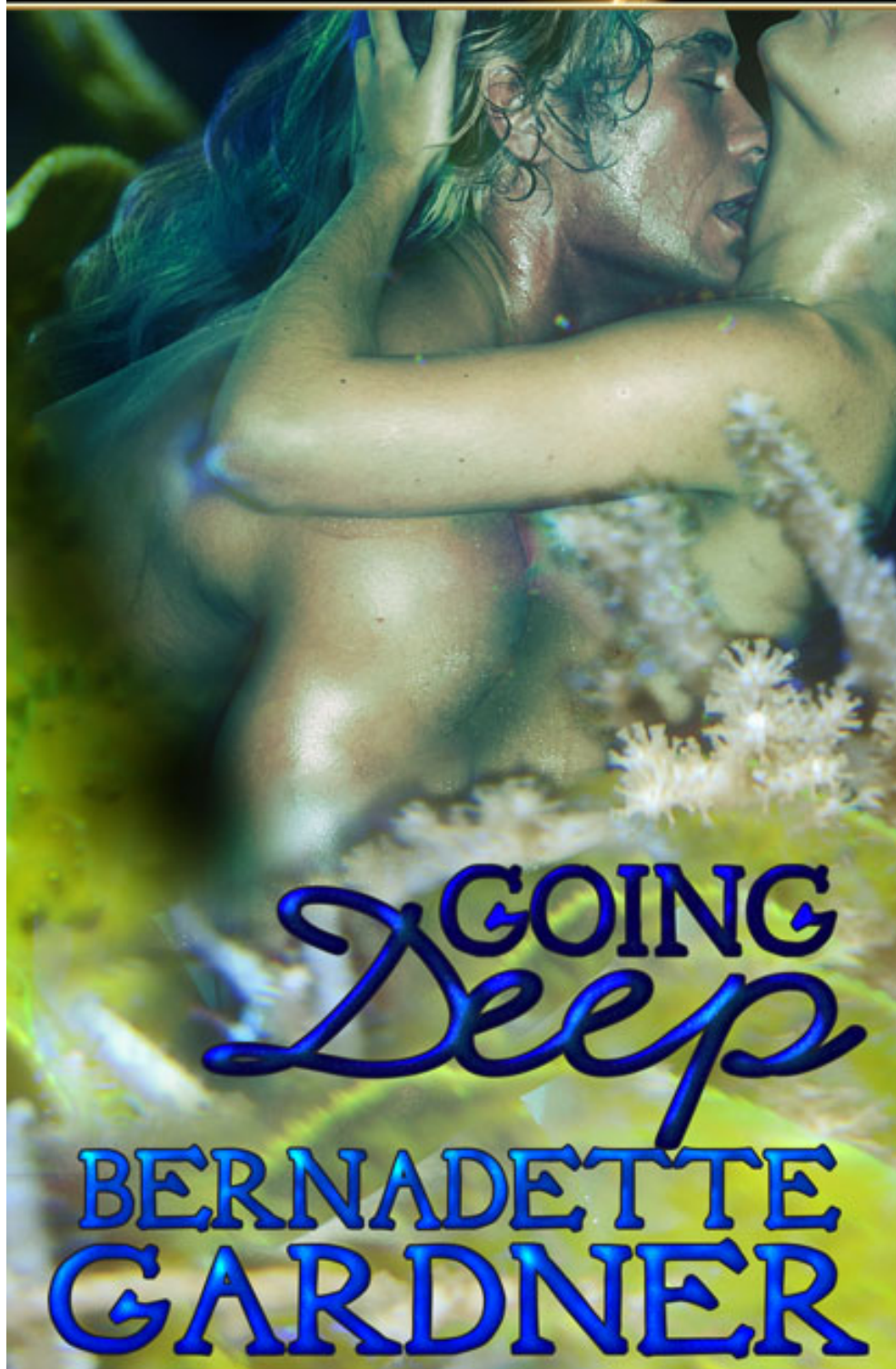


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



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Going Deep

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GOING DEEP

Bernadette Gardner

Chapter One

Dr. Celia Weston pressed a clean adhesive bandage to the small surgical scar on her patient's abdomen and smiled reassuringly. "The incision is healing nicely, Pela. You should be ready to go into the water by the end of the week."

Pela's wide, blue-green eyes lost the hint of apprehension they'd held when Celia's post-op exam began. "Thank you, Doctor Celia. I can't wait to begin my work." Pela pronounced each word clearly, with a slight hesitation between syllables. She'd been speaking in full sentences for a month now, not bad for a five-foot-ten-inch-tall twelve-month-old.

Celia reached out a hand to help Pela off the diagnostic cot. The girl—technically a full grown humanoid female—swung her long, muscular legs off the cot and hopped down, planting her delicately webbed toes on the smooth polished tile floor of Celia's Med Lab. She winced and wrinkled her small nose upon impact.

"Easy there. You're still going to be a little sore. No gymnastics, okay?" Celia squeezed Pela's long, webbed fingers and guided her to a nearby table to retrieve her clothing. UMEs were always anxious to leave the lab and join their fellows in the man-made ocean of the space station. Fortunately BioCon Corporation had designed the aquatic humanoids to heal quickly, but nevertheless, recovery from a complete hysterectomy took time for any species.

"Can I watch the dolphins now, Doctor Celia?" Pela's hopeful question, delivered while she slipped into her form-fitting enviro-suit, caused Celia a slight twinge of conscience. Pela had yet to overcome her childlike innocence and Celia feared that sweet naïveté that accompanied all the young female's questions would die a swift death in the sometimes harsh environment for which she'd been bred. UMEs—Space Station Gavrel's Underwater Maintenance Engineers—quickly learned unswerving

dedication to their assigned tasks. By the end of the week, Pela would no longer have time to enjoy cavorting with the dolphins or listening to recordings of whale song. She'd be expected to work two ten-hour shifts out of every thirty-hour day in Gavrel's ocean dome. Her ten off hours would be for eating, sleeping and learning skills to make her a more a versatile worker.

Celia reprimanded herself for worrying so much. She'd yet to hear any of the UMEs complain about their jobs. She grinned at Pela and brushed a long strand of pale blonde hair from the girl's shoulder. "Of course. Get a bucket of fish from the storage bin. I'm sure they'd enjoy a treat."

Pela squealed, a high pitched expression of glee that made Celia cringe as much as it made her laugh. On bare feet, the woman bounded off to play with her beloved aquatic friends, leaving Celia to wish her own schedule wasn't quite so full.

Subdued in the girl's absence, Celia straightened up her exam area and made notes on Pela's chart which identified her only as UME 976. BioCon discouraged Celia and other scientists who regularly came in contact with UMEs from giving them names, but like almost all of them whom Celia had worked with since her arrival on Gavrel eight months ago, Pela had chosen her own name shortly after BioCon's Speech and Occupational Therapy instructor taught her how to talk.

Celia finished the chart and slid the file into the reader to be scanned into her medical database. The whirl of the machine lulled her and she slipped into a mild daydream—a common one which revolved around gliding naked through the clear blue waves, free to roam the living ocean at her leisure in the company of muscular mermen and their sinuous female counterparts.

A familiar voice roused her from her fanciful thoughts. "Dr. Weston, we need some help here!" David Kyoto, one of Gavrel's structural engineers, rushed into the exam room. "Injury—" he said, wiping water from his dark, almond-shaped eyes. A puddle of ocean water formed around his feet before he ducked out of the room again.

Celia grabbed her trauma kit and dashed after him.

She found her patient sitting on the edge of the moon pool which connected her outer lab to the open ocean. One of the UMEs, a broad-shouldered male with golden hair and a skin tone just a shade darker than the norm for his species, sat hunched over on the edge of the pool, his arms wrapped around his midsection.

"What happened?" The question came out automatically and Celia's instincts took over. She scooped her arms under her patient's and eased him back away from the shimmering water.

David drew the male's legs up and stretched him out on the floor. "There's a torn mesh on one of the intake pipes in sector twenty-seven. The current dragged him halfway into the pipe before we could shut it down. The mesh tore his suit and impaled him."

Concern, likely mixed with a dash of guilt, made David's normally deep voice high and warbly. He'd blame himself for the injury since he governed the workings of the huge intake pipes that circulated the ocean water in lieu of lunar tides.

"Okay, it's going to be okay. Let me look..." Gently, Celia and David pried the UME's muscular arms away from his injury. His sleeveless black enviro-suit sported a tear almost a handspan long beneath his ribs. Bright red, highly oxygenated blood spilled out of an equally long gash in his honey-toned skin.

Celia prodded the wound, prompting a gasp from her patient. "I'm sorry. I know it hurts. It doesn't look like you punctured a lung, though, and I don't see any foreign material in the wound. You'll need to have this disinfected and stitched up, but it's not as bad as it looks. What's your name?"

David's startled gaze met hers. "He's 314. He's one of my undertow regulators."

Celia pointedly glanced away. She put calming hands on the UME's chest, which rose and fell rapidly beneath her touch while he tried to breathe through the pain. Along his neck, the striations of his gills flared with the effort to draw oxygen into his lungs, but he managed to grind out a response through clenched teeth. "I am...Del Mar."

"Del, you're going to be fine, but right now you have to breathe through your mouth and nose, not your gills, or you're going to pass out."

Del squeezed his deep blue eyes shut and nodded. The heaving of his chest subsided as soon as he permitted himself to breathe like a human instead of a fish.

"David, help me get him up on a cot."

Kyoto obeyed, his movements quick and efficient. Once they'd gotten their patient settled, Celia fixed her clinical gaze on the human engineer. "Thank you. Now go. I'll contact you with his status when I'm finished treating him."

David opened his mouth to protest, but Celia silenced him with her sternest glare. David was a good man who cared about his UME team members, but she planned to treat Del Mar like a human being and not a broken machine and she didn't need Kyoto hanging around calling him 314 and asking how soon he'd be back on the job.

David bowed his head and ran a hand through his glossy black hair. He turned to go. "If you need me, Celia," he said.

"I'll call you. Everything will be fine."

David retrieved his breather from the wet floor and secured it over his mouth. With a splashless dive into the moon pool, he disappeared, and Celia gratefully turned her full attention to her patient. His muscles seemed less rigid now and from somewhere in his chest came a low vibration, a healing hum Celia had often observed among the older UMEs. Pela hadn't learned the technique yet, but she would as soon as she began to interact with her fellows in the open ocean.

Not wishing to interrupt his pain-relief method, Celia didn't speak to Del. She worked quickly, grabbing shears to slice away the remains of the upper half of his suit and collecting other supplies she'd need to treat his injury.

The thin layer of neoprene peeled away easily, revealing bruises along the smooth, hairless skin of his chest. The lividity of the marks attested to the force with which the ocean water had slammed him against the metal mesh covering the intake pipe. Like shark teeth, the torn metal had left not only a deep, jagged cut in his flesh, but also a

series of smaller circular wounds where thin spokes of galvanized steel had impaled him.

Despite the damage, though, the mesh had also saved his life. If he hadn't been caught, he'd have been dragged deep into the circulation tube where the water pressure and velocity would have caused even a water breather to drown.

"You're doing great," she whispered while she cleaned the wounds.

Del nodded again. He went completely still when she applied anesthetic to his skin and he remained so, without the slightest complaint all the while she worked at stitching him up.

Thirty-seven tiny, nearly invisible stitches later, the largest wound was closed. The others required only bandages, and many of them would heal overnight.

Del's breathing deepened and the rumbling hum of his healing trance ceased. He met her gaze. "Thank you, Dr. Weston. I owe you a great debt." No longer tight with pain, his voice rode over her, deep and soothing as warm water.

Celia's hands stilled and she had to force herself not to brush at the wisps of wet blond hair that clung to the sides of his handsome face. "No, you don't. I'm a doctor, Del. It's my purpose to help." She tried to smile, but the intensity of his gaze left her somewhat weak. Her skin tingled under his scrutiny, and her clit gave a curious pulse.

"To know one's purpose is a blessing," he said finally.

"Ye...yes. I agree."

"I must return to my work now." He moved to sit up, the rippling muscles of his flat abdomen tightening with the effort, even as his arm came up to guard his stitches.

Celia placed a hand on the center of his chest and pushed him back to the cot. His strong heartbeat pulsed beneath her fingers. "No, you don't. I prescribe at least two days of complete rest. You may have contracted an infection from the mesh. I can't let you go back into the water until you've had a full course of antibiotics.

Del gave a very human sound of exasperation and lay back. "There's so much work to be done. Dr. Kyoto will fall behind in his schedule."

"Don't worry about David. Worry about you. Do you have pain anywhere else? I'd like to do a body scan to make sure you don't have any internal injuries."

"Other than my side, I'm in no discomfort."

"Well, good. Then the scan will turn up negative."

Even though the Med Lab was empty, Celia pulled a privacy curtain around Del's cot. "Do you need help getting out of the rest of your suit?"

He blinked at her, and the bewildered expression arched to a spot in the middle of her chest. Her heart skipped a beat when the corner of his mouth raised in the slightest smile. "I won't require any assistance."

"Okay." She handed him a thin robe from the supply cabinet. "Put this on, and call me when you're ready. Then we'll move you to a permanent bed where you can get some rest."

As if he had the choice to disobey, Del sighed. "Very well, but I assure you —"

"Doctor's orders." Celia stepped behind the curtain and let out a long, unsteady breath. She swiped a suddenly shaky hand over her brow, pushing her bangs out of her eyes. She tugged on the hem of her shirt, a professional habit she'd never been able to break, and gasped when the hard peaks of her nipples became visible against the light blue fabric.

Beneath the tight, indigo leggings she wore, her thighs had gone damp. How could thirty seconds of conversation with Del Mar have aroused her so quickly? She'd felt nothing sexual while treating him. She hadn't dared indulge in her fantasies about Gavrel's aquatic inhabitants while she tended his wounds and recorded his vitals.

Now though, her body hummed with unwelcome awareness. She glanced through the doorway at the currently placid surface of the moon pool and wished she could dive into the blue water to combat the heat rising in her core.

Celia had never allowed her personal feelings or desires to interfere with her work before. She wasn't about to start.

Get a grip, she advised herself in the same tone she'd used on David. *Doctor's orders.*

"I'm ready." Del Mar's sultry voice left her resolve in tatters. With her heart racing like a schoolgirl's, Celia turned and nearly dropped her scanner.

Her patient had done as she'd instructed and removed the bottom portion of his suit. He'd also put on the robe, backward. Meant to open in the back, the flimsy white garment hung from his shoulders, open down the front, revealing his sculptured legs, heavily muscled thighs and narrow hips. His partially erect penis and dark-skinned testicles hung amid golden curls between his legs.

Celia allowed her startled gaze to linger only for a split second before settling on his face. Unaware of his error, he regarded her with benign curiosity. "Is something wrong, Doctor? You look pale."

"No. Of course not. I'm fine." Celia pasted on her professional smile and gestured for him to close the robe. "Let's do it. I mean...do the uh...scan. Follow me."

* * * * *

"The body scan revealed no injuries or abnormalities. I predict a full recovery, but I recommend at least forty-eight hours in Med Lab under observation for infection. I anticipate Del...uh, delete Del...I anticipate UME 314 will be able to assume full duty load immediately upon medical release." After a deep breath, Celia shut off the audio log and typed in the code to transmit her report to BioCon and Gavrel Medical.

Though the rest of her shift had been uneventful, she still hadn't shed all the pent-up nervous energy which had plagued her since David brought the injured UME to her lab.

She sloughed off her uniform and stretched out on her bed in her underwear, deciding she was too tired to change into civilian clothes. Rather than go out, she considered spending the evening lying in bed reading.

With Del sleeping peacefully in Med Lab, his emergency call button at hand, and Pela off at her final speech lesson, Celia had no professional concerns at the moment. So why was she so agitated? She'd barely been able to sit still since she'd returned to her personal quarters. Even now, comfortably dressed and propped on a mound of pillows, she couldn't bring herself to relax.

When the instant message icon on her personal communication screen began flashing, she eagerly rolled over on the bed and hit the receive button. David Kyoto's face appeared on the small screen. Celia grabbed her uniform shirt and tugged it back on to cover the flimsy undershirt she wore and gave David her stock professional smile.

Ever the gentlemen, he made no mention whether he noticed her state of undress, in fact he seemed distracted and just as agitated as Celia felt.

"What's up, David? You look worried."

"I am." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I want to talk to you about what happened today."

"Del is going to be fine. His injuries weren't life threatening."

"It wasn't an accident."

Celia shifted to a sitting position on her bed and hunched over the screen. "How could it not be —"

"I've had a crew running sims all day, and we've come up with nothing that could have ripped that mesh apart. In fact, it looks like the wires weren't torn at all. They're pinched at the ends as though they were cut."

"Who would do that? The only people down that deep are —" Celia stopped herself before the words came out. She held David's gaze and shook her head. Despite her unspoken denial, he completed her thought for her.

"The only ones down that deep are UMEs."

Chapter Two

Celia met David in his office two levels down and half a kilometer away from hers in the Gavrel Undersea Complex. Here, rather than the gentle lapping of the ice-blue waters in the moon pool, the roar of water circulators filled the air.

A sheen of moisture clung to the walls and overhead piping and the voices of David's human and UME staff members echoed when they spoke any louder than a whisper.

Captain Benir Ganesh, Second-in-Command of Gavrel's internal security force, sat with the engineer in the crescent-shaped cubicle that served as his office. Ganesh rose slightly from his seat when Celia entered and offered her a respectful salute.

David motioned her to a chair. "You didn't mention my findings to 314, did you?"

Celia bristled at the numeric designation, but with Ganesh in attendance, now was not the time to press the point that the UMEs deserved individual names as much as their human creators did. "He's resting. I came right here after our conversation."

Ganesh regarded her with coal black eyes set under heavy brows. He was a handsome man, but job stress had aged him prematurely, and the lines around his eyes and mouth gave his features a sour cast. "Dr. Weston, I'd appreciate if you not discuss this with anyone outside this room."

"Discuss what, Captain? I don't know anything other than what Dr. Kyoto told me, and I find it hard to believe any of the UMEs would do something to endanger one of their own or something that could compromise the integrity of the ocean."

Ganesh and Kyoto exchanged glances. "What?" Celia prompted. She hated feeling like the odd man out of whatever secret information Ganesh and Kyoto shared.

"I was due to inspect the intake valves personally today, but I got tied up with a problem in the salinity tanks and I sent 314 in my place."

“Why would the UMEs want to hurt you, David? You treat them as well as you treat your human staff, if not better. They practically worship you.”

Ganesh made a disparaging sound. “There have been rumors, Doctor. Wholly unsubstantiated, of course but concerning nevertheless, that the UMEs are developing a society and a religion of sorts. Some say a faction of them has deified their human creators, and another faction is...violently opposed to that belief.”

Celia suppressed a shiver. Humans as gods? The concept made her slightly nauseated. “Why speculate? Why not just ask them what’s going on?”

Again the two men exchanged a glance. “That’s where you come in,” Ganesh responded.

Celia only stared until the captain continued. “We’d like you to question 314—in a subtle way of course, and find out if there’s any truth to the rumors.”

“Why don’t *you* do that?” Celia shot back. Her job was stressful enough without having to do Ganesh’s undercover work.

“We don’t want to tip our hand, and we have no way of knowing who belongs to what faction. You also have a new UME in your care, 976, I believe?”

Pela. “Yes. She’s due to accept her post at the end of the week. She’s only had limited exposure to other UMEs so far, though.”

“You continue to monitor new releases for several weeks, don’t you?”

Celia pursed her lips. “I don’t like that term, Captain. ‘New release’ makes them sound like animals bred in captivity and sent off into the wild. The UMEs are sentient beings who are, for almost all biological purposes, the same as humans.”

Ganesh shrugged and Celia’s respect for the man slipped a notch or two. “Whatever you wish to call her, the female can help acquire knowledge. If there is a coup or some kind of mutiny brewing, they’d probably want to recruit her into one camp or the other right away. You’re in a position to find out if anyone approaches her.”

Celia stood, eager now to be away from Ganesh. "I'll see what I can do, Captain. But I'll make no promises. These two individuals are my patients, and I'm not sure I'm comfortable betraying their trust."

"If the UMEs are plotting any kind of insurgence, Doctor, your loyalty lies with the staff and governing body of Gavrel." Ganesh's voice hardened, and his brows dipped low over his eyes. "Don't forget what species *you* are."

"I'm a doctor, Captain. That's the only 'species' that matters to me." Celia didn't wait for a response. She turned on her heel and strolled out of David's department without a backward glance. She fumed all the way back to Med Lab.

She found Del still asleep in his cot, muscular arms at his sides, his bare chest rising and falling rhythmically. With the privacy curtain gathered in her hand, Celia stilled, captured by his physical perfection. Beneath the thin thermal sheet, every bulge of his abs, his thighs and even the semirigid outline of his cock was visible. Celia's pulse quickened, but she couldn't force herself to look away. Once again her nipples peaked and her pussy dampened at the illicit thought of his touch. She imagined peeling off her uniform and straddling him, then working her aching pussy down over his erection.

How many times had she dreamed of sex with one of his kind, in the water or out, staring into deep-hued eyes while strong hands caressed her wet skin? Constantly battling with the ocean's currents made the UMEs much stronger than humans, and all that power wrapped in cool, sleek skin excited Celia beyond measure. Everything about them fascinated her, which was why she'd chosen to work with them when the opportunity arose.

As she watched Del sleep, she toyed with the idea of betraying Ganesh's confidence and asking him point blank if he knew anything about sabotage to the intake mesh. After all, why shouldn't a species separate from humanity by only a few DNA sequences be allowed to develop a theology and a politics of their own?

Perhaps mutiny could be avoided, but the growing pains of evolution could not, and maybe Del's people could be spared a terrible disappointment if someone stopped them now from elevating humans to godhood.

Del's long lashes fluttered then, and he awoke as if he'd sensed her presence. Celia's skin tingled beneath her uniform when his sleepy gaze swept over her body. "Doctor Weston?"

"I was just making rounds. I didn't mean to wake you." She tamped down the tremor in her voice and kept her eyes on his, refusing to let her gaze wander the landscape of his magnificent body. Warmth pooled in her pussy and her clit began to ache a bit. Celia pressed her thighs together and tightened her grip on the curtain.

Keeping the thermal blanket anchored at his waist, Del swung his legs over the edge of the cot and sat up. "The skin around my wound feels tight," he said. "Is that customary?"

"Uh...yes." Celia blinked, forcing herself to focus on reality. She dropped the curtain and moved toward the cot, acutely self-conscious of the sensation of her clothing rubbing against her skin.

According to his medical record, Del had never been injured or ill before. His last visit to Med Lab had been a standard physical a year ago, several months before Celia had been assigned to her post. Naturally he wouldn't know what to expect from the healing process. Pushing aside any other thoughts, she stepped forward and bent to examine his stitches.

His breath quickened when she touched him and the sculpted muscles of his abdomen tensed. Fine, silvery hairs on his arms and the backs of his hands rose at her touch. UMEs weren't prone to gooseflesh because of their acclimation to cold water, but their bodies responded to excitement, arousal, fear and pain in other ways.

"Am I hurting you?" she asked. Her throat had gone bone dry.

"No." He hesitated after the reply as if he had more to say.

Celia glanced up at him. "Everything looks fine. Your people heal faster than humans, so you'll experience a little more discomfort as your skin knits back together, but this isn't unusual at all."

Though he nodded his understanding, his deep blue eyes still held a question. "Is there anything else bothering you, Del?" Celia's heart raced. Did he suspect sabotage too?

For a second, she felt as though he were staring into her soul, trying to communicate with her on a deeper level than speech. She'd long suspected the UMEs could converse with one another telepathically even though BioCon hadn't designed them thus, because they rarely used the hand signs taught to them by their trainers for underwater communication. Del's piercing stare held a message of some kind, but Celia couldn't decipher it.

The disconcerting moment passed too quickly, and Celia stepped back. "Let me get some analgesic cream to put around your stitches," she said, then whirled away and busied herself in a nearby supply cabinet. The sound of her patient shifting his weight on the cot reached her, and she prayed he'd keep the sheet covering his lower half because right now she didn't trust herself to look anywhere but at his cock.

To her relief, he'd retrieved the lower half of his enviro suit and was fastening the garment at his waist when she finally turned around. The insulated neoprene effectively camouflaged the bulge between his legs beneath an inset protective codpiece.

Celia allowed herself to relax a bit. "Are you more comfortable that way?"

"No. Actually we prefer being naked, but you seemed uncomfortable before when I disrobed."

Celia gave a light, nervous laugh. "I'm a doctor. I've seen all kinds of bodies. Nudity doesn't make me uncomfortable." Even now, it wasn't nudity that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up or her clit tingle, it was her own reaction to Del's

nearness that had her stomach in knots and her panties damp beneath her uniform leggings.

"Humans prefer us clothed. Even though we rarely see other inhabitants of the station, we're advised to remain in our suits at all times except when in our private quarters."

Celia opened the tube of pain-relieving ointment with shaking fingers and began to apply the thick cream to Del's skin. He sighed at the soothing touch, and she had to bite her lip to keep from making a similar sound. "Our society still considers public nudity to be improper."

"Do humans find their uniforms comfortable?"

"Yes, I think most of us prefer to have uniforms or some type of clothing on in the presence of others, except in intimate circumstances."

"Intimate meaning only two at a time?" Again one corner of his mouth rose. Was he baiting her? Was he enjoying the fact that her hand trembled while applying the cream to his skin?

"Uh, well, in some cases. I just mean, with others that we know best." Gratefully, Celia completed her task and capped the tube. "How's that?"

"Better," he said, stretching the arm on his injured side corded muscles rippled, and Celia bit the inside of her cheek to hide her reaction. "Do intimate circumstances make you uncomfortable, Doctor?"

"What? No. Of course not."

"Then why did you seem startled when I was undressed?"

"I wasn't." Celia backed up again. She realized she'd been standing between his spread thighs, her hip bumping against his leg.

"Forgive me, then. My assumption was wrong."

"Don't apologize. I appreciate your concern for my comfort, but it's not necessary. I'm going back to my quarters now. If you need anything, press the call button and my colleague, Dr. Vanatu, will assist you."

Some nameless emotion darkened Del's eyes. Disappointment, perhaps? He bowed his head. His thick golden hair obscured his expression, but he sounded contrite. "Good night, then, Doctor."

"Good night, Del. Sleep well."

Celia practically raced back to her quarters after leaving Med Lab. She hit the door controls three times, which did nothing to make it slide closed any faster. Once sealed inside her small, private room, she let out a long, exasperated sigh.

She had never, in fifteen years as a practicing physician, ever indulged in an attraction to a patient, let alone one who was considered nonhuman. Despite her best efforts, she couldn't get images of Del out of her mind. During their conversation about intimacy, she'd been imagining his hands riding over her skin, pushing the tight sleeves of her uniform off her shoulders. She pictured him lowering his mouth to her breast and suckling the distended nipple while he slid one of his long, slender fingers deep into her aching pussy.

Desire practically doubled her over. She tore off her shirt and slid out of her pants, desperate to be free of the constricting fabric. She pulled off her flimsy undershirt and threw herself across the bed on her stomach so she could reach into the storage drawer beside her bed where she kept her toys. Her fingers closed around the pale blue cylinder she kept there and nerve endings all over her body sparked in anticipation as she pulled the dildo out of its hiding place and lay back against her pillows.

She let her mind go blank, forced it to actually. This was no time for logical thoughts. Trembling, she slithered out of her panties and activated the vibrating device. The low-pitched hum it gave off was enough to get her started. Her clit pulsed, and her nipples rose to high, hard peaks that begged for a man's rough touch.

That desire would go unsatisfied this time. She needed release more than anything. Moaning, she spread her legs and guided the smooth, rounded tip of the dildo toward her clit.

One touch and her body stiffened. She'd conditioned herself well. Since BioCon discouraged personal entanglements among its staff, Celia had trained herself to get off without a partner. She had it down to a science—one minute to orgasm, the very definition of instant gratification.

That didn't leave much time for her raging fantasies, so tonight she deliberately slowed her movements. She teased herself with the tip of the device, then squeezed her sweat-dampened thighs shut around her pulsing clit.

Del. His image flashed in her mind again, and her body tensed. Her flesh pebbled at the forbidden thought of him kneeling between her legs and guiding that magnificently long cock of his inside her.

Hadn't he been aroused too during their conversation? Or was his cock always partially erect? It seemed bigger than most she'd seen, certainly longer. She wondered if he had a female partner. BioCon knew the UMEs formed sexual liaisons. Though both sexes were surgically sterilized, they retained normal human hormone levels and sex drives. They fucked.

Who had Del fucked? One female? A dozen? How skilled was he at the art of making love?

Celia would never know, dammit.

Her naughty musings spilled over into the beginnings of an orgasm as she continued to tease herself with the smooth tip of the dildo. Would he be a gentle lover or a beast? How many times could he make her come with all those well-conditioned muscles controlling his erection? On that thought, she slid the device lower and plunged the tip inside her spasming pussy. Every nerve ending in her body screamed her sudden and violent release and she shuddered while her inner muscles contracted

hard around the cool, smooth shaft. The vibrations sent electric waves cascading through her spine, harder and faster until she arched her back and cried out.

After a moment's pure bliss, she relaxed. She switched off the dildo and tossed it across the bed, then threw her head back against the pillows. Del. How could he do this to her? She barely knew him.

In two days he'd be gone. He'd disappear back into the depths of Gavrel's ocean and she'd probably not see him again until his next scheduled physical, which she'd be wise to assign to Dr. Vanatu. For the next thirty-six hours, though, she needed to find an acceptable outlet for her sexual energy.

Maybe a longer, thicker dildo would do the trick, or a meaningless dalliance with that patrol pilot she'd met last month. Anything. She'd do anything to get over this insatiable desire to have Del Mar's long, hard cock inside her.

Chapter Three

Pela watched Celia prepare for their first dive. Her jewel-blue eyes followed every movement as Celia pulled wide, angular flippers over her toes and adjusted the compact breathing apparatus that fit over her nose and mouth.

"I wish I didn't need this," Celia said, lifting the breather away from her lips so she could smile. "I envy you being able to breathe underwater on your own. Remember, I won't be able to speak when we're below, so I need to use hand signals if I want to tell you anything."

Pela transferred her gaze to the shimmering surface of the moon pool. Her bare feet hung over the edge, dangling in the crystal clear water. Apprehension clouded her expression and her gill slits flared. "Will they like me?"

Celia paused in the middle of adjusting her breather. She'd acclimated four UMEs to the ocean so far, and Pela was the first to ask such a question. "They will welcome you. I'm told, among the UMEs, a new arrival is a cause for celebration. You'll make friends quickly, and everyone will help you settle in to your duties."

Despite her reassuring words, Celia empathized with Pela. Only twelve months had passed since her "birth" from a clone incubator at BioCon headquarters. Now she was expected to blend seamlessly into a society vastly different from the world of classrooms and medical labs where she'd spent all of her time. In twenty-four hours she'd be placed at her permanent post in the underwater environment where she'd spend the rest of her sixty-year life span serving the living ocean.

Emotion clogged Celia's throat for a second, and she patted Pela's webbed hand. "You're going to love it. It's so beautiful."

"I think I'm ready to go."

“Good.” Celia put her breather in place and dove into the pool. The muffled splash of Pela’s entry into the underwater realm followed a second later, and together they sailed into the vast blue expanse of Gavrel’s unique, man-made aquascape.

To Celia’s relief, Pela required no period of adjustment to water breathing. Her gills took over immediately and the full realization of her newfound freedom left her wide eyed with wonder. Acclimating back to air breathing would be more difficult, but fortunately she wouldn’t have to do that very often in the future.

Together they glided out away from the camouflaged structure that housed the offices and work stations of the ocean habitat, leaving the safety of the moon pool behind in favor of open water. Just a few yards out, the bottom dropped out of the world, giving the impression that the underwater sphere was infinite.

Celia concentrated on her own breathing. The view always made her lightheaded and secretly envious of her charges. This silent, slow-moving world was heaven to her, and the longer Celia remained submerged, the longer she wanted to stay.

Unable to speak, she signaled Pela to dive deeper toward a shelf of rock upon which the UME commander, Meydala, would meet the newest member of her aquatic family. So far, it appeared no one had arrived yet to greet Pela, so Celia motioned her to circle around for a bit and enjoy the scenery. She watched for signs of fatigue or discomfort as the girl moved, but for all intents and purposes, Pela would need no further medical follow-up for her surgery. Like the rest of her kind, she’d live a relatively long life free from disease and serious injury, Celia hoped.

After a few minutes of observation, Celia allowed herself to relax and enjoy her surroundings as well. The seascape would have taken her breath away had she not been wearing the breather.

Beneath the rock ledge, a huge reef grew from the ocean floor, forming a crescent which swept out toward the center of the dome. Schools of brilliantly colored fish moved in unison over it, rippling like gauzy, multicolored curtains in a lazy breeze.

Splashes of bright yellow, blue and lavender corals dotted the tips of the reef, and huge anemones—some large enough for a human swimmer to hide among their tentacles—swayed like hula dancers to the silent rhythm of the deceptively gentle currents.

Far below, two deep water dolphins, bred specifically to aid the UMEs by carrying supplies and equipment, sailed by, their long faces set in perpetual grins. Pela shifted to watch them, and once again an emotion akin to envy constricted Celia's chest.

By next week, Pela would be swimming with the aquatic mammals, using them to lead her to areas on the ocean floor that needed repair or maintenance. In a month, she'd be speaking their language, and she'd never have need to visit them in the Med Lab observation pool again when she could spend whole days, even weeks working in their company.

Movement at the rock ledge interrupted Celia's reverie and she angled down to follow Pela to her rendezvous. A tall, slender UME female had emerged from a hidden airlock in the rock. This well-disguised portal led to the sections of Gavrel's under-structure reserved for UMEs alone. Very few humans ventured there. Even Celia herself had never been invited to the deep chambers beneath the ocean floor.

Though she'd never seen her outside of the water, Celia instantly recognized Meydala, the highest ranking UME. Her numeric designation was 071. Not the oldest of the aquatic humanoids, but rumor had it she was the wisest and most forceful of them.

Silver blonde hair trailed behind her sinuous body like a veil, contrasting with her dark enviro-suit. She moved with exquisite grace and visible determination, and she held her arms out to Pela like a mother welcoming a long-absent child.

Tears stung Celia's eyes at the image. To be greeted like that anywhere had been her fantasy since adolescence when her own family had cast her out.

Careful to avoid screwing up her breather, Celia reined in her traitorous emotions and joined the females on the rock ledge. She slipped her feet into two of the dozens of

small straps anchored to the rock so the current wouldn't "blow" her off the ledge, and she signaled a greeting to Meydala.

The UME commander nodded regally in response. Unencumbered by a breather, she could speak aloud under water. Her voice sounded like that of the dolphins, but Celia could still make out English words among the high pitched squeaks. "Welcome, our daughter. How are you named, young one?"

Celia clamped her lips closed over the breather and focused her gaze on Pela. Names were important to the UMEs, whether BioCon liked to acknowledge them or not.

"I am called Pela. I am to work in the hatcheries."

"Where you are most needed, daughter."

Celia slid a hand over her belly and tried not to sniffle into her breather. Though her voice didn't convey it, the love Meydala had for her fellow UMEs shown in her dark blue eyes. Like Pela, Meydala was sterile. She'd never bear a child of her own, but she cared for each of her people as dearly as if she had mothered them all.

"Doctor, I know your time underwater must be short, but would you care to accompany us to Pela's post? We get few visitors to the fish hatcheries and they're quite impressive to see."

Celia's heart leaped at the invitation. Any time spent below made her feel somehow more alive. To be invited deeper into the ocean realm by Meydala herself was an unprecedented honor. She signaled her acceptance, then frowned at her feet, which seemed sluggish and stuck in the anchor straps.

With great care, Celia worked at pulling one of her flippers, then the other out of the straps. Her knees seemed rubbery, and each movement taxed her until she was panting so heavily into her breather that her exhalation bubbles nearly obscured her vision.

Her head spun, and vaguely at the back of her muddled brain, she registered the problem. Her oxygen mix must be off. But she'd double—no triple-checked it. Hadn't she?

Silver bubbles swirled around her and Meydala's high-pitched voice assaulted her ears, but the words didn't make sense.

Panicked, Celia struck out away from the rock ledge, arms and legs flailing, certain she could guide herself back to Med Lab if she could just keep moving. She swam through bands of light and dark, slipping through the grasp of unfamiliar hands until the shimmering disc of the moon pool became visible above her. One more upward thrust and she'd be breathing pure air again, but instead of gliding toward salvation, Celia's suddenly heavy body began to sink.

She fought it, battled the phantom current that pulled her down into darkness, but her limbs gave out, her breath stilled in her lungs and she drifted away into nothing.

* * * * *

Consciousness flooded back into Celia's brain at the same time oxygen filled her lungs. She coughed hard, expelling salty water from her mouth and nose and gulped air down her burning throat.

Sparks exploded in front of her eyes and cool hands snaked beneath her upper back, supporting her as she struggled to sit up.

"Doctor, you must breathe. Don't just swallow the air." The familiar voice sent a shock wave through her body—her mostly naked body—and she gasped again.

Del cradled her against his chest. Cupping her chin in one hand, he forced her head up to ease the pressure on her throat, allowing her to breathe a little easier.

"Wha...hap—"

"I don't know. I heard a noise, and I came in and found you floating in the moon pool without your breather. I..."

"You stripped me?" She wore only the bottom half of her enviro-suit. The upper vest lay on the floor beside her, and the dull ache in her sternum told her Del must have administered CPR. Had he put his lips over hers too, to breathe air into her tortured lungs?

She refused to consider that now. She struggled from his grasp and reached for her vest. Shivering, she held the rubbery material against her breasts, hoping to hide her erect nipples from his view.

Del knelt beside her, concern clouding his eyes. Her heart thundered in her ears. Shame and arousal battled for control of her brain while somewhere deep in her psyche logic demanded an explanation for what had happened to her.

Two shapes burst up through the churning surface of the moon pool then, and Celia jumped, practically landing in Del's arms. Pela and Meydala, moving in perfect sync, vaulted up on the metal grating beside the pool, sleek and graceful as dolphins.

"Doctor Weston, thank the ocean you're alive." Meydala's above-water voice was rich and melodic, nothing like the squeals she produced underwater. She reached a webbed hand out to touch Celia's shoulder. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Uh..." Celia's gaze bounced from one set of sapphire eyes to another, finally landing on Del's. She clutched her vest like a shield before her and struggled to take a calming breath. "My oxygen mix seemed to be off. I panicked."

"Yes. We tried to restrain you and take you to safety below, but you fought us and broke away. When you tore your breather off, I feared you would drown."

"She did." Del's reply made her shiver. "The doctor wasn't breathing when I pulled her out of the water."

Concern creased Meydala's pale brow. "Thank the ocean you were here to help her, Del Mar. Pela and I followed as quickly as we could, but we would have arrived too late to save her."

The regal female rose to her full height, a willowy six feet, and crossed the room to the communications pad set into the wall. "I'm going to alert Gavrel Medical, Doctor. You should be seen in the Station infirmary right away."

"No, I'm fine. I'll be fine." Embarrassment heated Celia's cheeks. She should have been more careful. In ten years of diving for work and for pleasure she'd never screwed up her mix this badly. "If one of you could just find my breather, I'd like to take a look at what I did wrong."

"I will!" Pela dove back into the water without question, her sleek form fading into the blue expanse almost instantly.

Del and Meydala exchanged a glance. "You should be seen by a physician," he said.

Celia sighed. The effort to breathe out taxed her lungs, and she coughed violently, effectively destroying her argument that she didn't require medical attention. Meydala made the call, and Del lifted gentle fingers to brush an errant strand of hair from where it had plastered to her cheek. The gesture left her body tingling and her heart racing. The intimacy of it stunned her.

"Someone is on the way to help you, Doctor." Meydala's announcement broke the moment, and Del pulled his hand away. "I would stay, but I'm needed below. Del Mar, will you care for her until the physicians arrive?"

"I will."

"I don't need...caring for." The blatant lie stuck in Celia's throat. She needed nothing more in fact, craved it, but the life she'd chosen seemed to preclude it. She'd learned long ago how to take care of herself.

"I will help Pela complete her task. Be well, Doctor Weston." With that, Meydala left, slipping silently into the pool.

Del captured Celia with that piercing stare of his, and again her breath caught. "You don't have to worry about me, Del. I'll be fine."

"I've been charged by the Queen of the Ley to care for you. That is my purpose now," he said, and without warning or permission, he scooped her up from the wet floor and carried her to a cot.

* * * * *

Gavrel Medical bustled. A city within the sovereign nation of Gavrel, the medical facility took up nearly half of one of the station's five residential domes and served close to six thousand of Gavrel's eight million inhabitants and visitors on any given day.

Celia's physician, Dr. Shania Langdon, had pronounced her fit for duty on the condition she agreed to remain in the emergency ward for twelve hours of rest and observation.

The observation part was easy. Thus far no less than a dozen members of GM staff had wandered in to check on her, poke, prod, gawk at or converse with her. One intern even stopped in just to tell her a joke. She felt like an exhibit at the zoo.

It was the "rest" part of Dr. Langdon's prescription that Celia couldn't manage. In addition to the constant interruptions, her head swam with thoughts of Del and the words he'd said to her before turning her over to the GM trauma team.

The Queen of the Ley had charged him with her care. The queen. Did the UMEs think of Meydala as their sovereign? That hinted at a much more developed societal structure than Celia would have ever guessed. Royalty. Undisputed rule. If the UMEs had indeed chosen a queen, why would they be considering worship of humans? It seemed unnecessary.

This meant they'd apparently given their race a name as well. Did Captain Ganesh have any idea? Or David, who worked so closely with them?

Celia considered mentioning this to either of the men, then dismissed the notion the moment a familiar, dark-haired head appeared in the doorway of her room.

"News travels fast underwater, I gather." She tried to smile but her attempt at levity fell flat. The engineer only scowled.

"This is getting out of hand," he said.

"What? David, I'm fine. I must have screwed up my oxygen mix, and I got the willies."

"Drowning is a little more serious than getting the willies, Celia. You had to be revived."

"Yes, by Del. If the UMEs were out to get me, or any human, why would he have saved my life?"

"I don't know, but I'm not ruling out attempted murder. Ganesh has a team searching for your breather right now. We're going to find out exactly what happened to you down there."

"A team? Pela said she'd find it for me."

"You mean 976? You trusted one of them to bring back a vital piece of evidence?"

Celia narrowed her eyes at Kyoto. This wasn't like him at all. Normally guileless and easy-going, the engineer rarely if ever had a bad word to say about anyone. Now he seemed to be condemning a whole species based on two unusual but far from unprecedented accidents.

"I wasn't thinking of it as *evidence* at the time, in fact. I was too busy worrying about breathing."

David swiped a hand over his face, and his features softened. "God, Celia. I'm sorry. This whole thing has me insane. How are you?"

"I'll be fine. No surprises in my test results. I overdosed on carbon monoxide and lost my head. No permanent side effects."

"You were damn lucky."

She thought of Del's strong arms lifting her from the floor of Med Lab. "Yes, I was."

"I've got to get back to work." David sighed. He paced the small patch of open floor at the foot of Celia's bed for a moment. "Will you be okay here? Is there anything I can get you?"

Celia gave him a rueful grin. "Yeah, a little peace and quiet would be nice. I've been underwater too long. All this noise and babbling makes me jumpy."

Finally David cracked a smile. "Sorry, I can't help with that."

"How about a mirror? I have this terrible feeling I look like someone tried to flush me down the lav."

Now he laughed. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"Oh no. Is it really that bad?"

"Here." He handed her a hand mirror from the adjacent bathroom, and Celia winced at her reflection.

"Worse than I thought." Her damp brown hair stuck out all over head in unruly spikes, and dark circles of fatigue seemed to drag her hazel eyes down toward her cheekbones. She pouted at the terrifying visage staring back at her. "I need a lot more help than I thought."

David patted her leg through the thin blanket. "Give yourself a break. You were dead, after all."

"*Were* being the operative word."

"Get some rest. I'm no medic, but I predict you'll look a lot better in the morning. I'll be in touch if I hear anything about the breather."

"Okay. And, David?"

Kyoto swung back into her room, his expression expectant. "Yeah?"

"Don't assume anything about the UMEs. We don't really know much about them, but that doesn't mean they're guilty."

He held her gaze for a moment, and his dark eyes softened. He nodded and disappeared, leaving Celia to hope he would take her advice.

* * * * *

Twelve hours in Gavrel Medical dragged by, leaving Celia even more exhausted, but rather than return to her quarters as Dr. Langdon instructed, her professional instincts led her back to her Med Lab.

The thought of seeing Del again left her knees weak, but she chalked the odd feeling up to hero worship. He'd saved her, after all—dragged her lifeless body from the pool and breathed air into her lungs, massaged her heart back to beating and held her while she expelled death. She owed him, if nothing else, at least her heartfelt gratitude.

She found him sitting in a low-slung chair across from his cot, head bent over a portable reader that rested on his thigh. He set the reader aside and looked up immediately as if he'd sensed her silent arrival. "Doctor."

"Celia. Call me Celia, please, Del. How are you?"

"I'm well. You, however—"

She held up a hand. "I know. I look awful. I'm on my way to rest, but I wanted to check on you and thank you for what you did yesterday. I believe I'm the one owing *you* a great debt now."

He bowed his head, and Celia resisted the desire to lay her hands on his golden hair. "My purpose is to serve," he said, and her heart clenched. She remembered what he'd said about Meydala.

"Who do you serve, Del? Your queen?"

"Yes, we all serve the queen."

"So there's a political structure among your people. You call yourselves the Ley now, not UMEs."

His chest heaved, and a long sigh escaped him. "UME is our designation. Ley is what we are."

"I understand. It's just surprising."

"Why? Because our creators had not intended us to be more than workers?"

Shame heated Celia's cheeks at his sharp tone. Clearly he counted her among these "creators". "No. I'm surprised because your society is so young. The first UME was cloned only thirty years ago, and now you have royalty, and from what I hear, a religion as well."

"Religion is a collection of rites and rituals used in worship of a higher being." Celia raised a brow at his textbook definition, and he continued. "We have a belief."

"That humans are your gods?"

His upper lip curled and he rose from the chair. "No. We believe the ocean is our mother. We are born in water, as are humans. We live in water, and we die in water. The ocean is our God and we serve it above all else."

Celia frowned. How could Ganesh have gotten this wrong? "Not humans?"

Del narrowed his eyes. "You were created by humans, correct?"

"I was conceived and born to humans, yes."

"Are your creators gods to you?"

"My parents?" Hardly. There was nothing godly about casting out a teenaged daughter because she fell in love with the wrong boy. "No."

"We come from human eggs and human sperm, so we are told. We grow in machines that approximate the environment of a human womb, but none of that is as a god to us."

"But the water, the ocean, is?"

"The ocean lives. Many souls, one body. Movement, breath, life, death all in one place. A superior being. A god."

Celia lowered herself to the chair Del had vacated. The beliefs of the Ley possessed a stark beauty, a perfection of logic that touched her deeply. "Do all your people believe this way?"

"Of course. It is clear to see. None of us disputes it."

"Del, Gavrel Security believes there might be unrest among the Ley and that the broken intake mesh might have been sabotage designed to hurt Dr. Kyoto. Do you believe that?"

"Do you?" The question rumbled from his chest like a growl.

"I don't. Would you be willing to talk to someone from Security and tell them what you just told me?"

He stepped forward and knelt before her. Celia's heart lurched when he raised a hand, as if considering placing his palm on her thigh. She braced for his touch, longed for it, but instead he rested his fingers on the arm of the chair. "Dr. Weston—Celia—I would do anything you asked of me."

She drew in a shaky breath. So many responses swirled through her brain. In a few hours he'd no longer be under her care and then it might not matter so much if she indulged her own personal needs.

God yes, it would matter. Could she live with herself if she gave in to this insatiable craving to have him touch her? She placed her own hand over his and traced the corded tendons visible beneath his warm skin. He drew in a quick breath at the featherlight touch. "I still feel your hands on me." The words slipped out unbidden, and Dr. Celia Weston would have given anything to take them back, but the Celia who had died today, who had lain beneath Del while he pounded life back into her chest, wanted much more. She needed acknowledgement from him, a moment of connection she wouldn't dare seek anywhere else.

He said nothing, but something in his eyes held her immobile while he slipped his hand from under hers. He leaned back on his heels, and Celia feared he was about to stand, to walk away and leave her to wallow in the shame of this forbidden desire.

Instead he placed a palm on each of her knees and drew her legs gently apart.

Even fully clothed, the move made her feel completely exposed to him. Her breath came in short gasps as he shifted to kneel between her thighs.

With his gaze locked on hers, he reached up to the fastening of the sleeveless shirt she'd been given at Gavrel Medical. Her body stilled as he slowly parted the garment down to her navel. Warm tingles raced up and down her spine and shot through her belly. Her clit began to pulse insistently, and her nipples hardened to diamond points that scraped against the fabric when he slid one hand inside.

Celia's head swam, and the skin at her nape prickled when Del ran cool fingertips over the faint bruise on her breastbone. Dr. Langdon had told her she was lucky his efforts to revive her hadn't broken any bones. Many recipients of lifesaving CPR suffered cracked ribs at the very least after such an ordeal, but Celia bore only the slightest imprint of Del's large hand on the delicate skin between her breasts.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

She swallowed hard. "O...only when I breathe." She would have laughed, but the intensity of his stare stole her will. He parted her shirt, further exposing her breasts. The cool air hit her aching nipples, and they tightened to dusky rosettes. If he'd only touch her there, she'd come, and she wanted so desperately to come.

"I was afraid to injure you. Your body seems so fragile and delicate." He brushed his knuckles across the underside of her breast, and Celia moaned.

Where would this lead? Could she ask him to fuck her and give flesh to all her fantasies? Was her brain still muddled from oxygen deprivation?

"In some ancient human societies, saving someone's life makes you responsible for them. They become yours to care for." Why had she said that? She had no right to place the burden of her life in his hands.

"Mine." He whispered the word and ran a finger down the center of her chest toward her belly. Once there, he lifted the waistband of her leggings just enough to watch her abdominals clench. "You are mine to possess then?"

Celia remained mute, watching his eyes darken as he slipped a hand into her pants and brushed his fingers over the fine hairs of her mound.

"Mine to command?"

She wanted to nod, to scream yes, to kneel before him and beg him to do anything he wanted to her.

With his eyes on hers he slid her pants down. Mindless obedience led Celia to lift her hips from the chair and allow him to strip her naked from the waist down.

"Mine to own?"

"Yes." She hissed the word. At this moment, she was nothing at all but his possession.

He smiled and lowered his head between her legs. Celia moaned, a questioning sound of surrender, when he parted her pussy lips with his thumbs. His warm breath across her weeping flesh set her whole body shaking. He flicked his tongue over the hidden nub of her clit and blinding need arced through every cell of her body. A shudder of wicked sensation swept up from her toes and left her skin taut and her muscles primed for release.

"Del—"

"Are you not mine to do with as I please now?" he asked. "Have you not given yourself to me?"

She only nodded. What had she done? Did he believe she meant for him to take her, to enslave her like this because he'd saved her life? Hadn't this been the dark dream she'd always harbored since the moment she laid eyes on the first male UME she'd ever seen?

"You said you would do anything I asked of you." She panted the words while her body arched toward him.

"I will." He regarded her from under lowered brows. "Ask."

"Fuck me." Oh God. She could never take those words back. *Please let this all be a dream.*

"Is that what you want of me, Celia?"

"Yes—no. No, we can't, Del. We shouldn't."

He nodded and lowered his head again. "Then this will suffice for now."

He thrust his tongue against her clit and Celia screamed. She grabbed his hair, burrowed her trembling fingers in the silk of it and pulled his face against her pussy.

One long, slow lick took him down the length of her intimate flesh to her opening and he stabbed his tongue inside.

Celia's body lit on fire. Every nerve ending burned, yet she shivered uncontrollably. Del snaked his hands beneath her ass and slid her hips to the edge of the chair, all the while impaling her with his tongue. In and out, hard and fast, slow and deep. She trembled on the verge of complete oblivion.

"Del, please..."

His response was another deep thrust. Hot flesh probed within her, licking her juices, lapping at her intimate folds. With quick, determined thrusts, he probed her slit, dragging her to the edge of reason until finally her body rocked with an orgasm that tore through her consciousness like a shuttle blasting out of space dock.

She panted and sobbed, gasped and groaned until he lifted his head from between her sweat-dampened thighs.

"Do you belong to me *now*?" he asked, guileless, his tone almost conversational.

She bobbed her head and wiped a weak hand over the tears streaming down her cheeks. "God, yes. I'm yours. You own me, Del. My God, you own me."

With only a brief nod of acknowledgment, he rose. "I must go. When I return, we'll find a place more private where I can do as you asked of me."

"No!" Celia bounded up from the chair on wobbly legs and clutched his arm to steady herself. "You can't leave. Your wound..."

"Will heal. The ocean water will not harm it."

"But Del—"

He waved off her protest and gently escaped from her grip. He slid his hand behind her neck, pulled her toward him and brushed his lips over the drying tear tracks on her cheek, then released her. "I will return," he said before sweeping out of the cubicle.

Celia scooped up her pants and ran after him, but by the time she'd shimmied back into the tight leggings and reached the moon pool, the crystal surface was utterly calm as if he'd passed into the ocean realm without so much as a ripple.

Chapter Four

Celia awoke in a cold sweat hours later. She'd fallen asleep in Del's empty cot, waiting for him like a love sickpuppy – too weak to follow him into the depths and too besotted to return to her quarters.

Her heart leapt at a sound from the outer lab. She stumbled out of bed and hurried into the adjacent chamber.

David Kyoto stood at the edge of the pool. His hair and uniform were dry. He'd obviously come in through the corridor rather than the water. Defeat laced his expression.

"What's wrong? Did something else happen?"

"Where's 314?"

"He—" Oh. What could she say? *He had to run off after giving me the most amazing orgasm of my life, but he'll be back soon to fuck me properly?* "He's swimming. He's healing so fast, I allowed him to—"

"You let him leave?" David whirled around and scanned the quiet pool through narrowed eyes. "How long has he been gone?"

"He's not a prisoner, David. There's no penalty for taking a swim."

"Ganesh just called me. His team found your breather, but the oxygen cartridge had been removed."

Celia cocked her head to one side. Impossible. "They must have made a mistake."

"Those things don't just fall out on their own, Celia. Someone took it out so no one could test the mix. Ganesh suspects there was something else in the formula that caused your accident."

"Wouldn't Dr. Langdon have found evidence of that in my blood tests?" Celia paced around David and ran her hands through her hair in exasperation. "I don't like to admit this, but the fact is, I was probably distracted when I was preparing my breather, and I punched in the wrong mix code." Distracted by thoughts of Del, obviously. It made sense. Since his arrival in Med Lab, Celia hadn't been able to think straight.

"He was alone here with the breathers, wasn't he? Have you checked any of the other cartridges?"

Celia stared David down. She refused to believe Del could have sabotaged her equipment. "He saved me, David. Why would he do that if he was the one who tried to kill me?"

David hunched his shoulders and shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't make sense, but we're human. Maybe the UMEs think differently."

"They do. I'm sure of that. I found out about their religion." Maybe she should have kept her mouth shut, but it was too late to take back her confession. David eyed her expectantly.

"They worship the sea, not us. They think of the ocean as a being, a superior being. I have to say, I find that a huge relief."

David's shoulders sagged. "He told you that?"

"Yes, he did. I asked him, point blank, and that's what he told me."

"Do you believe it?"

"Does it matter what I believe? If Ganesh is out to prove the UMEs want to hurt us, he'll find a way to do it."

David chewed his lower lip and glanced at the pool again. "I'm going to look for 314 and bring him back here. When Ganesh shows up, you don't want to have to explain why you let him go."

Celia rested her hands on her hips. "I have nothing to hide. I'll tell him the truth. Del is well enough to swim, so I let him. He'll be back soon for a final check up and then

I'll release him back to active duty. I don't want to be involved with Ganesh's witch hunt."

David let out a slow breath and stalked toward the outer door of the lab. "You may not have a choice, Celia. Just make sure Ganesh understands whose side you're on or he'll make things very difficult for you as well as the UMEs."

Rage boiled through Celia in David's wake. After he left, she cast around, looking for something to throw, any outlet for her anger, but her desire not to break any expensive equipment won out over her frustration. Instead she cursed, long and loud, until her voice echoed back at her off the metal bulkheads.

Exhaustion overtook her when she finished her rant and she sank to the metal grate, cross-legged, to stare at the still surface of the pool.

One thing David had said was true. Oxygen cartridges didn't just fall out of the breathers. In her state of confusion, she might have torn the device off her face, but she certainly would not have possessed the coordination to remove the cartridge. Someone had taken it out, but who and why?

After a few deep breaths, she hauled herself to her feet and headed for the supply rack. Four breathers hung on their specialized hooks, each with standard mix cartridges attached.

To personalize a cartridge, a diver removed it from the breather, placed it in the fill slot of the gas atomizer and programmed in the proper mix based on anticipated length and depth of dive using the proper codes listed on a printout posted next to the controls. Some divers added medicated gases to their mix to control asthma, anxiety, claustrophobia or other conditions exacerbated by pressure and depth.

Normally Celia would have grabbed a premixed cartridge from the wall, but yesterday she'd exhausted her air supply in the dolphin observation tank before taking Pela for her dive, so she'd had to refill her cartridge. Rather than simply grabbing a fresh breather, she'd popped the cartridge in the slot. The ten digit code she used was easy to remember, but she could have certainly typed in the wrong one and accidentally

gotten a dose of aerosolized steroids or a mild sedative along with her oxygen. Though why none of that would have shown up in her blood work baffled her. Maybe the medical tests had been wrong.

From now on, she'd have Vanatu check her code, and if that meant not diving until her colleague was on duty, so be it.

After a quick check, she replaced all the breathers and turned to face the pool. A sleek, golden-haired form broke the surface of the water. Her heart dropped into her gut when Del hoisted himself up out of the churning water.

Her body hummed for his touch, but logic demanded she speak to him about David's news first before she asked him for anything else. "Del, we need —"

"You must leave." He raced across the room, his strides swift. The muscles in his thighs, visible through the tight lines of his enviro suit, bunched as he moved. He put his hands on her shoulders and once again her knees turned to rubber.

"What are you talking about?"

He pushed her toward the door, crowding her so she was forced to step back to keep from toppling over. "They're coming for you and I can't stop them."

"Who? Is it Ganesh? I'm not afraid of Gavrel Security."

He shushed her by clamping a hand over her mouth. "Celia, don't argue. Just listen. They are coming to take you below and I cannot stop them. Go now, to the upper levels or leave the ocean dome altogether and stay away as long as you can."

Angry and confused, she pried his now cold fingers from her lips. "What in hell are you —"

At that moment two more bodies erupted from the moon pool. The tall, muscular male UMEs resembled Del to a degree. They could have been his brothers, except their features were not quite as perfect or sensuous as his. Their sapphire eyes lit on Celia and Del turned, pushing her behind him. "Go now. They won't follow you to the upper levels."

"What's going on, Del? Who are these two?" The newcomers shot forward, steel cable muscles propelling them across the metal grate with lightning speed. Celia reared back and Del held up his hands as if to shield her from them.

"Arnav, leave the woman. This will not help us."

The lead male stopped, only inches from Del. His eyes smoldered and Celia stared at him, cowed by the anger in his expression.

"Are you going to defy Meydala's wishes, Del? We do this on her orders."

Meydala? What could she have to do with this intrusion?

"In time she will see that this will only increase our suffering in the end."

"What suffering? Del, what's happening?" The one he'd called Arnav reached around Del and gripped Celia's arm so tightly she winced. The other drew a long, bone white dagger from behind the belt of his enviro suit and brandished it at Del.

"We were instructed not to harm either of you, Del, but if you resist, we will have no choice. I can spill your blood or hers. Who will cooperate better if the other is injured?"

Del and the nameless one stared each other down and Arnav wrapped his arms around Celia. Finally, Del relented. His shoulders slumped, but he held his fellow UMEs with a look of such contempt it made Celia shudder. He turned his back on the intruders then and grabbed a breather from the wall. With deft fingers, he removed the cartridge and slipped it into the atomizer.

"Del, what are you doing?" Celia's blood pounded in her ears. Dear God, could Captain Ganesh have been right about him?

"Last time the mix was incorrect. I'm responsible for your accident and I beg your forgiveness. This time, you will sleep and wake up with no ill effects."

"Del!" Cold terror laced through Celia's limbs. She struggled against Arnav's viselike grip, but he only squeezed tighter until she began to have trouble breathing.

The other UME stepped back, tucked his blade away and made room for Del to stand in front of Celia.

"You should have run," Del said, regret thickening his voice. "I wanted you to be safe."

"Del, please, tell me what's going on." She writhed in Arnav's grasp, desperate to break free, to find answers and to locate the man who'd left her panting his name in ecstasy a few hours before.

Del replaced the newly refilled breather cartridge and fit the device over Celia's nose and mouth, effectively cutting off any more conversation on her part. Wide eyed, she glared at him, but he refused to meet her gaze.

"Just breathe deeply, Celia. I'll see that you are not harmed."

Celia held her breath in defiance. She couldn't resist for long, though. Del brushed his knuckles over her cheek. "I give you my word, your life is my responsibility and I will not allow anyone to hurt you."

With that, he placed a hand in the center of her chest. A deep rumbling vibration emanated from his body, through his arm and into her rib cage. The inner pressure on her lungs increased as though a two-ton weight were pressing on her heart. The sensation made it impossible for her to hold her breath, and finally, defeated and terrified, she gulped in huge amounts of the tainted air hissing into the faceplate of her breather.

Del dropped his arm and Celia sagged against her captor. Her body became steadily heavier until she could do nothing more than hang limp in Arnav's grasp. He and his companion lifted her and carried her to the moon pool.

Celia wanted to scream. She would have panicked but whatever sweet-smelling concoction flooded her lungs left her without the will to fight. She forced her tired eyes to follow Del, who slipped into the pool, then turned to help the others lower her into the water.

"If all goes well, Del Mar, perhaps you can petition the queen to allow you to impregnate this one. I hear human females are quite willing and well skilled when their legs are spread." Arnav chuckled as he adjusted his grip around Celia's waist.

Del glared over Celia's head, and the steel edge in his voice made her shiver. "Speak of Dr. Weston that way again, Arnav, and I will kill you in your sleep."

Celia had no doubt Del meant every word. She closed her eyes to block out the heartbreaking sight of him and blackness stole over her like a shroud.

Chapter Five

Consciousness returned slowly this time, bits and pieces of previous events cart-wheeling through Celia's mind until she struggled to open her eyes. Warm and dry, cocooned in thermal blankets, she lay on a small cot which had been pushed up against a cool metal bulkhead.

Beneath the blankets she wore only her shirt and panties. Someone had removed her leggings and replaced her light boots with a pair of comfortable neoprene slippers. Still groggy, she had to work at freeing herself from the layers of insulating fabric in order to sit up.

The dim, recessed lighting filtering down through a dense network of overhead pipes and wires revealed little about her surroundings. The room in which she'd been placed seemed rectangular and barren except for a pile of unused wall support struts stacked in a corner. The tan-painted walls sported smudges and scratches, along with the designation 4B in a swath of neon orange paint. Celia guessed this was one of the sublevels of the ocean dome that housed the turbines for the water intake pipes. She'd never been down this far before where the damp air pulsed with a sound just low enough on the audible register to be felt in her bones rather than heard.

Taken by the immensity of the space above her, Celia stared up into the gloom. When a drop of water sailed down from some unseen place above and splattered on her cheek, she gasped and wiped it away, then stared at her damp fingers.

"That happens sometimes," Del's voice rode over her, gripping her insides with a mixture of apprehension and longing. She lowered her gaze from the interconnecting maze, but didn't permit herself to look at him.

From the corner of her eye, she watched his shadowy form approach. He moved cautiously, deliberately nonthreatening. "The ocean leaks. We struggle to repair tiny

cracks in the deck every day, but eventually the structure will become so weak, the sea floor will collapse. These sublevels will flood and the aquascape will be completely destroyed. Millions of life forms will die and very likely the shift in weight in this dome will cause it to tear apart from the rest of the station. A hull breach of that magnitude will kill every living thing aboard Gavrel."

Celia shuddered at the thought. "Does Gavrel Central know about this? Can't they do something?"

Del laughed. Celia still refused to look at him. "They know. That's why we work two shifts every day, but we can't keep up with the structural decay for much longer. At most, we have a decade, but one day there will be a catastrophic break in the understructure and we will all die within hours. My people don't want to be here when that happens."

Finally Celia found the strength to draw her gaze up to his. He stood before her, tall and much more imposing than he'd seemed when she'd come against his mouth just a few hours ago. "What do you want from me? I can't help save the ocean."

"No one can save this ocean. Only draining the dome will spare the station, but that's not why you're here. We need you for another purpose."

"What then?" She permitted a hint of annoyance in her tone. If the Ley planned to use her for something, they damn well better get on with it.

Del held out his hand. "Come with me. I'll show you."

"Tell me first. If you're planning to hurt humans, I won't help you. You'll have to kill me because I won't cooperate."

Del's features softened, and once again he knelt before her. Celia flinched when he raised a hand to brush his fingertips over her cheek. "I'm so sorry about what happened in Med Lab. If I'd arrived earlier, I might have been able to convince you to run away, but now that you're here, I'm glad. If anyone has the intelligence and compassion to help us, it's you."

"You kidnapped me and now you expect compassion? I don't understand, Del. I won't do anything to help anyone until I get answers to all my questions."

Del rose and held out his hand again. "You said your life belongs to me. You're mine to command, and I'm telling you, your questions will be answered better by seeing than by listening."

Celia glared. She wanted to lash out, to find some way to punish him for touching her, for making her wish she truly did belong to him.

Unblinking, he held her gaze until finally, she rose from the cot. She expected dizziness and disorientation, but nothing happened. In fact, she felt perfectly fine. "You drugged me," she said.

"For that, I'm sorry. The original plan was for Meydala to bring you below yesterday, but I mishandled the oxygen mix. In truth, my life is yours as payment for my mistake. I'll regret hurting you for as long as I live."

Celia stared up at him. She should have been enraged by his confession. Instead she felt only confusion and a sense of frustration, coupled with the attraction she couldn't deny. "Del, if you had wanted me to come below, all any of you had to do was ask."

"We couldn't give you a reason. We weren't sure you would understand."

"But you figured I'd understand better if you dragged me down here by force? Oh forget it. It's done now. Just tell me what you needed so badly that you wouldn't just come to Med Lab and ask for it."

Del drew in a deep breath. "Our children are dying. Our healer cannot save them and we hoped—we prayed to the ocean mother—that a human physician could figure out what's wrong."

Celia's mouth dropped open. "Your children? The UMEs are sterile. How...?"

"Not all of us. Come. I'll show you."

Del took Celia's hand and pulled her along through a confusing series of dank, metal-walled rooms and corridors. The pulse of the intake engines grew louder and

Celia could have sworn her heart began to beat in sync with the bone-jarring vibration. She stared in wonder at the enormity of the ocean sub level.

When another errant drop of sea water landed on her arm, the seriousness of Del's earlier announcement hit home. Her lungs constricted in fear. What if the Ley had miscalculated and the lower deck cracked irreparably much sooner than they anticipated?

The weight of sixty square miles of ocean seemed to settle on her shoulders and she found herself hunching down a bit as she walked.

After what seemed like half an hour wending their way through the dark maze of corridors, Del finally slowed his pace. He turned to Celia and the emotion in his eyes staggered her. "If there is anything you can do to help, we beg you." He said nothing more, just led her into the adjacent room, a dimly lit space dominated by a collection of large, cylindrical tanks. Coiling tubes and wires connected the tanks to each other and to a computer console. Celia recognized the setup immediately even though she'd never seen it in person. This was one of the fish hatcheries. Instead of schools of young minnows or carp, or gardens of seaweed or algae, however, these tanks held bodies.

Celia lifted a cold hand to her mouth.

In each of the half-dozen tanks, suspended in bubbling liquid that seemed to be more than simple sea water, hung a small, pale-skinned humanoid child. None of them appeared more than five or six years old. Each had long, flowing blond or silvery hair, webbed fingers and toes and the brilliant sapphire eyes shared by all members of the Ley. They swam languidly as if the effort to keep their tiny bodies moving was too much for them.

Speechless, Celia followed Del to the nearest tank. The child inside, a girl judging by her delicate features, put a webbed hand up to the curved glass and smiled somewhat sadly at them.

Del put his hand up to hers and stared at her for a moment, during which it seemed apparent they were communicating somehow. Finally he broke eye-contact with the

child and turned to Celia. "Her name is Maren. She is the oldest of those afflicted. The illness affects their lungs and prevents them from comfortably breathing above water, so they must remain submerged. The medium in the tubes contains medicinal balms to ease their discomfort, but the condition worsens every day."

The little girl lifted her hand away from the glass and waved at Celia. Shock and amazement erupted from her in a startled sob. "My God, Del. How? The UMEs are sterilized before they even come to Gavrel."

"Nothing can be done about the females, but our healer, Bejorin, stumbled upon a method to reverse the procedure used in males, allowing us to mate with human women."

Celia's knees wobbled. "What human women?"

"There have been several females from the sublevels. Gavrel Central ignores the existence of those who dwell below decks. On occasion, our males have found mates from among this population."

Celia leaned heavily on the nearest computer console. Her mind reeled, rebelling against this revelation. "For how long?"

"The first of our children is Juria. She is fifteen years old and apparently healthy. This seems to affect only those born within the last seven years. They began falling ill a month ago and we lost our first—" His voice broke and Celia hunched over the console to combat a sudden pang of sympathy. "We lost the first four days ago. It was then that Meydala formulated a plan to bring a human physician below to help us."

Celia stared at him dumbfounded. "Why didn't you just ask? There are thousands of doctors at Gavrel Medical, any one of whom would have been eager to help."

"And have them take our children away from us? Possibly send them back to BioCon to be studied or destroyed? Meydala knows the truth from her time in the growing labs before she came here. BioCon intended to control our population, hence why we are numbered and not named. It was mandated that we not reproduce because BioCon feared we would overrun our environment and now, with the addition of our

children—seventeen of them in total and two more about to be born—we have done just that.”

Celia swiped a trembling hand over her face and glanced down the row of tanks. Her heart ached so badly the pain nearly doubled her over. What if she couldn’t help? “Del, let me call my colleagues. No one knows Ley physiology better than BioCon.”

“No. We cannot risk it.”

“At least Dr. Vanatu. She knows as much about Ley anatomy as I do, and maybe together we can—”

“No, Celia.” Del laid his hands over hers and stared into her eyes. “We cannot trust anyone else. Already Gavrel Security suspects dissention. If they discover our children, in this weakened state, we could not protect them. When the illness is cured, Meydala will go to Gavrel Central with a list of our demands.”

“Demands? For what?”

“A world of our own. A living ocean that will not die out before we do, the right to reproduce and to govern ourselves and the privilege to call ourselves Ley, a sovereign race to stand equal with humans, not below them.”

Something inside Celia drew up tight at his words. The Ley deserved all that, but could they achieve it?

The war with the alien Viliri had left the human race skittish and militant. Anything not fully human was considered something to fear and to hold at a distance, which was exactly why the UMEs were so carefully monitored. Their very potential to expand beyond their intended purpose made them both infinitely versatile and frightening to their creators.

She decided in that instant, she’d do anything to help them, but what would she be expected to sacrifice to give them what they deserved?

Celia drew herself up and met Del's hopeful gaze. "I'm going to need some equipment and I'll need to start by seeing blood samples from all of the children, even the ones who are not affected."

A genuine smile broke across Del's face and his obvious relief arrowed straight to Celia's heart. "We will give you any help we can."

"Good. Can I work here?"

"Anywhere you wish. I will tell Meydala. You'll want for nothing."

Hmm. If only that were true. "One more question, Del."

"Of course."

"Are any of the children yours?" She wasn't sure why it mattered to her, or why she feared an affirmative answer, but Celia held her breath until Del replied.

"No, they are not."

She nodded and turned her attention to the daunting task at hand.

Chapter Six

Time seemed suspended in the sublevels. The lighting remained dim but constant. The gentle churning of the liquid in the incubation tanks soothed Celia's nerves, and silent Ley females brought her several meals, fresh water, and a clean, comfortable enviro-suit to replace her thin shirt and damp leggings.

It might have been hours she worked, hunched over at the computer console, studying DNA and blood samples. It might have been days.

When her eyelids finally grew too heavy for her to hold them open any longer, Del's strong arms circled her and drew her up from the bench on which she sat.

"I'm not finished," she murmured as he guided her past the tanks where the afflicted children now slept, each curled at the bottom of their cylinders, their pale hair flowing in gentle currents around their tiny bodies.

"The problem will still be here after you have slept some."

"No, Del—"

"Do not argue. Remember, here I am your master, am I not? You are mine to command and I insist that you rest."

She would have argued, should have, but the possessive lilt in his voice when he said the word "mine" made her heart flutter. It may have been only meaningless teasing, but her body responded to it like a caress. She leaned against him as they walked, drawing strength from the heat of his body.

He led her past the cot in which she'd regained consciousness and down another series of interconnecting corridors so complex she would never have found her way out, even if she'd been wide awake and taking notes.

"These are my quarters," he said when they finally stopped before a narrow door in a dark corridor lined with dozens of similar portals. The number 314 had been partially scratched away from the dull orange surface, and in its place the letters DEL MAR had been written in a careful hand with wide strokes of black ink.

All the other doors bore similar markings, at least as far as Celia's blurry vision told her. The door in front of them slid open and he led her inside a small room, about half the size of her own. His narrow bed held only plain blankets and thin, functional pillows, but right now it looked like heaven.

"Sleep. I'll return after I've spoken to Dr. Kyoto."

"No, Del..." Celia grabbed his arm. "Stay away from David. He might turn you over to Gavrel Security."

"I said I would speak to him, not see him. Until Meydala's plan is complete, all the UMEs will remain in the lower levels, away from humans. Thanks to you, Celia, everything will change now. Starting today, the Ley will begin to enjoy some of the power we've been working to attain."

Celia crawled into the bed, too tired to process Del's words. Vaguely, as he drifted off, she realized she'd stumbled into a revolution. Not only had she been conscripted to the opposing side, she'd been stationed on the front lines.

Celia dreamed of blood cells and protein chains and curtains of luminous bubbles through which sad blue eyes stared at her. She woke sobbing. Who would help the Ley children if she couldn't?

She gasped when a warm hand caressed her bare arm and moved up to brush her hair away from her shoulders. "Del?"

"I'm back. All is well for now."

Celia settled back against the thin pillow and sighed. In the dim light of a small, glowing lamp next to the bed, Del's silhouette appeared huge and imposing. She shivered. "Did you talk to David?"

"Yes. He's angry at me and concerned about you. As Meydala predicted, our reassurances that you are safe are not enough. Gavrel Security has been alerted and they have threatened to arrest all of the Ley and remove us from the ocean if you or any other humans are harmed."

Celia curled herself up to a sitting position. "You said all was well."

"It is as we expected. I'm sorry that you have to serve as a hostage, Celia."

She sat forward, wrapping her arms around her middle. "But I'm not. You tell David and Captain Ganesh that I'm here of my own free will, and I wouldn't leave even if I could."

"I cannot. Meydala will not permit that. With you as a prisoner who might come to harm if they attack us, we have power and leverage. With you as merely our honored guest, we show a weakness they can exploit."

"Oh, Del. This isn't going to work out the way you planned. Someone is going to get hurt."

"Perhaps, but you have my word it will not be you."

Celia wished she could believe that. She had no doubt Ganesh would do anything necessary to put down this rebellion, and when word reached BioCon, the consequences would be staggering. The UME program would likely be shut down permanently and the future of Gavrel's ocean would become even more precarious.

"If you let me talk to them, maybe I could —"

"No." He placed a finger across her lips. "You must play the part of a prisoner and do as your captors command you." The corner of his lip rose in what she'd come to recognize as the equivalent of a playful smirk. Something in her belly fluttered.

"And what will you tell me to do now?"

He ran his finger down her chin, along her neck to the hollow of her throat. There, he parted the fastening of her suit vest and dipped his fingers inside to tease her already erect nipples. "I can think of several things I'd have you do. As my possession, I should command you to sleep longer. You're clearly exhausted."

Celia pouted. "I can't sleep. My insides are shaking. I had terrible dreams."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps I can soothe you."

Before Celia could ask how he planned to calm her nerves, he flattened his palm against her chest as he had back at Med Lab. For a second, she feared the terrible, lung-crushing pressure he'd exerted in order to force her to breathe in the medicated air, but this time the deep vibration which emanated from his chest and rumbled through his arm into her body caused no discomfort.

The butterflies in her belly settled and the anxiety that plagued her seemed to fade. "The effect is temporary," he said, proving the vibration came from somewhere other than his vocal chords. "But it will allow you to sleep."

Celia's muscles seemed to liquefy and she settled back against the pillow. "Hmm. That's nice. Thank you," she said when he finally lifted his hand.

"I'm not finished yet."

All the calming influence of his actions faded when he parted her vest and spread the soft neoprene aside. Her heart pounded and the skin around her tightened areolas pebbled in the cool air.

"Lie still," he commanded and Celia obeyed, though once again her body trembled with anticipation. She moaned when he slid the lower half of her suit off and removed her panties. Next he began to caress her thighs with lazy, determined strokes of his knuckles along her flesh.

Celia's body stiffened when he brushed the curls of her mound and burrowed one of his fingers among them to part her pussy lips. "Del—" She reached for him, but he shook his head.

"When you have more strength, I will complete the task you charged me with. For now, this will help you relax."

She would have laughed. There was nothing relaxing about lying naked before him. Every nerve in her body screamed and her heart thundered so hard she figured he had to be able to hear it.

"You taste like the ocean to me," he said after licking the finger he'd swiped over her clit.

She shuddered deliciously. Would he use his skillful tongue again? She bucked her hips toward him, an invitation, a plea.

Wet with his saliva, his finger glistened in the dim light. Celia gasped when he returned to his explorations, gently circling her clit with the moist tip, then finally breaching her defenses.

He parted her inner folds inch by inch in a gentle, even stroke and rubbed her clit with his thumb. The dual stimulation left her breathless and panting. She needed more. Much more. "Del, please. I'm ready..."

"No. Not yet. Mating with a Ley male is strenuous and takes quite some time. This will have to suffice for now."

He teased her with a half-thrust, a flick against her aching slit, then pushed two fingers deep inside her. Celia writhed against the intrusion which touched off the beginning of a desperate pressure within her.

She'd come if he thrust again. She'd come if he commanded her to. Closing her own trembling fingers over his hand, she boldly guided his movements. "Harder."

He obeyed her strangled whisper and pushed deep again and again. Celia cried out each time and braced the soles of her feet against the bed to help steady the movement of her hips.

"I feel you getting tighter," Del said. "I feel your release."

She nodded and squeezed her eyes shut. "Del, harder...please!"

"I know something better." Again the rumble issued from deep in his chest and traveled down his arm. The vibration began in her pussy and every raw nerve ending within her caught on fire. She groaned and clutched convulsively at the rumpled blanket beneath her.

It felt as if something huge were spreading her inside, as if his fingers had doubled or tripled in width. The fullness, coupled with the relentless vibrations in her womb, paralyzed her with indescribable pleasure. She bucked her hips up to take his intrusion deeper, reveling in the sensation of being filled to the limit.

When she finally caught her breath, she keened, and her orgasm tore through her so hard, so uncontrollable, that her body curled up and shook with the intensity of it. He mimicked the rhythm of her inner contractions, thrusting hard against her firm muscles and curling his fingers up to touch her G-spot. She shuddered and bit her lip, wishing she could stem the inevitable flow of tears that accompanied her impending release.

Finally Del stretched an arm out behind her, cradling her back and easing her down to the pillows. At the same time, he withdrew his fingers from her still spasming pussy. She ached for the emptiness, even though the waves of her climax still washed over her, pounding in time to her racing heartbeat.

After several moments in oblivion, she opened her eyes and managed to normalize her breathing. Del wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You cry when you come," he said.

Celia managed a tired laugh, suddenly self-conscious. "I've always done that. I can't control it. But Del, it's never been like that. What did you do to me?"

He gave her another of those priceless smiles. "I owned you," he replied.

Celia might have argued, might have agreed, but her body had reached the limit of exertion. Any response died on her lips as she drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

After the first truly restful sleep she'd had in days, Celia followed Del back to the incubation lab. She walked behind him this time, alternately trying to memorize the route, or at least orient herself with some landmarks, and admiring the play of muscles in his tight buttocks and naked back.

Below, the male UMEs wore only the bottom half of their enviro suits. The females wore only their vests and short versions of the uniform leggings that showed off their long, willowy bodies to best advantage. Compared to them, Celia felt short and stunted, but she tried not to dwell on the genetic differences between humans and UME.

She did take note of the various clone generations however. The earliest of the Ley, including the double digit clones such as Meydala and those numbering below two-hundred, had gills running from beneath their jaws down their rib cages. These sported the retractable dorsal fins designed by BioCon to make them faster swimmers. Unfortunately, after too many injuries to the delicate fins left many UMEs incapacitated, BioCon changed the DNA sequence. Those numbering above two-hundred-fifty, including Del and all those up to Pela, had more human characteristics than those of the earlier crèches.

Del had no dorsal fin and the webbing between his fingers and toes was minimal, yet he swam as efficiently as the earlier generations.

At first Celia thought this genetic difference might be the answer to the illness affecting the younger children, but she'd learned through researching their records that those suffering from the strange disease had been fathered by UMEs ranging in number from one-hundred-four to seven-hundred-thirty-two.

Of the handful of older children who were unaffected, two, including Juria, the only teenager, had been fathered by single digit crèche members and the rest by clones from the later series.

As they continued on toward the lab, Celia ran the numbers in her head again and wished for a scientific epiphany that would help her solve the life-threatening puzzle.

When they reached the incubation lab, a Ley male Celia hadn't seen before stood among the tanks. Pale, silvery hair hung down his back, partially obscuring the dorsal fin which lay folded against his spine. He touched two of the cylinders with his deeply webbed hand and Celia knew he was communicating with the children.

"Bejorin," Del said softly. This was the Ley healer whose conspicuous absence up until now had left Celia wondering why the Ley hadn't kidnapped a human physician sooner.

After a moment, Bejorin bowed his head and removed his hands from the tanks. The children inside hovered weakly, but their curious gazes still held mischief. They smiled at Celia and she waved to them as the healer turned to face her.

"I see Meydala has captured the human." His conversational tone belied the suspicion in his eyes and Celia tensed. Obviously Bejorin was not a fan of Meydala's decision to seek help from outside their cloistered community.

"I'm Celia Weston," she said, extending her hand. "I hope we can work together to solve this problem."

Bejorin glanced at Del, then back at Celia, and she had the impression a quick, silent comment passed between the two men.

"I know you're all telepathic," she said. "But if you have something to say about me, please say it out loud."

The healer smirked and Celia saw the faint resemblance to Del. Even across different clone generations general similarities remained.

"Forgive me, Doctor. I merely admired Del Mar's taste in females. Upon my return, no less than four of my brothers have commented on your exotic beauty."

Celia blushed and gave Del a sidelong glance, which he stoically ignored. "Upon your return?" she repeated, still struggling to recover her composure. Bejorin already suspected their attraction to each other. How long would it be before the entire Ley population discovered how Del had lulled her to sleep the night before?

"I've been canvassing the intake tubes along the ocean floor, searching for what I believe is the cause of the illness." Bejorin once again turned his steely gaze on Del. "I needed to remove a section of the mesh in sector eighty-one. Please inform Dr. Kyoto so that safety warnings can be posted for that area."

Celia stared. "You? Were you responsible for cutting the mesh in sector twenty-seven?"

Bejorin regarded her as though she'd grown a third arm. "I was."

"Del could have been killed. Why are you cutting open the intake meshes?"

Bejorin didn't respond. He shouldered past Del and Celia and moved with long, fluid strokes to the computer console. A small glass beaker, capped with a black rubber stopper, sat atop at Celia's work station. He snatched it up and dumped it into her palm, the webbing between his exceptionally long fingers gliding over her skin like silk.

"Because deep inside the intake tubes is the only place I could find this."

Celia glanced at the beaker. A pale growth clung to the inside of the glass, spidery tendrils laced with veins of deep green. It resembled albino seaweed. "And this is?"

"A species I haven't seen before. It's growing in the intake tubes. It clings to the metal walls and it seems to be strong enough to survive the current."

"And you think this is making the children sick?" Celia glanced from the cold glass tube to Del. "The children don't go near the tubes, do they?"

Bejorin's sigh directed her attention back to him and he grabbed the beaker back from her. "It's not the growth itself, but something it secretes that causes the disease, I believe. If you help me analyze it, perhaps I can prove it and we can begin to formulate a cure."

Something in the back of Celia's mind told her she was in for it with Bejorin. He wouldn't be easy to work with, but obviously she had no choice, and at least he had a lead. She fixed him with what she hoped was as the same arrogant, disdainful glare he'd given her and said, "What are we standing around for? Let's get to work."

Chapter Seven

"He's in-*furiating*!" Celia paced the confines of Del's room gesturing her frustrations while he lay on his bed, watching through narrowed eyes. "He won't let me finish a sentence. He shoots down *all* my suggestions, and he talks to the children, but he won't clue me in on the conversations. I'd like to get to know them all and ask them how they feel, if their pain is getting worse or better, but Bejorin keeps me in the dark. He's obviously not happy about my involvement and I don't really blame him, but for heaven's sake!"

Del followed her movements, first with an expression of bewilderment, then with a more predatory gaze. "His number is 017. Among us, that makes him a venerable elder. His arrogance is well earned."

"Yeah, well, he cut the intake mesh and you could have been torn to ribbons in the tube. Now there's another broken mesh out there, and who knows what could happen."

"I've informed Dr. Kyoto. A human crew has been dispatched to fix it."

"Heaven help you all if anyone gets hurt."

"And who is Heaven?"

Celia stopped in her tracks and slid her gaze to Del. He looked delectable, stretched on the bed, wearing only the bottom half of his enviro suit. The neutral expression in his sapphire eyes told her nothing about the nature of his question. Was he teasing her again?

"Heaven is...the place where a god lives. It's a repository for souls, a place of peace and contentment. The final reward for a life well lived."

"And how can a *place* help us?"

"I...it's an expression. It just means if any humans are injured, the Ley will be in need of divine assistance."

He nodded but said no more.

"How did David take the news?"

Del looked away. "Not well. He's concerned for you and it was difficult not to tell him of your choice to remain here."

"It would be so much easier if you let me speak to him."

"I cannot."

"What about Meydala. Can I talk to her?"

Del rose from the bed and stretched his sleek muscles. "I will request it. Perhaps you can change her mind."

"I'll certainly try." With a sigh, Celia headed for the door, but Del grabbed her hand as she past him.

"Where are you going? This is your rest period."

"I know, but I'm not tired. I'd like to go back to the lab while Bejorin isn't there and research some of my theories while he's not around to shoot down my ideas."

Del's grip on her fingers tightened and he tugged her back toward him. "I can make you tired."

Celia grinned and her body responded instantly to his innuendo. "I know you can, but I don't want to be tired right now. I want to work."

"You need to rest. I'll not see you falling asleep at the computer again. Besides, Bejorin will find fault with you if you seem too weak to work."

"I promise I'll—" Del cut off Celia's protest with a kiss. He cupped her jaw and captured her lips, parting them and slipping his tongue inside. She moaned into his mouth, weakened by the flavor of him and the heat of his mouth and eager for the determined thrust of his tongue against hers.

Her skin tingled everywhere and her clit pulsed an urgent rhythm of need between her thighs. "Now, Del?" She broke the kiss and stared up at him, breathless, her heart pounding. If he commanded her, she'd obey any request.

"This now," he said and pulled her vest open. Her knees buckled when he slid his hands inside, parting the fabric and exposing her upper body to his claiming gaze. In three fast steps, he backed her against the far wall and pressed into her. The warmth of his hard, muscular chest set her nipples to tight peaks and instinctively she spread her legs to accommodate his thighs between hers.

The bulge of his erection strained the camouflaging codpiece of his suit and the pressure on her mons made her womb ache for completion.

Del slid his hands down her throat as he kissed her again, deeper this time as if reaching into her to find her soul. He thumbed her nipples, drawing desperate gasps from her, then eased his caress down her sides. She shivered and thrust her hips forward, begging, pleading.

He pushed her leggings down below her navel and worked his hand inside, searching for her heat. His thumb circled her clit and two fingers teased her pussy lips, slippery with the moisture already pooled there.

"Del, I want you. I need you to fuck me." She bucked against him, eager to come in his hand but anticipating much more.

He nuzzled her ear, but his words set her blood cooling. "Not yet. The time isn't right."

All Celia's wanton movements ceased and she cast a skeptical glance at him. "I told you, I'm not tired. In fact, I'm on fire. I *need* you."

"And you will have me, in time, but not yet."

"Why?" She placed her hands on his chest and heaved him back a step. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing with you. It’s just that now that we’re sequestered here below, Meydala has forbidden there to be mating with humans.”

Celia squinted at him. “Why?”

Del backed away and sat on the edge of the bed. He ran a hand through his hair, taming the errant locks that fell across his eyes. “Her concern is for any children not conceived. Until the disease is cured, we cannot risk another new life.”

Celia settled back against the cool wall and her shoulders drooped. She hadn’t considered the possibility of conception. Up until a few hours ago, she believed Del was sterile. Knowing he could impregnate her didn’t trouble her as much as it excited her. She’d given up using birth control patches since her only sexual partner for the last eight months had been her trusty dildo. Now she considered the consequences of bearing a Ley child...Del’s child. A dull, deep ache began somewhere beneath her heart.

“But back in the Med Lab you were going to...”

“I was. And it would have been against Meydala’s orders. A mistake. But I wanted you, Celia. I still do.”

Frustration coupled with the look of regret in his eyes left her wanting. She pulled her vest closed and crossed the room to kneel before him. “If it were just me, I’d take the chance, but I understand Meydala’s reasoning. Until we find the cure, and we will, we’ll just have to wait.”

He stroked her hair and dropped a quick, warm kiss on her lips. “Lie down then. I’ll—”

A frantic knock on the door interrupted his suggestion and they broke apart quickly, like guilty teenagers, caught necking. Del jumped up and swung the door open while Celia hurried to fasten her vest.

Pela rushed into the room. “Doctor Weston, Bejorin needs you in the incubation lab, Maren is in distress.”

Celia didn't spare Del a parting glance before bolting out the door after Pela. She knew he'd follow her. She only hoped when she reached the lab, she'd be able to do something besides watch helplessly while the Ley lost another one of their precious children.

Chaos ruled in the incubation lab. Bejorin had emptied Maren's tank apparently by yanking out the circulation tubes feeding medicated water into her tiny, isolated world. He sat on the floor now, in the center of a widening puddle, holding her small body in his arms.

Maren's eyes had dilated completely, and her gill slits flared so wide they resembled a series of deep, fiery red lacerations under her delicate jaw.

Other Ley huddled in a circle around the healer, among them a male Celia guessed to be the little girl's father. He wept, a gut-wrenching sound that tore at Celia's heart. His fellow UMEs sought to restrain him from prying his fragile child from Bejorin's arms.

Celia slid to her knees next to the healer and helped him cradle the girl. Del joined the onlookers and lent his strength to keep her father's grief from interfering with whatever treatment Bejorin could offer.

The healer's body vibrated with the same deep rumble that Del had produced. His own nearly colorless skin paled even further as he seemed to pour every ounce of his strength into his patient.

Celia had never felt so helpless in her life. Fighting back tears in response to the sounds of anguish coming from Maren's father, she gestured to Pela. "Bring me the crash kit from under the bench—hurry."

Bejorin swept an arm out and pushed Celia back. "No. We've tried all the rescue medications before. They don't work. She's suffocating and we have no way to stop it."

Defeated, Celia cast her gaze around, desperate for an alternative—anything to spare her from having to sit idle while Maren's life ebbed. Water seeped through her

leggings, reminding her that a defibrillator, her next choice after trauma meds, would not be advisable under these conditions.

Misery weighed on her, threatening to dissolve her professional detachment until a thought occurred to her that she prayed wouldn't seem foolish to the Ley healer.

"Bejorin, the water."

Without stopping his soothing vibrations, he glared at her. "What about it?"

"Where does the water in the tanks come from? Is it fresh water?"

"No, it's ocean water that's been filtered and medicated."

"Filtered, but maybe not enough. The filter would keep out the growth you showed me and its spores but not the substance it secretes into the water."

Bejorin stared.

"The water in the tanks isn't clean enough. It still contains the toxin. We need to get Maren into a freshwater tank—no meds, no salt, nothing. And we need to do it fast."

Struggling to her feet on the slippery deck, Celia lurched toward the incubation controls. "Can we get fresh water into this tank? And we need to start draining all the others too, as fast as possible."

Del broke from the crowd and began working the tank controls next to Maren's incubation tube. Clear, fresh water began pouring into the cylinder a moment later, and together Bejorin and Maren's father lifted the girl back inside it. Within minutes the swirling water covered the child's entire body. Bejorin held her under the surface, but suspended her body in his slender arms.

Water from the other tanks spilled across the already wet floor and Ley males and females ran to each of the remaining tanks to calm the panicked children and help them through the few, terrifying moments of air breathing before their tanks filled with fresh water.

Celia kept her eyes on Maren. The child had been limp a moment ago, eyes glassy and her jaw slack. Now submerged again, her gills took over from her tortured airways, and she convulsed then began struggling against the arms that held her.

After a moment, her movements slowed and her labored breathing eased. She hung, exhausted, from Bejorin's arms, but her chest rose and fell and her gills worked in the proper rhythm. Her father sagged against the outside of the tank looking both bewildered and relieved.

"How did you know?" Del asked. As soon as Maren's tank was full, he abandoned the water controls and moved to stand beside Celia.

"It was a long shot. I don't know if the fresh water will cure them, but it shouldn't make them worse." She glanced at Bejorin who had released Maren to rest at the bottom of her tank. He climbed down and padded through the shallow puddle to join Celia and Del by the computer console. "I have a few theories, if you'll allow me to test them."

"I will. I regret not listening to you sooner."

Celia refrained from a sarcastic comeback. "All that matters is Maren is still alive, and we have a fighting chance to save them all. We need to work fast, though. First, I'd like a sample of the water from the floor. The children might still have some discomfort, but we need to be very careful about what we add back into their tanks."

Del stood back from her, smiling. "I'll leave you to your work. Bejorin, don't allow Dr. Weston to exhaust herself."

"I promise I will not."

Del moved off to help Maren's father find a place to rest. Celia watched him go then turned her attention back to the healer. "I'm glad I could help."

"Before this day ends, I'm certain you will do much more."

Celia imagined she'd coaxed the hint of a smile from him, but she couldn't be sure. There'd be time later for mutual admiration if they were able to find a cure.

* * * * *

"We need Dr. Kyoto. He's the only one who can help us." Celia stood in an opulent chamber that looked out onto the ocean floor through a six-inch thick panel of microfiber reinforced acrylic.

Facing Celia with her back to the majestic aquascape, Commander Meydala, Queen of the Ley gave a weary sigh. "We have given our word no other humans would be abducted."

"You don't have to abduct him. Let me speak to him. I'm sure I can get him to do what needs to be done."

"Tell me and I will relay the request to Dr. Kyoto."

Celia rolled her eyes and spread her tired arms wide. After two straight shifts in the incubation lab, she and Bejorin had hit upon the root of the problem. She paced while she explained it to Meydala. "Several months ago, David's team got permission to introduce a new species of fish into the ocean. These fish were designed to eat the algae that grows on the intake tubes and thus reduce the need for repairs and cleaning. I think the fish did their job too well."

Meydala gestured for her to continue.

"I think they depleted the algae so much that another species took over, the growth that Bejorin found in the tubes that he cut open. Not only is the new algae growing faster than the old strain and creating a greater potential for clogs in the system, it seems to be secreting microspores along with its larger seed spores. The microspores are what's causing a fungal infection in the children's lungs which compromises their ability to breathe air, thus they've been kept in the water where the spores profligate, making the infection progressively worse."

Meydala tilted her head to the side. "But why does this not affect the older children and the adults?"

Celia stabbed a finger in the air. "Ah! Because the younger children don't spend as much time breathing air as everyone else does. I found out through Bejorin that prior to seven years ago all the Ley children were born above water. Their mothers were, of

course, all human and many were non-swimmers who gave birth here below decks rather than in the ocean. Those children weren't exposed to gill breathing for the first few months of their lives because, having been born into air, their gills remained closed at birth."

Meydala nodded. "And several years ago Bejorin suggested birthing our children in water in order to teach them gill breathing at an earlier age."

"Right, and all the adult Ley have been born at BioCon into air not water. They're not exposed to gill breathing for the first six months of their lives. Bejorin and I discovered that the microspores can't survive in air, so the older children and the adults who spend more time out of the water are actually killing the spores. The younger children don't spend enough time breathing air to kill off the spores, so once their lungs become infected, the discomfort makes it impossible to remain above water. The spores are protecting their environment, in effect forcing their host to remain underwater where they thrive."

"So you believe removing this new fish will restore the old algae balance and destroy the microspores?"

"Mostly, yes. The second algae species had always been there, just in smaller quantities and producing very few microspores. I also recommend treating all the children with an antifungal to clear out their lungs and gills and I think they should all remain above water for several weeks until they've regained full strength."

Meydala's regal shoulders relaxed. "But they will all survive?"

"Yes, I believe they will."

Meydala's serious expression morphed to joy, then clouded again, and Celia frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Do you believe Dr. Kyoto will agree to remove his new fish from the water? Since the microspores don't affect adult Ley, he has no reason to cooperate."

Celia understood Meydala's concern. Involving David meant exposing the Ley's secret before the children became healthy again. Celia saw no alternative. David would

help the Ley if he understood their plight and he loved the ocean as much as they did. He wouldn't want to see it harmed."

"Dr. Kyoto is a good man, Meydala. He will do the right thing once he understands the full impact of this change to the ocean's ecosystem. If you let me talk to him—"

"That, I still cannot allow. I thank you for the help you've provided thus far, Dr. Weston. My people owe our futures to you and I will find a way to repay you one day."

"You don't have to repay me, just—" Celia stopped herself. She thought of Del's plight and their mutual desire, but she certainly couldn't ask Meydala to suspend the rules about intercourse just for her and Del. She still had to follow her head, not her heart. "Just be careful when dealing with Gavrel Security. I don't want to see your people suffer needlessly."

Meydala put a warm, reassuring hand on Celia's shoulder. "Nor do I, Dr. Weston. Nor do I."

* * * * *

Celia collapsed into Del's bed at the end of her next shift and pressed the cool heels of her hands over her tired eyes.

After a day in fresh water, the children had improved. They all smiled and played now, waved to her and signed greetings as she walked with Bejorin among the tanks.

Their fathers had come to her and expressed gratitude for her help and she'd even met two of the human mothers, women from the sublevels who had assimilated into the Ley culture, but likewise kept out of sight most of the time for fear of discovery by the Gavrelian authorities. Not all of the women who had given birth to Ley children had remained on the station afterward, though, and several of the children had been adopted by Ley females who treated them as their own.

After a few more days, Celia predicted the children would emerge from the tanks and begin breathing air again. She looked forward to that time, but concern for the Ley in general eclipsed her anticipation. She'd never known a peaceful revolution and her

fear that this conflict with Gavrel Central and with BioCon would turn bloody mounted with each passing hour.

Nerves obliterated her ability to sleep once again, and by the time Del returned to his quarters she was sitting up in bed, fidgeting.

"What's troubling you?" he asked after closing the door on the dim little cocoon she'd begun to think of as home.

"Meydala is going to contact David. I'm worried things won't go well."

Del sat on the edge of the bed. "Our queen is very tactful. She will negotiate well."

"But if she let's David think I'm still being held against my will, he's not going to want to cooperate."

"Have faith in Meydala as we do. She will make her plan work."

"I hope so."

"Do you miss your home abovedecks? I'm sorry it's come to this, but soon—"

"No." Celia put her hand on his arm. "I should, but I don't. I like it here. I feel...safe. Needed."

"You are needed very much, but don't you feel that way in Med Lab too?"

Celia laughed. "Not so much. I realize now why so few UMEs—I mean Ley—came to Med Lab with illnesses and injuries. You have Bejorin to heal you. Except for acclimating Pela and the others to the ocean, I haven't had much to do since I transferred here. I was beginning to feel a little useless."

Del scoffed. "You could never be useless."

Celia shrugged. "Life was a bit boring for me, and a little bit lonely."

Del tilted his head. He lifted a hand to brush at her bangs and Celia's heart clenched at the gesture. "Surely you have family and friends. What about Dr. Kyoto and Dr. Vanatu?"

Celia's derisive laugh escaped despite her best effort to stifle it. "David, I suppose, is a friend, but Dr. Vanatu is merely a colleague. I like her, but we rarely see each other

since we work opposing shifts. I suppose her life may be a bit boring too. And I don't have any family."

Sympathy thickened Del's voice. "Were you a clone as well?"

"Oh no. I'm not. My family...disowned me many years ago." She'd dealt with the pain, but the admission still stirred up lingering feelings of shame.

Del's smooth brow wrinkled. "I don't understand 'disowned'. They had given you away? To not belong to them anymore?"

Celia shrugged. "It means cast out. I disappointed them and they asked me...well, they *insisted* I leave."

Shock widened his eyes. Here, where family units were based on choice rather than accidents of biology, the concept of denouncing one of your own probably seemed terribly alien. "What could you have done to disappoint?"

Celia leaned back on the pillows. How had she gotten into this maudlin conversation? Of all people, she could least bear having Del know of her childhood heartache. "I did something they didn't approve of and...that was that."

He stared. She tried to avoid his piercing gaze, but in the small room she couldn't escape his curiosity and she was too tired to chance a walk through the sub levels where she'd already gotten hopelessly lost several times on her way back from the incubation lab.

"I met a boy. I was very young, just sixteen—"

"By Ley standards that's quite old."

Celia smiled. "I forgot. Sixteen is closer to thirty-six in your people." She recalled from Del's medical file that he'd been decanted at BioCon twenty years ago, which put his physical age at closer to forty, though he still looked younger than any forty-year-old human she'd ever met. "Either way, I was only a child by my family's standards. I fell in love and we set out to run off together. Foolish, yes, but we were desperate to be together, to prove how mature we were. When my parents discovered I'd slept with

him—had sex with him—they couldn't forgive me. Their rules were very strict, and since I'd broken them, there was no place for me in their world. The only thing that saved me was I didn't get pregnant and I was able to join a youth study group. I worked hard and was accepted to BioCon's training program when I was nineteen. They've supported me ever since." Celia gave another rueful laugh. "But they have strict rules too, and being here with you, letting you...touch me, that's a violation of those rules."

Del bowed his head. "Then you shouldn't be here. BioCon has taken the place of your family and you cannot risk them casting you out as your parents did. We can find other quarters for you to stay in." He rose and Celia grabbed for his arm.

"No, Del. I'm not sorry for breaking BioCon's rules. They may fire me, but I don't care. I never apologized for falling in love when I was sixteen and I won't apologize for it now."

Celia's words hung in the air between them. Stunned by her own confession, she wondered if Del understood what she'd just insinuated.

Did she really love him? Or was it nothing more than the realization of her fantasies? A handsome, virile man—somewhat more than human—vowing to protect and care for her when she'd been alone for so long appealed to her deepest desires. He was everything she'd dreamed of, but was that enough to risk her heart?

Their gazes held for a brief, electric moment during which Celia feared Del might reject her. What future would they have, after all, once BioCon discovered all the secrets the Ley were hiding? She'd almost convinced herself to pull away from him, to leave the room until the static charge between them faded, but her slight movement triggered his reaction.

He scooped her into his arms and lowered his mouth to hers, first softly rubbing his lips on hers, then increasing his demand. He cupped the back of her head and held her to him, thrusting his tongue hungrily against hers. He tasted of salt and desire, and her thirst for him increased until she thought she'd burst from unfulfilled need.

“Del—” She broke the kiss and put her hands on his chest, pushing him away even as she longed to draw him closer. “You can’t disobey Meydala, but once I’m allowed to go back abovedecks, I can get the medication that will prevent me from conceiving and we can—”

He gripped her arms and shook her just a bit. “Once you go back to your world, Celia, we will never be together again. BioCon won’t allow it, and if Meydala gets her wish, we will all be leaving Gavrel for a colony of our own.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“You know they won’t let you. Meydala may not allow it even if BioCon would. There is no room for humans in her plans for our race.”

Celia laughed. “You’ll need fertile females. BioCon won’t continue making clones from the UME crèches and most of the children are too young to breed.”

Del’s eyes darkened. “It won’t happen, Celia. BioCon will never allow us to be truly free. Don’t fool yourself into thinking you have a future among us.”

His words stung like a slap and Celia reared back out of his grasp.

“If I could go, would you deny me?”

“It would be no life for you. Meydala plans for us to live at sea, below the surface. You could not survive there.”

Celia’s heart ached as though it had been torn. Of course Del was right. Without gills she couldn’t live with him in the ocean. Her fantasy of being whisked away beneath the waves by a handsome merman was nothing more than a childish dream grown from her unrequited desire to find a place where she belonged.

Celia unfolded her legs and rose. She brushed her cold fingers over Del’s naked shoulder, then headed toward the door. “You’re right. I could never survive in your world and you would never be happy in mine.”

Chapter Eight

Celia strode away from Del's quarters, blindly winding her way through the confusing maze of corridors. Vaguely, she planned to end up in the incubation lab, but misplaced anger at Del and her own rising shame led her on a circuitous route that had her lost in no time.

Surrounded by unfamiliar bulkheads and a maze of damp, dripping stanchions, she stopped finally and whirled around, trying to get her bearings. Fatigue and a terrible sense of loss closed in on her and rather than seek her way back to familiar territory, she sank to the damp floor and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"How stupid I am." Her harsh words echoed off the distant bulkheads. A chilly drop of water landed on the back of her neck, startling her and reminding her that even if Meydala failed to secure a new world for the Ley, they still wouldn't be here forever.

How could she have let herself consider a life with Del? She was as alien to his existence as he was to hers. She would never swim freely in the living ocean, whether here or on some colony world. She could never bear a child and give it up to live in a world where she couldn't roam.

Cursing her own foolish desires, she dragged herself to her feet and scrubbed her damp hands down her thighs. Despite the charade Meydala had constructed, she wasn't a prisoner. Maybe the best course would be to escape, then she could tell David everything and beg him to help the Ley, at the same time distancing herself from Del and giving herself time to figure out how to get over this ridiculous obsession.

A sound, like a sharp grunt of pain, bounced around the weeping deck supports. Celia turned and squinted into the dimness in the direction from which she guessed the sound had come.

Yelling followed, then cursing, and finally a distinctive voice rose from the commotion. Celia ran, first away from the noises, thinking she was heading toward them. Then she changed course and strained to follow the sounds rather than their confusing echoes.

"Hello? Who's there?" Her medical training told her she'd heard someone in pain. Fear of the unknown paled against her instinct to help someone in distress.

Another grunt reached her, closer now. Celia picked up her pace and soon found herself in familiar territory.

A group of Ley males, still dripping wet, their faces twisted in anger, surrounded a form that writhed on the slippery floor. Celia recognized Arnav, and her gut told her to steer clear of Meydala's eager foot soldier, but the moan from the dark-haired man on the floor drew her forward.

"What's happening? What are you all doing?"

"Celia?" David's voice broke off into a groan when Arnav kicked him in the ribs.

Celia threw herself to the floor amid the imposing circle of Ley and wrapped her hands around David's biceps. She struggled to help him to his knees and glared up at Arnav. "What's going on?"

"He would not cooperate. Meydala spoke to him, and he demanded to be brought to you. He threatened to have our clean air and food supply cut off if he couldn't see you, so we went and got him."

Arnav drew his knife and flashed the dull white blade in front of David's eyes. "Now you've seen her, Dr. Kyoto. If you are not careful, Dr. Weston will be the *last* thing you see."

"Stop it!" Celia pushed the blade away, chancing Arnav's wrath. His companions closed in around her, but she refused to back down. "None of this was necessary. You're all making it much worse for yourselves."

After her admonishment, she ignored the menacing group and concentrated on David. His lower jaw looked swollen, likely from a knockout punch, and he hunched over, guarding what she guessed were a few cracked ribs from Arnav's vicious kick.

"Are you all right, Celia?" David muttered, obviously in great pain. She cradled his head and checked his pupils for uneven dilation.

"I'm in much better shape than you. What happened?"

"I got tired of negotiating with them. They've been making terrible threats against you, against the ocean. Now they're demanding that I change the ecosystem. I said I wouldn't help them unless I had a guarantee that you were safe. Ganesh is mobilizing...he said if I don't bring you back within twenty-four hours, he's coming down here with blasters."

"Oh no." Celia shook her head. "David, I'm so sorry this happened. The Ley just need some help. They didn't exactly go about asking for it in the right way. They're afraid for their lives and for the ocean, and you can help them."

"The wh—" A spasmodic cough interrupted David's reply. Celia helped him to his feet, and he glared at Arnav and his henchmen. "The Ley?"

"The UMEs. That's what they call themselves."

"Why should I help them when they betrayed me, vandalized the intake tubes and kidnapped you?"

Celia ducked her shoulder under David's arm to steady him. "Come on, I'll show you. I think you'll feel differently once you see what I've seen."

Celia's icy stare actually parted Arnav's crowd of thugs, and she led David out of the imposing circle. After two steps, though, she realized she had no idea where she was. "Which way is the incubation lab?" she demanded, hoping her imperious tone left no room for argument.

With a deep, disdainful sigh Arnav pointed. Celia tossed her head and concentrated on helping David walk away from his captors.

"I really expected they'd killed you," David said once they'd left the Ley posse far behind. "They were so vague about you. I believed you'd drowned and they were pretending you were still alive to keep their leverage."

"It's not like that at all." Celia guided David through the maze, listening for the conspicuous bubbling of the incubation tubes as her compass. "Arnav and his friends abducted me from Med Lab, but when I found out why, I chose to stay and help. David, this is too important. Not only are the Ley at risk, but the whole ocean is in trouble."

"I know. The intake tubes are compromised, and without the UME teams to keep them working properly —"

"No." Celia turned to face David as they hobbled along. "It's much more than that." She told him about the leaks and the prediction of a catastrophic tear in the sub decks.

He scoffed. "That's ridiculous. This dome was engineered to hold an ocean. The decks aren't going to collapse."

"Gavrel Central knows and they won't do anything about it. When it goes, the station will be ripped apart by the force of the water shifting through the sub levels."

David stopped in his tracks. Though he winced in pain, he turned to face her. "What have they been telling you? There's no way the ocean will collapse. It's not possible."

"What would prove it to you?"

"Hell, I don't know. If someone could show me structural damage, stress tests of the deck supports, cracks in the upper hull lining?"

"And what about proof that your new species of fish is damaging the intake tubes *and* causing health problems among the Ley?"

"Show me."

"I will, but first you need to see this." The tops of the incubation tubes appeared in the distance and Celia hurried David toward them. When they rounded the computer

console she stopped short and stared, slack-jawed, down the row of tanks. Each one stood empty, drained of water and devoid of life. The children were gone.

She let out a breath. "Where are they?"

David leaned heavily on the console, his breath shallow with pain. "Who?"

"The children. There were children in those tanks. Six of them, all recovering from a fungal lung infection caused by a strain of algae that—"

The look of complete horror on David's face silenced her. "They're keeping children in hatching tanks? My God."

"*Their* children—water breathers. They had to keep them in the tanks because—"

Celia broke off and ran through the lab. No evidence remained that the children had been here. She called out for Bejorin, but the healer was not present.

Instead, Del appeared among the empty tanks. "Celia?"

"Del!" She rushed to him. "What happened? Tell me they're all right."

He nodded, a swift, nearly imperceptible movement of his head. "They've been moved to safety."

"Tell David about them. Tell him why we need his help."

Del transferred his gaze to David who fixed him with an adversarial glare. "Meydala will speak with him. He's to come with me."

"He's injured, thanks to Arnav. He's staying here until I treat him."

Del pushed past her. "There will be time for that later."

"No." She put herself between the two men. "He's *injured*. I'll care for him first. The Ley asked for my help, and now they're going to get it whether they like it or not. Don't treat him like the enemy, Del. David's better than that."

After a brief battle of wills, Del stood back. "Hurry," he said. "Meydala is waiting."

Celia led David to a bench and grabbed all of the medical supplies she'd assembled in the lab. Under Del's dark gaze, she helped David remove his enviro suit vest. She gave him a shot of painkiller and wrapped his damaged ribs as tightly as she dared.

Once she'd finished that, she tilted his face to one side and examined his jaw as best she could in the low light. It didn't appear broken, though the swelling was severe. She pressed her fingertips against his cheek bone and around the orbital bone of his eye, searching for fractures.

He groaned but endured her exam. Finally he caught her probing hand in his and captured her concerned gaze. He flicked his eyes toward Del, who remained a few feet away, arms crossed stoically over his chest. "Celia, are you really all right? They haven't hurt you?"

She sighed. "I'm fine. Really. Please understand, they're frightened for their children and for the future of their species. They're acting out of desperation. I'm sure we'd do the same in their place."

In response, David squeezed Celia's fingers then raised her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. "I'm glad you're okay. We'll get through this together."

Celia glanced over his head at Del who remained motionless. When David lifted his head, she gave him a rueful smile. "We'll be fine. Let's go talk to Meydala together."

The Queen of the Ley greeted David with a half-bow and placed one webbed hand on his swollen jaw. "Forgive me, Dr. Kyoto. You were not meant to be harmed."

"You might have told that to the creatures you sent to drag me out of my bed in the middle of the night."

Meydala bristled at the slur, and Celia cringed. She understood David's anger, but she prayed he wouldn't allow his frustrations to escalate into any more violent conflicts.

He jerked his head away from Meydala's touch. "What do you want from me?"

"As I tried to explain to you earlier, Dr. Weston has helped identify a species of fish that may be responsible for a disease that killed one of our children. We need your help to have that species removed from the ocean and a specific form of algae cleared from the intake tubes."

“UMEs are sterile. How is it that you have children? Where are you getting them from?”

Meydala cast a somewhat exasperated glance at Celia, her gill slits expanding with her frustration. Celia stepped forward and touched David’s arm.

“They’re reversing the vasectomies BioCon gives the male UMEs.”

His almond-shaped eyes widened, but he made no immediate comment.

Meydala continued. “Dr. Weston tells me you are a good man, Dr. Kyoto. I’ve worked with you for long enough to know that’s true. I’m asking you, now that you have seen for yourself that Dr. Weston is unharmed, will you help us?”

David’s skeptical gaze slid from Meydala to Celia to Del and the two other UME males who had been assigned as his bodyguards. After a long, heady silence, he said, “I can’t just snap my fingers and remove an entire species from the ecosystem. It took months to get approval to introduce it. I’d need scientific proof of the problems its causing and I’d have to present that to the Oceanography Department.”

“But it’s a life-threatening emergency, David,” Celia said. “Can’t you speed up the process?”

He shrugged. “With nothing to work with, no. I need to see for myself what the problem is. Show me the fish. Show me the algae and the intake tubes and these mysterious children, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Expectant, Celia turned to Meydala, and the queen nodded. “I will make the arrangements. Doctor, go with Del Mar. He will give you a place to rest until we are prepared.”

David turned and limped away from the Ley commander. “Thank you,” Celia mouthed to Meydala. She followed David, Del and Meydala’s guards out of the Queen’s chamber and through the interconnecting corridors to a small, unnumbered room.

The guards opened the door and shoved David inside. He stumbled and Celia flew in behind him, grabbing his arm just before he landed on his knees. She glared back at the three UMEs who remained in the corridor, but the brunt of her disapproval fell on Del. "He's not to be harmed," she said under her breath.

"Settle him," Del said. "And I'll escort you to your quarters."

"Mine?" So he was kicking her out of his room now too?

She set her jaw and turned back to David. "I'll have them bring you food and water. You'll be safe. I promise."

"Where are they taking you?" David glared at Del also. "Leave her here with me. Don't separate us."

"It's all right. I'll be fine." Celia rose, but her heart ached for David, being left in the small, dark room which contained only a bare cot. Would she now receive the same accommodations?

"Celia." David tugged on her fingers, drawing her gaze back to him. "There's something else you should know." He leaned in and whispered next to her ear. "Vanatu is helping Ganesh. She's contacted BioCon and they're sending their own security team."

Celia closed her eyes. If BioCon determined the Ley were a true threat, they could opt to destroy them. Every one of their genetic projects contained a failsafe gene, something that could be triggered in the event of an irreparable problem. Celia shivered at the thought.

Before she turned to leave, David slid a hand behind her neck. He pulled her roughly to him and kissed her once, firm and deliberate, on the lips.

Stunned, Celia stumbled away and lurched through the door. Out in the corridor, Del dismissed one of the guards, then he took Celia's hand and led her off through the winding sublevel maze.

To her surprise, he guided her back to his quarters, but she balked when he flung the door open and strode inside. "Don't I get my own cell now?" She chanced sarcasm, and Del responded with a dark glare. He pulled her into the room and shut the door.

"Meydala suggested I leave you with Dr. Kyoto, but I refused. Arnav insists you both be kept in chains to prevent escape, which I also would not permit, but now that I've seen him put his hands all over you, perhaps I should consider—"

"You're jealous?" Celia would have laughed, but the hammering of her heart against her ribs precluded her seeing the humor in Del's sudden spike of possessiveness.

"He looks at you like a lover. I was not aware you'd been intimate with him."

"I haven't. I don't know why David kissed me. Probably because he's scared and confused, not to mention in pain from the beating he took, and I'm the only familiar thing around."

"He speaks of you as though you belong to him, demanding to see you, insisting you be kept in his cell."

"Well, I'm not his. I'm—"

"Mine?" He glared and his chest heaved with angry breaths.

"You seem to think so, but I can't tell if you really want me or not."

Del met the challenge in her voice head on. He crossed the room, barreling toward her, and instinctively Celia retreated until her back hit the wall. Anger clouded her vision, but desire wound her muscles tight as bow strings.

Del grasped her shoulders and pressed his body against her. His erection, filling the supple codpiece of his suit, settled between her thighs. She spread her legs accommodate the intrusion.

"I've wanted you since the first time I saw you dive. Months ago, when you brought Bahari below for his first dive, I watched you."

Bahari. The name swirled in Celia's mind. That was the name chosen by UME 975. "You noticed me then?"

"Yes." Del swept her hair from her shoulder and dipped his head to nuzzle her neck. Conscious thought fled and she closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of his lips against her heated skin. "I watched you glide under the rock ledges and show Bahari the angel fish. I was jealous then. I wanted to touch you, but you were beyond my grasp, as far above me as the surface of the ocean. When Meydala requested a volunteer to go to Med Lab, I offered myself, but she passed me over in favor of Arnav."

Celia stiffened at the mention of the brute, but Del's hands on her body, molding her hips, plucking at the fastenings of her suit, relaxed the sudden tension.

"The thought of him being the one to touch you sickened me. I was angry when I took over the inspection job for Dr. Kyoto and I was careless. My injury wasn't planned, but I was grateful for it because it meant I would be the one to enter your domain."

Vague surprise filtered through Celia's brain tempered by a blinding surge of lust when Del tore her vest open. She arched her back, delivering her breasts into his hungry hands. "Meydala took advantage of your injury then?"

"Regrettably." He growled before drawing a nipple into his hot mouth.

Celia moaned. She should have been furious with him and with the Ley queen, but all she felt was desire, insatiable and consuming.

"I wasn't lying when I told you I wanted you safe and away from this conflict and I wasn't lying when I said I was glad you ended up here with me."

Celia's body trembled as he ground his hips against her and devoured her with his demanding kisses. She drowned in him, gave up breathing in order to let his passion alone sustain her. When he finally lifted his lips from hers she panted, "If you want me that much, take me."

Chapter Nine

"I intend to do just that, the moment Meydala gives her permission." Del dragged Celia away from the wall and guided her to the bed. He yanked her vest from her shoulders as she lay down and pulled it halfway down her arms. She struggled out of the garment while he tore her leggings off and dragged her panties down her thighs.

Still partially dressed, he fell on her, hands and mouth rough and demanding. She reveled in his aggressive touch, panting his name when he pinched her nipples, bit her shoulder and thrust his hand between her legs to thumb her clit. Deftly, he manipulated her sensitive nub, circling it with hot fingers moistened by her own juices. She slid against him, matching his movements, teasing herself by thrusting against his hand. With his insistent rhythm he brought her almost to the brink of orgasm. Every muscle in her body coiled with need, and she begged him to end her torment. Rather than let her come, though, he rose, leaving her writhing on the edge of oblivion. He parted her thighs wide and lowered his head to finish her off with his skillful tongue. Despite her aching need for completion, Celia stopped him.

"I want you, Del. I want you inside me now."

He ceased all movement and stared at her. His gaze burned, and every nerve ending in Celia's trembling body screamed for him. "If you conceive..."

"I want you in me, Del. I have to have you. Meydala can punish us both. I don't care."

His chest swelled with a shuddering breath, and once again, he growled, a feral sound that left Celia shivering beneath him. Without breaking eye contact, he shed his suit, and his erection sprang free from the codpiece as he removed the constricting neoprene.

Celia had never wanted anything more than this man, so alien and so beautiful. Her heart stuttered at the thought she might conceive his child, but she refused to let the moment pass in favor of the consequences. She needed him, and she reached for him, guiding his body over hers.

The warmth of his skin covered her, and she sighed into his neck before she wrapped her legs around his waist. The hot tip of his cock found her entrance, and a shock of desire so pure and sharp that her whole body convulsed with it left her panting before he even slid inside.

The heat of him cleaved her. The intrusion of his first thrust left her trembling within, electric pulses of desire racing along her spine. She threw her head back and moaned, low and deep and clung to him as he began to move within her.

This was what she'd dreamed of all those nights she'd spent alone with her dildo. The fantasies of being taken hard and fast by a virile, demanding spirit of the sea didn't compare. He was longer, thicker, hotter than she could have imagined, and when he seated himself to the hilt, pressing his body tight against hers, she could do nothing more than gasp for breath.

Buried between their bodies, pulsing from the friction of his iron-hard shaft against it, her clit ached. The speed and depth of his thrusts increased. Her body swallowed his gratefully, as if taking sustenance. Her vision blurred and her thoughts scattered, leaving her unable to do more than simply feel the length of him buried deep, striving for a perfect and complete union. He filled her completely, and his virile body fit hers as if it had been designed to do so. Having Del finally insider her made Celia whole.

Tears welled in her eyes when the first tremors of her orgasm threatened, tingling the base of her spine and working its way through her womb.

She bucked beneath him, eager for every inch of him she could take inside her.

He held her gaze, and the intensity of it forced the first drops of moisture from the corners of her eyes. She sobbed his name when he thrust again, taking her to the very edge.

His chest began to vibrate and he dipped his head to kiss her, to draw her tongue into his mouth. The tremors emanating from somewhere beneath his sternum set her body on fire. She groaned into his mouth and then gasped when his cock seemed to expand within her.

She dug her nails into the smooth skin of his back and arched against him, afraid to let go. Unable to force enough breath from her lungs to say a word, she endured pleasure so intense that her mind blanked.

Her orgasm raced through her, leaving tears running in hot rivulets down her cheeks, and her own juices soaking the churning flesh between them. A pulse within her left her panting, and the hot rush of his own climax surged inside, shooting deep into her contracting womb, sending searching drops of his essence to her core.

He held her while she shuddered, while she sobbed out the last constriction of her battered muscles, and when she lay limp beneath him, he pulled out, still hard, still pulsing his seed against her damp thigh.

Del held her gaze for a moment, and the unspoken question hung between them. Would Meydala learn of their disobedience, and what consequences would they face for succumbing to their mutual passion?

With a tender, soothing sound, Del shifted to cradle Celia in his arms. He dabbed at the remnants of her tears and brushed sweaty tendrils of hair from her forehead.

"I have obeyed your command. What would you have me do next?"

Exhaustion made her light laugh brittle. "If you could, promise me we'll do that again as soon as I've recovered?"

He smiled, his eyes gleaming in the low light. "I am so ordered."

Celia curled her body into his, seeking his warmth against her cooling skin. "Could I ask something else of you?"

"Anything."

"Let me go back abovedecks with David before Captain Ganesh's deadline."

Del stiffened in her embrace, and the teasing tone evaporated from his voice. "That would not be wise."

Celia shifted and put her hands on his chest. She rose above him, throwing one leg over his hips as if to ride him. "Ganesh doesn't make idle threats. I've seen him deal with internal security problems before. I've heard the news reports. He won't hesitate to kill anyone who gets in his way and if he's planning to attack the lower levels, Ley will get hurt."

Del shushed her with a finger across her lips then stroked her shoulders, her breasts, finally resting his hands on her hip. "Meydala will not permit it, and while I may have disagreed with certain details of her plan, I see merit in keeping you here where I can protect you. For now, you will stay. Should the situation change, I will see that you get to wherever you will be safest."

Celia's shoulders slumped. "I'm afraid for the Ley. I wish you'd let me help."

"You've already helped more than you know," Del said, drawing her upper body down across his chest. "We can ask nothing more of you, and my own demands are simple. Circumstances may tear us apart eventually. Let's steal whatever time we can before that happens."

Anguish squeezed Celia's heart. She laid her head on Del's chest and prayed silently that this prediction never came to pass.

* * * * *

Celia awoke when the thin mattress shifted beneath her. She lifted one heavy eyelid in time to catch a glimpse of Del's muscular backside as he slid out of the narrow bed.

She mumbled a half-coherent question, and he turned, revealing his partial erection. "Hush. I'm going to take Dr. Kyoto to see the intake tubes and the structural damage to the hull liner. I'll be back in a few hours."

Celia snaked a hand across the warm spot Del had just vacated. "Be careful," she muttered, wishing for the strength to rise and wrap herself around him. Her clit tingled

at the memory of his strong hands gripping her waist in the throes of lovemaking, and a spot deep in her womb ached with the question, would she conceive his child? Had they made a foolish mistake by indulging their lust when Del's unstable world had no room for another hungry soul?

His shadow passed over her, and she closed her eyes again, hoping to dream away the uncertainties of her situation. Gentle fingers brushed her naked shoulder. "Go to Pela when you wake. She will show you where Bejorin has taken the children so you can check on them. I will find you later."

A shiver of need cascaded along her skin when he dropped a quick kiss on her back. "I will have you again when I return."

She smiled and forced her bleary gaze to follow his movements out the door. She'd have liked nothing better than to lie here and wait for him to return and fuck her senseless again. She'd never felt this complete and this feminine, but the lazy, languid memories of lying beneath him, clutched in his arms while he fulfilled her every sexual desire, paled quickly as her muzzy brain cleared.

She couldn't rest here, a kept woman, reveling in his sexual and physical possession of her. Ganesh and Vanatu would be dangerous together—one with the firepower, the other with the scientific knowledge to wipe out the Ley at BioCon's capricious whim.

Celia climbed out of bed, pausing only once while she dressed to indulge in a delicious shiver when she pictured him rising above her. If she succeeded with her own plan, she might be able to relive her fantasies later, but if she did nothing, she had no doubt Del's prediction that they'd be ripped away from each other would come true.

She fastened her suit, slipped her feet into the neoprene moccasins and left the room quietly, careful to keep to the abundant shadows as she made her way through the sublevel maze.

Twice she nearly turned back, once when concern for the children overwhelmed her. She'd promised Maren tales of the other habitat domes—places they had no hope of seeing while their existence remained a closely guarded secret. She might never have

the chance to tell those tales, and guilt at breaking her promise washed over her. The second time, when Arnav's harsh voice reached her in echoes off the moisture-slick walls, she cowered between two stanchions, praying Meydala's brute wouldn't find her and report her to the queen.

Finally she reached an access ladder that would take her to the upper levels. Her hands shook so she had trouble keeping a grip on the cold metallic rungs, but she climbed, all the while hoping Del would forgive her for disobeying him.

She found Mura Vanatu in Med Lab, holding her poker straight black hair back with one hand while she squinted into the eyepiece of an electron microscope.

Not wishing to startle the woman, Celia coughed to get her attention. A momentary blank stare morphed into recognition and Mura's narrow face lit with a smile of relief. "My God, Celia! You've escaped."

Always a physician first, Vanatu rushed across the quiet lab and captured Celia's hand in her own. "Are you injured? Have they fed you? Come and lie down. I will call security."

"No!" Celia stilled Mura's almost motherly attention with her protest. "I'm fine. Thank you, but I don't need a doctor. I do need your help, though. Listen to what I have to say, please, before you call Ganesh."

Skeptical but curious, just as Celia would have been in the same situation, Mura lowered herself to a stool and gave Celia her attention. "Is it true they've been breeding?" she asked.

Celia coughed again, this time in shock. "How did you hear that?"

"Rumors at first. Unsubstantiated. People have speculated about them for a while. I started to monitor their food requirements more than a year ago when I began to notice increases not consistent with the addition of only one new UME at a time. I speculated they were either sharing food with the homeless from the lower levels, or they had found a way to breed."

“Why didn’t you mention it to me?” Vanatu had always clued Celia in on her findings and theories in the past.

The slender woman shrugged. “If it was true, it represented a scientific boon. I confess, I didn’t want to share credit for the discovery.”

“Oh.” A year ago, Celia might have been taken aback, but knowing she would not have shared the knowledge for her own selfish reasons, she certainly couldn’t take Vanatu to task for being proprietary. She saw no point in playing coy at this point and decided to tell Mura all about the children, the algae microspores and the dire predictions for the ocean. “Will you help me?” she asked in conclusion. “David told me you have alerted BioCon. We can’t let them exterminate the Ley because of this.”

Dr. Vanatu looked bewildered. “Exterminate? What makes you think they would do that?”

“Come on, Mura. You know as well as I do, BioCon frowns on its experiments breeding outside the labs. Anything with even a single strand of human DNA is sterilized before its put into field operation.”

Mura tilted her head. “BioCon doesn’t practice genocide, Celia. They’ll be surprised. Maybe shocked is a better word, but I’m sure their response will be to change the sterilization method in future clone generations. They might have to go to radiation rather than surgery.”

“No!” Celia rolled her eyes. “That will only make the problem worse. We need to convince BioCon to intervene with Gavrel Central and allow the UMEs to leave the station.”

Shock widened Mura’s black eyes, but she reigned in her reaction quickly. Too quickly for Celia’s comfort. Something was wrong. “It’s all right, Celia. Calm down. We can talk it over with the team they’ve sent as soon as they arrive.”

A chill raced down Celia’s spine at Mura’s placating tone. She backed up. It hadn’t occurred to her when she found her colleague alone, but now she realized too late that Med Lab would be the first place Gavrel security would look for rogue UMEs.

Mura rose from her stool and inched forward. "Everything will be all right. Whatever they've done to you, we can make it go away."

"What are you talking about? They haven't done anything to me." Shame and anger battled in Celia's jumbled thoughts. She'd betrayed the Ley rather than helped them. She'd betrayed Del.

"Your tests from Gavrel Medical showed high levels of hallucinogens. They drugged you, Celia, so you would be compliant."

Celia shook her head. "That's not true. Dr. Langdon said there was nothing unusual in my blood work. I overdosed on carbon monoxide. That's all."

"No, it's not all. She kept the information from you at Captain Ganesh's request."

"I don't remember hallucinating, Mura. I've been completely lucid since I woke up after —"

"After the Ley attacked you."

No. Celia understood now. Ganesh planned to engineer a story that would make the Ley look like monsters to justify his destroying them. BioCon would play along.

"Celia, I've discovered the truth. The Ley males are abducting females from the homeless population and using them to breed, then killing them. They planned to take you when you escorted 976 below, but you managed to escape. They came back for you and drugged you again."

The mix of truth and lies left Celia cold. Panic rose, tightening her chest, and she cast around for an escape route. The door leading to the outer corridor swished open just as Mura rushed forward. "She's still delusional," she said to the phalanx of Gavrel Security that streamed in to Med Lab. "Be careful not to injure her."

Celia backpedaled toward the moon pool. *Del!* She screamed silently, wishing he might hear her somehow. "I won't let you hurt them."

"Celia, please." Vanatu made a calming gesture and held the guards back with a sidelong glance. "Let us help you. You're not seeing things clearly."

Ignoring Mura's plea, Celia edged toward the pool. Without a breather, she wouldn't get far, but the water was her only hope. Terror dogged her every move. She managed two steps toward the pool, her gaze bouncing from Mura's to the guards taking up position behind her. Her dive would have to be flawless and well timed. Her only possibility of escape lay in making it to the ocean floor in record time.

Dragging as much air as she could into her lungs, she threw herself into the pool.

Fast, sure strokes brought her to the sandy bottom quickly and she shot off across the dangerous open expanse toward the artificial ledge and the airlock. There, she anchored one arm into the waving straps fastened to the rock and swung her legs around to kick at the camouflaged door leading to the Ley realm. She didn't dare consider that no one might be able to hear her, or that the security guards might have been equipped with breathers and could be upon her in a moment.

After twenty seconds, the urge to breathe became unbearable. By twenty-five her chest ached and by thirty, her head swam. The physical exertion took up too much oxygen. By forty seconds, she'd breathe whether there was air around to sustain her or not.

Finally the airlock door slid open and Celia tumbled in with a rush of water. She hit the far bulkhead and her last breath exploded from her mouth. Weak and disoriented, she gasped. Fluid filled her mouth and nose, burning all the oxygen-starved passageways it touched. A moment later she blacked out.

* * * * *

Webbed hands stroked her face and shoulders. The thin membrane between delicate fingers tickled her nose and her lips. A gentle kiss breathed energy back into her leaden limbs, and she stirred, fighting sudden panic that she'd been captured by security.

She gasped and fought, straining aching muscles until a familiar face took shape in front of her. Bejorin held her chin in his hand. His slender body cradled hers where she lay on the slick floor of Meydala's chamber.

"Do not struggle. You are safe."

A violent coughing fit racked her, and she sat up with his help. Her neoprene vest lay beside her in a puddle and the Ley healer's cool hand rested in the center of her naked chest.

A faint vibration coursed through her, clearing her tortured sinuses and lungs. Strength returned to her frigid body and the blue tint beneath her fingernails began to fade to healthy pink. Good lord, had she died again?

"Bejorin? Where's Del?"

"He is still with Dr. Kyoto." Meydala's voice echoed in the large room. Her slim shadow fell over Celia's half-naked body. "And unaware of your deception."

"I didn't mean to deceive anyone. I went to try to help." Celia extricated herself from Bejorin's healing embrace and drew her shaky limbs tight around her. She remained on the floor, looking up at the Ley queen. "I thought I could help if they knew I was all right."

"And you were not aware that they have created a panic among your people by telling them of your brutal assault at our hands? No. We kept that information from you, but your people told you, I'm sure. You were not aware that Gavrel Central has forsaken you as collateral damage in this little war. You are a martyr, Dr. Weston. A hostage brought below by genetic mutants to be raped, impregnated and then killed when you outlive your usefulness."

A crushing pain circled Celia's chest. She bowed her head. "Why didn't you tell me what they were saying?"

"It was my intention to spare you the humiliation. That was my mistake."

Disdain colored Meydala's voice and every word dug deeper into Celia's shame. Why hadn't David told her? Or was he to be made a martyr also?

"I thought I could help. I'm sorry."

Meydala knelt before Celia and cupped her chin as Bejorin had. Memories of a similar gesture by her own mother ripped through Celia's soul. She'd blocked out the bone-crushing pain of staring into her mother's eyes and confessing that she'd made love to Kiel when such a thing was forbidden by the strict rules of their beliefs.

Meeting Meydala's angry gaze actually dwarfed that horrendous recollection. "You've been with Del Mar, haven't you?"

Celia nodded.

"You've taken him inside you. Accepted his seed. And you are fertile."

Tears choked off any verbal response.

"You are fortunate your medicines cured the children, or I would berate you for your carelessness. At least if you have conceived, your child will not die from the horrible infection that claimed Narrissa."

Celia sobbed. She'd never known the name of the one child who had died. The loss cut her as if she'd lived through it herself. Tears blinded her, but through them she saw Meydala's sapphire eyes soften just a bit.

"You underestimated my power, little one. You think I'm merely a construct of BioCon—a human-shaped pet trained to act like a scientist now and then. As a clone, they consider my intelligence inferior. They ripped out my womb to prevent me from procreating because to them I'm only a tool, not a person. Rather than accept my station, as so many others have, I decided to rise above it. I pulled together a society, created rules, a hierarchy of power to which I was elected as the head, not because I'm pretty, or because I'm older than so many others, but because it was unanimously decided that I knew how to lead these people to a better existence."

Celia swiped at her tears. Another apology died on her tongue as Meydala continued. "You are clearly brilliant, Dr. Weston, and you possess a wealth of compassion I've not encountered in a human before, but you are not smarter than I am or more powerful. I did not undertake this dangerous plan lightly or without full understanding of what it would take to win my case."

Meydala pulled her hand away and backed up a step. She crossed the room to the small sitting area that overlooked the open water beyond the acrylic screen. When she returned, she held a tiny object in her pale hand. Celia struggled to focus on it. A computer chip, medical grade. The type used in brain surgeries and focused learning. For a moment, Celia feared Meydala planned to use it on her.

"This is all I need now to secure a future for my race. Gavrel Security is a small obstacle. Gavrel Central is meaningless to me, and BioCon will cower in the face of my true ally. The Galactic Government will pay dearly for me to keep silent about what I have here. It's nothing more than a malfunctioning data chip, but one they would do anything to see destroyed."

Celia didn't understand. Meydala had an ace in the hole, but it didn't look like much. She sat back on her heels and lifted her swollen eyes to the queen's. "You have a bargaining chip?" In every sense of the word.

"I have a key to our freedom. This chip is evidence of Central Command's illegal human warfare experiments. BioCon may work at creating slave races, but their crimes pale in comparison to the atrocities committed against humans by their trusted government. If word of Central Command's failure should leak out, the resulting uprising will undermine the war effort and shake the foundation of the human government, which it can ill afford while the Viliri are still a threat."

"How did you manage to get this chip?" Celia stared at the seemingly innocuous device until Meydala closed her webbed fingers over it.

"That's not important. What matters now is I've already made the contacts necessary to deal with Central Command. The negotiations are done. The world on which the Ley will flourish has been secured."

The Galactic Government wasn't known for interfering in small mutinies or border skirmishes. The internal affairs of humans meant little in the face of the Viliri threat, but apparently whatever Meydala had secured on this data chip took precedence over the alien threat. So many questions swirled through Celia's mind, but shame kept her silent.

Meydala put the chip back where she'd gotten it and returned. This time she knelt before Celia so their faces were at the same level.

"If you carry Del Mar's child inside you, you are my daughter just as Pela and all of the others are my children. For your role in saving the young ones, you are welcome among us. But understand, aside from the consequences of your indiscretion with Del, your purpose here has been fulfilled. Your people will not allow you to live and speak the truth about your time here. I keep you only because to return you abovedecks now would mean your death."

Another stab of guilt rocked Celia. A final tear escaped and rolled in a burning streak down her face. "I'll go, if you want me to."

"No, Dr. Weston. Celia. Del would not allow it and he would endanger himself on your behalf. If you carry a child of the Ley you are one of us, and if you do not, we still owe you a debt, which we cannot repay if you are dead. You are here now. And here you *will* stay."

Chapter Ten

Thankfully, Arnav was not among the trio of guards Meydala assigned to escort Celia back to Del's room. Though the door to his quarters had no external lock, she didn't need to be telepathic to know at least two of the hulking Ley males remained in the corridor after they'd shut her inside.

Surely Meydala didn't think Celia foolish enough to return to Med Lab. No. Clearly the guards' presence would serve to alert Del to her mistake.

As if Meydala's disappointment wasn't enough to bear, Celia couldn't imagine how she would face Del and explain she hadn't had enough faith in the queen's intelligence to obey her wishes.

For what seemed like hours, Celia paced the small room, rehearsing her inadequate apologies. Finally, exhaustion and shame left her curled on the bed, limp from her struggles to recapture even a shred of her dignity.

Raised male voices roused her and she sat up just as Del flung the door open. Out in the corridor, David struggled between the two guards.

"Celia!" He broke free and pushed past Del to reach her. Stunned, she surged toward him, but Del stepped between them, cutting off David's advance.

"You may not touch her, Dr. Kyoto. She belongs to me."

Horror lengthened David's expression. He tried to sidestep, but Del held his smaller frame back easily. "What do you mean, she belongs to you?"

Celia's heart beat a little faster at Del's words. She glanced at David, buoyed for the first time since her inauspicious return to the sublevels. "I belong to Del." Pride colored her words, something she never thought she'd feel again. "He saved my life, and I...gave myself to him in return. He owns me."

"My God, Celia, this is barbaric." David whirled around to face Del who merely raised a golden eyebrow. "You don't own her. She's a human being and she —"

"And I am not." Del took one menacing step forward, and the great difference in their heights became apparent. "I'm merely a bio-engineered clone. I own only what is freely given to me, and Dr. Weston gave herself to me. I own her because she allows me to. Step aside, Dr. Kyoto. Among my people, one male does not touch another's mate."

David turned back, a hint of revulsion mixing with the confusion on his face. Celia's stomach soured, but she held her head up.

"You've slept with him?"

"Yes. And I intend to do it again." She transferred her gaze to Del before adding, "I love him."

David stumbled back as if she'd slapped him. He paused at the door with the guards hovering behind him. "I saw everything, Celia. I told Del I would do what I could to help, but —"

She cut him off before he could recant his words and say anything else that might be hurtful. "You may not have to do anything, David. The Ley have it under control."

"Bring him food," Del told the guards. "And let him rest until Meydala wishes to see him again."

"Celia? Celia —"

Del closed the door on David, and he and Celia listened to the engineer's protests recede down the corridor. In the silence that followed, Del sighed. "They might have killed you," he said, staring Celia down. "Or worse, done to you all the things they're accusing us of doing to drive home their deception."

"I had no idea. If you'd told me —" Celia cut herself off and shook her head. She had no desire to place blame on Del or even Meydala for keeping her in the dark. It did hurt to know Gavrel Security placed so little value on her life and it angered her to realize they weren't above demonizing the Ley to fuel their xenophobic tendencies.

Those emotions paled, however, compared to the despair she felt at the thought of hurting Del or of losing him. "What I meant to say was, I'm sorry. I disobeyed you and Meydala. I *won't* do it again. I meant what I said to David. I belong to you."

Celia never would have believed that one day she'd be begging a man to take possession of her and offering to obey his every command.

"Is that all you meant?"

She glanced at him and realization dawned a moment later. "I also meant it when I said I love you." Her body trembled at the admission which had come so easily before.

Fear that he might reject her still lingered. With nowhere else to go, how could she survive among the Ley if Del no longer claimed her?

He captured her gaze. "Do you love me enough to give up everything you know to live in my world?"

Celia bowed her head. "I made that decision long before I found out I couldn't go home. It seems you're stuck with me now. I hope you'll want to keep me."

Though anger still radiated from him, his lip quirked just enough to convey a crack in his stoic mask. "You've proven useful. I suppose it would be no great hardship to—"

She threw a pillow at him. He didn't flinch, just let it slide to the floor and continued to stare darkly at her. "What I meant to say was, I love you too, Dr. Weston. And I will keep you as long as we both live."

He crossed the room and gathered her in his arms. His first kiss was gentle, exploratory. His second left her panting and weak in his arms. "You may not have conceived yet," he said, lowering a hand to her belly. The heat of his touch there above her womb sent a delicious shudder through her core. "But you will in time. Are you prepared?"

"I'm ready for anything, Del, as long as I can have you."

"Then you shall have me, right now."

He stripped her still damp vest off with maddening attention to detail, lowering the front zipper inch by inch and placing hot kisses on each patch of skin he revealed. Her leggings followed, then her panties, and when she lay bare beside him, he set about exploring her.

He caressed her thighs with long, appreciative strokes of his fingers, teasing the already taut muscles there until she ached for him. He teased her nipples first with his fingertips using a reverent touch that pebbled the delicate pink skin. Then he used his tongue to suckle and taste. The erotic pull sent a longing to her core that drew a strangled sob from deep in her chest. He scraped his teeth over her shoulder, feathered gentle touches over her abdomen and watched the smooth skin there ripple with waves of desire. Finally he blew cool air across the crisp curls of her mound until her pussy throbbed with need.

Anticipation left her trembling. Her skin rose to gooseflesh from ankles to collarbone. He reached one tentative hand to part her thighs and her whole body jerked with the shock of that intimate touch.

She bucked her hips to meet the first thrust of one long finger and moaned low when he pressed inside. Her womb contracted hard at the brush of his thumb over her rigid clit.

"You're like the sea," he whispered, gently stroking her pussy lips, then easing his way inside her again. "You move in waves, tightening and releasing. I taste salt on your skin, and the scent of life surrounds you. The water within you will hold life one day. A life I'll put there."

Celia wanted to respond, but tears already silenced her. With Del's rhythmic penetration, the first contractions of her orgasm began. She keened and clutched his arm, desperate for more, but he held back. "Wait until the waves subside, and when the water is still, I'll start again."

"Now...please."

"No." He stroked her to complete calm, running his fingertips, hot with her own juices, over her belly and her mound. Little by little her inner tremors abated. Not until she lay completely still did he rise and pull off his own suit. He climbed over her and even though she'd reached completion, she opened eagerly for him. Her pussy clenched hard around his shaft when he drove into her, igniting all the little electric pulses that had died only a moment before. Within seconds she was coming again.

She cried out and curled around him, twining her legs with his, bracing the soles of her feet on the bulging muscles of his calves and tilting her hips to help him settle deep. "Give me everything you have, Del. I want it all," she whispered. He began his familiar rhythm, and she rocked with him, striving less for her own third climax than for his first.

"You are everything I have, Celia. You are my only possession," he told her, clutching her writhing body close. "All that I am is in you."

A moment later the hot liquid rush of his orgasm surged through her. She clung to him while he spurted every drop of his essence into her womb, and she kissed him until they both lay too exhausted to move.

Time seemed suspended for a while after that. With Del's chest rising and falling beneath her splayed fingers and the faint contractions of her climax drawing his seed deeper inside her, she felt complete peace, as though she were riding an ocean wave.

Celia drifted, allowing herself to imagine life on a world populated solely by the Ley. With a supply of breathers she could exist there, meeting Del for rendezvous beneath the surface of an alien ocean. He could come above now and then...if there was enough land for a settlement. Surely some of the other women who'd given birth to the Ley children would want to come along. Meydala would make provisions for them, wouldn't she?

Celia put the hard questions out of her mind for now. She'd worry about the logistics of living with a merman as a mate later. Right now she just wanted to float on the tide of her imagination.

If only the world would leave her be. An insistent pounding reached her from beyond the door of Del's quarters. Muffled voices rose in alarm outside and Del stiffened next to her, then clutched her and sat up.

"Stay here." Though his voice wavered, his command left no room for argument. She obeyed, letting her fingers trail off his skin as he rose from the bed.

He scooped up his discarded suit, and Celia retrieved her own clothes as well. A pall settled over them as sounds of chaos from the corridor increased.

Once dressed, Del flung the door open to reveal a river of running feet. Ley filled the corridor, eyes wide with confusion, most covering their mouths and noses with their hands. No one spoke coherent words, but Celia sensed their terror as clearly as Del now read their thoughts. He glanced over his shoulder at her and spoke, his voice tight and sharp. "Fumes are coming through the air vents. We must evacuate the sublevels."

Ice cold rage nearly blinded Celia. BioCon had arrived to deal with his threat in the only way they knew how. She vaulted off the bed and squeezed past Del. Still pulling on her vest and leggings, she stumbled into the writhing tide of frightened Ley.

"Everyone's got to move fast," she said more to those in the corridor than to Del. The gas is engineered specifically to kill you all."

The press of bodies grew unbearably tight for a moment then thinned rapidly as if a bottleneck had been cleared. Celia found herself bringing up the rear of the fleeing mob, Del on her heels. She raced ahead but rather than following the crowd at the juncture of the next corridor, she turned in the opposite direction.

Del's fingers closed around her wrist and he yanked her back against him. In the intersecting corridor, a puddle of pink-tinged smoke rolled along the floor, accompanied by a sweet, acidic smell, like fermenting fruit.

"We have to get to the water," Del said before covering his own mouth and nose.

Celia lurched back and used all of her weight to push him out of the intersection, away from the pooling vapors. "You go. I've got to get David out of his cell."

"I won't leave you here."

Celia rounded on him and wrenched her arm from his grasp. "I don't know if that gas will hurt me, but I *know* it will kill you. Get out of here now and I'll catch up. Please, Del. Help the others and see to the children."

He hesitated for an agonizing moment, and Celia's frantic gaze bounced from his face to the advancing layer of gas. There wasn't time to argue. Neither of them would survive if they stayed together.

Again Celia flung herself at him and he caught her. She kissed him once, hard, before placing her hands on his chest and shoving him backward again. "I love you, but you have to GO!"

"I'll find you—" he said and turned away. He muttered something else and raced off, leaving Celia ankle deep in the advancing cloud. For now, she'd assume he said he loved her too, and she'd tell herself there'd be time later when they met again to ask him about it.

As a precaution, she pulled the front of her vest up over her mouth before slogging through the foggy corridor ahead. She passed two vents through which the pink gas spilled like water. Fortunately whatever it was weighed more than air. It would take time to build up enough to overwhelm the Ley — maybe just enough time for them all to escape.

She thought of the children and her heart lurched. Forced back into the tainted water, they risked reinfection with the algae spores, but down here in the sublevels, they'd die for sure. She vowed Ganesh would pay somehow for permitting BioCon to practice genocide on his station.

No sound came from David's cell, and Celia feared the worst. She opened the locking bar and shoved with all her strength against the heavy door, which exploded inward, clanging against the wall. Inside the tiny, dark space, David sat on the floor, his back wedged into the corner. He'd removed the bandages from his ribs and wrapped

them around his lower face as a filter. Above the gauzy, makeshift mask, his dark eyes widened in relief.

"Come on." She laced her fingers through his and pulled him to his feet. "We have to find some breathers and get to the water."

"We're all going to die down here."

Celia dismissed his remark with a sharp wave of her hand. "Let's really stick it to Ganesh by coming out of this alive. Keep your head up and pick up your feet. If we kick up the gas when we run, it'll affect us faster."

David didn't argue. He stumbled out of the cell and kept pace with Celia through the empty sublevels until they reached the hatchery where Bejorin had treated the children.

Celia rifled through the medical supplies and found the breathers she and David had worn when they'd been brought below. She handed one to him. "Take the cartridge out. It's drugged. We'll find clean ones by the moon pool."

"We hope." David caught her gaze. "No one intended for us to survive, Celia."

"Well, fuck that, David. *I* intend it. Let's go."

Panic mounted, clogging Celia's lungs faster than the acrid-smelling gas. She had no idea where the Ley moon pools might be. They could wander for days in the sublevels and never find their way to the water. "David, which way?"

He paused and glanced at the distant ceiling then the damp bulkheads. "Auxiliary air lock is much closer. This way."

They ran together, their steps in perfect synch, pounding away the distance like a heartbeat until they reached the airlock through which Celia had been given admittance to the Ley realm after her escape.

David punched the controls, and they tumbled through the sliding door together. Once inside, he began unwrapping the bandages from his face.

Celia fumbled the oxygen cartridge out of her breather and slapped it into the mixer inside the inner air lock just as the door closed, sealing them in the confined space between the poisoned sublevels and the open sea. Cold water began seeping into the tiny, square chamber, swirling around their feet while the computer replaced the drugged air in her cartridge with a clean mix.

"Hurry, dammit! Come on!" She pounded on the bulkhead and glared at the gauge—fifty percent, sixty, seventy-five percent full. That would have to do. They still had to refill David's before the water in the air lock crested.

Celia tore her cartridge from the slot, jammed it into her breather and handed the device to David. "Put it on and give me yours."

"No." He pushed her aside and dropped his own cartridge in the slot. "I came down here to save you and that's what I'm going to do."

Celia held his gaze for a brief second, during which his cartridge filled to fifty-percent, then stopped. A red tell-tale blinked on the mixer, and the words *Supply Depleted-Refill Master Tanks* flashed on the small display screen.

Water churned at waist level now. The outer door would open in sixty seconds.

"It's fine." David pulled his cartridge from the slot and placed it into his breather. "We just have to get back to Med Lab. Fifty percent capacity is plenty for that."

"I'm going to the surface," Celia countered. "I've got to find the Ley."

David affixed his breather over his face, but before clamping his lips on the mouthpiece he said, "It's up to you, Celia. If you come with me, I'll do what I can to protect you. You know that."

Celia grabbed David's cold fingers and squeezed. "Thank you, but I don't think it'll be enough. I'm safer with the Ley."

The ocean water reached chest level, and Celia released her grip on David's hand. They shared a quick glance, then both pulled their breathers into place and dove below

the water. A moment later the outer air lock opened, disgorging them onto the artificial rock ledge.

David brushed his hand along Celia's arm, then waved once and pushed off toward Med Lab across the open ocean floor. Celia hovered a moment, watching his body slice through the blue expanse.

I'm no longer human. The words echoed in her head. Pride mixed with sadness as she thrust away from the ledge and propelled herself toward the shimmering surface of the sea.

Chapter Eleven

Chaos ruled above the waves.

Celia broke the surface and ripped her breather off. Salt spray whipped around her, and the bone-rattling buzz of hover planes filled the humid air of the ocean dome. Overhead, a fleet of the red-hulled Gavrel Central rescue craft danced on the artificial air currents, some swooping low over the choppy waves, others careening close to the mist-shrouded ceiling of the dome.

Riding the next swell, Celia searched the water for signs of life. The wind stirred by the engines of the hover planes stole her breath, leaving her gasping in nothing but cold pellets of water. Finally she spotted forms floating nearby.

One by one heads broke the churning surface. Pale blond and silver hair plastered down against sleek skulls, wide blue eyes searching like hers, the Ley appeared. Most were adults, but some children clung to their elders in the confusion. The hover planes dove for them, and Celia screamed. They'd escaped death below only to be captured on the surface.

She swam furiously, cursing the pilots and Ganesh and all of humanity until a rescue ladder splashed into the foam-capped water in front of her.

"Grab on!" An amplified voice commanded from above.

Doubt battled with her desire to reunite with the Ley. Where was Del? Did she dare encourage the others to climb into the planes?

She didn't need to. Nearby, Ley males were already helping the children reach for the dangling rescue ladders from two other craft. Where they went, she would follow.

She grabbed the bottom rung and hauled herself out of the water. A uniformed rescue worker hung from the hatch of the plane, steadying the swinging ladder. When she reached the top, he pulled her into the craft.

“Are you injured, ma’am?”

Celia lay for a moment on the plane’s deck, breathing heavily from her exertion. “No. I’m fine. Where are you taking the—” Her question caught in her throat when a rough hand dragged her to her feet.

Captain Ganesh glared at her, a disconcerting mix of hatred and disapproval in his narrowed eyes. Celia reared back, but he held her wrist and a second later he clamped cuffs on her.

“Welcome aboard, Dr. Weston. You and I have a lot to talk about.”

Celia’s blood froze. Her first instinct was to try to throw herself back out of the open hatch. If the fall didn’t kill her, though, plunging into the roiling water without the use of her hands would likely lead to a swift drowning. Before she could move one step in any direction, Ganesh yanked on the cuffs and tossed her bodily into one of the narrow crew seats lining the deck. “Sit tight, Doctor. We have a long ride.”

A million questions raced through Celia’s mind as she sank into the seat, none of which she imagined would warrant an honest answer from Ganesh. Terrified more for the Ley than for herself, Celia weighed her options.

She could fight her way out of the plane—to what end? She could pretend to cooperate until she saw a way to escape or she could remain defiant until Gavrel Security did all the terrible things to her Meydala had promised they would.

At a loss and aching with fear for Del, Celia closed her eyes and prayed to the ocean for a quick and painless end.

* * * * *

The hover plane took her from the ocean dome to the security hub at the center of the sprawling, multi-limbed station. There, armed guards, led by Captain Ganesh, escorted her to a cold, metallic interrogation cell and strongly suggested she sit in a cold, cushionless chair opposite the captain.

Celia placed her cuffed hands on the table and boldly met the security chief's icy stare. "What's happening to the Ley?"

A question flickered through his eyes, and Celia translated for him. "The UMEs. What are you going to do to them? Does BioCon have them? Are they being exterminated?" Her voice broke on the last word. How would she survive if Del and his people were all dead?

Ganesh sat back in his chair and rested one booted foot on the edge of the table. "We're not allowed to touch them by order of Central Command. But you knew that, didn't you? You knew what that bitch was going to do."

Not allowed to touch them? "But they were being gathered into the planes...?"

"Taken to a holding area in the ocean dome and held until further notice. Even BioCon can't touch them. Fortunately the orders didn't say anything about you."

"And the gas? You tried to *kill* them."

"A sedative. It would have made the transfer easier for all of them, but you interfered, so I understand. You helped them escape."

"The only person I helped escape was David Kyoto. Is he all right?"

Ganesh pursed his lips. "Kyoto is fine. Much more cooperative than you. Now it's time for you to answer my questions...and *his*."

The door to the interrogation room opened and a man stepped inside. Above the high collar of his BioCon uniform, his pinched expression spoke volumes. Celia recognized the normally disdainful attitude of Dr. France Emilon, leader of the UME project. He'd hired her and he would very likely be the one to fire her. Mura Vanatu strolled in behind him, a portable computer in her hands.

Neither of them greeted her, not that she expected pleasantries.

"Is there any reason why I'm handcuffed?" she asked. "Am I under arrest? Because I don't recall being formally charged."

Ganesh's dark gaze never wavered. "Conspiracy is a nice charge. We can make that one stick. You collaborated with terrorists to vandalize the ocean intake mechanisms and kidnap Dr. Kyoto."

Celia's jaw dropped. "Is that what *he* told you? Or is that the official story you're going to use to further your cause?"

"My cause is keeping this station safe." Now the security chief rose. Though he wasn't nearly as tall or broad as Del, he was still imposing. Even with the long, dusty metal table between them to serve as a buffer, Celia felt his wrath.

She tried not to shrink back from it and instead transferred her gaze to Emilon. "France, what's the bottom line, here? Are the Ley going to be exterminated?"

Emilon showed the same moment of confusion Ganesh had. He glanced at Mura, and a silent communication passed between them. When he spoke, his quiet voice held controlled fury. "I'm sure the Captain has explained, the UMEs are out of BioCon's jurisdiction now. They have protection from Central Command."

A small victory. Celia allowed herself a smirk. "I bet that's killing you, isn't it?"

"I never had a desire to see them destroyed."

"But you're taking heat for them developing beyond their intended capacity, aren't you? You made them too human, too smart. They figured out a way to breed and created their own society. Lab experiments gone bad."

"They've sabotaged the ocean dome," Ganesh cut in. "And you offered them assistance, Doctor. I wouldn't be so smug, if I were you."

"I helped them cure an illness. I tried to save their children. That's all I did." Celia stared at Emilon. "The only thing I'm guilty of is not spying on them like Ganesh wanted me to."

"I'd say you're guilty of a little more than that." Ganesh nodded to Vanatu who opened the small computer and turned it around to face Celia. "We have some interesting video evidence that shows the level of your...shall we say 'devotion' to the

enemy. They apparently have some kind of power over you. Just how far back this influence goes, is something I'm going to enjoy finding out."

Mura still wouldn't meet Celia's gaze. She activated the computer, and the grainy feed from a surveillance camera began to play on the small screen. The image blurred in and out a bit before becoming clear enough to make out a familiar scene.

Celia caught her breath and sat forward just long enough to see much more than she needed to.

Del's voice played through the tiny speakers, deep and resonate. Celia's chest heaved and her nipples contracted at his damning words.

"You are mine to possess then...? Mine to Command...? Mine to own?"

"Yes," came her incriminating answer, faint but unmistakable and followed by a moan of pleasure when he lowered his mouth to her clit.

Celia looked away from the screen. Heat swept up her body as the recorded conversation continued interspersed with intimate sounds of Del lapping at her flesh. "Are you not mine to do with as I please now? Have you not given yourself to me?"

Celia closed her eyes. The memory of that moment burned in her core. Her clit throbbed, and sweat broke out on her upper lip when her own scream of ecstasy echoed off the metal walls.

"Turn it off." Her voice came out as a strangled whisper.

"Oh I'd like to see more." Ganesh's hand trembled a bit as he reached for the device. "In addition to the part where you beg him to fuck you, I especially like where you tell him he owns you. You pledge your allegiance to a terrorist – albeit in the throes of passion, but still."

"There's no camera in that part of Med Lab. How did you get this footage?"

"After you refused to help me, I had a few portables installed. I figured if I couldn't count on you to bring me the evidence I wanted, I'd have to get it myself. Imagine my surprise when I first saw this."

Celia chanced raising her eyes to Emilon. The man looked gaunt, utterly bloodless. Surely he'd never expected to see her having sex with one of his experimental humanoids. Beside him, Mura sat stone silent, her head bowed. Even with the black curtain of her hair obscuring part of her face, the flush on her olive skin was visible, telegraphing both her embarrassment and arousal.

Celia's growing anger made her tremble. "All this proves is that the Ley have human emotions. They can feel, just like we can."

"It proves they can control you, Dr. Weston!" Ganesh slammed his fist against the table and everyone jumped. Mura shut off the video then, to Celia's immense relief. She might have thanked her colleague for sparing her further humiliation, but since she'd been party to it in the first place it just didn't seem right.

"I'm aware that the UMEs are telepathic," Emilon said. "They could have coerced you into...cooperating with their plans."

"Would you like to believe that, France? Would it make you feel better to think that something you created was capable of controlling my mind and my body, not only to make me conspire against Gavrel Central to sabotage the ocean, but to make me want to mate with him as well? Would you feel better knowing I had no control over what you just watched, that Del manipulated me into that unforgettable orgasm you just saw?" Celia swung her gaze toward Mura. "And it *was* unforgettable, by the way. The best I've ever had. If you thought that was spectacular to watch, you should have seen when he actually did fuck me. It was epic. You don't know what you're missing, honey."

Vanatu coughed. She closed up the computer and gathered it against her chest like a shield. "Am I finished here, Dr. Emilon? I have to get back to work."

"What work?" Celia raised her voice. "Your work is gone, just like mine. There's nothing left but empty rooms and a dying ocean."

"Dr. Vanatu will be going back to BioCon with me, Dr. Weston. I wish I could say the same of you, but..."

"But I'm fired. I know. Thrilled to hear it. I don't want to be party to the manufacture of slaves anymore. Thank you."

Emilon bristled. "You believed in our work, Celia. What happened?"

"I believe in the Ley now, and if I have to take the fall for what happened here, then I will. As long as they're all safe."

Ganesh smiled wickedly and leaned over the table as both Emilon and Vanatu hurried out of the room. "I'm so glad you said that, Dr. Weston. So glad."

* * * * *

Celia spent the rest of the day in a cell, handcuffed and cold in her damp environment, waiting for the worst. Ganesh interrogated her again, demanding detailed accounts of every moment she'd spent in the sublevels.

He played the video of her and Del in Med Lab over and over for her until she couldn't bear to hear the words anymore. Finally she begged him to stop. The memory of it caused her nothing but pain now.

Her demands for an advocate went unheeded, and her pleas for news of the Ley were met with disdain. She asked to see David, and even that request was denied.

Finally she gave up and fell silent, the first and only act that produced any form of irritation from Ganesh. He didn't want her quiet. He wanted her ranting about her rights, begging for information and crying in shame, and she'd given him all that and more. Now she had nothing left. She curled on the floor of her cell and forced herself to go to sleep, telling herself over and over again that at least the Ley would be safe.

When she awoke, a dark-suited figure stood over her. She cringed away from the threat certain this was when her punishment really would begin. Instead of continuing her interrogation though, the man held out a hand to her.

"Dr. Weston? You can come with me. You're free to leave now."

She blinked and sat up, stretching atrophied muscles. Without a word, the man pulled her wrists toward him and opened her cuffs. "Who are you?"

"Rees Daltry, Central Command. I've been assigned to escort you to Meydala. She's arranged for your release."

Celia rubbed her wrists. "She has?"

"I've been given orders to bring you to the Ley."

It couldn't be true. Why would Meydala have used her influence to save Celia at this point? She rose on unsteady legs. "Are you sure?"

Daltry smiled, making his bland face rather handsome. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sure those are my orders."

Doubtful of her turn of fortune, Celia struggled to her feet. She wouldn't put it past Ganesh to trick her. "How did Meydala manage to —"

"I don't ask questions, ma'am. I follow orders. This way. We have a ship waiting to take you back to the ocean dome."

"The ocean? Why?"

"The Ley will be stationed there for a few days until the colony ship comes for them."

Celia dared to allow herself a small smile of triumph. The queen had been right. She knew what she was doing, and she'd made friends in the right places. Still, there had to be a catch somewhere. Central Command wasn't known for its generosity.

With a shrug, Celia followed Daltry out of the cell, certain she'd find out soon enough what price the Ley had truly paid for this coup.

The flight back to the ocean dome took forever. By the time the small hover plane deposited her on the beach, Celia could barely breathe over the pounding of her heart. The Ley had gathered to greet her. They stood in a semicircle around the plane and the crowd parted as soon as Celia stepped off the deck and into the cool sand.

Meydala appeared first, looking regal if a little tired. She opened her arms to Celia. "Daughter, welcome home."

The force of those words almost doubled Celia over. She'd dreamed of being welcomed into a family for so long, but she never imagined the physical ache it would cause.

She might have made it into the queen's embrace, but a figure came out of the crowd and intercepted her. Strong arms scooped her up and spun her around.

"Del!"

He lowered her down the hard ridges of his body and took her face in his hands. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"Is everyone all right? Are they all here?" She wanted to kiss him, to run off someplace secluded and beg him to take her, but first she had to be sure her adopted people had all made it to safety.

"Yes." He smiled and brushed a quick kiss over her lips. "Everyone is here, and soon, we'll all be going home. Meydala has secured a colony for us."

Celia shook her head. "I can't believe she was able to bargain with Central Command."

Del kissed her again, longer this time, deeper. "You must have faith in the queen, and in the ocean."

Celia wrapped her arms around Del and gazed out across the sea of hopeful faces and beyond to the strangely still waters of Gavrel's ocean. "I do now. And I think I always will."

Chapter Twelve

On the third day after the evacuation of the sublevels word traveled through the Ley camp that the colony ship had arrived.

Anticipation mixed with fear rippled through the Ley community. Meydala had indeed kept her promise. She'd secured a world on which her people could settle, but what kind of world? Could they dare to hope for a place all their own, or would it be just a corner of someone else's territory where the Ley would once again be expected to serve human masters?

Del seemed hopeful. He spent the early evening staring at the dome sky, watching artificial stars pop out of the deepening blue.

Celia stood beside him, her hands wrapped around his biceps both for the comfort of physical contact and to steady their trembling.

"On a colony of your own, you'll have to name the stars and constellations," she said, tilting her head back to follow his gaze.

He smiled. "I like that idea. Everything should have a name."

"Has Meydala decided on a name for the colony itself?"

"Not yet. She says we need to see it first, to taste the salt of the waves and smell the air before we can know what to call it. I'll be content just to call it home."

Celia nodded and let Del slide his hand across her shoulders. "That'll do for me too. I haven't been home in a long time."

Darkness fell in the ocean dome, but no one slept that night.

In the morning the transfer began. Nine hundred and ninety-two Ley—among them sixteen children and eight human females including Celia—marched through the

connecting corridors from the ocean dome to the docking port where their Central Command colony ship awaited.

Residents of Gavrel Station lined the observation decks. Some cheered the procession while others hissed and shouted insults, apparently still believing the tales of horror Ganesh and his staff had disseminated to the news groups.

Celia tried not to stare back as she kept pace with Del. His strength prevented her rubbery knees from buckling. The pressure of his hand clasped around hers kept the terror at bay. She forced herself not to think about what would happen if the armed Central Command security operatives hadn't been there to keep the surging crowd of onlookers contained.

When they reached the space dock, a column of humans lined the access ramp leading to the ship. Celia recognized some of her acquaintances from Gavrel Medical and the Environmental Sciences Department, friends of David's and members of his engineering staff. Their faces bore none of the hostility she saw in the spectators, and for that, she was grateful. She'd had her fill of disdain for her choice to give herself, body and soul, to the Ley.

At the far end of the assembled group, David stood a few steps apart from the others. He wore his official Gavrel Central uniform and he looked good in it—fit and strong, if a little stiff. His gaze remained riveted to the deck until she and Del drew parallel to his position.

While the others filed behind them into the ship, Celia turned to face her friend.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you," he began, his voice tight. "I did everything I could."

Celia put her hand on his arm. "It's all right. I don't blame you for anything that happened."

David glanced up finally and his black eyes shimmered. "I'm campaigning to have the ocean drained and repaired. It's going to be a long battle, but I think I can win it."

Relief lightened the pressure that had plagued Celia's lungs since their walk to freedom had begun. She smiled. "I wish I could help somehow."

"If you stay —"

"Oh David, I can't. You know I can't."

A brief look passed between David and Del, one Celia couldn't quite decipher. "If you ever want your old life back—I think I could find you a job." A half smile tilted David's lips, and he clasped her hands in his.

"My life is with Del," Celia said, grateful for the chance to say it aloud. "But thanks for the offer."

They parted, and David gave them a salute then stepped back into the column of well-wishers. The noise of the crowd increased when the colony ship's engines roared to life. Time was up. Everyone had boarded except for Del and Celia.

After a final, furtive glance at the assembled crowd and a wave in David's direction, Celia followed Del into the ship and never looked back.

* * * * *

One year later

Celia brushed sun-streaked bangs out of her eyes and smiled as she began the short walk from her hut down to the edge of the water where Del waited for her. Each footprint Celia left in the sand sank a little deeper. Apprehension slowed her pace, though reasonably, she knew she had nothing to worry about.

After months of treatments with Bejorin, she was finally ready to make her first trip into the ocean of the new Ley homeworld. Celia reached up to run a fingertip over the two, narrow gill slits below her jaw.

Today she would join her husband and visit the underwater complex where the majority of the Ley spent their time. The prospect of swimming underwater without a breather thrilled and terrified her. This had been her dream for as long as she could remember, and yet she had to force herself to cross the last few feet of sand and entwine her trembling fingers with Del's.

“Don’t worry, love. You will acclimate in a few minutes, just as all the Ley do.”

“But I’m not Ley.” They’d had this discussion before. She would never be entirely the same species as Del, but with the DNA restructuring Bejorin had done for her and several of the other women who had accompanied the UMEs to their new colony, she would also not be fully human either. Now she would be able to take up residence in the sprawling underwater complex Central Command engineers had built for the Ley.

She’d be leaving the beachside hut where she and Del had spent the last twelve months living during the construction. Today she would take her place among the people she proudly called her family.

Celia kissed Del’s cheek and took one last deep breath of salty air. This was her home now. Without regret she turned away from the beach and made her way to the water. Today she would bid the land goodbye and truly become one with the man who had captured her heart.

About the Author

Drawn to spicy tales of adventure from an early age, Bernadette Gardner made the leap from writing hard science fiction to writing erotic romance in 2005 and has never looked back.

Now multi-published, Bernadette also writes paranormal, fantasy and contemporary titles under the name Jennifer Colgan. When not exploring distant galaxies or alternate universes, Bernadette can be found at home with her husband of fifteen years, two children and one slightly neurotic Dalmatian. She spends her spare time reading, quilting and haunting the local craft stores and looks forward to bringing steamy stories to her fans for decades to come.

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

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