



Chameleon

By

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Chapter One

It had been a decade since the aliens had come to their world asking for sanctuary, ten annums since the elders, in their infinite wisdom, had welcomed the insatiable locusts into their midst. For despite their glib promises, they'd begun to encroach almost immediately and to desecrate Mother Testa, the giver of all life, by the customs they had brought with them across the vast gulf of space.

It had been ten annums since he had first begun to covet the one among them known as Cara.

They had considered her no more than a child then—or so they claimed. He had never understood that, wasn't certain that he believed it, but that had been the basis for their refusal to unite their two peoples by allowing him to take her as his woman.

It was true she had just begun to blossom into a woman, but she was a woman nevertheless—by his people's customs, even physically, by her own. He had been close enough to her enough times to know that for the truth.

Not that he had approached them directly. The political nature of such a union had prevented him from doing that, but he had offered when the elders had met to discuss whether it would be better to adopt the strangers and teach them their ways or to keep their distance and allow them to survive, or not, on their own.

It had pleased his father—since he had no idea that his son, his heir, had already broken the council's decision not to interact with the strangers until they'd had time to observe them and come to a better understanding of them and their strange ways. He'd thought his son had begun to accept the responsibilities of his position.

It had made him uncomfortable, but he saw no reason to disillusion his father. It wasn't to anyone's benefit as far as he could see to admit that he'd ignored the ruling of the council and gone to spy upon the aliens himself.

He'd certainly seen no reason to admit that he didn't consider it a sacrifice, political or otherwise, to take Cara as his woman.

Her people had refused the offer—been outraged and insulted—which in turn had outraged and insulted *his* people since the offer had come directly from their king to unite the two peoples by the joining of his son and heir to a young woman/girl who had no stature among her own people that they could discern.

It hadn't insulted him. It had enraged him. Right up until the refusal, he'd been able to convince himself that he was merely intrigued, felt a mild sense of obligation and friendship because the girl had 'rescued' him and befriended him.

Not that she actually had, but she thought she had and it was that generosity of spirit and bravery that had first drawn him to her.

Of course, she had not known it was him any of the time.

It was hard to convince himself after that flat refusal even to consider allowing such a union that his interest was mild in any way.

For a while, he'd considered simply taking her. If she'd been one of their own, he would have without a second thought. He would have taken her deep into the forest and

kept her there until he had filled her belly with his babe and forced them to see that he had staked his claim upon her too thoroughly to take her back.

She wasn't one of their own, however, and he'd discovered that her people not only would not have considered it a disgrace that could only be remedied by allowing the union, they might well have simply removed his child and discarded it.

He'd decided then and there to have nothing more to do with her or any of her people. For a time, he'd managed to honor that vow, but never for very long. No matter how hard he tried, eventually he would find himself right where he was now, watching, hoping for a glimpse of her, hoping for the opportunity to be with her even if just for a little while and even if it was not in a form that she would recognize or respond to as he wanted her to.

Hoping that, in time, he would cease to covet her.

And yet, here he stood, frozen, unable to move, hardly able to draw in a breath, watching her slowly make her way through the sacred forest she had been forbidden to enter, strolling through it as she had any time the whim struck her ... just as she had that first time.

It had been five annums since the last time he had ventured this close to the alien colony—three the time before.

Anger flickered through him, briefly, and vanished. He had been certain that this time he would feel nothing at all. He had managed to stay away five annums. He had overcome his obsession with her.

He would have been better off, he thought in disgust, if he had not decided to test it.

She had matured since he had first seen her. He had wanted her when she had still been as much child as woman—more hard angles than curves and nothing much besides a couple of little apples ripening on her thin chest. She had ripened to full womanhood, all lush curves that made his throat go dry as she came closer, made him go taut all over, sent his mind into chaos.

If she hadn't been so lost in her own thoughts, she would have seen him.

Those thoughts flickered through his mind as he stood frozen, trying to decide what to do, and for a moment, he was tempted to act upon them as he had that first day.

She was thinking of him—as she'd known him—the wounded mantichore she had named Rae.

He banished the temptation as soon as it occurred to him. Not this time, he thought grimly.

Discovering he was leaning against a menzil tree, he plastered himself more fully against it, focusing his mind on replicating the color and texture of the bark and the shape of the trunk as she stopped abruptly and bent over to set the case she was carrying down. His gaze moved of its own accord to the bottom she'd turned up to him and his felt his cock, which had only begun to relax, bound upward again in hopefulness.

He glanced down uneasily and discovered it was just as he'd suspected. His shaft had refused to cooperate with his will. It was standing stiffly erect as if determined to catch her attention.

And it did.

Before he could will the damned thing to obey him, she straightened and turned, staring directly at it.

He didn't dare try to tame the damned thing once she'd spotted it. It was a dilemma he hadn't encountered before and he felt a mixture of wry amusement and dismay as she moved closer to examine the 'strange growth' on the tree.

* * * *

Curiosity flickered through Cara as she straightened to survey the area where she'd decided to collect plant specimens for study and immediately noticed the odd growth on the tree the locals called a menzil tree. "What a peculiar place for a branch," she muttered to herself, wondering if it actually was a natural growth or if it was some parasitic growth. The menzil trees had a tendency to look more like umbrellas than trees. She hadn't seen a single one before with such a low growing limb.

The disturbing thought that it might be the result of parasites, or insect activity, or worse, pollution from their colony, drew her closer to examine it.

Kneeling at the base of the tree, she stared at the strange growth closely. In color and texture, it looked like the rest of the tree, but it was blunt for a branch beyond the fact that it was growing in a place where there shouldn't be a branch. Grasping it, she bent it up and down a few times to test its flexibility. It didn't seem like deadwood. It was hard, too, didn't have the spongy consistency of decaying wood. Bending it down again enough to see it better, she studied the blunt end for any sign that it had been broken off, which would explain why it wasn't tapered as it should have been. There was a small hole in the end, but she didn't see any other sign that it might have been damaged. There was no raw, exposed wood. The bark covered it completely.

Except the hole. She studied that for several moments, wondering if, as she'd suspected before, insects had burrowed into the tree, but she didn't see any sign of insect activity—no insects, anyway. A little sap was oozing from it. She collected it on the tip of one finger and rubbed it between her index finger and her middle finger, testing the viscosity of it. It didn't actually *feel* like sap, she decided, testing the scent with her nose. It didn't smell like tree sap either.

She was just about to turn away when she discovered that there was an odd looking bulge below the branch—sort of like a knot. Another branch? That was really strange—that one had evidently budded, but had either broken off or failed to develop and then another right above that. Releasing the blunt branch, she felt the knot below it. Startled when she discovered it wasn't hard like the branch, or the trunk of the tree, she snatched her hand back.

Frowning, she stared at the growth, mildly revolted about the fact that it seemed soft and ... squishy when it certainly shouldn't.

Convinced abruptly that she'd found a colony of parasites, she decided to extract some of the fluids just below the bark for study. "Well! I'll just have to have a look at that! Poor tree! It's a very good thing I found this. The entire forest might have become infected—might still."

Getting to her feet abruptly, she moved back to her case to get a knife and a container for the samples.

* * * *

By the gods, Nouri thought with a mixture of amusement and horror! Cara meant to castrate him! Or something equally unpleasant—far less pleasant than her investigation of his 'branch' and the 'growth' below it, at any rate. Detaching himself from the tree the moment she turned away, he stared at her for a long moment and

abruptly assumed the form of the manticore, despite his earlier decision not to.

She sucked in a sharp breath when she turned and saw him, dropping the knife and the sample jar from nerveless fingers.

Regret wafted through him—and resentment. Had she forgotten him when he hadn't been able to put her from his mind?

For many moments, she simply stared at him in horror, her heart beating so frantically in her chest that he could see that it made her breasts quiver.

"Rae?" she whispered when he'd begun to think she really had forgotten, a strange note in her voice that convinced him she not only hadn't forgotten, but she remembered him with fondness.

As a beast, he reminded himself with a touch of anger, regretting that he'd taken that form almost more because of that than the fact that he'd frightened her.

"Rae? It is you, isn't it?"

He approached her slowly so as not to frighten her more, sensed the moment the tension went out of her. She tangled her fingers in his mane when he rubbed against her, closing his eyes at the pleasure it gave him to touch her even in the form of a beast.

She knelt abruptly, curling her arms around his neck as she had so many times before, and brushing her cheek along the top of his head. He breathed her scent with something akin to ecstasy, nuzzling his face against her breasts, content enough for the moment just to feel her acceptance and the affection she had for the beast.

She leaned away after a moment—too soon—holding his head. "I can't believe you still remember me! It's been years ...!" Her gaze moved over his face. "And you are still so handsome! Just look at you!"

His pleasure waned, took an abrupt nosedive.

He'd promised himself the last time he went to her that he would never do it again, certainly not as a beast!

He was a prince, gods damn it! He didn't have to settle for being petted like a dumb beast! There were plenty of women of his own tribe that would rejoice if he had offered to take any one of them into his pallet and planted his seed in them! His father had pointed that out to him until they had nearly come to blows over it, for he should have long since taken a woman and sewn his seed to preserve their line. He knew it. Everyone knew it, and they were beginning to look at him a little strangely because he hadn't shown any interest in settling with one.

Not that he hadn't favored many, but then there was the rub. He had gone through the most of the eligible population of females without bestowing his seed on a single one of them and rumors had begun to surface that he was incapable of breeding—because a round dozen were claiming he had sown his seed and it simply hadn't taken, he thought with sudden anger.

It was the niggling fear, he realized abruptly, that she would *still* only see him as a dumb beast that had prevented him from approaching her in his true form. Her people considered his as little more than savages.

In all likelihood, Cara was no different than any of the others of her kind.

Angry, more with himself than her, he pulled away from her abruptly.

She looked at him with distress. "Don't go! I haven't seen you in so long! Come back to my habby with me. I've got a nice, thick, juicy steak I'll give you!"

He glared at her irritably at the 'enticement', so tempted to inform her that the

only 'juicy steak' he was interested in was between her legs that it completely distracted him from his intention to leave. Drawn by the direction of his thoughts, he studied the juncture of her thighs, licking his lips as his mind supplied him instantly with images of her as he'd watched her bathing—many times, too many times. He knew her body more intimately even than the bodies of the many females he'd fucked—because he hadn't studied theirs

She grinned. "I thought that would interest you."

He studied her sullenly from beneath half closed eyelids, wondering abruptly what she would do if he shifted into his true form.

It was a sign of just how desperately he wanted her, he thought with disgust, feeling a wave of cold wash over him that he'd considered it even for a moment. The one most important thing her people did not know and were never to know was that they were chameleons, able to take any form they chose.

He was still tempted.

He was still debating what to do when an explosion of sound in the sacred forest jolted through him. He whipped his head automatically toward the sound, *knew* what it was even while his mind was scrambling to identify it. He could hear the scream of the wounded creature in his mind, could *feel* its pain and terror.

"Oh my god! Poachers!" Cara exclaimed, so horrified, she couldn't think for several moments.

Rae had vanished by the time she'd checked for her weapon. For a handful of moments, she debated whether to rush back to the colony for reinforcements or confront the poachers herself, but it was a brief debate. They would be long gone by the time she could raise an alarm and go after them. Pulling her pistol from its holster with a hand shaking with almost equal parts rage and fear, she raced through the forest in the direction of the shot that had been fired. Any doubts she'd had that she had mistaken the direction were eliminated when she heard two more shots in close succession. The sound jolted through her almost as if she'd felt the blows of the laser blasts herself.

She fell over their kill in her blind rush to stop them. Nausea and fury went through her as she felt the warmth of the dead animal. Staring at it for a moment in horror, she glanced around for the weapon she'd lost when she'd sprawled out and scrambled toward it.

A booted foot settled on the pistol as she reached for it, and she glanced upward sharply at the owner. She didn't recognize him. On one level, that was a relief because she would have if he'd been from her own colony. It brought home the fact that she was in serious trouble, however.

He bent down, pried her pistol from her grip and straightened. "Get up!"

Pandemonium erupted around them even as she scrambled to her feet. She heard another man utter a profanity in a hoarse shout of alarm, the first she realized that the man who'd just taken her pistol wasn't alone. She whirled at the sound and discovered to her horror that Rae had bounded from the forest and was rushing toward them. She screamed when she saw the other poacher bring his weapon up to fire, launching herself at him in a desperate effort to prevent him from shooting Rae. It streaked through her mind that he was as vulnerable as the beast they'd already killed, along with a fervent wish that he'd been a dragon instead of a mantichore, with a leathery hide that would protect him from the laser blast, and the sheer terror that she couldn't deflect the man's

aim enough to save him.

As quickly as the thoughts passed through her mind, Rae changed mid-leap from the winged lion into a dragon. It was hard to say whether the stunned shock that swallowed her in that instant of recognition was entirely due to that or because she slammed into the man with the pistol and then into the ground in almost the same instant. As if she was watching the entire scene play out in slow motion, she saw the first man take to his heels, firing wildly behind him. She saw the shot the second man had fired go wide because she'd thrown his aim off. She saw the dragon that had appeared to be Rae only a few seconds before land on the second man with razor sharp, four inch claws extended and rip him to shreds and then bound after the man racing away.

Still feeling completely detached from her body, she managed to push herself upright and stared at the remains of the poacher with the distance that only deep shock could provide. The screams of the other man finally pierced her disordered mind enough to allow the instinct for self-preservation to take hold of her. She got to her feet without any awareness of having commanded her muscles to lift her, stared blankly around for a moment in an effort to pinpoint threat and safety, and finally whirled and fled.

It was bizarre, gave her almost a sense of running with someone else's body. She felt the jolts each time her feet struck the ground, but she seemed detached from everything else. She could hear her heart hammering in her ears with fear, hear the rasp of her breath in and out of her lungs, feel the impact of her steps jarring her, but not as she usually would have. The sounds were distant. She didn't *feel* an awareness of the fear. She didn't feel the strain of her muscles. She didn't even feel the jolts of her feet impacting with the ground like she should have.

And then something heavy slammed into her from behind and she saw the ground tilting upward to crash into her.

* * * *

Nouri knew the very moment his rage diminished enough that the haze of madness began to part and allow other thoughts in that he'd screwed up—badly, seriously, irrevocably!

He'd been infuriated when he'd realized the earthlings had killed one of the protected beasts of the sacred forest, but that had paled beside the threat to Cara. He'd been too intent on reaching the killers himself to realize she'd also raced toward the scene—until he'd seen her—heard the intent of the men she'd surprised.

She was a threat to them. They'd instantly recognized it and immediately come to the decision to dispose of her and the threat.

And he'd completely lost any ability to reason. He didn't even realize he'd plucked the thought from Cara's mind until he'd finished with the second man and looked down at himself to search for injury.

He didn't know *what* he'd shifted into beyond the fact that he realized abruptly that he'd plucked it from Cara's mind—just as he'd pulled the form of the winged lion from her mind so many years before.

And she'd seen him.

Encroaching on the sacred forest paled beside what he'd just done.

He'd revealed what they truly were to an outsider.

His gut tightened. It was absolutely forbidden to allow the strangers to know and the penalty for revealing their most closely guarded secret, their best defense against all

intruders—was death.

To her.

He searched for her immediately with his mind, hoping against hope that she hadn't actually seen him or that she hadn't grasped what she'd seen. Her mind was blank with shock except for the chant repeating over and over—Rae—dragon.

"Shit!" he snarled. Whirling, he raced back to the clearing where he'd left her, searched with his mind until he'd found her path, and chased her down. She was amazingly fleet even taking her absolute terror into consideration.

But then he'd discovered the form he'd adopted was heavy and unwieldy on the ground.

He shifted into Rae once more and then discarded that form abruptly when it occurred to him he might still convince her that she hadn't seen what she'd thought she had.

He discovered it was impossible to match her stride. He slammed into her when he caught up to her and lost his balance. He tried to recover, tried to throw his weight to one side, but they landed in a tangle with Cara on the bottom, hard enough he heard the breath knocked from her.

She stared up at him with wide, terror filled eyes, struggling to catch her breath when he rolled her over.

He couldn't kill her. Even as it flickered through his mind that he'd allowed her knowledge that no one in his tribe would allow to go further, he knew he couldn't.

He also couldn't let her go back to her people and tell them and he didn't trust that she wouldn't. He couldn't *allow* himself to trust that she wouldn't because it wasn't his decision to make even if it was his screw up that had created the problem.

Especially because it was his mistake.

Chapter Two

“What are you?” she gasped finally.

Nouri felt his anger nearly surge completely out of control. *What?* Not who? That demolished any lingering doubts about the strangers’ reception to the discovery of just how different they actually were. He rolled off of her, thinking, trying to bring his mind into some kind of order. He discovered it was impossible with all of the conflicting thoughts and emotions still raging through him—paramount the realization that she’d nearly been killed and weighing heavily against that the sick realization that he’d thrown her into far more danger.

“By the gods, woman! What did you think you were doing?”

She blinked at him. After staring at him blankly for several long moments, her gaze flickered over him.

He shifted uncomfortably when she met his gaze again.

“There were ... poachers in the sacred wood.”

“And what are you if not a poacher?” he growled.

She went back to blinking at him. “I only came to study the plants and animals, not to harm,” she said shakily.

Her ‘study’ of his cock while he’d been blended with the tree popped into his mind. It would sure as hell have harmed *him* if she’d taken her damned sample!

“Strangers are forbidden to enter this wood *at all!*” he said tightly.

Her chin wobbled.

His belly clenched. He scowled at her to harden his resolve. “Get up.”

She swallowed convulsively a few times and struggled to stand. He got up, caught her arm and pulled her to her feet. “Let us go.”

She threw a frightened look at him. “Where?”

“Strangers are forbidden to enter this wood,” he reminded her—*precisely* for this very reason—to ensure that none of them stumbled upon the natives out hunting!

“Yes, but ...”

“The treaty does not recognize ‘but’.”

“Yes, but I didn’t ...”

“You contaminated only by being here.”

She sent him a resentful look. “I’ve come here for years.”

“That is only an admission of more guilt!” Nouri snapped, although he felt a touch of guilt, as well. He had certainly been well aware of it. If he’d done something when he should have, this might never have happened. There was no point in regretting that now, however. He had to take her ... somewhere, until he could decide what to do.

“C ..Couldn’t I just go back?” she said pleadingly. “I won’t do it again.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You should not need to ask that. You strangers are so much more intelligent, you should be able to figure it out,” he said sarcastically.

Resentment and embarrassment flooded Cara in equal measure, embarrassment that the natives apparently knew how the majority of the colonists thought of them and resentment because she'd never made the assumption that the natives were less intelligent only because they had different customs. She hadn't actually known *what* to think of them since she'd never met one in person, never conversed with any of them. They hadn't welcomed the strangers into their midst, and they hadn't shown any interest in mingling that she knew of.

She'd been too young to pay much attention to the politics of establishing a colony on a world already inhabited by an intelligent species when their group had arrived. Not that she'd been a child! She'd been almost grown, but still young enough that her interests had wavered between childish desires and adult wants, and she'd been too focused on her personal battle to pay that much attention to the arguments of the adults.

Beyond being hopeful that the leaders of the two groups wouldn't be able to come to an agreement at all and they'd go home.

It was a sign of her immaturity and self-absorption that she'd thought they actually had the option of returning to earth. They hadn't had that option when they left.

It was true that her parents had volunteered to go. All of the colonists had, but they'd only volunteered in the sense that they'd realized it was their best hope of survival.

It hadn't seemed that way to her at the time, but then she'd been nothing but a child when they'd left earth. The only thing she'd taken away from the decision to leave was that her parents were taking her away from everyone and everything she knew to a strange place and they were never going to go home again.

She'd hated the new world from the time they'd arrived because, despite her parents eagerness to establish a new home, it really hadn't seemed a great deal different than living on the ship—and she'd hated that. They were still living with the same people they'd traveled with for four years and the habitats had had the same cramped, antiseptic feel as their quarters on the ship.

The only thing different was the atmosphere and the gravity—which had been hard to get used to even though there wasn't much difference between the natural air and gravity of the new world and that on the ship. They didn't even have that much more freedom of movement because the natives had made it clear that they expected the strangers to stay on the lands they'd negotiated for—X number of acreage was reserved as theirs and no more.

It had seemed almost like living in a prison camp to Cara. It still did.

Other colonies had been established by displaced earth people, but they were cut off from one another—connected only by radio and the occasional shuttle, which meant that, to all intents and purposes, they were alone. The atmospheric interference wreaked havoc with electronic communications between the colonies and even bouncing the signals off of the mother ships that had brought them, now orbiting the planet, didn't help much. And, due to the fact that they'd only managed to negotiate for a small patch of ground for the colonies, their resources were limited enough they didn't dare expend much on traveling from one colony to the next with the shuttle. It was used strictly for ferrying trade goods.

That thought brought her to the poachers. She was almost positive they weren't

from her colony. True, there were nearly ten thousand men, women, and children in her colony, but in the fifteen years since they'd left earth, she'd seen pretty much everyone, recognized them on sight even if she didn't actually know them.

They hadn't just broken the treaty by hunting in the forest they were forbidden to enter. They'd broken no telling how many other laws by leaving their own colony to hunt.

Death still seemed like a damned harsh penalty, but then the dragon

The native who'd captured her pulled her to a halt abruptly, breaking into her thoughts. "Be still."

Alarm went through her when he grabbed her pants just at the waist and gave the fabric a yank that split the seam from the waist to the knee where she'd tucked the tops into her boots. It created havoc within her, splintered her thoughts—except they all took pretty much the same direction—assault. He was going to tie her up and rape her and then kill her!

His expression hardened. "Be still and I won't have to bind your hands."

Cara's mouth was so dry she couldn't swallow. "What are you going to do?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"Blindfold you," he said tightly. She'd seen more than she should have already. Maybe it was too late to worry about it, but he wasn't ready to accept that ... yet.

She began to shake with fear when he took the strip he'd torn from her pants to cover her eyes. It made his gut twist with a mixture of emotions he didn't readily identify and didn't want to. It bothered him more than he liked that she was so afraid of him, that she had immediately leapt to the conclusion that he would rape her.

He didn't *need* to force himself on women, gods damn it! Truth be told, he had more trouble keeping them from waylaying him than the other way around.

Of course, he thought wryly, that was mostly because they found his position in the tribe so very appealing, but just the same

When he'd checked to be sure she couldn't see anything, he looked up to gauge the distance between the ground and his hunting cabin above them. He doubted she weighed more than an *ulk*, though, and he'd carried a full grown one to his cabin before.

He hadn't adequately considered, he thought wryly, what carrying her up was going to entail. He debated briefly, but his cabin was not just the first possibility that had occurred to him. It was the only one. He sure as hell couldn't take her back to the village.

Bracing himself, he caught her arms and drew them over his shoulders. She stiffened, immediately trying to draw away but he caught her waist, jerking her up against his length. Pain and pleasure immediately assaulted him. He hadn't actually been aware that he was sporting an erection until she slammed bodily against him. Gritting his teeth, he tightened his hold on her.

"You're going to want to hold on," he growled.

She didn't think so.

Amusement flickered through him. "You may change your mind when we start up."

"Up?" she gasped uneasily.

"Straight up."

He unfurled his wings, lifting the two of them off the ground. She gasped,

flinging her arms tightly around his neck.

He hadn't counted on her also curling her legs around him, but as soon as they began to lift higher, she did exactly that and he had a hell of a time focusing on remaining airborne, let alone climbing. He'd broken a sweat by the time he alit on the wide deck built primarily for that purpose that fronted his hunting cabin.

He also wasn't in any great hurry to peel her loose. He hadn't felt her like this before, although he'd imagined it more times than he could count—the feel of her soft, warm body clasped tightly against him.

There was no passion, unfortunately, beyond terror emanating from her, though. Remembering to tuck his wings away, he loosened his hold on her. “You can let go, now,” he said in a slightly hoarse voice when she only tightened her hold the moment he loosened his.

“No! I'll fall!”

Releasing a harsh breath, he reached up and pulled the blindfold from her eyes.

She blinked, threw a frightened glance around, and burrowed her face against his neck. He considered peeling her loose and finally decided she might be more inclined to let go if he took her inside.

She was in no hurry, he discovered. She lifted her head after a few moments and looked around again. Apparently, it finally dawned on her that he was a threat himself once she'd realized the possibility of falling to her death was no longer an issue. She unlocked her legs and lowered them until her toes touched the floor and then withdrew her arms, slipping down his length as she settled fully on the floor. “What is this place?”

“Your prison for now,” he said tightly.

She threw him a frightened look. “Why?”

“You've a short memory,” he said dryly.

She looked confused. “Without a trial? I'm just imprisoned?”

His lips tightened. “We *are* savages.”

She frowned, but she didn't argue with him. Instead, she surveyed the small cabin, taking in every detail, he didn't doubt. “This is a prison?”

He was on the point of telling her it was his private hunting cabin, but he changed his mind. “What is your name?”

She didn't seem surprised at the question and he didn't know whether to be relieved or irritated. It seemed to imply that she didn't associate him with the beasts she'd seen, but he wasn't certain he could trust that. In fact, he knew he couldn't afford to count on it. She'd been thoroughly terrorized, first by the men who'd attacked her, and then his attack, and her capture. She might or might not eventually remember enough to put it all together. He had to be sure she didn't before he could let her go.

If she did ... well, he'd deal with that when he had to.

“Cara,” she responded finally. “What's your name?”

His debate was shorter that time. “Nouri.”

Something flickered in her eyes, but she kept her thoughts close. Deciding he didn't want to delve too closely, he let it go, closing his mind to her thoughts. He was almost positive that the strangers weren't able to project their thoughts to one another as his people could. If they did have the ability to do so, they'd kept that secret as carefully as the tribes of Uzra had kept theirs—until he had screwed up, he added with disgust.

Nice ass.

The thought that broke into his mind was so unexpected and so clear that Nouri thought for a handful of seconds that Cara had spoken aloud. A jolt went through him. He managed, just barely, to curb the instinct to whip around and look at her.

Not that I should be thinking about his nice ass—or his nice anything! God only knows what his intentions are, but that boner was a strong indication that he isn't completely disinterested in sex whatever he says! Of course, it might have been generic, just a physical reaction he couldn't control. He certainly doesn't behave like anyone that has rape on his mind.

No point in putting it in his mind by staring at him, though!

Cara tried to decide whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that he'd asked her name. From what she'd understood of the human psyche, kidnappers usually distanced themselves from their captives. They didn't want to think of them as a person. Could the same be said about the Uzra, though?

She didn't know and fear and despair filled her. She knew she'd broken the treaty herself, and it seemed very likely that she was going to face the consequences of her actions, regardless of her determination to convince herself that what she'd been doing wasn't wrong. He obviously didn't care that she'd never harmed anything within the sacred woods.

It should still count for something, she thought a little resentfully. After all, if she hadn't broken the treaty all those years ago, Rae would've died—he might have, anyway.

She loved this forest! She didn't think the natives could possibly care more about it than she did! There was just something about it that had always called to her. Just about the only time she was really happy was when she was in the forest—especially since Rae had left her.

Her throat closed at the thought. If he'd been killed trying to protect her she was never going to forgive herself. She'd done her best to just *not* think about it, which hadn't been too difficult when she'd been so afraid for her own life, but she discovered as soon as she struggled to capture the memories to reassure herself that she really couldn't be certain of anything.

Everything had seemed to happen so fast. Even though, at the time, it had seemed that time had slowed, she had fragmented memories with gaps between. She remembered the hunter aiming at his chest and the certainty that he would kill Rae if she didn't do something but, wrack her brain though she would, she didn't recall if the shot had found its mark.

She hadn't seen, she decided. The man who'd taken her pistol had grabbed her. It had been just enough to throw her off balance. She'd fallen against the shooter and then hit the ground. She thought that must have been enough to throw his aim off, but when she looked for Rae, she hadn't seen him. She'd seen the dragon and she'd been too horrified once she'd seen the dragon to look for Rae.

He must have been hit, she thought, struggling with the urge to cry. He must have been! She should have seen him if he hadn't been lying on the ground.

"Did you see the mantichora?" she asked Nouri finally.

Nouri frowned at her, pretending he had no idea what she was talking about.

"The beast—he had golden fur? Wings?"

"I saw the beasts the poachers killed," he said tightly.

Cara stared at him, trying to absorb that, finding she couldn't. "He wasn't dead."

"You will not see him again."

Cara stared at him for a long moment and finally burst into tears. "He can't be dead! He can't be!"

"He was a beast," Nouri said impatiently.

"Don't *say* that! Don't you dare say it like it doesn't matter! I loved him!" Cara cried angrily.

"Then you should have stayed away from him!"

It crushed her to realize that he was right. He'd cared for her, too, and that was why he was dead! If she'd left him alone he wouldn't be dead. Wilting to the floor, she clasped her arms around her knees, buried her face and cried—blubbered, muttering his name over and over as if she could call him to her. She hadn't even gotten the chance to say goodbye! It made it worse that she hadn't seen him in years, that she'd missed him all that time, searched for him every time she went into the forest—and then she'd caused his death!

When she'd finally cried herself out, she lifted her head, mopping her face with her hands and looked around for Nouri. Discovering she'd driven him from the small cabin with her wailing, still sniffing, she moved to the door. To her relief, she discovered it wasn't locked and she found Nouri on the wide porch outside. His posture was unwelcoming, but she decided to ignore it. "We can't leave him like that," she said hopefully. "We have to go back and bury him."

"The creatures of the forest need to eat."

She gaped at him in disbelief for his callousness. "Not Rae! You can't leave him for the ... animals to feed on him! You can't!"

"I can and I will," he said tightly.

Her chin wobbled. For several moments, she thought she would burst into tears again when she'd been certain she couldn't cry any more. "Please? Let me if you won't."

"No!" he growled angrily.

His anger set her back for a moment, but only a moment. After staring at him for a long moment, she stalked to the edge of the porch to look for a way to climb down. The distance to the ground was dizzying. They must be seventy or eighty feet in the air, she thought in shock, wondering how he'd brought her so high so quickly.

Glancing around for some device that would explain it, she discovered looking up and out made her even more dizzy than looking down. A jolt went through her when Nouri snaked an arm around her waist and jerked her away from the edge. She turned toward him when he set her on her feet, wrapping her arms around him. "Please. Don't leave him like that."

His hands settled on her shoulders, tightened as if he would push her away and then lightened. "The beast you weep so pitifully for is not dead," he said in disgust.

Cara looked up at him with surprise and hopefulness. "You're not just saying that?"

He looked irritated—no angry. "He is not dead."

Cara felt her own anger rise. "Why would you tell me that if it wasn't true! It's cruel!"

He set her away from him abruptly and stalked to the edge of the platform where he'd been sitting before. "Go inside, woman!" he growled.

She stared at him, unable to decide whether to believe Rae was alive or dead. She didn't trust the hope he'd given her and yet she clung to it anyway, as worried as she was that he'd only said it because he didn't want to deal with her tears or her demands to give the manticore a burial.

She discovered she simply didn't have the strength to fight him, though. She was too weighed down with sorrow. Turning away, she went back inside. After staring numbly at her surrounding for several moments, she retreated to the bed. Curling up on the surprisingly comfortable surface, she turned toward the wall, turning her mind to her memories of the beast as if, by resurrecting them, she could hold on to him.

Chapter Three

The breathless, giggly excitement Cara had felt when she'd managed to elude the teacher and sneak away from classes waned as she reached the woods. She stopped just beyond the first of the brush and trees that edged the clearing beyond the last of the ugly little structures they called habitats, or habs for short, that made up the colony.

No one had noticed her slipping away, she realized, happy at first, grinning to herself. Hiding behind the broad trunk of an ancient tree, Cara watched carefully to see when the teacher would discover she'd sneaked off, but although she waited until she'd begun to tire of watching hopefully for something to amuse her, there was no hue and cry, not even the angry, or worried, scowl of her teacher running outside the schoolhouse to search for her.

Her hope of stirring up even a little excitement died an unhappy death. Staring at the patchwork of roads that crisscrossed the 'city', the habitats dotting the bare brown earth, Cara felt depression settle over her.

She hated this place, she thought in sudden anger, hated it!

She couldn't understand why her parents had decided to move to this god-awful place.

They just didn't want her to be happy, she decided. They were miserable, and they couldn't stand that she wasn't just as miserable!

They should be happy now, though, she thought angrily, because now she was just as miserable as they were. She'd had to leave her best friend in the whole world—the 'real' world—all of her friends—just to come to this stinking, miserable place where nothing ever happened, where there were no shopping emporiums, no metroplex theaters, no virtual game rooms—nothing!

All she ever got to do anymore was work and go to school. She didn't know why they even *bothered* with the school! What difference did it make if she knew the history of worlds she was never going to see—not now? What difference did it make if she studied the sciences? Literature? Mathematics? What was she going to do with any of that knowledge *here*, in this god-awful place?

They were farmers! All they ever got to do was dig in the damned dirt and count frigging potatoes and peas and feed stinky old animals!

Pushing away from the tree at last, she turned her back on the crude little 'city' all the grown-ups were so proud of. It was ugly. Everything about it was uncomfortable and ugly!

She stared around the woods—the forbidden woods—trying to decide what to do now that she'd managed to escape.

She wasn't allowed to come into these woods. The natives of the world considered them sacred for some dumb reason, which made it off-limits to the 'strangers' as they called the colonists.

She was damned if she could see anything about the place that would explain why it was a sacred place. It was pretty, though, she finally decided, cool beneath the shade

of the huge trees. Despite her displeasure over life in general, she couldn't see anything about the woods to complain about. After a few minutes, she decided to take a walk, even though she felt uneasy about it, *knew* she was going to be in big trouble if she was caught.

Maybe part of it was because she felt rebellious and didn't care whether anybody found out she'd been in the sacred woods or not.

Maybe part of it was because she more than half hoped she'd run into one of the aliens—the people *she* thought of as being aliens. Actually, everybody in the colony thought of the natives as aliens.

She thought that was kind of funny. It was typical, too, that they'd dragged everybody all the way across the galaxy to this remote little world on the edge of nowhere and claimed it and now considered it theirs even though there had already been beings living here that thought the planet was *theirs*.

She knew they had a treaty with the natives—the Galactic Confederation had negotiated the treaty for the settlers—and part of that treaty included a promise by the upstart humans to stay out of the sacred woods—to stay on the land the natives had grudgingly given up to them for their colony.

If they got kicked off the planet, though, they'd go home and that suited her just fine.

The prickles of resentment stayed with her for a while, but as she stalked along the path she found among the giant trees and studied the exotic plants, the anger was usurped little by little by the beauty of the place. She stopped from time to time, tipping her head back to stare up at the strange flying creatures among the branches, studying the gnarled, twisted shapes of the trees.

After a while, it occurred to her that the woods did have a mystical feel to them, magical. She knew it was just ordinary woods and everything just seemed that way because it was all new and exotic to her, but she couldn't shake the feeling. Thinking back to the lessons earlier on ancient mythology, she realized it looked like just the sort of place where magical creatures would dwell—unicorns, fairies, dragons, manticores, and gryphons.

Pausing beneath a tree, she leaned against it and closed her eyes, thinking dreamily of discovering something like that in the woods, thinking how exciting it would be if this was a special place just for her where she could sneak away and see all sorts of magical things.

It *had* been exciting, but it had also been deeply distressing, because that was when she'd found Rae, caught in a poacher's snare, his leg broken.

* * * *

Artificial light lit the cabin when Cara woke. For a few minutes, she lay staring at the wall, listening to the sounds around her. Realizing finally that she'd been listening for Nouri and hadn't heard him, she turned over to search the cabin.

She'd wept so much, she felt headachy and dehydrated. When she saw no sign of Nouri, she got up and explored the cabin, discovering to her surprise that it had a bathroom—a fully functional bathroom. It was startling to see something so completely recognizable as a feat of clever engineering in a cabin that she'd considered totally primitive. Undressing, she stepped into the showering unit and discovered it worked with water, just as theirs did at the colony—primitive by earth standards, but effective

and actually far more therapeutic than the particle baths she only vaguely remembered from when she'd lived on earth.

Nouri was standing in the doorway to the bathroom when she shut the water off and turned around. She jumped with surprise. "You startled me," she gasped.

Wordlessly, he held out a cloth for her to dry with.

She wasn't particularly self-conscious about being naked, but then, ordinarily, she wouldn't have had someone watching her so keenly when she dried off. It took an effort to ignore her sudden awareness of him as she picked up her clothes to put them on again.

She was almost tempted not to put them on at all. Quite apart from the fact that she was clean and the clothes weren't, Nouri didn't wear so much as a stitch of clothing himself.

She frowned at that thought, realizing he hadn't been wearing clothes when he'd captured her—so it wasn't just because he'd bathed, although she could tell from his fresh, clean scent that he'd made use of the shower himself not long before her. Not that he'd smelled badly before, but he'd smelled of the woods. "Don't your people usually wear robes?"

His expression closed, but she thought she saw a flicker of amusement. "At times."

Like on the few, rare occasions when they interacted with the strangers? "Isn't it ... uncomfortable to be naked all the time?" she asked curiously.

He shrugged. "Not when one is accustomed to it."

She supposed she could understand that. She remembered when she was young that she'd often gone barefoot. Still, clothing protected. It wasn't just for preserving privacy from prying eyes, although that in itself was certainly a comfort when a person's perception of themselves was that they were flawed in some way or inferior.

It generally boiled down to self-perception, to her mind. She wasn't flawless by any stretch of the imagination and she knew it. There were things about herself that she would've changed if it had been fairly effortless to do so. She just wasn't worried enough about her flaws to take extreme measures.

She supposed that was partly because she hadn't had more than a mild interest in anyone of the opposite sex in the colony. She'd actually considered joining the mates exchange set up to help people find someone to share their habitat with and perhaps produce a child. With four colonies on Uzra now, and the mate exchange, it wasn't necessary to settle for someone within the particular colony one lived in—doubtless she wasn't the only one who hadn't developed a special interest in the kids she'd grown up with. Somehow, she'd just never gotten around to it, though.

It just seemed like too much effort, too unlikely to yield a reward. She'd been quite willing to sample a variety of lovers in an attempt to find someone she was compatible with and that hadn't really worked for her so she felt, right or wrong, that she wasn't likely to have more luck looking elsewhere.

Because Rae had fulfilled her need for companionship, she thought sadly. From the time she'd first sneaked him into her room in her parents' habitat, he'd made up for everything she'd had to give up, everyone she missed. He'd made it possible for her to not only accept the drastic change in her life, but to look upon it as the adventure her parents did ... or at least had tried to convince her it was. She'd never understood why he'd strayed or why he'd been gone for longer and longer times each time he left, but she

supposed he'd been searching for a mate of his own kind—maybe had even found one.

"I have made food," Nouri said abruptly.

Cara blinked at him a little vaguely, having been so caught in her thoughts she'd lost all awareness of where she was. It took a moment for his comment to sink in and then she searched for any interest and discovered she didn't have any. "I'm not really hungry, but thank you anyway."

"We do not waste as the strangers do," he responded tightly. "I prepared for us both."

Cara eyed him a little resentfully. "Eating when you aren't hungry is still wasting," she said pointedly.

"You are hungry—should be. You are just sulking."

"I'm not sulking!" she snapped. "I'm ... sad."

"You have been sad long enough. It was a beast."

Cara stared at him. "You said he wasn't killed."

"You obviously did not believe me."

"Why should I when you told me he was dead and then said he wasn't?" she said angrily. "Which truth am I supposed to believe? I trusted you to tell me the truth the first time—because I couldn't think of any reason for you to lie to me. I don't trust you to tell me the truth anymore!"

It angered him, but Nouri realized he was more angry and disgusted with himself than he was with Cara. It seemed the very importance of the moments he spent with Cara made him clumsy and stupid. Every step he took seemed the wrong one and seemed to lead him further and further from what he wanted.

What he still wanted, what he had begun to realize that he would always want—Cara. "You did not trust me to begin with," he said tiredly. "I am a savage to your mind, an alien—though this is my world."

Cara felt her throat close. "That isn't true. Maybe it is with some of the others, but I don't make decisions about things before I know and understand them. Maybe the others wouldn't be that way, either, except that they know they aren't welcome here and that the natives want nothing to do with them."

He gestured to a chair set before a small table and took the opposite chair when she sat down. "I know more than you think. My people offered to befriend yours when you first came."

Cara stared at him in surprise. "Really?"

"Really. The king suggested a marriage to unite the two people—his son the prince would take ... you as his woman."

Cara felt the blood drain from her face in shock and then rush back until her face felt hot. It wasn't just a shock, though, it seemed so farfetched that she decided, as serious as he looked, that he must be joking. Amusement bubbled inside her. "You're just saying that! *Me*? Why would he be willing to marry me?"

"To ally the two peoples."

"Oh." It was impossible to prevent disappointment from creeping into her voice when her imagination had gone wild with romantic possibilities. "Politics." She frowned, thinking it over. "You were joking, right? I mean, I could see it, but I'm nobody. Wouldn't they want to ally their prince with someone ... important?"

He studied her thoughtfully. He was on dangerous ground and he knew it, but it

was something that had always bothered him—still bothered him. “You did not know?”

Cara sobered. “You mean to say that it seriously happened?” She frowned, trying to think back, to remember if she’d ever had any inkling at all that something like that was being discussed and finally shook her head. “When we first came? Gosh! I was a kid! I guess that’s why they turned the offer down and I never heard about it, but *really!* They should have at least told me!”

“If you had known, what would you have done?”

She thought it over and chuckled. “I would probably have demanded that they let me! I guess that’s why they didn’t tell me. I might even have sneaked away to meet the prince!”

She saw that he was looking at her strangely and shrugged.

“I was a kid and I was ... *so* angry about having to leave our own world and come here. I was ready to do anything as long as it wasn’t something they wanted me to do. I think it would have appealed to the romantic in me, too. But then I found Rae.” Sadness descended abruptly and without warning. “I know you think it’s crazy, but, really, he was the one that saved me. I needed him so much more than he needed me. I used to sneak him in to my room at night when my parents wouldn’t know.

“It didn’t matter that he couldn’t talk back to me. I could talk to him about anything and everything and know he wouldn’t think badly of me no matter how bad the things were that I did or thought about doing.

“He made me feel safe when I was afraid ... and I *was* afraid. It wasn’t just that I was angry about coming here. It was different and scary, but I could cuddle with Rae at night and I knew nothing would bother me, that he’d take care of me.”

Nouri shifted uncomfortably and finally pointed out that her food was getting cold. Beyond the position it put him in—which was a very bad place—he discovered that he wasn’t particularly happy to realize how deeply her affection for the ‘beast’ ran.

And the position he had put himself in was mind boggling in the potential for disaster.

He was deeply regretful that he could not put the entire situation down as the folly of his own youth—for he had been a man full grown and should have had the sense to know better.

It was a mistake he could not recover, he realized with a sick feeling in his gut. He had betrayed her trust. It didn’t matter that he had never intended to, that it had started innocently enough. He *had* been hurt—in a trap set by *her* people—and he had felt well within his rights to investigate the aliens by whatever means necessary and discover what he could about them.

The problem was, he hadn’t followed through with that noble intention to protect the interests of his own people from the interlopers. He had fallen so deeply under Cara’s spell from the moment she had sneaked him in to her home and into her room that he hadn’t been able to tear himself away—hadn’t wanted to leave.

Worse, he had gone back time and time again.

“It boggles the mind that you would feel safe being with so terrible a beast,” he muttered in irritation.

Cara chuckled. “He was so sweet! So gentle. He only looked fierce. He used to bathe me with his tongue—as if he thought I was his kitten,” she added with amusement.

Nouri felt his face redden. He cleared his throat. “You let him?”

She grinned. “Actually, no. He would hold me down and bathe me and then I’d have to get up when he finally let go and take another bath! I liked the way he purred when he did it, though.”

“Maybe he thought you were his mate?”

Cara blinked at him. “He didn’t try to fuck me! Well ... actually, he did one time, but I popped him on the nose and told him that was a definite no-no! He got the funniest expression on his face—really pissed off, you know?—but he went back to licking me so I guess he wasn’t too pissed off about it.”

Nouri dropped an arm to the table and rubbed his throbbing head with one hand, shielding his face from her. He’d forgotten that. Gods! One might know that she wouldn’t have!

“So ...,” Cara said as casually as she could when they’d finished eating, “this prince you were telling me about ... What’s he like?”

Nouri lifted his head and stared at her blankly as it dawned on him that he had dug yet another hole for himself.

“We all look alike,” he growled.

Cara sent him a look. “He has black hair and brown skin like you, you mean?”

His lips tightened. “Very much like me,” he muttered.

“About the same height and weight?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “He is old and very ugly ... even to our people.”

Cara looked at him blankly for a moment, but he could see her mind was rapidly assessing what he had said. He couldn’t *tell* what she was thinking because it was a great jumble of random thoughts. “You said his father had tried to make the arrangement,” she said suspiciously.

He covered his face with his hands. “You make me crazy, Cara.”

“Why don’t you want to tell me?” she asked after a moment.

“Why do you want to know?” he shot back at her, dropping his hands.

“I was just curious,” she said a little defensively. “You said he’d wanted to marry me.”

“I said that his father tried to make the arrangement,” he retorted tartly.

She looked a little hurt and more than a little disappointed. “You mean, he didn’t want to?”

He got up abruptly and began to stack their dishes. “He would have been agreeable,” he said finally.

“But he didn’t want to.”

“Why do you care, gods damn it? It did not happen! You do not even know the prince!”

She frowned. “How is it that you can speak our language so well?” she asked abruptly.

Nouri sent her a startled look but decided to take the offense. “You are surprised that we are not as lacking in intelligence as you had thought?”

She pursed her lips. “It isn’t my fault that I didn’t know when I’ve never even met any of your people before! I still don’t understand how you learned our language.”

“And I will not explain it!”

She followed him to the sink when he carried the dishes to it. “I’ll do that. You cooked. It’s only fair.”

He was all too glad to hand the task over to her, partly because he had never liked the chore but mostly because he felt a great need to put some distance between them.

He could not think straight when he was around Cara! He had never been able to ... though it didn't made him feel any better to realize it was his focus on her that prevented him from behaving, or saying, anything of intelligence.

He was tempted to leave the cabin altogether but decided to content himself with pacing the porch when it occurred to him that he was as trapped as she was. Without shifting, he couldn't leave and even if he managed to do so without her seeing him, he ran the same risk when he returned. He sat down finally on the edge, staring off toward the village and wishing himself there.

"I was just curious," Cara said quietly.

He stiffened, having been so deeply in his own thoughts that he hadn't noticed she had followed him outside.

Chapter Four

“You are too curious.”

She frowned. She supposed it was a polite way of saying she annoyed him. She was about to retreat again when he stopped her. “Why have you no man?”

Cara tilted her head at him curiously. “How do you know I don’t?”

“Do you?”

She tried to decide why he was interested. Mere curiosity? Or interest in her? “I haven’t gotten around to it,” she answered finally.

He studied her speculatively. “You are not young. When do you plan to get around to it?”

She gaped at him in outrage. “I’ll have you to know I’m not old, damn it! There’s plenty of time—if I decided to.”

“Young women in our culture commonly choose a mate by the time they have fourteen annums—few have not chosen by the time they have reached twenty annums and a woman not chosen after that is considered old.”

She studied him sourly. “Good thing I’m not from your culture!” she said tartly, then frowned thoughtfully. “Annums—you’re talking about a year on your world?”

“Yes.”

Her face lit. “*That’s* why they thought it was alright to ask for me to marry the prince!”

He studied her thoughtfully. “This is not done in your culture?”

“Oh! God no! Actually, marrying at all is considered very archaic. We generally just co-habit and sometimes contract. My parents married. That should tell you how old fashioned *they* are! Anyway, that’s a no-no. Both would have to be at least eighteen before it would be allowed at all. They aren’t legally considered an adult until then so they aren’t allowed to make that decision.”

He stared at her in disbelief. “You do not have *sex* before you are eighteen annums?”

Cara felt her face redden, but she laughed at his expression of horror. “I didn’t say we didn’t. It just isn’t allowed. Theoretically, sex education discourages experimentation—well, it does with some, but kids will be kids! They want to experience everything so—they sneak off and do it.”

He decided he didn’t especially like the turn in the conversation even though he’d initiated it himself. For one, it made it more difficult to get his own mind off of sex. For another—he didn’t want to know if Cara had chosen a man among her own people. He only wanted to know that she hadn’t settled on one.

“And yet you have reached” He paused, considering. “Twenty five annums and you have not chosen a man to live with?”

“How do you ...? Oh! I guess you figured it out because of the prince thing. I’m still curious about that, you know.”

“Why? Because he is a prince?”

She frowned. "I suppose that's part of it. It sounds almost like a fairytale! I always loved fairytales! Mostly I guess it's because I'm wondering what sort of man would consider marrying a woman—girl—he hadn't even met." She thought that over. "No. It's because I'm wondering if he ever did see me and that was why he agreed."

"Why would that make a difference?"

She made a sound of impatience. "Because then it would mean that he was actually interested in me, of course! If he never saw me, then it could only be a political thing and that isn't romantic at all."

"You have not assuaged my curiosity," he said pointedly.

She blinked at him. "Oh! I just never have met anyone I was interested in—that way—not since I've been grown, anyway. I had a couple of crushes growing up, but now that we're grown ... well, it's different. Anyway, they already settled with someone so even if I was interested I'd have to wait and see if they stayed together. I've been thinking about signing up for the mates exchange—where you meet people from the other colonies. I just haven't gotten around to it."

"You have no wish for children?" he asked curiously.

She shrugged. "I do, but we have to be careful about the population, you know. We have limited resources so we're only allowed to have one. I just want to be sure when I do have a baby that I've picked the perfect man to father it."

Nouri wrestled with temptation, but he discovered it was just too much to resist. "What would you consider the perfect man?"

She lifted her head and studied him thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. I always figured I'd know him when I met him."

* * * *

The one thing that was abundantly clear to Nouri was that he could not afford to spend a great deal of time with Cara. She was in far more danger that he would blunder and give himself away than if he had not decided to capture her to start with. More over, he had not seen any indication at all that she had seen anything she shouldn't have, or been able to piece together what had happened.

He thought it was the very fact that they were so different that made it unlikely she ever would. Clearly, she had no experience or understanding of any beings even remotely like they were.

That being the case, and also because he knew that the more time he spent with her the more likely he was to slip up when changing was as natural to him as breathing, he decided to release her and send her back to her people.

Contrary to what he'd expected, she didn't seem particularly happy when he told her.

"You're sending me back?"

"I am releasing you."

She frowned. "But ... I thought I was ... like arrested, or something. Only one night in jail?"

He stared at her in exasperation. "You're complaining that I've decided to not to hold you?"

"I guess not," she said doubtfully. "Do you ... patrol this area of the sacred forest?"

He looked at her in confusion. "I don't understand what you're asking."

"You guard it from trespassers and poachers?"

"I was here ... hunting. I live in the city."

"Oh. Is that very far from here? I've never seen a Uzra city."

"And you will not," he said shortly, lifting the piece of fabric he'd used before to blindfold her.

"Why are you blindfolding me? You said I wasn't a prisoner anymore."

"Do you really want to see when we descend?" he asked impatiently.

"Uh ... no, actually I don't."

She clutched at him uneasily when he'd tied the cloth over her eyes. "It's really scary being so high and not being able to see."

"I won't let you fall," he assured her, pulling her close as he had before.

She twined her arms around his neck far more trustingly than she had the first time, but as he leapt from the platform, she tightened her grip as frantically as before and she was no more anxious to let go when he had settled on the forest floor.

"We are on the ground."

"Ok," she said shakily, dropping one leg from his waist and feeling around with her toe for the ground.

He caught her arms and loosened them from the stranglehold she had around his neck, lowering her until she was settled firmly on the ground. When he'd removed the blindfold, she looked around and then up. "I can't see it from here," she said in surprise.

"That is as it should be."

She sent him a curious look but, thankfully, she didn't immediately begin to pelt him with questions. He led her back to an area he knew she was familiar with and released his hold on her arm.

"Do not come back into the sacred wood, Cara."

She looked at him with a mixture of hurt and determination and looked away. "I'm not going to see you again?"

"No."

She chewed her lower lip, glanced at him as if she would say something, and finally nodded. "I'd like to be your friend," she said when he turned away.

Nouri halted, trying to steal himself against the plea in her voice. He discovered it was impossible. Turning, he gave her a hard look. "I don't want to be your friend, Cara."

"Is it something I said?"

Uttering a sound of disgust, Nouri stared at her for a long moment and then strode decisively toward her. He made no attempt to be gentle with her, though it made him feel vaguely ill to treat her in such a way. It had been borne in upon him after a great deal of soul searching, though, that as much as he wanted Cara, he could not have her and, worse, he was a danger to her. It was his obsession with her that had put her in danger to begin with. He had thought of himself as a man when he had first seen her, and yet he had come to realize that he had still been too young himself to realize that it would not work no matter how badly he wanted it to. Their people were too different. It was not meant to be even if it did feel like it was to him.

Catching her arms, he pulled her roughly against his chest and bent his head to kiss her with a savagery meant to drive her away, because he knew he could not leave her himself. It was the only way—to frighten her and make her stay away from him.

For her sake—for his own sanity—she had to understand that the forest was as forbidden to her as it was to all of her people.

Her eyes were closed when he set her away from him. She swayed a moment before she caught herself and opened her eyes to look at him.

“Go back to your people, Cara,” he said harshly.

She lifted a hand to her bruised lips, staring at him wide-eyed, but he could tell nothing from her expression and her mind was in turmoil. *His* was in turmoil if it came to that! Turning, he strode swiftly away from her.

Cara stared blankly at Nouri until he disappeared—in a matter of seconds. It was disconcerting how quickly and easily he could vanish in the forest.

Still thoroughly rattled, she turned away finally and studied her surroundings until the familiarity of it finally penetrated her chaotic mind. She found her specimen case where she’d left it only the day before. More confused when she realized he’d brought her back to the exact spot where she’d been the day before when she’d heard the poachers, she puzzled over it as she made her way out of the forest.

Her arrival back at the reservation caused a commotion she hadn’t actually anticipated and didn’t particularly want. She’d hoped she hadn’t been gone long enough for anyone to actually notice she was missing but that was dashed immediately. The first people who spotted her called out excitedly and before she knew it she had a half a dozen people surrounding her, pelting her with questions.

Dismay filled her, banishing the last of the dream-like stupor that had enveloped her since that rough kiss Nouri had bestowed on her. The worst of it was, she realized immediately that she couldn’t claim to have been lost in the forest. She wasn’t supposed to go at all—not into the sacred forest—and she was liable to land in a real jail if she admitted that was where she’d been. The poachers might make it seem as if the people of the colony didn’t take the treaty seriously, but the authorities certainly did.

As uncomfortable as it made her to lie, she told the city guard, who greeted her and immediately began to question her, that she’d gone into *their* forest to collect specimens for study and had lost track of the time and ended staying the night. She didn’t think they would believe she’d gotten lost, though, when their ‘forest’ was only a few acres in any direction and pretty much everyone was thoroughly familiar with the terrain.

“We were organizing a search party to look for you,” Officer Markham informed her accusingly.

“Oh my god!” Cara exclaimed with a mixture of dismay and budding irritation, which she firmly tamped. “Well, it never occurred to me that anyone would even notice I was gone! I certainly didn’t plan on creating a ... an alarm!”

Her parents were almost tearfully grateful to see her back and unharmed, which made her feel more guilty for lying. She didn’t especially feel guilty for going off to start with. She’d done it fairly frequently with no one the wiser, and it certainly hadn’t been her intention to stay out all night.

It made her shudder to think what the reaction would’ve been if Nouri hadn’t decided to let her go after only one night, though.

Galactic political incident came forcefully to mind!

Thankfully, her parents removed her from the center of attention as soon as they were satisfied themselves, ignoring broad hints from Officer Markham that he wasn’t

completely satisfied and wanted to question her further. When they'd walked with her to her personal habitat, they hugged and kissed her and told her she should take the day off to rest from her 'ordeal'.

She felt guilty about that, too. Her primary contribution to the colony was in carefully monitoring the colony garden greenhouses. Within the rigidly regulated greenhouses, they grew the foods they had brought with them from Earth—the foods they were most familiar with and that were 'natural' to them. Contrary to what the Urza apparently believed, they did work hard to protect the environment of their new home, Testa, and part of that was insuring that there was no contamination of Testa's delicate eco-system by introducing potentially harmful 'alien' plant life.

They farmed, as well. They had already identified native plants that met their requirements for taste and nutrition and introduced them into their diets, but although Cara had taken part in the program to hybridize the native plants and make them more viable as food producers, she preferred working in the greenhouses.

She dismissed her qualms. It wasn't likely that one day would result in a calamity and, in any case, her supervisor would send someone else to check if she didn't show up for work.

She didn't really feel a need to rest, but she did feel a great need to have some time to herself to come to terms with everything that had happened.

Her grief over Rae had pretty much dominated her thoughts and emotions since the incident in the sacred forest. The release she'd allowed herself, mostly because she had completely lost control, had helped in reestablishing emotional equilibrium, but she was not 'over' it by any means.

She thought, in a very real sense, her grief had cocooned her, protected her from the full brunt of the incident with the poachers. She hadn't had time to feel the threat to her own life, but it occurred to her forcefully that there had been a threat. The authorities would have made an example of them by giving them the maximum allowable sentence for breaking the treaty in such a manner. She thought they had been aware of that themselves and wouldn't have hesitated to eliminate the threat she represented to their freedom.

They would've had nothing to lose and a great deal to gain by killing her and leaving her there. Without her to testify, they would've been able to cover their tracks completely—if not for the dragon.

Horror washed over her at that memory, not only of the attack, but the beast itself. It was far more terrifying in the flesh than it had seemed when she had read about the creature of mythology and studied artistic concepts of it. As soon as the fear began to dissipate, though, questions began to flicker through her mind.

It had seemed to come out of nowhere. That wasn't particularly odd in itself. She was struggling with the poachers. She was afraid for Rae. It wasn't really surprising that she hadn't noticed it until just before it attacked.

It occurred to her forcefully, though, and for the first time, that it had merely attacked and killed. Mythological beast or not, it was still a beast. It should have exhibited the same behavior as any other beast. Animals primarily killed for food. Some were very territorial and would kill because they felt threatened. Females would kill to protect their young. Some animals actually committed murder, killing for no apparent reason beyond the enjoyment of killing, but mostly animals killed for food.

It didn't seem to her that the incident could possibly have met the criteria for *any* of those possibilities. It had killed and left to chase down the man who'd run and killed him, she was certain, even if she hadn't seen it. It hadn't returned. It had ignored her presence. If it had been protecting its territory, or young, or hunting for food, it wouldn't have ignored her. She'd been stunned, but she hadn't exactly been playing dead because she hadn't had her wits about her to think about trying it.

Beyond that, she hadn't seen a sign of the dragon when she'd entered the clearing, much less younglings. It was true, she'd been under a great deal of duress and that might contribute to her not seeing it, but the memory was almost like a still photo in her mind. She hadn't seen the beast they'd killed, or hadn't realized the 'lump' in the brush was the beast, but she did remember the clearing itself and the two men standing frozen in it now that she'd had time to summon the memory.

It struck her abruptly that the dragon had appeared almost the instant it had formed in her mind.

She dismissed that thought, but she found her mind going back to it over and over.

It simply defied logic, but it finally occurred to her that she was trying to apply the logic of her own world to one she knew almost nothing about. What if she dismissed the 'laws of nature' of Earth? What could she then make of what had happened?

She'd 'conjured' the dragon from her imagination?

Her impulse was to dismiss that immediately, but she struggled with her skepticism and considered the fact that it had appeared on the heels of her own thoughts and it looked *exactly* like she'd pictured it in her mind—not a lot like, *precisely* the same.

It certainly hadn't been her imagination that the creature had attacked the man who'd been trying to shoot Rae, though. She'd still been spattered with the man's blood when she'd bathed at Nouri's cabin.

And what about Rae, she thought, abruptly remembering that she'd been thinking about mythological creatures just before she'd found him? She'd never questioned that before. Like any other youngster still open-minded enough to realize there were many things she hadn't seen yet, she'd accepted what her eyes told her was there.

Rae wasn't a true mantichora, though, not from mythology. He was a creation of her mind. He didn't look like the creatures of mythology. He looked like she had pictured them—like a beautiful African lion with bat wings—no scorpion tail, no cloven hooves or scales.

He wasn't just a figment of her imagination, though, any more than the dragon had been. No one in the colony had ever seen him—but she'd taken great care that they wouldn't because she'd known their reaction would be to kill him or try to. Nouri hadn't disputed his existence, though. Besides, as active as her imagination was, it wasn't *that* good! And she wasn't crazy!

She'd treated him like a pet. She'd bathed him and petted him. She'd loved the soft feel of his fur and she'd wallowed all over him for the pure joy of feeling it against her skin. She'd slept with him many nights, curled up against his warm body, comforted by the solid feel of him in her bed.

He hadn't *smelled* like an animal, she remembered abruptly. Why had she never realized that before? She'd had dogs. She'd had cats. The cats weren't as inclined to be as smelly as the dogs were, but they still had a distinctive animal smell, especially when

she caught the scent of their breath and burrowed her face in their fur.

Her parents would've noticed if her room had begun to smell like a wild animal and no amount of bathing him would have completely rid him of it.

She set that aside after a moment, reminding herself that she was again trying to make Testa fit what she knew of Earth and its creatures, wondering what she could make of the fact that both creatures seemed to have sprung from her own mind.

She realized there was only thing that she could make of it.

Something in the sacred forest could capture her thoughts and replicate the images that her mind produced.

* * * *

It had taken far more work to avoid detection than it had ever taken before, Cara thought irritably, and that was only *half* the job! She managed to sneak out of the colony without raising an alarm, but she still had to creep through the sacred forest without being detected by any of the Urza.

She couldn't sleep, though, until she knew for certain, one way or the other, if Rae was dead—or worse, hurt very badly and in need of her help. She was almost sorry when it occurred to her that he might. It made her feel ill just thinking about the possibility that he might've been lying in pain, in need of help, since the attack.

That she'd been prevented from even attempting to help him most of that time didn't make her feel a bit better. She would've tried harder to get to him sooner if it had occurred to her before that he might've been injured—and it should have!

She paused when she'd entered the forest, allowing her eyes to adjust to the deeper shadows beneath the trees. She'd never been in the forest at night, and it made her shiver looking at it cloaked in darkness. It didn't look magical. It looked creepy.

It didn't help that she couldn't put the damned dragon out of her mind!

Pulling her night vision glasses from the pocket of her jumpsuit, she set them on the bridge of her nose and turned them on. She could see far better instantly, but it wasn't 'day' vision by any stretch of the imagination. There were still shadows and the glasses gave everything a strange, greenish glow that was almost more creepy than it had looked without them.

Pushing the thoughts aside, she picked her way quietly to the spot where she'd been when she'd heard the poachers and then scanned her surroundings until she was certain she remembered the direction she'd taken when she'd run. She'd been too upset to have any concept of the distance and she'd been running in any case. It still took her so long to reach the area that she'd begun to think she'd gotten lost. She paused to look around, though, when she reached an open area that reminded her of the spot.

She saw after a few moments that the brush had been trampled and churned up, clear evidence that she had the right place, but there was no sign of *any* bodies at all. Frowning, she moved from one spot to another, crouching to examine it and finally found a few stained patches she decided must be dried blood.

It was odd that there wasn't any sign at all, beyond that, of the violence that had taken place. Predators wouldn't have dragged the carcasses off. They would've fed where they found them and they would've left ... leftovers. Dismissing it after a moment, she began moving back and forth across the clearing, thinking that, perhaps, Rae had been hurt but had managed to crawl off. There wasn't any broken brush to support that theory, but she'd come too far and taken too many risks not to be absolutely

certain before she went home.

She'd finally decided to give up the search when a crashing in the brush drew her attention. As she whipped around, more than half expecting to see the dragon bearing down on her, she caught a glimpse of Rae.

She thought it was Rae. The color seemed right and the hind quarters of the beast and size seemed consistent. "Rae?" she whispered loudly.

There wasn't any sort of response. She chewed her lip, debating, and finally dashed across the clearing to the spot to see if her eyes had been playing tricks on her. The brush, she discovered, had been broken. *Something* had passed that way.

Warning bells sounded in her head the moment she considered following to see if it was Rae. He had to have noticed her in the clearing, she thought. If it was Rae, he would've come to her, not left.

"Rae?" she called out in a shaky voice. "Is that you?"

Someone or something pounced on her from behind at that moment. It sent such a jolt of panic through her when she was grabbed that she went into flight *and* fight mode. Dancing around in a circle and trying to fling whatever was off at the same time, she only succeeded in tripping over her own feet and when she crashed to the ground, she took her assailant with her.

Chapter Five

He should have known, Nouri thought grimly, that it would not be enough for Cara to see her 'beloved beast'. He'd known immediately when he spotted her that that was what had drawn her back, in spite of his warning, in spite of his roughness when he'd tried to scare her away.

He hadn't actually counted on the violence of her reaction to being grabbed, he realized with a mixture of amusement and surprise as he felt himself lurch out of balance and tumble toward the ground with her. He managed to twist enough to prevent his entire weight from slamming into her, but he still landed on her hard enough to knock the breath from her.

Still blinded with panic, she began slapping at him almost as she hit the ground. He caught her arms, forcing them to the ground and heaving his weight higher onto her to pin her and keep her from kicking him. "Gods damn it, Cara! Did I not tell you *not* to come back?" he growled.

She stopped fighting immediately, staring up at him blankly through the absurd glasses she was wearing. "Nouri?"

She didn't wait for a response. "You scared me!" she said accusingly, her chin wobbling like a child on the verge of tears.

Nouri felt his throat close but irritation flooded him, as well. "There is no frightening you enough to keep you out of the woods, obviously! I should turn you over my knee like a willful child and spank your ass!" he snarled angrily.

Shock flickered across her features. "You wouldn't!" she said doubtfully.

"You do not know me, Cara! You do not know *what* I would do!"

It was unfortunate for both of them that Cara's mind instantly filled with an image of the two of them locked in a passionate embrace, naked limbs entwined. He didn't have time to throw up a defense against it, not when he had been tormenting himself with much the same images for years.

It flickered through his mind that he had frightened her and that she would see his overtures as an assault, not making love to her, but that thought vanished as quickly as the rest of his reason. He released his hold on her arms and grasped her face between his palms, tilting his head as he sought her lips and covered her mouth. She gasped, parting her lips, and he thrust his tongue into her mouth. The remembered taste of her shredded what was left of his self-control and the sweet, hot cavern of her mouth around his tongue filled the void with a sort of madness.

He sucked her taste and scent into his starved soul, drunk with it, wild with the need drumming through him to merge his body fully with hers. Content for no more than a handful of moments to explore only her mouth, he tore his lips from hers, sucked in a ragged breath and dove for her throat, sucking at it as he yanked frantically at the clothing barring his path. It parted with a rending sound that pierced his madness briefly but fled his mind as he filled his hands with her soft breasts and then his mouth.

He felt the frantic movements of her hands on him, but it barely registered in his

fevered mind beyond the pleasure of her touch added to the pleasure of his explorations. Her gasps filled his ears, but his own were louder, harsher.

Impatient with the clothing that was still in his way, he sat up, pulling her with him and gnawed a path along the upper slope of her breasts and throat as he tugged at the suit she wore, peeling it from her shoulders. It exposed more flesh as he pulled it away. He sucked at her shoulder, ran his mouth and tongue along the slope to her neck and found her ear, exploring that as he filled his hands with her, stroking her arms, her shoulders, her back and then shoving his hands deeper to fill his palms with her buttocks.

He massaged them, reaching around to push his hand between her legs to find her sweet spot. The petals of flesh there were silken, hot, wet.

“Nouri!” she gasped, a trace of urgency in her voice.

It communicated to him a desperation to match his own. Balked by the fabric from entering her, he surged toward the ground with her again, leaning away from her only long enough to jerk the suit to her ankles and then diving over her again. She gasped, bucking against him as he aligned his body with hers and curled his hips to enter her. A shudder went through him as he felt her body close around his cock. The heat of her seared him. Her flesh locked so tightly around his cock he couldn’t breathe for a moment, uttered a choked breath as he pumped his hips, trying to gather enough moisture to sink deeper inside of her. And then abruptly, when he’d begun to think he would explode, her flesh yielded to him.

He released a ragged sigh of pure bliss as he felt her sheathe his flesh within her. “Cara,” he groaned roughly. *You fit me, beloved. The gods made you for me.*

The urge to move washed over him. Dragging in a sustaining breath, he answered his body’s call, driving into her and withdrawing again and again until he found the pace that set his blood on fire. She began to gasp and groan with the fervor of his thrusts. He felt his gut tighten as she abruptly arched against him and uttered a choked cry. The muscles along her channel tightened and relaxed around his cock, milking him. A grunt was wrenched from him as his body responded by pumping his seed into her.

Bracing his upper body on his elbows, he allowed his head to drop forward weakly as the tension left him. His entire body seemed to sting with the radiating waves of pleasure that moved through him and slowly began to dissipate.

Awareness came slowly, but with a cold vengeance. He lifted his head slowly to study her face. As if she sensed his perusal, she opened her eyes slowly and met his gaze. For many long moments, they simply stared at one another, Nouri with profound wariness and a mounting shame. “Did I hurt you?” he managed to ask hoarsely.

Something flickered in her eyes. She lifted a hand and coasted it slowly along his cheek. Her lips curled faintly at one corner. “I think there might be thorns in this brush,” she murmured teasingly.

Relief flooded him, but it hadn’t settled completely when the full impact of what he’d done hit him.

And then the urge to do it again, more slowly, so that he could relish it. He struggled with that impulse, but his mind had only to fill with the certainty that he could not have her again than his resolution failed him. Rolling, he carried her with him, burrowing his fingers into her hair and drawing her face to his so that he could kiss her.

The brush she’d complained of prickled beneath his back and the urge to take her to his cabin and make love to her on his pallet smote him. He resisted it. He couldn’t

take her there without revealing what he was and he was abruptly more fearful of what she might think of it than he was concerned about revealing a tribal secret.

It was almost tempting to do it, if for no other reason than the fact that it would tear her from him forever, seal the fate so that he knew it was useless to look back, but he couldn't do it.

One night, he promised himself—just one, and he would let her go. He wouldn't look back again.

Cara wasn't altogether certain of what had happened beyond the fact that she'd just experienced the wildest, most mind-boggling sex she'd ever had in her life. She was reeling with the aftermath when Nouri dragged her close for another kiss.

She felt no reluctance, only eagerness, although he'd unnerved her the first time he'd kissed her. The sheer savagery of it had almost been frightening in its intensity and nothing afterward had been any tamer. She almost felt ... battered by it, as if she'd been swept up in a storm.

As bewildered as she was by the ferocity of his passion, though, there was no lingering doubts that she had enjoyed it as she never had before. Her climax had rocked her to her core, so far surpassed anything that she'd felt before that she began to doubt that she had achieved climax before.

The kiss was not a lover's salute, however. Almost from the instant her mouth melded with his, the storm swept over her again. It was his taste and scent, she thought vaguely.

It was the hunger of his touch.

It was the burning need she felt in him that found and answering echo inside of her.

She didn't know, but she felt anticipation rise inside of her again, felt his eagerness rise between them. She found his cock with her hand as he kissed her, stroked it with a lover's caress of fondness and lifted her hips to guide his flesh into hers.

You fit me, beloved. The gods made you for me.

The words that had flitted through her mind before when he'd engaged his body with hers echoed in her mind as she took him inside of her and she realized that it was true. Where ever the thought had come from, he felt so right it *was* as if they had been made to fit together. It gave her joy just to feel the connection and when she began to feel her passion rise with the delicious friction of his cock sawing along her passage, that special sort of warmth only made the pleasure more wondrous—magical.

Her throat closed at the thought.

He was the one she had been waiting for. She knew it with absolute certainty and accepted it as her body soared upward toward rapture again, exploded with it, leaving in its wake the elation of knowing the passion she felt, the ardor she felt from him could only come with the binding of hearts and souls.

That certainty lasted until the first rays of the sun began to brighten the sky, rousing her from a blissful sleep. He stirred beneath her, stroking a hand lightly along her hair, as if he thought she was still sleeping and didn't want to wake her.

"You must go," he murmured, his voice husky with sleep.

She dragged in a deep breath and released it slowly. "I don't want to. I want to stay like this forever."

His hand settled along the back of her head but the tension in him was

unmistakable.

"That cannot happen," he said after a long pause. "It should never have happened."

Feeling a surge of dismay, Cara lifted her head and looked at him in bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

He sat up abruptly, carrying her with him. "You are not a child, Cara!" he said harshly. "*This* shouldn't have happened and you know it as well as I do."

Confusion joined the dismay. "Why?"

He set her off his lap, not ungently, but firmly. "Because I am ... Urza and you are human!"

"But ... we're lovers!"

He surged to his feet. "I fucked you! I'm a man ... even if your people don't see me as one! I desired you. I took you! We are not lovers! Our tribes barely tolerate one another! Shall I waltz into your city so that you can see how your people would receive the news that we are lovers? Do you need to *see* how despised that I would be and how you would be despised and looked down upon for fucking a 'savage'? A being barely above the animals?"

"Or would you prefer to go to my village and see how they would feel about a human among them?"

Cara felt her throat clog with unshed tears, but it didn't take a great deal of imagination to picture it. "Why couldn't we live here?"

He turned on her. "Is that you want? To live in the wilderness with your beast?"

"That isn't what I meant!"

"There *is* no place on this world for a Urza man and a human woman ... even if I wanted to be your lover! Go back to your people! You belong there!"

It took all Cara could do to choke back the tears clogging her throat. She managed it, though, getting to her feet shakily when he had stalked off and disappeared. She found the jumpsuit she'd worn the night before, rumpled, stained, but thankfully not torn.

It was nothing short of amazing that it had survived his rough handling when he'd seized her and stripped her the night before. Fortunately, it had been designed for ease of removal. The ominous sound she'd heard dimly the night before was the closure yielding and not the fabric itself.

Not that she wanted to be seen sneaking back in shame anyway! But at least she wouldn't create a scandal if she *was* spotted, an uproar that she'd been raped!

Trying to keep from crying, she felt her hair and pulled the twigs and leaves from it, using her fingers to bring it to some sort of order, but even the mundane tasks did little to calm her. She wanted to weep so badly her throat hurt with the effort to keep the sobs back, but she couldn't break down now. Not now!

Nouri would hear her and she didn't think she could bear that.

People were already stirring in the colony, but thankfully few had left their habs when she reached the city and began to make her way to her own hab. She knew at least a couple of people had caught glances of her, but she thought she'd managed to flee inside before anyone got a very good look at her.

She was dismayed when she saw herself in her mirror. She *looked* like she'd been out all night fucking in the woods!

She hadn't thought of it as fucking, though, not until Nouri had said it.

How could she have been so wrong? Why had it felt as if he was making passionate love to her when it hadn't been anything at all but pure animal lust?

Not that she felt like complaining about it, regardless! It had felt wonderful! It had felt like the best thing she'd ever experienced in her life!

She discovered she couldn't hold her emotions at bay any longer when she pulled her jumpsuit off.

She smelled his scent on her skin still!

Even she thought it was crazy, but the thought of cleansing her skin of his scent just capped her misery. Somehow, she felt that she could hold on to him a little longer, hold on to the night if she could still smell him on her skin.

Leaving the bathroom, she climbed into her bed and drew the covers up, breathing deeply and remembering every kiss, every touch until tears welled in her eyes and flowed down her cheeks. She felt like her heart was breaking when she wept. Her chest hurt and by the time she'd wept until she couldn't anymore, her head and her throat hurt.

She was still snuffling and trying to breathe when she fell into an exhausted sleep. Her dreams were filled with him. She relived those moments when he had first kissed her, the urgency of his hands as he caressed her.

And then she dreamed that she saw Rae, that he stopped and looked at her almost sadly and then ran away.

She woke struggling to sob again. Too miserable to think, she got up and went to take a shower. By the time she'd bathed, it had occurred to her that she'd missed work the day before and she would miss it again if she didn't get moving.

She didn't want to go. She couldn't remember a time when she had even thought such a thing, that she didn't care, that it wasn't important, that nothing really mattered.

She went. Her supervisor looked her over and asked her if she was coming down with something.

She smiled wanly and said she thought she might have caught a cold from spending the night in the woods.

Fortunately, the supervisor already knew she'd claimed that lie to cover the night she'd spent in Nouri's cabin and assumed that was what she'd meant. She had so much trouble focusing on her work that she had to check everything over and over because she couldn't remember if she had and she couldn't remember to take the notes she was supposed to take.

She almost felt like patting herself on the back for managing a full shift, though. Considering how absolutely miserable she was, that had taken sheer determination.

Her mother came by her hab to check on her after her own work shift and fussed over her, demanding she go to the clinic to be checked. She lied and said she would go the following day just to get her mother to stop nagging. She was on the point of telling her mother that all she really wanted to do was go to bed when a sudden thought occurred to her.

"Someone told me the strangest story," she said slowly. "I've been thinking about it and I wondered if it was even possible that it was true."

"What story, dear?" her mother asked curiously.

"When we first came here to Testa ... I heard the king of the native people had tried to ally his family to ours by offering to take me as a bride for his son."

Her mother's lips tightened. "Who told you that?"

"I don't remember. Is it true?"

She could see her mother was trying to decide whether to tell her or not. "It's true," she said finally. "I was terrified the ruling council would demand it. They were anxious to make peace with the natives and worried that refusing might cause a war ... which we certainly weren't prepared for after our long voyage! You weren't much more than a baby, though! Not even fifteen! Well ... almost fifteen and I *know* you were sexually active, by the way, but that's entirely different than being prepared to be a wife and mother!"

Cara studied her mother, trying to regain control of her runaway heart. "I wasn't a baby! Maybe not an adult, but certainly not a baby!"

"You were still a baby to me and far too young for that sort of thing! You would've been too young to marry one of our own people, but this was political. You couldn't have handled anything like that. They realized that, too—the council. That you didn't have the maturity to be a representative for the colony. I think if they weren't afraid that you'd create more trouble than you resolved, they would've tried harder to convince us to allow it."

Cara frowned, not certain why it mattered now. "It wasn't because they're different from us?"

Her mother shifted uncomfortably. "We didn't know anything about them or their culture, Cara—we still don't know much more than we did then. For all I knew they wanted you for a sacrifice to one of their gods!"

"Why would they have tried to arrange a marriage between me and the king's son if that was what they had in mind? Why wouldn't they have just demanded a sacrifice?"

Her mother shrugged. "Well! I'm just throwing out suggestions. The point is—was, that we didn't really know or trust them and I wasn't about to trust my baby to them!"

Cara supposed she could understand that. It seemed to her that she hadn't changed all that much in the intervening years, but she supposed, wryly, that that might only mean she really hadn't matured much. "Did they ever say why they wanted me?"

She could see by the way her mother was twitching that she didn't really want to answer that. "The prince suggested it. Their council was considering allying themselves with us by marriage. He said he would be agreeable if it was you."

"He called me by name?"

"Cara of the beautiful red hair," she said a little dryly. "It was pretty hard to pretend we didn't know who they were talking about."

"So ... he'd seen me?"

Her mother shrugged. "I suppose. I can't think of any other way he would've known about the hair." She frowned. "Actually, I hadn't really thought about it before, but he knew your name. Maybe it was just that he asked for the girl with the red hair and the council told him your name?" She fixed her daughter with a firm look. "You didn't meet him?"

"I'd never met any of them."

Dismissing it, her mother rose. "That was all a long time ago. I don't know why you'd even bring it up."

"You should've told me," Cara said. "Even if I was too young to make that kind

of decision myself, you should've told me."

Her mother looked angry. "Well! Now you know! Although I'd still like to know what busybody decided to tell you!"

Cara smiled wanly. "Which is exactly why I'm not telling."

She stopped her mother again when she reached the door. "If I had married into the Urza tribe, how would you have felt about it?"

"Horried!" her mother said emphatically. "Don't tell me you've seen one and developed some fanciful idea of romance? They're savages! Believe me. I don't care what they look like or how handsome they might seem to be, they're savages!"

Anger surged through Cara. "You have absolutely no basis for that assumption, mother! They have *never* behaved like savages toward any of the colonists. We've been at peace with them since we came!"

Her mother looked at her hard. "Primitives," she said. "You're right. I shouldn't have called them savages, but they are primitives by our standards. You've hated the colony ever since we came because we left so much behind and, believe me, as primitive as the colony is by Earth standards, it's still light years ahead of the natives!"

Cara shook her head at her mother. "I hated leaving my friends and everything I knew, that I was comfortable with. It was never about things, mother."

Chapter Six

Nouri wondered if he'd realized just how miserable it would make him to leave Cara after he'd made love to her if he would've made the same decision. He didn't know, but he was fairly certain that it hadn't actually been a decision any of the time. He didn't think he could've stopped if the world had collapsed around him.

Of course, in a sense it had. For those hours he had spent with her, he'd been able to close his mind to what came next, but the 'next' was far worse than he'd expected.

He should have stayed away. He'd begun to believe that he could completely cut her out of his life and if he hadn't tested it, maybe he could have.

Now ... now he realized he had no choice, never had.

Despite their differences, they might have had the chance to build a life of contentment if they could've escaped their people, but they couldn't. If he'd just made himself see that before, maybe it would've been easier to stay away from her.

He didn't regret it, even so, he decided. It had been everything he'd always believed it would be—*more* incredible than he'd expected.

Because she'd loved him back.

He was almost sorrier to realize that. As much as he ached already, it wounded more deeply to know that he'd hurt her. He hadn't wanted to do that. He'd never meant to.

He'd just ... wanted.

Rising abruptly from his pallet, he left his cabin and strode to the edge of the porch outside, staring out over the forest that he had always loved. He would not come here again, he told himself. It was too close to Cara and he knew now that he would never be able to stay away if he was close enough to reach out to her. The temptation was too much.

Closing his eyes, he pulled his form into that a winged beast and leapt into the air, spreading his wings. There was some pleasure in it, not the joy he had always felt before to feel the wind in his face, the air stirring around him, but some enjoyment. Lifting above the canopy of the trees, he turned his back on the colony of the humans, for the last time, he told himself.

He'd neglected his people long enough. His father wasn't young anymore. He wanted to know that his son would lead when he was gone and that his grandson would lead afterwards.

Maybe he should ask his father to choose a woman for him? He had to take a wife to breed a son and he didn't particularly care who it was.

* * * *

Days passed before Cara emerged from her grief enough to feel like facing what had happened between her and Nouri.

The first question to form in her mind was 'how'?

As much as she'd always *wanted* to believe there was such a thing as love at first sight, she realized that, deep down, she hadn't really believed it anymore than she

believed in fairytales.

How could she hurt so much, though, if it wasn't love?

Maybe she wasn't any more mature than a kid, she thought miserably. She hadn't felt this badly, though, when she'd had her first crush—or even her second!

She'd never been so miserable in her life! Not even when they'd first landed on Testa!

Her sheets still smelled like him—she thought! Maybe it was just her imagination?

And how stupid was it that she kept sniffing her sheets until she nearly hyperventilated just to get a tiny whiff and remember?

She didn't *need* that to remember! She remembered everything!

Except, it made it seem as if he wasn't gone!

Rae had abandoned her and now Nouri!

She didn't believe what he'd said when he'd told it was nothing but fucking, she realized. As angry as he'd seemed when he'd said all those hurtful things, she didn't believe it hadn't meant anything to him! Yes, it had been raw passion, but she'd felt *more* in the way he touched her and kissed her! She'd felt like he was making love to her even when he'd seemed so desperate. She didn't believe she'd imagined that. Why would she when it hadn't occurred to her that he might love her until he'd made love to her like that?

Sighing glumly, she tried to push it from her mind. There was no point in torturing herself. He was right. It wouldn't have worked out even if they'd wanted it to. It couldn't have. She hadn't wanted to believe that he was right even when she knew it was the truth. She couldn't imagine him living with her in the colony, could easily envision the way people would stare at him, whisper about him and her, look down their noses at them.

She didn't doubt that she would have to face the same thing if he'd thought to try to take her to his village.

She still thought they should've tried. If he'd felt even half the things she had, wouldn't have wanted to try?

She thought he would, which seemed a strong indication that he hadn't.

Turning again, she pounded her pillow almost angrily and burrowed her face into it, breathing deeply. The faint scent that teased her was almost as familiar to her as her own, and far more dear. It comforted her, gave her a sense of safety.

She sat up abruptly, staring into the darkness. After a moment, she picked the pillow up and sniffed it again. How weird was it that it reminded her of Rae?

She fell back against her mattress. She'd lost her mind! She'd finally cracked!

It couldn't *possibly* be Rae's scent. He hadn't slept in her bed in years!

It continued to tease her, though, and she couldn't put it out of her mind.

It dawned on her abruptly that, when she'd been trying to piece together what had happened when the dragon had attacked, she'd wondered if there was some creature in the forest that could pick things from her mind and take those forms.

She'd dismissed it even though she couldn't think of any other explanation for the fact that the dragon looked almost like she'd conjured him.

And Rae.

And then both of them had disappeared and Nouri had appeared.

Nouri who knew English so well when he'd refused to admit that he'd ever even been around the humans.

Nouri who seemed to know so much about her that he couldn't possibly know.

He hadn't acted like she was a stranger because she wasn't a stranger to him!

She sat up in bed again, her heart thundering in her chest. Disbelief warred with a strange certainty.

He hadn't felt like a stranger to her either. She'd felt completely comfortable around him and she never felt that way around people she didn't know.

She shook her head. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be possible.

Covering her face with her hands, she strained to pull a memory of Rae's image into her mind. Memories flooded her, many memories.

She'd always thought it was ... odd that intelligence seemed to gleam in his eyes. She'd thought she was just imagining the times he looked at her and seemed amused, almost as if he would smile. She thought she'd imagined the empathy in his eyes when she was hurt, the anger. He'd just been reflecting her emotions, right?

How had Nouri known about Rae, she wondered abruptly? He'd told her the beast was dead, but *he* hadn't been there! She'd been afraid that the dragon would come back and kill her. She'd run like hell. Nouri hadn't caught her until she was a very long way from the scene of the attack.

No one had been there except the poachers, and her—Rae and then the dragon.

Because she'd been terrified that Rae would be killed and wished he had the leathery hide of a dragon to protect him!

Throwing her covers aside, she got up. She had to know if what she believed was true.

Because if it was

Well, she didn't know, but she deserved to know! If Nouri was Rae, she wanted to know why he'd been sneaking into her bedroom—her bed!—for years!

"Oh my god! Cara of the beautiful red hair!"

Her heart swelled so with excitement that it completely ousted the budding anger inside her. With shaking hands, she searched for something to put on and then rushed about her hab looking for her night vision glasses.

The city patrol passed her hab just as she was about to step out the door and her heart nearly stopped. Feeling almost faint with relief that she'd managed to avoid a nasty encounter with the enforcers, she waited until they had turned the corner and quickly crept out and dashed into the shadows of the next hab over. She was so shaky by the time she reached the edge of the city that she had to wait for her knees to stop knocking together to make the dash into the shadows beyond.

Relieved when she managed it without raising an alarm, she jogged the distance between the colony and edge of the woods, darting behind a tree and pausing there to catch her breath. When she decided she could manage a fast walk, she pushed away from the tree and began to walk briskly through the woods, trying to ignore the rustle of the brush, trying not to think that predators prowled the night.

Testa's twin moons had risen to their zenith by the time she reached the clearing where the attack had taken place. She'd more than half convinced herself that she would meet up with Nouri by the time she reached the spot. When she'd stood in the clearing for a time and he didn't appear, she felt doubts begin to creep in.

Maybe it hadn't been the best idea to try to find him in the middle of the night?

She hadn't seen him in days, though, and he'd seemed He'd told her not to come back. She realized abruptly that part of her fear was that he'd gone away, gone back to his own village.

And she had no idea where that was.

She decided to see if she could remember the way to his cabin. If she could, she could at least check, call to him. If he was still there, surely he would answer her if for no other reason than to escort her out of the sacred forest again?

All the trees looked the same, she thought in dismay when she'd walked far enough she thought she must be close to his cabin and even with her night vision glasses and the aid of the moons she couldn't see high enough to detect any sign of the cabin.

Was it that late, she wondered? Had he gone to bed?

Give up and go home?

"Nouri!" she called out in a loud whisper. "Hello?"

Nothing but the wind and the rustle of it through the trees answered her and she discovered she'd lost the nerve that had carried her so far. The woods gave her the creeps anyway. Calling out—it made her feel as if she was drawing attention to herself that she might not want.

Turning abruptly, she began to jog back in the direction she'd come. She had a stitch in her side by the time she reached the clearing again and she slowed, trying to massage it away. A rustle in the brush that sounded like something big moving through it brought her to full alert. She lifted her head, trying to calm herself, trying to convince herself that it was Nouri—or Rae.

Two shadows emerged from the trees. Cara thought for a moment that she would simply pass out with fright. Instead, she scrambled into a panicked, awkward run. She'd made it almost halfway across the clearing when the shadows loomed up beside her and she realized it wasn't Nouri—and it certainly wasn't Rae.

And it wasn't humans!

Letting out a squawk of terror, Cara tried to pour on more speed. She hadn't managed to gain even a yard, however, before they caught her.

"What do here, hume?" one of the men growled when he'd dragged her to a halt and jerked her around to face him.

Cara gaped at him. "I was ... uh ... was looking for my lost cat," she weakly when it suddenly dawned on her that she was in the sacred woods and that Nouri might be in big trouble if she mentioned him.

The man glanced at his companion. She stared uneasily at the two of them as they began to argue in their own language—she thought. It sounded like they might be arguing anyway. They certainly sounded angry!

"I'll ... uh ... I'll just go, if it's alright with you guys? I mean, I can look for my cat later."

They stopped arguing and turned to stare at her.

"Or not ... I mean, not here. I've called and called. I'm sure he isn't here. Can I go home now?"

"What saw you?"

Cara blinked at him. "Saw? I didn't see anything ... except the two of you."

That didn't seem to go over well. The expressions on both men's face hardened

and they started arguing again.

“What I mean to say is I didn’t see either of you until you were practically on top of me.”

The man who’d been ‘interrogating’ her snatched her glasses off her nose abruptly and put them on, turning his head. He looked more grim when he pulled them off and handed them to his companion.

“See us with this?” the second man demanded.

“You know ... really ... my eyes are very bad. I have to use those to see anything at all and I can’t actually see that well with them! I’m sure I didn’t see anything I shouldn’t have.”

It might’ve been her imagination, but it seemed to her that the harder she tried to convince them that she hadn’t seen anything, the more convinced they were that she had. She wanted Nouri desperately, but she couldn’t bring herself to say his name because the more certain she became that she was in deep trouble, the more sure she was that he would be, too.

“Rae!” she called out on sudden inspiration. “Rae! Here kitty, kitty!”

“No kitty,” the first one growled. “Sacred woods. You break treaty.”

“No, no, no! I really didn’t! I just got lost. You mean to say this isn’t the reservation woods? I was sure it was.”

She might’ve tried harder to convince them except, so abruptly it sent her into a state of absolute shock, both men ... changed. One moment they looked like men, the next they became some sort of winged things. She couldn’t even find her voice to scream until one of the things grabbed her and began to flap his wings.

She screamed like a banshee then, grabbing the talons he’d gripped her with and trying to pry them loose. She might have continued that mindless pursuit for freedom except she suddenly became aware that her stomach seemed to be floating toward her throat and she couldn’t feel the ground beneath her feet anymore.

She nearly swallowed her tongue when she looked down and discovered the ground was a good ten feet down and rapidly getting further. She began screaming then and trying to climb the thing to get on top of it.

Fortunately, he had an unbreakable hold on her and her frenzied screams finally resulted in total blackout. She resurfaced sluggishly, aware of a tightness around her that made it hard to breathe before she began to be aware of anything else. A shiver raked its way through her.

She was cold and the air blowing over her made her colder. The first thought that popped into her mind was that she’d kicked her covers off. She discovered when she’d groped blindly for them that she couldn’t feel anything around her at all, though, and that brought her eyes open.

There was nothing but blackness beneath her. She stared at it in absolute horror for several moments, trying to convince herself that it was a nightmare, and then squeezed her eyes shut again. Her mind was so disordered she couldn’t seem to make any sense at all of her situation.

It wasn’t until her stomach told her that she was descending that it hit her that the last thing she remembered before the horrible darkness beneath her was going up. It took an effort to pry her eyelids up enough to see if she could tell what was going on.

She wasn’t happy when she discovered she could see lights below her. The

twinkling lights might have made her think of fairies if she hadn't been staring down at the canopy of trees far below her instead of looking up at them. She closed her eyes again, but the sense of falling persisted, nauseating her, and she opened them again, trying to regain her equilibrium. She saw the lights were far closer, illuminating some sort of structures.

She thought.

Curiosity overcame her fright as she stared at the lights they were moving closer and closer to and then she saw a definite pattern that wasn't natural. There were dwellings in the trees, she thought blankly—everywhere—and walkways or bridges that joined them.

The thing—the Uzra carrying her began to flap his wings harder as they neared what she discovered was a huge flat area—like a porch only mammoth in size. He let go of her abruptly when she was just above it. Her heart seemed to leap into her throat and lodge there. Her feet hit the solid surface and she kept going as her knees buckled. Sprawling on the flat surface, she tried to dig her fingernails in when she realized her head was spinning until she felt like she would roll off.

She heard a meaty thud as the two men who'd captured her settled on either side of her and then voices and footsteps—more than two men would've made. Still unwilling to give up her grip on the planks beneath her, she lifted her head, trying to shake her hair out of her eyes as she turned toward the voices.

There was a crowd of people—Urza—she discovered, clustered on the other side of the platform from her—all of them staring at her.

Nouri was one of them.

Their gazes locked.

Cara couldn't help but think he didn't seem at all happy to see her.

Chapter Seven

"Its ... a human!" one of the women gasped.

"Its one of the aliens!"

"Human!"

"Silence!" Odyn bellowed abruptly as the whispers continued and began to grow louder as everyone's shock wore off and they began speculating on the reason for her capture. *"By the gods, Wyn! What the hell do you mean by bringing a human here!"*

"She saw us! We were in the sacred wood, hunting, and she saw us. We didn't know what else to do."

Frowning, Odyn turned his attention to the female. "What were you doing in the sacred wood, woman?" he demanded in her language.

Cara dragged her gaze from Nouri with an effort. "I was ... looking for my cat," she lied uneasily.

He looked taken aback. "Cat?"

Cara felt her face reddening. "It's an animal—a pet—very dear to me. It wandered off."

His eyes narrowed. "And you were looking for it at night? In the sacred woods?"

Nouri shook his paralysis abruptly, realizing where the questioning was leading. He couldn't shake the sense of fierce gladness, however, of triumph that had jolted through him. She'd taken matters into her own hands, he thought with grim satisfaction. There was no hope for her now.

"She was looking for me," Nouri said grimly.

Odyn shot a shocked look at him. *"For you?"*

He turned to look at Cara again. *"She's my woman,"* he said in his own tongue. Abruptly moving away from the others, he strode toward her and knelt down. "Are you hurt, beloved?"

Cara stared at him uneasily. "No."

Nouri smoothed her hair from her face and studied her. "It's too late to back out now, beloved. I told you to stay away."

Cara swallowed a little convulsively. "I couldn't," she whispered. "I missed you too much."

Nouri felt his chest tighten, felt a profound sense of relief, of joy. She'd felt it, too, felt the joining of their souls! It hadn't just been him, although he'd feared it was. Rising decisively, he helped her to her feet and slipped an arm around her, urging her toward the others, feeling shaky. "This is my father, Odyn. Father, this Cara ... of the beautiful red hair."

Odyn's brows rose. He sent his son a startled look. "The one you offered for when the strangers first came?"

"Yes." He turned to look at Cara. "The woman I have loved these many years."

Odyn glanced between the two of them. "And she is ready to unite our people by pledging herself to you?"

Cara felt her face redden. Dragging her gaze from Nouri's, she looked at his father uneasily. She swallowed a little convulsively, feeling doubt and fear and certainty. "I'm ready to try. I have loved him since I first met him."

Odyn chuckled abruptly. "Well, then we have something to celebrate!" He turned to the others. "My son has chosen a woman to be his life mate."

"You must celebrate without us," Nouri said, amusement threading his voice. "My woman and I have a something we need to get straight between us."

Odyn stared blankly at him a moment and then uttered a guffaw of ribald amusement. "I don't suppose a little wine and company could compete with that!" He sent his son a speculative look. "But you and I will have a discussion come the morning, Nouri!"

Nouri inclined his head in a show respect and turned to usher Cara away from the festivities. She glanced at him uneasily once or twice, trying to decide if he looked grim because he was angry or if he had something else in mind.

She was distracted by the discovery that he was leading her toward one of the narrow bridges that seemed to connect every dwelling. Trying not to think how high up they might be, she focused on the planks rather the darkness on either side of them, glancing uneasily at the Urza they passed along the way that stared at them curiously.

He brought her at last to a stout wooden door and opened it. "Lights!" he called out as they entered, and the room flooded with a soft, golden light.

Cara was still reeling from that discovery when he led her across the spacious living area just beyond the door and into another room. He didn't command the lights that time, however. As soon as they entered, he turned and pushed her against the wall, covering her mouth in a heated kiss.

Surprise held her for a handful of seconds, but desire was too close on the heels of her surprise to hold her long. She clutched at him eagerly, surging against him and kissing him back with the fervor of her deep longing. Heat rose between them like a steamy cloud.

When he broke the kiss, he followed her throat with his mouth, tugging at the closure of her suit until he'd parted it and then bending to suckle at first one breast and then the other. He hoisted her upward after a moment, bracing her between himself and the wall and supporting her by grasping two handfuls of her buttocks. Lifting her legs to curl them around his waist, she shrugged her arms from her suit and clutched at him.

"You wear too many clothes," he growled when he came up for air.

"I'll take it off if you put me down," she gasped.

"I can't wait that long," he muttered, bracing her and peeling her jumpsuit over her buttocks and then tugging at it until he had pulled it half way down her thighs.

"I can't either," she gasped, searching his belly with one hand until she'd found his erection and then trying to mount it.

He ground his teeth when she dragged the head of his cock down her cleft and pressed it against her opening, surging against her the moment he felt it. She groaned in delight when she felt him stretching her, pressing deeply inside of her.

"Nouri! It feels so good!"

He swallowed audibly, seeking her lips again and kissing her ravenously for several moments before he broke away and began to surge into her at a feverish pace that drove her to her peak and then over it. She groaned hoarsely as the waves of ecstasy

pounded through her, clutching at him tightly. He followed her, driving deeply inside of her as she peaked and began her descent. The heat of his seed bathing her womb sent a last, hard quake through her, and then pleasure like nothing else, as if she'd taken a part of him into herself and made it hers.

When they'd both ceased to shudder, they leaned together for long moments, panting for breath. Finally, when Cara had begun to wonder if he meant to stand with her against the wall the rest of the night, he hefted her against him and crossed the room.

She gasped as he tipped her backwards, the breath leaving her in a rush as they landed together on a mattress and bounced.

He released a harsh breath of relief, nuzzling his face against the side of her neck. "I meant it, you know," he muttered drowsily.

"Meant what?" Cara asked, stroking his hair.

"You can't back out now."

"What makes you think I want to?"

He pulled away and stared at her face. "I love you, Cara. I've always loved you. The gods know I tried to stay away."

Cara felt her throat close. "I'm so glad you didn't."

"You say that now, beloved," he said wryly. "My people ... we aren't like your people, Cara. This won't be easy ... for either of us."

She nuzzled her face against his neck. "I know, Nouri, but I love you too much not to try."

He moved away from her. "When did you know that you loved me?" he asked, staring at the ceiling.

"I don't know. I guess always." She sighed. "You know, I would've felt a lot better if I'd known you were you."

He turned to look at her, lifting his brows at her. "You didn't know I was the beast."

"No. It took me a while to figure that out—Maybe I never would have if we hadn't met in the woods. But you know I loved you then. I meant it when I said that you saved me. You were my best friend, my dearest companion." She released a an embarrassed huff of breath. "It's been a deep, dark secret that I tried to hide from myself, but ... you know when you used to hold me down and lick me all over?"

"Cara ..."

"Well, it felt really good. I thought I was a total pervert for enjoying it, but I just couldn't help it."

He stared at her a moment and started laughing.

She punched his shoulder irritably, pouting. "Don't laugh! Now, I'm sorry I told you!"

He rolled over on top of her, grinning down at her. "I'm not. I guess I'm a total pervert, too. I enjoyed the hell out of it. Nearly drove me crazy, but I enjoyed it." He sobered. "I never meant to deceive you. It's instinct with us ... changing, to protect ourselves. But once I had ... fallen madly in love with you, I couldn't stay away and that was the only way I could be near you."

The End

Read an excerpt from Conquest Earth, also available from NCP.

Conquest: Earth

By

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Chapter One

Galen propped his hands behind his head and stared down his bared torso at Onyx's bowed head as she patiently stroked his flaccid member. He was bored with her, he decided, realizing he couldn't summon a flicker of warmth, let alone heat. Time was when she could've had him hard in five sects flat and gotten him off inside of five septs. At this rate, it didn't look like she was going to even manage to get a rise out of him.

"Admiral?"

Galen frowned as the voice of his first officer abruptly intruded. He couldn't have a few fucking minutes to himself, he thought, feeling a welling of resentment? *Nothing* ever happened on the gods damned ship that his officers weren't perfectly capable of handling on their own. "You'd better have a gods damned good reason for bothering me, Ken-so," he growled at the man's image that appeared on the intercom console across his cabin on his desk. "If it's another brawl among the colonists, send the peace keepers in—if it's the gods damned swab jockeys, send the PKs and leave me the fuck alone! I'm *off* duty!"

"Sorry, Sir! You asked to be informed when we received first reports from the scout ships."

Even knowing they were only going to be exchanging the deadly boredom of life on the ship for what promised to be an equally boring, but far more uncomfortable existence once they reached their destination, Galen felt his heart miss a beat with a brief surge of something akin to excitement. Disgust followed that he felt even that much for the headache ahead of him. His lips thinned. "Unless there's something pressing"

"The reports aren't good, Sir."

Galen stared at the first officer's face through narrowed eyes for a moment, trying to guess what might have brought about the look of panic in his eyes. A thread of uneasiness wafted through him. Ken-so was a soldier to the bone. He wasn't prone to get worked up over nothing. Abruptly, he sat up and shoved Onyx away from his lap. She sprawled on the deck beside his bunk in a tangle of lithe, naked limbs. He barely glanced at her as he grabbed his discarded uniform and shoved his legs into it. Standing, he pulled the suit up to his shoulders, shrugged his arms into the sleeves, and strode toward the door, absently smoothing the front edges of his uniform together.

"I'll be waiting here for you," Onyx cooed as he reached the door.

Having dismissed her from his mind, Galen halted abruptly in his tracks at the sound of her voice and swiveled around to look at her. His gaze flickered over her perfect face and then down her equally perfect body. He released a disgusted sigh. "Don't bother. We're done. You may return to the pool."

He realized as he strode purposefully down the narrow corridor to the lift that his pulse was pounding with far more excitement now than it had been when Onyx had been trying to arouse him. He supposed he wasn't really surprised. A steady diet of pleasure bots could put anyone off of them. It had been annums since he'd even been within sniffing distance of a real, honest-to-gods, flesh and blood female.

And, at that, he hadn't been much closer than that.

Not that that she-devil of an attorney he'd had actually qualified as female in his book. The conniving bitch had thoroughly screwed him over or he wouldn't be here now ...on the backside of nowhere, going nowhere.

Dismissing the thoughts as he felt his temper rising, Galen paused before the lift, stepped inside when the door dematerialized, and braced his legs slightly apart for balance, clasping his hands behind his back. "Bridge," he said in a clipped voice.

The sensation of movement was brief, the jolt when the lift stopped shimmying his knees despite the braced stance. Ken-so met him at the door as he stepped off.

Galen lifted his dark brows in surprise.

"We're missing a planet," Ken-so announced immediately in a low voice resonating with the panic Galen had seen in his eyes on the com unit, turning to follow Galen as he strode past him and headed toward the vid display.

Galen stopped and threw a disbelieving glare at his first officer, wondering if the wet-behind-ears recruits had wandered into the wrong solar system. "*Missing ...?* How the fuck could we be missing an entire planet? Computer malfunction? Are they even in the right gods damned solar system?"

Tale Ken-so nodded vigorously. "I checked, Sir. The coordinates are correct. There's no malfunction. It's the right system, alright, but the fifth planet's gone. Nothing but a belt of debris where it was."

Galen's lips compressed in a look of disgust. "Any idea when it happened?"

Tale shrugged. "The computer is calculating maybe ten or twelve thousand annums—give or take. The orbits of the third and fourth planets are stable."

"About the time they charted the system," Galen muttered after a quick calculation in his head, turning and striding toward the vid display to study the system they were approaching.

"Sir? Should I inform mission control?" Ken-so asked, following his senior officer and hovering near his shoulder as Galen studied the display and finally took a seat before the console to read the reports coming in.

"Do you think they give a flying fuck, Ken-so?" In any case, they'd know by now. The sons-bitches-had probably observed the collision—or whatever had caused it—before they were halfway to their destination if the calculations were right, since their home system was roughly that many light-annums from the target system.

The question shut him up, thankfully. He was a good officer, just too damned fresh faced and eager as far as Galen was concerned—and at that he was a sight more mature and level headed than the majority of the men under his command.

It was a motley crew of soldiers and colonists he was leading. About half of them were like Ken-so. Young, eager, and stupid, buoyed by dreams of glory, they honestly saw this as a grand adventure that would earn them a place in the history books. There hadn't been an attempt at colonization in centuries. Once all the prime real estate in the closest systems had been settled, the government had been content to reap the benefits and ignore the more distant systems as too costly to bother with, whatever they might have of value. The war had changed that and the eager young recruits that had volunteered to man the colonization mission to the new star system they were entering would be the first colonists in generations. They were going to conquer the universe and all that rot.

Another quarter were blatant undesirables, men who'd already proven they were virtually useless to society. He strongly suspected they had been rounded up from the prisons and workhouses, and probably from the streets, from the look of some of them.

The mission was a good way to take out the trash.

The rest were screw-ups.

And he fell into that category.

Not that he actually *had* screwed up his mission. He'd done exactly as he'd been ordered by his senior officers. Where he'd screwed up was in failing to consider that, as the youngest admiral in the entire armada, he was going to end up being the scapegoat when the shit hit the fan—particularly since he already had one strike against him—his birth.

It galled the hell out of him that the others had not only dismissed his input when they'd been planning their battle strategy, but then they'd closed ranks afterwards and set him up to fall for their piss poor planning.

And that had left him in the unenviable position of accepting the leadership of the colony armada or rotting in prison.

Staring at the preliminary data, he almost wished he'd opted for prison. Ten annums wasn't that much now that he thought about it. He would've still been young enough when he'd gotten out to start over, train for a different career.

The five annums he'd already spent in prison had been pure hell, though. When they'd offered to let him lead the expedition, to reinstate his rank, he'd been ready to jump at the chance. Anything, he'd thought then, would be better than staring at four walls all day long—when he wasn't beating the other inmates off his food—and his body.

He should have known they wouldn't have offered it if it hadn't been worse than what he was already enduring.

Fucking bureaucrats and politicians and their gods damned wars!

They were always hot to send someone else in to die for the 'greater good', meaning them and their credits.

He wondered if the rest of the crew and colonists realized those brides the government had promised were never going to materialize. Short of shipping them out in chains, that is, because no female in her right mind was going to actually volunteer to be shipped out to the frontier to co-habit with the dregs of society the government had rounded up to colonize the distant system.

They'd be damned lucky if they got more pleasure bots.

"The scout craft that was to have set down on the fifth planet has diverted to the fourth."

Galen didn't glance at Ken-so that time although his lips tightened in irritation. "I haven't forgotten how to read, Ken-so," Galen muttered. "It's probably just as well," he added after a moment, though more to himself than to his first officer. "Wonder of wonders it didn't fair well after the collision that took out the fifth planet—no plant life, very little air or atmosphere. It's going to take a hell of a lot to bring it up to livable."

"The third planet still looks good."

Galen got up. "The scout ship hasn't landed yet," he pointed out.

"Preliminary readings, though"

Galen shook his head. "We'll know when we know. It looks like we're going to be setting down on the third planet, though. Best-case scenario, it looks like it'll take a

couple of annums to make the fourth planet even tolerable. Run some figures for me, Ken-so and see if we've got the resources to set up a base there."

* * * *

The sound was like nothing Breanna Denton had ever heard in her life. Her heart contracted in her chest in response, squeezing the breath from her lungs. Instantaneously, adrenaline began to surge through her in waves of hot and cold. Paralyzed, for many moments, Bree could do nothing but absorb the chaos that suddenly surrounded her.

Deafening noise; an intense vibration that seemed to emanate from deep within the earth to rattle the house on its foundation and everything in it; and electronics gone suddenly berserk—her microwave, TV, radio—every light and piece of electronics in the house winked on and then off, over and over—screaming silence one moment and deafening noise the next.

She couldn't assimilate the source of the chaos. Her mind simply fastened on the one thing it *could* interpret—danger. Neither the word nor the concept actually formulated in her mind. Her brain simply ordered her body into motion. Without any clear idea of what the threat was or what direction it was coming from, Bree dashed out of her kitchen and raced toward the front door. She was out the door and halfway across her front lawn before she actually realized that she'd instinctively headed away from the noise that represented the threat, which almost seemed omnipresent once she'd left the house.

Halting when she realized she had no idea where to go to find safety, she lifted her head and looked around.

Her gaze was snagged almost instantly by the thing that filled the sky above her house. She stared at it blankly, in disbelief, unable to grasp that it could possibly be what it seemed to be.

It wasn't an airliner, although she realized, dimly, that, in the back of her mind, she'd been certain the screaming noise of something huge bearing down on her must be a plane going down.

It wasn't a meteor, although the thing still glowed from the heat of its entry and swift flight through the atmosphere.

It wasn't the space shuttle.

As it passed over her house and settled in her backyard, however, she realized that she wasn't hallucinating, and it wasn't a crash of anything that had originated on earth.

In point of fact, although the thing settled heavily enough the ground beneath her feet shook, it wasn't a crash at all.

It was the sound of jets overhead that finally penetrated Bree's stupor of stunned amazement. Her head jerked upwards automatically to survey the crafts that shot over her head, low enough she could read the numbers painted on the underside of the crafts. In the distance, she could hear the blaring horns and sirens of emergency vehicles.

Maybe she *had* been mistaken, she thought?

Something had gone down.

She didn't consciously make the decision to move closer for a better look. Her mind wasn't actually functioning on a level of conscious thought. Shock still gripped her. Her heart was pounding like a trip hammer. She had to remind herself to breathe.

As she inched around the side of her house to look behind it, more than half expecting any moment to hear a tremendous explosion, she saw that the thing had taken

out at least a quarter of her peach orchard. A great cloud of dust still lingered in the air, obscuring much of the craft, but there was no smoke as she would've expected to see if the thing had actually crashed.

She stared at the thing in consternation, wondering what she should do. Call 911? Run?

She looked down at herself, realizing she was standing in her front yard in her panties and the t-shirt she usually slept in.

The wail of the sirens was getting closer.

As she stood indecisively, the jets that had flown by before, or two more, passed overhead again and it finally dawned her that she was going to have people swarming over her yard at any minute and she was barefoot and half-naked.

She'd already started toward the house with the intention of running in to grab a pair of jeans and shoes when she saw movement on the craft. Halting in her tracks, she peered toward the ship, feeling Goosebumps ripple along her arms and then run down her spine as an opening appeared in the side of the thing. As she watched, a ramp descended toward the ground. Before it had even settled completely, a trail of metal monsters began to emerge like ants out of a stirred anthill, moving away from the ship in a wave.

Curiosity flickered through her, but she had no trouble squelching it. She'd stop to see what was going on when she was a safe distance away.

Galvanized by the realization that she was going to have to do her running on foot, and barefoot, if she didn't at least grab her keys from the house, she whirled and ran toward her front door, trying to remember where she'd left her car keys. Thankfully, they were lying on the hall table just inside the front door. Grabbing them up, she raced into her bedroom, grabbed the jeans and shoes she'd discarded by her bed the night before, and ran back outside. She skidded to a halt, however, when she rounded the side of the house and discovered that the machines she'd seen emerging from the ship were swarming all over her backyard.

One of the things stopped, almost seemed to stare at her, and then headed straight towards her. Uttering a shriek, Bree threw everything she was holding into the air, whirled, and ran. Relief flooded her briefly, for even as she turned to run, she saw trucks pulling into her front yard.

She hadn't managed to cover even half the distance between the machines and the soldiers piling out of the trucks when something snaked around her waist and jerked her to a halt. The metal tentacle tightened, coiling around her as it lifted her off of her feet. Dizzy and disoriented beyond the shock and terror, she hadn't even managed to assimilate what was happening when she found herself staring at the mechanical monster face to face.

Mindlessly, she began shoving at the tentacle, trying to pry it loose. It didn't yield at all, but, fortunately, the tentacle didn't tighten either. She was nearing blackout from her panicked breaths before it dawned on her the robot hadn't done anything else, that it was merely holding her captive.

Studying her?

* * * *

"We have a preliminary feed from scout ship one. It has successfully landed on the third planet and deployed the constructors."

Galen lifted a brow but he felt a lessening of tension. The scout ship wouldn't

have deployed the construction bots if the planet weren't within the preset parameters, which meant that it was livable.

"Excellent!" he said. "Bring up the data on the forward vid."

He narrowed his eyes when the data began to scroll across the screen, studying the components of the atmosphere critically and then the land mass/water ratio. The land mass to water ratio was a little daunting. Great to have water and all that, but they needed land to develop a colony. The next readings were more promising.

Despite the ratio, the planet was big enough to have some fairly extensive landmasses. Temperature good. Air quality not so good, but bearable. They were going to have to figure out what was causing the high levels of methane and carbon dioxide and clean it up a bit but ... it was certainly closer to the mark than the first planet they'd surveyed.

Methane levels certainly indicated a planet lush with life forms they were familiar with ... unless it was from some other source altogether.

"Any vids yet on our new home?"

A ragged hurrah went up from the men on the bridge.

Galen decided to ignore the breach in protocol. They had reason to celebrate. They'd been on the fucking ship for nigh four annums now—in status more than half that time, granted, but still long enough to be going stir crazy from being on the fucking ship and he hadn't been thrilled with the idea that they might have to look for another star system to settle.

He felt a rise in exhilaration himself. Whatever was down there, it still beat the hell out of canned air and metal decking beneath his feet.

Sky overhead—solid ground beneath his feet—real gravity—natural air

A view of bright blue sky suddenly filled the screen. Galen felt his stomach go weightless at the sight.

A collective gasp of appreciation went up from the men.

Galen frowned. Before he could direct their minds to the somberness of the situation, something flashed across the screen, too swiftly to actually identify the objects.

"What in the *fuck* was that?" Galen growled.

Ken-so turned a pale face toward him. "Unknown, Sir! The droids are still accumulating data."

The blue sky with its fluffy white clouds and the strange objects vanished. Flashes of scrubby green and brown vegetation filled the screen that had small pink globes hanging from them.

"Vegetation," Ken-so announced unnecessarily. "It would nice if we discovered the fruit was edible. There seems to be quite a bit of it in the area."

Galen was just about to comment on the unlikelihood that the scout ship had settled in the middle of edible, native vegetation when Ken-so exclaimed again.

"A biological specimen! Sir! One of the constructs has captured a creature."

"Let's hope it's edible," Galen growled instead of informing Ken-so that he didn't need a fucking play by play. He could see the gods damned vid as well as Ken-so could. "I've had about all the space rations I can handle."

"Bringing it up now, Sir."

The pinkish white blob that filled the screen was out of focus due to the proximity of it to the vid. Galen felt a jolt of shock run through him. Everyone on the bridge

reacted much as he had.

The vid lens adjusted, bringing the features into focus—two eyes opened so wide he could see white all the way around irises that were nearly the color of the vegetation they'd glimpsed. Thick black lashes on the upper and lower lid of the eyes. Short black crescents of hair above that, forming eyebrows. The nose was a long, straight bridge in the center of the face that formed flaring nostrils on either side of the rounded tip. Pinkish-brown lips surrounding an 'o' of a mouth that displayed a vibrating pink tongue, white flat-edged teeth. Long, reddish brown hair, whipped around the face by the wind. Tiny brownish marks dotted the skin across the high cheekbones and the narrow bridge of its nose.

Galen finally found his voice. "Tell the gods damned construct to pull back so we can have a look at the rest of it," he said in a hoarse voice.

When the image zoomed out, they saw two flailing, hairless arms and two hands, balled into fists. Mammary globes, tipped with dark pink points they could see through the thin material that covered the body—and when the vid panned down, two hairless, completely bare legs—also flailing.

"It's a... it's a ... it's a ... female!" Ken-so finally managed to get out.

A sense, almost of panic, swept over Galen when he heard the other men mumbling. Possessiveness swelled behind it. "It's *mine*, gods damn it!" Galen growled. "That's what it is!"

Chapter Two

“But ... but ... but, Sir!” Tale Ken-so exclaimed.

Galen bolted from his seat and strode closer to the vid, examining his prize with a heady sense of exhilaration. “I, Admiral Galen of the royal house of Drako hereby claim this star system in the name of the Royal Confederation of Star Systems! And that female as mine!”

“You think there’s more?” someone on the bridge murmured, sounding as stunned as he was.

It penetrated the heated fog of Galen’s mind, however. “Of course there’s more! There are bound to be more—but this one’s mine.” He returned his attention to the vid, admiring the beauty of the creature. It looked almost like them!

He couldn’t believe his luck! After all this time—a living, breathing—female-being!

He frowned, trying to recall if the scouting ship had the facilities to examine the specimen to discover just how compatible it was, physiologically, with their species—or, more importantly, him.

He couldn’t seem to direct his mind into any sort of order. “Ken-so! Are there facilities on the scouting ship to analyze the being?”

When Ken-so didn’t answer immediately, he turned to look at him, glaring when he saw his second in command was still white faced. His mouth was working, but he couldn’t seem to form words. “Well?” he barked.

“You mean ... dissect, Sir?”

Galen gaped at him. “Are you out of your fucking mind, man! What good is my bride going to be to me in fucking pieces!”

Ken-so gaped at him. “Bride?” he repeated as if he’d never heard the word.

Galen sent him a look. “We’re colonists. Brides? We didn’t bring any, if you’ll recall.” As if any of them could forget *that* little detail!

“Yes ... but ... It’s alien, Sir! We don’t even know if it *is* a female—or warm blooded!”

“It has mammary glands, dolt! Of course it’s female and warm blooded!” Not that he was sure he’d object if it wasn’t warm-blooded. The pleasure droids certainly weren’t—weren’t even living, and he hadn’t seen anybody objecting to cozying up to them. In point of fact, their pool of available sex droids seemed to be showing some distressing signs of over use and it occurred to him abruptly that it probably hadn’t been the best idea to send Onyx back to the pool. But then he’d completely forgotten, at the time, that more than half their sex droids had gotten caught up in the last riot and hadn’t weathered the brawl that well.

Ken-so shrugged uncomfortably. “It seems to be a specimen of an *intelligent* alien species, Admiral Drako. It may already be taken.”

Galen sent him a look of indignation. “By whom?” he growled, outraged that the man could suggest that anyone had a higher claim than he did, but then that was the

trouble with these fresh faced colonist recruits! They had no respect for their superiors!

“*Her* people!” Ken-so responded baldly. “Sir, what I’m trying to say is that we’ve had an analysis of those objects we couldn’t identify. They’re some sort of alien crafts—*flying* alien crafts. I think our colony is under attack.”

It took Galen a few moments to absorb that. They’d considered the possibility that any world capable of supporting life would already *have* life. It was almost inevitable that it would and something they’d actually counted upon. Of course, they’d brought everything they expected to need to produce their own food, but they’d known their chances of success were far better if they discovered a source of food already flourishing on the world they settled on.

They’d expected primitive life, however. Animals that might be domesticated.

It dawned on him abruptly that adequate consideration hadn’t been given to the possibility, indeed the likelihood, of the evolution of higher order animals ... because the gods damned system they’d been sent to colonize had been a very young system at the time it was observed.

He was no scientist! He was a gods damned soldier! It hadn’t occurred to him that the gods damned men of science might have screwed up!

He felt his belly tighten with a mixture of disappointment and frustration. After studying the pretty creature—who was still battering at the construct with her fists and screaming at it if her vibrating pink tongue was any indication—for a few more moments, he finally returned to his seat and settled in it heavily, massaging his temples and trying to rid himself of the headache forming there.

“So ... you’re suggesting that, between the time we left our system and arrived in this one, an intelligent, technologically *advanced* race has sprang up? Is that even possible?”

Ken-so frowned. “Considering the speed that light travels—yes. Clearly, we were studying the distant past of this star system—which we were aware of, of course. And the distance from our system, even with our sophisticated equipment, made it impossible to study anything so minute as the flora and fauna of the worlds that were possible targets.”

Galen drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “But ... it only took us four annums—four of the most miserable fucking annums of my life—notice I’m *not* excluding the five fucking annums I spent in prison, Ken-so—to get here!”

Ken-so looked uncomfortable. “Yes, Sir. I know, Sir. But ... you see we were studying this system ten thousand annums ago—give or take a couple of thousand annums—when we first looked at it and it had already progressed ten thousand, give or take, so even though utilizing the worm holes allowed us to make the trip in a mere four annums”

Galen’s eyes narrowed. “There was nothing *mere* about it! I feel confident in speaking for everyone when I say this has been the most hellish trip ever conceived! And now you’re saying we’ve arrived and it’s already taken?”

Ken-so shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s beginning to look that way, Sir. Apparently, it was just ... uh ... providence that we happened to discover it just as a dominant species emerged.” Instead of trying to explain further, he turned to the vid display again and ordered the constructs to beam them a 360-degree view of the landing site. The moment the scene switched from their construct’s captive to an overview, they

saw the flying machines ... and far more.

The sight was appalling, to say the very least.

* * * *

Bree didn't know if her battering on the thing had finally resulted in a malfunction, or what, but she didn't wait around to find out. The moment the thing set her on her feet and uncoiled the tentacle from around her, she leapt away, managed two churning cycles with her legs, and sprawled in the dirt since she hadn't waited to regain her equilibrium before she tried to flee. Such was her terror, however, she didn't even feel the impact with the ground, didn't wait to regain her bearings. She bounded up as if the ground was a trampoline and churned up several more clods of dirt before she managed to get enough momentum and traction to shoot forward and away.

A growing wall of police, firemen, and soldiers had sprung up since she'd been grabbed by the mechanical beast, but she headed toward them without considering the possibility that she might be mown down by the guns they were aiming. Luckily, they seemed too stunned to do anything more than level the weapons at the invaders. One of the men from fire and rescue seemed to recover sufficiently when she slammed into him to grab her and shove her behind him, and she found herself passed from one to another until she was finally expelled from the rear.

Staggering when she suddenly found herself free of the pack, she managed to lock her watery knees to prevent herself from sprawling in the dirt again. Huffing for breath, both with terror from her narrow escape and exertion, she looked around dazedly for help. The rescuers—everyone—seemed too focused on what was going on to pay her any mind, however, and after a brief mental examination, she finally decided she wasn't actually injured—a little bruised, still terrorized, but she thought she was alright.

Two more troop transports arrived while she stood shakily at the rear of the force already assembled. As the soldiers boiled out of the backs of the truck and charged toward her, Bree managed to gather the presence of mind to move out of their way.

She was still too dazed with shock, however, to bring her mind to any sort of order, to think of what to do. Her house, she discovered when she managed to work her way through the fact that she was still virtually naked, bare foot and without transportation, was not only surrounded by the ground troops that had steadily been swelling, but it appeared that the metal beasts were taking it apart!

After bouncing up and down on her tiptoes for several moments, trying to see over the heads of the soldiers in front of her, she looked around for a vantage point to see what was going on. A row of tanks were just pulling into her yard. She gaped at them in disbelief as they crushed her pump house and flower beds and churned them into the dirt.

Rage abruptly suffused her, ousting the remains of her shock. "Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

A couple of the soldiers near the back glanced in her direction absently, but almost immediately returned their attention to the activity everyone was watching. The tanks advanced until they had formed a perimeter and finally stopped. Bree glared at the tracks through her front yard and finally stalked toward the nearest. Planting her balled fists on her hips, she glared up at the men on the top that had popped out of the ironclad beast like gophers to stare at the alien craft in her peach orchard. "Hey you! This is my damned yard! What the hell do you mean by tearing up my damned yard!"

The soldier glanced at her and did a double take. A scowl contorted his young

features. “Get out of here, woman! What the hell are you thinking? We’re about to have a battle here!”

Bree gaped at him. “I *live* here, damn it! You are *not* going to have a battle in my damned peach orchard! We’re right in the middle of harvest!”

“You’re in the middle of a damned war, idiot woman! Get your ass back or I’ll have you arrested!” another soldier bellowed at her.

She glared at the man furiously and finally turned away, trying to spot a man wearing an officer’s uniform. Unfortunately, she didn’t know dick about military men. She couldn’t see anyone that looked like they might be in charge.

Before she could decide whether to try to bulldoze her way through the men gathered at the front or try to find a phone, a soldier grabbed her, hauled her toward the dirt road that led up to her house and plunked her on her feet. “Town’s three miles that way! I suggest you start jogging! We’re liable to start trading lead any minute, lady!”

Bree gaped at the man in disbelief. “But ... I didn’t see a thing but robots! You’re going to shoot the robots?”

“Leave this to us, ma’am. It’s our job!” he said shortly, turning and marching away from her.

“But it’s *my* damned yard! My house! And my damned peach orchard!” she yelled at his retreating back.

He either ignored her or he didn’t hear her—no surprise considering the racket the continuously arriving trucks, jeeps, and tanks were making and the helicopters and jets as they crisscrossed the sky above them.

Unnerved by the massing military despite her anxiety about her property, Bree began to jog along the edge of the road, leaving the road to the military convoy streaming down it.

When she’d reached the edge of her orchard, she stopped to rest, leaning against one of the trees and staring with a mixture of alarm and anger at the steady stream of military vehicles as they went by. The soldiers stared back at her when they caught a glimpse of her although mostly they seemed too preoccupied to notice her. A few even had the audacity to offer up wolf whistles as they went by. She glared at them, resisting the impulse to shoot birds at them.

When she’d caught her breath, she pushed away from the tree, but then glanced up at it. It was too scrubby, really, to be much of a tree. She doubted it was much more than fifteen feet high to the very tips of its uppermost branches. It was one of the older peach trees, though, and the branches were fairly stout. Without stopping to consider it, she placed a foot in the crotch of a limb and the trunk and hoisted herself up, climbing carefully until she’d reached the highest branches that seemed likely to hold her.

The land had risen slightly—which accounted for some of her breathlessness—as she’d jogged away from her house. With the added height of the tree, she could just see the peak of the remains of her roof.

Dismay filled her. As she’d suspected, the damned robots were systematically dismantling her house—not simply demolishing it—taking it apart! As if there weren’t soldiers and war machines surrounding almost the entire perimeter of the space ship—and it *was* a space ship, unlike anything she’d ever seen before—the robots were as busy as they could be. They’d cleared about an acre—possibly more—of her prized peach orchard. They hadn’t simply leveled it, however. They were excavating!

As chaotic as her mind still was with shock, it settled in her firmly that they were constructing ... something.

* * * *

"I hesitate to point this out, Sir, but it occurs to me that we might have created an intergalactic incident."

Galen slid a sardonic look at his first officer. "You think?"

Tale reddened. "Should I contact high command, Sir?"

Galen drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, thinking. Aside from the fact that he didn't particularly want high command to know they'd fucked up and landed their gods damned scout ship on a planet already taken by beings obviously extremely territorial, what would be the point? It wasn't likely they'd send out re-enforcements to take the planet—aside from the fact that it would take them annums to make the trip.

He needed time to consider the situation, he finally decided. From what he could see, the aliens seemed content, for the moment at least, to simply watch.

"Order the constructs to set up a perimeter shield to protect our property, Ken-so," he said abruptly.

Ken-so looked like he wanted to question the order, but he merely nodded and belayed the order to the techs that were monitoring the constructs.

Galen pushed himself from his command chair and strode toward the lift. "I'll be in my quarters. Inform me if anything happens that I should know about."

"Yes, Sir!"

He glanced toward the vid screen while he waited for the lift to arrive, scanning the crowd for any sign of the female he'd claimed earlier. He wasn't surprised when he didn't see her, but he was vastly disappointed. He glanced at the tech at the console nearest him. "Did the construct tag the biological entity he examined?" he asked as casually as he could.

"It's standard procedure, Sir!" the tech responded.

Nodding, Galen entered the lift as the opening materialized and assumed a wide legged stance and an expression of unconcern. He was fuming, however, as he stepped off of the lift on his own level and strode briskly to his quarters. He halted once he'd stepped inside and his door had closed behind him, staring at nothing in particular while he tried to sort through the tangled mess of the problem he was facing. After a few minutes, when he realized he was still too tense to make any headway, he turned to the com unit. "Send Onyx to my quarters."

There was a brief pause. "Onyx has been checked out, Sir. Should I recall her?"

Galen frowned. "No. Just send me Jaide."

Instead of the response he'd expected, there was another, longer pause. "Jaide's in the repair lab."

"Just send me a gods damned companion droid!" Galen snarled.

"Yes, Sir!" the man on the other end of the com unit responded.

Sprawling on his bunk, Galen stared at the ceiling, trying to untangle the mayhem in his mind. From the massing military presence beyond the perimeter of their colony construct ship, he was reasonably certain they'd stumbled upon a fairly sophisticated race of beings—clearly aggressive.

It seemed to also follow that they couldn't have the capability for space travel, or much in the way of space travel, or they would've encountered them before.

Of course they were from a different galaxy altogether than he was so it was possible they had space travel capabilities. They just hadn't devised, or discovered, any method of making the great leaps necessary for intergalactic travel as his own people had.

Getting up abruptly, he moved to the com unit. "Ken-so!"

"Yes, Sir!"

"See if you can put a report together for me from the scout ships indicating whether or not these people have intergalactic, or inner solar system, flight capabilities. If there hasn't been enough data collected yet, then have the scout ship on the fourth planet launch some drones to survey for any sign of them."

There was a slight hesitation in Ken-so's response, enough to alert him to the fact that Ken-so was struggling to contain his curiosity about the request. Finally, he merely affirmed the order, however, and said the report would be sent to him as soon as possible. "Anything else, Sir?"

Galen hesitated, wrestling with the impulse to ask where their biological subject was at the moment. He finally tamped it with the reflection that the military was likely to interpret the launch of scout drones as an act of war, as tempted as he was to order a search for her. "That will be all for now Contact me at once if there is any significant change in the situation with the forward scout ship."

"Admiral?" Ken-so asked hesitantly.

"What?"

"Should I order the constructs to cease preparations?"

A jolt went through Galen. "You mean to say that hasn't been done yet?" he growled.

"N-no, Sir," Ken-so stammered.

Galen ground his teeth. He was surrounded by idiots! "Then I think it might be wise to do so, don't you Ken-so? Or hasn't it occurred to anyone yet that we already have an incident on our hands?"

"Yes, Sir! I'll see to it at once, Sir!"

Releasing an irritated huff of breath, Galen scrubbed a hand over the whiskers on his jaw and then raked his hair from his face with his fingers, creating more havoc with his hair as he tugged on the locks. Frowning at the evidence of his unkempt appearance, he moved from the com unit to his shaving mirror and peered at himself. The face looking back at him came as something of a jolt.

He was a disgrace to his uniform, he thought in disgust—several days growth of beard—or maybe weeks—he couldn't recall the last time he'd shaved—and his hair was even worse. The neat military cut he generally wore—or had when he was actually a standing officer of the Royal Confederation of Star Systems—had completely vanished. There was no sign, now, that he'd ever shorn it. He distinctly recalled, though, that he had carefully shaved the hair from either side of his scalp and trimmed the black hair in the center to the required maximum length of three inches so that it formed a bristling cockade from his forehead to the hairline before he'd presented himself to the review board.

Of course, that was when he'd discovered the conditions of his re-instatement.

He had to suppose he hadn't cut it since, though he discovered he couldn't actually recall.

He'd spent the first week out 'celebrating' his release from prison by getting roaring drunk and lying in his cabin in a drunken stupor—at least a week.

Maybe a little more than that?

Shaking his thoughts, he studied the parts of his face that he could see for several moments—his forehead and eyes—and finally moved back to his bunk and sprawled on it again. He didn't just look like hell. He looked old! When the hell had that happened? While he was recovering from his wounds in the med center? During his hellish incarceration in the prison?

During the trip out to the ass end of the universe where he realized he had been banished for life?

He frowned, trying to calculate his age.

He wasn't old enough to *look* old, he finally concluded—nearly twelve annums older than he'd been when he'd first risen to the rank of admiral, but he'd been *young* then—no older than Ken—so was now.

A buzz at the door of his quarters finally distracted him from his unpleasant thoughts and he rolled up to a sitting position. "Permission to enter!" he barked at the door.

The panel vanished, revealing a trio of companion droids.

Galen stared at them blankly for a moment, having been so caught up in his thoughts he'd forgotten he'd summoned them. As he surveyed them, however, anger replaced his surprise.

The one in the forefront was smiling at him seductively—but her head was definitely listing to one side at an awkward angle. The one directly behind her seemed to be missing an arm. He scowled at them but lifted his hand and beckoned them inside. "Turn."

Obedient as ever, the three companion droids pirouetted for him and finally faced him again, their expressions expectant.

Galen sighed in disgust. "Were any of you, by chance, *not* involved in the brawl on C deck last month?" he asked tightly.

Chapter Three

Bree frowned in puzzlement as she watched the frenetic activity from the alien craft abruptly cease. For several moments, it almost seemed as if someone had switched the mechanical monsters off. They froze where they were, mid-motion, and then, after a few moments, they stopped whatever they'd been doing, turned, and began to head back inside of the ship.

That was almost as bizarre as their behavior before.

Crane her neck though she could, however, she couldn't see that there was anything the military had done to make the robots react in that manner. The soldiers had surrounded the ship and the activity around it, but they were merely gaping at the robots as she had. There hadn't been a single shot fired nor any demands from the military commanding them to halt and desist.

She discovered after a bit, though, that not all of the robots had returned to the ship. One, this one more humanoid in appearance than most of the others, had parked itself at the foot of the gangplank. As she stared at it, a voice emerged from it, magnified so that it echoed across her grove.

Whatever it was saying, however, was as much a mystery as everything else that had happened. *She* certainly couldn't understand the language.

When it stopped speaking, there was silence for nearly ten minutes. Finally, a man wearing an officer's insignia lifted a bullhorn and bellowed back at the machine. "You have invaded in the United States of America! State your intentions!"

The robot swiveled to face the man who'd spoken, but another ten minutes or so passed before it responded—in the same language as before.

Settling a little more comfortably on her tree limb, Bree listened to the 'conversation' for nearly an hour. The man with the bullhorn would bellow a question, or a demand, at the robot and the robot would, after a lengthy delay, spout a string of gibberish in response.

While she was perched in the tree, the redneck brigade arrived in beat up trucks, waving everything from hunting rifles to shotguns and beer bottles. Churning up the dirt in the ditches on either side of the road, which was still clogged with arriving military vehicles, blowing the truck horns and bellowing rebel yells, they skidded to a halt when they finally reached the barricade the military had devised and poured out of the trucks.

They were immediately met with resistance.

The soldiers gathered around to watch the proceedings in her orchard turned to meet the redneck 'army' and ordered them back. The rednecks protested, loudly, informing whoever was in command that it was their damned territory and they had the right to defend it from the alien sons-of-bitches!

Bree narrowed her eyes angrily. It was *her* damned territory! She'd inherited the farm from her parents and nobody had the right to be there but her—not the damned rednecks, not the military!

But they'd run *her* off—of her own property!

She saw they didn't chase off the redneck brigade. They were ordered back. They were told not to shoot until or unless an attack was commanded, but they were allowed to stay as long as they didn't get rowdy. The soldiers didn't even try to confiscate their guns!

She climbed down from the tree when she finally got tired of clinging to the limbs of her perch and settled at the bottom, trying to decide what to do. Now that she'd had time to calm down somewhat, she was excruciatingly aware of her state of near nakedness. She distinctly remembered that she'd dashed inside to grab her jeans, shoes, and her truck keys, but she couldn't remember what she'd done with them—dropped them, she supposed when that *thing* had grabbed her. As tempted as she was to march back to her place and demand that they allow her inside her house, the prospect of having to run the gauntlet of red-necks and soldiers was daunting to say the very least.

The alternative was to go to her nearest neighbor's house as she was, though, and that didn't appeal to her either. Finally coming to a decision, she got up, brushed at her butt to remove the debris from the ground and marched back toward her place. If nothing else, she was determined to get a few things from her place—whatever she could—and remove it from the path of almost certain destruction before she had to find some place to wait to see what was going to happen.

Aside from the landing itself and the damned robots that had wrecked her orchard and taken apart the back end of her house, there hadn't actually been any overt signs of attack. She didn't doubt that there still would be, and that was why she intended to grab anything she could *while* she could!

* * * *

Galen couldn't say that he was entirely free of his unaccustomed turmoil by the time he'd showered, but he felt more in command, more certain of the decisions that had been floating around in his head while he'd bathed. Striding decisively to his com unit when he'd exited, he summoned a groom and strode to his locker to examine his uniforms. His palace uniform caught his eye immediately. He studied it indecisively for a moment and then removed it from the locker. He couldn't make a more impressive figure, he decided sardonically, than to appear in all the regal glory of the empire.

When the barber arrived, he settled in his desk chair naked, propped his feet on his bunk and crossed them at the ankles.

"Clean shaven? Or would you prefer to retain the facial hair around the upper lip and chin?" the droid inquired politely.

Galen frowned, drumming the fingers of one hand on the arm of his chair thoughtfully. "Which do you believe would be most appealing to a female?" he asked finally when he discovered he felt uneasy about either possibility. He was in his prime, but the view in his mirror hadn't been particularly reassuring.

There had been a time when he had seemed to be personable enough to appeal to plenty of females—at least females from his own galaxy—but, with the war, and then imprisonment and finally the trip here, it had been annums since he'd even had the opportunity to discover if that was still the case. To him, it seemed the annums or the pain from his wounds, or both, had carved the lines around his eyes deeper, although he was obliged to admit anxiety over his appearance might not make him the best judge. Would that evidence of time merely make him appear distinguished? Mature and thus more desirable because of the stability it suggested? Or would shaving away the hair that

covered his face merely emphasize the fact that he was older than the fresh faced recruits on board?

It seemed important to make the best first impression he could—assuming the object of his desires was still around to see.

He was inclined, he discovered, to keep the hair in the hope that it would hide whatever flaws lay beneath.

On the other hand, although he hadn't paid that much attention to the males, it seemed to him that they'd been clean-shaven. And, dimly, he recalled that the females he had courted before back home hadn't been particularly pleased about facial hair. Their skin was tender. The coarse hair chafed them.

The question seemed to have thrown the robot completely. When he emerged from his own contemplation, he discovered the droid was still collating data. He blinked. "My data suggests that the majority seem to prefer clean shaven."

He was referring, of course, to their females, Galen thought irritably. They hadn't collected enough on the beings from this world to know *what* they liked.

The worst of it was that, once he allowed the droid to shave him, he was committed.

He frowned over his unaccustomed indecision and finally ordered the droid to shave him. He might as well know right off if the female had any interest in him. If she wasn't, well where there was one, there were bound to be others. If he discovered she had no interest, maybe he would allow the hair to grow back before he tried again?

He wasn't particularly satisfied with that decision. In point of fact, he felt downright depressed.

It was absurd! He'd done no more than lay eyes on the female! For all he knew she was completely incompatible with him in temperament.

There was just no getting around the fact that he'd liked what he'd seen, though—enough to feel an immediate sense of possessiveness. He was inclined to think that counted for a great deal when he hadn't had that strong a reaction to a female before.

Of course, he'd been focused on his career before—not settling down. It could be his mind set that was responsible for the powerful reaction considering he'd finally accepted that he was a colonist now—not a soldier. The only thing he *could* look forward to accomplishing, now, was establishing a household, and that required a companion, which wasn't likely to be supplied by the bastards that had sent them off, whatever the other men thought.

Not that there was any certainty that he could breed little Galens on the female—they certainly weren't the same species—but it would be a hell of a lot more pleasant trying than settling into a domicile with nothing for companionship, or comfort, but a companion droid. He wasn't even altogether certain he could handle having rug rats running around him, as far as that went, but then he was sure he could always find something to do to keep himself occupied if it transpired that his domicile wasn't much of a haven.

It would take a lot of hard work to establish a colony.

If they were allowed to establish a colony in this system.

When the droid had finished, he climbed out of the chair and flicked the random hair off that the droid had missed. Striding to his locker, he opened the door and peered at himself in the larger mirror critically.

His face looked gaunt and hard without the softening effect of the wild growth of beard, but he decided he actually looked more youthful. Deciding he was just disgusted and tired of life in general and that accounted for his first impression, he felt some of his old confidence returning.

By the time he'd donned his dress uniform and carefully attached the epaulettes of his rank and his hard won metals of valor, he felt considerably better.

He still looked like a tropical flitter in his royal dress, in his opinion, but there was no getting around the fact that he'd always caused a flutter of interest in the females at the palace whenever he'd appeared in the ridiculous outfit.

Almost as an afterthought, he moved to the case that held his dress swords and settled them into the scabbards on either side of his shoulders. They were more a symbol of his status as a soldier than anything else since swords hadn't been used in centuries, but the women seemed to find them thrillingly barbaric.

Reasonably satisfied with his appearance, he left his quarters and strode briskly to the lift. "Bridge," he said in a clipped voice once the doors had closed behind him, assuming a rigid military stance.

He caused a stir when he reached the bridge again. Ignoring the stunned looks of the men, he strode to his command chair. On second thought, however, he decided not to sit for fear it would crease the fabric.

"What's our status?" he asked Ken-so, whom he discovered was gaping at him with something akin to awe.

"Nearing the fourth planet, Sir!"

Galen nodded. "Are we in range to project a holographic image?"

"Coming up in twenty septs, Sir," Ken-so responded when he'd checked the data.

"Good!" Galen said briskly, striding toward the vid displays and studying them critically. Finally, he pointed with an index finger. "Target this spot."

"Uh ... Sir! We haven't managed to interpret their language, Sir!"

Galen turned and glared at him. "Well, what's taking so gods damned long, Ken-so? How the fuck am I supposed to communicate with them without a translator?"

"We're working on it, Sir!" one of the techs reported uneasily. "It's just that they haven't *said* much. It doesn't give the computer much to work with ... and we haven't found any keys yet."

Galen frowned. "They must have broadcast capabilities," he said finally. "They have the flying machines. How else would they communicate with them? Scan the radio frequencies and see what you can come up with."

He could tell from the man's expression that that hadn't occurred to him. Red faced now with discomfort, he and the other techs scrambled to scan various bandwidths for chatter. In short order, they'd discovered a wealth of verbal communications—too much. More time was spent trying to decide whether it was all the same language or various languages—which they discovered to be the case.

"Anything?" Galen asked irritably when, by his guess, at least another thirty septs had passed.

"A few words ... here and there," one of the techs reported uneasily.

Galen's lips tightened. "Keep working on it! Are we in range for a hologram?"

Ken-so, whom the last question was directed to, nodded.

Galen moved to a point between his command chair and the navigation console.

Assuming a comfortable military stance, he nodded that he was ready. A few moments later, he watched as his image was projected at the foot of the gangplank of their scout ship.

The reaction of the aliens wasn't quite what he'd anticipated.

* * * *

Bree's lips tightened when the rednecks started pelting her with wolf-whistles and catcalls. Ignoring them, she stalked toward her house. Two soldiers intercepted her.

"Sorry, ma'am! You can't go in there."

Bree glared at them. "It's my damned house! Just who the hell do you think you are to tell me I can't go in!"

The two soldiers exchanged a questioning glance. "It's not safe, ma'am. You'll have to move to the rear—further might be better."

"Just as soon as I get some of my things," Bree responded, trying to duck around the pair.

The soldiers each caught one of her arms and guided her around and away from her objective. Bree dug in her heels and started berating both of them at the top of her lungs. "I'll sue! This is *my* property! You can't do this, damn it! I just want to get my things before you blow it all up!"

The rednecks, who'd been annoying her a few moments before, began to pile out of their trucks. "Hey! Get your hands off of her!" one of the men, who looked like he might have easily weighed three hundred pounds bellowed.

"Yeah, you commie bastard! Let her go! You can't throw her off of her own property!"

Before Bree entirely knew what was happening, she found herself the center of a heated exchange between the military and the rednecks.

Someone bellowed at them through a bullhorn just as the situation was beginning to look like it might escalate into a brawl.

"Bring the woman here!"

The rednecks looked like they might object to that, too, but Bree was ready, willing, and able to fight her own battle. "Are you in charge?" she bellowed back at the man.

"That's General Moore, ma'am," one of the soldiers responded.

"Well, good! Just the bastard I wanted to talk to!"

The man, who looked to be around his mid-forties, or possibly a very youthful fifty, leapt down off of the tank he'd been standing on and marched toward her and her escort.

"I could have you arrested and jailed, woman!" he growled. "This is a military operation!"

"And I could sue the shit out of you, too!" Bree shot back at him. "This is my land you've destroyed with your damned tanks and trucks! And that's my house and I'm going to get what I can out of it before you wreck the rest of it!"

"Have you lost your mind? You've got an alien craft in your backyard, in case you haven't noticed!"

Bree slung one of the soldier's hands loose and poked the man in the chest with her index finger. "I noticed it a hell of a while before you got here! And they haven't destroyed half as much as you have!"

The man's face hardened. "Get her out of here. If she gives you any trouble, arrest her!"

Bree gaped at the man in disbelief. Before she could think of a suitable response that wasn't prefaced with a string of curses, however, their attention was drawn by a sudden commotion among the people around them. The hands of the soldiers gripping her went lax, but Bree hardly noticed. Like everyone else, her full attention had been captured by the column of colored light that had abruptly appeared at the foot of the gangplank.

As she gaped at it, the column took shape, solidified.

Bree blinked at the apparition that emerged from the light, more stunned if possible than she had been by the sudden appearance of the light. Her heart seemed to put on brakes for a split second and then surged painfully against her chest wall. Her lungs seemed to suspend at the same moment. It wasn't until a wave of dizziness washed over her and a sense of suffocation that she remembered to breathe.

The strangest sense, almost of awe, swept over her when she realized the being that had materialized out of the light looked like an artist's conception of a heavenly being—an angel.

The perception didn't last more than a few moments, no longer than it took to regain control of her involuntary functions and begin to breathe again, for her heart to jump start itself.

Beyond the fact that he had iridescent white wings and the strange garment he wore that covered him from waist to knee and looked as if it had been spun from pure silver, he looked far more war-like than angelic. Bands crisscrossed his bare chest and the hilts of two swords could be seen protruding above the epaulettes on each shoulder from which a purple cape was draped. His skin, which was golden, glistened in the light as if it actually was metal. Deep blue and silver highlights gleamed in the black, black hair that bristled from his scalp in a spiky two inch wide Mohawk that followed the center of his head from his forehead to the base of his skull.

She couldn't tell much about his face from the distance beyond the fact that it appeared to be the face of a man—and his features were hard and angular—but she had the sense that it was as breathtaking as the rest of him.

Even as she emerged from her stupor, everyone else seemed to awaken.

"Is it ... do you think it's real?" someone—one of the soldiers nearby—gasped in a breathless whisper.

Murmurs from dozens of other throats followed, too many at once to pick out more than a word here and there, but she heard the word angel more than once before a cacophony of shots rang out. Those galvanized everyone.

"Hold your fire! God damn it! Who's shooting?" the general bellowed as everyone around them ducked, or dove, for cover.

It didn't take him long to discover it was the redneck brigade.

Even the melee that followed failed to distract Bree completely from the being. In spite of the distraction, as she dropped to a crouch on the ground, she glanced toward him again—fearfully. The shots, evidently, missed their mark. He seemed unfazed, although he was glaring in their direction now. He took a step forward and stopped abruptly.

And Bree realized in that instant that he wasn't standing in her orchard at all. The

image ... flickered when he moved.

Still awed, but far less intimidated when she realized the being wasn't actually there, Bree glanced around at the soldiers. When she saw they were preoccupied with trying to bring order to their ranks, she hesitated and then strode boldly across the ground that separated her from the being, determined to see him a little more closely. She'd managed to cover half the distance before she was spotted.

"Get back here! Woman! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"It's a hologram or something like that," she flung over her shoulder, pausing only a moment to look back at the general. "And I wish to hell you'd stop calling me woman, damn it! My name's Bree ... Bree Denton."

"They're inside the damned ship, Ms. Denton!" the man bellowed at her. "And you're in the line of fire! Get the hell out of there!"

Bree stopped again, feeling uneasiness creep through her, both at the possibility that the being might be inside the ship and the realization that she was liable to be shot down by the eager beavers in the group. When she glanced back toward the being, she saw that he was staring straight at her and another wave of uneasiness went through her.