door aside.

As always, she sensed the intense interest of everyone in the room. There were so few human/leonine hybrids in existence that she was always an object of curiosity. Since she had the distinction of having been the first child born to a Miratan male and Earthen female, she'd long ago grown used to the pointed questions and odd glances.

Her unusual appearance had been even more noticeable here on Mirat, the planet of her father's birth. Though this world was decidedly more advanced technologically than Earth, it was far behind in the acceptance of racial diversity. Miratans were still enmeshed in a tiered society determined by racial heritage.

Luckily, her father, a bipedal African lion for all intents and purposes, had been at the top of the food chain, even though the genetic blend of human and lion DNA had given her an appearance that more closely resembled one of the lesser breeds. She wasn't quite in the lowly tabby caste, but with her slight build, refined features and small stature from her mother's side, there was no way anyone would confuse her with the ruling lions of Mirat.

That's where attitude played a big part. Walking purposefully down the long aisle leading to the front of the large hall, she kept her Aunt Sheyna's directive in mind on how to deal with the arrogant and bigoted members of both worlds—*Hold your head*

high and walk like you've got bigger balls than they do.

With the image of basketball-sized testicles in mind, Kefira strode to the supplicants staging area at the front of the room. The small platform put her in full view of the Council of Nine, the ruling aristocracy on Planet Mirat. She had absolutely no idea why she'd been called to present herself before this renowned body of rulers, but from the intense scrutiny she received from the nine lions seated on the raised dais, Kefira had no doubt she was about to find out.

* * * * *

Tad Barton read the notice on his handheld and frowned. The Miratan Council rarely dealt directly with humans, but he'd called to confirm the order he'd received, and this was definitely where he was supposed to be.

He nodded to the sentry on duty, showed his Starship Captain's ID badge and entered the huge chamber. He hadn't taken more than a couple of steps down the broad aisle when the sense of someone he'd not seen in ages suddenly slammed into him.

Kefira! Oh shit... What in the name of the Mother was she doing here? He managed to maintain his stride even though his heart lurched into high speed, pounding at least a million miles a minute. The closer he got to the supplicants booth, the more his fight-or-flight responses kicked in and the stronger his urge to flee...or maybe just throw up.

He'd requested duty on Mirat when he heard she was coming here for advanced studies and then, like a complete idiot, he'd done everything in his power to avoid her. What was it about the damn female, anyway? They'd been playmates from the time they met almost thirty Earth years ago. She'd been the one to teach him how to use his Talents, the one who saved both their lives when they were kidnapped by a madman back in the last days of the rebellion between Talents and the World Federation.

She'd also been the object of every sexual fantasy and wet dream he'd had from the time he was old enough to experience either.

Kefira's parents had been the leaders of the rebellion—his father was president of

the World Federation. Both sides had finally managed to come together in a manner that had resulted in a lifelong friendship between Kefira's family and his own, and had forged an enduring peace among the diverse factions of both Earth and Mirat.

He just wished he'd managed to forge an enduring peace with Kefira. For whatever reason, the little minx had decided to put space between them when she turned about fifteen. He'd been trying—unsuccessfully—to get back in her good graces ever since.

Not easy when he didn't have a clue what he'd done to get kicked out of those good graces, other than one quick teenaged kiss...and this probably wasn't what he should be thinking about as he prepared to face the illustrious Miratan Council of Nine.

By the time he reached the supplicants platform, Tad had his shields in place and his nerves under control. Kefira's head jerked up when he stepped into place beside her.

Good. She hadn't sensed him coming. He acknowledged her with a brief nod and then turned to face the Council, well aware of her confusion and obvious discomfort with his nearness. He was even more aware of her feminine scent, the perfect shape of her small breasts beneath the fitted skinsuit and the thick fall of her dark mane flowing over her shoulders.

He checked, out of habit more than anything else, and her shields were solidly in place. In that respect, nothing between them had changed. She'd been shielding herself from him for almost twenty years. Tad stared ahead and thought of all those years without her friendship, without her quirky sense of humor, without her quick mind linked with his.

Best friends forever, they'd promised. For so long they'd been inseparable.

And then they weren't.

Damn, but he missed her. It was probably just as well she blocked him, or she might have figured out the truth.

The lights dimmed and then came back up as the last of the council members filed in. Tad blinked himself back to the present. He stood at parade rest with his hands folded neatly against the small of his back. Kefira stood beside him, a small dynamo

holding the same calm, reserved position. Only the nervous twitch and flick of her long tail gave her away.

Tad watched the older female at the center of the long dais in front of him. She stood and nodded in their direction. "Welcome, Scholar Kefira of Two Worlds and Captain Thaddeus Barton of Earth. We of the Council appreciate your prompt attention to our request."

Tad glanced at Kefira. She focused entirely on the Council. Tad might as well have been on another planet for all she seemed to care. Would he ever figure her out? *Probably not in this lifetime.* He turned his attention back to the Council.

"...and since this request comes from a sentient planet, the only one we have discovered, much less formed diplomatic ties with, we are loath to ignore it."

What? Sentient planet? Must be BoldCené. Tad glanced once more at Kefira. She looked his way and shrugged before turning back to the dais.

"Your names were mentioned as two not only personally known to the consort, but also possessing the skills and training the goddess and her consort hope to utilize as they bring their people forward into a more modern way of life. Too many years under the yoke of evil have left the planet's inhabitants traumatized and struggling to rebuild their villages, their very way of life. At BoldCené's request, a ship is being outfitted with necessary educational and technological materials. If you are willing to accept this assignment, we expect you to depart for the sentient world in three days."

The Council leader nodded to the members at both her right and left, and then turned to Tad and Kefira. "What say you?"

Tad looked to Kefira, deferring to her and giving her the chance to speak first.

She glanced his way, wide-eyed. *No, you! I don't know what to say!*

Her tail twitched so uncontrollably, Tad softly set the heel of his boot down on the fluffy tip to hold it in place. He almost smiled. He'd done the same thing years ago when they were kids, always getting into trouble together. Kefi'd never been able to keep that damn tail of hers under control—it broadcast every mood, every thought she

had. Especially guilt. Poor Kefi never got away with anything. Tad bit his lip to keep from grinning at the memories.

He bowed to the leader of the Council, including the other members in his deference as well. "Kefira and I are honored to be considered for such an extraordinary opportunity, my lady. Will there be a briefing before we leave?"

Kefira jerked in place. Her body went rigid. Obviously she hadn't expected he'd accept so readily.

"There is no need, Captain Barton, Kefira. The journey to BoldCené will take the equivalent of two of your weeks. Your instructions have already been loaded into the ship's memory and you'll have plenty of time to study before you reach the planet. Expect to be gone for at least two years. I would suggest you contact your families before you depart as communication at that distance is difficult. Your flight crew will brief you once you board. Report to Dock A, Section twelve of the StarQuest terminal in the main port at dawn of the Mother's Day. Your departure instructions including suggested personal items to pack have been loaded on chips for your convenience."

She handed a pair of info-chips to one of the security guards standing to the left of the dais, who carried them to Tad and Kefira.

Tad took the one the lion handed to him and watched Kefira clasp hers in a paw shaking so badly she could barely hold the small disk.

Bowing stiffly to the Council of Nine, Kefira stared for a moment at the disk in her hand. Then she turned and quickly led Tad out of the auditorium.

The moment the huge double doors closed behind them, she spun around and glared at him. "How dare you commit me to a two-year assignment? Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Tad backed up, both hands raised. Damn it all. He hadn't expected this! "Whoa, baby. You deferred to me to answer their request. How the hell was I—"

"I deferred to you to get us out of this." She spun on her heel, stomped about ten steps and then turned around and glared at him. "You were supposed to tell them it

was impossible, that we have work here that prohibits us from —”

“And I was supposed to know this how?” Tad shook his head. “Sorry, Kefi. I refuse to take blame for this. One, you don’t tell the council you can’t do what they’ve just told you you’re going to do, and two, what have you got that’s so all-fired important you can’t take the trip of a lifetime? Do you know how long I’ve been hoping to go on a starquest? Humans just don’t get plum assignments, especially something like this. We’ll get to see Bolden again. We haven’t seen him since he left on his starquest.”

Kefira planted her paws on her slim hips and leaned forward until they were almost nose to nose. Tad bit back a laugh. She hadn’t been this mad at him since they were kids.

“He’s a god, Thaddeus. A frickin’ immortal god, consort to the only sentient planet in the known universe.” Her eyes flashed green and her mane stuck out around her perfect kitten’s face like a halo of black silk. Her small breasts practically quivered with her outrage.

Tad bit back the retort he’d started to make and fought a powerful urge to haul her into his arms and kiss the frown right off her face. Instead, he sighed and forced himself to relax.

“He’s also our friend,” he said. “A cute little kid we hunted frogs with in the creek behind your mom and dad’s house. A kid who tagged along behind us because we were the big kids and he wanted to be like us. Bolden hasn’t forgotten us. Why do you think we were the ones he asked for?”

Kefira bowed her head and wrapped her arms around herself in an entirely defensive posture. “I don’t know. I just know I can’t spend two years on some primitive planet with you, Tad Barton. I can’t do it.”

“Well, that’s just too fucking bad, Kefi.”

Her head snapped up and she glared at him.

To hell with her. She’d been yanking his chain for years and he’d had enough. Tad grabbed her wrist and hauled her up against his chest. Where the last time they’d been

almost the same height, he now towered over her and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds.

She stared up at him, wide-eyed, lips parted in shock. Her breasts pressed against his chest and he felt the pebbled tips of her nipples through the thin fabric of his skinsuit. Before he could give his rational mind a chance to surface, he kissed her. His lips covered hers, his tongue forced entry and he was suddenly tasting cinnamon and cloves, the sweetness of brown sugar – all the flavors of Kefira he'd not tasted since that one kiss he'd stolen twenty years ago.

The kiss that had sent her running away from him, shields high and strong, anger and outrage radiating from every pore of her teenaged body.

Rational thought slammed into him and he broke the kiss. Turned her loose and set her away from him. Fought the surge of arousal that was impossible to hide in the tightly fitted flight suits worn by all starship captains.

He tried to read the expression on her face. He couldn't, but it didn't matter. She hadn't kissed him back. Hadn't wanted him to touch her, if her rigid body language meant anything.

She must really think he was scum.

He dipped his chin and sighed. "I'm sorry, Kefi. That was inexcusable. I will not touch you again. I promise you'll have nothing to worry about during our assignment."

Before she could answer, he turned and quickly walked away.

Screwed. He was so totally screwed, and there was no way in hell he'd ever get the taste of her off his lips.

Chapter Two

Kefira stared after Tad's tall, lean profile as he stalked away from her and wondered why the ground couldn't just open up and swallow her. She was such an idiot!

She'd dreamed of him kissing her *just like that* for so damn long now. Then, when it finally happened, she'd been so shocked she freaked. He must hate her. He should hate her, as stupid as she was.

"Fool. You're a damn fool." She ran her tongue over her upper lip and then her lower. She could taste him on her lips, but it was nothing like she remembered. No, he tasted like a man now. A strong, sensual man, not a skinny teenager with bad skin and a squeaky voice who'd kissed an even homelier misfit on a dare.

Mother, had it been twenty years?

Blinking back tears, she turned and slowly walked outside and across the central plaza to her room in the dorms. She needed to pack. She'd have to cancel the classes she'd already signed up for, and she definitely had to call her folks.

Her mom would worry and her sire would be proud and terrified all at the same time, but both of them would be thrilled she was finally leaving the protected halls of academia and actually putting all her training to use. After a lifetime of travel, they'd never quite understood her need for life in one place for an extended period of time. They'd never pressured her, though, and she knew they loved her no matter what.

Damn but she missed them. Mom Mara had understood exactly what it was like growing up as the odd one in the bunch. She'd been a little girl with powerful Talent in an era when Talent could get a person locked up or worse. Still, she'd grown into a beautiful, self-assured woman capable of bringing a powerful starship captain to his knees.

Kefira smiled, thinking of the amazing love between her mother and father. She'd been lucky to grow up with such loving parents, traveling the stars on her sire's starquest, meeting leaders of different worlds once Sander took on the role of diplomat. But even with all the amazing travels, she'd loved it best when they returned to Earth and she got to see her best friend in the whole universe.

Tad Barton. They'd bonded as children when they'd saved themselves from a madman. They'd promised then to be best friends forever, to share every secret, to stand up for each other no matter what. She'd known they had something special. At least, that's what she'd thought until the summer she turned fifteen and she'd heard a bunch of the guys talking about her. Making fun of the girl who was half cat, half human, the one with pointy ears and stiff whiskers and a long, snaky tail. They'd called her a pussy, but it was obvious they weren't referring to her catlike qualities.

She'd never heard the word used that way before, but she'd known immediately what they meant.

She was used to kids being cruel and she'd always been able to handle it. Until she rounded the corner and saw the boys who were making the stupid jokes. Her heart had broken when she realized one of them was Tad.

She'd slipped out of sight. He hadn't seen her, but his betrayal had cut like a knife. She'd kept her pain to herself. She'd kept her distance as well, until he cornered her a few days later behind the recreation center, and kissed her.

If she hadn't loved him so much, it wouldn't have hurt her as badly. But knowing he was doing it on a dare, kissing her to prove something to the guys—that was more painful than anything that had ever happened in her life.

After that, she'd managed to avoid him, though he always seemed to turn up wherever she went. Of course, his position as one of the few human starship captains stationed on Mirat had meant more contact than she might have otherwise expected, especially since she'd been doing her advanced studies on her father's home world.

At least on Mirat she wasn't quite the misfit she appeared among humans. Here she

was surrounded by other sentient feline and leonine creatures, and most of them had tails just like hers.

Now, though, she felt as if her world had collapsed. Two weeks on a small ship and then two whole years on that damn planet and she'd be seeing Tad every day, living beside him, working with him. Knowing he thought she was a freak...wondering why he'd kissed her.

He was angry. That had to be the only reason. He'd used his kiss to show her he was stronger, that he could do as he pleased. Obviously, only his training as a starship captain had reminded him that his behavior was reprehensible. It couldn't possibly be anything else, not when he thought she was nothing more than an inhuman freak...nothing better than a convenient pussy. That's what the boys had called her.

What Tad had called her.

Amazing, to think that twenty years had passed, yet those childish taunts still haunted her. Wiping the back of her paw across her streaming eyes, Kefira closed the door to her room and prepared to pack for the next two years of her life.

* * * * *

"Captain Barton." The pilot nodded briefly to Tad and quickly returned to his controls.

"Gentlemen." Tad acknowledged the pilot and copilot and strapped himself into his seat behind the flight deck of the small starship. Kefira was in the seat just ahead of him. She'd not spoken a single word to Tad, and nothing more than a brief greeting to the pilots.

It felt strange to be a passenger on an interplanetary flight. Tad was used to piloting his own craft, accustomed to having complete control within the vessel. He recognized the two males in the cockpit—both of them were seasoned Miratan pilots with years of training behind them. They'd been polite enough to their two passengers, though Tad sensed some animosity toward him. He was used to it, having gained honors as the first

human pilot to qualify for the Miratan starship program.

Miratans had enough trouble accepting the various castes within their own kind. Having a mere human not only earn acceptance to the training program, but then go on and excel at his profession had been difficult for many of the pilots to handle.

These two, however, were treating him in a professional manner, if not exactly as an equal. Tad figured he and Kefira were in good hands for the next two weeks.

From the looks the copilot kept slanting Kefi's direction, he, at least, appeared to be thinking of all sorts of things to do with his hands beyond fly the ship. Jealousy coiled in Tad's gut, a hot iron burning in his belly. He fought back the inexcusable desire to search the man's private thoughts, took a deep breath and willed the pain away. Kefira had made it perfectly clear she didn't want him. He had to get over his feelings for her or he'd never survive the next two years.

They made the first jump, one that took them well beyond the gravitational pull of Mirat. Since the ship was powered by kinetic energy alone, it was a completely silent journey. He'd offered his own Talent to the two pilots, but it had been politely refused. He was a passenger, not a pilot on this flight.

So was Kefi. Though she was still blocked, he sensed Kefira's frustration at not being able to participate in powering the ship.

The added boost from a Talent as powerful as she was would definitely shorten their time in space. It appeared Kefi wanted this journey over just as quickly as he did.

* * * * *

After the first day, they fell into a routine that kept them as far from one another as was possible on a craft less than a hundred feet in length. Tad studied the info-chip planted in the ship's computer and learned what he could of the sentient planet and its immortal god and goddess. Though he'd heard the story before, reading it with the knowledge he'd soon be standing on Bold's world changed everything.

Their friend Bolden, the child of the human Jenna Lang and Garan, a lion of Mirat,

had been marooned on the primitive world when his ship crashed during his starquest. After two years, he'd made contact with Cené, a young woman who was a handmaiden to the goddess—a goddess, it turned out, who was the sentience of the planet itself.

Bolden had fallen in love with the goddess when she borrowed Cené's form, but it was a time of fear and upheaval on her primitive world, with an unnamed evil staking a claim. In spite of the goddess's attempt to protect him, Bold had lost his life in a deadly battle with the evil sentience trying to destroy her world. Before he bled to death, he'd managed to vanquish Evil and save the handmaiden Cené, but Cené's love for Bolden was so powerful that she offered up her life force in exchange for his.

The goddess had prayed to the Mother, a more powerful entity than herself. Bold's unselfish bravery and Cené's willingness to die that Bold might live had obviously impressed the Mother. She had rewarded the handmaiden with immortal life shared with her beloved goddess, and then granted Bolden immortality as her consort.

The two of them ruled together now, not merely as god and goddess but as the sentience of the planet now called BoldCené. Able to take their mortal forms at will, they had specifically requested Kefira and Tad as emissaries and teachers to help bring BoldCené out of its primitive state.

Tad sat alone in the back of the ship, staring at the final words on the screen. He tried to recall the last time he'd seen his friend Bolden. Eight years younger than Tad, Bold had been as cocky and arrogant as his father, Garan, yet every bit as likeable. Even so, picturing him as the immortal consort to a goddess was a stretch.

Imagining him loving a woman enough to die for her was another thing altogether. Tad wondered, if he were tested, would he show the same kind of selfless courage Bolden had? He wanted to think so, but...

Tad wasn't sure how long he sat, staring out of the viewport and wondering where his own life would take him, when he heard the sound of weeping. Kefi? Definitely not one of the pilots. He shut the computer off and listened long enough to identify the sense of her, to know she was in the small lounge on the lower deck where she'd been

spending most of her time studying.

Studying, hell. Avoiding me, more like it.

Expecting her to tell him to get lost, Tad went in search of Kefira. He found her below, curled up in a comfortable chair like a lost kitten. She held the end of her tail between her fingers and played with the soft tuft of hair at the end, much as he recalled her doing when she was just a little girl.

Silently he crossed the carpeted floor and took the seat across from her. Her head snapped up. From the wide-eyed look on her face, he knew she hadn't heard him.

"Wanna tell me what's wrong?"

She swiped a paw across her tear-stained face. "Go away."

He sighed and leaned closer. She was so beautiful she made his heart ache. So intelligent he knew he would never grow tired of her insight and imagination if they were to live for a thousand years.

Knowing how much she hated him made the loss of her friendship hurt even worse than the fact she'd never love him. He grabbed both of her soft paws in his hands and held on tightly, even when she tried to tug herself free. At least she kept her claws sheathed. "Kefi, we're going to be stuck on this ship together for another week, and then we've got two years where we're going to have to work together once we get to BoldCené. Can we call a truce? I don't know what else to say, except I'm really sorry. I promise I won't kiss you again. Honest. That was a terrible mistake."

She turned away and burst into tears. If it weren't totally against everything he believed, he'd search her convoluted mind and find out what in the hell was going on, but that was intrusive, and it was wrong. Dead wrong. Instead, feeling totally clueless, he looked at her small paws still clenched in his big hands and did the only thing he could think of. He pulled her into his lap. Surprisingly, she didn't resist. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her against him. She actually curled up even closer, slipped her arms around his waist and pressed her damp face against his chest. Her entire body trembled as she cried. Her misery broke his heart.

He had no idea what to say. No idea why she'd suddenly allowed him to give her comfort, but he wasn't going to question it. Instead Tad leaned back in the chair with Kefira in his arms, reveling in her sweet scent and the steady rhythm of her heart beating close to his.

* * * * *

Kefira wasn't certain what woke her, but the fact she was curled up in Tad's lap with his arms wrapped solidly around her probably explained the fact she'd slept so soundly. How many nights had she imagined waking just this way, with her cheek pressed close against his chest and the slow, steady drumbeat of his heart in her ear?

Moving slowly, carefully, she managed to disengage herself from his embrace. He slept soundly, his head tilted uncomfortably to one side, his lips slightly parted. When she finally stood beside him, she realized she didn't want to leave.

It had felt right. Just perfectly right, to awaken in his arms. It couldn't happen again. She brushed one paw across her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Better not to get used to it. He'd promised to leave her alone.

There was nothing quite so damaging to a girl's ego as to be called a mistake, but that's all she would ever be to him.

Not just a mistake, a terrible mistake. Okay. She could live with that. It wasn't as if he'd ever even hinted at anything else. He'd offered her comfort on the basis of their longstanding friendship. That was it. The planet was certainly big enough that, once they landed, they shouldn't have to work together. Her experience and training were in social structure and education. Tad was a mechanical engineer and had studied just about every kind of technology on his way to flight training school, but she imagined he would end up teaching or developing something to help the planet's industrialization.

She was mulling over their possible jobs when she reached the door and swept her hand across the sensor to open it. Nothing happened. She tried it again with the same

results—or lack thereof. Glancing back at Tad, still sound asleep, Kefira flipped open the emergency access panel and tried to manually open the door.

It was stuck. She stared at it for a moment with her hands planted firmly on her hips and silently seethed. She really didn't want Tad to wake up while she was still here in the lounge with him.

"What's the matter?"

Damn. Too late. "The door's jammed, I guess. I can't open it." She glanced at Tad and wished she hadn't. Still half asleep, he looked more approachable than he had in years. His hair, worn long in the way of the Miratan lions' manes, brushed the collar of his skinsuit and fell in thick waves over his forehead. His eyes were sleepy and his lips slightly swollen. She wanted to brush the tangled hair back from his forehead.

Kiss that beautiful mouth.

Instead, she stepped aside so he could take a look at the door.

He tried everything she'd done. Then he pulled a small metal tool out of his back pocket and pried the panel loose from the wall, checked the wiring and replaced the panel.

The door remained closed. He pressed the button for the intercom and radioed the flight deck.

"Yes?"

"Captain, we've got a problem with the door to the lounge. It appears to be stuck. Can you send the copilot down with a pry bar to free it? I've tried resetting the—"

"I'm sorry, Captain Barton, but that's not possible."

"Would you like to explain why not?"

"Not particularly. I'm afraid there's been a slight change in plans, but you and Scholar Armand will be quite comfortable in the lounge for the remainder of your journey."

Tad stared incredulously at the intercom, slammed his fist against the button and spun around to glare at Kefira. She blinked and took a step back before she realized he wasn't angry with her.

"We're being kidnapped."

"What?" She wrapped her arms around herself and took a deep breath. "Are you sure?"

"Try contacting the captain mentally." He was looking around the room as he spoke, pacing like a trapped tiger.

Kefira cast out with her thoughts. She hit a wall in any direction she went. Curiosity outweighing concern, she tried opening the door kinetically. Nothing happened. She spun about and glanced at the small table in a corner of the room and tried to lift the cup she'd left there earlier in the evening.

It remained in place. Her skin flushed hot and then cold and a trickle of perspiration left a shivering track between her breasts. "What's blocking us? Can you read my thoughts?"

"Are you shielding?" Tad stopped his pacing and stared intently in her direction.

She shook her head. "No. I haven't used shielding at all since I came down here." She tilted her head and frowned. "You haven't tried to read me?"

Tad shook his head. "No. It wouldn't be right to breach your privacy like that. Why?" He laughed and she jerked her head up to stare at him. "Have you tried to read me?"

Oh crap. She dropped her chin to her chest and stared at the floor. In a strangled whisper, she said, "I tried. I thought you were blocking, that you had your shields up against me."

He didn't say a word. He didn't have to. The tip of her tail was twitching like a damn mouse on steroids and he had to know how stupid she felt.

His hand brushed the side of her face. She jerked her head up and caught him staring at her with a curious, unreadable expression on his face.

“Kefi, I’ve never blocked you. I wouldn’t think of it. Any thought I’ve got is yours. Don’t you know that?” He shook his head. “I’ve been an open book to you for years. You just never seemed interested enough to check out the pages.”

Stunned by the powerful sincerity in his soft voice, Kefira raised her head and frowned at him. “Why would I want your thoughts? I’m not a masochist. You think I’m a freak – why would I want to hear more of that? You’ve always thought I...”

“What?” He grabbed her shoulders and practically shook her. His dark eyes blazed “Why in the hell would you say something so stupid?”

She could hardly speak over the lump in her throat. Twenty years hadn’t softened the pain at all. “I heard you. The others said terrible things about me, and you agreed. You were the one who said I was a pussy, that you just had to call me and I’d come. Here, pussy, pussy...” She choked on the hateful words, spun out of his grasp. “And then you kissed me, but it was just a dare. You were my best friend, Tad. My only friend. That’s why it hurt so badly. I was prepared for that kind of treatment from the other kids, but not you. I trusted you.”

Moving beyond his reach, she stared at the locked door. “Enough chatter about old times,” she said, forcing a lightness to her words she didn’t feel. “How are we going to get out of here and take over the ship?” He didn’t answer. Hadn’t said a word.

She glanced over her shoulder. He wouldn’t meet her eyes. Instead he turned slowly and walked across the small lounge and sat down in the same chair he’d been in before. The same chair where he’d held her in his arms as she slept. Bowed his head and stared at the deck between his feet.

Kefira turned her attention back to the locked door. It hurt too much to look at Tad. There had to be a way out. She and Tad might never be friends again, but they were still two of the strongest Talents in two worlds. Somehow, they needed to get out of this room and take control of the ship.

Chapter Three

Tad wanted to howl. He wanted to break something, hit someone. Cry. All those years ago and the stupid words he never should have uttered, lies about his very best friend said to impress a bunch of jerks he couldn't stand. He'd carried the guilt of having said those awful things for years.

He had no idea Kefi had heard him. Mother, he wanted to crawl into a hole, but he was trapped here and there was nothing to do but face her and apologize—again. No wonder she hated him. He'd been a traitor of the worst kind, and now he'd talked her into this trip that had gone so wrong.

He'd treated her attitude as a game. Figured she enjoyed leading him on and teasing him, when all along...

Shit. He raised his head, caught her watching him. "Kefi, I don't know what to say." He scrubbed at his face with the heels of both hands. They came away wet. Tears. Damn, he was crying. *A little late for that.*

He forced himself to meet her somber gaze. "I'd like to say I was just a stupid kid, but that's no excuse. I remember that day, but I had no idea you heard me. For what it's worth, which is a shitload of nothing, I've carried the guilt of having said those ugly things about you ever since. I didn't mean a word of it. None of it."

She didn't say anything. She just looked at him out of her gorgeous green cat's eyes like he was something she'd rather scrape off her shoe than speak to. He shrugged and looked away. "I was such a loser, a bigger freak than you ever were, Kefi. My dad was the president, and that alone set me apart. On top of that, I was too damn smart, too tall, too skinny, too homely and awkward to have any friends. I wanted to be one of the guys, to talk like they did, to have guy friends like they did. They knew how close you

and I were. Instead of defending you when they started talking trash, I did my best to outdo them. It was stupid and cruel and I was dead wrong. Can you ever forgive me?

She stared at him for the longest time. He had no idea what she was thinking. Finally she sighed and looked away. "I don't know, Tad. I honestly don't know. Right now, I think we have bigger things to worry about."

She was right, obviously. That didn't make him feel any better, but at least it gave him something else to focus on. "Have you looked for cameras?" He walked around the lounge and checked all the obvious spots. Kefi went to the small kitchen area and looked under the cabinets and into every nook and cranny.

"Tad?"

He glanced her way and saw that she was gesturing to him to come closer. She pointed to one of the small overhead storage lockers. One of the glass knobs had been replaced with a fisheye lens. Tad looked directly into the camera before he reached up and pulled it out of the door, tossed it on the ground and stepped on it. The sound of breaking glass should have made him feel better. It didn't. "Any more?"

"Well, that was effective." Kefira slanted him a noncommittal glance and continued her search. She found two more miniature cameras and three listening devices. Tad destroyed all of them.

"It still doesn't explain why we can't use Talent." Kefira stood in the middle of the small lounge with her arms crossed over her chest. She looked calm and focused, but the tip of her tail twitched and skittered in an agitated dance over the floor behind her.

"Something's blocking us." He tilted his head, listening. "There's a low hum, a vibration of some kind."

Kefi glanced around. "Any idea where it's coming from?"

He walked to the door and put his ear against it. Did the same to the bulkhead. Moved to different sections of the wall and listened. "I think it's actually embedded in the walls. Some sort of energy. It must dampen Talent." He glanced at Kefi again and an idea flashed into his head. "I want to try something."

He walked over to her and hesitated. "Will you let me hold you?"

She frowned. "Why?"

"I want to see if when we're touching, when we're as close as we can get, if we can read each other. I've dropped my shields. I want you to do the same."

Kefi nodded and wrapped her arms around him. It felt so good to have her close that he sighed as he hugged her tight against his chest and searched for her thoughts.

Nothing.

"Let's try this." He led her to the overstuffed chair and pulled her down into his lap. She snuggled close and this time they pressed their foreheads together, held their hands to each other's temples.

Do you hear me?

Her voice, so soft, so utterly familiar, it made him want to weep. *I do. It appears we have to be really close to get past whatever it is that's blocking us.*

I wonder if we have any kinetic ability?

Tad added his own burst and felt the rush of power. A cabinet door behind him slammed shut. "Do you want to try it on the main door?"

Kefi pulled back and gazed at him. "Not yet. I want to know what's up, first. Do you want to contact them, or should I?"

Tad grinned at her. "You go ahead. I'll just get mad and punch the intercom off again."

She actually laughed when she shoved herself out of his lap. He hoped she didn't notice the undeniable bulge in his skinsuit. Luckily, she walked straight to the door without looking at him.

Kefira pressed the pad for the intercom. "Captain? Would you explain, please, why you are holding us prisoner?"

Static crackled for so long that Tad wondered if the bastard would even answer. Finally his voice broke through. "Ah, I wondered when your curiosity would get the

best of you. Your captain ended our conversation before I could tell him that the room is fully stocked for the ten days it will take us to reach our destination. You will find sufficient bedding and your travel packs have been moved into the larger storage locker.”

Kefi turned and glared at Tad and took a long, deep breath. She let it out and turned back to the intercom. “Will you answer my question, Captain? Why are you holding us prisoner?”

“You don’t appreciate my concern for your comfort? Why, Ms. Armand...I am disappointed.”

“Answer the question, you stinking son of a —”

“Enough. I have a ship to fly. You and your companion have sufficient value to make our detour in plans more than cost effective for the refit of the ship and the expensive technology required to hold you.”

He laughed. As far as Tad was concerned, nothing about this situation was at all humorous.

“With buyers from two worlds showing interest in the purchase of both of you, especially of a hybrid female, negotiations for your sale should be highly entertaining.”

Static echoed through the speaker when the captain disconnected.

Tad slowly turned his head and stared at Kefi. She gazed at him with a look of utter confusion on her beautiful face. Without further thought, Tad wrapped her in his arms and held her close. Somehow, he had to get them out of this mess. If not for his interference, Kefi never would have accepted the post. If he’d kept his big mouth shut, she’d be perfectly safe on Mirat. If not for him...

* * * * *

She’d lost track of time, but her stomach finally reminded her they needed to eat. Kefira popped two prepared meals into the oven, waited impatiently for at least thirty seconds until both meals were properly heated, and set the trays on the table. Tad was

still pacing about the confines of the lounge, checking for more devices, fiddling with the control panel on the door or staring out the one small porthole that showed them a slice of the star-studded sky.

“Tad, come and eat. I’ve got food hot.” He paused and stared blankly at her. She wondered what he was thinking, if he had any idea at all how to free them. He shook his head, as if coming out of a daze, walked over to the table and sat. He took a couple of bites of the stew she’d heated before he set his utensils down and stared at her.

“I’ve got an idea how to use our Talent, but you’re not going to like it.”

His stance was more belligerent than hopeful. Kefi took one more bite, chewed slowly and finally said, “Well? Are you going to tell me, or is this a guessing game?”

He looked away from her. She tried to read his thoughts. There was no sense of his blocking her, merely the knowledge that her Talent flat out didn’t work. Finally, he turned back to her and sighed.

“We know when we’re touching we can link. I think if we linked during a more intimate connection, we might be able to blow the door.”

Kefira stared at him for a moment, doing her best to process what he’d just said. “How intimate?”

At least he had the decency to blush. “Sex,” he said, glancing away as if there was something really important outside the porthole.

“That’s what I thought you said. Okay, so you think if we have sex we can create a strong enough link for our combined Talent to blow the door? I’ve heard it can increase kinetic power, but I also know kinetic use can decrease libido. Tim Ryan was impotent for years before Carly came along. The fact she’s a synergist allowed him to function.”

Tad frowned. “How’d you know that about Tim? I thought it was a big secret.”

She laughed. “You’re kidding, right? You think Carly could keep something like that a secret?” She touched Tad’s hand. “I’m a synergist, but mine’s not a freely accessible Talent like Carly’s. When someone wants to draw on my ability to increase

their power, they have to get inside my head and actually find the thread to that Talent and call on it.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Why didn’t you ask?” She held up one paw and shook her head. “I’m sorry. That’s not fair. To be honest, I just didn’t think about it. It’s not something I’ve ever used. I only know it’s there because I was tested for it when I came to Mirat to study their social structure.”

“Why haven’t you used it?”

She glanced down at her paws, now folded neatly on the table in front of her. Didn’t he understand anything? “I have to link with someone for them to use it. It has to be a very deep, very personal link. It’s...” She paused and raised her head. She wanted to see his expression, no matter how much it might hurt. “It’s very intimate. The kind of link where you have no secrets left. No privacy. I was very uncomfortable linking with the technician at the university. Imagine walking naked into a room full of strangers with all your faults, all your failings, broadcast on a screen for everyone to see. I felt humiliated when it was over, and if I hadn’t needed to do it for the course I had to take, I never would have subjected myself to anything that invasive.”

Tad reached across the table and held her paws in his big hands. She stared at them—his so perfectly human, hers more animalistic with their retractable claws and soft fur pelt—and wondered exactly what he felt about her.

If they linked, she’d know. After all these years, she’d finally know the truth.

Kefira raised her head once more. “You’re right. I think it will work. We will have sex. Link with me at the beginning, but wait until just before you orgasm. You’ll need complete control to search for the thread in my thoughts that will tie you to my synergistic powers. I promise to open entirely to you. No blocks or barriers. Let me know when you feel you have control of the power and draw on whatever I have. Hopefully we can damage the door enough to break free, or possibly even destroy the

machinery that's blunting our Talent. But be sure you wait. You're strongest at the peak of your climax."

For some odd reason he was smiling.

"What?"

Tad laughed out loud, leaned across the small table and kissed her. A short, hard pressure of lips to lips, over before she had time to consider what it meant. "I know, I promised not to do that but honestly, Kefi...you're kidding, right? You expect me to do all that while we're having sex?"

She frowned at him. Concentrated on not sweeping her tongue across her lips to see if she could taste him. "Why not?"

He stood up and tugged her paw until she stood as well. He laughed again, but there was an oddly strangled sound to it. "The woman's a sadist," he said. "C'mon. We need a practice run first." He held on to her paw and pulled her out of the eating area to the couch in front of the vid screen. Then he pressed both hands down on her shoulders until she sat on the couch. "Stay put."

She stayed, but she watched him go to each of the lights in the room and turn them off, one by one, until only a single lamp glowed from the far side of the lounge. Then he sat down in the semidarkness beside her and took both paws in his hands.

"You have absolutely no idea how long I've wanted you, Kefi. How long I've imagined making love to you, but it was never like this." He shook his head. "Let's do this at least once to make sure we can get it right. Then maybe by the second or third time I'll be able to actually follow instructions. Is that okay with you?"

Second or third? She tilted her head and tried to see him better in the shadows. He loomed over her, perfectly male and so beautiful...just as she'd imagined him for all these many years. "It's okay," she said, but she dreaded what he'd think when they linked. When he finally saw how she'd loved him for so long. How pathetic it was that she'd fantasized about him when she pleased herself.

How she'd refused the few men who'd shown any interest in her at all because they weren't Tad. For all the sexual freedom of her peers, he would be her first...and the only reason they were going to do this at all was to try to break free of their prison.

No, it wasn't quite what she'd expected – or dreamed of – either.

She waited for him to touch his forehead to hers as they'd done earlier, but he didn't. First he leaned over and removed her boots and set them aside. Then he caught the fastener of her skinsuit and slowly separated the seam down the front. Her skin shivered as the fabric parted. When he paused as he bared her breasts, her nipples clenched into tight little peaks. She heard him swallow, an almost convulsive sound in the silent room, but he didn't touch her. After a moment, he took a deep breath and opened her suit all the way past her belly. Then he pulled her to her feet and slipped the stretchy fabric down past her hips, over her tail and legs and off her feet.

When she was entirely naked, Kefira fought a powerful instinct to cover herself, until she looked into his eyes. His need for her was written on his face, in his rigid posture, so obvious it took her breath. She'd wondered how it would feel for her, should she ever make love with Tad, but she'd never once considered what it would be like for him.

He leaned over and unfastened his boots. Slipped them over his long feet and wriggled his toes. Then he raised his head and smiled at her. She thought of linking. Decided not to, not yet. What if she were wrong? What if it wasn't need she saw at all? What if he was doing anything he could, just to make her sexually attractive?

For all she knew, he was thinking of another female, anything to avoid accepting the fact he had to have sex with a freak. No, the link could wait. After this first time. After she had a chance to finally experience her own fantasy.

Kefira shivered, remembering how it felt when he slipped the seam open on her skinsuit, how her body had come to life with each inch of her soft pelt he'd uncovered. Arousal blossomed and she sucked in a deep breath. And then she reached for the fastener at the collar on his suit.

Chapter Four

When the soft fur on her knuckles brushed his throat, he almost lost it. Tad went through every mathematical equation he could think of as Kefi slowly parted the seam of her skinsuit, running her fingers along the inside to separate the panels of material covering his chest. By the time she'd opened it to his waist, he was so damn hard he was afraid the fabric wouldn't slip over his boner, but she paused with it opened just that far, and stroked her fingers through the thick black hair that covered his chest.

He swallowed and looked down—she was so tiny compared to him. Nothing but a little kitten, though the sensual spark in her green eyes wasn't the least bit childish. She grinned, flashing sharp canines, and ran her fingers through his chest hair once again.

"You didn't have this last time I saw you without a shirt. I like it." She leaned close and sniffed. Before he could think of a response, she rubbed her cheek against him. "Smells good. Like a man grown. Like you."

Then she stood on her toes and grabbed the shoulders of his skinsuit. She tugged the fabric over his broad shoulders and then over his arms. He pulled his hands free of the sleeves and waited impatiently while she studied him. The air was comfortably warm in the lounge but he broke out in goose bumps under her intense scrutiny. He tried linking, and while he caught a flash of her, it wasn't enough to form a connection, not enough to know what she thought.

Damn whatever the bastards were running to interfere with their Talent! He wanted to see into her thoughts now, to know if she was as affected by what they did as he was. As eager and inflamed as he was over what was coming next.

Kefi grabbed the stretchy fabric bunched at his hips and slowly dragged it down over his thighs. His erection popped free, and though she paused for a second as his cock bobbed between them, she kept tugging the suit until she'd reached his feet. He

lifted one foot and then the other for her to pull it off. She tossed his suit aside to land atop hers. Then she knelt in front of him, sitting back on her heels and gazing up. Her tail wrapped around her hip and over the tops of her thighs. The tip twitched and skittered in front of her.

She ignored it. Instead, she seemed fascinated by his cock and balls and the curly black hair covering his legs and thighs, growing thick across his groin. He waited for her to look up and catch his eye, but she stared at his package instead. The intense scrutiny should have embarrassed him, but all it did was make him hotter—harder and hornier than he'd ever been in his life. His cock took on a life of its own, swelling larger, rising up to rest against his belly.

She reached out with both hands—paws really, with their retractable nails and soft pelt across the backs—and stroked up his legs, against the natural flow of his body hair. When she reached his groin, she slipped her fingers through the thicker tangle of hair until she reached the fat root of his penis. He bit back a strangled groan when she circled the hard shaft with one paw, cupped his balls with the other. Watching, feeling her tentative exploration of his sex had him close to the breaking point. He'd waited so long, imagined so much.

His fantasies hadn't come even remotely close.

His legs shook with the effort to remain standing. When she raised up on her knees, grasped his erection and pulled it down to her warm mouth, he almost collapsed. Groaning, he tangled his fingers in the silky mane that spilled over her shoulders, unsure whether he wanted to pull her away from his cock or hold her close.

Her tongue was rougher than a human woman's, though not as raspy as a full-blood Miratan. In Tad's opinion, it was absolutely perfect. She curled the mobile tip around his shaft, licked the full length in a slow, sandpapery sweep and lapped at the steady stream of pre-cum spilling from the tip.

Mother, she was trying to kill him, but he was positive he'd die a happy man. He didn't want to come, not without her, so he reached down, wrapped his hands around

her upper arms and dragged her to her feet. She had a slightly glazed expression in her eyes, as if tasting him had turned her on as much as it had him.

“Kefi, you’re going to be the death of me.” He kissed her nose, her cheeks, her lips, rubbing his face against the stiff whiskers across her upper lip, tasting himself on her mouth. Mother, she had such perfect lips—full and sweet and soft against his. Unlike her father with his fully leonine face, Kefi was a perfect blend of human and beast, a kitten in a world of lions with her sparkling green eyes, full lips and slightly elongated muzzle. Her nose was almost human, her forehead entirely so, and the dark sweep of her mane could have been the thick fall of hair on any beautiful woman, if not for the sensitive little furry ears poking out from the upper sides of her skull.

She’d fascinated him since the first time he saw her, standing in the doorway of the Miratan ship with her tiny paw clasped in her father’s huge hand and her long tail wrapped around one ankle. Where Captain Sander had scared the crap out of him, seven-year-old Kefi had enchanted him. He’d been as charmed and intrigued as an eight-year-old boy could be, and before too long, totally enamored of the captivating little hybrid. They’d been best friends from the beginning, until he’d screwed up.

Now, in spite of his stupidity, after a lifetime of dreaming, she was finally going to be his. Forget the situation, the danger, the fact she was only allowing this because it was their best chance to escape—forget everything except the fact his childhood dreams, his boyhood fantasies, the desperate needs of his adult self, were finally going to be realized.

He laid her down on the soft couch, kissing her mouth, her throat, the soft swell of her perfect breasts. He suckled briefly at both nipples, pleased with her soft whimpers and obvious desire for more. He sensed her arousal, but he wasn’t ready to try the link. Not yet. What if he discovered this was all an act on her part? What if she played the role she knew he expected, merely to build his sexual excitement, the level of energy they’d need to break through the door?

Shielded, as much for self-preservation as his fear of the truth, Tad worked his way with small kisses and soft, sucking pauses from her throat to her belly. The sleek, golden pelt covering most of her body was like silk against his lips, but the thicker, darker curls at the juncture of her thighs glistened with her arousal and drew him with the scent of cinnamon and spice and sweet brown sugar.

Even when she was little, Kefira had always smelled like cookies to him. Now, so many years later, he finally had the chance to taste. Kneeling beside the couch, Tad parted her thighs and lifted her hips. She tried to cover herself with her paws, but he nudged them away with his nose and kissed the tender skin at the inside of her thigh. Her hips jerked when he licked slowly along the crease between her thigh and groin, but when he finally wrapped his lips around her clitoris, she cried out and pressed closer to his mouth.

Her first climax rolled quickly through her body. He tasted her sweet release and almost laughed. She tasted even better than she smelled. Licking gently between her labia, he found every drop of her juices, lapping at her like a cat after cream. Easing her down from her first orgasm, he gently built her back up for another.

Using fingers and tongue, lips and teeth, he licked and nipped gently, teasing her as he slowly slipped one finger inside her tight, wet passage. He hadn't expected the heat, hadn't realized how small she was. He was big, his cock long and thick. As turned-on as he was, he was larger than he'd ever been.

He didn't want to hurt her, but damn it all, if he didn't get inside her soon he was going to die from the pain of wanting, of needing. She'd climaxed at least twice and her body still trembled from her last release. Her lips were parted, her eyes half-lidded and slumberous, and he'd never seen anything more beautiful in his life than Kefira when she'd come.

She was ready now, as ready as she'd ever be. Was he reading her right? Did she want him as much as he wanted her? Could she possibly feel anything remotely as powerful over this joining as he did? Tad crawled up on the couch and knelt between

her trembling thighs. His cock was high and hard against his belly, his foreskin stretched back behind the darkly distended glans and his balls so tightly drawn up between his legs they felt as if they were ready to explode.

He wrapped his fist around his thick shaft and rubbed the crown against her swollen vaginal lips. She lifted to him, inviting him in. He glanced at her face. She watched him. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth, her once sleepy eyes were wide and staring.

“Are you okay with this?”

She nodded, but he sensed her anxiety. “I’ll be very careful, Kefi. I know you’re a lot smaller than me, but I think your body is ready. Hopefully I’m not too much bigger than any other guys you’ve been with.”

He didn’t want to think of those other guys. It hurt too much to picture her with anyone else. Instead, he swept the thick head of his cock through her damp folds, passing over her sensitive clitoris, dipping into the dark passage so slick with her juices. Then he lifted her slim hips in his hands and slowly pressed forward.

Her tail curled over her thigh and his, and he felt the furry tip as it twitched and jerked against his butt. Someday he’d learn how to read that damn thing, but for now it was merely another set of fingers brushing his ass as he slowly, carefully forced his way between Kefi’s thighs.

In a fraction, out a bit, in a little more, then out, barely teasing her outer lips, wanting nothing more than to plunge hard and fast, to bury himself balls-deep in her tight sheath. He felt her muscles slowly begin to relax, felt her slick cream easing his way, just as he’d hoped. Deeper, harder, stretching her tight sheath with each small, incremental thrust. All as he’d expected. She might be tight, but he knew he’d fit, knew they were meant to...

She gasped, a tiny sound of pain, not pleasure. Startled, he looked into her wide-eyed gaze and knowledge slammed him deep in the gut. Kefi’d never done this before. She’d been untouched, a virgin. He was her first, and he’d given her pain, not pleasure.

Before he could draw back, before he could fully grasp what had just happened, she jerked her hips hard, lunging against him, forcing him deep inside. She groaned and closed her eyes, but when he would have pulled out, she grabbed his wrists and held him close.

Impossible. No woman Kefira's age, human or Miratan, was still untouched! How? She raised her legs and wrapped them around his waist, pulling him closer, taking him deep inside with hot, rippling muscles grasping the full length of his cock. His thoughts scattered and his body took over, forcing him into the rhythm of two bodies in sync, two hearts beating as one—and without even planning, without intending this at all—two minds linked, irrevocably connected in the act of love.

There was no warning, no sense of Tad, and then there was no sense without Tad. The unexpected pain when he'd filled her so completely, when the thick length of his penis had stretched and burned its way deep inside her tight channel, had taken her out of the moment. But when she'd met his rhythmic thrusts with her own response, her own acceptance, she'd suddenly discovered she'd taken more than his big cock inside her body.

She'd taken his thoughts into her head. Taken Tad Barton into her heart, and with that, she'd opened her memories to his searching mind and freely wandered through his. As their bodies moved in a sensual rhythm, their minds found the synchronization each of them had avoided for far too many years.

And with that synchronization came truth—a truth denied for much too long.

He loved her. It was as simple as that. He found her beautiful, not freakish, sexy and alluring, not disgusting. All her fears, all her stupid worries had been the product of her own insecurities and Tad's one lapse as a desperate teenaged boy.

And the kiss? The one that had left her humiliated and shamed? Not a dare. Not a dare at all. Instead it had been an act of courage on his part, knowing he faced rejection if she didn't love him the way he'd finally realized he loved her.

Not merely best friends forever. No. It was more. So much more than friendship.

Fool that she was, she'd run away from him. Severed their friendship. Ignored the promises they'd made to each other as children and given up the best thing that had ever happened to her. Now though, when she tried to pull back, to find some quiet place to hide and lick her wounds, Tad was there, loving her. Forgiving her and hoping against hope she would forgive him.

Stupid, lonely kids. That's all we were, Tad. Misfits...both of us. Just stupid and lonely.

He kissed her, suckled her breasts, nipped at the tender skin beneath her jaw. He wasn't put off by the pelt that covered her body, thought her paws were cute and felt wonderful touching him. He loved the flavor of her kisses but he loved her intimate flavors even more. He'd just have to learn to be wary of her sharp teeth, but he'd discovered a new form of sex play with the subtle tickle and caress of that damn tail of hers brushing against his testicles.

All this and more she learned. All this and more he now learned of her.

The discrimination she'd endured over so many long, lonely years. The love of her family, but the horrible lack of true friends. How she'd suffered as an outcast on Mirat even more than on Earth, but the need to find her own way outside her parents' sphere had been more important than personal comfort. He learned how, for all those years, she'd loved one man. Wanted one man, and had avoided any entanglements, hoping.

She wondered if he thought she was foolish, or even worse, pathetic.

Never. You have honored me more than you will ever know.

So simple, really, to find love, now that they'd finally linked in spite of the mechanical equipment interfering with their Talent. But would it hold when they parted? Would they be able to work together, use her abilities as a synergist?

Later, he said. Can't think of that now. Don't want to think of that now. You, Kefi. I only want to think of you. How much I love you. How good you feel.

His thrusts grew harder. His hips slammed into her now, filling her as she'd never been filled. Kefira tightened her legs around his hips and held him close, felt the first

stirrings of another orgasm. Tad's tempo changed from long and slow and deep to short and fast. He reared up on his knees, dragging her into his embrace.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and felt her climax cresting, the coil of heat from womb to breasts to sex, the sharp stab of glory and she was flying, sailing off whatever heights he'd taken her to, flying, but not alone. Tad was with her, his hips thrusting hard and fast, his thick cock trapped in her clenching, spasming sex. She felt his hot seed, knew he filled her with more than his ejaculate, more than his cock.

He filled her with love, with the answers to all those old questions, all those needs and unmet desires. And when his hips finally stopped their sway, when he leaned forward with her body still caught in his strong embrace and laid them both down on the soft cushions, Kefira's doubts were finally put to rest.

She ran her fingers through his sweaty, tangled hair, paused a moment to enjoy the residual clench and release of her feminine muscles around his thick cock, and sighed. "I didn't expect to link. You caught me by surprise."

"I didn't expect a virgin," he said. "You caught me by surprise as well." He raised his head and studied her for a long moment. "Are you sorry?"

"No. Never. I do love you, you know."

He kissed her nose and her lips. "I know now. I also know how to tap into your synergistic abilities. I had no idea how powerful you were. You're an amazing Talent. I never realized."

"My parents wanted to keep it secret. They were afraid it would be hard enough for me to lead a normal life as a hybrid. A hybrid with Talent that went off the charts could have created all kinds of problems. I trained with Jenna, Garan's mate. My Talent is even greater than hers."

"So you buried yourself in academia. Didn't you miss contact with the real world?"

She shook her head. "No, Tad. I only missed contact with you."

He used his hands to push himself up and off her body. "Not anymore, you won't. Let's clean up and get dressed and blow this joint."

She grinned. "Do you think we can?"

"You're kidding, right? C'mon."

He stood up and grabbed her hand. She went willingly. He was, after all, the man she loved and they had a planet to save...once they finished saving themselves.

Chapter Five

The small bathroom in the lounge lacked actual bathing facilities, but Tad decided there was a lot to be said for washing one another in such tight quarters. Kefi proved to be amazingly creative with a washcloth and warm water. So creative he made love to her again, sitting on top of the toilet seat with her legs wrapped around his waist and the nipple of her left breast caught firmly between his lips.

Kefi finger-combed her long mane and cast a wary eye at Tad. "I will never see a bathroom quite the same way again."

He laughed, leaned over and kissed her as he fastened the front of his skinsuit. "I will never see you quite the same way again. Damn but I love you. If anything goes wrong..."

She pressed her fingertips over his lips. "It won't. You've been in my head and you know what we can do together. Those idiots haven't got a chance."

He nodded. She wasn't exaggerating. The power of Kefi's Talent lay not so much in what she could do on her own, but in what they could do together. When they were children and they'd been kidnapped by a madman, the two of them had managed to not only turn the small craft around and return to their parents, they had killed their kidnapper in a violent yet very effective manner.

They'd literally turned him inside out as they struggled to turn the aircraft. At the time, everyone thought the two children had drawn on the Talent of the adults who had linked in an effort to save them. It wasn't until years later that tests had proved Kefi's abilities as a synergist had given Tad the mental strength he needed to accomplish the task. They'd saved themselves, without the help of the adults.

Now, linked as they'd never linked before, Tad knew there was nothing that could stop them. But if anything – anything at all – hurt Kefi, there would be hell to pay.

They stepped out of the small bathroom and he kissed Kefi again—would he ever get enough of her?

She shook her head, grinning. “I hope not.” She placed one small paw on his forearm. *I’m reading you really well. Will you be able to draw on me, even if we’re not connected?* She stepped back, out of his reach. *Can you read me now, when we’re apart?*

He wanted to laugh out loud. *I hear you as loudly as when we were making love. Are you ready?*

She flashed him a smile that was all coquette. *Yeah, but it’s more fun when we’re making love.*

Hard to attack the bad guys when you’re naked. Let’s go.

He grabbed her hand. When she looked his way and frowned, he laughed. “Not because I have to hold you. Because I want to, Kefi. Because I can.”

Then he linked with her. It was so simple now, in spite of the equipment meant to dampen their Talent. He found the center of her mind that gave his powers their synergistic boost and focused on the locked door.

It slid open. Silently. He shot a cocky glance at Kefi and the two of them stepped through the door. Their Talent blossomed the moment they left the lounge. Whatever was attempting to control their abilities appeared to be confined to that one small room. Tad cast about for the other minds on board the ship.

The copilot was on the flight deck. The captain slept in his quarters. *Captain first. That way I won’t have to worry about flying the ship until we have both of them under control.*

Kefi nodded and followed him to the captain’s quarters. They clasped hands and used kinetic power to open the door. Before the captain was fully awake and aware, Tad grabbed him by the throat, applied pressure to a nerve in his neck, and the Miratan lion collapsed.

Kefi located restraints in his equipment locker and secured the captain to the sleeping platform. He should be out for at least another hour, but there was no reason to take chances.

Tad leaned over and kissed her. *One down. Let's go!*

Kefi grinned at him, glared at the unconscious captain and silently followed Tad to the flight deck. Carefully shielding their own mental signals, they entered the control section without discovery. At the last moment, the copilot swung around in his seat with a laser pistol in his big paw.

Kefi's mind immediately boosted Tad's. He felt her surge of power and kinetically caught the copilot before he could take aim. It took very little effort to hold him in stasis while Kefi took the pistol from his unresponsive fingers.

Tad took over the ship while Kefi kept control of their prisoner. The coordinates were off, though they weren't all that far from BoldCené. "I'm not sure who or where they planned to meet," Tad said, checking the star charts, "but with a simple adjustment to coordinates and your boost of power added to my brilliant flying skills, we should make it to BoldCené within a couple of days."

Maintaining complete control of her prisoner, Kefi flashed him an amazing smile. "I knew you were brilliant—and modest, of course," she teased. "But I've always wanted to fly a starship."

It was all Tad needed to hear.

* * * * *

Bolden, son of Garan of Mirat and Jenna of Earth, consort to the Goddess Cené, one half of the sentience of the planet BoldCené and Kefi and Tad's childhood playmate, met them at the landing field just outside a small, rather primitive-looking village.

Immortal god or not, Bold hadn't changed a bit as far as Tad could tell. Still audacious and brash and every bit his father's son, he strode across the thick green grass, accompanied by an absolutely fascinating creature. Tiny and feminine, with skin the color of purest ebony, brilliant red lips and emerald green eyes, the goddess Cené was unbelievably beautiful, and a perfect companion to the hybrid who was her mate.

Where Kefira's mix had resulted in more kitten than lion, Bold had the massive build, the thick, dark mane and retractable claws of his Miratan sire, coupled with the human features and naked skin of his human mother. He also lacked what Tad considered Kefi's most endearing feature—a tail.

Tad, with Kefi at his side, raised his hand to salute Bold and his mate as the leaders of their world. He never got a chance.

"Tad! Kefi! By the Mother, it's so damn good to see you two!" Bolden grabbed Tad up in a bone-crushing hug and then turned and held Kefi just as tightly. He kissed her soundly and then stepped back beside his mate.

There were tears in his eyes when he brought his woman forward for more proper introductions. "My Lady..."

Bold's grin was wide. Tad realized he was grinning right back at him.

"I want you to meet two of my oldest and dearest friends. Starship Captain Thaddeus Barton and Kefira Armand, better known as Tad and Kefi. When we were all kids, I was the little brat always tagging along and making them crazy, but they put up with me anyway. For that, I will always be in their debt. Guys, this is my lady Cené." He moved to stand behind her. His hands rested possessively on her slight shoulders and his eyes glowed with the strength of his love.

Tad bowed his head. "My Lady. I am honored." He reached for Kefi and took her paw in his hand, but before he could make his formal introduction, Cené burst into laughter. "Please. No formalities here. When I am Cené, I am merely a simple serving girl, handmaiden to the goddess. Only when I am One with our world do I think of myself as someone to be feared and treated with utmost respect."

Bold whispered in a dramatic aside, "She throws a mean lightning bolt, but don't let her kid you. She's always to be feared."

Cené jabbed him with her elbow, and reached for Kefira. She grabbed Kefi's paw in one small hand and stroked the soft pelt with her fingers. Then she looked up with a huge smile on her face and tugged Kefi away from Tad. "Come. I've missed girl talk.

It's been too long since I've had a chance to spend time with another female, especially one who has seen so many interesting worlds." She turned to Bolden and Tad with an imperious wave of her hand. "You may bring the luggage."

Bold snorted and waved the women off. Tad watched them go, aware of a tightness in his heart as Cené dragged Kefi away. The two were already laughing and talking as if they'd known each other for a lifetime. As the women passed out of sight around a small hut, the weight of the past few days pressed down on his shoulders.

He turned to Bold. "I told you earlier, when we linked, about our problems on the way here. We've got a couple of prisoners on board the ship. I contacted Miratan security as soon as we took over the ship and they're sending a crew to take the captain and copilot back for trial. The bastards'll be fine on board until then."

"Any idea who was behind it?"

Tad nodded as he grabbed their travel bags, slung his over his shoulder and handed Kefi's to Bold. "It turns out our kidnapping was arranged by a very small, very wealthy political faction of Miratans who are violently opposed to both diplomatic human contact and the existence of hybrid citizens. One of them owns—or I should say *owned*—the company that built our starship. He was able to get some sort of mechanism wired into the walls of the lounge that completely neutralized our Talent. Miratan and Earth scientists will be busy for some time to come figuring out how that works—and making sure there's a way to negate its effect. It had to be pretty powerful in order to control the two of us before we linked."

He paused, sobered by what they'd barely avoided. "Once Kefi and I linked, there wasn't anything that could stop us." *Thank the Mother we linked.* Then he bowed his head a moment as the full impact of what they'd just been through chilled a spot beneath his heart. They'd come very close to tragedy on this journey. Too close for comfort. He could have lost Kefi if their link hadn't been so complete.

Tad swallowed back the bile that rose in his throat, the visceral fear of what might have been. His throat ached and tears burned behind his lids when he finally voiced the

horror he'd discovered. "The captain told us he planned to sell both of us, but the truth is, they planned to kill us as soon as the monies were paid—after their leader had his way with Kefi. Sick bastard. He doesn't think a hybrid, an abomination in his words, deserves to live, but he wanted to 'try her out' first."

He shook his head, still unwilling to accept what so easily might have been. "Bold, I could have lost her—lost everything. I've been reassured they're all in custody and the threat is over, but I can't help but think how close we came."

Bold nodded. "That's something that can't happen on a sentient planet. There is no thing that happens, no bird that falls, no words that are spoken that Cené and I, as the very structure of our world, are not aware of. Even now, in this body, I feel the pulse of the tides, the wind in the branches, the life and death of all living things that exist on our world. You'll be safe here, for as long as you wish to remain. Accepted as honored citizens, beloved of the goddess and her consort. That's a promise not made lightly, my friend. Cené and I both hope you'll choose to stay beyond your two-year commitment. You are welcome to live out your lives with us, a part of our world." He held his hand out to Tad.

Tad wrapped his fingers around Bold's and sensed untapped, unexplainable power in his childhood friend. This wasn't the cocky little kid he'd grown up with. Not anymore. Bolden was consort to a goddess. Immortal...the sentience of a planet.

Offering protection to Tad and the woman he loved.

What passed between them was something Tad knew he'd spend much time dissecting over the months and years to come. Now, though, he was too far from Kefira, and he felt a great need to remedy the situation. The two of them turned and followed the path the females had taken.

As if nothing unusual had passed between them, Bold explained the reason he and Cené had asked for help on their world. "There is nothing that occurs here that we're not aware of, which is why we are so appreciative of you and Kefira agreeing to come and help us. Our people were held back from normal developmental evolution by the

evil that was slowly taking over the planet. We want to make their lives easier. In order to do that, they have to move beyond their primitive way of life. Life is peaceful now and they're ready to go forward. It was pretty bad here for a lot of years. The goddess wasn't able to fight it alone."

Tad stopped and touched Bold's arm. "And that's where you came in?"

Bold solemnly nodded. "That's where I came in." He took a deep breath and gazed off into the distance. "I've learned a lot about myself since coming here, Tad." He smiled and then continued walking. "The biggest lesson, though, has been the importance of having love in my life. True love. The kind that makes you whole." Then he slanted a wry glance at Tad. "But throwing lightning bolts is a damn close second."

* * * * *

They found the women seated in a small patio near a large but not overly ostentatious building. Kefi glanced up at Tad with an uneasy expression, but he had no idea what she was thinking. They'd decided to refrain from using telepathy until they knew whether or not their mental conversations were private when among gods. They trusted Bold without hesitation—it was their own developing relationship where they felt the need to tread with care.

Tad loved Kefi. He'd always loved her, but she'd still not truly forgiven him.

Kefi shot a glance at Bold and then focused directly on Tad. He felt as if she pinned him in place with her clear, green-eyed gaze.

"Cené asked about our living arrangements," she said. "Do you prefer your own apartment, or would you like to share one with me?"

In that one, small question, everything seemed to fall into place. She was every bit as frightened as he was, as afraid that somehow this couldn't be real. After so many years, so many mistakes, it couldn't possibly be this good.

But it was. Not just good, but perfect. Complete, now that he had Kefira in his life.

Certain of his feelings, sure of Kefi for the first time since they were children, Tad held his arms open wide. Without another word, Kefi stood up and slipped into his embrace. She felt perfect there, close to his body, her cheek pressed solidly against his heart. Her mind was fully open to him. Her love, her forgiveness, a shining beacon, leading him directly to her heart.

“Why would I want to live apart from my life mate?” he asked, nuzzling the soft fur covering her cheek. “When I love you more than life itself. Of course we’ll share. For the rest of our lives, we’ll share.” He kissed her, and it was more than a public declaration of his love. More than a kiss with someone he found attractive and wanted to spend time with, have sex with.

So much more.

Best friends forever.

It was a promise, one made long ago to his childhood friend, a promise that had grown from friendship to love.

A promise kept now and forever.

About the Author

For over thirty years, Kate Douglas has been lucky enough to call writing her profession. She has won three EPPIES, two for Best Contemporary Romance and a third for Best Romantic Suspense. She is multi-published in contemporary and paranormal romance, both print and electronic formats, as well as her popular futuristic Romantica™ series StarQuest.

Kate and her husband of thirty-five years have recently moved to the beautiful mountains of northern California, where they find more than enough subject material for their shared passion for photography – though their grandchildren are most often in front of the lens.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorasCave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can e-mail us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Kate Douglas

Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails III *anthology*

Ellora's Cavemen: Tales from the Temple I *anthology*

Just a Little Magic

Luck of the Irish *anthology*

More Than a Hunch

StarQuest 1: Lionheart

StarQuest 2: Night of the Cat

StarQuest 3: Pride of Imar

StarQuest 4: Synergy

StarQuest 5: Bold Journey



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

WWW.ELLORASCAVE.COM