

Flight

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I don't know how long I'd been alone in the desert before I found the angel.

When I first escaped from the mines, my only concern was avoiding recapture. I'd quickly lost track of how many days I spent huddled beneath any meager shelter I could find, hiding from potential patrols and the sun's blistering heat; how many nights I spent putting as much distance as I could between myself and any of the inhabited camps. The terror of those first weeks is still enough to wake me at times, my heart pounding in my chest as I remember running, stumbling, crawling in the darkness in my desperation to avoid recapture; my thirst growing, my lips cracking and bleeding, my own acrid blood the only moisture left in my parched mouth. I'm sure I became delirious, hearing noises that weren't real, starting at every touch of the sere desert wind, until I was afraid to believe the first oasis I stumbled upon was anything more than another vicious hallucination. By the time I realized that no one was coming after me, that slaves were apparently so plentiful it wasn't worth my captors' efforts to track me down, my careful accounting of how much time had passed since the slavers raided my world was long abandoned.

I think I had managed to survive nearly as many months since my escape as I had in the backbreaking travail of the mines, though I was no longer sure I was any better

off. At least in the mines I'd been fed regularly, food that was nourishing if unpalatable. There had been some shelter from the extremes of heat and cold, but most of all there had been companionship. The work crews were always a mix of many races, making communication between the slaves difficult if not impossible. I'd come to believe this was deliberate on the slavers' part, a means of defusing any possible collaboration between the workers—but we learned quickly enough that crews who couldn't cooperate didn't survive for long. We looked after one another, as long as we were together, though each time a deposit played out and we were shuttled and marched to another site, the crews were shuffled—another way of preventing any plotting among the slaves. Still, even if we couldn't speak to one another, it helped just to know there was another body beside you in the darkness, someone else who shared your suffering and cared that you survived another day, if only so they wouldn't have to pick up your share of the work.

As the weeks and months passed, my body grew gaunt as it learned to function on little food and less water; my skin burned, peeled, and toughened, turning dark as my hair bleached pale under the searing sun. I grew more acclimated to the extremes of daytime heat and nighttime cold, hardier as I trudged through the bleak desert landscape in search of the next source of shade and water. I had little to drive me forward but the stubborn determination to elude my captors. Even when I slept, in those brief hours when I found a bit of shelter or my limbs could simply carry me no farther, my dreams returned to the horrors of the mines, the anguish of what I had lost, the empty hopelessness that stretched before me.

Until I saw the body sprawled brokenly on the blinding desert sand, I didn't realize how much I'd missed companionship. I've always been a loner, even on my home world, but spotting another being in the distance, obviously not a slaver but perhaps another escapee like myself, set my pulse racing. The loneliness of my months of solitude suddenly welled up inside me at the prospect of relief. Surprised by the urge I felt to run forward, I forced myself to approach warily, though by now I knew the slavers would never have set so elaborate a trap; there was nowhere for miles that anyone could hide, in any case. As I drew nearer, I realized there were no footprints other than my own in the sand, and my heart sunk. If the body had lain there long enough for the erratic winds to erase its tracks, the chance of it being anything more than a lifeless carcass was slim.

When I got closer still, I noticed the wings.

I hadn't seen them at first because their colors, beige and brown and tan feathers melding together, nearly disappeared against the rusty desert sands. The wings were long and powerful-looking, and one of them hung canted at an angle that clearly indicated a break in the main supporting bone. Almost without my volition, I reached forward to gently touch the graceful arc; the feathers were smooth and soft beneath my fingertips. My breath caught as I realized this was not another dream or hallucination, but a fellow living being. The touch of something that was not harsh sand or harsher stone sent a thrill of delight trembling through my senses.

The angel moaned and stirred. I quickly drew back my hand.

There were legends of winged beings on my planet, but I had no more believed in them than in the deities they were purported to serve. *Perhaps the legends were based in reality after all*, I thought as I cautiously rolled the unconscious being to one side, careful not to put any pressure on the damaged wing. The face I revealed made my breath catch in my throat. The man—for the injured entity was definitely male—was perhaps the most beautiful being I had ever seen. His skin, abraded and covered with sand, was a warm honey-bronze, which had undoubtedly helped protect him from the sun's scorching rays. Long, silky lashes brushed high cheekbones; narrow, finely sculpted lips parted slightly with each puff of breath; dark tendrils of hair waved from a smooth forehead, tumbling down the man's slender neck. How had such a vision of perfection come to a place of such barren desolation?

I brushed aside the silky curls, my torn fingertips gently exploring the soft skin of the being's throat until I found a pulse. I had no idea if the speed or strength was normal for the stranger, but at least it confirmed he was still alive. If I wanted to keep him that way, I knew I was going to have to move him to somewhere sheltered, at least until I could examine the damaged wing and make sure there were no other serious injuries.

I had planned to keep walking until I found another of the rare spots where underground water ran close enough to the surface to support a few stunted trees and smaller vegetation. I owed my survival to these scattered oases, experimenting until I'd learned which plants were safe to eat, digging under the tree roots to reach fresh water, sometimes even catching a small lizard or other creature. Mindful of the

fragile ecological balance, I tried not to stay in one place for more than a few days, but I couldn't spare the time now to search for a new haven. Carefully, I slid an arm around the injured man's back, below the place where the wings extended from the filmy tunic he wore, and wrapped my other arm beneath his knees. The stranger did not stir. His body felt hot against my skin, but I couldn't tell if that was due to the sun or a fever or was simply his normal temperature. There was so much I didn't know, but for the first time since I'd been brought to this accursed planet, I was looking forward to finding answers.

Staggering to my feet, I started back toward the shelter I'd just left, carrying the angel in my arms.

It wasn't until late that night that the stranger awoke. I had examined him, once we made it back to the small cluster of trees hidden between several dunes, but except for scrapes and bruises I couldn't find any major injuries other than the ones to his wings. A ragged puncture marred the upper ridge of each pinion, as if some type of restraint had bound them together and been torn roughly apart. A clear, thin ichor stained the feathers around each wound, but they no longer seeped and other than cleansing them as best I could with clear water, I left them alone. The break in the long bone of the left wing was more worrisome. My first instinct was to leave it alone as well, but I was afraid if it wasn't set soon, it would never heal correctly. I found it hard to believe that those incredible wings could really carry the man aloft, but if

it were true, it would be a terrible gift to lose. Finally, I broke off the straightest branch I could find from one of the stubby trees to use as a makeshift splint, tearing strips from the bottom of the stranger's tunic to secure it, immobilizing the wing as best I could.

Once I had done everything in my limited power to tend to the stranger's injuries, I settled cross-legged on the sand beside him. I wasn't very concerned yet that he hadn't awakened—it had made setting the break easier, and rest would help the healing process—but I looked forward to learning something of my new companion's story. I wondered if he was an escaped slave like me, but if so, he could only have been on the planet a short time. The tunic from which I'd torn the fabric for the splint was fashioned of a delicate, gauzy material that did little to conceal its wearer's slim but muscled chest—the dusky areolae of his nipples were apparent through it even now in the gathering dusk—which would have been tattered to shreds within a day in the harsh environment of the mines. The stranger's palms and fingers were smooth and uncalled; he had obviously never been forced to dig ore from the rock with nothing more than crude tools and, at times, bare hands. I was eager to learn who he was, if he had been brought to this be-damned planet in the same way I had, and how he had managed to escape from our captors. My eyes were drawn back to the steady rise and fall of my companion's chest, gratitude that my long solitude had come to an end filling me with unexpected warmth.

Both moons were riding high in the sky when the stranger woke at last. I must have dozed off, my head nodding against my shoulder, when a sudden noise snapped me to wakefulness. My new companion was struggling to

rise, obviously finding it difficult in his weakened state. He had twisted about to reach for his damaged wing when he seemed to feel me watching him. An expression of panic crossed his face, and he scooted backward across the sand, his gaze darting wildly around the moonlit grove.

I spread my hands in what I hoped was an unthreatening gesture. "It's all right; you're safe," I murmured softly, my voice sounding odd in my own ears from disuse. "I'm not going to harm you, I promise."

The stranger's eyes widened as I spoke. He tilted his head, clearly taking in the isolated surroundings, my ragged appearance, and the fact I hadn't moved from my position on the sand. His mouth opened, but the sounds that passed his lips were not any dialect I had ever heard before. Languages came easily to me, and I'd managed to figure out a few words in several of the tongues spoken by my fellow captives in the mines, but this sounded more like the trills and whistling of birds, interspersed with low, guttural tones that could almost have been moans. The stranger watched me intently, repeating his burst of wordsong when I shook my head to indicate I didn't understand.

Grimacing in what was clearly frustration, the dark-haired man twisted again to prod at his bandaged wing. Fearful that he would try to remove the splint, I rose to approach him, knowing he couldn't understand my words but hoping at least the intent would get through to him. "You have a broken bone. It needs to be held in place so it can heal." The stranger's other wing unfurled from where it rested against his back, beating the still air in agitation. "I'm

sorry,” I said softly, dropping to my knees. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

The stranger cocked his head, his eyes glittering with intensity as they studied me. His gaze slid from my mop of ragged, sun-bleached hair, over my deeply bronzed skin, down my gaunt torso and legs to my worn and battered boots. I wondered, given the quality and elegance of his clothing, what he made of my sorry appearance. A hand rose hesitantly to my shoulder, turning me enough to allow the other man to examine my back. “No wings,” I admitted, somehow understanding what he was looking for. “I’ve never even seen a being with wings before you.”

My companion sagged back wearily to the sand. Realizing he must be parched, I offered him the small waterskin I’d devised from the carcass of one of the creatures I’d caught at another one of my camp sites. The man sipped cautiously and then broke into a smile that rendered his face even more beautiful, making me think again of the legends of angels and the radiance that was supposed to surround them. After drinking deeply, he handed the depleted skin back to me, whistling something that must surely be his thanks.

Returning the skin to my belt, I raised my hand to my chest. “I’m Varan,” I stated, tapping my chest with my fingers. “Varan—that’s my name. What is yours?”

The winged man watched me for a moment and then whistled something that might have been the first syllable of my name, followed by a decadent-sounding sigh. I repeated my name, and he answered with the whistle and moan that seemed to be the closest he could come to matching the

sounds. When I nodded, he pointed to himself and trilled, then added a series of breathy tones. “There is no way I’m going to be able to repeat that,” I muttered, doing my best to match the vibrato whistle and failing utterly. A wide smile spread over my companion’s face, and he repeated the musical tones. “Tvri’il,” I struggled, shaking my head as I tried to repeat at least the initial syllables. “I know that isn’t your name, but it’s the closest I can come. My throat just isn’t designed to make those sounds.”

My new companion—Tvri’il—made a trilling vibration that, combined with his smile, I took as his version of laughter. I grinned back at him, and before I knew it, I was laughing until tears filled my eyes, rocking in the sand as he warbled in response. Slowly, our mirth quieted, and we sat gazing at each other in silence until my stomach rumbled loudly.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, pointing to my stomach and then to his abdomen, realizing as I did that I had no idea if that was where his stomach was located. “Can you eat?” I asked, pantomiming placing food in my mouth and chewing.

“Ea’,” Tvri’il answered to my shock, cocking his head to one side and bringing his hand to his lips. “Ea’.”

I nodded, stunned at how quickly he’d understood what I meant. Retrieving the packet of seeds and berries I’d tucked into my pocket for the journey, I opened it and spread it out between us. “Not much, but it’ll keep you alive,” I said, hoping that I was right and he could eat the same foods I did. I popped a berry into my mouth and watched him follow suit, grimacing a bit at the sour taste. “Tart,” I agreed, matching his expression. Again, Tvri’il tilted his head and

copied my speech. “Ta’t.” Picking up another of the small fruits, he held it in his hand, his gaze flickering from his palm to my face and back. “Berry,” I said. “Be’ey,” he repeated, tossing it into his mouth with a smile. “Be’ey.”

By the time we had finished the last of the provisions, Tvri’il had asked and repeated the name of each nut and seed, as well as the water, the sand, and the sky. He’d whistled and trilled what I assumed were the equivalent words in his own language, but my efforts to reproduce his sounds led only to more laughter, and we soon abandoned the attempt. I marveled at his rapid understanding and also his appetite: between us, we’d eaten what would have been several days’ meals for me alone. I’d have to gather more food once the sun rose, before we decided what to do next. I wondered how I would make Tvri’il understand the need to move on. No matter how quickly he had learned the names of distinct items, abstract concepts like distance and danger would be much harder to convey. Deciding to leave that problem for tomorrow, I replaced the empty pouch in my pocket. The smaller of the planet’s two moons had already dropped below the horizon. Stretching out on my back, I pointed to the ground and pillowed my head on my hands. “Time to sleep.”

“Slee’,” Tvri’il repeated dubiously.

“Sleep,” I repeated, closing my eyes as soon as he had mirrored my posture on the sand. Not many minutes later, I heard his breathing slow and glanced over to see him lying with his legs pulled up to his chest, his undamaged wing stretched over him like a cloak. My own rest proved elusive, so I turned my attention to the sky, wondering as I always

did which of the pinpoints of light was my home world's sun. The ships that had landed on my planet without warning, each herding in thousands of helpless people as if they were cattle, had taken us so far from our world that the stars overhead were no longer the constellations I knew. Lying alone beneath an alien sky, it was easy for me to despair. I might have escaped from the slavers, but there was no way for me to get off this planet, much less back to my home. But tonight, the soft sounds of Tvri'il's breathing reminded me I was no longer alone. Drawing comfort from that thought, I drifted into sleep.

I awoke with a start, shaking and covered in cold sweat. Tvri'il crouched beside me, reaching out to stroke my arm soothingly. I must have cried out in my nightmare and awakened him. He trilled and sighed something in his strange language, his eyes wide with concern. I hadn't really noticed his eyes before, but they were a rich, warm brown, the irises ringed with gold, and they conveyed all the sympathy his words could not. Knowing he couldn't understand me, I nonetheless found myself describing my recurrent dream, reliving our arrival on the planet. The slavers had culled through the captives as they'd unloaded us from the ships, separating us, though I hadn't realized it at the time, into those who were strong enough to work and those they deemed not worth the resources to keep alive. I'd watched in anguished horror as my wife and hundreds of others—too small, too old, too damaged—were killed in a single spray of energy weapons. The rest of us were split into groups of a hundred or so each, drawn not only from the ships that had raided my planet but from a number of other worlds as well. My twelve-year-old son had been torn from

my side and shoved, terrified, into a different group from my own, marched away as I had been to a transport sledge that would take us within walking distance of one of the mines. I had never seen him again since that day, though I searched and asked for news of him in vain at every site I was sent to until I escaped. I didn't even know if he was still alive.

The words tumbled out until I couldn't speak any more for the tears coursing down my cheeks. It had been a long time since I had allowed myself to waste precious water in weeping, but something in the stranger's comforting presence seemed to break down the barriers I had built around my emotions. Tvri'il's hands pulled me against his strongly muscled chest, the warmth of his body seeping into my back as he gently rubbed my arms, crooning consolingly until my trembling ceased. Still holding me in his arms, he nestled back into the sand, his wing settling over us both.

"Slee'," Tvri'il murmured. "Slee'."

Surprisingly, I did.

I AWOKE the next morning to the unfamiliar, but not unwelcome, comfort of a body pressed against mine. Slender arms circled my chest, a leg rested over my thigh, and as I stirred, I felt the tickle of soft feathers brushing my shoulder. Memory slowly returned, and I recalled falling asleep in Tvri'il's arms. Knowing I should rise, but reluctant to disturb my companion, I lay still and savored the rare sense of peacefulness, until movement behind me told me Tvri'il was

waking as well. His arms tightened around me as his head turned, rubbing against my cheek. The long feathers of his wing brushed down my side, making me shiver in reaction to the touch. Tvri'il's breath fluttered beside my ear, and then his lips opened against my throat, trailing slow, moist kisses down the side of my neck.

For a moment I lay immobile with shock, stunned by the welter of sensations his touch awoke in me. My skin felt hot everywhere he pressed against me, and yet I was trembling as if with cold, my nipples hardening when his hand brushed over one as he explored my chest. With a muffled cry of protest I pulled away, rolling to my other side and rising to a crouch, staring at him as he stretched gracefully and returned my gaze, his own expression puzzled.

"No," I said shakily, holding out my hands in a gesture of warding off. His eyes widened, their expression and my own traitorous body urging me to return. "No," I repeated, my voice firmer this time, shaking my head. It was only because it had been so long since I had felt another's touch, any touch, I told myself. Of course my body would react, even if it was to a stranger and a male at that; but that didn't mean I had to give in to its urges. I rose to my feet, brushing away the sand that clung to my clothing. "We need to gather food for the journey," I said, more to calm myself than from any expectation I would be understood by my companion.

"Vood," Tvri'il whistled, tilting his head in what I was beginning to recognize was analogous to a nod of agreement. He touched his stomach and smiled, proving he had indeed understood. "Ea'."

Surprised as I was, I couldn't help but return his smile. "Yes, eat," I agreed, extending my hand to help him stand. He held it a moment longer, his fingers smoothing over the rough calluses on my palm, before we turned to the small stand of trees that defined the underground river. I showed him how to gather their spiny seedpods, stretching to reach the upper branches since I had already stripped the lower ones during my earlier stay. He remembered the orange berries we had eaten the night before, picking them from their bushes without being told; but when he reached for the larger red berries that grew beside them, I stopped him with a hand to his arm. "No," I told him, shaking my head. I didn't know for sure if they'd make him as sick as they had me, but I wouldn't take the chance. I put my hand over my mouth, shaking my head. "Danger," I said, wondering if he would understand. He didn't answer, but he bypassed the red berries, popping an orange one into his mouth instead.

Hoping there was nothing else that could harm him, I gave him the pouch and gestured for him to fill it. He tilted his head and smiled in agreement. After watching him for a moment, I pulled the small tool I had fashioned from bone and rock out of my belt and began to dig at the root of the largest tree, scooping aside the sand until it felt damp beneath my fingers. When the water bubbled up to the surface, I quickly filled the waterskin and then beckoned Tvri'il to join me. He caught up a handful of the clear liquid and drank thirstily, splashing it over his face with a joyful grin. "Feel good?" I asked, grinning in return. Tilting his head, he was quick to add the new word to his store. "G-good," he mimicked, stumbling over the guttural "g", turning it into a softer, breathier sound. "Wa'er good."

I drank my fill and scrubbed at my own weathered skin, wishing we had a way to hold more of the precious fluid. It often took several days' march to find a new shelter; at times my waterskin ran dry long before I found a source to replenish it. And now there would be two of us drinking. Finding the largest leaf I could, I filled it with more of the tart orange berries. They wouldn't take the place of water, but perhaps with careful rationing they could help us stretch what little we could carry with us.

When we had gathered all we could, I stowed our provisions in my pockets and stood, stretching my cramped muscles. Even after many months out of the mines, my legs and back still ached when I crouched for too long. I could feel Tvri'il's eyes on me as I arched, and to my shock I felt my shaft thickening against my leg. Looking away quickly, I covered my confusion by talking.

"We have to find a new place to stay," I told him, pointing back to the desert. "The food and water would run out if we stayed here too long." Tvri'il looked around at the nearly bare branches of the sparse vegetation; again I got the impression that he understood far more than it was reasonable he should. Turning my face to the rising sun, I motioned for him to follow me. When I had first escaped, I had been forced to find whatever shelter I could from the day's searing heat and travel only after sundown; but now that the nights were lengthening the days had grown slightly cooler, making it possible to walk while it was light, when it was easier to scan the surrounding landscape for both shelter and threats. It was still incredibly hot and physically draining, but I'd gotten accustomed to it over the months since I'd escaped, my skin toughening so that it no longer

burned and peeled, my body adapting to long stretches with little or no provisions. Gazing at Tvri'il, though, I wondered if he would be able to endure it. His slender body was delicate, almost fragile-looking; he'd felt surprisingly light when I'd carried him, but his honeyed skin seemed to drink in the sun's glare, almost glowing with its own golden sheen. Realizing I was staring, I trained my eyes on the horizon, though it was far too soon to expect to find another outcrop of life-giving verdure. He'd have to endure the desert's harsh conditions, somehow. We had no other choice.

Tvri'il kept up with my pace until mid-afternoon, when I paused to allow us a mouthful of water each and a few berries. When he settled cross-legged on the ground beside me, I realized that he was barefoot, the soles of his feet raw and abraded from the hot sands. How had I failed to notice before this that he wore no boots? For the first time I began to believe that he could truly fly: a winged being would have little need to walk long distances, would certainly not develop the thick soles a march across the desert would require. I touched the torn skin gently, sick with remorse. I'd been alone for so long, I'd grown insensitive; I had to start considering the needs of someone other than myself again. "I'm sorry," I said guiltily. He'd never voiced a sound of pain or complaint during our trek, but he whistled softly now, his hand touching the back of my fingers. I jerked away, afraid of adding to the discomfort he must already feel.

Pulling off my worn boots, I offered them to him, hoping the size would be close enough to fit him. "You wear these," I told him, pointing to his feet. "They'll protect you."

Tvri'il whistled fiercely, tossing his head in a gesture I assumed meant denial, his long curls flying around his head in a halo that caught the afternoon sunlight in its depths. "You need them more than I do," I insisted, taking a slender calf in my hand. I felt him tremble beneath the dark silk of his leggings as I drew his leg closer, brushing away the sand from his foot as gently as I could. I wished we could spare the water to cleanse it properly, but I settled for blowing over the sole to free as many of the embedded grains as I could. Tvri'il's tremble turned into a shudder, his hand grasping my hair to still my head. "I'm sorry," I repeated, fitting the boot over his foot and drawing it up the length of his leg. My own pulse was erratic as I repeated the actions to clean and encase his other foot. Tvri'il stared at me, his dark eyes liquid as he flexed his ankles, accustoming himself to the feel of the leather surrounding him. Once again, I felt myself stir in response to his regard.

"Let's go," I said, rising to my feet and brushing the sand from my trousers, adjusting myself to hide the bulge of my arousal. The hot sand beneath my feet was an almost welcome distraction as I watched Tvri'il take a few tentative steps. When his gaze fell to my feet and then followed up the length of my body to my face, I had regained enough control not to embarrass myself. "There are at least a few hours left before it will get too dark to walk safely." I forced my attention to our surroundings as we marched, scanning the distance for any sign of shelter or danger, but I was constantly aware of his presence beside me. *It's a natural reaction to loneliness*, I told myself silently, trying to rationalize away my growing attraction, the words becoming a litany I chanted with every stride.

By the time the sun had sunk below the horizon and I called a halt for the night, my own feet were scorched and bruised, and I was more than ready to collapse into a hollow in the sand that was all the shelter we could find. This time it was Tvri'il's turn to examine my soles, warbling at the damage he found. The rush of excitement I was beginning to anticipate every time he touched me heated my blood as his fingers tenderly cleaned away as much of the sand as he could. "They'll callus up in another day or two," I told him, ignoring the sense of loss I felt when his hands left me. I portioned out a meager ration of food and water for us both, not knowing how much longer it would take to find more.

The night grew chilled quickly once the sun was down, and I was not surprised that Tvri'il was soon shivering—his thin tunic and leggings offered little protection against the cold. Lying down, I beckoned for him to join me so we could share our warmth, spooning around me as he had after my nightmare. I might have warmed him more by taking him into my arms, but I was cautious of risking any further damage to his wing. And facing away from him, I could conceal the erection that pressed against the front of my trousers. I'd accepted that my body was so hungry it was reacting to even another male's touch, but I wasn't anxious for my companion to become aware of it.

Not even wrapping himself around me was enough to stop Tvri'il from trembling against my back. Pulling his arms forward to circle my chest, I began to rub over the gauzy sleeves of his tunic, using the friction of my hands to warm his forearms. Tvri'il's chin nestled against my shoulder, his breath raising the hairs at the base of my skull as he cooed softly against my neck. After a few minutes he began to rub

my arms in return, inciting a heat that burned through the rough fabric of my shirt, spreading across my chest, pumping through my veins with every heartbeat. Closing my eyes to savor the sensation, it took me a moment to realize that Tvri'il's hands were spreading that heat, slipping beneath my arms to wander my chest. The gentle glide of his fingers was so soothing that I indulged myself in the feeling, not protesting even when his palms brushed over my nipples, hardening them to peaks he must surely have felt. His touch did not linger, and I relaxed again, letting the warmth envelop me, until his hands slid lower, down the planes of my abdomen, below my waist to cup the firm length of my cock.

My pulse pounded in the shaft beneath his fingers as my hands closed over his, stilling them. "No," I protested, trying to pull them away, but his resistance was surprisingly strong. "Tvri'il, no."

"Vvr'ahn," he answered, the heel of his palm rubbing against my erection, sending fire racing through my veins. He threw his leg over my thigh, pressing closer until I could feel his own arousal pushing against my hip. "No da'ger." As shocked by his words, culled from our conversation that morning, as I was by his actions, I did not fight his lips opening against my neck. A vision formed behind my closed eyelids, of Tvri'il stripping off my tunic and exploring my chest with his lips; of both of us naked, our bodies entwined together as we kissed; of pushing into the heat of his body, sheathing myself in his tightness as his wings enclosed us both....

My eyes snapped open, realizing the vision was not my own. I had never dreamed of making love to a man the way I would with a woman, never imagined a connection like the one I had just seen play out in my mind. Pulling away from Tvri'il's grasp, I stared at him in confusion. "You—were you—how did you—" I stammered, panting as I fought to bring my body under control.

"Fveel good," Tvri'il said softly, his unbandaged wing standing away from his back, its feathers stirring in the cool breeze. "No da'ger."

"I can't," I whispered, though my body persisted in demonstrating that it could, despite what I felt in my mind and my conscience. "I'm sorry." The remembrance of what I had imagined made me shiver, and I swallowed hard, meeting his gaze. "You did that," I confronted him. "You put that—picture—in my mind." I rubbed my temples, as if I could somehow erase the memory of the ecstasy I had felt.

Tvri'il's slender fingers touched his temple and then curled between my fingers. "Mine," he agreed. "Mind. Fveel."

I couldn't tell if he was repeating himself or had truly made a distinction between the two words, but another fear disrupted that thought before I could pursue it. "Can you read my mind?" I accused him, pulling his fingers away, touching my temple and then his. "Do you see what I'm thinking?"

His look of confusion argued against the possibility. I watched his expression change as understanding broke through, and he tossed his head in negation. "No... Vvr'ahn, no." He moved his free hand, the one I did not still hold in

my clasp, from his temple back to mine. He whistled something I couldn't understand, threading his fingers into the hair above my ear, cupping my cheek in his palm. "Mine. Fveel."

Suddenly, even as I held his eyes with mine, I saw an image of myself sitting in the sand, pulling my boot over his leg, and I realized I was seeing myself through his eyes as he had seen me. I felt his calf trembling in my palm and recognized that what I had thought was pain had been desire. Shaking my head in denial, I freed myself from his touch. "I can't," I repeated. "I'm sorry."

"No' sorry," Tvri'il replied, dropping his eyes. He stretched back onto the sand, patting the declivity before him. "Slee'. No da'ger."

Uneasy even though I knew it would be foolish to refuse—the increasingly cold breeze reinforced the need to conserve our warmth—I returned to my companion's embrace. His arms twined around my chest, well above my waist, and I closed mine over his, holding them still. Tvri'il's wing covered us both, holding in our bodies' heat. Our chests rose and fell together, but I think it was long before either of us slept.

The next morning, Tvri'il displayed no awkwardness as we awoke and consumed nearly the last of our supplies of food and water. I had sensed no shame or impropriety in his desire the night before; perhaps on his world there was no stigma against love between males? Just the memory of the embrace I had envisioned left me heated, and I weighed the shriveled waterskin in my palm, knowing I could not rely on it to cool me. I limited myself to the merest swallow, barely

enough to wet the inside of my mouth, eating a few more berries instead. We would need to find another source of water soon, one that could sustain us until I could devise some way to carry more water as we traveled.

Tvri'il glanced at me sharply as I retied the neck of the makeshift container. "Wa'er?" he asked, frowning, making me glad for once he did not have the words to voice his suspicion. "Almost gone," I admitted, returning the depleted pouch to my belt. "We'd better find another spring soon, or we'll be going thirsty." Hiding a wince as I rose to my feet, we set off again over the arid sands.

Almost at midday, when the sun's glare was so blinding that the air itself seemed to writhe around us, a sound other than the hiss of shifting sand beneath our feet penetrated my thirst-obsessed senses. Raising a hand to shield my eyes, I squinted vainly into the white-hot sky. I couldn't see what was approaching, but I knew from the sound alone what it must be: a slaver's transport. Cursing our ill luck, for in all the months I had wandered the desert alone I had never seen any sign of my former captors, I fought to refocus my eyes on the horizon, searching for anything that might serve as a hiding place. I wondered if we had merely stumbled across a flight route by accident, or if the slavers were actively seeking my companion. At least, since the transport was functioning, we could not be near a mine, but that would mean nothing if the ship's crew spotted us. Unfortunately, there was nothing but sand stretching around us in all directions, not even a hollow spot where we might try to hide. When I scanned the skies again I could make out the black speck of a ship, growing quickly as it approached.

I turned to Tvri'il in desperation, but before I could speak, he shoved me roughly to the ground, throwing himself atop me. Pulling our knees up between us, he straddled my hips, tearing the bandage from his injured wing. The tawny pinions spread wide over us both, covering us from head to foot. Tvri'il's head tucked into my shoulder; I could feel his pulse pounding as fiercely as my own as the sound of the transport grew louder, until we could feel the vibration of its passage shuddering the sands beneath us as it flew overhead. My breath caught in my throat, afraid to exhale lest the sound or the motion give us away. Every sensation seemed amplified as we huddled together, our heartbeats booming in our chests, the slick heat of our skin sliding against each other, the tremble of Tvri'il's wings sending sparks shooting through my nerve endings that I didn't dare react to for fear of detection. I clenched my hands into fists to keep from reaching for him and squeezed my eyes tightly closed, as I had when playing hiding games with my brothers when I was a child, as if that would somehow prevent them from seeing me. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the vibrations diminished, the sound clearly fading as the transport passed us by. Tvri'il didn't move until the last echoes had faded away, scanning the sky from beneath a wing-tip before slowly furling the concealing plumage. For a moment we both lay unmoving, our eyes watering as they re-acclimated to the sun's glare; then Tvri'il rose to his knees, pulling me with him as we drew deep gasping breaths, wide grins creasing our faces at our narrow escape.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world for Tvri'il to lean forward and kiss me, for my lips to open beneath his in joy and relief. Our parched tongues sought and found the

little moisture remaining in our mouths, sharing it as we had shared our warmth the night before, as we had shared the terror and elation of the past few minutes. Tvri'il's mouth tasted as sweet to me as the freshest desert spring, and I drank from him deeply, welcoming his kiss in return, until our racing pulses steadied at last and a different kind of excitement began to build between us. We could not indulge it here, but I knew that if—when—we reached shelter, when Tvri'il touched me again I would not pull away.

Before he could rise to his feet, I ran my fingers over the leading edge of Tvri'il's left wing, from where it sprang at its base on his back to the long feathers at its tip, feeling the knot where the splintered bone meshed together. His eyes watched me hungrily as I examined the break, which was much farther along in its healing than I had expected for so short a time. Judging it better to err through over-caution, I picked up the discarded bandage, thinking to rewrap the wing, but Tvri'il stopped me with a touch. "No," he said, stretching both wings to their fullest extent, beating the air with them several times before folding them against his back. "Almos' gone."

"Almost healed," I corrected, my elation withering at more than the reminder of my words about our dwindling water. I had no doubt my companion was someone important; the elegance of his clothing, his innate air of assurance, the thought that the slavers were searching for him, all made that clear. Chance or fate had thrown us together, but could separate us just as readily, and as quickly as he had grown important to me, he could be gone. I had seen how easily loved ones could be torn away; all the more reason to seize the time that was given to us.

We walked the rest of the afternoon, and when the sun set we kept on walking. Our water would not last the night, and I knew we would be hard-pressed to survive more than another day once it was gone. The same good fortune that had allowed us to elude the slavers seemed to remain with us, for not long after the second moon had risen I caught a glimpse of a darker shadow against the horizon. I waited until we were close enough to be certain before I pointed it out to Tvri'il, who had continued to trudge along without complaint long after I was ready to drop myself. He trilled with joy and broke into a run, leaving me to follow as quickly as my aching legs would carry me until we reached the grove of trees.

It turned out to be one of the largest stands of vegetation I had encountered in my wanderings, with not only ample plants for food but a blessing I had never before encountered: a small pool of open water, welling from an outcrop of smooth stone. Tvri'il turned to me in excitement, opening his mouth to speak when a look of bewilderment crossed his face. He rubbed the back of his neck, not as if in pain but more with an air of puzzlement. Pointing to the water, he whistled in agitation, watching me closely.

"Water," I said, puzzled since it was a word he knew. He tossed his head, dropping down to drink and then cupping the liquid in his palm, pointing to it again. Slaking my own thirst, I dunked my entire head below the surface and threw it back blissfully, spraying him with the excess droplets that flew from my hair. "Water," I confirmed, frowning when he struggled vainly to repeat the phrase. He rubbed the base of his skull again, scowling, and suddenly I thought I knew what was wrong.

“You have a translator implant, don’t you?” I asked. That explained how he’d been able to pick up the meaning of my words so quickly. Not a few of the captives from other planets I had met in the mines had similar devices embedded below their skin. And I knew what his sudden confusion meant as well. “It’s stopped working, hasn’t it?”

I ran my hands through my dripping hair, wondering how to make him understand. We had to be near a mine, or at least a deposit of the ore—the ore our captors could only quarry with slave labor, using the simplest of hand tools. The ore that disrupted any type of energy-powered device, rendering it useless.

Kneeling beside Tvri’il, I touched the base of his skull, and then shook my head. He repeated the gesture, his fingers probing beneath my hair. “I don’t have one,” I told him, tapping the back of my neck and tossing my head in his sign of negation. His fingers continued to explore, working their way up the back of my skull, and I scowled in frustration, half wishing Tvri’il’s powers allowed him to see into my thoughts. At least it would make communicating easier. “I don’t—” I started again, and then I looked in his eyes, and a shiver shook through me, and I realized I was the one who didn’t understand.

“Vvr’ahn,” Tvri’il sang as his hands pulled my head down to his. “Vvr’ahn,” he whispered as our lips touched, as gently as the brush of his wing-tips against my thighs as he knelt before me. His lips rubbed ever so lightly against mine, the moist skin clinging and parting and clinging again, our breath mingling, but he made no effort to deepen the kiss, and I realized he was giving me the chance to pull away.

Something hitched in my chest, and I exhaled deeply, my mouth opening against his as my hands slid under his arms, around the base of his wings, urging him closer.

Tvri'il spread his knees to bracket mine, our bodies aligning as his lips opened to me. One hand slid from my head to wander the planes of my back; the other remained in place, fingers combing through my hair, demanding nothing, allowing me to control the kiss. At first it was enough simply to taste his lips, cool and moist from the water, sweet and firm and yet yielding beneath mine. I savored them from every angle, drawing first his upper lip between mine, suckling it gently, releasing it only to claim the fuller, lower lip in its place; tracing the smooth contours with my tongue, adding my own moisture and then tasting them again. When he mewled against my mouth I slid my tongue inside, chasing the sound and meeting his eager response. I measured his tongue against mine, circling it, stroking it, laving it from base to tip, drawing it into my mouth and sucking it as I would a ripe fruit. Tvri'il moaned and my cock jumped, pushing against his thigh, and my mind was suddenly filled with a vision of Tvri'il's mouth closing over my shaft, kissing and licking and sucking it as I had his tongue. The image was so vivid that I gasped, arching against him, feeling his tongue in my mouth and on my cock at the same time. Shaking, I pulled him closer until he straddled my hips, rocking against him, adding the sweet friction to the waves of sensation already swamping me. His hands slid lower, cupping my buttocks, guiding me so that my shaft thrust against his, rigid beneath his thin leggings. My fingers splayed through his wings, ruffling the feathers, feeling them quiver beneath me as our kisses grew shorter,

wetter, wilder, our breath turning to moans and cries as our hips rocked together, and the pleasure built and swelled in my belly, rolling and surging until the wave crested over me, flooding my senses with ecstasy. Tvri'il cried out musically and stiffened against me, his wings trembling as he sagged against my chest.

We leaned against each other until we regained our breath, Tvri'il's hands stroking my back, mine smoothing his feathers, aligning the longer quills over the softer down beneath. Finally I drew back, grimacing at the awkward stickiness inside my trousers. Tvri'il's leggings were no better, a wide stain marring the dark material and the hem of his tunic as well. With a chirruping laugh, Tvri'il pulled me to my feet and led me back to the little pool where he stripped off his garments, careless of his nudity as he knelt to rinse them clean. I stood staring in wonder at the grace of his form, limned in the silvery light of the planet's larger moon and the warmer glow of its smaller satellite. His skin seemed to gleam in the play of light, the smooth contours of his chest flexing as he wrung out the damp fabric, his gracefully arched wings half-concealing the tantalizing curves of his hips and buttocks. He glanced up at me and warbled something that was clearly an admonishment. Embarrassed to be caught staring, I stripped more slowly, knowing my body was no equal to his perfection; though to judge by the way he watched me rinse my threadbare clothing, Tvri'il seemed as fascinated by me as I was by him.

While I spread our wet garments over a spur of rock to dry, Tvri'il waded into the shallow pond, splashing water over himself, the droplets shimmering in his wings like a net of gems thrown over the tawny feathers. The pool was barely

deep enough to reach my ankles, but it still retained a bit of the sun's warmth even this long after nightfall, and I washed myself as best I could, feeling clean for the first time since landing on this forsaken planet. I laughed as Tvri'il spread his wings and beat them in the still air, showering me with the excess water, the unexpected joy as refreshing to my spirit as the pool was to my desiccated body.

The night air was chilly when I stepped from the water, though the vegetation surrounding us shielded the worst of the evening breeze. Lying on the still-warm sand, I opened my arms to Tvri'il, who joined me eagerly, his limbs interweaving with mine as we nestled together, face to face for the first time, our cool skin warming everywhere it touched. With a quiet coo of contentment, Tvri'il spread his wings over us both. Blanketed in softness, we drifted into peaceful repose.

I awoke the next morning to the tickle of fingers combing through the hair on my chest. Tvri'il's golden-brown eyes sparkled as he wound a curl around the tip of one slender digit, trilling when it sprang back to shape after he released it. I chuckled in turn, and he glanced up to meet my eyes, claiming a quick kiss before returning his attention to circling my nipples. When I flinched at the sensation, he dipped his head to swipe over them both with his tongue. They tightened and peaked at the attention, awakening my cock, which began to stir as well. When Tvri'il caught a few strands of hair in his teeth and tugged them gently, I rolled my hips and trapped him beneath me. Spreading his wings and sinking back on the sand, Tvri'il let me explore the expanse of his chest in turn. My palms skated over the strong muscles required for flight, tracing up his wide

breastbone to the slender curves of his collarbones. Wondering if he was as sensitive as I was, I retraced the same path with my lips while my fingers outlined his dark nipples, so much larger than my own. As Tvri'il warbled encouragement, I kissed my way downward, dragging my arousal against his until I could take one of the disks into my mouth. His skin was silky and warm and sweet as nectar. I feasted until the nipple was wet and swollen, and Tvri'il's hands guided me to repeat my attentions to its mate. His lilting cries as I suckled urging me on, I slid my lips down his abdomen, following the taut muscles toward where his cock rose, proud and slender, from the smooth juncture of his legs.

My thoughts flashed back to the vision he had shown me the night before, of his mouth closing over my shaft, and though I had never dreamed of such a thing before, I was suddenly eager to taste him, to see him dissolve in the pleasure he had revealed to me. Coaxing him to bend his knees, opening himself to me, I knelt between his spread legs, stroking his lean thighs, bending to nuzzle at the golden flesh and lap at his pendant sacs. His hands burrowed into my hair as I took one between my lips, laving it with my tongue, drawing the second in beside it. The fullness in my mouth awoke a hunger I had not realized I felt until he showed me the means to slake it. Tvri'il whistled in protest as I let him slip from my lips, only to moan as I took him in hand, lifting the rosy column to my mouth. A creamy drop of fluid trembled at its tip, and I lapped it onto my tongue, the flavor rich and intoxicating. Spreading my own legs wider to free my growing erection, I took the head into my mouth, teasing with my lips at the ridge of flesh that

defined it, smoothing the silky skin with my tongue. A warble of pleasure rewarded my efforts, and Tvri'il's hands tightened their grip, urging me to take more of him. Slowly I let him push deeper into my mouth, suckling gently as I caressed him with my tongue, drawing back until he almost slipped free and then sliding even lower with each thrust. I tasted more of the salty fluid seeping from him as my hands cradled his saliva-moist sacs, gliding over the smooth skin behind them and the wrinkled rosette behind that.

Tvri'il tensed, and the image I had seen the first time he touched me—of my sliding into his body the way I would a woman—replaced the darkness behind my closed lids. My fingertips gently tested the furls of delicate skin, finding it hot, tight, and dry. I opened my eyes and saw him watching me, his eyes dark with desire, urging me on. Letting him slip from my mouth, I knelt back on my heels and shook my head. “I can’t,” I told him, shaking my head. “I’ll hurt you.”

Pushing himself up to mirror my posture, his wings opening behind him, Tvri'il combed the fingers of one hand into my hair, holding me still as he dropped moist kisses over my wind-chapped face. His other hand guided mine back to his shaft, directing me in stroking it, showing me how to twist the loose skin enclosing the head, how to tease my thumb over the slit. His breath came in little whistling gasps, the rhythm of our strokes growing erratic until he gave a great trilling cry and spilled himself, the creaminess of his release thick and hot on my fingers. Before I could move to clean it, he stilled my hand, spreading his legs wider and drawing me back to the cleft between his cheeks. I saw what he wanted in my mind as he guided my slippery fingers to push against the opening. With his essence to ease the way,

I was able to slide a finger inside him, the muscle clenching around me as I breached the portal. The tight heat squeezing me was so different from the moist softness of a woman's passage that I hesitated, imagining that pressure closing around my cock. Even as I felt myself twitch in eager anticipation, I started to draw back, sure I must be hurting him. Tvri'il caught my hand and pushed it deeper, the sounds escaping him clearly connoting pleasure as he turned my finger in its sheath. After a moment the visions in my mind convinced me to add a second digit, the image of his face contorted in pleasure merging with the reality I could see before me. When I had three fingers inside him, stretching and penetrating as deeply as I could, he gathered the rest of the fluid that splattered his stomach and spread it over my cock, his touch coaxing my own moisture to mingle with his.

Easing my fingers from him, Tvri'il spread his legs to straddle my thighs. Guiding our hands to my cock, aligning it with the opening we had just prepared, he thrust down until the head breached the ring of muscle. I gasped at the heat and pressure that squeezed me even more tightly than I had imagined, and Tvri'il caught my face in his hands, his mouth claiming mine as he sank down on me, enveloping me completely. His wings spread wide as we rocked together, thrusting and retreating, his hands roaming my body, smoothing and lingering, kneading at the muscles of my back. I buried my face in his wings, breathing in the scent of clean, fresh air, of cool winds that never touched the earth. I soared with him as I caressed the elegant curves of his pinions, the feathers spreading beneath my fingers, my body melding with his, flying with him, higher and faster until we

broke free from the gravity of the world and the sky itself was not vast enough to contain our joy.

How long we floated on the gentle currents of our bliss, sharing slow, languid kisses as his feathers fanned our glistening skin, I could not say. At one point I must have drifted into sleep, for I awoke alone, feeling chilled at his absence despite the growing warmth of the day. I glanced at the pool, expecting to see him splashing again in its cool shallows, but the water was still. I could see no sign of him in the foliage that surrounded us, and for a moment I panicked, the image of our soaring together still vivid. His wing could not have healed enough for him to risk truly flying, I was certain. I had begun to rise to my feet when long brown feathers covered my face, obscuring my sight. I twisted about, and the pinions opened, and Tvri'il stood before me, proudly dangling some sort of small animal in his hand. "How did you catch that?" I asked, pointing to the unfamiliar creature. Tvri'il caught the context if not the words and pointed to the canopy of one of the taller trees with a wide smile. I grinned in return, for while I had no idea if any part of the creature was edible, we should at least be able to fashion a second waterskin from its hide, more than doubling what we could carry with us.

We spent three more nights in that green haven, feasting on the abundant vegetation, regaining our strength and replenishing our spirits. Though communication was more difficult without the aid of his translator, we made do well enough with touch and expression and gesture; and when we held each other in our arms, Tvri'il could paint pictures in my mind, showing me how to love him and bringing me more pleasure than I had ever known. Had it

not been for the threat of discovery, I would have been happy to remain there with him longer, but the fact that his translator did not work was a constant reminder that we were not safe. I had no doubt that our captors had mapped the location of every deposit of ore on the planet that was large enough to disrupt their devices, and if they were not actively mining this site yet, they could march a crew of slaves in tomorrow. I was not sure how I would make Tvri'il understand, but we needed to move on.

Deciding the simplest method would be by example, on the fourth morning since we had found the refuge I began to gather a supply of food to last us for several days. Tvri'il looked at me quizzically when I handed him a pouch and pointed him to a bush laden with sweet blue fruit. They did not travel especially well, but they were so juicy they would help augment our water for the first few days at least.

We reaped until all my pouches and pockets were filled, but when I knelt to fill our waterskins Tvri'il caught my arm. He whistled and warbled something that I was sure was a protest, or at least a query of why we were leaving. Taking his hand, I led Tvri'il a short distance to an outcrop of rock I had reason to recognize all too well. Squatting on my haunches, I pointed out the stratum of glittering crystalline ore that snaked through the darker rock.

"That's what keeps your translator from working," I told him, rubbing the back of his head. He wet a fingertip and rubbed at the bright rock, which might have been attractive in its own right were it not bought at such a terrible price. He raised the wet digit to his lips and frowned, though I knew the ore had no taste. I drew his fingers to my own lips

and kissed them; then holding his hand in my own I again pointed from the ore to his neck and back, mimicking clawing at the rock to remove the crystal. Tvri'il tilted his head in comprehension, turning over my hands to soothe the scarred palms, gesturing back to the rock. I nodded, and he raised his hands to cradle my head, showing me an image of a transport sledge skimming over the planet's rocky terrain. I'd been on enough of them myself, the slavers using them to shuttle work crews from one mine to another, at least until they reached the distance where the ore's effect stopped the engines. After that, the slaves marched. I owed my own escape to learning to judge that exact interval and taking advantage of a fluctuation—our energy manacles had faltered as we neared a deposit, and though it was only an instant, it was enough for me to break free and race away before the guards' particle-beam rifles had regained their charge. As the image played out in my mind, I saw that Tvri'il's escape had been even riskier; he had simply torn the restraining device from his wings and thrown himself off the transport's open surface. Unfortunately the damage to his pinions had been severe enough that he couldn't stay aloft, and he'd plummeted to the surface, breaking his wing on impact. No wonder I hadn't seen any footprints leading to his body.

"We can't stay here. It isn't safe, so near a deposit. Eventually the slavers will come to mine it." I gestured to the rock again, and Tvri'il tilted his head. Though I wasn't sure how much he had understood, it was enough to convince him to help me rise, his fingers remaining woven in mine as he pointed to the horizon. It was my turn to try to puzzle out his whistling response, but I suspected he was asking me

how I knew which way to go. Wishing I had a better answer for him, I turned us to face the sunlight. “We follow the sun,” I told him. “It’s the only constant guide in this wasteland.” Reaching up to push my hair back from my brow and brush my lips with his, Tvri’il furled his wings against his back and started forward, still holding my hand.

When I had been wandering the desert alone, I had never spared much thought to anything beyond surviving the day; I had certainly not worried about the future. Either I would find another water source in time, or I would not; there was nothing I could do about it in either case, nothing to look forward to if I found another shelter, nothing more to lose if I did not. Now, though, with Tvri’il at my side, I found myself scanning the horizon anxiously as we walked, reducing the amount I ate and drank to stretch our meager provisions as long as I could. For the most part fortune was with us, and we usually reached a new haven before hunger and especially thirst became dangerous. We learned to use Tvri’il’s translator implant as an indicator, turning in another direction whenever it stopped working, trying to keep as far from anywhere the slavers might have set up operations as possible. Whenever we found shelter we would linger a few days to rebuild our strength, luxuriating in the food and water and the protection that allowed us to let down our guard a little. And every night we would lie in each other’s arms, and Tvri’il would teach me all the ways we could bring each other pleasure. He had learned a few more words once his translator began functioning again, but for the most part we did not need to speak; gesture and touch was enough to communicate our desire, and when he held me Tvri’il had no difficulty showing me exactly what he

wanted. He was still too cautious of his damaged wing to attempt to fly, but each time we made love, his pinions stretching as he reached his climax and cradling us afterward, I soared with him.

We had been in the desert for weeks, long enough for Tvri'il's skin to darken to copper and his elegant garments to become as frayed and tattered as my own; long enough for us to have worked out the basics of communication; long enough for me to realize that I had fallen in love with him. I told myself, in the beginning, that it was only a natural reaction to my loneliness and physical need, but it was more than the warmth of another body against mine or even the sensual pleasures he taught me that drew me to him. His smile, his trilling laughter, his uncomplaining endurance in the face of overwhelming hardship, the way he gave of himself so openly and completely when we loved, restored my deadened spirit and reawakened my emotions. I loved everything about him, from the simple touch of his hand as we struggled over a dune, to the profound comfort of his wings closing around us every night, sheltering me in the warmth of his embrace. I found myself watching him as he slept, wishing I could tell him somehow how much he had come to mean to me, looking forward to the new day simply for the joy of spending it in his presence, however harsh the conditions we struggled to survive.

It had been five days since we left the last shelter, and I was beginning to become concerned about finding another before the last of our water was gone, when our march was once again broken by the distant sound of an approaching vessel. There was a low outcrop of rock not far ahead of us, little enough shelter if the slavers were actively searching for

us, but it was all we had. I pulled Tvri'il toward it, but to my surprise he resisted, staring at the sky with his head angled, as if he were straining to hear something. My fear of losing him, stronger than any fear I had harbored for myself, made me tug at him desperately. "Tvri'il, come on! Danger!" I shouted, pulling him toward the rocks with all my strength. He trailed behind me, his wings opening to flutter in agitation as the sound grew louder, not the rough growl of the slavers' engines but something smoother and yet, I was sure, just as deadly if we were discovered. We had reached the scant pile of stone, and I tried to pull him down beside me when he broke away, warbling loudly and flapping his wings strongly enough to set the sand whirling around us.

"Tvri'il," I shouted in panic as he ran toward the small vessel that dropped from the blue-white sky to settle on the shifting ground, shocked by his actions. Even before the engines had stilled, the door slid open, and a dozen or more beings flew from the vessel. *Flew*—their wings snapping in the hot, still air as they surrounded Tvri'il, blocking him from my sight, a chorus of trilling sound greeting him. Of course, he must have recognized the ship. These were his people, clearly overjoyed at having found him. I sagged against the spur of rock, watching as they crowded around Tvri'il, touching him, hugging him, and I knew my time with my angel was over.

Tvri'il endured the crowding for a moment and then whistled something that caused his rescuers to fall back into what even my inexperienced eyes could tell was a soldier's formation. He stretched out his arm to beckon to me, his face breaking into a wide smile. "Vvr'ahn," he sang, racing to throw his arms around me as I hung back in uneasiness.

“Vvr’ahn, come! Savfe! Savfe, come!” He covered my face with kisses as his wings beat the air in exultation. Against all hope, we—*he*—had been rescued.

No sooner had we been ushered aboard the shuttle than Tvri’il was surrounded again. I sank unnoticed into an empty seat, listening to the whistling conversation around me without understanding a word of it, but I didn’t need to understand the words to know what was happening. I had sensed from the beginning that Tvri’il was someone important. He was undoubtedly being barraged with questions about what had happened to him, how he had survived, and (judging by the occasional gestures in my direction) who I was. I shivered in the unaccustomed coolness of the cabin as it left the atmosphere, the sky outside the main viewport darkening from blue-white to starlit black. The sight ought to have fascinated me, since I was locked deep in the hold of the slaver’s ship along with thousands of other captives on my first voyage into space, but I stared out the port without really seeing anything. I, too, should have been rejoicing at my escape from the hellish world I had been sure I would die upon, but all I could think of was that I had lost Tvri’il. I wondered if his people had the power to stand up to the slavers; I wondered if his world was anywhere near my planet; if there was any chance I would be able to return home. With a pang of loss, I realized that even if I had the means to do so, there was nothing left for me to return to. My wife was dead, my son perhaps dead as well, or still held captive on the slave colony, and the only other being who meant anything to me would soon return to his own life of power and privilege, our time together a part of the nightmare he was doubtless eager to forget.

A short while later the vessel docked with a much larger ship. Tvri'il and I were escorted through long, echoing corridors to a clinic of sorts, where we were both subjected to thorough examinations. Doctors seem to differ little anywhere in the galaxy—these certainly probed and prodded with as little care for their patient's comfort, or modesty, as any on my home planet. Even Tvri'il seemed disconcerted by their attentions, his eyes meeting mine across the room with a sympathetic scowl as his wing was examined for a third time. Something cool and stinging was sprayed onto my battered feet and hands, easing the ache I had lived with for so long, I had almost forgotten it until it was taken away. By the time the spray had dried and I was allowed to dress again, Tvri'il was already being led from the cabin. I called out his name; no, not his name, just my mangled version of it, I reminded myself. To my surprise he stopped, stepping from the group that surrounded him to turn back to me.

"Vvr'ahn," he sighed, and I wondered if it was the last time I would ever hear him speak my name. "Sor'y—sor'y. Need...." He tossed his head in a frustrated gesture; he obviously did not have the words for whatever he wished to say. "Savfe—no da'ger. Ea', slee'. Soon...." He tossed his head again, rubbing the back of his head. "Soon...." He bent to kiss me, his lips warm and sweet and tender, and I forced back tears as I watched him be led away, hoping it had not been our farewell kiss.

A pair of soldiers who had apparently been designated as my escorts accompanied me to a dining hall, where I was presented with a vast, unfamiliar array of food and drink. I am sure it was all very delicious, but I tasted none of it as I ate, my thoughts returning again and again to Tvri'il and

whether I would ever see him again. How could I even hope for it? I had fallen in love with him, but I didn't delude myself that he felt anything for me, other than gratitude for helping him survive. He was obviously a person of importance; I held no status even on my own world, and on his I would have no place at all.

My companions, one with hair and wings of tarnished gold, the other with dark hair and mottled gray-black feathers, were cordial enough, offering me more whenever my plate or glass were empty, but they did not have even Tvri'il's rudimentary grasp of my language, and I had never been able to master any of theirs, making conversation impossible. With Tvri'il, the struggle to communicate through word and gesture had been a game, one we both enjoyed playing; but now I was the only one who couldn't speak. I felt like an intruder, listening to the unintelligible voices around me; I would have felt foolish trying to make myself understood. It was easier to fall back into silence, a state I had grown inured to until Tvri'il's arrival.

When I had eaten all my stomach could hold for the first time since I'd been taken from my home world, I followed my escorts to a small but comfortable cabin. The winged blond demonstrated how to operate the bathroom facilities and the lights, and then they left me. Stripping off my clothes, I managed to operate the cleanser control and stood under the cascading water, letting my skin drink in the moisture until it puckered and I was overcome with weariness. I dried with a soft, thick cloth, but I had nothing but my soiled and ragged clothing to put back on. Rejecting the distasteful thought and wondering if Tvri'il's people normally slept nude, I dimmed the lights and crawled into the luxuriant

bedding. The cabin felt cold to me; I missed the warmth of Tvri'il's body spooned against mine and the gentle brush of his feathers wrapping around me. I wondered where he was, if he was lying in another cabin somewhere on the ship thinking of me as I was of him, or if he had already found someone else to sleep with. Trying not to imagine him curled around another winged body every time I closed my eyes, it was long before I slept.

I awoke with a start the next morning to a persistent humming noise, which my dream had translated into the whine of a slaver's transport. My pulse pounding from the terror of the memory and awakening in unfamiliar surroundings, it was several moments before I remembered where I was and realized the sound was coming from the doorway. Wrapping a length of the bedding around my hips, I shuffled over and fumbled at the control pad until I managed to open it. I had dared to hope it might be Tvri'il returning to me, but my spirits sank when I recognized my dark-haired escort from the day before standing in the corridor, holding a stack of clothing in his arms. He whistled something that might have been a greeting and handed the garments to me, his eyes roaming openly over my chest and legs as he entered. Settling easily into a seat, he nodded at the clothes and warbled several notes, probably a command to get dressed. His eyes continued to follow me as I headed toward the bathroom to refresh myself and pull on the garments. They were sheer and clinging, more similar to the outfit Tvri'il had been wearing when I found him than the more utilitarian outfits the soldiers wore. Just the thought made my heart ache with missing Tvri'il, the more so as I forced myself to acknowledge I might never see him again.

Blinking away the tears that threatened at the prospect, I tugged at the gauzy shirt, which had obviously been modified to close the slits for my nonexistent wings.

Feeling uncomfortably exposed, I padded barefoot (for the pile had not included any footwear) back into the bedroom, where my companion was feeding my ragged clothes into what I assumed was a recycler. He smiled and tilted his head appreciatively as I entered, giving a whistle I thought I had heard from Tvri'il under far more intimate circumstances. I supposed I could have been flattered, but though the guard was attractive in his own right, he was not Tvri'il, and I wanted no one else.

"Tvri'il?" I asked, not really expecting to be understood. "Any chance I can see Tvri'il this morning?"

My companion trilled something that might have been Tvri'il's full name, followed by a chorus of undecipherable sounds. Shaking my head, I spread my hands toward him in resignation. "Okay, then," I muttered, "what did you have in mind for me today?"

The door hummed again, and I wasn't surprised to find the big blond soldier waiting in the corridor. I apparently had an appointment somewhere. Hoping in vain that they might be taking me to Tvri'il, I followed them down a maze of corridors and lifts to what looked like another clinic, though it wasn't the same one we'd been examined in the previous day. An older, gray-haired man, his wings pure white, stood to greet me when we entered, dismissing my escorts with a nod. He bowed graciously to me, and I returned the gesture, winning a smile and a clap on the shoulder.

“Vvr’ahn?” he asked. He’d obviously been talking to Tvri’il, then.

“Varan,” I agreed, feeling a little of the tension I’d felt when my companions had left easing. The older man seemed to sense my concern, for he smiled again, pointing to himself and whistling a long passage of sounds, the only one I could reproduce being a drawn-out “Chr’ee.” He chuckled at my attempt and turned to a table, picking up a small device and showing it to me. He gestured with his other hand to the back of my head and then to his own, and then to his mouth and mine. “A translator implant,” I realized. “You want to give me a translator implant?”

Chr’ee tilted his head, his blue eyes sparkling as he tapped the back of my head again. “Go ahead.” I nodded in agreement, though I doubted how much it would help if his people had never met anyone from my planet before. I wondered if Tvri’il had arranged it, or if it was simply a routine process to implant every vagabond they picked up. Chr’ee lifted the hair from the back of my neck, his long fingers probing the base of my skull, and I felt a short, sharp shock as the device was implanted beneath my skin.

Chr’ee whistled something, and I shook my head, still not able to understand him. With an empathetic smile, he sat me down at the table and pressed a button that lit a view screen on the wall. The image of a man appeared, and then changed to an image of just his raised hand. A warbled word was spoken and then repeated, followed by a pause. Chr’ee gestured to the image and then raised my hand, his expression inquisitive. “Hand,” I said, realizing what he was asking. The image changed, and another warble sounded.

“Thumb,” I stated as the images changed, more rapidly now. “Finger... finger... finger... finger... palm... wrist...” It was going to be a long morning, I realized, settling into the rhythm of the translator programming.

In fact it was a long day, for except for a short break for lunch, I spent the entire time talking to the transcomp, naming an increasingly complex set of images from items to actions to situations that described sensations and emotions. I was feeling pretty drained by the time Chr’ee returned to release me, but it was all worth it when he spoke to me and I heard not only the whistling tones I expected, but a deeper masculine voice overlaying them. “You did quite well, Vvr’ahn. You must be exhausted.”

“I can understand you!” I exclaimed, claspings his hands in my excitement. I thought immediately of Tvri’il, of being able to talk to him at last, of having the words to say all the things I had longed to tell him for so long. If it were still just the two of us, back on the slavers’ planet, nothing could have stopped me from confessing my love. Now, though I had the means to speak to Tvri’il, I didn’t know if I’d ever see him again, or if I would dare to disclose my feelings even if I did.

“And I you,” Chr’ee answered. “Now that the basic program is—” he whistled something I didn’t understand, “the implant will continue to learn the more you speak.” I must have frowned at the missing word, for he smiled indulgently. “The program will mark the words it cannot translate—though you may be surprised at how few those are, for it can deduce quite a bit just from context. Stop back in a week or so, and we can put you through another round of programming if you need it, but this should be quite

enough to get you started.” I thanked him sincerely, wondering what my whistling sounded like to him as he called for my escorts to reclaim me.

The two guards—Te’vv and Zha’a, my translator rendered their names—grinned when I was able to greet them in their own language. “Though it gives you a strange accent, like you’re talking with a mouthful of—” The translator stumbled over the word, and Zha’a snickered, making me suspect whatever Te’vv had said was not polite usage.

“Speaking of mouthfuls, let’s get Vvr’ahn fed. He’s had a long day,” Zha’a added, leading us toward the dining hall. Our discussion as we ate was innocuous, mostly centered on describing the various foods we were eating and how they were prepared. I wondered if they had been instructed to steer the conversation away from more sensitive topics, but for the moment there was only one question I wanted answered.

“Will I be able to see Tvri’il again?” I asked finally, as we were heading back to my cabin.

“Tvri’il?” Te’vv chuckled, and Zha’a cuffed his partner’s shoulder in annoyance.

“Crown Prince Tv’vri’ilivrr’ee’vv has been closeted with his advisors ever since his return to us,” Zha’a answered. “I can try to get a message to him tomorrow, should you wish it....”

I had known he was someone important, but a prince? Hereditary ruler of his home world, at least, and perhaps even more? What possible message could I send to him?

Smothering a sigh, I shook my head. “It isn’t important enough to disturb him, but thank you.”

“The council is debating how to deal with these—” another word the translator couldn’t recognize, “who dared to kidnap the Crown Prince, though it seems they may not have realized what they had done.” Zha’a explained that the prince had been on a beneficent visit to a marginally developed world in a nearby system that was suffering from famine. When the slavers raided the system, he was taken along with the native population.

“If it were up to me, I’d just blast them all and be done with it,” Te’vv blustered.

“It isn’t their home world,” I protested. “And you’d be killing a planet full of innocent slaves in the process.”

“It’s a good thing it isn’t up to you, then,” Zha’a told his partner with a wry smile.

The pair left me at the door to my quarters, where I spent another restless night. How ironic that I found it harder to sleep in these luxurious but cold surroundings than I had in the desert, when all I needed was Tvri’il to keep me warm.

The next morning, I discovered why I’d been fitted with a translator implant. Zha’a and Te’vv escorted me to a meeting room where a panel of officials spent the better part of the day interrogating me on everything I knew about the slavers: how they had captured me and how long I had been held on the mining planet, what the slaves had been forced to do and how I had escaped. They wanted every detail I could remember about the ore and its properties, how much we

had mined, how often we had changed sites, and how many other slaves there were on the planet. I answered as much as I could, but I had to tell them far too often that I didn't know the answers to what they asked, like how the slavers managed to transport the ore. Obviously they had some way of shielding the energy dampening effect, but I had no idea what it was or how it worked. My inquisitors seemed shocked by much of what I told them, though they remained distantly polite. When I broke down while describing what the slavers had done to my wife and son, they scowled grimly, but no one offered to hold me while I cried.

As the hours wore on, I gave up hoping that Tvri'il might join the inquisition. I gathered from discussion between the officials that the slavers' activities had been unknown to them until their Crown Prince was kidnapped. They assumed that the abductors only raided worlds like mine and the world their prince had been taken from, that weren't technologically sophisticated enough to resist them. It was just bad luck that Tvri'il had been accompanying the planetary administrators on a tour of their drought-blighted fields when the raiders struck. By the time Tvri'il's retinue discovered their prince and the entire tour contingent had vanished, the slavers were long gone. Days of futile searching had passed before anyone thought to try to locate the prince by tracing the energy signature of his translator implant, and once they'd detected the signal, it kept fading in and out—due, though they didn't know it at the time, to the dampening effects of the ore. The panel members were convinced the slavers were amassing huge quantities of the ore for use as some kind of weapon, and a heated debate over where they might strike and how such a threat could be

countered went on for many minutes before the chief official called them back to order.

Once my questioners were convinced I'd told them all I could about the slavers and their activities, they began to inquire about my home world and where it was located. I lost count of the number of star maps they projected on the view screen, but none of them were familiar to me. Nor could I speak for my planet when they asked if my people would be willing to join the interplanetary union to which they belonged, to assist in taking action against the slavers. The officials seemed dismayed at my obvious lack of status, which only reinforced my certainty that the gulf between Tvri'il and me was too vast to be bridged, even if he had wished it, which it seemed apparent he did not. Since it was also apparent that until we could locate my home system, I had nowhere to go, I wondered if it might have been better if they'd left me on the mining world. At least there the constant struggle for survival might have kept me from wondering where Tvri'il was, what he was doing, why he had made no effort to see me since our arrival.

Only the announcement that we were approaching their capital's spaceport ended the interrogation. Shortly after the vessel landed, Te'vv and Zha'a were back to escort me off the ship to new quarters. "I guess they still have more questions I won't be able to answer," I muttered as we boarded a small private skimmer.

My first impression of Tvri'il's world was how *alive* it was in comparison to the arid starkness of the mining planet. A temperate golden sun shone brilliantly in the deep blue sky, accented by diaphanous trails of clouds. The buildings below

us glowed in pearlescent splendor amid a verdant backdrop of trees and gardens, and I could see the city's inhabitants moving between them, their wings spread wide as they flew.

The skimmer landed in a wide plaza behind a building of opalescent stone. My escorts led me along a walkway shaded by graceful arches covered with lacy flowering vines, which scented the air with a delicately sweet fragrance. A fountain splashed on a terrace at the end of the path, its placid tones following us as we entered through a set of open doors to a spacious and luxuriously appointed bedchamber.

"Are you sure you've brought me to the right place?" I asked, looking around in wonder.

"They've brought you to exactly the right place," a musical voice answered, and Tvri'il stepped from behind a pillar. If I had thought him beautiful when I found him in the desert, he took my breath away now. He was dressed in a flowing robe of some pale green material that clung to him as he walked, accentuating the elegant lines of his torso. His hair had been brushed until it shone, the glossy tendrils held back from his perfect features by a fillet of intricately woven silver strands. A matching band circled one slender ankle. His wings fluttered once as he moved forward to greet us.

I glared at Te'vv and Zha'a, who bowed to their prince with deference. "These aren't just two random guards, are they?"

"Zha'a and Te'vv are part of my personal staff," Tvri'il admitted, dismissing the two with a nod. "I wanted to be

sure you were well attended, since I couldn't be with you myself."

"Of course, you have important issues to deal with," I answered, hoping I didn't sound as if I had a right to complain. "I'm glad to have a chance to see you again, to thank you for my rescue, before—" I realized I had no idea what would become of me, a stranger on this beautiful world, but I was grateful I had been granted a final opportunity to say farewell to the man I knew I would love the rest of my life.

Tvri'il silenced my words with a raised hand. "It *was* important for me to speak with the council, so they can take the news of the slavers to the interplanetary union. A vote to act must be taken at once, so the planet can be secured and the slaves rescued. Perhaps under questioning, our captors may reveal the location of their home world; but even if they do not, we must get samples of the ore so that a means to screen against its effects can be found." He took another step forward, until he stood directly before me and took my hands in his. "I did not dare send for you until I had convinced them of the slavers' threat and the need to act on it immediately." He raised my hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to each scarred knuckle. "I knew once we were together again, I wouldn't be able to let you go."

His words and the touch of his lips to my skin sent a surge of desire flaring through me, but while I would not have hesitated to sweep Tvri'il into my arms, I didn't even know the proper form of address for the Crown Prince. "Your highness," I began, hoping the translator would provide the appropriate honorific, "I don't think—"

My words were stopped by Tvri'il's mouth closing over mine. I stood stiffly in his embrace for a moment, but when his tongue lapped at my lips, pleading for entrance, I surrendered and wrapped my arms around his back, sliding them beneath his wings as I let him plunder my mouth hungrily. If I had only this last night to spend with him, I would store the memory of each minute to relive in the empty times to come.

When he finally stopped to allow us to breathe, he tossed his head in negation. "Don't call me that," he demanded, his voice softening as his palms caressed my back, lingering over the muscles of my shoulder blades. "As much as I've longed to be able to speak with you this way, I miss hearing you call me '*Tvri'il*.'" His lips moved to my ear, his breath hot as he whispered, "Call me '*Tvri'il*', Vvr'ahn."

"*Tvri'il*," I moaned as his tongue traced the whorls of my ear, his teeth biting gently at the fleshy lobe. The press of his erection against my thigh as I repeated the moan made it clear he wanted me as much as I needed him. Turning my head, I met his lips hungrily, my tongue invading his mouth as I slaked my thirst on his sweetness. He pulled away only long enough to strip my tunic over my head before taking my mouth again, walking me backward until I leaned against the milky stone balustrade of his terrace. Despite the warm breeze that caressed my skin, his fingers teasing through the springy curls on my chest made me tremble. His lips closed around a tightened nipple, nuzzling and suckling until I was panting breathlessly beneath him. When he transferred his attentions to the other side of my chest, repeating his sensuous assault, I could only cling to him, my fingers burrowing into the long flight feathers of his wings.

“Stay with me, Vvr’ahn,” Tvri’il pleaded, running his tongue up and down the flat of my sternum. “Promise you will stay with me.”

The emotion in his voice was so unexpected that I caught his chin with my hand, holding him still so I could look into his eyes. “I have no place else to go,” I confessed. “I will stay with you as long as you want me.”

“We will find your home world,” he insisted, cupping my cheek in turn. “But even when we do, I hope you will stay with me. I am not asking you to warm my bed for a few nights, Vvr’ahn. I want you by my side, as my partner and consort, for the rest of our lives.”

“There is nothing I want more, but are you certain?” I asked, knowing that my love was already his, whatever his answer. “Will your people accept it? The Crown Prince taking an alien as consort, a former slave from a planet you can’t even find on your star charts? I don’t even have wings,” I tried to joke, though my heart had almost stopped beating while I waited for his response.

“My people believe that love is to be treasured wherever it is found,” he answered. “They already honor you for having rescued me. When they see how much happiness you bring me, they will rejoice for us.”

“Honor *me*? It was your guards who found you and rescued you—rescued us both,” honesty forced me to protest.

“If not for you, they would have found nothing but my lifeless body,” Tvri’il retorted. “I would never have survived if not for you. You healed me, fed me, gave me your boots....”

His voice softened, and his lips pressed to mine briefly. “I think that is the moment I knew I loved you. I was a stranger, someone you couldn’t even talk to, and you put your own life at risk to secure mine.”

“You gave me a reason to want to live again,” I countered, though I was still uneasy. Harsh as it was, I had learned how to survive on the mining planet, but here on this idyllic world I felt lost, despite his assurance of his people’s acceptance. “Though I don’t know what I have to offer you, other than my love in return.”

“If that were all you had to offer, it would be more than enough.” Tvri’il laughed. “But I fear that will not be your only duty!” His face sobered. “I expect action to be taken against the slavers swiftly once the extent of their atrocities becomes known. After the mining planet is taken, there will be tens of thousands of slaves to be liberated. I was hoping you would agree to take charge of that task. They will be frightened, perhaps angry, with little cause to trust anyone. You know exactly what they have gone through, and I can’t think of anyone who would be better suited to help them until they can be returned to their home worlds.” Tvri’il threaded his fingers into my hair, sweeping it back from my brow. “You might even be fortunate enough to find your son.”

My heart leapt at the thought, and I opened my arms to the man who had taught me to hope again. “I will stay,” I promised, drawing him to me as his lips met mine, sealing our vows and awakening the heat that flared whenever we touched. More by luck than by skill I opened the fastening of his robe, easing it over the folds of his wings to pool at his feet, baring him to my touch. His hands roved my torso as I

kissed every inch of honeyed skin my lips could reach, but it still was not enough. When his fingers teased beneath the waist of my leggings, I pushed them off and kicked them away, molding our naked bodies together. Now that I had the words to speak to him, I realized they were still just words, powerless to express how much joy he had brought into my life. There was only one way I was sure he would understand. “Make love to me,” I pleaded, sliding my hands up the powerful tendons of his wings. “Make me soar.”

The pinions flexed at my touch, and Tvri’il kissed me fiercely, his tongue probing the depths of my mouth before turning me in his arms. My hips pressed against the cool stone of the balustrade as he kissed the back of my neck, his hands seeking all my sensitive places, making me ache to feel him inside me. “Now,” I hissed, rocking backward as he cupped my buttocks, reaching behind me to try to pull him closer. “Now, Tvri’il....”

“Wait.” He darted inside the open doors of the terrace, leaving me shivering in the warm evening breeze. Before I could draw a full breath he was back, a small flask of oil in his palm. His slickened fingers prepared me tenderly, stroking and stretching until I was nearly ready to come from his touch alone. My hands clutched at the smooth stone railing as I turned my head to meet his lips. His tongue entered my mouth at the same instant his cock breached me, and I sucked at him wildly, reaching back for his hips to try to pull him deeper inside me. Any pain I had experienced, then or ever in my life, faded in the glorious heat of him entering me, filling me, each movement inside me setting sparks of pleasure racing through my body and exploding in brilliant light behind my eyelids, putting the stars to shame.

Tvri'il's hands caught mine, and he stretched our arms wide, leaning forward to press me against the balustrade. His wings opened behind us, stirring the air around us with each roll of his hips. I craned my neck further, and Tvri'il's mouth locked to mine, our bodies molded together back to chest. I could feel us climbing, one body, one spirit, the snap of his wings and the thrust of his hips carrying us higher, higher, until together we reached the pinnacle of ecstasy. The hot surge of his seed filling me triggered my own fierce climax, my untouched cock painting its release over my abdomen as I spasmed around him, prolonging the waves of pleasure that held us aloft. Finally, his wings closed around us like a cloak as we drifted back to reality with whispered words of love and tender kisses.

When even the shelter of Tvri'il's wings was no longer enough to keep us warm, we made our way inside to his bed, where we curled together as we had done each night in the desert. "Now perhaps I will be able to get some decent sleep," Tvri'il murmured as he pulled me closer, his head nestling into my shoulder. "I missed you terribly the last few nights."

"I was beginning to wish we hadn't been rescued, so that I would still have you with me," I admitted, sighing in contentment as his wings enfolded us.

"If we had been trapped there forever and I could never fly again, I would be happy as long as you were with me," Tvri'il vowed. "As strange as it sounds to say, I give thanks to the Powers that the slavers captured me. If I had delayed visiting that drought-struck planet by only a day, we might never have met."

I would once have denied any belief in intercessory deities, but Tvri'il had restored my faith in more ways than one. I no longer doubted that we were meant to be together, and gave silent thanks myself that despite all I had lost, I had been given so much in return.

"On my world, the word 'flight' has two meanings," I told Tvri'il softly. "One is to run away, to escape the way we did from the slavers; but it also means freedom, soaring, exhilaration—all the ways you make me feel. I may not have wings, but when I'm with you, I can fly."

Tvri'il's lips met mine in a slow, sweet kiss that sealed our bond more clearly than any words could ever express. His arms closed around me, his head pillowed against the steady beat of my heart, and then we slept, sheltered in the comfort of my angel's wings.

Growing up in Chicago, NICKI BENNETT spent every Saturday at the central library, losing herself in the world of books. A voracious reader, she eventually found it difficult to find enough of the kind of stories she liked to read and decided to start writing them herself.



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