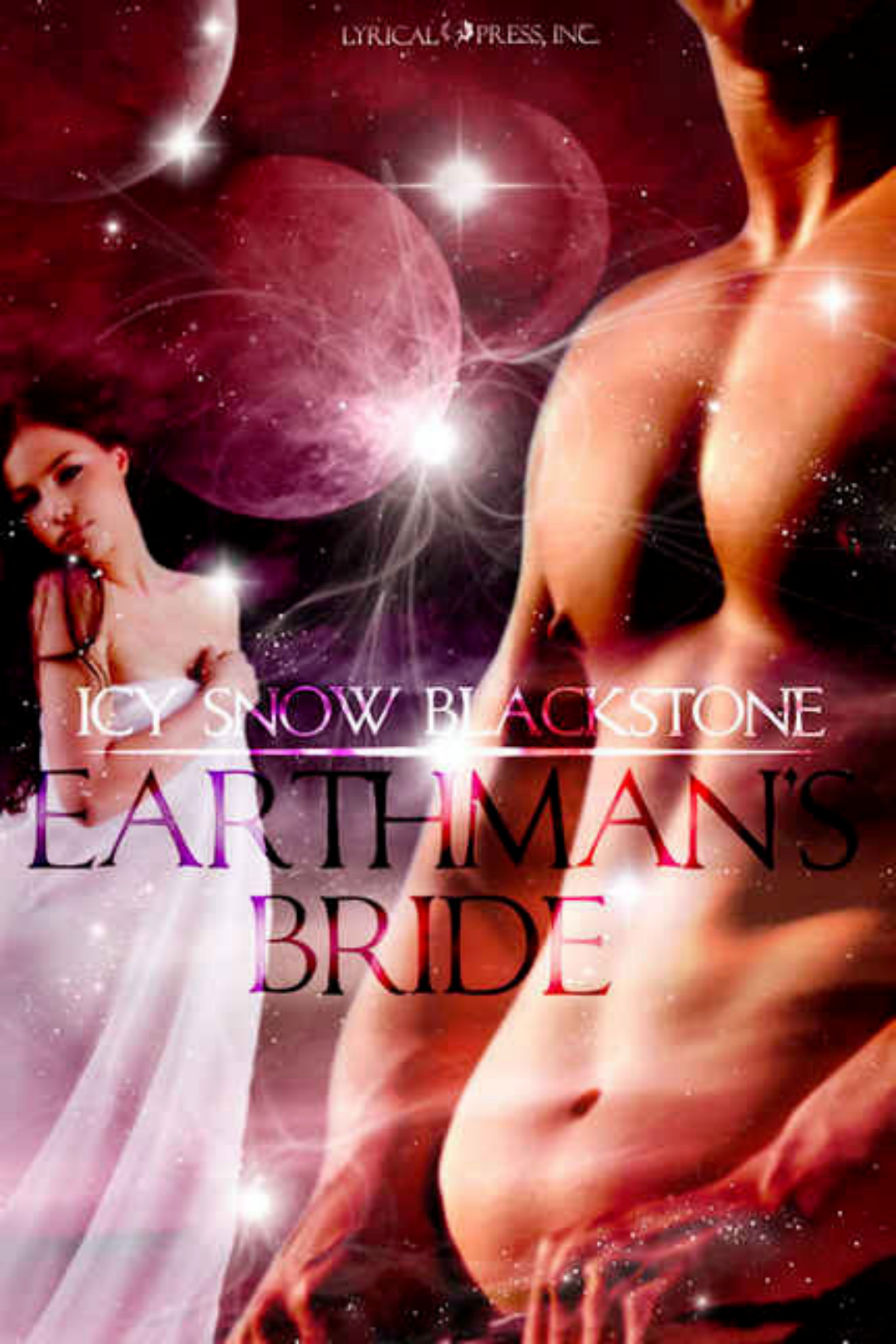


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ICY SNOW BLACKSTONE

EARTHMAN'S
BRIDE

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

Lyrical Press, Inc.

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Rebeka's orders are to marry, then betray—but love gets in the way.

Rebeka Spearman's planet is at war with the Earthmen. The invaders have overrun her home world and taken possession of its wealth, but now Rebeka's father has a plan to end the conflict: Under a flag of truce, he offers Rebeka in marriage to Philip Hamilcar, the Earthmen's leader.

Rebeka and her android bodyguard have a hidden agenda: to kill Phillip and destroy the invaders from within. What no one knows is that Darius, the android, has an empath chip within his artificial intelligence system, allowing him to feel emotions.

Now a love triangle is on the rise between three very different hearts. War, betrayal and passion collide—can they untangle their choices in time?

Highlight

Philip held out his hand, and Rebeka took it without hesitation, and when he smiled at that, she smiled back.

They were behind the high hedge now. Philip glanced toward the terrace. He couldn't see Darius and he was certain the robot wasn't able to see them, either.

Without warning, he caught her by the arms, pulled her toward him and kissed her, thinking as he did it, *Fool! Idiot! She'll call for Darius and he'll pound you into the ground and you'll lose your life and your chance to make peace just because you're getting a hormonal itch for Spearman's daughter!*

But she didn't move, didn't fight, didn't do anything as he pressed his mouth against hers, feeling the soft lips open slightly and her warm breath float gently onto his tongue. When he released her, Rebeka's hand went to her mouth. She was breathing quickly.

"You're the first man who's ever kissed me," she said softly, and he was startled at the—yes, God, it was awe—in her voice.

Since she didn't appear to be about to yell for her bodyguard, he asked, "Then may I also be the second?" and kissed her again.

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Dedication

To Mary Marvella, Friend, Writer, one of the Three Muskettes.

I was sixteen when my brother, Taryn, and his hunting-mates killed the artificial man. They buried his body at the foot of Mount Scar, then came boasting to our village of what they'd done.

"Idiots!" Old Mara, my nurse, had railed at them, turning white with fear. "Now, the Earthmen will come after us and kill us all because of your foolishness!"

Mara was right to be afraid. The war with the Earthmen had gone on for three decades and we lived every day in fear of their attacks. Nevertheless, no one came seeking the mechanical being. Never again mentioning the act, we hoped it was forgotten.

Later, however, Taryn took me to the spot, to allay my fears.

How could I know how important the creature buried beneath our feet would become to my life?

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Chapter 1

"See?" Taryn said, pointing to a small hill of rocks a few feet away from where the rise of Scar's base began. "Up there, by that outcropping of granite?"

They had hobbled Rebeka's little bay and his own big roan, leaving them under the shade of the pine grove's branches. Walking up the gentle rise to the synthetic man's grave, Taryn adjusted his long-legged stride to match his sister's shorter one.

Several times, he turned to offer her his hand, shifting his spear to the other as he helped her over the grass-covered hillocks and half-buried rocks protruding from the fertile, red-clay soil.

Now, as he indicated the spot, Rebeka turned to look past his pointing finger, putting up a hand to shade her eyes.

There it was, a little cairn of broken granite and flint, long and narrow and in a vague body shape. Growing out of the crevices between the rocks were several thick-leaved plants, blossoming with bright yellow daisies, not native to this section of the valley, and already partially hidden by the tall, tough grass.

"You planted flowers on its grave, Taryn." She looked back at him. "That was kind."

Her brother snorted derisively and shook his head.

"There was nothing kind about it. If I put them there for any reason, it was to prevent the creature from rising.

Perhaps the flowers' roots will tie his limbs the way they once used oak wythes to bind other unnatural beings to the soil."

Rebeka's smile faded. With a gasp, she looked up the hill again.

Suddenly, it was as if she could see it: a rust-encased metal hand forcing itself through the soil, clumps of grass and clots of dirt in violent upheaval as the mechanical man burst from the rocks, daisies dangling from its ribcage.

"Oh, it couldn't!" Without warning, her chin began to quiver, and she burst into tears, covering her eyes to blot out the imagined scene.

"Here, now!" Taryn reached out, drawing her towards him. "Don't cry."

Briefly, his voice wavered between concern and annoyance, a typical warrior's response to a woman's tears.

He hadn't meant to frighten her. Putting his arms around her, he patted her shoulder a little awkwardly, his other hand creeping up to stroke her dark, lustrous hair.

"Don't worry, Beka. That thing won't come back. Ever."

"H-he won't?"

"No! And if somehow, he did—why, I'd just kill him again," he promised, and made a fierce face at the grave, shaking one fist until she laughed. He hugged her tightly. "You needn't ever be afraid of that thing, Beka. He's probably nothing more than a pile of rust by now."

"He didn't really look like us, Taryn?" Her voice was like that of a child waking from a nightmare. "He didn't really look human, did he?"

He shrugged, not daring to let her see how shaken he'd been at first sight of the thing.

He'd thought it was a real man, albeit a giant, confronting him, tall, wearing a short tunic revealing strong, muscular legs, and its face—gods, the completely human look of stunned surprise on those handsome features! The artificial man had been the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen, an unholy creation in its perfection, and he hoped to never encounter such a being again.

"No, Beka. He barely looked human at all."

"What if the Earthmen come looking for him?" The aliens themselves were monsters used to frighten children into obedience. Old Mara had done it often enough to all of them.

"I doubt they'll be doing that."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I think it was an old model, probably almost obsolete, otherwise it wouldn't have tried to run away." The creature's skin-like covering had been worn in spots, so thin the brambles it had walked through had torn its legs in several places, so the metal casing showed through. "It was clumsy and wearing out. I think it was sent out here to lose itself because it was obvious it hadn't been maintained."

From time to time over the past thirty years, corroded metal shells had been found, all that remained of the things, abandoned by their creators when they became defective.

"I think the Earthmen have some law about destroying the creatures when they are of no use, so I doubt anyone will ever come to see what happened to it."

At least, he hoped that was so.

Reassured, Rebeka pulled away from him, and ran the last few feet to the rock-piled mound, reaching out to snap off one of the long green stems. Holding it up like a scepter, she returned to her brother's side. Gathering her skirts and bobbing him a curtsy, she touched the flower to his forehead.

"Taryn Spearman, I declare you a Warrior First Class, for the bravery you have shown this ... uh—when did it happen, anyway?"

"Last month sometime."

"—for the bravery you showed last month sometime." She held out the daisy. "Take this flower as the symbol of your victory, Warrior."

Silently, Taryn took the flower from her hand, sniffed it, and with an elaborate bow, slid the end of the stem under the leather strap attaching his knife-sheath to his belt.

He didn't tell Rebeka he hadn't felt very brave when the creature had blundered upon them. Briefly, he'd been very frightened, but his training had taken over. Wielding his weapon to drive the thing backward, he'd acquitted himself as Alcin Spearman's son should. It had tripped over a piece of tree branch half-covered by soil, landing on its back in the dirt, and he and his hunting-mates had used its momentary helplessness to smash in its head with rocks.

Rebeka smiled at him, bestowing a look of total hero-worship.

If Taryn had been a weaker man, that adoring gaze would have made him weep. Mentally rebuking himself for allowing

his thoughts to be so sentimental, he looked up at the mountain, where the sun was now silhouetting the high peak.

"It's going to be dark soon. We'd better go."

As she followed him down the hill, she turned to look back one last time, at the rock-covered mound, and the thought came, with surprising sadness, that it seemed a little lonely, hidden there among the high grasses.

* * * *

Riding back to the village, Taryn found himself thinking about the mechanical man's death.

It had come upon them by accident, he was certain, and had looked as surprised as they as it burst through the bushes and found itself face-to-face with three young humans. There had definitely been a look of astonishment on the man-like face, and, as they raised their spears, he thought he had also seen fear. Though it was bigger than they, taller, and definitely stronger, it tried to escape rather than fight. That was why it had fallen, amid a shower of daisies, and they'd been able to finish it off, pounding its head with rocks, until the artificial skin had shredded and fallen away. Instead of blood and brains, wires and little black chips, and tiny *angelica* filaments burst from its skull.

Nevertheless, as the creature frantically rolled its eyes in its ruined skull—he had been startled to see they were as blue as Rebeka's and looked just as human—Taryn had felt a shameful stab of pity. He'd quickly quashed the feeling as the mechanical man shuddered once and lay still.

It hadn't made a sound, not even crying out.

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Perhaps it hadn't felt any pain. Perhaps it had simply stopped working once its internal mechanisms were damaged. Any thoughts it might have had simply *ceased* as if someone had flipped a switch. But it had looked so *real*, so *human*, that briefly, while his two friends were yelling and congratulating themselves for destroying one of the Earthmen's metal servants, he could almost believe he'd killed a fellow being.

And then, he had seen the little yellow daisy, its petals crushed and bruised, still clutched in the de-activated fist.

The sight of that little flower had bothered him.

Perhaps that was the reason he'd come back later that night—alone—while the others slept. Why he had dug up the daisy plants from the ravine near the village and carried them, tucked in his saddlebag, to the grave. Moving aside some of the rocks, he pressed the plants into the soil, packing the pieces of stone tightly around them.

If anyone had asked him why, he couldn't have given an answer. Certainly, it wasn't shame at what they had done. Could it really be as Rebeka said, a kindness, for a creature dying alone and far from its own kind?

He had frightened his little sister though he hadn't meant to. Sometimes, he thought she was too sensitive for her own good. Perhaps it was because Father pampered her so. She was nearly seventeen, and surely, having lived under the Earthmen's domination all her life and survived the many attacks upon their village, she shouldn't have been so afraid.

Yet she *was*—fearful, and timid, and gentle.

Truly, I love you, little sister. Taryn thought the words he'd never say aloud, words that would make him seem white-

blooded in the eyes of his hunting-mates. *I'd never willing hurt you.*

And he'd kill anyone who did!

Rebeka was his only sister and that was enough of a reason for him to adore her. At the age of a half-century, his father was still lusty enough to continually satisfy his four wives, occasionally managing to get one or more with child.

Alcin Spearman had seven other sons, but only one daughter. Though his father obviously loved Rebeka and made no excuses for spoiling her, Taryn had often heard him marveling at siring a girl-child. He'd also heard Alcin tell his uncle Talbot that the ale he'd consumed the night of her conception had undoubtedly weakened his seed and caused it to form that well-favored, intelligent—but regretfully *female*—child.

When the baby was born, and its sex confirmed, Talbot had poured himself a clay cup of ale and commented, off-handedly, "I could have done it after swilling half a hogshead of ale. You're getting old, Big Brother!"

Alcin had struck him, knocking him to the floor.

Talbot had gotten up, punched his brother in the belly with his fist, and dodged as Alcin swung at him, and continued swinging. At last, a fist connected, and they persisted for several minutes, pounding at each other, until the anger was replaced by drunken good-nature, and Alcin, bloody and bruised, went off to see his daughter and barely-conscious wife.

"I'll never let that happen again!" he'd declared, and made certain that, whenever he went in to one of his wives, he

drank nothing stronger than spring water for hours beforehand. When one of Alcin's other wives announced she was again with child, there was no doubt in his mind that this time he would have another son, and Taryn saw his father's faith rewarded with the arrival of a new half-brother before the year was out.

Taryn could not personally see why his father would have been unhappy to have another daughter. He realized sons were needed to go hunting, and to help defend the village against the Earthmen, but sons would sooner or later need other men's daughters to become their wives, to warm their beds and provide bodies to slake their burgeoning lusts, and if there were none, they might have to resort to wife-stealing as had been the custom centuries before.

Taryn wasn't looking forward to the day when someone offered for Rebeka, had often asked himself how he would feel if one of his mates decided to lust after his sister, asking Alcin for permission to court her. He himself had been initiated quite early into the enjoyment of a female's body, by one of the women who lived in the black tents on the northern outskirts of the village. Taryn found each visit there sweet and totally pleasurable to the senses as well as the emotions, but wasn't certain how he'd feel when someone took his little sister to bed and got her big-bellied with child.

Will I protest? Could I give up a friend to keep Rebeka at home a little longer?

He knew one day it would happen. His father had already delayed announcing her readiness for marriage, but she was

seventeen now and he was certain the young men would soon come calling.

Though Taryn was nearly nine years older than Rebeka, he had always been protective of his half-sister. Perhaps it was because her mother was so young when she was born, having no idea how to care for an infant. Anemoni had spent a good deal of Rebeka's babyhood weeping and wringing her hands while Old Mara tended the child.

The old nurse had helped raise all Alcin's children. Alcin declared she had been sent by the gods, else he might have given Anemoni back to her parents until she grew up a little!

Unlike Taryn, who was blond and brown-eyed and fair and as tall as his father, Rebeka was small, her long hair dark with bluish lights shining through it when it was touched by the sun. Her eyes were as blue and clear as the sky, and so trusting and guileless that sometimes her brother was actually afraid for her.

Looking at her as she rode before him on her little bay gelding—and wouldn't Father rail about that, since it was the custom for young women of marriageable age to ride sidesaddle, to prevent an accidental tearing of that precious maidenhead—he studied the lustrous fall of dark hair where it lay against her back, bouncing in time to the animal's uneven gait as it trod over the mounds of grass. Abruptly, his heart seemed to swell with a tenderness he'd never felt before.

Dear little sister! Oh, gods, let me enjoy being her big brother for just a little longer.

* * * *

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

Before the day the Earthmen arrived, Tusteya had been a peaceful little planet. Afterward, it had lain in broken, smoking ruin, the lives of its people destroyed forever.

Though not as technologically advanced as the men from Earth, they *did* have long-range wireless communications, a great love of music and the arts, and were fairly sophisticated as far as their progress in medicine and other sciences. They also had their share of wars but at the present—and for nearly three centuries—the four tribes who made up the population of Tusteya were at peace.

When the first shuttle from the Terran explorer ship, *Condor*, landed on the plain lying between the capital city of Ulea and Mount Scar, the Tusteyans weren't frightened. Although they had no space-traveling vehicles of their own, they had received other guests from the stars, and in fact, did a very profitable commerce with several planets. Expecting these visitors wished to do the same, young Alcin Spearman, as First Counselor of the Elius, the warrior caste that ruled Ulea, had welcomed them with friendship.

* * * *

That attitude changed within the short space of half an hour.

The Earthlings' leader, a tall, dark-haired man in a blue uniform, had wasted no time in explaining his mission: to find worlds which contained materials, minerals, natural resources, which their planet—he always referred to it as *Terra* in spite of calling himself an *Earthman*—no longer possessed, having squandered them through the millennia.

Once such resources were found, the planet in question became a part of the United Terran Federation.

"Our sensors show you have an abundance of *angelica*," he said, holding out a small hand unit on whose screen a jumble of words and numbers made statements that Alcin couldn't understand.

Angelica was the mineral which had been discovered on so many planets three centuries before that it had replaced gold as the galaxy's most precious substance, being made into currency and jewelry, as well as being used in medicine, electronics, communication, and defense.

"I'm sorry," Alcin handed back the unit. "I don't read your language."

Surely the Earthman had known that.

Marc Renault waved away his apology, studying the young man as he spoke. *A callow youth, probably not much more than twenty, too young to be a leader, probably no experience in warfare, easy to overpower.*

"This simply shows the location of the angelica deposits, and the estimated amount of raw, as well as processed, material, they will yield."

He studied the screen a moment.

"—and also how long it should take to deplete the deposits."

"And that is...?" Alcin was curious as to where this was leading.

"About nine hundred years."

"We use *angelica* ourselves, in manufacturing, as well as in trading." Alcin's attention was momentarily distracted by the young Lieutenant who stood behind Renault.

Twice now, the young man had seemed about to speak, as if to repudiate something his superior said, then abruptly remained silent.

"If your Federation wishes to establish a trade exchange. I'm certain the Council will be pleased to speak with you."

Renault shook his head. "I'm afraid you don't understand, Spearman."

Alcin stiffened. Though the Earthman was relatively polite, the young man had already sensed a slightly disparaging tone in his voice. Using his last name instead of his title of *Counselor* was very close to an insult. Also, he didn't like the accompanying Lieutenant's nervousness, or the slightly aggressive stance of the men he'd brought with him, noting the heavy pistol-like weapons strapped to each uniformed thigh.

Why would men on a peace mission come armed?

"I'm not here to ask you to join us. I'm here to secure your surrender into Federation custody."

"Surrender!" Alcin was astounded at this statement. "That indicates some crime has been committed, Captain Renault. I suggest you explain yourself, and your Federation's reasoning."

"It's very simple," came the answer, delivered with cool self-possession. "The Federation needs what Tusteya has, and intends to take it. You and your Council will place your planet into the custody of the United Terran Federation. Your people

will be protected from outside interference, and in exchange, we will transport the processed *angelica* to Terra for our own use."

For a moment, Alcin simply stared at him. He couldn't believe what the man had said. What bravery—or total stupidity—to come into someone's home and announce that he was taking over.

"We have no *outside interference*." He could barely keeping the sarcasm out of his voice. "What you mean is that we will become prisoners on our own planet."

"I wouldn't look at it that way—" Renault began, only to have Alcin interrupt, "How *would* you look at it then, Captain?"

He forced his voice to remain calm, glancing over at one of the guards who stood behind his chair, seeing a gloved hand slide slowly towards the rifle resting against his leg as the captain was speaking.

Slowly, he shook his head and the man relaxed.

"This isn't an invitation!"

"It is, Counsellor," Renault replied. "Unless you wish it otherwise. Most planets are honoured to be offered this opportunity!"

"They must have a different criteria for the definition of honour than mine."

Renault shrugged. "Either way, Tusteya will become a part of the Federation!"

"I think not, Captain." Immediately, Alcin was on his feet. Behind him, the guards came to attention. "That's no invitation but an order, and I and the Council would have to

be insane to willingly place our planet—and all our people—into slavery."

Renault also got to his feet. The sound of his chair being pushed away from the table was lost in the noise of rifles being jerked into the Tusteyan guards' hands and cocked, all aimed at the men who stood behind him.

It had happened so fast none of them had been able to draw their own weapons.

"I think, Counsellor, you may regret this," Renault said softly.

Alcin took a deep breath. "Tusteyans don't bow to the yoke very well, Captain. If we do regret it, *you* will regret it more."

He gestured towards the open doors of the Council Hall.

"You will leave here. *Now*. Return to your ship and go back to your Federation and tell them Tusteya refuses to be enslaved to support a world we hadn't heard of until an hour ago."

Without another word, Renault and his men turned and walked out. It was to Alcin's credit—and his later regret—that he allowed them to leave unmolested.

As soon as the last Earthman had disappeared down the steps, he found his brother, Talbot, telling him to warn the other cities of what was going to happen.

"You're certain they're going to attack?" Talbot asked. "Brother, how can we defend ourselves? We have nothing that approaches their technology weapon-wise!"

"Then, we'll simply have to hide and hope some of us survive."

Terse, urgent messages were sent to the Counsellors of the other cities telling them to muster their civil guards, and send the townspeople into the hills for protection. No one had any idea what weapons would be used against them, but Alcin was certain that, as his brother had said, it would be ones for which they had no defence.

Two hours after Renault and his men arrived back on board the *Condor*, Ulea was blasted into ruins.

The other cities followed its destruction. Many were killed as few had time to flee and hide before the attacks started. In a matter of minutes, three-fourths of the population of the four cities had been killed outright, or buried under the debris of falling buildings to later die of their injuries.

The Tusteyans couldn't know that even as their civilization was being destroyed, the young Lieutenant, Philip Hamilcar, was risking his own career defending them.

"Sir, you can't do this!" he burst out as soon as he'd saluted and been recognised.

"Yes, I can, Lieutenant—and am, as a matter of fact—even as we speak."

"It's unethical, sir, immoral! To destroy a people simply because they don't want to be slaves? Because they refuse to allow themselves to be conquered by an invading force?" He allowed himself a little ironic laugh. "Does that sound familiar? How many times has that happened to Terra, Sir?"

"What is this, Hamilcar?" Renault shifted from the captain's console to face him. "We've taken other planets. You've never protested before."

"We never attempted to destroy those planets, sir! These people received us in friendship, unlike the others." The young man shook his head. "Perhaps that justified the threat of force we used with them, but it was just that—a threat—and nothing more. The Tusteyans are a little too much like us, sir. I don't think they're going to give up without a fight!"

Hamilcar's prediction was correct.

The survivors tried to rescue those buried and failed. They took their wounded, and joined the others in the hills surrounding the valley.

Alcin, his brother, and two surviving council members, led their people to the eastern slopes of Mount Scar on the other side of the valley, where there were ravines and foothills to hide in. Returning at night to Ulea, they scavenged what supplies, and other items—books, medicines, cooking utensils, blankets, and clothing—they felt their people would need. Then they returned to their camp.

They had lived on Mount Scar for thirty years now.

Alcin and Talbot had been young men when they'd arrived, neither married, and neither with a child. At that time, there had been three dozen survivors of the warrior caste. Now, there were nearly a hundred and fifty, many of them children born after the attack.

They'd settled their people in, and welcomed anyone who wanted to join them, trained all the men to fight with what they had available, and placed themselves on alert against further attack from the Earthmen.

The other leaders had done the same.

Within hours, the Earthmen had returned to the ruins of Ulea, sending out rescue squads to discover anyone surviving under the rubble, using their lasers and machines to dig them out. A triage centre was set up, where medical staff from the ship put back together the Tusteyans' broken bodies and nursed them back to health.

Leading the *Search-and-Rehabilitate* Squad was Lieutenant Philip Hamilcar, reluctantly obeying his Captain's orders.

As soon as Renault was assured that the people of Tusteya were under control, the *Condor* left orbit. There were several more planets to be surveyed. He would come back on the return trip to Terra, he said.

No one knew when that would be. To all extents and purposes, Philip Hamilcar and his men had been abandoned.

There had been little time for him to reflect on that. When the Astorii, the Elius, the Ryneans, and the Vantas had come from the hills to attack them, he'd ordered his men not to shoot to kill, and to retrieve all bodies, attempting to save the lives of any Tusteyans who had been wounded.

The Astorii were completely overcome. Every one of them had been captured and brought before Lieutenant Hamilcar in the field tent set up next to the medical pavilion on the plain.

"We wish to rebuild Ulea," he said, forcing his voice to sound harsh and authoritative when what he really wished to do was tell them all how he hated what he was saying, that he agreed with and applauded what they had done. "Help us and you will be treated well. Refuse, or try to sabotage our efforts, and I will have no choice but to order my men to kill anyone who does so."

The one surviving Astorii counsellor assured the young lieutenant his people would be totally cooperative.

They were set to removing the wreckage of the city, alien and Tusteyan working side-by-side, bodies bared to the heat of the summer sun. The soldiers abandoned their uniforms, wearing makeshift tunics that resembled common Tusteyan-wear. Looking at them from a distance, Lieutenant Hamilcar reflected that it was impossible to tell the Earthmen from natives.

Eventually, all the wreckage had been cleared, the buildings rebuilt, and the streets repaved.

The Earthmen had been given enough supplies to last them a year, as well as a food synthesizer, but now there were more people than the machine could provide for. All needed nourishment, so any who had knowledge of farming or animal husbandry were sent to the pastures outside the city, to live in little settlements which existed for no other reason than to make certain those in Ulea were supplied with plenty of food. Other Tusteyans were set up inside the city to act as managers of that food. Animal produce was turned over to the Astorii weavers and textile workers to be manufactured into cloth or thread or other items.

The Lieutenant reinstated limited trade with other planets, promoting commerce that would also fill the Federation's treasury.

Many of the Tusteyan women became servants in the rebuilt Counsellor's Hall where Hamilcar and his men now lived. A day care centre was set up and some of the older women were ordered to tend the few surviving children while

the younger women toiled in the Hall, cooking, cleaning rooms, and doing laundry and other domestic chores, and eventually, as always happened with the conquered, to find their way—willingly or by force—into the aliens' beds.

Once life on Tusteyna had settled itself into some kind of routine, Philip Hamilcar had time to consider what had happened to him and his men, and the more he thought of this injustice, the more he was filled with an anger which would stay with him for the rest of his life. He knew why *he* was being left behind, but to maroon his men simply because he'd been rash enough to speak back to his commander...

He still had no reasonable explanation for what he had done. He'd always considered himself level-headed and knew when to keep his mouth shut. His actions had bordered on mutiny and he fully expected a court martial. Instead, he'd been left to become governor of the Tusteyans.

Governor? An ironic smile had twisted his mouth as he'd looked up at the sky, as if he were able to see the *Condor* speeding away. He was as much a prisoner of the planet as its people were *his* prisoners.

Without realizing it, he transferred the rage he felt towards his commander and the Federation who'd abandoned him and his men, to the Tusteyans. He'd defended these beings and been stranded for his compassion, and now that compassion died.

He made certain his captives were fed and kept in good health, but other than that, within the space of a few months, he became a complete dictator, cruel and uncaring and unfair,

and he remained that way, becoming more pitiless and harsh with each year the *Condor* failed to return.

The tribes were now waging open warfare on the invaders, attacking whenever anyone ventured outside the city. All these raids yielded were more prisoners to be brought into the Earthmen's grasp, and fewer members of the tribes to fight them.

Eventually, the Vantas fell to the Earthmen's superior firepower, joining the Astorii in the communes that now made up Ulea. The Ryneans managed to withstand the invaders for another dozen years before succumbing.

Now, only the Elius were left to fight the enemy.

At last, a quarter of a century after he'd been left on Tusteya, Philip Hamilcar died, and his son, another Philip, took his place. Educated by the remaining Earthmen, nourished on his father's hate and embittered tales of his faraway home, the younger Hamilcar was thought to be a worse tyrant than his father—to such an extent that Alcin Spearman was forced to form a desperate plan to rid his planet of the aliens, once and for all.

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Chapter 2

"Look at her, Martin." Alcin held back the oak slat blinds from the window.

Master Martin's hut was one of the few permanent dwellings in the mountain camp and Rebeka was sitting in its little garden. Her slender body, in its bright grass-green gown, was curled into a little hollow she had made in the grape arbour growing there. Her gleaming head was bowed over the book she held. It had been loaned to her by Master Martin, one of the precious few he had managed to retrieve from the wreckage of the university library before he followed the others from the city.

"She's a beautiful child, Alcin," the old man said.

"Beautiful, and intelligent. I've enjoyed having her as a pupil."

The slat slid from her father's fingers as he looked away.

"Am I doing the right thing, Martin? Do I have the right to do this?"

"You're her father, Alcin, but you're also our leader."

Martin's voice held a soothing note that was lost on his friend.

"I think you'll do what you feel you must."

Alcin raised the glass he held, taking a small sip of wine.

"Aren't we an odd pair?" he laughed ironically, holding up the glass to the sunlight. "A rabbit-skin-clad barbarian and a former physician. Drinking hundred-year-old wine from lead crystal goblets, and discussing whether or not to sacrifice my daughter to an alien's lust."

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He shook his head in mock wonder, making the golden braid hanging over his shoulder swing.

"Did it take me only thirty years to backslide into barbarism and you that little time to be reduced to teaching adolescents what they need to know to become adults?"

Alcin was still sensitive to the way his people's mores and morality had changed since Ulea's destruction. Before that, a man had only been allowed one wife, but afterward, with more females than males in their makeshift village, the men had been urged to breed with as many women as possible, in order to supply the tribe with new blood.

It was only because of Spearman's insistence that they hadn't become total savages, waylaying women and mounting them where they stood. He'd insisted his men marry the women they chose, though the number of wives one could have was determined by how many he thought he could manage. Most stopped at two. Alcin and Talbot were the only men in the village with enough stamina to handle more, at four wives each.

He drank again, a larger swallow this time.

"You're no barbarian, Alcin," Martin replied. "Even if you *are* dressed in animal skins and carry a spear. We've merely *adjusted* to our surroundings, that's all."

He gestured at the room in which he sat—his *office*, the back room of a little hut built of unsanded oak planks held together with wooden nails. Shelves on the walls supported his precious books, covering the subjects he had felt would be important in their new life.

Briefly, he sighed as he thought about the house he had owned in Ulea, with its many rooms containing finely-crafted furniture, beautiful artwork, and smiling servants.

There had been a garden, too, filled with lush plants and exotic trees, where he'd taken his women—as beautiful as the flowers that grew there—to seduce them on the thick carpet of grass.

His garden had been destroyed in the *Condor's* attack, reduced to a smoking pile of burnt wood and crushed foliage. In his house, the one woman he'd decided to love forever had perished, and with her had died Martin Celsius' love life. He hadn't touched a woman since that day, keeping his wife's image in his heart, telling himself he never wanted another.

"As for me, I certainly had no idea on the day the Earthmen arrived that within a few hours I would begin a journey taking me from being a highly-esteemed professor of medical studies to this little hut where I now tutor my friends' children in the rudiments of human biology as they begin their own journey to adulthood." He raised his own glass, smiling. "*Martin Celcius, Sex Educator!*"

He thought a moment before continuing ruefully.

"I'm old enough to be grandfather to most of these children and I have no wife and no child—how does that old adage go? *Those that can, screw, those who can't, teach others how.* But I do it. I help prepare them for what awaits them."

"And what awaits my daughter?" Alcin let his voice trail away. "How can you, or I, prepare her for that?"

Martin shrugged. He really had no answer.

"Does anyone else know? Taryn, perhaps?"

"Only Talbot and Anemoni. I didn't dare tell the boy. You know how protective he is of Rebeka. He might become so emotional, he'd do something foolish—like charge into the Ulea and try to kill young Hamilcar himself!"

"I doubt that." Martin liked Taryn. He'd been another very good pupil, eager to learn subjects other than the basic information on how to procreate. Most of the others barely cared whether they could read or write, as long as they knew how to breed. "Taryn's more level-headed than you think."

"Oh?" Alcin raised shaggy golden brows. "What about that business with the android, then? That could have been a problem if it hadn't been such an old model it was undoubtedly being junked."

"Yes, I admit that might have been a bit of bad luck. Still in other ways, the boy has shown very good judgment, and"—Martin pointed out—"is a son to follow in his father's footsteps."

"Don't make it sound like that will happen any time soon. I'm not ready to be placed under a bed of rocks yet," his friend retorted.

Martin inclined his head in agreement.

"This has to be done, Martin," Alcin returned relentlessly to the subject. "We *must* have peace."

"I agree. We should never have had war!"

"It's just that..." Alcin turned away from the window. He couldn't look at Rebeka any longer and continue their conversation. "I wish we knew more about young Hamilcar. At least I met his father. He was with Renault that day, but

the boy, even though he's been leading the Earthmen for nearly five years now, he's still an unknown entity."

"In what way?" Martin leant forward to reach for the decanter of wine.

It was one of a set he had dug out of the ruins of a jewellery shop, a heavy crystal wine carafe and sixteen glasses, still in their wooden case, miraculously unbroken.

Another of the little incongruities of their present lives.

He'd felt guilty joining in the looting, but told himself it was for the best, that they had to get what they could out of the city before the invaders came back—which was the truth—nevertheless it weighed on his conscience for a long time.

"The boy's intelligent and a good leader, from the aliens' point of view. I think we can assume he's well-educated." He hesitated, then muttered, "As well as can be expected, anyway, and, in anyone's opinion, very good-looking."

Alcin's sigh made him frown.

"That's not very much, is it? Certainly doesn't calm a father's fears."

"How can you say that, Alcin? We've been watching him since he was born. How unknown can he be?" Martin shrugged. "It's natural, I suppose, for you to worry, although I think it's merely a father concern for the young man who's going to be such an important part of his daughter's life."

"Part of her life? *All* of her life, Martin." Alcin waved the hand holding the goblet so violently that some of the wine splashed upon the reed matting covering the floor. "I'm sending my only daughter as a peace offering to this ... this alien and it frightens me! What do we know about Philip

Hamilcar, personally? About his sexual orientation? Is he violent when he ruts? Hell, he may not even like women. What do we do, then?"

"If he doesn't like women, then we'll send Taryn to him." Martin allowed himself a slight chuckle as Alcin turned a horrified glance on his old friend.

"Damn it, Martin!"

"Oh, calm down, Alcin. You know I'm joking. I don't think you have to worry about the boy having odd habits. Our people in Ulea have even talked to some of the whores he frequents and none of them had any complaints."

"Would they say them aloud if they did?"

"Perhaps not. Nevertheless, young Hamilcar appears to be a normal healthy young alien, a little excessive in some ways, perhaps—but most of them seem to be when they're his age." He thought about that a moment before adding, "In fact, the Earthmen's offspring all appear to be as randy as young goats! Must be a characteristic of the species. I doubt he'll abuse Rebeka or force her to do anything bizarre, although she's probably in for some very enthusiastic lovemaking. Probably the worst that'll happen will be that he'll refuse to meet with you, keep her as his mistress, and continue the war."

Alcin didn't answer.

"Call her in here." Abruptly impatient, Martin gestured towards the door. "Let's get this over with."

Sighing, Alcin stood up, squaring his shoulders determinedly. At that moment, the last thing in the world he wished to do was speak to his daughter.

"I'd rather face another attack by the Earthmen than do this."

Setting his glass upon the table next to the decanter, he opened the little hut's back door.

For just a moment, he stood there looking at his daughter, before clearing his throat. "Rebeka, would you come here, please? Master Martin and I would like to speak with you."

* * * *

Placing a forefinger in the book to mark her place, Rebeka rose from her little hollow and entered the hut, smiling at her father and Master Martin.

"Yes, sir?" She looked from one to the other.

Neither spoke but simply stared back at her.

She frowned. They looked so stern, faces almost alike in their seriousness, though Alcin was clean-shaven and Master Martin was white-bearded.

"What is it, Father?"

"I-I was just thinking how much like your mother you are, Daughter. You look almost as she did the first time I saw her!"

He took his daughter's hand, guiding her to a little stool near the charcoal brazier that heated the hut during the winter. The ashes in it were presently cold and dead since the summer's heat was now searing the mountain.

As he released her and stood back, falling into silence again, Rebeka continued to frown.

"Is there something the matter, Father?" She turned to Martin. "Have I done something to displease either of you?"

"No, I..." Alcin focused his attention on the book she held, staring at it as if fascinated. "You're reading, I see. Another history?"

She looked down at the book, lifting it so he could see the flaking gold print on its spine. The book was very old and covered with scorched dark green cloth. The pressure of many hands upon its surface had worn away the fabric, leaving fingertip-shaped holes.

"It's a fiction, a-a love story, really ... Master Martin loaned it to me." She directed a smile at her teacher than looked back at her father. "It's beautiful, but terribly sad. The hero dies to protect his sweetheart and her people."

Martin and Alcin exchanged glances.

Rebeka opened the book, looking at the passage just past her fingertip. "*I do this thing today though it loses me all my tomorrows.*"

"A noble sentiment." Martin commented.

"Perhaps." She closed the book. "But I wanted him to live, and be happy."

"We can't always have what we want," the old man said.

She frowned again, puzzled by his expression.

"Rebeka," Alcin took a deep breath. "I ... we need to speak with you."

"Yes, sir?" She looked back at him but he didn't say anything more, just stood there, staring at her for so long that she began to shift uneasily on the stool.

At last, he turned towards the window. "I can't! Martin help me."

Rebeka looked startled. She'd never seen her father so emotional before.

Martin cleared his throat, drawing her attention away from Alcin, who stood at the window staring out into the summer glare, one arm against the frame, forehead against his fist.

"Rebeka, you know how long we've been fighting the aliens?"

"Yes, sir. Over thirty years."

The last battle had caused serious loss of life in the village.

"I'm afraid soon there won't be any of us left to fight." She looked over at Alcin. "Is that why Father's so upset?"

Martin didn't answer her question. "What would you say if I told you your father may have found a way to stop the fighting?"

"Why, that would be wonderful! But how?"

"Look back to your history lessons, child! What generally happens to end wars—other than everyone being slaughtered, that is?"

"Someone surrenders," Rebeka answered. She didn't even have to think about it.

"Other than that." Alcin looked around. "We'll never surrender!"

She considered a moment.

"A-a truce is called, and, sometimes—Father, you're not going to challenge the Governor to single combat?" She looked stricken. "Or-or make Taryn your champion and send him to fight Philip Hamilcar?"

Alcin left the window and came to sit in the chair next to Martin's, facing his daughter.

"No, Rebeka." He took her hands, holding them between his own, reflecting how warm her skin felt, how soft against his spear-toughened, callused palms. "If we gain a truce, there will be no more fighting by anyone."

She was still frowning and shaking her head, and the tightening of his fingers around hers only confused her more.

"But ... the only other way is through marriage, and the Governor has no female relatives for you to take as a wife."

It was time to say it. Taking a deep breath, Alcin forced out the words, trying to speak as gently as possible.

"The Governor himself has no wife, my daughter."

To his surprise, she smiled slightly. "Who would be insane enough to want to marry *him*?"

Neither answered, both men simply sat there staring at her, and a silence began to grow and lengthen, until Alcin said softly, "The daughter of the man who calls for the truce, child."

At first, she didn't understand the inference in his words, "B-but you have only one dau—*Me*? Y-you wish *me* to marry that-that alien? Oh, no, no, no, no!"

Her voice became shrill and Martin half-rose from his chair, reaching towards her but Rebeka suddenly quieted.

"Father, you haven't thought this through very well!" she accused, shakily.

Martin leant back again.

"I've thought this out very clearly, daughter," Alcin tried to make his voice stern, as if he were talking to one of the young men he was training to fight. "It's the only way!"

"Let one of the others send *his* daughter. Surely there are other girls here who are older and prettier than I am!"

"I'm the leader of the Elius." He had to reason with her, wanted her to accept of her own free will, what was to become her destiny. "I'll be the one to ask for a truce, and it must be my daughter who is sent as my pledge, my hostage, to keep the peace, just as it must be my daughter that Philip Hamilcar accepts as his promise to maintain that peace from now on."

"I'm just a child. I know nothing about men and their ways."

That much was true. He'd forbade Martin to give her more than the basic knowledge of what happened to young bodies at that turning point in their lives, to keep her from becoming interested in some young man, and thus preserve her virginity. Now, Alcin wondered if that had been the wrong thing to do.

Martin had said the boy was lusty. Perhaps young Hamilcar would be more interested if his daughter's maidenhead had already been taken.

"Master Martin will teach you what you need to know."

"I haven't ever been kissed by anyone other than you and my brothers."

"Rebeka, you have to do this!" Alcin wanted no more arguments. As he forced himself to speak calmly, he reflected how once he'd been lauded for his diplomacy and tact. Thirty years of near-primitive warfare had certainly done away with that.

"You have to marry Hamilcar, Rebeka." Martin broke in, adding before Alcin could speak again, "but it won't be for long."

"What do you mean?"

Again, Alcin caught her hands, his grip uncomfortable, making her fingers pale under its pressure.

"You must marry the Governor, Rebeka, make him comfortable in your presence, get him to trust you, and then ... you must kill him."

Rebeka stared at her father as if he'd begun to rave. Abruptly, her chin began to tremble. A tear welled in the corner of one eye and slid down her cheek. She didn't touch it, letting it continue to her chin and drip onto the bosom of her gown.

Her eyes held total horror at what her father was suggesting.

"Let one of your warriors do that."

"We've tried," Alcin replied. "He's too well-protected. We need someone who can get into the palace and get close enough to him without rousing suspicion, someone like a wife."

"B-but if I do that, I'll die, too! His soldiers will kill me as soon as they find his body."

She looked on the verge of more tears, as if she were ready to burst into hysterics, and both men knew that once that happened, they wouldn't be able to reason with her.

"We'll send a bodyguard with you," Martin said.

"A bodyguard?" She took a shaky breath. "Who?"

"His name is Darius." Martin shot a warning glance at Alcin. *Don't say anything. Let me tell her my way.*

Inclining his head in agreement, the Elius' leader released Rebeka's hands, sitting back in his chair.

"There's no one in the village by that name," she argued.

"No," Martin agreed. "He's from Ulea itself. He'll be by your side at all times. He'll protect you, and after it's done he'll do his best to get you out of the city and back to us safely."

She surprised them both by giving a short, sardonic laugh. "I think I'll want him to do more than his *best*, sir! This is my life we're talking about."

"Rebeka..." Martin gestured at the book lying forgotten in her lap. "Those words you just read to us, did you understand them?"

She picked up the book, staring at the finger-worn cover.

"Don't try to play on my emotions, Master Martin. Or confuse me with high-sounding words."

Both men looked surprised at this suddenly display of anger. Rebeka had always been respectful of her elders, but then she'd never been ordered to become an assassin before.

"Yes, I understood them. They're a beautiful sentiment, but they're just fiction. A story made up by a writer, and not real life." She dropped the book into her lap again. It slid to her knees and fell to the floor, landing open with pages crumpled. "I don't want to die!"

Bending, she retrieved the book, clasping it against her bosom as if it could be a shield protecting her from harm. Neither man said anything, waiting for her to begin to cry, to

have to endure the expected hysterics to finally break upon them. Alcin, especially, dreaded it.

"Father, may I go, please?" Rebeka stood up, gesturing towards the door. "I-I wish to be alone. I need to think."

"Go into the garden, child," Martin said. "You won't be bothered there."

Nodding, Rebeka turned and opened the door. She started to step across the threshold, then paused to look back.

"Is it necessary that he die, Father? D-does he have to be killed?"

She sounds as if she's pleading for the Governor's life, Alcin thought.

"I mean, if we make a peace, why can't we—"

"I plan to rid our planet of these aliens once and for all, Rebeka, so Tusteya can be free again!" He spoke more fiercely than he meant to, and she backed away from him, clutching the book even tighter.

"B-but won't someone else take over? If he's dead, I mean?"

"Without a doubt," Alcin agreed. "But there'll be hours, perhaps even days, when they'll have no leader, and during the confusion, it'll be easy for us to enter the city, and with the aid of the surviving Astorii warriors, finish them off."

She turned her head, refusing to meet his eyes.

"If we catch them off-guard, we can do it. Yes, Rebeka," Alcin finished, "Hamilcar has to die. There's no other option."

Did her shoulders slump slightly at his words?

Nodding, Rebeka stepped out into the sunshine.

Though she pulled it shut, the lock didn't latch, and the door slowly swung open again. The two men watched her little green-clad figure walk up the beaten path to the garden at the rear of the hut.

"I never thought myself a coward," Alcin whispered. "But at this moment, I'd rather be whipped in the camp square than force this upon my child. I'd rather we were going to send Taryn to be dishonoured, than have Rebeka go."

His friend didn't answer, just reached over and refilled Alcin's goblet, holding it out to his friend before picking up his own.

Alcin drank deeply, emptying the glass in two gulps.

"She won't do it."

"Yes. She will." Martin answered with certainty.

"How can you be so certain?" The leader of the Elius turned to look at him.

"Because Darius is in the garden." Martin smiled. "He'll convince her."

* * * *

Once she was out of sight of the doorway, Rebeka simply stood there, still holding her book, eyes shut to block out the trees and the flowers before her.

Master Martin had tried to recreate his Ulean garden in the foothills, filling it with flowers and shrubs he'd found in the ravines around Mount Scar. Often, after she finished her studies, she went there sit and enjoy her surroundings. She didn't want to see the garden's beauty, didn't want to do anything except try to think of a way out, a way to somehow

to obey her father and still not be responsible for ending a man's life—and probably her own.

As if she'd only just realized she still held the book, she looked down at it. She'd never finish it now, not after having that beautiful quotation used against her. It was just a story, characters and words manipulated by someone who controlled the ending. It wasn't real, wasn't the way things actually happened!

No, I'll never read the rest of the story, but ... Turning the book over, she opened it to the last page. She'd see how it ended, that was all, then she'd put it back on the shelf in Master Martin's office and never think about it again.

Her eyes scanned the last words on the page, then she looked up, smiling ruefully. The hero lived. His death had been a ruse, and he'd rescued his people, and married his sweetheart.

Rebeka shook her head. If only she could solve her own dilemma so easily, with a few well-chosen, well-placed words. She didn't want to disobey her father. She'd never been a rebellious child but she had to force herself to refuse him now. She didn't want to die either!

I can't do it. I must shame my father and allow my people to remain slaves to the Earthmen because I'm too cowardly to sacrifice myself!

Unconsciously, she began to walk again.

She was at the edge of the garden now, where it was obscured from the house by the little lean-to Master Martin used as a bathing shed, built over the stream falling over the large outcropping of rock and flowing downhill towards the

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rest of the village. On the other side, reached by the little bridge spanning the water, there was a bench amid a trellis of vines and flowers where she often sat.

There must be some way out of this.

Head down, she came around the high boulder, looked up and was startled into silence.

Seated on the bench below the rose arbour was a man.

...a naked man...

No, he wasn't *completely* naked, she realized after her initial shock. She could see cloth bunched around his hips. He had pulled his arms out of his tunic, pushing it down to bare his upper body to the sun.

Barely daring to breathe, Rebeka stood there staring, as she realized he was still unaware of her presence.

He was sitting cross-legged on the wooden bench, outstretched arms resting on his knees, back straight, head raised, eyes closed as if in meditation.

Hair as white as dandelion floss fell straight and gleaming over one shoulder, almost to his waist. His eyebrows were also white, his face as calm and serene as a statue's. Though his eyes were closed, she was certain they were blue. With hair that color, they had to be.

He was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen, like something from the book of fables Master Martin had given her. An enchanted prince, a benevolent demon, one of the winged messengers of the gods who sometimes enthralled human women.

She felt a little wiggle of anxiety in the pit of her stomach at that thought, and a sudden—until now—unknown sensation just a little lower.

Only the jagged edge of a scar, curving crookedly from the hairline at his forehead to the beginning of his left cheek, marred the perfection of his face, which was smooth and unlined in its placidity.

Rebeka wondered how he had gotten the scar, and why anyone would wish to harm such a handsome being.

Someone had definitely done him much harm, however, for now she saw that his arms and legs were cicatrixed with long thin scratches, almost like fine knife slashes, which had been carefully sutured together by an expert hand. Nevertheless, the scars were ugly and seemed out of place on that magnificent body. Except for the mark on his forehead, however, his face and torso appeared to have escaped the punishment his limbs had received.

How long she might have stood there watching him, she didn't know, but suddenly, without opening his eyes, he said, "Didn't your parents tell you it isn't polite to stare?"

His voice was as beautiful as the rest of him, deep and quiet and soothing, but it made her jump, and stammer, apologetically, "I-I didn't mean to! I-I d-didn't expect anyone to be here ... Y-you..."

He opened his eyes then, and she saw that they were blue, like the sky when the wind has blown all the clouds away.

"...you're beautiful," Rebeka finished.

"Thank you."

That wasn't the answer she was expecting.

Surely he should have laughed and told her what a silly little child she was, but instead, he inclined his head as if she'd paid him the highest of compliments. "I'm certain my Maker would appreciate hearing that!"

That was an odd thing to say. Was he speaking about one of the gods? Could he *really* be a supernatural being?

That thought was dispelled as she realized she was staring at his chest, thinking how smooth and tanned it was and how totally bare of hair or any of the tattoos the tribesmen wore for identification.

Hastily, he pulled up the tunic top and slid his arms back into the sleeves. He didn't tie it, however, simply pulled the front together and smiled at her.

"I-I didn't mean to disturb you," she felt compelled to explain. "I needed to think, and I usually come here to do it."

"And I've usurped your place." The blue eyes studied her before he went on, "I imagine you have a lot to think about."

"Yes, I do, but how did you know?"

"I know a great deal about you, Rebeka," he replied, uncrossing his legs and standing up.

He was extremely tall, even taller than her father.

Rebeka looked up at him, thinking of the pictures of the giants in her storybook. If she were close to him, the top of her head wouldn't reach his shoulder.

If she were close to him...

She was very aware of how handsome he was, how different from the young men in the village, and that she was feeling an odd *interest* she'd never felt before, something she'd never truly felt towards any man.

Lowering her eyes, she tried to look demure, and found herself staring at his thighs, barely covered by the tail of his tunic. The garment was fashioned of a thin piece of fabric, looked like someone's old bed sheet, the weave so shabby and worn that—*oh gods!*—the thick shape of his penis was clearly visible through it.

A blush suffusing her cheeks, Rebeka forced herself to look away—at the harbour, her book, his face, anything except that intriguing ridge under the worn-out garment.

"I'm Darius." He seemed totally unconcerned with his clothing, or its inability to conceal his body, and bowed, very gracefully, giving her a soft smile.

She looked back at him and cautiously dipped him a brief curtsey.

"You have much to think about, don't you?"

"If you're who you say you are"—She was gripping the book tightly. Why was she hanging onto it so, surely she didn't think it was going to offer some solution?—"then you know I do."

"Of course I'm who I say I am. I wouldn't lie to *you*, Rebeka."

Again, there was that gentle smile. He appeared so composed and tranquil she felt her own anxiety slipping away.

Rebeka forced herself to remember what her father had said.

"I don't want to die!"

"And you won't, while I'm with you."

"You really think you can keep that from happening?"

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"Yes." He didn't even think about it.

As if trying to get a different view of him, she backed away, walking from one side of the little clearing to the other, then circling behind him, while watching him warily.

He didn't move, just stood there, with that little half-smile on his lips as if slightly amused by her scrutiny.

"Master Martin says you're from Ulea..."

He nodded.

"You're not Astorii."

"No."

She took a step closer.

"And you're not Vanta, or Rynean. My mother is from that tribe, and you look nothing like her people." She was speaking quickly, determined to learn more about this beautiful stranger's origins. "That leaves only the Elius and I know you're not one of us."

"That's true," he confirmed. "I'm not one of your people, any of them."

"Then, who?" Suddenly she was a little frightened. "There are no other people in Ulea."

"Oh, but there *are*!" Again, that calm little smile.

"Who..." Rebeka stopped, frowning as if trying to solve a puzzle, and then looked at him again, startled. "You're an *Earthman*? Frankly, I can't see any of them helping us of his own free will. What happened? Did you come searching for the artificial man and the Master captured you?"

Even as she said it, she knew that wasn't so. If Master Martin had captured anyone, the entire village would have known of it, and she couldn't see the old man doing anything

so strenuous, for surely, considering his size, Darius would have put up quite a struggle.

He looked startled. "You know about the android—the artificial man?"

"My brother helped kill him."

"So he's the one I have to thank for this." He touched the scar on his forehead.

It took her a full minute to understand what he meant.

Oh, sweet gods!

"You-you're the artificial man? B-but..." Her voice was suddenly sharp and high. "T-that can't be! Taryn said he looked nothing like us."

"Then I'm afraid your brother is not only a murderer but a liar, as well."

She was transfixed by that clear blue gaze. The book fell from her hands, striking the grass. In a moment, she would turn and run, try to get away before it could seize her.

She didn't move.

"Rebeka." Darius didn't move, either, just looked a little sad. "Don't be afraid of me. I could never harm you. I've been programmed to protect you."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" Rebeka managed to keep her voice calm. Nevertheless, she was trembling, and knew he could see her fear. "You could be lying, so you can overpower me, and—"

"I won't lie to you. I told you that, remember?"

He had. Would he admit he was one of those awful mechanical creatures if he was going to attack her? Keeping silent, letting her think he was human, would have enabled

him to get closer to her. He was only a few feet from her now, could probably cross that space before she could draw a breath.

Master Martin knew about him, had told her his name, and Darius knew hers, so surely, he also was aware of what the creature actually was.

Darius held out one hand. "Please," he indicated the bench. "Sit down."

Silently, Rebeka obeyed.

"We have much to discuss," he went on. He sat down beside her.

Rebeka slid several feet away.

"Sit at the end of the bench if it makes you feel safer but I assure you I can't hurt you in any way. If I did, my systems would suffer a massive malfunction."

She wondered exactly what that would look like. Would he fall to the ground as if having a seizure, or simply cease movement and stand there immobile, looking like a beautiful statue?

"You're really an android?" She still couldn't believe it, would have preferred he told her he had been sent by the gods.

A nod of that glorious head.

Without warning, he stretched and yawned, mouth revealing perfectly-formed white teeth and a pink tongue, arms going over his head, hands fisted, muscles contracting. The tunic was sleeveless; she could see that his underarms were as hairless and smooth as his chest and, accustomed as she was to the bearded, fur-chested warriors among whom

she had grown up, Rebeka felt a startling and very agreeable wave of pleasure sweep over her.

It would be very enjoyable, she thought irrelevantly, to sit and look at Darius—minus his tunic—for an hour or two. For some reason, she found her face getting hot at the thought, which, before today, she might not ever have had.

To do more than simply look...

Today was definitely becoming a day of shocks and surprises.

The untied front of his tunic fell open and she swallowed quickly as she saw how smoothly the muscles of his chest moved as they tightened and relaxed. Then, he opened his eyes and his mouth quirked into something that could only have been the faintest of smirks, and she understood.

The creature's showing off his body!

"How?" She forced herself to ignore his actions. "Taryn said they killed you, smashed in your head with rocks."

"And that *would* have killed me, if my central control unit had been in my head."

"It's not?"

He shook his head and placed one hand on his ribs, just below his heart. "It's here."

Rebeka allowed herself a little quirk of a smile. "So what my mother has always told me about men's brains being in some other part of their bodies is true."

That made him laugh. "You're quick! Philip will like that."

She ignored that. She didn't want to think of Philip Hamilcar just then.

"I don't understand. How did you get here?"

"Master Martin. He dug me up, brought my body back here—and not very gently, I should add. Tied ropes around my ankles and dragged me over every shrub and bramble between here and Mount Scar, I swear!" He looked a little rueful, placing a hand on one hip and rubbing against it gently. "Really tore up my backside. Master Martin repaired it, of course, but it's not too pretty now, I'm afraid."

Rebeka had to bite her tongue to keep from telling him she'd like to see his backside and judge for herself. As far as she could tell, its shape, under the tunic's thin covering, was very pleasing. Then, she thought again of the vague outlines at his thighs.

Why would a mechanical creature be given organs he'd never use?

Ignorant of her thoughts, Darius went on, "Master Martin reconstructed me, and activated my guardian program. It wasn't very detailed, was fairly rudimentary, in fact, only added as an afterthought since they didn't believe my type of 'droid would ever need it. So, he reprogrammed it adding more factors and details to make me your protector."

"How could the Master rebuild you? He's no scientist."

"No," Darius agreed, "but he *is* a doctor, and he has books that gave him enough insight into how I was constructed. Apparently, your own engineers have been working with artificial intelligence for quite some time."

He touched one of the scars on his arms. "He also sutured all my cuts and repaired my cranial damage, even though he's no surgeon. I think he did a fairly good job." He turned

his head, giving her a look at his profile, which was as well-formed as the rest of him. "Don't you?"

Why, he's as vain as a human, Rebeka thought, but she answered, if a little grudgingly, "Yes, a very good job," because except for that scar, there was no evidence that anything hard and solid and deadly have ever touched Darius' beautiful skull.

"A good many of my memories of Terra were destroyed, although most of my knowledge of the palace and my life there is still intact." Darius went on. "The only thing that has changed is my loyalty."

He turned that blue gaze on her, and she would swear it held the adoration of a faithful hound.

"It's to you, now, Rebeka. And only you."

She had completely forgotten the reason she came to the garden, curiosity about this odd and wonderful creature chasing it from her mind. His statement brought it back with a jerk.

"What did you do for the Earthmen? You said *your type* didn't need a guardian program?"

"I was an information 'droid. Within my memory, I hold the entire history of the Earthmen and all their achievements ... from the first days when they huddled together in caves. After Lieutenant Hamilcar's son was born, the governor chose me to become his tutor."

"You taught the Governor?" She didn't want to think of her potential victim as a schoolboy.

He nodded. "He was a very good pupil—bright, inquisitive, always asking questions." He paused, looking at her sharply. "Will it upset you if I speak of him with fondness?"

"Yes, after all, I'm supposed to kill him." Rebeka was a little surprised at her own answer. "I've never even seen him, you know."

He shrugged.

"It doesn't bother you to know he's going to die?"

"I told you, I've been programmed—*re-programmed*, actually—to protect *you*, Rebeka." His voice was unconcerned. "If anyone—the Governor, your own brother, a Ulean shopkeeper—*anyone* tries to harm you ... I'll stop him."

She didn't ask how, didn't want to know.

"Still, it *will* be a pity." His voice was pensive. "Philip always said he wanted me to teach his own children. I suppose that will never happen now, since you're going to end his life."

"What about *me*?" Rebeka drew in a breath, feeling tears stinging her eyes. "What about *my* life and my children? They'll never be born either, if I do what my father wants—and you aren't the mighty protector you think you are."

"Rebeka..." Abruptly, Darius was on his feet, falling to his knees before her. Taking her hands, he pressed them against his forehead. His synthetic flesh was soft and warm and that startled her. "I swear to you. As long as I'm near, you'll be in no danger, and after you've done what you must do, I'll bring you safely back to your father." He looked up. "He has a husband picked out for you, you know. One who'll be

honoured to marry the woman who freed her people. His name is Cillian, I believe."

Rebeka knew Cillian, one of her brother's friends. Liked him. It could be nice being married to Cillian, she thought. *If I survive.*

"Will he also mourn me as a proper husband should, if I don't come back?" Her voice was sharp and bitter.

She blinked quickly. Suddenly, she didn't want to shed tears in front of this beautiful creature with his synthetic flesh, this being who could never experience any of the emotions she was now feeling.

"I don't want to do this," she whispered.

"I know." His answer was soft.

With a sigh, Rebeka got to her feet. She waited until Darius was standing, then took one of his hands, looking at the long, slim fingers, the wide, strong palms.

"Your hands are warm."

He shrugged. "There's a thermal network between my outer and first internal dermal layers. There's a small—I guess you could call it a generator—that keeps it heated, as well as sending an intermittent rhythm through it so I appear to have a pulse." With his free hand, he touched his sternum. "If you were to put your ear to my chest, you'll hear what sounds like a heartbeat. But you didn't want to know all that, did you?" He looked down at the hand Rebeka held and fell silent.

"You could kill someone with those hands," she said, quietly.

"Only if I have to." His voice was just as quiet.

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

"If you can't bring me home, don't let them capture me."

"I promise." There was a short, silent pause. Darius looked into Rebecca's eyes, and she could swear she saw pity. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

He bent and picked up her book, presenting it to her with another short bow.

Still holding his hand, Rebeka started down the path leading back to the hut.

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Chapter 3

"That's not going to help, you know."

It was almost sundown, and Alcin Spearman was standing at the bar of the village tavern. Along with Master Martin's little shack, the tavern was one of the few permanent buildings in the village. Alcin had been there since leaving the teacher's home, since Rebeka had reappeared, holding the android's hand, to give them her answer.

"Yes, it will." He looked over his tankard of ale at his brother's face. Talbot's features were younger but similar to his own, even to the intricate tattoo on his left cheek which indicated he was a member of the warrior caste.

Placing an unexpectedly gentle hand on Alcin's shoulder, Talbot leant his own spear next to his brother's as he settled himself. "I know how you feel."

"How can you?" Alcin snapped, raising the tankard to gulp down a swallow of the strong, cheap brew, and immediately making a face. Drinking Martin's fine wine spoiled a man's palate! "You have no daughters."

"No," Talbot agreed. "But Rebeka's my niece and I love her almost as much as you do."

"I'm a heartless bastard, Talbot!" Alcin slammed the tankard onto the bar, the sound lost in the gabble of voices in the small room. "As vile as those ancestors of ours who sacrificed their children to the gods."

"Don't blame yourself so." It appeared Talbot meant to try to soothe him no matter what, and that was a surprise, for

his younger brother wasn't noted for either his patience or his sensitivity. "You discussed it with me and the others, but you made your own decision. You're doing what you have to."

"I'd rather lay her on an altar and cut her throat myself than send her to that monster."

His brother abandoned his intentions. "Does Anemoni know?"

"Yes." Alcin caught the barkeep's attention, gesturing at his own tankard and Talbot's. "I'm going to her later tonight."

He didn't even want to think of his confrontation with Rebeka's mother, the favourite of all his wives.

To his surprise, Talbot laughed, almost contemptuously. "Oh, my brother, you're such a contradiction."

Alcin turned to stare at him.

"You ask your child to give up her life and that same night crawl into her mother's bed."

The implication that he didn't care, so quickly after Talbot's attempt to calm him, made Alcin warn, "Don't push me, Talbot! I'm short on patience tonight, and it wouldn't take much for me to backhand you off that stool."

Talbot, who'd gone through his entire life being pummelled by his older brother for wrongs real and imagined, and who usually gave as good as he got, wisely changed the subject. "Is it true that all of your wives are pregnant?" He whistled softly. "That makes a man weak with envy."

Alcin forgot his guilt long enough to strut just a little.

"Haven't seen you drinking much spring water lately, though."

"Yes, well, I've decided that's totally unnecessary. All my weapon needed was some tender loving care, and it's been getting plenty of that, lately." Alcin allowed himself a smile of total conceit. "Always did have good aim. And this time, I hit the bull's-eye. Four times!"

"You've outsmarted yourself, though," his brother went on, as Alcin looked at him inquiringly over the top of his tankard. "Won't they all become untouchable about the same time? What are you going to do then?"

Alcin looked a little chagrined, as if he hadn't realized that fact until this moment, and flushed angrily as Talbot began to laugh, realizing even as he did so that he should keep his mouth shut.

"You're going to be a very frequent visitor to the black tents, Brother, or spend a lot of time with Lady Five Fingers." He flexed the fingers of his left hand and twiddled them at Alcin, laughing again.

"No, I won't," Alcin informed him with the dignity only the very drunk can achieve, and that startled Talbot who knew his brother was still in the upper levels of sobriety. As leader of the Elius, Alcin never allowed himself to become too drunk not to remember what he said or did. "The black tents are for the young ones who can't keep it in their codpieces or men whose wives refuse them too often, and as for the other—I've never done that, Talbot, and don't plan to start now."

He nodded as if he'd bested his brother in some verbal battle, and Talbot looked just a little angry, since he had—on more than one occasion—found himself standing in line at the black tent's flaps when his four wives had informed him that

they had simultaneously become afflicted with the Curse. He'd often wondered if they were lying, but wasn't desperate enough to try to find out.

Alcin looked up at the clock affixed to the wall behind the bar. "As a matter of fact, I should be going." His voice was totally calm now, holding no trace of his previous guilt. "I told Moni to expect me at sundown."

He pushed away from the bar, picking up the spear which rested against the raw-edged wooden trim, nodded to Talbot, who shrugged, ordered another ale and shook his head.

As he left the tent, Alcin once more thought of how Rebeka had looked that morning. She was so like Anemoni, as her mother had been the first time he'd seen her.

He shifted his weight uncomfortably, glancing down to make certain there was no obvious evidence of what he was feeling. No need to have everyone in the tavern know he'd been visited by a swift stab of desire. Another time, he might have flaunted an erection, but just now, it seemed indecent, like mounting your wife while a funeral procession went by.

Thoughts of Rebeka's mother always brought a hot feeling to his groin. He'd wanted the little dark-haired Rynean the moment he'd seen her, when, taking advantage of a lull in the fighting, he had gone to their camp to trade for arrowheads.

Her father was the fletcher as well as their gunsmith, making arrows, spears, and bullets for the village. Alcin had seen her peeping into the tent, trying to catch sight of their visitor. When he'd looked up, she'd walked away with an exaggerated sway to her hips that had drawn his attention to

the round, plumpness of her rump. He could almost feel his hands grasping its softness.

Then, she'd glanced over her shoulder and smiled, her tongue coming out to slide across her lower lip before she'd disappeared into the shadows of the trees across the clearing.

He'd taken her back to the Elius camp with him that night, and Rebeka was born a year later.

For some reason, they'd never had another child, until now. A month before, Anemoni told him she had conceived, and he forced himself to believe it was a sign that the gods were going to forgive what he planned to do.

He was so long in thought he was almost home before he realized it, surprised to see the tent-attached wooden structure which backed against the granite base of one of the foothills.

* * * *

Alcin's home was a partially permanent dwelling, a two-story set of rooms fashioned of wood, the lower ones for his wives, the upper for their offspring, except for Taryn who had struck out on his own three years ago. There was also an attached large tent holding an eating area and a place to receive guests. Each wife had her own room, designed with a door which could be shut while the occupant slept or when her husband came visiting. As was the custom, Alcin's own quarters were separate from any of his wives, in case he chose to bring in some other female for variety and a little private coupling.

Not surprisingly, he had never felt the inclination to do so.

Anemoni's door was open and he could see her sitting on the edge of the bed as he stopped in the doorway.

She looked up, saw him and got to her feet. She was wearing something soft and sheer that hid her figure while still revealing enough of it to make his own body feel heated. He'd thought the little walk up the mountainside would dispel his desire, instead, it seemed to have intensified it.

Anemoni turned to face him, and he could see she'd been crying, the elaborate facial paint around her eyes and cheeks smeared and wet. The lamp by the bed starkly silhouetted her body's outline, making the gown almost transparent, breasts heavily undershadowed, the crevice of her thighs darkly outlined. She was still slim-looking, as yet showing no evidence of the child she was carrying.

In one hand, she was holding a cup of wine and as she took a step towards him, she staggered slightly.

"Well, look who's here." Her voice was slurred as she waved one hand, spilling wine on the thick rug covering the floor.

"You shouldn't be drinking," He made his voice mild. "It isn't good for the babe."

Moni's answer to that was to raise the cup and down its contents in one gulp, then burst into a spasm of coughing as she nearly choked on the fiery liquid burning its way down her throat.

"What do *you* care?" she gasped, tearfully. "Child-killer!"

Alcin didn't answer. *Let her vent her anger. Call me what names she will. I deserve it.*

He hoped she wouldn't resort to throwing things.

Anemoni dropped heavily onto the edge of the bed, letting the cup fall from her fingers. It struck the carpet, rolled and stopped against a nearby chest.

"Alcin..." She turned a tear-stained face towards him, wiped at her eyes, further smearing the brightly-coloured paint. "Hold me. Let your body comfort me. *Please...*"

Face in her hands, she began to sob, shoulders shaking.

Setting his spear against the wall, Alcin unbuckled his knife belt, letting it fall to the floor. Sandals followed, and he pulled his tunic over his head, dropping it on top of them so that he was clad only in the leather codpiece worn to protect his privates when he was on horseback.

He walked to the bed, started to take her in his arms.

"No."

Sniffing, she moved away, dodging his embrace, then caught his hips and placed a kiss just below his navel.

"Take that"—she nodded at the codpiece—"off, also."

He reached behind him, fingers pulling at the thin leather strips holding it in place just above the division of his buttocks. It fell to the floor and he took Moni in his arms. Carefully, he tugged open the bows holding the night rail in place, slipped it from her shoulders, and dropped it atop the little stringed triangle.

Then, he lay down, pulling up the sheet to cover them. She snuggled against him, fitting her naked body to his, head against his shoulder.

For several moments, neither spoke. Alcin held her close, one hand stroking the lustrous dark locks tangled about her

shoulders, while he felt Moni's fingers begin to trail across his ribs to the small of his back.

He wanted to shiver, but forced himself not to move.

"Do you remember the night she was born?" Moni whispered, one forefinger making a little circling motion under the crease of one buttock.

"How could I forget?" He doubted if he could have raised his voice in that moment. "I was furious when I'd learnt I had a girl-child. Nearly beat Talbot to a pulp when he dared mock me about it. Then I came here and saw her and ... she was so beautiful, Moni."

He had never told his wife exactly how he'd felt at first sight of his only daughter.

"It startled me that I could create beautiful daughters as well as handsome sons."

"This child will be a daughter, too." She kissed the underside of his chin, breath warm against his throat.

He kissed her forehead. "Then, I'll be proud of her also."

"Oh, Alcin!" Abruptly, she burrowed her face against his chest. "Help me be brave."

"You *are* brave, Moni." Crooking a finger under her chin, he raised her head. "You don't need my help." He stroked a hand across her stomach, imagining how, in a few months, the flat soft planes of her belly would be taut and full as his child grew within her. Sliding his fingers lower, he brushed against the soft inner flesh of one thigh, moving deeper into the tender cleft hidden by dark curls.

"The child, has it moved?"

"Silly!" She laughed slightly, a woman amused by her man's ignorance, "That won't be for months yet."

As if, after nine births, he wasn't well aware of what was going to happen, and when.

Lowering his head so his mouth was touching her ear, he whispered, "I'd like to couple with you tonight, Moni," as his fingers became more insistent, plunging deeper, feeling her react by opening her legs to allow his hand more access.

"No."

His fingers stopped their gentle probing. He was startled by her refusal even as she continued to press against his hand.

She kissed him again, and went on, in a quiet whisper, so low he had to turn his head to hear, "We'll not *couple* tonight but we *will* make love, my husband ... and comfort each other."

And that, Alcin realized, was exactly what he wished to do.

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Chapter 4

"Meditating again?" Rebeka asked.

It was the next morning, too early for Master Martin to have awakened and while she waited for her teacher to rouse from his bed, Rebeka returned to the little bench under the arbour, to find Darius once again sitting there.

The android opened his eyes and smiled. "Yes, Mistress, that's exactly what I'm doing."

"And just what does an artificial man have to think about?"

"Oh ... who I am ... my place in the scheme of things ... why I'm here..." He gestured vaguely. "*What immortal hand or eye framed my fearful symmetry—*"

"That sounds like poetry!" Rebeka frowned at the odd phrasing and the foreign-sounding words.

"It is—*The Tyger* by William Blake, an ancient Terran poet."

"What's a tiger?"

"A great cat-like animal with orange and black stripes. They were killed off in the twenty-fourth century."

"And there aren't any more?" He shook his head. "That's a pity. Earthmen seem predisposed to violence, don't they? To animals, other peoples..."

...*Young women who attempt to kill their leaders*. Vaguely, she wondered what they would do to her if Darius wasn't successful in helping her escape—or how he would kill her.

"As you say, Mistress," he responded, with an ironic dip of that glorious silver head.

"Oh, please, don't say that. My name is Rebeka, and don't use that humouring tone with me, either."

"I stand corrected, my Lady." He attempted to look penitent but all he succeeded in doing was appearing as if he were about to burst into laughter.

"No, you don't. You're sitting down. Get up, and show me a little respect." She bit her lip to keep from smiling as he obeyed, getting to his feet in a single, fluid movement. She came to stand next to him. "Move over."

Darius shifted his weight to the left. It barely gave her enough room, he was so big. Rebeka dropped onto the bench.

"Now sit down."

He didn't move.

"Shouldn't I place myself at your feet, Mistress?"

She didn't answer, just gestured impatiently at the bench, and he dropped onto it, sitting quietly, hands clasped together and resting on his knees, waiting for whatever else she was going to say.

"Darius?"

"Yes, Rebeka?"

She didn't answer. Just sat there, staring straight ahead.

"You have questions you wish to ask me, don't you?" The teasing tone was gone now.

"Yes. I do."

"Then ask, I'll tell you anything you wish to know. *The time has come, the Walrus said ... to talk of many things ... of shoes and ships and sealing wax ... of cabbages and kings...*"

"More poetry?" Rebeka tried to keep from smiling, and failed.

"Yes. I'm sorry." Darius looked ashamed. "Sometimes that happens. It's a glitch. Perhaps it came about when your brother beat in my brains. Whatever the reason, sometimes certain words trigger poetic responses. Some kind of odd association, I think."

"Please try to keep it under control, if you can," she begged, stifling a giggle. "It's really distracting."

"Do you want to know about Philip Hamilcar?"

"No!" She startled herself with her violent denial. "I mean, not just yet."

No, I don't want to know about Hamilcar. That would make him real, a person of flesh-and-blood, and not just the name of a faraway person she had never seen who was, at this point, no more real than a character in a storybook, though her people had lived in fear of him and his father for more than three decades

"I'd like to know more about *you*."

"Me?" That seemed to surprise him. "Very well." He thought about it a moment. "As I said before, I was an information 'droid, a historian. I was programmed with the Earthmen's history, so it could be taught to the people on the planets taken into custody by the Federation, as well as for the purpose of adding their histories to our own."

"*Their* own," she corrected.

"What?"

"*Their* own. You said *our* own. You're not part of the Federation any more. Remember?"

"Oh. Another glitch. Sometimes I speak as if I were still in the Governor's palace. It really means nothing."

She hoped that was the truth. "Go on. You were saying?"

Frowning, he was silent a moment as if trying to pick up the thread of his thoughts.

"I ... uh ... I added to the Federation's databanks the history of any planet it took into custody."

"*Enslaved* you mean." She couldn't resist correcting him again.

"I suppose it's a matter of semantics. The Terrans *accepted* planets into their custody. The planets themselves probably would agree that it was a form of slavery since the alternative—well, you know the alternative." He smiled slightly. "All the others surrendered rather peacefully, and a figurehead government was allowed to rule, with androids left to watch over the leaders and make certain they obeyed the Federation's tenets. I think Tusteya's refusal was a bit of a shock to Captain Renault."

"You mean none of the other planets has a Governor?"

"None of the other planets fought back. I was one of the androids sent to Ulea with Lieutenant Hamilcar when he became Governor of Tusteya."

"When he became *tyrant*, you mean."

The pale head dipped slightly. "*Tyrant* of Tusteya, then."

He smiled as if her little flare of anger amused him.

"It doesn't bother you when I say that?"

Master Martin had told her as much, the day before, after Rebeka had given them her decision. *Trust Darius and*

whatever he says, child. He cannot feel as we do, has no emotions, but will always tell you the truth.

"Of course not. I told you, Rebeka, my loyalty is to you, now, no matter whom I obeyed before."

She wondered to what lengths Darius would go to obey her. She was afraid to ask him.

Abruptly, he stood up. "I'm sorry, Rebeka, but I suddenly have a need to move. Perhaps it comes from having been a teacher for so long but whenever I carry on a long discussion, I feel myself wanting to start pacing."

"It must be common to all teachers then! Master Martin can't sit still and carry on a conversation, either." She stood up. "Here, let's walk down the path."

Darius started in the direction she indicated, being careful to walk one pace behind her as a proper servant should.

He resumed what he had been saying. "When Lieutenant Hamilcar dared to protest against the destruction of Ulea—"

"Wait, you say he *protested*?"

"That's right. I don't know why. He never did it with any of the others, and when he realized he was going to be left behind as punishment, he asked that I be left as well."

"Why?"

"Because, as a historian, my knowledge was encyclopaedic. He really missed Terra, spent many hours talking to me about places he had seen. They're in my memory banks so I could speak with him about them as if I had been there, too. When his son was born, I became the boy's teacher."

"Did you have any other duties?" Once again, she shied away from mention of young Hamilcar. "Besides being the Tyrant's friend and tutoring his son?"

"Oh, yes." Darius' expression changed, becoming severe. "No matter what their other duties, there was one chore all the droids performed."

"H-how many of you-you creatures were there?"

"Our original number was twelve but gradually, the technicians at the palace manufactured more. I think there must be fifty now."

"What other tasks did you do?"

His answer was short and clipped. "We serviced the guard's wives."

"*Serviced*. You mean you were servants?" She thought that was an odd way to phrase it, tried to imagine him mopping a floor, or plunging his arms into boiling water as he rubbed soapy clothes against a scrubbing board.

"No, Rebeka." His voice became gentle, as if he were explaining something to a child. "We serviced them, as if we were stud animals." As she continued to give him a blank look, he sighed and went on, bluntly, "We *screwed* them."

The word was spat out in startling fury.

She was shocked, but more at the look of anger on his face than by his words. "But, why would a human woman want..." She couldn't finish her sentence.

"Most of the Earthmen have wives or mistresses who live with them. When the men are sent out to patrol the valley, they can be gone for months at a time—it's a large place, you know—and the women complain because they're left alone."

So, when they became bored, or their own desires became too strong and demanding, rather than simply practicing a little self-relief, they send for a 'droid."

He stopped, waiting for her reaction.

Still too startled, Rebeka didn't say anything.

"We're all fully functional." Now he sounded as if he were defending the women's actions. "And quite capable. I myself had been programmed with the full text of several of Terra's most famous sexual manuals, such as the *Kama Sutra*, and the *Libra de Amor*."

The titles of those books meant nothing to Rebeka. What was important was the look of shame she thought she saw on his face.

It means nothing. It's just for my benefit. Master Martin says he has no emotions.

"And the Earthmen allow this? They don't complain that their wives are sleeping with robots?" She tried not to say it with such distaste, didn't want to insult him further.

"Why should they? It's not like we were seducing the women or anything. It kept them from straying during their husbands' absences, so couldn't really be called adultery since we're non-living. There was no chance of pregnancy. They considered us merely highly-evolved sex-toys."

"Did you enjoy it?"

His expression told her he hadn't, but his answer was totally cold and unemotional. "Since most of my fellow androids don't have empath programs, enjoyment didn't enter into it. They simply performed as ordered, to the best of their ability, which—if I might boast slightly—is considerable."

His face belied his braggart tone. "An android doesn't tire, you know. I always left the ladies satisfied. Several of the guards even asked me for pointers, in fact."

Rebeka didn't answer, just sat there, staring at him, trying to imagine how it would feel to have to sexually satisfy someone when you were unable to feel any emotion, to respond to being touched and caressed, and to also touch and caress, with no sensation of pleasure involved. *That could also be a description of the life I'll have with Philip Hamilcar.* There was no way she could come to love him, and he would be her husband only until she could lull him into trusting her enough to become vulnerable.

"I'm sorry. That's embarrassed you, hasn't it? Right now, you're probably imagining the Governor's palace is simply one large den of orgiastic acts. Naked bodies coupling everywhere!"

Rebeka didn't answer, for that was exactly what she was thinking. Scenes of scantily-clad Ulean women being chased by equally unclothed Earthmen who pounced upon them with alien enthusiasm.

"You needn't worry, Rebeka," Darius assured her. "Earthmen are able to set aside their desires when necessary. They're oddly ambivalent about their sex lives. A man may brag about his prowess or the many ways his women please him, but might challenge another to a duel if he so much as speaks of his wife in the most general terms."

"Y-you said the 'droids had no emotions."

"That's correct."

"But you laugh and frown," she pointed out. "And just now, when you talked about ... *that* ... you looked very angry. Is that part of your programming, also? To simulate emotions to make us poor fallible human more comfortable?"

She smiled as she said it and when Darius smiled in returned, realized she was still having a difficult time remembering he wasn't as alive as she.

"Most of us are programmed that way." For just a moment, he seemed to evade her eyes. "However, I myself—"

Suddenly from below them came a sharp *crack!* repeated several times. The sound echoed and rolled up the mountainside.

"What's that?" Darius whirled around, stepping between Rebeka and the direction of the sound.

"Just my brother and the others at target practice. They have to be good shots, you know, so once a week, they go to a clearing past the village to shoot at targets."

"Earthmen-shaped targets?" he wanted to know, a sardonic gleam in his blue eyes.

She nodded. "They have to limit their ammunition because every bullet counts, so they're only allowed five shots each, and each one has to strike the target's heart."

"What happens if it doesn't?"

"Father calls that carelessness, and personally beats the culprit in the village square."

"Isn't that a little drastic?"

"Not when our people's lives depend on our sharpshooters' accuracy. A beating is a small price to pay if it saves someone's life."

"And your young warriors, they willingly accept this punishment?" He seemed to find this unbelievable.

"Of course!" Rebeka gave him a pitying look. "Perhaps it's something you can't comprehend, Darius, coming from the Earthmen's culture, but when an Elius is negligent, whether in honing his killing skills or in any other act, he accepts the punishment for it and strives never to let it happen again."

"Your brother Taryn is one of the snipers, isn't he?"

"Yes, as are some of my other brothers."

"How many times has he stood in the square and been beaten by his father?"

"None. Taryn is a very good shot."

"Hm." He felt silent.

They had come to the point where the path dead-ended at a granite shelf. During the summer rains, soil washed down the mountain, lodging in the rocks' folds and creases. These had formed as the molten lava that became the mountain had settled and cooled, and now, tiny flowers and greenery bloomed in the crevices.

Darius' attention was drawn to these, and he bent to look more closely at the little yellow blossoms.

"Amazing," he whispered, more to himself than Rebeka.

"They look like miniature orchids. Barest bit of soil, practically thriving on air ... but the climate's wrong."

One hand touched a tiny petal, stroking along the underside.

With an apologetic smile, he straightened.

"Forgive me, Rebeka. A bit of my old self rising to the surface." He touched her arm. "We should walk back now."

He glanced back at the rock shelf as he spoke.

"When this is over," Rebeka promised him, hoping that it would happen. "You can come back here and study those little flowers as long as you wish."

He didn't answer, just released her arm, and fell into step behind her.

"Darius?" She slowed her pace so he could catch up. "What happens to a 'droid when it gets old? Taryn told me they were sent out to lose themselves in the mountains."

"That's true. Some of the first ones were upgraded or incorporated into other models, and when that happened, the resulting shells, usually possessing only the barest intelligence, were sent into the mountains to destroy themselves."

To Rebeka, that sounded a cruel thing to do to something that had been a faithful servant.

"Why? Why couldn't they just be melted down or—"

"The Earthmen have a strange belief in something called a *soul*." He held up one hand in a halting gesture. "Please don't ask me to expound on that. I've always thought the philosophical treatises in my databank boring and a waste of usable space. The Earthmen refuse to destroy anything with artificial intelligence, though they don't seem to have the same reverence for naturally intelligent beings." He shrugged elaborately. "They'll dismantle a 'droid, transfer its parts to another vehicle, erase its memory, even convert it into an

aquarium but they will never *kill* it." His lips curved sarcastically. "To send one away, after having the equivalent of most of its vital organs and brain transplanted elsewhere, and tell it to lose itself in the mountains—that they will do without the least qualm."

She could almost imagine a quiet anger under his soft words, at the treatment of his kind by his masters.

"Is that what happened to you?" She was surprised that she felt pity for the mechanical creatures. "You became outdated, lost a good portion of your internal mechanisms, and were sent out to die?"

"Oh, no."

"No?"

"When young Philip was grown, and no longer needed a tutor, he gave me freedom to do as I wished. I was no longer a teacher, and also no longer to be considered a superanimated sex toy for the guards' wives to fight over. I was allowed to roam the countryside and satisfy my curiosity about Tusteya, and that's what I was doing when I was attacked."

"They were defending themselves!"

"From a creature who offered no harm?" He looked scornful. "Who had his arms filled with flowers and couldn't fight back?"

"Flowers?" Taryn hadn't mentioned that.

"I was building my own database of the Tusteyan flora, going around the valley and collecting flowers and plants to study. I was at Mount Scar that day because I had heard that a certain flower grew only in that area, and I was picking

blossoms when I came upon those three young savages..." He stopped, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Rebeka, I mean your brother and his friends. Which one was he anyway? The blond, or one of the dark-haired ones?"

"T-the blond."

"Strange, I thought he would be dark-haired like you."

"Taryn's mother is Astorii. Each of father's wives is from a different tribe."

Darius looked surprised at that, then continued, "Anyway, they very effectively killed me ... the last thing I remember was your brother raising a rock to bring it down on my forehead."

"Why didn't the Earthmen miss you? If you weren't ready to be junked, why didn't the Governor realize you were gone?"

"I never saw him after I was dismissed," Darius explained. "He was too busy to inquire after me, and though the others knew of my habits, they also knew I might be gone for months at a time in my roaming throughout the foothills." He allowed himself a short ironic laugh. "Right now, they probably think I'm doing just that."

"Could you ever become obsolete?"

Suddenly, she wanted to be told that the android would always be there, someone to talk to, to hear her worries, to soothe her fears—be her companion, and ... friend.

"I was a historian, Rebeka." He smiled, his future apparently not troubling him. "Though I've forgotten a portion of the data I contained, and I'm now a defensive weapon, I

can still record whatever happens. My usefulness will be over only when there is no more history for me to absorb."

"How old are you?" From the moment she'd seen him, sitting on that bench, she'd wondered. He looked to be no older than Taryn. "I mean, when were you constructed?"

"I'd been on twenty voyages with the Earthmen before their journey to Tusteya," came the surprising answer. "And before that, I was part of the library staff at the space centre on Mars. That's one of the planets in the Terran System. I've been in existence about thirty years, Rebeka."

She was startled. If Darius had been human, he'd be just a little younger than her father. She couldn't believe it.

She thought of something she'd intended to ask when he spoke of Lieutenant Hamilcar.

"You said the Governor's father missed his home. Do *you* ever miss Terra?"

"Of course not." He shook his head, sending his pale hair swinging. "There's too much data for me to gather. I'm sorry, there I go speaking like my old self again."

He reached out and took her hand and once again, she was startled at how warm his touch felt. She was certain that if she pressed his fingers, she would feel little pulses coursing through them, as Darius had described.

"I'm your bodyguard now, Rebeka, and I'll stay wherever you are as long as you need me, and when we succeed—"

"*If* we succeed." She couldn't keep the fatalism out of her voice.

"When we succeed," he repeated, a little forcefully. "Then perhaps, you will also free me and let me return to my flowers and plants."

Rebeka smiled, and squeezed the fingers claspings her own. "Bring me back from the Governor's palace alive, Darius, and I will personally plant a garden just for you to explore."

"Well. What have we here?"

They both turned to see Master Martin standing on the path.

* * * *

"Good morning, sir." Rebeka smiled, turning her attention to her teacher. "Darius was just telling me about the Earthmen and what he did when he lived with them."

She felt, rather than saw, Darius release her hand, his own falling to his side.

"And was that all?" Martin's voice held an odd note, almost *disapproval*?

"Yes sir. What else could there be?"

Master Martin didn't answer but instead asked, "Have you been here long, child?"

"Yes, sir. Since dawn. I'm sorry." She looked a little ashamed. "I know that's early but I was so anxious."

"You should have awakened me." His voice held a reprimand, but he was looking at Darius as he spoke.

Rebeka shrugged. "Just because I can't sleep is no reason anyone else should have to lose theirs."

That made the old man smile. "You're such a thoughtful child, Rebeka."

She smiled in return, looking from him to Darius who hadn't spoken since the old man appeared.

"You mustn't call me a child, now, Master Martin. After all, in a few days, I may be a married woman, and soon after that—a widow." She couldn't help adding the latter.

"We can only hope," the old man murmured.

It was then Rebeka noticed the small book he held in one hand. Its binding was as worn and damaged as all the others. Briefly, she wished she could see a brand-new book, with whole and unstained pages. "Is that for me, sir?"

He looked down at it as if he'd forgotten it was in his hand. "Yes." He held it out to her. "Take this and read it."

She took the book from him. The edges of the thick pages had been brushed with gilt that now flaked off on her fingers as she fanned through them.

Physiology of the Tusteyan Male.

"Read it through tonight," Master Martin continued. "And when you're done, ask your mother—"

"Mother?" Rebeka looked startled.

"...to explain to you what she does to arouse your father when he comes to her," Martin finished.

Rebeka stared at him, feeling the hot flush creeping across her face. "Sir, I can't do that."

"You can, Rebeka," he replied, gently, realizing he'd probably startled and definitely discomfited her. "And *will*. She'll tell you. Gladly."

Rebeka looked unconvinced, as well as uncomfortable at the thought of speaking to her mother about something so personal. Closing the book with a snap, she frowned as she

shook her head. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Darius shift his weight, and wondered if the android was considering striking the old man for embarrassing her.

Surely, his protective programming wasn't *that* finely-tuned.

Unconscious of any possible harm to his person, Master Martin was still talking. "Remember, if you were marrying one of the young men of our village, she would tell you, teach you everything you would need to know to please your husband. This is no different, really."

"Yes, sir." Rebeka couldn't argue with that, but felt her shoulders slump a little as she answered.

Martin placed a hand on her shoulder, patting gently. It was the same thing he'd done whenever she had been dejected after failing one of her exams.

But this isn't the same thing. This isn't a test on math or history. This is about sex, the most personal aspect of life—and my parents!

"Now run along." She was being dismissed, just as he'd always sent her away after her studies, as if today was no different. "Come back tomorrow and tell me what you've learned."

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Chapter 5

In Master Martin's office, Darius wandered about the room, staring at the objects lying on desk and table, peering at the books lining the ragged, make-shift shelves.

He'd come out of deactivation a few moments before and was satisfying his curiosity about the teacher's home while Master Martin slept. Darius himself never required sleep but, since there were many who didn't want an inquisitive android prowling about their homes while *they* slept, he, like most of his kind, had a *Sleep Response*, where all activity would cease for several hours while certain cells recharged.

Stopping before a bookcase near the door, he looked at the volumes it held, fingers trailing over the worn, damaged bindings before selecting one. He pulled it from the shelf, turning it sideways to read the title on its spine. *An Encyclopaedia of Orgies.*

Darius' pale brows went up. *Interesting.*

Gently, his fingers touched the cover, stroking the smooth leather, the places where there were tiny scorch marks and little indentations as if the book had been peppered by tiny sharp objects. Then, he opened it.

Inside, the book looked almost new, *unused*, in fact, in spite of its outer damage. The pages were smooth and uncreased, some still uncut.

As he turned the thick, attached pages, a picture suddenly leaped out at him—a drawing, but depicted so cleverly that for a moment it appeared to be actual people—a naked

woman lying on her back on a table. Between her spread legs, a man knelt, pressing his face against her shaven mound, her knees resting on his shoulders. Above her, another man bent, hands grasping her breasts while he suckled one.

Darius' brows rose even higher. *Oh*. It was a book of what the Earthmen called *pornography*. Surprisingly, he had little of that material stored in his databanks. Here was an opportunity to study it.

He turned another page.

A second illustration, as lifelike as the first—a kneeling woman being mounted from the rear while she held the penis of another man in her hands and licked it enthusiastically.

He began to ruffle through the unbroken pages, pausing to look at several more sketches.

Abruptly, Darius shut the book, wondering what the Earthmen—and apparently the Tusteyans, also—considered so appealing about those acts. After the third illustration, he found it all very repetitious and boring.

It must come from being a participant. A sudden image flared into his mind—Rebeka, naked beneath him, hands going between his thighs to lift his balls and kiss them.

Where had that thought come from?

He returned the book to its place on the shelf. Why had Master Martin rescued such a thing from Ulea's destruction? Undoubtedly, the teacher had never opened it, or the pages would have been cut.

Knowing of the Master's celibacy, he was unable to envision the old man hovering over the book by candlelight

while he relieved himself. If he was any judge of men's characters, he felt that Martin was one to ignore his longings and sublimate them into some more useful activity.

It appeared that Darius himself was the first one ever to look upon those pages. *Perhaps he saved it simply for the beautiful way it's been bound.*

A light snore from the other room reminded him that Master Martin still slept so he unlatched the door and walked out into the little yard, shutting it behind him.

It was early morning, still fairly quiet. Below in the village he could see a few people moving through the little dirt streets, heard sounds of stirrings from within the tents. In one of the corrals, a horse neighed softly.

He was glad the teacher's house was isolated enough from the village to allow privacy, because at the moment, Darius wanted to do something that required a little seclusion.

He wished to take a bath.

He knew the humans wouldn't have considered him dirty, but he had been buried under pounds of red clay for nearly three weeks before Master Martin's resurrecting, and the thought of all that dirt pressing against his outer dermis was still distressing. Even though the Master had given him a cursory bath using some type of astringent, he still felt unclean.

Darius walked across the little yard to the path leading to the garden and the rock ledge hiding it from the house's view. The little stream falling from the rocks ran straight for a few yards, then downhill to the village where it widened into a creek. In certain areas, tents had been hung over the water—

one for the men, one for the women—where they could bathe. Only Master Martin, in his honoured role as a teacher, had a private bathing area.

Just under the little waterfall, someone had lined the streambed with round, smooth stones, forming a basin that trapped the water briefly before allowing it to overflow and fall downstream. Nearby in the lean-to, towels and small, irregularly-shaped bars of soap lay on a little rough-hewn table.

Pulling his tunic over his head, Darius dropped it near the table as he stepped into the water. It was deeper than he thought, rose almost to his knees as he waded into it. Then, he sat down, and leant back, closing his eyes, and allowing the pleasant sensation of the water to flow over him.

"Ahhh..."

It was wonderful. No one around to watch him. He could indulge himself briefly in a little pleasure of his own, feeling the sensual flow of the water against his body. There were currents in the stream, warm trickles around his legs and buttocks, chilling at his waist, a surge of almost hot water at his thighs and across his groin.

He shifted slightly. *Better watch that.* Getting aroused had no place in his life just now. Just as he mustn't allow any more salacious thoughts of Rebeka into his mind.

Reaching for one of the little pieces of soap, he sniffed it. *Smells like almond oil—that shouldn't be a problem.* Carefully, he dipped it into the water, rubbing it into a lather. He had to be cautious of what he put on his outer dermal layer. Some oils and unguents could cause the materials in it to

deteriorate. Master Martin had done a fine job of restoring his skin-like covering but the materials he'd used were scarce and as far as Darius knew, every bit had been utilized in his repair.

Getting to his feet, he rubbed the suds sparingly over his body, then completely submerged himself, rising from the water to sling wet hair out of his face. As he pulled the long white locks over his shoulder and wrung them dry, he reflected that his hair hadn't grown since he'd been rejuvenated. A small synthesizing unit had been placed inside his skull, continuously manufacturing the long strands from a silky synthetic that closely resembled hair. Darius had often had to have his hair cut while he'd been with the Earthmen, but now, he was certain it hadn't grown a centimetre since his restoration. Obviously the mechanism had been damaged by the blows to his head.

Reaching for a towel, he began to dry his body, wondering once more why his Maker hadn't given him any body hair. That was the only trait that made him visibly different from the Earthmen. His underarms, chest, even his genitals, were as bare and smooth as one of the classical statues that adorned the halls of the Governor's palace.

Who am I to question the wisdom of the Makers? he thought to himself, falling back on the old excuse all the androids used when they discovered some contradiction in their make-up.

Perhaps it would have been too tedious and exacting to place similar units at other places in his body. Perhaps by that time, his Creator had been in a hurry to finish. *Who knows?*

With a shrug, Darius retrieved his tunic and slid it over his head, tying the narrow sash at his waist.

He turned as he heard a soft step behind him.

* * * *

Rebeka.

"Good morning, Mistress!" He smiled at her, grateful she hadn't arrived a minute sooner. "You're up early again."

"Yes," she agreed. "I don't seem to be sleeping much these days."

He thought she looked slightly agitated, and very tired

"You were bathing?" Rebeka indicated the damp towel and sudsy bar of soap.

"Does that surprise you?"

"As a matter of fact, it does," Rebeka answered. "I suppose any creature that exists in our world gets dirty. It's just that for some reason, I didn't think of it."

"Oh, I don't get dirty, not as you mean," Darius explained. "I don't sweat and I have no glandular secretions, but my outer dermis is slightly porous and catches dust, pollen, and other minute particles very easily."

He stopped, hoping his explanation hadn't sounded like a lecture.

"Pollen? I'm glad I have no allergies, then."

Darius decided to steer the subject away from himself.

"Master Martin isn't awake yet."

"I don't know whether I'm glad or disappointed." She glanced towards the back door of the hut, then back at him,

mouth setting determinedly. "There's something I wanted to ask you, Darius."

"You mean something else?" He forced himself to speak lightly.

"Where do you sleep? I know Master Martin has only one bed. You don't sleep with him, do you?"

He hadn't expected that, almost laughed out loud.

"Good God, no! I mean, I don't actually *sleep*, Rebeka," he went on, quickly. "I usually just deactivate for a few hours. It simulates sleep, makes the humans relax a little. I just sit in a chair while it happens."

She didn't answer, just nodded, and looked away, her gaze straying over the yard.

"You seem anxious. Has something happened?"

"What hasn't happened?" Taking a deep breath, she looked back at him as if he were stupid to ask such a thing. "In the space of four days, my life had been completely turned upside down, and you can ask *what's happened?*"

He accepted her chastisement with a brief nod.

"All right. What specifically? Something last night?" he guessed, looking at her face. "Something to do with that book Master Martin gave you?"

She nodded, and unbidden, the blush came once more, flowing up her throat to her cheeks.

"I took it home, read it through. I am now an expert on those parts of a man's body that differ from my own, can reel off their names immediately, and recognise them on sight." she announced, waving her hands slightly. "And what comes next frightens me."

He knew what she meant, chose to down-play it for the moment. Rebeka was letting what she must do prey on her mind. It was natural, of course, but not only was he supposed to protect her, he was to keep her mind off what was to happen.

Somehow.

Briefly, he felt a little surge of resentment towards Master Martin and Alcin.

"It seems to me you've gotten over the difficult part," he commented. "What—" He was startled as she interrupted, voice sharp and angry.

"I thought you were smart but it seems to me that suddenly you've become very stupid! I've never been with a man, Darius. I'm a virgin!" Her voice rose shrilly. "And knowing what body part does what and when and how isn't much help when I've never even seen a man's bare body."

Abruptly, she looked frightened and, something worse. Desperate.

"What if, when I'm confronted by Philip Hamilcar's naked body, it disgusts me, and I show it?"

"Then you should tell this to Master Martin. He'll probably know what to do." He said the words quietly, while feeling his own body react slightly to the sudden wish to show her what she needed to know.

Rebeka wasn't listening but continued talking frantically.

"I've already thought about that, and that's another problem. The only thing that Master Martin can possibly do is to show me a live, naked man." She looked up at him, eyes widened in total panic, and seized his hand. "Oh Darius, what

if he chooses *himself*? What if he strips himself naked before me, and he's wrinkled and loose-skinned and withered?"

He was startled to see tears in her eyes, even more shocked as he realized they weren't for herself.

"Suppose I take one look and begin to laugh? I care for Master Martin, Darius," Her voice was earnest and pain-filled. "I have no wish to hurt or insult him in any way, but I'm afraid I might."

It was a delicate moment. Darius could have laughed at her fears, shaming her further, or teased her out of them. Instead, he tried to soothe her, clasping her hand gently between his own.

"Calm yourself, Rebeka." She bit her lip and looked up at him. Briefly, he was reminded exactly how young she was. "In the first place, I've seen Master Martin as he dresses, and I can assure you he's neither wrinkled nor loose-skinned nor"—He allowed himself to smile slightly—"withered. For his age, he still has a fine body, and it's a shame he prefers to keep it celibate."

"He lost his wife in the attack on Ulea," Rebeka said, as if defending the teacher's decision. She pulled her hand from his. "He swore he'd never love anyone else he could lose."

"A noble sentiment," Darius agreed. "But a foolish one when your people have been so decimated. I've never really understood that facet of human nature. How someone can simply turn off a natural urge as if there were a switch of some kind?"

He shrugged, realizing he was allowing himself to get sidetracked. "Never mind. If that's the Master's choice, I'm

not the one to question it. I'm sure Master Martin will make certain you're fully knowledgeable before you go to Ulea." He paused, then added, a little unconvincingly, "Somehow."

At that point, he decided it was best to change the subject.

"I see you brought the book back." He gestured at the little book she had under her arm. "Sure you don't want to keep it for future reference?"

"Now you're mocking me." Her face was pink again, but this time with anger.

"No, Rebeka, simply trying to lighten your worries a little. Master Martin asked you to speak to your mother. Was there any problem there?"

"No, as a matter of fact, Mother was very helpful. Maybe too helpful." She allowed herself a slight smile. "When Father's other wives found out what she was doing, they joined in."

Her laugh this time was an odd combination of laughter and surprise.

"Gods, Darius, I had no idea my father was such a sensual creature! The things they told me. How will I ever be able to look at any of them again? Especially Father?"

One hand went to her mouth, as if to stifle her laughter. "The next time I see him, I know I'm going to have an image of Rhedora licking the soles of his feet or Anissa tickling his earlobes or-or Simi stroking his testicles with a feather."

She shook her head and shivered as if to dislodge the images from her mind.

"No, you won't," Darius assured her, successfully stifling the images appearing in his own eidetic processing centre.

"You're going to realize here and now that everyone has a private life and a public one, and you're going to tuck what you've learned into a secret part of your brain and never bring it out again for anyone to see. You'll look on your parents as you always have and your secret knowledge won't affect your relationship with them. You'll simply accept that they're as human and lusty and loving as everyone else is."

"I hope you're right," Rebeka answered, and turned upon him a gaze so full of total admiration that he was startled. She seized his hand, squeezing it tightly. "How do you do it?"

"How do I do what?"

"Always manage to say the right thing? It's so odd, Darius, but after talking to you, I feel so much better," and she smiled as if to prove her words.

"I was a teacher, remember? I always know what to say."

"You're so human, Darius." He almost answered that he felt that wasn't such a compliment. "If you actually could experience emotions, you'd be perfect."

"But I ca—"

Master Martin chose that moment to emerge from the hut.

"Ah, here you are. Good morning, Darius, Rebeka. What are you two up to so early? Couldn't sleep again, my dear?" He looked at the girl sympathetically.

She nodded. "I decided to come here and wait for you to waken. Darius and I were just talking."

"Hm," Master Martin looked pointedly at their clasped hands. "So I see."

Darius released Rebeka's hand, then scowled as he realized the movement had a furtive, almost guilty move to it.

"You brought the book back, I see. Did you finish it?"

She held it up, shifting it from one hand to the other, as if uncertain what to do with it now that it was the subject of his attention.

"Yes, and I spoke to Mother and Rhedora and Anissa, and Simi," she went on before he could ask.

"And?"

"A-and it was very ... uh ... very frightening, but enlightening. I think."

That answer seemed to satisfy him.

"There's only one thing left for me to teach you, then! Come into the house." Turning, he started back to the hut, calling over his shoulder, "Darius, you come, too."

"Yes, sir." Obediently, the android followed behind them.

The look Rebeka gave him as she walked through the doorway was similar, he thought, to one a child expecting a tongue-lashing—or a spanking—would give.

* * * *

In his office, Rebeka sat at the little table with Master Martin, going over the drawing and diagrams, reeling off names of body parts and how they functioned and what would stimulate them, while Darius lounged on the little window seat across the room, his big body looking too large for that small space. One elbow leaning on the raw wood, he rested his chin in his hand, eyes half-closed, appearing totally disinterested in what was going on across the room.

Gradually, he allowed the grey lassitude that preceded dormancy to slide over him.

It was only when Master Martin took the book from Rebeka, snapped it shut and stood up, calling to him, "Darius, would you come here, please?" that the android roused, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs of near-deactivation from it, and obeyed.

"Certainly, Master." Three strides brought him to stand between Martin and Rebeka. "How may I help you?"

"Take off your tunic."

"S-sir?" For an instant, Darius was certain he'd misunderstood. Just stood there, unmoving.

Surely he doesn't mean...

Rebeka, who had been staring at the teacher, turned her attention to him, mouth open with a look of something unreadable on her face. She seemed to be holding her breath.

"You heard me, Darius. Take off your tunic. You must obey, you know." This was said very softly, but Martin's quiet tone seemed almost threatening.

Mouth set in a hard, straight line, Darius did as he was told, untying the sash at his waist and pulling the tunic over his head.

Master Martin took it from his hands and dropped it over his chair, too far away for him to reach, then waved a hand in the android's direction.

"There he is, Rebeka. A naked male. He's exactly like a human. Look him over well."

Darius bit his lip and took a deep breath.

Rebeka stared.

Directly at his crotch.

To his surprise, she didn't blush or avert her eyes in embarrassment. Instead, she continued to look at his penis as if it was the most fascinating item she'd ever seen.

Under her gaze, he shifted uncomfortably.

Master Martin broke the silence. "Now, Rebeka, you know it all. *Show me the erogenous zones.*"

She looked at her teacher.

Had to practically force her eyes away from me, Darius thought, resentfully.

Taking a deep breath, she said, like a bored schoolchild reciting a lesson, "First, there's the ear lobes," she hesitated, pointing vaguely. "Should I touch him, Master Martin?"

No, damn it! You old bastard, you'd better not say what I think you're going to!

She stopped, looking at the old man, who nodded and then said the one thing Darius had hoped he wouldn't hear, "Show me, Rebeka, how you will arouse your husband."

"Master—" Darius began a protest, which was quickly cut off.

"Quiet, Darius! Just stand there, be obedient and silent."

So Darius remained where he was, mouth set grimly, as Rebeka reached up and caught his left earlobe between her forefinger and thumb.

Her touch was so gentle that for a moment, he barely felt it.

Abruptly, she put her other hand behind his neck, pulling his head down. Her body was so close to his he could feel its warmth. He wanted to put his arms around her, hold her closer. It was an effort to make his hands remain at his sides.

Standing on tiptoe, she began to nibble on his earlobe, breath warm and soft against his skin.

Darius shivered slightly, then forced himself to be still as he felt her tongue trace itself around the edge of his ear.

If I were to ... straighten ... he began, recognizing that his thoughts suddenly were becoming erratic, *she ... couldn't touch ... my ear ...* but he didn't move, continuing to stand, leaning forward, his head trapped in Rebeka's embrace.

When she released him, allowing him to stand upright again, he relaxed, but then her hand slid down his shoulder to his chest, and her mouth trailed kisses along the same path.

One finger encircled his left nipple, its fingernail scoring invisible grooves around and around it as Rebeka pressed her lips against the other, mouthing it gently. Darius took a deep breath that was almost a gasp.

She looked up at him. "Is something wrong, Darius?"

"No," he lied, hastily. "I was just taking in extra oxygen. I have to do that to renew my pneumatic cells so I can appear to breathe."

He took a couple of extra deep breaths to demonstrate.

Master Martin—*the son of a bitch*—smiled slightly.

"That's enough oxygen, I think," the old man put in, quietly.

Rebeka turned her attention back to Darius's body, moving even closer so her own was pressed against his.

Darius closed his eyes. *God, she's so warm, so soft. I'm going to kill Master Martin! As certain as Tusteya's sun rises each morning, I'm going to tear the old fart limb from limb to pay him back for this!*

When Rebeka embraced him, Darius nearly recoiled as her hands slid to the small of his back, encircling his buttocks, fingernails performing that little *scratch-and-arouse* that made the tiny sensors in his outer dermis bristle invisibly to attention. Her fingers floated over the deep separation of his cheeks, hesitated at the rough repair to the tattered skin on his left hip, then circled under them, squeezing lightly.

There was a slight tremor of Darius' body under her fingers. His skin began to quiver.

Releasing him, she stepped back, brushing one hand across his stomach, circling the little depression that had never been attached to any umbilicus, bending to kiss and gently lap at it, her tongue flicking delicately into the little dimple.

The tremor grew stronger. He was visibly shaking now.

Feeling the sudden quiver, she looked up at him. "Darius?"

He didn't answer, wouldn't look at her, eyes riveted on something on the far side of the room.

Rebeka stepped away from him.

It was all he could do not to heave an audible sigh of relief.

She didn't look at Master Martin, didn't see the broad smile now framing the teacher's mouth, but Darius did and silently cursed the old man.

"Go on, Rebeka," Master Martin ordered.

"But that's all," she looked from Darius to the teacher, then gestured vaguely,

"E-except for..."

She nodded at the android's genitals, still—thankfully—at rest.

"Go on, Rebeka," Master Martin's voice was softer now, very gentle, as if he was afraid of frightening her.

No—oh, no! Darius's eyes met the old man's. He took a deep breath, preparing to protest, grab his clothes, stalk out.

As if he realized the android's thoughts, Martin shook his head. "Darius, what is the first tenet of your programming?"

"I will obey the commands of my human makers to the best of my ability." The words were spoken with a total absence of inflection.

Dammit! He had to do what the teacher said. His will was his own only when it didn't clash with human wishes, and it would take a great effort to override that order.

"Go on, Rebeka," Master Martin repeated.

Obediently, she slid her hand under Darius' testicles. He flinched.

Suddenly, she seemed to freeze, just standing there, head down, staring at his penis. His balls were cupped by warm hands, chafed gently.

The android's gasp was so sharp it startled her. His face was expressionless though his jaw muscles tightened, as if he were gritting his teeth.

Rebeka stroked one forefinger along his penis, from base to tip, finger brushing back and forth across the crown.

"It's so soft!" There was total wonder in her voice.

Darius spoke up suddenly. "T-the c-covering of t-the *glans p-penis* has been c-compared to the skin of a two-day-old n-newborn."

In spite of his stutter, his voice was tightly controlled, almost constricted, practically biting off the words.

Rebeka continued to caress him.

She didn't see Darius' hands curl into fists, or how his jaws abruptly clamped or the deep flush that swept over his face. He was angry and *trapped*, caught in her hands, being fondled as if his organ was a timid animal. *Well, in a few more minutes, that timid animal's going to turn into a raging beast!*

Rebeka pressed her lips against the soft head.

His tolerance point snapped.

Ignoring the painful ripple that went through his system at disobeying a human command, he seized her by the shoulders, jerking her upright, gasping aloud with relief as his penis slid from her hands.

Darius pulled her up to face him and then his mouth was on hers, tongue sliding inside as her lips opened in surprise. It brushed against her own, laved over and under it, then he was sucking its tip almost desperately before he thrust her away.

She staggered and nearly fell as he released her, staring up at him with startled blue eyes. Slowly, one hand went to her mouth.

"That's what you'll get if you do that to Philip Hamilcar—and more." His voice was harsh, husky with emotion, chest heaving as if he were struggling to breathe. "I think, Mistress Rebeka, your lessons are over."

Turning, he picked up his tunic, put it on and tied the sash with a movement of finality. By the time he finished, he was calm, in possession, body relaxed, no tell-tale ridges in the tunic skirt. Even his breathing was once more under control.

"Don't you agree, Master Martin?" He bestowed a cold smile on the old man.

Martin came to life. He'd been watching with startled amazement, realizing he'd had no idea Darius was able to disobey a direct order, realizing that the android had been so fast he couldn't have saved Rebeka if Darius had decided to do more than kiss her.

"Y-yes, I believe Darius is correct, Rebeka. I can teach you nothing more."

He put his arms around the girl, hugging her gently.

"This will be the last time you'll come here."

"But—" She didn't want to hear that because it meant she was one step closer to that awful task.

"Tomorrow," Martin went on, "you'll go to the Warrior's Field, where your brother will teach you how to kill."

No, I don't want to kill anyone!

Rebeka bowed her head. "Of course, I suppose I do need to know that, don't I?"

Slowly, she turned to go, then stopped, and looked back. Before Darius realized what she intended, she reached up and touched his cheek, pulling his head down as she pressed a little kiss on it. "Thank you, Darius."

"For what, Mistress?" *For not raping you? For managing to keep my mechanisms under that much control?*

"For being who you are." Her words startled him. "I don't believe I could have touched you if I thought you could actually respond. I'm so glad you don't have real emotions, Darius."

Then she was gone, shutting the door behind her.

The moment she was out of earshot, Darius turned on Martin so violently the old man cowered backward.

"You bastard! You told her I can't respond emotionally? That my reactions are all simulated?"

"I thought it best."

"*Best!* My God, do you know what you just put me through? When she touched me, I wanted to pick her up and carry her into that bedroom and-and thrust myself into her! I wanted to—" Darius shook his head, refusing to think about it.

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't," he agreed, adding quickly, "But there's no safety-lock on my emotions, Master. I can experience lust as well as a human. And, as you just saw, if pushed to my limit, I can override an order." He paused, then asked, quietly.

"Why didn't I do what I wanted?"

"I think you can answer that question better than I, Darius."

"Yes." Once again, he acknowledged his programming. "Because I have to protect her, keep her from harm. That's one order I *can't* disobey. And, even if I don't like to admit it, if I had sex with Rebeka, it definitely *would* harm her. Mentally, if not physically." He shook his head, sadly, "Oh, but that kiss was good!"

"Darius." Martin placed a hand on the android's arm.

Darius looked down at him.

"Now, I know your emotional capability, but don't allow yourself to fall in love with the girl. Remember, she's for Philip Hamilcar and no one else."

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

"Of course, Master," Darius answered, calmly, as if the idea was totally absurd. "I'm well aware of that."

But he was afraid that falling in love was exactly what he had done.

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Chapter 6

"Is he going to sit there and watch us?" Taryn nodded towards the android who was leaning against a boulder at the edge of the field.

"Of course, he is," Rebeka replied. "He's been ordered to stay with me."

"Hm." Taryn didn't look too happy about that.

It was mid-morning of the following day.

Darius had accompanied Rebeka to the Warrior's Field. He was now officially her bodyguard. From that point on, he would be at the girl's side except when she slept or was alone with Philip Hamilcar.

Her brother was already there when they arrived, sitting on the big roan, the end of his spear resting against his stirrup. He looked surprised to see someone accompanying his sister and slid from the horse's back, leaving the animal to graze untethered, as he came towards them, his posture slightly defensive as he looked at the tall stranger walking just a few feet behind Rebeka.

"Beka, who's this?" he called as soon as he was close enough to speak without shouting but before she could answer, he had gotten a look at Darius' face. "*You!* But how—"

He didn't wait for an answer or give either of them time to explain, just swung the spear into an underarm striking position, the other hand pulling his knife from its sheath.

"Beka, get out of here while I hold off the creature!" Taryn confronted Darius in disbelief. "We killed you! I know we did!"

"Yes, you did." The android didn't move except to raise his arms to chest level, palms outward in a gesture he had learned the Tusteyans used to indicate peace. "And I have the scars to prove it."

There was a flick of Taryn's brown eyes to the jagged streak across Darius' brow, then back to his face, as Rebeka stepped between them.

"Beka, move. You'll be—"

"Oh, Taryn, stop it. He isn't going to fight you." Her voice was scornful. "If he was, he'd have already done so. He *won't* fight you unless you threaten me."

Taryn looked even more confused as Rebeka leant against the android and took his hand. "Darius, apologise to my brother."

"Mistress," the android protested. "I did nothing wrong."

"You startled him. Apologise, Darius."

When he bowed his head and dutifully said, "Taryn Spearman, I regret my actions," the boy returned the spear to an upright, non-aggressive position.

"I don't understand." He looked from Rebeka who still held Darius' hand, to the android and back. "Would someone care to explain it to me. This is the artificial man we buried, isn't it?"

"Yes," Darius spoke up. "And before you start thinking I have remarkable recuperative powers, let me disabuse you of that. Master Martin repaired me, reprogrammed me, and placed Mistress Rebeka in my care."

Taryn looked as if he didn't like that too much.

"Why didn't someone tell me?"

"After the way you reacted, you can ask that?" Rebeka released Darius' hand. "I'm surprised Father even told you why you're here today."

Taryn looked chagrined. "All I have to say is it's lucky I didn't know sooner what he planned, or I'd have found some way to kill that monster myself."

"In thirty years, your warriors haven't been able to kill either governor," Darius pointed out. "What makes you think one lone boy could?"

Taryn flushed. "I may be one lone boy, but I'm an Eliusian warrior, robot. Don't insult me."

"If you tried that foolish scheme, you'd be a *dead* Eliusian warrior."

Taryn ignored that. "It's demeaning for all of the warriors, to send a *girl* to do what we can't—especially since there's a good chance she may succeed."

"She *will* succeed," Darius corrected. "I'll see to it."

"Can we really trust you?"

"Ask Master Martin. I'm tired of defending myself." The android took a deep breath, as if forcing himself to become calm. "Suffice it to say I'm your sister's protector and I will continue to be until Philip Hamilcar is dead and she is once again returned to this village. And now, I suggest that you get on with why we came here before the day gets much older."

Taryn bristled. "I don't need you to remind me of my duty, android."

"No?"

Abruptly, Rebeka had enough of their sparring.

"One more word, and I go back home." Looking at Darius, she went on, "Go! Sit!" gesturing towards a large boulder protruding from the grass. As he obeyed, she turned to Taryn. "Let's get this over with."

Her brother returned his knife to its sheath. Rebeka saw then that he had another stuck through his belt and he pulled this one out and handed it to her.

"Here. This is the dagger you'll take with you. It's new, never been used—is as virgin as you are—and it's the one you must use to kill the Governor."

She took the knife from him. It felt heavy and strange in her hand as she hefted it.

It was a beautiful weapon, blade bright and sharp, the handle wrapped with flat strips of leather. The smith had put great care into its construction.

She wondered if she'd be able to handle such a weapon.

Gesturing for her to follow him, Taryn walked over to a scaffold on which hung life-sized mannequins which the warriors in sparring practice. One, however, wasn't a straw-filled, man-shaped figure, but the carcass of a large boar.

"We killed it last night," Taryn explained. "You need something of flesh and blood to practice on, Beka. This is as close as we could come to a human." He lowered his voice so Darius wouldn't hear. "Appropriate, don't you think? Using a beast to represent the Governor?"

In spite of her disgust, Rebeka found herself smiling at the look of mischief on her brother's face.

"...and when we're finished, it'll serve us even better, for we'll have it for supper."

He glanced back at Darius who was settling himself against the rock—as he'd been instructed—his back against its curved cold surface.

Ignoring the android, Taryn began to instruct his little sister in what she had to do to kill a man.

"That's a good blade," he began. "The best one the smith has made. It's so sharp there'll be no pain for several minutes."

That fact isn't very comforting. Rebeka couldn't prevent a slight shudder.

"I've been thinking it over," Taryn became business-like. "I believe the best way for you to do it is to stab him in the heart."

Rebeka closed her eyes, then quickly opened them as she heard Taryn move.

"It won't be difficult to get Hamilcar near you, I imagine. You'll simply put one hand behind his neck, like this," he gestured, cupping his hand around an imaginary neck, "...pull him forward"—his hand moved as if pulling someone—"and bring up the knife!"

His other hand came up, stabbing into the non-existent victim's belly.

Rebeka bit her lip.

"The knife should go in about here." Taryn pulled open his tunic-front, pointing to the curve of the bottom rib on the left side of his chest. "Under the ribs and up into the heart. He'll be dead before he knows what's happening."

He didn't notice the colour draining from his sister's face.

"I don't want to do this, Taryn," she whispered.

"Too bad." He was trying to sound unfeeling, and not let his sympathy show. "It's too late to back out now. Let me see you do a couple of feints with that knife."

Obediently, she raised the heavy blade, holding it as she'd seen him do, and jabbed—awkwardly and timidly—at the air while Taryn watched.

"Not bad, but you're going to have to be a little more decisive, more forceful. You're not knocking the heads off daisies, you know. You're going to be driving that knife through layers of skin and guts."

If he keeps on like that, I'll be sick. I just know I will!

Putting one hand to her mouth, Rebeka turned her head. She'd watched the men gut and clean a deer carcass once, and been very ill afterward.

She had a violent vision of her knife piercing Hamilcar's body and his insides spilling out, while he grasped at them—a look of disbelief on his face—before collapsing at her feet.

"Where am I supposed to hide this?" She shook her head to dispel that thought from her mind.

"Doesn't your gown have pockets?"

"Yes, but what if I don't have on a gown? What if we're in t-the privacy of our bedchamber. Suppose we're both naked?"

"Hm, I hadn't thought of that." Taryn did so now, pondering deeply before brightening. "You'll just have to kill him before you undress. If you're asking him to kiss you, I doubt he'll complain about whether you're clothed or not. Or, hide it under the mattress or inside your pillow."

Its concealment was her problem, his manner suggested.

"Now,"—Placing a hand on her arm, he turned her towards the boar's body—"Pretend that's the Governor, and stab him."

Sliding the knife into the deep pocket of her skirt, Rebeka reached up with her left hand, placing it on the animal's short, thick neck. Its hide was covered with short bristles that scratched her palm.

"Suppose he's taller than this? She looked over at Taryn, searching for excuse not to strike. "What if I can't reach his neck?"

"Then get him to lean towards you. Gods, Beka, think about it!"

Nodding, she took a step towards the animal, attempting to pull the body towards her. It swayed against the ropes, as if grotesquely attempting to obey. As she reached for the knife, however, the hilt caught on the pocket lining. She had to let go of the boar and use both hands to free it.

"I'm afraid he'd be a little suspicious by now, Beka." Taryn said. "He isn't going to just stand there and wait for you to stab him, you know."

Flushing, she returned the knife to her pocket and tried again. This time, she got it out easily enough, but as she brought it up, it sailed out of her hand, landing in the grass several feet away.

Behind them, came a laugh that was quickly transformed into a cough as Taryn turned and glared at Darius. The android transferred his attention to something in the rocks near where he stood.

"Try placing it in your belt, at your back," Taryn suggested.

This time, everything went well, the boar was pulled to her, the knife cleared Rebeka's sash. Her aim was perfect, just under the bottom rib ... making a one-inch deep cut.

As she pulled the knife out of the wound, proud she had at last done as her brother ordered, she was startled, and a little angry, to hear Taryn say, "You're going to have to do better than that. A wound that shallow—why, he'd feel that, take a deep breath, and yell for the guards."

Biting her lip, she repeated the action, with the same result.

"Once more, sister!" Taryn's voice was sharper. After the third time, he stalked to her side, took her hand, "Here! Let me show you," and standing behind her, guided it as it stabbed the boar's belly. "Like this."

He struck the animal several times. She was startled at the vibration travelling through the blade and up the handle into her hand as it sank into the thick flesh. Then, he released Rebeka's hand.

Transferring the knife to her other hand, she flexed her right. It throbbed slightly from the tightness of Taryn's grip.

"That's how it should be done." He stepped to one side. "Now, try again."

Biting her lip in determination, Rebeka seized the boar and pushed the knife into its ribs as hard as she could.

Once more, the cut was shallow enough to be non-lethal.

"Perhaps its hide is just too thick?"

Taryn shook his head. "Master Martin says pigskin is as close to the thickness and density of human skin as any animal's can be."

He looked at her hand. It drooped at her side, the knife's heaviness pulling it downward.

"You're just not strong enough, Rebeka."

Glancing back at Darius, he took a deep breath as if making a decision, and walked over to the android.

"You saw," he said quietly. "She's too weak to deal a death blow. Do you have any suggestions?"

Darius didn't hesitate. "She'll have to cut his throat. While he sleeps."

The unemotional way he said it, made Taryn blink but he nodded and returned to his sister's side, telling her what Darius had said.

"Kill a sleeping man? Oh, Taryn! That's awful. It's dishonourable. To kill a man who's unconscious and unable to fight back?"

"Do you *want* him to fight back? Rebeka, there are no rules in battle. You fight to kill your enemy and to remain alive, and that applies to all warriors, male or female. When you enter the governor's palace, you're going into combat as real as any we've ever fought. You're meeting an enemy and you have to dispatch him as best you can."

Seeing the mix of emotions—he'd almost say the *terrified* look—on her face, he went on, "Look, he's your husband. Theoretically, he's going to love you."

She looked doubtful.

"He *will* love you, Beka. So ... you entice him ... enflame him ... exhaust him so he'll want to sleep afterward, and then make certain he never awakens."

Rebeka didn't answer.

"Do you understand?" For just a moment, he didn't sound like her loving brother, but more like one of her father's war-weary soldiers.

Though she nodded, she couldn't keep her shoulders from slumping.

"Then let me see you do it."

Gritting her teeth, Rebeka spun around, raised the knife and slashed it just under the boar's lolling head.

Immediately, Taryn was beside her, pushing the animal's head back, examining the gaping cut across its throat.

"Better!" he declared. "But it needs more pressure."

Once again, he stood behind her, hand on hers, slashing the blade across the animal's chest.

"See? Now try again."

When the blade cleared the creature's throat this time, he smiled at her proudly.

"Now *that's* a death-blow!" He lifted the head, exposing its ruined neck, blood oozing down its chest as the filled arteries emptied. "Look at that."

Rebeka didn't want to, had to force herself not to turn away as Taryn pushed the head to one side, holding it so she could see the severed blood vessels.

"Cut completely through the windpipe, veins, and arteries. If this creature had been alive, it would have bled to death in two minutes with a slash like that."

He released the head, allowing the boar's body to swing away from him and turned to hug Rebeka tightly. "Do that to Hamilcar and we'll be minus one Governor and on our way to freedom."

Rebeka felt like throwing up. She tightened her arms around Taryn's body to drive the sick feeling away.

Arm around her waist, he walked her back to Darius, telling them both, "I'll see you in the morning."

"You're coming with me?"

Taryn nodded. "Father decided someone should represent the Council. I was chosen." He looked at Darius but didn't speak, then turned and went back to his horse.

Catching the reins, he swung into the saddle and rode away.

"So, you're an assassin now." Darius came to Rebeka's side.

"Not until Philip Hamilcar dies," she said quickly.

He didn't answer and they walked on through the thick grass.

* * * *

"Where do we go now?"

"Back to Master Martin's. I have to bathe and he told me I could use his pool. I want some privacy. I don't feel like being subjected to a bunch of laughing, splashing women just now."

"You mean the women have their own bathing place?"

Darius looked surprised. "I'd certainly like to see that."

Rebeka looked at him.

"Uh ... merely out of curiosity, I mean," he amended. "In the Governor's palace, the men have a communal bathing pool but the women have private baths. I'm interested on a purely cultural basis."

"Of course," she replied and turned away before he could see her frown.

They had walked a few yards before she spoke again.

"I suppose it's time." She said it with a sigh of defeat.

"Darius, tell me about Philip Hamilcar. Tell me about the man I'm to kill."

"What would you like to know?"

"What does he look like? I have only a vague idea of a faceless figure that radiates menace." She shuddered slightly.

"I imagine him to be dark and short and terribly ugly."

"Then you'd be wrong. He's tall, almost as tall as I am, and blond—as fair-haired as your brother, in fact. And even the men consider him very handsome. I've often said that if I didn't look like my Maker, I'd like to look like the Governor."

"You mean your features were copied from a human's?"

They were at Master Martin's home now, skirting the hut to reach the garden where the stream spilled over the rocks into the pool.

Unbuttoning the front of her gown, Rebeka walked over to the little waterfall.

Turning his back, Darius stopped at the garden path though he continued talking.

"My Maker's name is Dr. David Marx. Some of the more sophisticated androids are replications of their builders. You see, the Earthmen have this belief that everyone has a double

somewhere in the universe, someone who looks just like them. My Maker said he wanted to be certain of it. The only difference between the way he and I look is our hair colour. His is very dark, about the colour of yours."

"Is he still alive? Oh, the water's warm today." There was a slight splashing and the sound of water lapping against the edges of the pool.

Darius closed his eyes, imagining Rebeka's body displacing the water, sending it in little waves to splash onto the grass as she sank into it. He thought of how warm the water had felt against his legs and groin when he'd bathed, thought of that same warmth covering Rebeka's bare body. It was a moment before he answered her question.

"I imagine so. He was only twenty-four when I left Terra."

"How very odd. And disturbing."

"Most of the things one learns about Earthmen are disturbing."

She's probably raising one of the tiny bars of soap, and rubbing it across her body, while the little waterfall sprays over her ... trickling down her breasts and across her belly to fall into the stream again ... Darius forced his thoughts to the Governor.

"Philip's father raised him as an Earthman. In spite of having an Astorii mother, the governor considers himself to be pure Terran."

"His mother's Astorii? I didn't know that."

More gentle splashing, and the sound of water striking the rocks forming the top of the pool.

"She's dead now. She didn't want to marry the Lieutenant. She hated him, and hated their child. The day after Philip was born, she ran away, tried to reach your village as a matter of fact."

"What happened?"

"A *jalbeay* found her before she could get here. The guards trailing her took her body back for Lieutenant Hamilcar to bury. He never remarried, but whether he mourned her for the rest of his life or simply didn't want to be hurt again, I don't know."

She didn't say anything to that.

Darius shifted his weight, and, as usual, began to pace along the path, careful not to glance in Rebeka's direction.

"That, however, isn't telling you about the Governor. He's intelligent. A voracious reader. His father was also, and had the library in Ulea restored as well as many of the books. He also had Terran books transcribed and placed there." He paused, thinking about his former pupil. "Philip's a bit of a bookworm, in fact. Quiet, a bit shy—believe it or not."

Rebeka's snort told him she'd prefer not to.

"The other Earthmen consider him fair and just."

"Tell that to the Astorii!"

"Be that as it may," Darius went on, mildly. "He hasn't enacted any new laws, but simply adheres to the ones his father made, which may tell you something. Let's see. What else? He's been Governor since he was fifteen, wouldn't have been placed in such a position of power if any of his father's men'd had the gumption to take over." Darius' voice became derisive. "Philip became Governor by default."

He stopped. "I'm uncertain exactly what more to say."

"H-how does he treat women?"

Darius heard her stand up and step from the water. The soft sound of fabric being brushed against damp skin made his sensors bristle.

"Very gently, I think. I never accompanied him on any of his trips to Ulea's brothels so I have no first-hand knowledge, but I think I can safely say that, while he goes there for his own physical satisfaction, he makes certain his partner gets some pleasure from their couplings, also."

"Darius..." Rebeka stopped behind him.

Reluctantly he turned to face her.

She had wrapped one of Master Martin's towels around her body, tucking in a corner so it was stretched tightly across her breasts. The ends of her hair were damp and clinging to her shoulders and neck, the rest starting to curl from the heat of the water.

"Darius, what if Philip Hamilcar doesn't want me? What if I don't please him?"

"Rebeka, don't doubt yourself." He started to touch her shoulder, then let his hand drop instead. "He can't help but want you."

She looked unconvinced. "How do you know that? He may be an Earthman but he's also a human, and if there's one thing Master Martin has taught us, it's that humans are unpredictable. He may take one look at me and be totally repulsed."

She looked up at him, blue eyes bright and damp and he imagined it wasn't from the water she'd splashed on her face.

"How can you say he'll want me?"

"Because I know Philip. He loves women—all of them!"

"I don't care about all of the women he loves," she whispered. "I'm only concerned with how he will feel about me. Darius, do the Earthmen have a standard of female beauty?"

"Of course they do. All cultures do, and before you ask: Yes. In my databanks, I have images of some of the women they've considered the most beautiful, such as Nefertiti, Helen of Troy, Cleopatra. Women whom men loved and fought wars over and died for. They have a certain image of womankind they're always seeking."

"Then tell me..." Before he realized what she intended, Rebeka had pulled the end of the towel, releasing it so the long piece of fabric fell in soft folds around her ankles. "Look at me, Darius. Compare me to those women and tell me if Philip Hamilcar will truly want me."

"Rebeka!" Averting his gaze, he wasn't certain what to do.

"Please, Darius."

His show of reluctance wasn't pretended. Hoping neither Master Martin nor Alcin nor—God forbid!—that defensive older brother came along and misunderstood what was happening, Darius turned to look at Rebeka, forcing his eyes to move from the earnest seriousness on her beautiful little face to surprisingly full breasts, swollen from the heat of the pool, nipples pink and rounded.

Unconsciously, his fingers flexed, wanting to reach out and touch them, and he wanted to lick the drops of moisture clinging to her skin. He wanted to clasp the narrow

smoothness of her waist, brush the still-damp softness of the dark curls at the meeting of her thighs and seek between them, plunging inside her. He wanted to hear her gasp with shock and then pleasure.

Taking a step backward so Rebeka was out of reach, Darius placed his hands behind his back, curling them into fists. "If Philip Hamilcar doesn't want you, he's a fool!" *And I'm a bigger fool because I do want you.*

She relaxed, shoulders slumping with relief. "Thank you, Darius," Quickly, she stooped and gathered up the towel, wrapping it around herself and hurried back to the pool where her gown lay.

With a long, shuddering breath, Darius turned away.

There were minute pebbles on the path, tiny grains of rock eroded from the mountain by the evening winds. He picked up one, looked at it a moment, then closed his hand around it, squeezing tightly. When he opened his hand, the pebble had been crushed to dust.

He blew the dust into the air.

That made him feel better.

When Rebeka touched his arm and he looked back, he was relieved to see she was dressed again.

"Rebeka, there is one thing you should know about Philip..."

She looked anxious again.

"I say he treats women gently, but you must remember he's a man who's been raised by men. Other than the whores, he's been very seldom in the company of women. Philip's quarters are on the main floor of the palace. The others have

apartments in the lower levels and their wives, daughters, and mistresses are never allowed into the upper stories. I doubt he's ever seen many of them."

"What are you trying to tell me, Darius? If he's gentle—"

"It may not be *gentle* as you define the word. He won't do you physical harm, but he may seem crude, brutally frank, and embarrassingly explicit—because that's the way Earthmen are."

"I see." She considered that. "So if he says something my people would consider terribly rude or even forbidden, I should simply accept it as the difference in our cultures?"

He nodded.

"Thank you, Darius." Her voice was quiet and very thoughtful. "Thank you for warning me."

He nodded and touched her hand, giving it a little squeeze. "Where to now, Mistress?"

"Home." There was no anticipation in her voice. "So my father's wives may begin my wedding preparations."

"And then?"

"In the morning, we'll go to Ulea."

"*The journey, and not the destination, is of more importance.*" he quoted and went on, apologetically. "My glitch again."

"And not exactly appropriate in this case," Rebeka pointed out.

"Yes," he agreed, "for it's where we're going and not how we get there that matters most, isn't it?"

* * * *

They were greeted by a tall blonde woman, who had the look of an Astorii about her, with a stomach rounded with the middle months of pregnancy. This lady, Darius decided, as he noted her golden hair, had to be Taryn's mother.

"Stop right there, big man," she ordered, placing a hand on his chest. "You're not coming in."

"What am I to do then, Mistress?" He kept his voice mild, since hers held no anger.

"You to stay right here, and allow no man—neither the Counsellor nor our sons—to enter."

From the decisive way she gave orders, never questioning that they wouldn't be obeyed, she had to be the Prime Wife, he decided. The perfect wife for a man who led others.

Putting an arm across Rebeka's shoulders, she whisked the girl inside, and let the tent flap drop, leaving Darius standing there.

Taking his place in front of the entrance like a sentry, he remained there rather stoically for several minutes, unconsciously assuming the posture the Governor's guards called *At Ease*, feet apart and braced, hands resting together at the small of his back.

Am I really supposed to prevent Alcin Spearman from entering his own home? And his sons? How many of them were there, anyway? Would they obey him and turn away? Is she serious?

He hoped none appeared until whatever was going on inside was finished.

What is going on inside?

Eventually, curiosity overcame him.

Sliding a hand through the tent opening, he pushed the flaps apart. After all, she hadn't said he couldn't *look*.

Two of Alcin's wives sat on one of the hand-loomed rugs covering the floor, Rebeka standing naked between them. *Gods, she's beautiful!* Darius forced himself to look from the girl's pleasing bareness to what the women were doing. One was massaging something into her breasts, an oil or unguent that made her pale skin gleam in the lantern light. The other appeared to be using a tiny feathered quill to paint a flower on the girl's left buttock. Dipping the point of the little pen into a cup she held, she shook it and applied more colour to the tiny petals she was drawing.

Darius's botany data told him it was a violet.

The other two women were kneeling at her feet and ... were they actually painting her toenails?

Painting parts of the body to be covered by clothing?

Eliusians had even odder practices than the Earthmen. Then, he realized the flowers on Rebeka's body were intended for only one person to see.

He didn't like that thought. Not at all.

Shaking his head, he let the flap fall together and once more turned away. He didn't want to be discovered spying on them. He wasn't yet certain how Alcin's other wives might regard him or how timorous they were; certainly the blonde one hadn't seemed afraid.

Once or twice, he heard laughter, and then it got very quiet, the sounds from inside becoming a low murmur.

Darius concentrated on the trees surrounding the tent entrance, watching the shadows creep towards him as the

sun went down and the moon rose and the time came closer for him and Rebeka to leave the village.

He had to be careful, couldn't let the trait of which he was most proud, the one that was both his weakness and his strength—his capacity to experience human emotion—get in the way and cause their plan to fail. Rebeka thought him an unfeeling piece of machinery, his responses programmed to make humans comfortable. He had to make certain he never let his feelings for the girl be obvious, that no matter what he saw happening between her and young Hamilcar, he never reacted improperly—and that was going to be damned difficult, because he'd already revealed them, though Rebeka had misunderstood.

From inside the tent came a spurt of female laughter, dying into a series of high-pitched giggles.

Peering again through the tent flap, he saw the five of them sitting in a circle on big soft cushions. They were drinking from large clay cups, and at that moment, Rebeka was lifting hers to her lips. The big blonde and a little brunette—who had to be Rebeka's mother—had obviously already had more than one cup from the jug sitting before them, for they appeared to be supporting each other as they broke into another spate of laughter.

Darius couldn't know they had been asking Rebeka about him: *Is he really the artificial man Taryn and the others dispatched several months before? Is he as intelligent as he appears? He's very handsome ... does he—you know—have all his body parts?* and her answer to that, with a whispered

explanation about the guards' wives, sent them into spasms of shocked laughter.

"Perhaps," commented Rhedora, lifting the jug to fill her cup again. "We should invite the big man to join us. Does he like wine, Beka?"

"Oh, yes," Anemoni agreed, sarcastically. "Wouldn't Alcin like that? To come home and find his wives drunkenly cavorting with a naked android."

"Who said anything about him being naked? But now that you mention it..." The blonde licked her lips and rolled her eyes, and the others began to laugh again. "Do you suppose he might be persuaded to prove he's ... anatomically ... correct?"

"Gods, Rhedora," Anissa gasped between giggles. "You're awful."

Rhedora glanced towards the entrance. Luckily, she didn't see the tent flap move slightly.

"I'll just go ask..." She started to stand up, and was pulled back down by a hand on her skirt.

"You'll do no such thing!" Simi hissed. "What would Alcin think?"

"That I'm hungry for some affection?" Rhedora wavered drunkenly, righted herself and set down her cup, rubbing her eyes, and succeeding in smearing the bright flower painted on her left cheek.

"You've already had plenty of that," the little redhead pointed out. She looked around, patting her stomach which was even rounder than Rhedora's. "We *all* have!"

"Oh, don't worry, Simi. I doubt if anyone other than our dear husband would look at an old pregnant woman like me." Hiccoughing loudly, Rhedora shifted her bulk. "Damn Alcin! Why does he have to be so virile, anyway?"

She raised the cup, tilted it slightly and nearly poured it into her lap.

"Now, Rhedora," Anissa spoke up. "You know you enjoy having Alcin's babies." Her hand went to her own stomach where her third child was now nurturing.

"Oh, yes!" Rhedora agreed, giving them all an owl-eyed leer. "But not as much as I enjoy creating them."

They all broke into laughter again, Rebeka the loudest of all. She'd always loved these little drink-and-gossip sessions her father's wives held, eavesdropping at the door of her room while they laughed and teased each other and complained good-naturedly about her father and their sons, though they'd never been this outspoken before. For a little while, she forgot what awaited her in the morning—for a little while, she was very, very happy, pretending this was an ordinary pre-wedding celebration.

"Laugh while you can!" Old Mara, sitting upon the stairs watching them, spoke up suddenly.

They all turned to look at her.

"This plan of the Master's is foolish. Those aliens will kill my girl."

"Mara," Rhedora snapped. "Go to bed!"

Muttering to herself, the old woman got to her feet and headed for her room located under the stairs.

"Don't listen to her." Rhedora turned back to Rebeka, leaning forward to pick up the jug of wine and refill the girl's glass. "I trust in Alcin's plan."

Rebeka didn't answer, fearful that if she did, her own doubts would come pouring out. Lifting the wine cup, she took a sip to keep from speaking.

It took a moment to restore the mood, but eventually, the wine was all gone, and each woman staggered to her bed, leaving Rebeka asleep among the big cushions. From the flower adorning her cheek—symbol of her status as a bride-to-be—the girl's painted body was a bright contrast to the dull colour of the fabrics on which she lay. Stimulated by the wine and the speculations about Darius, each one hoped that upon his return, Alcin would decide to honour her with his affection in the remaining hours of the night.

* * * *

It had been quiet for so long that Darius was startled when the tent flap jerked open and Rhedora reappeared, weaving slightly.

"Mistress, are you well?" Without thinking, he reached out and caught her by the elbows, steadying her.

"Well, enough, big man." She drew herself up regally, took a deep breath and announced, quietly enunciating each word, "We are retiring now. You may allow our husband and our sons to enter when they return."

She turned away, only to look back as if suddenly remembering something.

"Big man?"

"Yes, Mistress?" Darius was looking out into the shadows, uncertain whether he should be speaking to Rhedora at all.

"Do you have any preference in women?"

He was startled to see the blue eyes fix what had to be a leer, albeit a slightly sleepy one, upon him.

Oh, God, this could be dangerous.

"No, Mistress, other than that they be warm and living." He forced his answer to be slightly flippant.

For just an instant, she stood there staring at him. Then, she burst into laughter, turned, and stumbled in the direction of her room, leaving Darius to continue his sentry-duty until, one by one, the male members of Alcin's family returned.

* * * *

The following morning—amid tears and predictions of doom from old Mara—Darius and I left my village for Ulea. Master Martin and my brother came with us. Though I was glad they were there, two men who loved me and would lay down their lives to protect me, I cared more for the presence of that unfeeling machine who defended me simply because a program had been fed into his electronic brain. I knew I was safer with Darius, because he had no emotions which might make his hand fail when determination was needed. I was still afraid, and nothing would change that, but I felt safer knowing the artificial man was there to defend me.

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Chapter 7

The Governor of Tusteya sat at his desk, studying the hand unit sent him by the overseer of the *angelica* mines located in the mountains west of the city.

Two months before, a drill had penetrated a gas pocket in one of the tunnels, and the escaping vapour had killed five men and sickened three dozen others before exploding and collapsing one of the tunnels. It had taken them weeks to clear the debris, and the doctors had told him it would be months before the survivors could return to work. In the meantime, the remaining crews were working overtime in double shifts, trying to maintain the quotas set for them.

When this wasn't successful, he had ordered the conscription of three dozen able-bodied men between the ages of eighteen and thirty to try and reinstate the quotas, but even that did not seem to be working.

Philip Hamilcar frowned and the expression looked oddly out of place on his young face. Soon, he had to make a decision—whether to continue to overwork the remaining men, or close down the mines until the survivors recovered.

To do that would put them even more behind in their quota of mined *angelica* ore, and, once that happened, there would be no way they could ever catch up.

It would be the humane thing to do, however, but he realized that by doing so, he would be going against the procedures his father had set up for the mine's operation. Philip had never countermanded any of the protocols his

father had set in place, and even now, five years after the former Governor's death, he was hesitant to do so.

We have to have as much angelica ready as possible when the Condor returns. How many times had he heard his father say that?

The Lieutenant had worked many Uleans to death trying to keep up the goal of one hundred pounds of ore a month, which was what the scans of the planet had estimated could be produced before the ship returned.

Secretly, Philip was beginning to doubt that the *Condor* was coming back at all.

If it was, it should have reached Tusteya long before now. They had probably found some other planet which rebelled against being taken over, killing the remaining crew. Or the ship had crashed somewhere, with the same result, or its crew had simply forgotten them and returned to Terra.

Whatever the reason, Philip was certain the *Condor* wasn't going to return.

It shouldn't have taken thirty years to explore this section of the galaxy.

Initially optimistic, the Lieutenant had put men on duty in one of the palace towers, manning the communications and surveillance equipment they'd brought with them. For over three decades, those men and their sons had dutifully watched the screens, kept the huge dish-shaped antenna repaired, and listened to the hiss and rattle of white sound through their receivers. Nowadays, however, they mostly napped in their chairs, lulled by the monotonous noise from outer space.

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

The equipment was outdated, but as far as the boy knew, could still detect anything as large as a space ship if it came into orbit, and if that ever happened, Philip Hamilcar wanted to be ready. He was almost eager, in fact, to prove to the captain of the *Condor* that he and the present inhabitants of the Governor's palace were, like their fathers before them, loyal Earthmen.

Like the others in his generation, Philip ignored the fact that they weren't, in fact, true Earthmen, that there wasn't a pure-blooded Terran in the group.

When his men had begun to notice the Tusteyan females, the young Lieutenant had quickly set down rules, and made certain they were strictly followed. Lieutenant Hamilcar had been determined that, unlike other times Terran soldiers had occupied conquered soil, there would be no abandoned half-breed children in Ulea, to grow up hating their unknown fathers, and adding their bodies to the ranks of those who lurked on the eastern hillsides waiting to attack.

He'd ordered contraception among his men, freely dispensing packets of River Mud, a non-perishable spermicide. If one of the men found himself facing impending fatherhood—either through open rebellion against his commander's policy or because of religious beliefs—he and his woman were given a choice: abortion or matrimony.

It was amazing how the majority became fervently marriage-minded when the existence of their unborn children was at stake.

The Ulean priest called upon to solemnize the ceremonies was soon performing so many weddings that he was given

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free access to the palace chapel, told he could exercise his holy duties without permission from the Governor, and was eventually installed as counsellor and comforter for Ulean and Earthman alike, an office he still held.

The Governor's palace was a small city inside Ulea, a fortress within the city itself. Guarded by the sons of the original invaders, two generations lived in its lower levels—in some cases *three* generations since some of the Earthmen's offspring now had children of their own. Knowledge was passed from father to son, the men from the *Condor* training their children in whatever field they themselves had been educated, teaching them everything they knew about their own skills. Daughters weren't allowed to follow in their male parents' footsteps, but were expected to become the wives of the sons of their fathers' comrades, although it was acceptable for a young man to find a wife in the city itself, to prevent the inevitable inbreeding.

Unlike his men, the Lieutenant himself waited eight years before succumbing to the calls of the flesh and his choice hadn't been a particularly wise one.

Though many of the women who worked in the palace had tried to excite his interest, setting aside their hatred of the invaders for a chance to put themselves in the handsome young Earthman's bed, it was the daughter of the single surviving Astorii Council member—now merely a figurehead and liaison between the Earthmen and his own people—who had caught his eye.

Her name was Wylana.

Unlike the others, she'd wanted nothing to do with the love struck young alien and told him so.

Using his authority as Governor he'd married her anyway, threatening her father with dire consequences should his daughter continue to reject him

Their wedding night had been a disaster, and Philip immediately realized he'd made a mistake. He'd taken Wylana by force, something he had never believed himself capable of doing, but the kind, gentle young man he'd been had died when the *Condor* pulled out of orbit.

When his son was born, he hoped things might change between his wife and himself, but a day after the birth, Wylana disappeared. A week later, her body had been found in a ravine near Mount Scar. From what they could tell, she had been making her way to the camp of the Elius when she'd been attacked by a giant and deadly sloth-like creature called a *jalbeay*.

Lieutenant Hamilcar had buried his wife, and turned to the comfort of Ulean spirits to ward off the guilt he felt over her death, the anger he still held towards Renault, and the yearnings his brief marriage had awakened. He'd raised his son as an Earthman, urging him to ignore his Astorii blood, while telling him stories of the wonderful life he would have on Terra once the *Condor* returned.

"You're an Earthman, Phillip," he would say, usually when he was in his cups. "Don't ever forget that."

"No sir." The boy would look up at his father, green eyes—his mother's damned jade-green Astorii eyes—bright and trusting.

Young Philip still believed that.

A twinge of pain stinging across one temple made him look up from the report, closing his eyes quickly.

No, please, not a headache. Not now.

His father had suffered from debilitating pain, brought on by alcohol and the tension of living among people who wished him dead. *Migraines*, he'd called them.

Many times, Philip had witnessed his father gulping down powders and medications given him by their physician, tears of pain streaming from his eyes. They rarely worked, and the only other remedy was seclusion in his bedchamber where heavy curtains kept out light and muffled sound. Lying naked on a bare mattress because the pressure of even a single sheet was sheer torture to his skin, he would try to sleep, and if fortunate enough to lose consciousness, the headache would be gone when he awoke, and he could function again.

When Philip took over the Governor's chair five years before, he, too, began to experience the same symptoms but as yet they hadn't disabled him as they had his father. He had learned to ward off most of the headaches by ceasing whatever activity he was doing, closing his eyes, and forcing his mind to think of anything but the current problem.

Usually, it was successful.

This time, however, he knew he couldn't ignore what was happening. A decision about the mine had to be made.

Soon.

The pain in his temples grew stronger.

Dropping the hand unit and leaning his elbows on the desk, Philip rested his chin against his fingers.

I will not let this happen. Not now!

He shifted his gaze to the garden just visible through the double doors opening onto the palace terrace.

His father's garden.

Young Philip still had ambivalent feelings about it.

It was a place representing comfort and security as well as an odd disdain for those feelings, and a certain shame for the father who had displayed this same weakness.

In the evenings, the Lieutenant had taken his small son there to watch the child play in the grass, and for just a little while, pretend he was back on Terra, in his own garden on an island called Hawaii, where the air was always warm and sultry and it never snowed or turned cold, and there were no hostile tribesmen waiting in the mountains to attack his men when they patrolled.

He would think about his lost home, and tell his son about it, and promise him that when the *Condor* returned, they would be taken back there. He had constructed an elaborate daydream that, told over the years, became very real to both of them: Captain Renault would appoint a governor from the Uleans, one friendly to their oppressors, the androids would monitor their actions as they did on other worlds, and the Earthmen would return home, to a world that hadn't changed in decades.

The sound of a door opening behind him made Philip turn his head.

His courtesy uncle, Alexander McIntyre, his father's oldest friend and the Governor-Regent, stood there.

An eighteen-year-old ensign aboard the *Condor*, Alexander had sided with his Lieutenant during the attack on Ulea, stoically joining him on the surface. Being an orphan, the young Scot wasn't as affected by their abandonment as Philip Hamilcar had been, and had done his best to make the most of what was a very unpleasant situation. He'd married, fathered two sons and a daughter, and had just become a widower a few years earlier.

When the Lieutenant died, Alexander had become advisor to young Philip. His twin sons, Timon and Abraham, who had played with the new Governor as children, become his bodyguards. Secretly, he'd hoped Philip might show an interest in his daughter, Alexandra, and express a wish to marry her, becoming an actual part of his family, but though he'd courted her briefly, the Governor now remained aloof where the girl was concerned.

Walking over to the desk and leaning against it, Alexander said, "Philip, there's no sense in putting it off any longer. You know what has to be done."

"But to keep the mines open, Uncle Lex—after what's happened. It just doesn't seem right."

"And what would you call *right*?" Alexander demanded. "Disobeying the Federation's orders or letting the Tusteyans waste precious work time in idleness while you refuse to make a decision?"

His voice rose slightly, the way one might when speaking to an irritating child.

"That's not what I—" Philip began, only to be interrupted as his uncle went on, coldly, "Keep the mines open. Meet the

quotas. Conscript more men if necessary, but keep things running!" He made a dismissing gesture with one hand. "End of argument. Problem solved."

Briefly, Philip felt a stirring resentment towards his uncle, quelling it by telling himself he should be grateful Alexander was here to help him with those decisions which he was still too young to make on his own. *So why doesn't that make me feel justified in what I'm agreeing to do?*

All it seemed to be doing was making his headache worse.

Before he could say anything else, however, there was a knock at the door.

Opening it, Alexander spoke briefly with someone, then returned to say, "One of the gate guards is here, asking to speak with you."

"Can't you handle it, Uncle Lex?" Philip was startled to hear a childish whine creep into his voice, evidence of the hold the headache was establishing over him.

Five years before, Alexander had taken it upon himself to screen anyone seeking audience with the Governor, seeing many of them himself, and taking some of the burden off young, inexperienced shoulders. "The guard already tried that. He insists he has to speak to you personally."

This is all I need. Philip scowled. The pain was settling behind his eyes now.

"Very well," he conceded with barely concealed reluctance. "Send him in."

When the guard was before him, saluting, his greeting was brusque. "All right. What is it?"

"Sir, there's an Eliusian at the gate. Under a white flag."

"An Eliusian?" Philip looked disbelieving. "It isn't Alcin Spearman, is it?"

"No, sir." The man chose to take his question seriously, his next statement even more surprising. "He's much too old, but he says he speaks for the Counsellor."

"Is he alone?" He couldn't believe Alcin Spearman would be sending someone to him, unless it was at the head of a band of armed warriors.

"No sir, there are two others with him."

Philip thought about that for a moment.

Three Eliusians. At the palace gate. Under a white flag.

Standing up, he walked to the window overlooking the gate.

On a stationary tripod stood a large Astorii-made telescope which he used to indulge in stargazing whenever he had an idle moment—pathetically searching for the *Condor*, though he'd never admit it. Adjusting the lens, he looked down at the figures standing outside the wall.

* * * *

Sure enough, there was the old man, waiting impatiently for the guard's return, dark robes, riding cape with its hood thrown back to reveal white hair and beard. Definitely not Spearman, whom Philip remembered his father saying was about his own age or would be if the elder Philip had lived.

As for the other two, they had stopped a little ways from the gate, staying together, one also caped and hooded, on a black horse, the other driving an enclosed wagon of some

kind. Rider and mount stood by the driver's side of the wagon.

"What's in the wagon?"

The guard shrugged. "I don't know, sir. When we told them we'd have to search it, they became very belligerent so I thought it more prudent to wait until after the old man spoke with you—if you'll see him—before we pushed a search."

Nodding, Philip looked up at his uncle. "What do you think?"

His uncle bent to look through the telescope, also, then straightened. "It would be an odd way to stage an attack—riding up to the front door and announcing yourself."

"I agree." Philip nodded, then called out, "Bram!"

The eldest of the twins appeared, waiting for an order.

"Accompany the guard to the gate and escort the Eliusian to me. Only the old man."

Nodding, Bram followed the guard out, Philip returning to his desk.

As he seated himself in the tall Governor's chair, he was startled to realize his headache had disappeared.

* * * *

It seemed only moments before Bram was back, ushering the old man into the room.

Philip didn't give him time to speak, demanding, rudely, "What message does Alcin Spearman have for me and why didn't he deliver it in person?"

"Perhaps he trusts you as little as you trust him, Governor." As he straightened from his bow, Master Martin's tone was just as brusque. "As to your first question—the Counsellor wishes a truce."

"A truce?" Philip and his advisor exchanged surprised glances. "You mean he wishes to surrender?"

"He'll never surrender, Governor. No," Martin corrected. "He wishes to come to Ulea under a white flag and begin peace negotiations."

"Negotiations." Philip considered. "That implies concessions on both sides. What could Alcin Spearman possibly offer me to make me agree to a ceasefire?"

"I don't like it, Philip," Alexander spoke up. "Remember what your father said about the warrior caste: Don't trust them and don't underestimate them."

"The Counsellor realized you might question his motives, Governor." Martin decided it would be best to get to the point before the older man convinced the younger one not to continue the audience. He saw immediately that Philip relied on his advice. "The wagon at the gate contains his most precious possession. He sends it to you as proof of his sincerity."

Philip looked intrigued, then as eager as a child given a surprise gift, an expression which was quickly erased but not before the old man had seen it. *He's taking the bait*, Martin thought in satisfaction, and realized that if the boy had been older, their plan probably would have had no chance of working.

"Very well. Go and fetch it, then," came the imperious order. "Bram!"

Again, Alexander's oldest son appeared to return with Master Martin to the wagon waiting at the gate.

As soon as they were out the door, Philip was once more out of his chair and returning to the window, in his curiosity barely able to keep from running to the telescope.

"What can Alcin Spearman send me that he thinks would make me accept..." he began, then his words trailed away as he looked again through the eyepiece.

Below, at the gate, the old man was speaking to his two companions. The rider swung off his horse. A tall man. There was something vaguely familiar about the way he moved and for an instant that bothered Philip.

The driver of the wagon climbed down from his seat and opened the enclosure door.

The tall man held out his hand and a slender arm encased in a full blue sleeve emerged from the wagon, a small hand placing itself in his. Once again, there was that disturbing familiarity about his movements as he stepped back, helping a little figure swathed in an all-enveloping blue garment from the wagon.

God, it's a child, Philip thought. *He's sending me one of his children?*

Then, he understood.

"A hostage. Son of a bitch, Uncle Lex! He's giving me a hostage."

* * * *

When they came through the door, ushered in by both guards, it was the girl's companion who drew his attention ... as the tall figure pushed back the hood covering its head.

"Darius!" It was a greeting of surprise and delight at seeing his former tutor again. "What are you doing with these people?"

"I'm guarding my lady, Governor." The answer was totally impersonal and without any of the android's usual friendliness.

Surprised, Philip stared at his old friend and Master Martin felt it expedient to intervene before the young man could ask the wrong questions.

"I'm afraid Darius had a little mishap while rambling through the mountains. I repaired his injuries but in doing so erased part of his memories and re-programmed them. He's no longer loyal to either you or the Federation, Governor Hamilcar."

"Darius?" Philip looked from Martin to the android for confirmation.

The robot nodded. "It's as he says, Governor. My sole loyalty is to my lady, now."

That made Philip look at the small garment-swathed figure standing by Darius' side, her body and features barely visible through the many layers of cloth.

"And just *who* is your lady?" he demanded, his gaze shifting from Darius to Taryn, who glared back. *Is this another android? If so, he's not one of ours.*

"This is Alcin Spearman's only daughter," Martin explained hastily, not wanting Taryn and the Governor to confront each other any sooner than they had to.

The closer they got to Ulea, the angrier Taryn had become, and the old man had spent a good portion of the journey soothing the youngster's indignation, thinking Alcin had definitely made a mistake in sending his son with them.

Philip turned his attention back to the old man who mentally breathed a sigh of relief.

"He sends her to you as proof of his sincerity. Accept her as a hostage until his arrival here."

For just a moment, the young man didn't answer, his gaze straying back to Rebeka.

Martin waited. He thought the boy was slightly surprised by what he had said, though he was very good at hiding most of his reaction.

Clothing Rebeka in bridal-wrap had been a good idea. The Governor couldn't keep his gaze on anyone else. No matter how many times he looked away, he always turned to look back at her.

He's snared, Martin thought with satisfaction, as Philip spoke to his advisor while his eyes once more turned to watch the girl. *He wants nothing more in this moment than to get rid of us and tear away Rebeka's veils.*

"Why is she covered so? Is she so ugly to look upon that her face has to be hidden to keep from frightening the horses?"

Philip laughed and Timon and Bram joined in, not as if humouring him but as though they genuinely thought what

he'd said was amusing. Surprisingly Alexander turned a disapproving gaze on the Governor and his guards.

Taryn's face blazed. He took a step forward, mouth opening to retort.

"It is the custom for young Eliusian women to cover their faces when they travel." Martin explained, scowling at Taryn. "I assure you Mistress Rebeka is well-favoured."

Philip looked unconvinced. One corner of his mouth twisted upward in a disbelieving movement. He forced himself to look at the old man. "It doesn't matter to me how the girl looks. A hostage is a hostage, and an ugly woman can die as easily as a pretty one."

Out of the corner of his eye, Philip saw Rebeka take a step closer to Darius, and allowed himself a slight smile as he realized he had frightened her, though why that pleased him, he couldn't say. As the android put his hand on her shoulder, however, Philip's expression changed to a slight scowl.

"Be careful, Philip. I don't like it." Alexander's whisper was sharp in the Governor's ear.

"Tell Spearman I accept his offering, but he'll come to Ulea on *my* terms."

Martin bowed his agreement.

"He will come under a white flag." Philip's forefinger tapped sharply against the polished wood of the desk to emphasize what he was saying.

Martin nodded.

"And he'll come unarmed."

Once more, Taryn nearly spoke.

Again, the old man silenced him with a look.

"He will come alone. No one—no guards, no other members of his Council accompanying him."

"The Counsellor expected this," Martin told him. "He has empowered me to tell you that he agrees to whatever terms you specify, provided he is not prevented from leaving the city whether or not an agreement is reached."

"Agreed—if no accord is reached, I'll be glad to be rid of him." Philip didn't even take time to consider it.

His uncle started to protest.

"Don't bother saying it, Uncle Lex. I know that holding Alcin Spearman prisoner would end the conflict fast enough, but sometimes it's best to keep one's word." He looked past Taryn to Bram. "Take the girl to my quarters."

"No!" Taryn, who had forced himself to remain quiet until that moment, spoke up.

Martin froze, biting his lip, thinking a silent prayer. *Oh, gods, don't let him spoil it now!*

"She isn't to be touched!"

Philip turned an arrogant gaze on him. Faced with apparent hostility from someone so close to his own age brought about such a remarkable change in his expression that the old man blinked. Phillip's face became cold, looking suddenly older as he asked, with a sneer, "And you are...?"

"Taryn Spearman. The Counsellor is my father." Recovered from his outburst, Taryn made an effort to control his anger, forcing his voice to a conversational tone.

Philip smiled, as if the sudden discovery that he had two of his enemy's offspring within the palace walls was totally

delightful. He looked from Taryn to Rebeka who hadn't moved since releasing the android's hand.

Darius hugged her tighter against his side.

"His daughter *and* son. Now that's an achievement! Perhaps I should keep you, too."

Taryn flushed. "Do you have a taste for young men, Governor? I won't turn my back for you!" He still had his temper under control, however, even returned Philip's smile with just the slightest baring of teeth. "I'm not part of the bargain and I don't think my father will be so eager to speak with you when he learns how you have insulted my sister and now plan to dishonour her."

"Lex," Philip threw a controlled whisper to his advisor, "did that young hothead actually insult my sexuality?"

He was startled to feel his cheeks and the back of his neck getting hot. It was a delicate moment, and while he wanted to backhand the Eliusian upstart, this was no time to show anger or allow himself to be insulted by something said by a protective brother.

"I merely wish to speak with the girl in private." Making his voice as mild as possible, Philip backed down from an actual confrontation without seeming to do so, calming Taryn's fears while maintaining the upper hand. "She'll be given rooms of her own in another part of the palace," he went on, making his voice impersonal. "There are women enough in my life for a fugitive's ugly daughter to interest me."

Taryn stiffened.

God, the girl is either terribly homely or extraordinarily beautiful from the way he reacts to my insults. Which, I wonder?

"You may assure your father that when he arrives here, his daughter will be in the same pristine condition as she is now." He managed to inject some doubt into his voice as to Rebeka's present chasteness and was surprised when Taryn nodded, turned and walked out.

After bowing to both Philip and Lex, the old man followed him.

Without being ordered, Bram went with them.

"At least the old one knows something about protocol!" Philip muttered.

Alexander placed a hand on Philip's shoulder. "You baited the boy. Why?"

"I wanted to see if he would respond. What better way to find out how sincere his father is than by how well his son controls his temper?"

"Better watch that one," Alexander warned softly. "He kept himself in hand today, but he looks like he could decide not to follow whatever you and his father agree upon. You two may strike a bargain and find that young Spearman is out recruiting his own army of rebels."

Alexander looked up as his other son appeared in the doorway.

"Timon," Philip ordered. "Take Mistress Rebeka to my suite."

Nodding, the boy spoke softly to Darius who released Rebeka. Timon held out his hand to her, guiding her into the hallway.

For the briefest moment, the girl hesitated, then she went with him.

"Darius, wait!" Philip called. "I wish to speak with you."

The android stopped and looked back.

"You may speak to me when you talk with my lady, Governor. You and I have nothing else to say to each other." He paused, then added almost as an afterthought, "And speaking to her is *all* you will do, for I'll be present." Then, he turned to follow Rebeka and Timon.

Abruptly and heavily, Philip fell back into his chair. "God, what a day this has been!" He gave Alexander a rueful smile. "I'd hoped for a simple distraction to ward off my headache, but it seems I got more than I bargained for."

* * * *

As Philip entered the suite, he saw the girl still held the android's hand. She turned as Bram—after a moment of protest at leaving the Governor alone with them—shut the door and stationed himself outside.

Pulling her hands from Darius', she clasped them tightly together at her breast, and stood waiting for Philip to speak.

"Mistress Spearman." He forced himself to speak gently for he imagined—since the veiling hid her features—she was little more than a child. *Poor little thing is probably terrified.* He wasn't certain what to say since he'd had little experience with frightened children. "I ... Please, what is your name?"

"Rebeka." Her voice was soft and low, almost a whisper.
"I'm Rebeka."

"Mistress Rebeka." He held out his hand and she placed her right one in it, if a little reluctantly. He bowed quickly and released her fingers. She allowed the hand to drop to her side.

"Mistress Rebeka, will it be a breach of etiquette if I remove your face veil?" As Philip touched the edge of the veil, he saw Darius stiffen and clench his fists. Philip had no idea exactly how important this Tusteyan custom was, but apparently it was serious enough for the robot to become defensive.

Her eyes turned towards Darius, then back to Philip. She shook her head, a barely perceptible movement.

"Then, may I?"

She nodded.

Gently, he lifted the veil and hood, unwrapping it from around her head, and let it fall to the floor. A pale little oval surrounded by a wealth of dark curls was revealed, the dark lavender of an intricate flower design following the curve of her cheek. Blue eyes studied something just past his shoulder. She was older than he'd thought, but not by much.

"Why, you're beautiful!" He hadn't expected her to look like that, didn't intend to let his surprise show. It had simply burst from him. No, more than beautiful. *Exquisite*, except for that ridiculous flower marring her cheek, but he could ignore that. Would, in fact. "Why, in the name of God, were they hiding you under all that cloth?"

The eyes swung back to his face.

"I believe Master Martin told you the reason, Governor."

Damn it, there was a hint of reprimand in that sweet little voice. Philip had a feeling Spearman's daughter was as temperamental in her own way as the son had been.

Suddenly wanting to include his old friend in this somewhat one-sided conversation, he said, "Nevertheless, you are beautiful. Don't you think so, Darius?"

"No, I don't," came the surprising reply. They both looked at him, and he went on, "She's exquisite! A jewel among women ... a pearl among swine ... a diamond in the rough."

"Please excuse him," the girl interrupted, with desperate sincerity. "It's a glitch in his systems, some kind of odd word association."

"I see," Philip smiled also. "Well, he never did it before. He—"

"—resents being spoken of as if he isn't present."

They both turned to look at the android.

"It's the result of some of my cognitive filaments coming into traumatic collision with several blunt objects. A good portion of my Terran memories have been lost, and I would be grateful if you wouldn't mention it again."

As they continued to stare at him, the damned glitch once more injected itself, and he spoiled his little outburst with, "*The rest is silence!*"

Rebeka looked back at Philip, who seemed to be suppressing a smile at his old friend's expense.

She leant towards the Governor. "He's a little sensitive about it," she whispered. She knew, by the way Darius stiffened that the android had heard, but he didn't speak

again, just stood there, giving off almost visible vibrations of annoyance that seemed to ripple through the room.

"Yes," Philip agreed. "The Darius I knew could become very emotional at times."

Darius started slightly, certain the Governor was going to tell Rebeka that *the Darius he knew* had possessed an empath chip, but instead, Philip caught the girl's arm.

"I wish to speak with you. Alone. Come with me."

"I can't allow that." Darius took a step towards him.

It was all Philip could do not to gape at the android. His behaviour was so much like the robotic guards on the lower levels.

Oh, Darius, my friend and teacher, what have they done to you?

He couldn't argue. If the android was programmed to stay with the girl, that was that, but suddenly, he wanted very much to be alone with her.

Rebeka helped him by saying, "You can stand on the terrace, Darius, and watch us. And if the Governor acts improperly, you can leap over the railing and seize him."

She turned to look at Philip, and he would swear the blue eyes were laughing. "Will that be permissible, Governor?"

"For him to seize me? I'm not so sure. It depends on what he does afterward."

She did smile then, although it vanished quickly, as if she thought it improper under the circumstances. "No, I mean if he stands on the terrace." She reached over and patted his hand gently.

Philip looked down in surprise.

"You won't act improperly will you? He can leap from the balcony to the courtyard without harming himself, you know."

"I'm very well aware of Darius' abilities, Mistress." Philip assured her. "I swear I'll comport myself as a Terran gentleman."

Offering her his arm, he led her down the steps into the courtyard and from there onto the little path wandering through the garden, while the android stationed himself in the centre of the terrace's railing, looking down at them.

"I taught you manners, Philip," he called. "If you're really a gentleman, you'd better remember them."

"What does he mean?" Rebeka asked.

"Oh, he thinks I'm going to throw you against a tree, flip up your skirts, and take a sample." Philip's reply was alarmingly casual. "Which isn't such a bad idea. You're a tasty little morsel, Rebeka."

Shocked at his frankness, she began to tremble.

"Was that a shiver of anticipation?"

"No! A shiver of fear." She pulled away from him. "You won't, will you?"

If I was planning such a thing, would I warn you?

"Don't worry." Once again, Philip enjoyed the thought that he'd frightened her. It gave him a feeling of superiority to have one Elius—even a female—personally afraid of him. "I gave your brother my word, although I'm rapidly regretting that."

To Rebeka, it sounded like a threat.

By now, they had reached the garden.

Pulling her hand from his, Rebeka stopped, looking around with astonishment. "Why, this is beautiful!"

"Don't sound so surprised," Philip told her. "Earthmen aren't total barbarians. Some of us appreciate beauty, too." He thought of his father.

"I don't think I've ever seen so many flowers." She looked back at him. "There aren't that many in the mountains, you know."

"My father had it restored after he moved into the palace."

Rebeka paused to catch at a limb heavy with blossoms and inhale their fragrance. "It's strange to think of the old Governor as being a man who loved flowers."

"Why not? He was, after all, just a man."

"No." She released the branch. "Not *just* a man. The man who enslaved my people."

"Your people enslaved themselves, by refusing to join the Federation." He took a step towards her.

She didn't back away as he expected but stood her ground, looking up at him, blue eyes sparkling. "By refusing to be *forced* to join, you mean!"

"You're a brave little thing, aren't you?" He smiled at her. "Talking back to me like that."

"Of course I am. I know Darius is watching you."

Briefly, Philip had forgotten about the android. He looked up.

Darius had stepped to the balustrade, one hand on it. Preparing to hurl himself over, Philip didn't doubt, if he took one more step towards Rebeka. He moved back and took her arm and resumed walking, forcing his voice to assume a

quiet, conversational tone. "My father said the flowers reminded him of his home on Terra. An island."

Philip released her hand and fell silent, as she began to wander from flower to flower.

Her attention was caught by something at a tree's base.

He stood watching her, trying to think of something harmless to say, remembering Darius's admonition.

The android had tried to teach him the social etiquettes of both Terra and Tusteya, including the art of innocuous talk and mildly flirtatious conversation, but those small talents had never been used. Having grown up almost exclusively in the company of men who kept their own women sequestered in the lower levels of the living quarters, the only females Philip saw on a regular basis were the servants and the whores of Ulea's West End, and he didn't need polite chatter in dealing with either of those.

All he could think to say was, "Are you afraid of me, Rebeka?"

She looked up from the flower she was studying. "Of course I am! I'm your hostage. And you can do whatever you want with me if my father doesn't keep his word about the peace."

"Yes," he agreed. "And I can think of several things I'd like to do with you, even if he *does* keep his word."

She turned her head quickly, avoiding his eyes, saying as if she hadn't heard, "Oh, look, you have love lilies, a whole bed of them. They're very rare, you know."

He hadn't known what those tiny red flowers were called, but nodded as if he was familiar with every plant and shrub in the garden.

"May I pick one?"

"Yes." He watched as she knelt and broke off one of the tiny stalks, then stood up, holding it to her nose. *Such a dainty little nose.* He wondered if the rest of her, hidden by that shapeless garment, was just as small and delicate. He wanted to remove it as he had the veil, and discover for himself. That sent a warm ripple through him.

When she offered the flower to him with a faint smile, he took it and sniffed loudly at the centre of the little trumpet-shaped blossom. It had a delicate smell. Slightly elusive, a little disturbing.

"Careful," she warned. "Don't smell it too long."

"Why? Is its fragrance poisonous?"

Be just my luck to die from a sniff of deadly perfume!

Before he could enjoy this little sweetmeat.

He was already envisioning how she would look, lying naked on his bed's dark blue sheets, her skin pale in contrast. He wondered if she would cry out during their lovemaking. He hoped so, wanting to make her moan loudly with pleasure. He liked his women verbal ... it meant they were enjoying his lovemaking, too.

"N-no." *If only it were that easy.* "When a man sniffs a love lily," she explained. "He's supposed to fall in love with the first woman he sees afterwards."

I don't need any perfume to make that happen, Philip thought. *Damn it all, I want you, Rebeka!*

"Guess I'd better be careful, then." Reaching out, he tucked it behind her right ear.

"Oh no, I mustn't wear it there." Childishly earnest, she transferred it to her left. "Only a young woman who's looking for a husband wears a flower over her right ear."

"And you're not?"

She shook her head.

He put a hand on her shoulder. It was strong and heavy and Rebeka felt as if she would sink under its weight. She realized she was bracing herself.

"You mean no young man has gotten through those layers of fabric and stolen your heart or something else?"

Her blush told him he'd been indelicate, when all he'd intended was to be flirtatious. *Damn it, I'm no good at this coyness and teasing.* He needed to associate more with his men's gently-bred daughters than with the city's whores!

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that." Secretly he was glad there wasn't any lovesick swain waiting in the mountains for her return. "Of course your father wouldn't send me an unvirginal sacrifice."

Was that considered indelicate, too?

"Is that what I am, Governor, a sacrifice?"

"Well, you *are* my hostage, as you said."

"Yes, I'm a hostage, I understand that. To make certain that once my father signs the peace treaty, he behaves himself afterward, and if he doesn't, you'll kill me."

"Kill you?" Was that what she expected? "Rebeka, I don't believe I could ever harm you."

"No?" For just a moment, he thought he saw a sly look in her eyes, gone almost before he recognised it.

"Please, don't fear me."

"Don't fear you?" She took a step back, looking up at him as if his words were absurd. She liked what she saw—a young man who could have been a Tusteyan except for the uniform he wore—curly blond hair tied back from his face, green eyes watching her. Yes, put warrior's leathers on him and he would look like one of them ... but he wasn't.

"You're the Governor of Tusteya! You and your people have enslaved and fought mine for over thirty years. You've killed off most of my tribe, and you say don't fear you? I'm afraid it'll take a great determination on my part ... and a considerable amount of kindness on yours ... to make that happen."

Attempting to put her at ease, he also put space between them. "Let me say you're hiding your fear admirably. But be assured it doesn't please me when anyone has to die, and if your father and I can reach an accord, I'll be the happiest of all to have peace."

"That's the thing my father wants most of all," she assured him.

He held out his hand, and she took it without hesitation, and when he smiled at that, she smiled back. They continued to walk.

They were behind the high hedge, now, out of sight of the android. Philip glanced towards the terrace. He couldn't see Darius and he was certain the robot wasn't able to see them, either.

Without warning, he caught her by the arms, pulled her towards him and kissed her, thinking as he did it, *Fool! Idiot! She'll call for Darius and he'll pound you into the ground and you'll lose your life and your chance to make peace just because you're getting a hormonal itch for Spearman's daughter!*

But she didn't move, didn't fight, didn't do anything as he pressed his mouth against hers. All he felt was her warm breath floating gently onto his tongue.

When he released her, Rebeka's hand went to her mouth. She was breathing in little gasps.

"I know I shouldn't have done that," he began, thinking he'd better ward off the hysterics he expected. "Let's blame it on love lily intoxication, shall we?"

"You're the first man who's ever kissed me."

He was startled at the—Oh God, was that awe?—in her voice.

Since she didn't appear to be about to yell for her bodyguard, he asked, "Then may I also be the second?" and kissed her again.

This time, her arms went around his neck and her mouth opened slightly, and he felt a warm, soft tongue brush his lips before darting back into her mouth like a frightened little animal scurrying for its hiding place.

This time, when he released her, they were *both* breathing rather heavily.

The man who gets you is going to be a lucky devil! Philip thought. He'd felt just a brief hint of the passion Rebeka

possessed, probably was holding in check for the man she'd marry.

God, he thought, if I could be the one to unleash it! If keeping the girl untouched weren't so important, if only there was some way he could have her *and* the treaty, too.

At that moment, the wind whipped through the garden and Rebeka began to shiver.

"Oh, it's cold." Her hands rubbed her arms as her wrappings fluttered.

He took off his jacket, draping it around her shoulders.

"The wind comes in quickly about this time of evening, and the temperature can drop suddenly." He placed an arm around her waist. "We'd better go inside. Darius is probably ready to dive off the balcony about now."

Even before he came into view, they heard Darius' voice saying sternly, "You were out of sight for ten minutes. I was about to search for you."

Like a worried father, Philip thought.

As they came up the steps, the android met them halfway.

He scowled at Philip's arm, still around Rebeka's waist. Philip returned the android's stare and escorted Rebeka inside.

"There was no need," she told him. "The Governor was just showing me the love lilies." She pulled the sprig from over her ear, holding it out to him. "See?"

Frown disappearing, Darius took the little stalk, turning it over in his hands. Philip could almost see his desire to study the little flower, to rush to the garden to see it in its growing state, and assimilate the information on its form, structure,

and colour, into his databanks. In those few moments, the old Darius would have been totally immersed in studying the love lily. The new one, however, gave a little sigh and handed it back to her.

"A very pretty bit of horticulture," he announced, and watched Philip walk to the door.

Calling for Bram, Philip told the guard to take Rebeka to her suite, "The one overlooking the garden," and as she passed him on the way to the door, he bent and picked up the discarded veil lying upon the floor, presenting it to her as he caught her hand and raised it to his lips. "Good evening, Mistress Rebeka."

"Good evening, Governor." She accepted the veil, draping it over her hair, then dipped a quick curtsy and went out, eyes downcast.

Darius started to follow her out, then hesitated and looked back. "That was well done, Philip. I'm glad to see you remembered at least one of my lessons."

As soon as the door closed, Philip whirled and stalked into his bedchamber. Then, he stood there for several minutes, staring at the bed, allowing his previous thoughts to return as an arousing daydream with Rebeka lying beneath him while he taught her how an Earthman made love.

* * * *

Rebeka didn't speak during the walk down the hallway, just moved quickly to keep up with Bram's long strides, sending Darius an occasionally anxious glance.

Once inside the suite, with the door shut, and after Darius had assured himself that Bram's footsteps were receding from their doorway, the android said quietly, "You can drop the frightened child act now, Mistress. There's no one but me to see it."

She stiffened, turning to look back at him, and pulled the veil from her hair, tossing it onto a nearby sofa.

"What happened in the garden while you were out of my sight?"

"Oh, Darius!" She whirled around, draperies flying. "He kissed me! Twice! Told me he thought I was beautiful. Again." She paused to laugh delightedly. "And that he'd never harm me. He wants me, Darius. Just like Father and Master Martin said he would."

She threw her arms around the android's waist, hugging him tightly.

Darius forced himself not to touch her.

"At first, I was frightened, and he knew it. It pleased him, the insufferable Terran pig! But, then ... For the first time, I think my father's plan may work."

Darius didn't answer. He simply shut his eyes, took a deep breath, and stood there, silently accepting Rebeka's caress.

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Chapter 8

"Counsellor Spearman, Your Excellency."

Alcin strode in behind the announcing guard, stopping before the huge desk and the man who stood behind it.

For just a moment, they studied each other before Philip nodded in greeting.

"Counsellor."

Alcin didn't answer, startled to see that the man he and his people had been fighting for the past five years was a mere boy, surely younger than Taryn—as young as he himself had been when the Earthmen arrived. He'd known it, of course, but the fact had been almost subjective and now, to actually see this child who was Governor of his planet...

"You will honour my white flag?" He thrust out his right hand so the white cloth tied around it was plainly visible.

"It's as I told your son, Counsellor," Philip marvelled how Alcin's appearance was so at odds with the cultured sound of his voice. The Tusteyan was dressed in a short riding tunic under an ankle-length open-front robe fashioned from animal skins, his handsome face with its startling tattoos looking out from under a hooded cape. "Whatever the outcome of our meeting today, you'll leave here unharmed."

He didn't ask Alcin to sit, but went on quickly, as if to prevent his visitor from speaking.

"I doubt there's going to be much of an outcome, however. I spent most of yesterday trying to find compromises either of us could make,"—when he wasn't having uncomfortably erotic

little visions of Rebeka, that is—"and quite frankly, I found none. There are no land disputes. You have no borders being called into question. There's nothing between us except your rebellion and the attacks on my men. It would be better if you simply surrender."

"Elius never surrender," Alcin replied. "As to compromises, I'll give you two of the best: You stop killing my people and we stop killing yours. It's as simple as that."

When Philip didn't answer Alcin went on, "The only other thing I ask is that we be allowed to come to Ulea to trade and otherwise live as an independent colony with no allegiance to the Federation." He fell silent.

"That's it?"

Alcin nodded, and the boy laughed.

"If I'd known it was that simple, I might have ceased hostilities sooner. You simply want to be left alone, and not under the Federation's protection, and for that you'll never wage warfare against us again?"

"Except when we come to Ulea to buy supplies, you'll never know we exist."

"Philip, I don't think..." Behind him, Alexander stirred briefly, placing a warning hand on the governor's shoulder, his fingers tightening.

The boy ignored the Regent. Turning to the scribe who sat to his left, stylus poised over the little grid in the hand-unit he held, he said, "You heard him, Morrison. Prepare a peace treaty and include what Counsellor Spearman requests. Exactly."

"There is one other thing," Alcin said.

"Uh-oh, here it comes," Alexander muttered. "Watch it, Philip."

"Yes, Counsellor?" Though he braced himself, Philip assumed a bland expression.

"My daughter. Rebeka."

"Your daughter's unharmed," he assured Alcin. He'd called at the chamber door three times this morning to make certain, only to have Darius refuse him entrance. "As I promised your son."

"There's a custom among our tribes that, when peace is reached, there is a further way to strengthen the bond of non-hostility. I think your own planet has also used it in the past."

Philip frowned. *Where is this leading, and what's the man talking about?* Darius had taught him Terra's ancient history but he couldn't remember anything about treaty customs.

"Yes?"

"I wish you to marry my daughter."

Philip stared at him. "Marry Rebeka?" The words burst out before he could stop them. "Me? Marry that *child*?"

"Oh, dear God," Alexander murmured.

"My daughter is seventeen, Governor. Considerably above marrying-age, I assure you."

Philip didn't answer.

"What better way to cement the peace?" Alcin smiled at what he thought was the Governor's dismay at this new development. "I'd never harm the father of my grandchildren." *And you'll be dead before that happens, please the gods. You'll die, you damned Earthman, before you*

can get my daughter with child. "And I would hope you'd never order an attack on your father-under-the-law's village."

Philip still remained silent. He'd always expected he might marry someday—but so soon? And to that luscious little bit? He wanted Rebeka, but had never thought of marriage. His lustful thoughts held nothing of matrimony in them, but ... *why not?* To be married to that wonderful little creature, have the right to love her whenever he wanted to? God, he'd make it a habit to spend at least one day a week naked in bed with her!

"What does Rebeka think of this?" He forced his voice to hold reluctance, successfully hiding the eagerness he felt.

"Does she know she was brought here as a possible bride?"

"She knows."

"I'd prefer to hear it from her lips." Philip couldn't believe she had been able to hide that from him. She seemed so guileless. He looked towards the door. "Bram! Bring Mistress Rebeka to us, please."

* * * *

In the suite given her, Rebeka waited anxiously.

Now, she looked at Darius who'd been totally silent since awakening her that morning. Nodding a greeting to her, he had reached out and brushed the sleep-tousled hair back from her face before bending to kiss her forehead gently.

"Good morning, Mistress."

She'd smiled and yawned. "Good morning, Darius."

"Did you sleep well?"

"As well, I suppose, as a captive can sleep," she had replied, smiling a little ruefully.

The truth was, she had slept wonderfully, dreaming the most fantastic dreams ... of herself and Philip, of him gently but firmly removing all her clothing and then his own, and her surprise when she discovered his body was even more beautiful than Darius'. She had reached up to pull the band from his hair, delighting in the way the blond curls fell over her breasts ... Unfortunately, the android had awakened her before her dream could progress past that point.

Darius fell silent.

"I suppose," she said quietly. "I should prepare myself."

She knew her father would come straight away and it would take him only six hours to reach Ulea. Half a day for the others to return, half a night for him to ride through the gates, twelve hours before they would learn if this part of his plan was going to be successful.

While she'd bathed in the beautiful little room created for just that purpose, Darius had stood at the foot of the tub, staring, as far as she could tell, at the tiling in the wall above her head.

Now however, his continued lack of speech was beginning to worry her.

Dressing in the wedding gown that had been packed in the little trunk the guard brought from the gate, she put on her makeup and did her hair and laid the wedding veils on the bed so they'd be nearby when she was called. Her father had said he would see her married before he returned to the village with the treaty.

She wanted to be ready.

"Do you think I look all right?" she asked suddenly, and her voice sounded so loud she almost jumped. "Will the Governor like it?"

Darius studied her a moment, blue eyes critical and serious, then for the first time, he smiled.

"She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies; And all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes." He smiled again, and spoiled the compliment by adding, "Hamilcar will go to his death willingly."

She turned away, closing her eyes.

"A mind at peace with all below, a heart whose love is innocent," Darius went on.

"Don't say that!" she ordered, angry that there were tears in her voice.

"How long will your mind be at peace or your love innocent if you use it to kill?"

"Why are you doing this?" Rebeka flung at him. "You know it has to be done. It's the only way. Why didn't you say something sooner if you disagreed?"

"Because I can't actually disagree. Because your father and Master Martin were set on this course. My loyalties may have been forcibly changed but I can still extrapolate what is going to happen. Still, I'm only an android, Rebeka—a machine. I may hold more intelligence in my databanks than all the men on this planet, but if they don't want to listen to my counsel, they won't. So I've kept silent."

"But you think I'll listen?"

He nodded.

"Then you're mistaken! Because I agree with my father. Philip Hamilcar must die, and *I* plan to kill him!"

"He could actually love you, you know," Darius persisted. "I turned him away from your door three times this morning."

"I heard," she retorted, and now her smile was sardonic, "and your excuses were a little lame. Really, Darius—sleeping all night *and* all day? It's a wonder he didn't think me ill and call a physician! You should have thought that out a little more."

"It worked, didn't it?" His smile matched hers in its cruelty. "Kept him from seeing you, whetted his appetite. I thought you were going to be the lamb who was slaughtered, Rebeka, but after the way the Governor's acting, I realize *he's* the lamb in this story."

Whatever Rebeka was going to say was interrupted by Bram's knock upon the door.

* * * *

Philip smiled as she came through the door, eyes demurely downcast, veils covering her hair and cascading down her back. Then, she saw her father and nearly ran to him, holding out her hands.

"Oh, Father! You're here! You actually came!" as if she hadn't believed it, had expected Alcin to abandon her to the tortures of the Earthmen's dungeon.

"Of course, daughter." Alcin's answer was mild. "Isn't that what I said I would do?"

He gestured towards Philip.

"Governor Hamilcar wishes to speak with you."

"Yes, Governor?" She turned her attention to him, once again the meek little hostage.

"Rebeka, your father wishes us to marry." He'd been trying to compose a way to say it gently, but had decided just to state the plain facts. "We've only known each other a day and I want to know what you think. The truth."

She studied his face. *He wants me to say that I love him, that in one day, I've found him so pleasing I wish him to be my husband.* Suddenly, she wished it were true.

"Before I left the village, Father told me of this. I agreed to do as he asks. I'll do anything to bring peace to my people."

The disappointment on Philip's face was only momentary. He looked from Rebeka to her father and nodded. "Then it's agreed. We'll be married immediately after the treaty is signed."

Rebeka looked startled. "What? Now?"

Oh, gods, does that mean he isn't able to keep his desire in check any longer? Will he take me straight from the Governor's office to his bed?

She hadn't expected that.

"I thought you had no objections?"

"I don't, but—"

"Governor," Alcin broke in, to cover her sudden and obvious dismay. "May I speak with my daughter alone?"

"Certainly." Philip waved a hand towards the open doors. "The terrace is open and whatever you say there will be unheard by any in this room."

"Come, Rebeka." Taking his daughter's hand Alcin led her from the room as Philip once again called to his guard.

"Bram! Get me a Ulean priest." He turned to the scribe.
"What's the hold-up, Morrison?"

"Governor, I've never prepared a legal document before," the young man began apologetically. "I'm uncertain—"

"Here," Alexander took something from his breast pocket. "I have a template. Found it in the computer library. Didn't even know there was a pattern for a peace treaty in there."

* * * *

Once outside in the bright sunlight, Alcin turned to Rebeka. "You weakened ... for a moment, and he saw."

"No," she assured him, with a confidence she didn't feel. "He'll only think it's a young girl's fear of the marriage bed, and quite frankly, Father, that's exactly all it is."

She didn't add there was a deep anticipation also. Her present emotions were extremely ambivalent. She wanted to actually experience what she'd dreamed—Philip Hamilcar's naked body covering hers, the kisses he'd given her in the garden repeated over and over, growing stronger in intensity each time. Wanted it to happen again and again and again, but her husband's dying would prevent that.

Alcin relaxed.

"I must warn you, Father," she went on, taking his hand. "He won't die soon."

"What do you mean?"

"Even if Philip comes to trust me, there are others in this place who don't ... that Lex, for instance, and his bodyguards.

I must make all around him view me as harmless, just the Governor's little wife"—for a moment, her voice turned vicious—"so they'll more or less ignore me. And then I'll kill him."

She smiled up at her father.

Briefly, Alcin was startled by the coldness of her expression.

"So don't expect to see Darius and me riding into the village any time soon."

"You've changed, Rebeka. What could possibly have happened in one day to transform you from the shy little creature who cried when she was told we wanted her to kill to this woman who smiles at the thought of her husband's death?"

"Nothing, Father," she lied. "Now that I've met the Governor and have had more time to think, I'm just accepting the facts and deciding to act accordingly."

Alcin looked up. "Come, it looks like they're ready. Let's go back in."

* * * *

"All settled and satisfied?" Philip asked as they approached the desk.

Rebeka bestowed an angelic smile on him. "Very."

Over his shoulder, her eyes met Darius'.

A heart whose love is innocent.

With one hand, Philip was indicating the scribe. "Morrison will read the treaty and, if it's acceptable to you, we'll both affix our sigils."

Alcin nodded.

Standing, Morrison cleared his throat, and held up the hand unit, reading from it in a clear, if slightly embarrassed, voice.

"This treaty is made between Philip Hamilcar, Junior, Governor of the city of Ulea and the planet of Tusteya, representing the United Terran Federation, and Alcin Spearman, former Prime Counsellor of Ulea and leader of the warrior caste of the tribe of Elius."

He paused to take a breath.

Beside Rebeka, Alcin shifted his weight impatiently.

"Both parties agree to a ceasefire and total termination of hostilities between Earthmen and Eliusians, with these concessions: Earthmen and their androids will be allowed to patrol, without threat of seizure or attack, the eastern end of the valley where the foothills to Mount Scar begin; neither will their androids, either wandering or sent for disposal, be captured and their programming changed; Eliusians will hold no allegiance to the United Terran Federation, but will be considered a free and independent nation; Eliusians will be allowed to traverse the valley, and enter and leave Ulea without threat of seizure or attack; they will be allowed to trade freely within the city for supplies; they will be allowed to live unmolested and free from fear of attack in the village they have established in Mount Scar's foothills, in an area to be designated from the eastern base of that mountain's slope in a ten-mile radius in three directions. This area will be called Spearman's Territory."

Alcin looked surprised.

"Further, to strengthen the tenets of this treaty, and to insure they hold, Philip Hamilcar, Junior, Governor, does agree to marry Rebeka Spearman, only daughter of Alcin Spearman, Counsellor, this date." Morrison looked up. "It's to be signed by you, Governor, and the Counsellor and two witnesses."

"Is it to your liking?" Philip turned to Alcin.

Alcin nodded.

"Then," Phillip took the stylus and the hand-unit from Morrison and signed his name on the little grid. He held both out to Alcin. "Counsellor?"

As her father took the stylus and scrawled his own name next to the Governor's, Rebeka realized she was gripping her hands together tightly. She didn't relax until he handed it back to Philip.

Next, Alexander signed as witness, but then, Philip said, "We need an Eliusian witness also."

"And you asked me to come alone," Alcin reminded him.

"I can witness." Darius stepped away from the wall where he'd been standing and approached the desk.

"But you're an android," Morrison protested.

"I'm also a cognizant being. My signature's considered as valid as any of yours."

Taking the stylus from the scribe, he wrote his name under Lex's, adding his class designation and serial number.

As Morrison took the stylus from him, Darius returned to his place, giving Alcin a brief, almost conspiratorial glance.

Inserting a tiny disk into the unit's side, the scribe pressed a pressure pad and waited. In a few seconds, the disk ejected and he placed it in a small leather pouch, handing it to Philip.

"Your copy, Governor." Philip took it and handed it to Alexander who placed it in a small strong box sitting on the desk while Morrison repeated the procedure.

"Yours, Counsellor." He handed the second copy to Alcin who placed it in an inner pocket of his robe.

There was an awkward silence.

"Well!" Philip's smile was a little forced, as if something a little embarrassing had just happened. "It appears we're now allies, Counsellor. Will you take my hand in friendship?" He held out his right hand.

Alcin didn't hesitate. As his fingers closed around the young man's palm, Rebeka closed her eyes.

To use the right hand—the knife-hand—to grasp another's was to show it held no weapon, was peaceful. Philip couldn't know that not her father, but she, figuratively held that knife hidden behind her back.

In the doorway, Bram reappeared with the priest.

"Your Honour," the priest bowed to Philip, then caught sight of Alcin. "Counsellor Spearman?"

"The Counsellor and I have just reached an accord and are ending our hostilities," Philip explained in a business-like tone. "I am marrying Counsellor Spearman's daughter, and I wish you to perform the ceremony."

He was careful to keep his eagerness out of his voice. Let them all think he was doing this out of mere duty and nothing more.

"Now?" The priest looked surprised.

"Now," Philip confirmed.

Nodding as if a call to perform a hasty wedding for the Governor was an everyday occurrence, the priest placed the little case he carried on the desk, opened it and looked back at them.

"Please take your places before me," he instructed, and as Philip and Rebeka stepped forward, he went on, "Two witnesses, one for each participant."

Alcin and Alexander stepped beside them.

The priest removed a long piece of rawhide string and a sprig of flowers from the box.

"Join hands, please."

Philip held out his right hand and Rebeka gingerly placed her left in it. Her fingers were cold and for just a moment, he clasped them tightly as if to warm them. They both avoided looking at each other.

Touching their hands, the priest separated them. Turning Philip's palm up, he placed the little flower in it. Then, he took Rebeka's hand and laid it over Philip's so the blossom was caught between their palms.

Carefully, he wound the piece of rawhide around their hands, tying it in a knot at their wrists.

"Cherish your wife, Philip. Honour her body, listen to her counsel, protect her from harm. Do you swear to do this?"

"I..." Philip cleared his throat, coughed, and nodded. Why was it suddenly so difficult to speak? "I swear."

Oh yes, I'll cherish her body, and do other things to it too, as soon as I can.

The priest turned to Rebeka.

"Obey your husband, Rebeka, honour his body, listen to his counsel, and keep him from harm. Do you swear to do this?"

Oh gods, how can I swear that? I have to do him harm!

Rebeka swallowed, a little loudly, hoped it would be mistaken for the same hesitation Philip had displayed, and nodded. "I swear."

Ildred, Father of the gods, help me keep this oath!

The priest took a small jar from the box, pulled the cork and dipped his forefinger inside. It came away blackened.

Gently, he traced a cross on Philip's forehead. "May the God of the Earthmen smile upon your union."

Turning he did the same to Rebeka's brow.

"And may the gods of Tusteya do likewise."

He placed the concentric spiral signifying the Tusteyan pantheon of gods over the little cross.

Smile upon me? The gods will damn me for this. Rebeka thought despairingly.

Returning the jar to the box, he turned to smile at them. "Now, remove the string."

"Uncle Lex, a knife, please." Philip held out his hand.

The priest put his hand over the outstretched one.

"No, the string mustn't be cut nor the knot untied. You must remove it without destroying it."

They looked at each other. With his left hand, Philip pulled at the string, trying to stretch it enough to slid it over their fingers. When he failed, he let his hand drop, nodding to Rebeka to try.

She was no more successful than he.

"Priest, this is impossible!" Philip exclaimed.

The man shrugged. "If you cut the string, your marriage will surely be a disaster."

Frowning, Philip looked at the string. Unconsciously, his fingers had entwined with Rebeka's, squeezing them.

Abruptly, he smiled.

"Rebeka—"

She saw the answer at the same time. "Philip, we have to—"

"Yes, press your hand against mine."

She did so, and the string gave slightly as their hands compressed. Gripping each other's fingers tightly, they began to work the string over their fingers until it came free.

Triumphantly, Philip handed it to the priest, who removed the flowers from between their hands and displayed both the blossoms and string to the surrounding men.

"The string is unbroken. These two have discovered that to work together, they could accomplish the impossible. The blossoms of the *tuola* tree are uncrushed. Their union will be a happy one."

How wrong you are, priest. Our union will be short and only its ending will bring happiness! Unless the gods help me.

"Kneel, please."

Slowly, Rebeka sank to her knees, pulling Philip, who still held her hand, down beside her.

Placing a hand on each bowed head, the priest looked at those around him. "In the presence of these witnesses, I

pronounce that, as I am a priest of the gods of Tusteya, these two are now husband and wife."

Rebeka and Philip looked at each other.

On each young face was stunned disbelief, the expression on Phillip's immediately replaced by a more transparent one. He made no attempt to keep his desire from showing. He wanted her then and there. *If we were alone, I'd rip that gown from your body, my delicious little wife. Mount you right here on the office floor. No—no, I wouldn't! I'd show you gentleness. Damn, I've got to learn how to be gentle.*

He stood up, helping Rebeka to her feet. The look he turned on her was so hungry and full of longing that she staggered as if he had struck her.

She closed her eyes.

"What is it? Are you all right?" His hands tightened on hers.

Rebeka smiled as she opened her eyes, and pulled away, pressing one hand to her breast.

"I know you want me to say I'm overcome by the knowledge that I'm now the wife of the Governor of Tusteya," she told him, "but the truth is, I've had no breakfast this morning and it's made me a little weak."

If her reply disappointed him, Philip didn't show it.

"If you need breakfast, breakfast you'll have." He looked around at the others. "We'll all have breakfast. A wedding breakfast."

He turned to Alcin who had been uncharacteristically quiet.

"I know you're probably eager to return to your village and present the treaty to your Council, but you will join us in this meal before you go?"

"With pleasure."

Oh Father, how vile you've become. You took this man's hand in friendship and now you'll break bread with him, and still you wish him dead! The gods will damn us all!

Philip offered her his arm. "M-Mistress Hamilcar?"

He seemed to have trouble saying the words.

Biting her lip, Rebeka, placed her hand upon her husband's wrist and allowed him to lead her from the Governor's office, while Philip's guards and Darius—silent as a shadow—fell in behind them, followed by Alexander and her father.

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Chapter 9

"This is the mess hall," Philip waved a hand to indicate rows upon rows of tables and chairs covering the tiled floor. "Most of the men eat their daytime meals here."

"N-not with their families?" Rebeka asked.

Suddenly, she felt slightly daunted by the number of tables. *How many men are there in the palace, anyway?*

"They share their evening meals with their wives and children," Philip's reply was short, as if her question was foolish. "In their quarters, on the lower levels."

He led her to a nearby table, seating himself at its head. "Would you sit at my right hand, Counsellor?"

With a nod, Alcin complied.

Rebeka waited for Philip to tell her where to sit, but he didn't speak to her, instead beginning a conversation with her father, explaining how he would make an announcement concerning the peace treaty within the next twenty-six hours, and the Elius could expect free entrance into Ulea any time after that. After waiting a few moments and continuing to be ignored, she pulled out the chair on his left, but Darius leant over and took it from her, holding it so she could sit, then pushing the chair towards the table so she was comfortably close.

Rebeka looked up at him and smiled and the android nodded slightly and reached forward and picked up the napkin beside her plate, shaking it open with a *snap* before placing it across her lap. He shot Philip a pointed glance that was

almost a reprimand for not showing his new wife the courtesy of seating her.

Philip, who had turned back at the sound, looked away again, and ignored the android for the rest of the time they were in the dining hall.

Over her father's shoulder, Rebeka saw the guard called Bram go through a doorway at the back of the room, then reappear with a woman in a white servant's robe.

He resumed his place behind Philip's chair as she came towards the table in a hasty scurry. His twin stayed at the door, guarding the entrance.

Darius took up a similar position behind Rebeka, making an elaborate show of standing exactly behind her chair, almost hovering.

Briefly, Philip spoke to the woman, explaining they wished a morning meal, and she bowed and disappeared through the double doors again.

Rebeka, who had been watching her, asked, "That woman, she's Vanda, isn't she?"

Philip glanced towards her, nodded, then turned his attention back to her father. To anyone watching, his attention might seem totally concentrated on Alcin, but he was very aware of her nearness, that she was sitting so close he could have reached out and put his arms around her if he wished, her knee under the protection of the table near enough for him to place his hand upon, and finger-walk up her thigh to the waiting warmth nestled there.

He also knew that she was angry because he was ignoring her, but he deliberately kept his attention elsewhere.

I mustn't let the little slip or anyone else see how much I want her. I nearly gave myself away back in my office. I'll have to be careful, otherwise I'm going to become a back-barracks joke.

Alcin spoke up.

"It's appropriate that she should be here in the dining hall. Vandas are noted for their culinary skills." Still feeling cautious about what information he gave out, he nevertheless felt compelled to add, "My second wife is Vanda. That's why I married her, because she's such a good cook." He slapped his very flat, firmly-muscled stomach with one hand. "And that's why I have this belly on me now."

"Don't believe that." Rebeka allowed herself a laugh that sounded almost patronizing and caused her father to shoot a sharp glance at her. To get his attention, she raised her voice so Philip had to look at her. "It was a love match." Her eyes met her father's. "And you know very well you're as well-appointed as when you were Counsellor here, Father."

"Your second wife," Philip repeated, choosing to ignore her reminder that *his* father had usurped *hers* as ruler of Tusteya. "How many wives do you have, Counsellor?"

"Four," Alcin tried not to smirk at the boy's well-controlled astonishment.

"Each of Father's wives is from a different tribe," Rebeka persisted, determined to be part of the conversation.

Philip regarded her unsmilingly.

"Then you and that boy Taryn"—She saw her father's brows rise at the disparaging note in Philip's voice—"are half brother and sister?"

"I have seven other half-brothers, also."

He looked at Alcin.

"Eight sons! I have even more respect for you, Counsellor Spearman, as I would for any man brave enough to attempt to handle four women, and that many offspring!"

"I don't just *attempt* it." Alcin surprised himself by managing to conceal his pride. If he'd been in his village—in the tavern, perhaps—and had met this young pup, he'd be strutting and bragging of his prowess by now.

"It's the Earthmen's custom to take only one wife, and quite frankly, I think one will be more than enough for me." Philip forgot his resolution and turned a green gaze upon Rebeka, then quickly remembered and looked back at Alcin, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Tell me, how do you have enough energy?"

Alcin laughed and said something in an undertone which made Philip laugh also, and Rebeka was certain they were sharing a man's joke. It angered her that Father would speak to an Earthman of her mother and his other wives in what she imagined to be a vulgar fashion.

After a moment's hesitation, she dared to reach out and place her hand over Philip's. It must have startled him, for she felt his hand twitch slightly, though the others didn't notice. Without looking at her, he moved it away, ignoring the angry way her lips tightened.

It was an effort for Alcin not to say what he was thinking, though he continued to smile. *My daughter will be more than a match for you, you alien upstart!*

Any doubt he had disappeared and his smile broadened as he had a mental image of Philip being totally overcome by his daughter in their marriage bed.

The Vanda and another servant were back, placing large platters of steaming food before each of them.

Rebeka studied her plate. Meals in the village were simple and spare—whatever game the men killed, wild vegetables and a few grains that had been cultivated in the rocky mountain soil. She didn't recognise any of these foods, slices of meat, obvious vegetables, and a fluffy yellow mass that gave off fragrant steam.

Alcin, she noticed, had also placed his napkin in his lap and picked up his fork and begun to eat, obviously recognizing the plate's contents from the days when he lived in the palace. Everyone in Ulea had eaten well in those days.

Philip and the others were already eating, with evident enjoyment.

Rebeka was slightly surprised that their manners were no better than her father's warriors when they were at one of their feasts. She had supposed Earthmen would be more refined. She started to comment on this, then decided against it, realizing it might sound like a criticism of Alcin's men also—though their manners when dining with their families were more polished. They might act like the barbarians they appeared to be when together for feasts and celebrations, but in the privacy of their families, they became the well-bred gentlemen they had been before, using the etiquette that was now their only tie to the life they had lost.

She picked up her own utensil, a three-tined instrument, touching the yellow stuff lightly.

"What is this called?" she asked, trying not to insult her husband or the Vanda cooks with her ignorance.

He swallowed and looked over at her plate, but not at her.

"An omelette." He didn't stop the hasty shovelling of food into his mouth. "A scrambled egg omelette. You must learn to like them. We eat a lot of those."

The Elius ate eggs, also, stolen from wild birds' nests, but not cooked like this. Watching how he wielded the utensil, she speared a fragment. It promptly fell back into her plate. It took three attempts before she was able to keep the morsel on the tines.

She was grateful none of the men appeared to notice as she carefully carried the food to her mouth. It was hot and well-seasoned. She chewed, tasting the flavour—*very appetizing*—swallowed and nodded.

"It may take me a while to become accustomed to all the seasonings, but I like them." She hated that apologetic tone in her voice but her answer seemed to satisfy him.

He nodded and stabbed another morsel with his fork.

The Vanda was filling their goblets, but when she reached Philip's place, she set down the wine bottle and took a pitcher from the other woman, filling his glass with clear liquid.

"Water?" She couldn't keep the surprise out of her voice. She'd envisioned all the Earthmen, especially the Governor, as being as hard-drinking as the Elius warriors. "You're drinking *water*?"

"Your first discovery about your new husband, my Lady," Alexander spoke up. He had seated himself just far enough away to hear what they said but to ensure a little privacy if they lowered their voices.

Rebeka looked at him inquiringly, noting that he was, at least, seemed to taste his food before wolfing it down.

"The Governor doesn't drink."

She turned to Philip, the obvious question on her lips.

She never got to ask it.

"Because of my father," he said in an undertone, and his expression told her not to pursue the subject.

"A good many of the Second Generation don't imbibe," Alexander went on, apparently having no such qualms. Vigorously, he wielded a knife against his steak. "Foolish lads don't know what they're missing."

There was silence again as they all applied themselves to devouring the meal.

Alcin didn't speak for most of that time, noting sardonically the way the Governor was watching his daughter out of the corner of his eye, and thinking no one saw. That studied indifference. He'd seen the lads in the village act the same way when they found girls they liked.

Foolish boy! Philip was really still just a boy, thrust into a man's responsibility. Briefly, he thought it a pity that one proving himself so capable so young had to die in that youth. It was too bad the boy had to be an enemy.

His infatuation is fortunate—for us, anyway—Terribly fortunate.

It seemed only minutes before Rebeka was setting her fork to the side of her platter. Lifting her napkin, she patted her lips daintily and folded it, placing it beside her plate before leaning back with a well-fed sigh.

"That was wonderful. Now I can truthfully promise I won't embarrass you with any more signs of faintness!"

Dropping his own napkin onto the table, Alcin took that as his cue to stand up, assuming an apologetic expression.

"It's time I left, Your Excellency. I should be on my way to take the good news to my people."

Nodding, Philip called to one of the twins to order the Counsellor's horse saddled, while Alcin went around the table to Rebeka who stood up and put her arms around him.

"Goodbye, daughter," he said with a meaningful look into her eyes. "Remember your training."

"I shall, Father."

Kissing her forehead, he released her and bowed to Philip and Alexander.

He barely heard the Governor's farewell, "A safe journey back to your home, Counsellor," and his soft aside to Rebeka, delivered in an insinuating tone, "Your training? Is that something I should look forward to?"

You wouldn't be so eager if you knew exactly what my daughter has been trained to do, Earthman.

He didn't hear Rebeka's answer, for now, he was out of the dining room, looking down the long hallway to where the young guard waited to show him the way to the stables.

* * * *

"Philip, as much as I know you don't want to hear it, there are problems awaiting us that don't care if it's your wedding day or not."

"I agree, Uncle Lex, but surely they can wait a little longer." Philip turned a gaze on Rebeka that was so brilliant, she looked away. "They've waited this long, haven't they?"

Wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, he picked up the napkin and rubbed it against his fingers before tossing it onto the table. Then, he stood up, holding out his hand.

With only the slightest hesitation, Rebeka placed her own in it.

Now, it's going to happen. Rebeka was startled to feel her insides give a frightened quiver. *Now I'll become his wife and it will begin.*

The quiver changed to a nauseating churning. Briefly, she hoped her over-fed stomach wouldn't rebel in fear and make her vomit.

Philip surprised her by escorting her back to her own suite, not speaking the entire time. At the door, he hesitated a moment, then, a trifle awkwardly, lifted her hand and kissed her fingers.

"I have to leave you now, Rebeka."

"What? But ... no!" Not caring that the others saw her distress and disappointment, she clutched at his hands, trying to draw him into the room.

Gently, he extricated his hands from hers.

"My uncle's right. There are some problems which need to be settled as soon as possible, and this *marriage business* has delayed my making a decision." As if realizing how abrupt

that sounded, he added, as if placating a fractious child, "I-I'll join you for lunch."

She didn't answer, just let her lips droop downward in a tiny pout.

Philip wasn't affected by her expression. Dropping her hand, he turned his back and was gone, Alexander and his guard following.

For a moment longer, Rebeka watched them disappear down the hall. Then, she whirled and flounced into the suite.

Darius followed her inside, shutting the door.

* * * *

Oh, I was wrong! She'd thought he was interested in her, clumsy with love, but ... *he doesn't care.* If the way he'd acted at breakfast and just now—abandoning her so easily—was any indication, Philip possessed very few of the more gentle emotions! *If any at all.*

In fact, she was beginning to believe he was worse than Darius had warned, that he was an ill-mannered, totally uncouth lout.

* * * *

For the rest of the day, she remained in her suite, alone except for the android's silent-shadow presence.

At noon, one of the twins appeared—Timon or Bram, whichever. *Honestly, those two are exactly alike, how will I ever to tell them apart?* He informed her that "His Excellency is still in conference and will be unable to join you for lunch,

My Lady," and inquired if she would care to be served on the balcony of her suite rather than eat in the mess hall?

Not wanting to brave that huge place when it would probably be filled with strangers, Rebeka chose to sit at the little table on the balcony, and Timon—or Bram, *whichever*—withdrew, to be replaced by several white-clad servants carrying serving dishes. Arranging them on a nearby buffet table, they bowed and just as silently disappeared, leaving Rebeka to her solitary meal.

It was delicious, though her palate, as well as her stomach, were going to have to become accustomed to the rich food. but it would have been better, she realized, if Philip—as rude as he was—had been there. If she'd had anyone there, to talk to while she ate. *Besides Darius*.

The android had been conspicuously untalkative since the moment he'd witnessed the treaty, his silent criticism of Philip's manners notwithstanding. Rebeka looked over at him as he straddled the balcony ledge, his long legs swinging lazily.

"I think you'd better consider changing your style of clothing."

The swinging ceased. "If you think it, I don't have much choice, do I?"

She ignored that. An insolent husband was one thing, an insolent android another. *At least I can handle the android*.

"You should dress more like the Earthmen, wear those—what are they called?—those garments that cover the legs?"

"Trousers," he supplied, wondering where this was leading.

"Yes, *trou-sers*." Rebeka nodded. "Beginning tomorrow, you will wear trousers and jackets like the guards do."

"May I ask the reason for this sudden concern with my clothing?"

"I ... Merely a sense of decency. That tunic is nearly threadbare. You're practically displaying the private areas of your body whenever you move." She looked disdainful to cover her dismay at the prudish sound of her voice.

"Oh. I see." Darius slid off the wall and placed himself in front of the table, leaning insolently forward with hands braced against it. "You didn't find it indecent when Master Martin stripped me naked so you could fondle those private areas."

Rebeka flushed and looked away, then thought better of it and turned back to him, raising her chin slightly. "That was different. That was a lesson."

The expression on his face was so strange she couldn't guess its meaning.

"Very well, Mistress," he replied, just a little stiffly, straightening and stepping back. "It shall be as you wish. Even though I wore garments such as this when I lived here, tomorrow, when you awake you'll find me fully clothed. With nothing indecent showing."

Though he didn't look it, Rebeka thought she sensed anger in his expression, but how could that be?

"It's best, Darius."

"For whom, my Lady?" When she didn't answer, he went on, "You got no pleasure at all from touching me?"

Rebeka was certain she heard disappointment in his voice. Surely the creature was mocking her with his pseudo-emotions.

"No more than you did," she retorted. "It's not like I was caressing a human who could be excited by my touch."

"Rebeka, you should know that I—" He stopped as the sharp rap on the door echoed across the sitting room to them.

To Rebeka's call, the guard—Timon or Bram, *whichever*—appeared, with the news that Philip would also be absent from dinner.

Rebeka accepted this with a gloomy sigh, but as he turned to leave, an absurd thought struck her. "Oh, wait!"

Bram stopped.

"M-may I ask you something? Something personal?"

"How personal, Mistress?"

"A-are you and your brother real, or androids like Darius?"

"Why we're human, Mistress—a little too human sometimes, my father says. We're the Governor-Regent's sons."

Rebeka tried not to look surprised, hiding it under a sigh of relief.

"Are there many robots working on this floor? I'm not sure if I can tell the difference, but I'd like to know."

"With the exception of our old friend Darius,"—he bestowed a grin upon the android who was leaning against the terrace wall now, arms folded over his chest—"the other androids rarely come up to this level. They work mostly in the living areas."

Rebeka flushed as she remembered Darius' description of his "duties" there. Her eyes met the android's and he smiled, a little ironically.

"Which twin are you, anyway?"

His handsome face held surprise that she'd care to differentiate between them.

"I'm Bram, my Lady. Abraham."

"Is there any way to tell you from your brother?"

"Only if you see us mother-naked, my Lady. I have a birth mark on my left ass-cheek."

Reminding herself that the other men were probably not going to be as tactful or delicate in their speech as Philip attempted to be whenever he thought about it, Rebeka managed not to blush and allowed herself a little smile.

"There's little chance I'll be doing that. But I need to know which I'm talking to, if only for my own benefit."

Bram shrugged unhelpfully and didn't answer, though he waited as if expecting her to say more.

Rebeka looked at Darius.

His shoulders moved in exact copy of the Earthman's shrug.

Rebeka frowned and looked around, turning her attention to the plants on the balcony. In a long stone planter near the balustrade, was a beautiful *philedriom* plant, its large glossy leaves spreading in a starburst to reveal a spray of tiny heart-shaped blossoms growing from its center.

"I know." Standing up, she walked over to the planter and broke off one of the stems. "Here!"

She seized the lapel of Bram's tunic and pushed the *philedriom* sprig through the top buttonhole. "From now on, wear a flower there, and I'll know who you are."

Bram looked down at the row of scarlet blooms. One finger touched the topmost bud with such extreme gentleness that Rebeka was surprised. In spite of that, he looked slightly rebellious.

"An ingenious solution, Mistress, but it's going to be embarrassing to me when my mates start ragging me about wearing a corsage!"

She wasn't certain what a *corsage* was, but understood what he meant, and waved away his concern. "Just tell them it's your new identification badge, and you're wearing it by order of the Governor's Lady."

There! Now let's see just how much authority Philip's wife has around here!

She was surprised when Bram didn't tear the sprig from his buttonhole and toss it over the balcony as she expected, but simply bowed and left her. Her little triumph in solving that minute problem disappeared, however, as the day wore on and the dinner hour came and went and Philip was still absent.

* * * *

In the late afternoon, out of sheer boredom, Rebeka entered the bathing room.

Water from an artesian well located in the palace's cellars flowed first into the kitchens, then to the many bathing rooms into large porcelain pools and out again. From there, it was

filtered and recycled into other areas of the palace. Like the little mountain stream, there were currents in the water and the temperature varied. At present it was deliciously warm. In a basket on the pool's rim, there were large bars of unscented soap.

Of course, she thought. Men wouldn't want to bathe with something that would cover their bodies with sweet-smelling perfume, would they? She decided she had better resign herself to a lack of fragrances and lotions in her life. She hoped this didn't mean her skin would be adversely affected.

Nevertheless, the rich slathering of suds over her body and the varying temperatures made her feel decadently luxurious.

With Darius standing guard in the doorway, Rebeka bathed, then simply lay and soaked for nearly an hour, coming out only when the android called, "I think you'd better consider bringing your bath to an end, Rebeka. You're probably going to become wrinkled as a prune if you stay in that water any longer."

She refused to look at him as she walked past, wrapped in a towel. She just stripped it off and handed it to him.

Darius stood there staring at the damp length of fabric before hurrying back into the bathing room, emerging only after Rebeka had dressed herself in the beautiful wedding shift her father's wives had prepared for her. Then, clad in her night robe, she began to pace, partly with nervousness, partly with anger that her bridegroom still had not appeared.

As the shadows grew longer and the day darkened into evening, the servants came to light the lamps and build a low fire in the huge stone fireplace. Since it was summer, Rebeka

thought this strange. Sandals making a clacking sound on the polished tiles, she continued to walk the floor.

Presently, as she was completing another interminable round from fireplace to door and back, Darius spoke up. "Rebeka, if you make one more circuit of this room, you're going to give me vertigo. Be still!"

Whirling, she announced, dramatically, "Darius, he's forgotten about me. I've been abandoned. That cold-hearted bastard doesn't even care enough to come to me on our wedding-night."

To Darius's relief, she stopped moving. "Nonsense!"

Her reaction to that was to look angry, like a child told to behave.

He walked over to her, putting gentle hands on her shoulders. "Believe me, Philip hasn't forgotten you. Far from it."

"How can you be so sure? He's not here."

"No, he isn't," Darius agreed. "And the reason he's not here is because he hasn't forgotten you."

"That makes no sense."

"He's thinking about you, Rebeka. He can't concentrate, has to say and do things over, makes mistakes that have to be corrected. Tomorrow, Philip probably won't remember a thing that happened today, except that he got married." Darius smiled, if a trifle grimly. He knew that was what he'd be doing if he were human. "As for his being a cold-hearted bastard—in spite of all I tried to teach him, Philip has a lot to learn about women, but trust me on this ... it's his wedding

day, Rebeka, and he'll be thinking about nothing but coming back here and making love to you."

"I hope you're right." Nevertheless, she still looked unconvinced.

"I am," Darius told her, without a trace of doubt.

Pulling from the android's hands, Rebeka walked away but didn't resume pacing. Instead, she went into the bedroom and sat down on the bed. It was soft and thick, and the unbidden image came into her mind ... of being pressed against it by Philip's body.

"Darius..."

"Yes, my Lady?" He appeared in the doorway.

"What were you going to tell me earlier? When Bram interrupted you?"

"When, my Lady?" Darius hedged slightly, knowing exactly what she meant. "I've been interrupted many times while I speak to you."

"You said there was something I should know."

"Oh, *that!*" It wasn't the time to tell her now, not with the room dimly-lit by candlelight, not with her in that beautiful, totally revealing sleep-shift, waiting for a bridegroom who had yet to appear. "It's nothing that can't wait."

Surprisingly, she accepted his answer, nodded, and turned to pull back the counterpane. "I suppose I should go to bed."

"Yes, that's a good idea. I imagine you're tired. Today has been a busy day." Suddenly, he was eager to have her retire so he could escape the beautiful, desirable sight of her.

Yes, she agreed, in disappointment, *a busy day spent waiting for my husband.*

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

He didn't leave until she was lying down, the blankets tucked securely around her. When he did, it was to say softly, "Sleep well, Rebeka," as he shut the door and stationed himself outside.

I won't get any sleep tonight, Rebeka thought rebelliously. I envy Darius. All he has to do is shut himself down for a few hours no matter what's happening. Where is Philip? Why isn't he here? What could be more important than being here with me? Oh, I won't sleep a w...

She fell asleep. Totally and heavily. Into a deep, dark, soft, dreamless pit.

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Chapter 10

Several hours later, Rebeka was awakened by movement at the foot of the bed. Opening her eyes, she saw a tall shape silhouetted against the flickering light from the hearth.

"Philip?"

"Sure's to Hell better not be anyone else."

Clutching at the coverlet, Rebeka sat up, then thought better of it and slowly let it fall into her lap. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to see that you're as beautiful asleep as you are awake." The silhouette came closer.

"Thank you." She turned and plumped the pillows behind her against the headboard, leaning back.

"Don't thank me. It's the truth."

One truth deserves another, Rebeka thought. "I must say such a compliment coming from you surprises me. You're not very honey-tongued, are you?"

"Not so you'd notice," he replied, not in the least insulted, and added surprisingly, "Being a tyrant doesn't require much diplomacy."

His tone was light and ironic as was his next question. "Did you miss me?"

"Yes." If this was going to be a time of truths spoken in a slightly bantering way, Rebeka accepted his unspoken agreement to continue. She *had* missed him, even his straightforward, semi-crass way of speaking, and that thought was as surprising as it was terrible. "I did."

"Really?" He leant towards her, trying to see her face, one hand reaching out to touch a curl hanging over her shoulder. Awkwardly, he twined it around his finger, concentrating on it very intently.

"Really," she answered, then spoiled it all by adding, "I'm quite ready to perform my marital duty, Your Excellency."

She was certain he recoiled slightly, but he didn't reply, just released the curl and stepped back.

"And so you shall, but not tonight." He began to unbutton his tunic. "I've had a very trying day with the Governor-Regent. There was a problem that had to be decided, and all I want to do now is sleep. Since I now have a wife, I thought it would be appropriate to do it here. You're on my side of the bed, by the way, so move over."

He turned to sit down.

Rebeka didn't move and Philip nearly sat on her before he realized this. He straightened with as much speed as if he'd planted himself on a spiny cactus and whirled to face her.

"Didn't you hear me? I said—"

"I heard you," Rebeka told him. "I heard everything you said, but I don't understand it. This is our wedding night, Philip. We must consummate our marriage."

"I'm quite aware of that, Rebeka." His answer sounded very weary as if he had been arguing with someone all day and wasn't looking forward to another confrontation. "But right now, I need to rest. We can do the *consummating* later."

"I can't believe you're saying that!" She wasn't about to let it go. "I was told young Earthmen were like randy rampant

bulls, and so lusty that, quite frankly, I was fearful of even being near one, but now ... now that I've met you—"

"Now that you've met me?" he prompted, an angry glitter coming into the green eyes.

"Oh, you're like a bull all right! Clumsy and awkward and apparently very stupid. And as for being randy, I've seen more response out of a horse who's been ploughing a field all day."

Philip stiffened, every inch of his body registering insulted male.

"What's the matter with you?" Rebeka demanded, and abruptly her voice dropped, asking in sudden horror, "Is there something *wrong* with you? Philip, can't you—"

"Very well." He cut into her question, words clipped and short. "If it's the only way I'll get any rest tonight, let's get this *duty* over with."

She had angered him—worse yet, offended his masculinity. Would he make her pay for that by taking her so roughly she'd be injured? Rebeka wanted to shrink away, find somewhere on the large bed where Philip couldn't reach her.

"Get up, Rebeka."

Get up? Are we going to make love standing? Is this some odd Terran custom?

Suddenly, Rebeka was filled with a doubt that had nothing to do with her mission. She had just realized that neither her father nor Master Martin nor Alcin's wives, had mentioned anything about the Earthmen's sexual practices. Using the information gotten from the Ulean whores, the only females their spies could reach, they had assumed the aliens' tastes

were similar to their own, but suppose the whores had lied or didn't dare tell the truth?

Who knew what these men did in private?

With the barest shiver, she pushed aside the blankets and slid out of the bed to stand in front of her husband. She felt very small and very vulnerable and wished with all her heart she hadn't said anything, that she'd told him instead how she actually wanted him and loving him would be no duty at all.

Whatever he wishes, no matter how strange, I will attempt it.

She wasn't prepared for his sudden movement towards her, sweeping her into his arms and walking quickly through the door into the sitting room.

"W-where are we going?" It came out in a surprised squeak.

"To my suite. If I must perform my husbandly duties tonight, I'm going to do it in my own rooms. Timon!"

The door swung open, and Philip strode through, Rebeka clinging to him, her face pressed against his collar, hiding from the guard's eyes. He marched down the hallway, the draperies of her shift flowing over his arm like white banners, Timon and Darius following behind.

* * * *

Bram was waiting outside the governor's suite. As they came near, he looked a little startled, but recovered quickly, reached out and opened the door. Rebeka had time to see that he still wore the scarlet spray on his label before the door

swung inward. Philip sailed through, kicking it shut behind him, leaving the two guards and the android outside.

"Well, Darius," Tim smirked as he looked at the closed door. "Looks like the little lady's going to be ridden hard and fast tonight."

On his way towards the exit leading to the terrace, Bram laughed.

"Why tell me that?" Darius snapped. "I'm well aware of how lusty Philip can be when he lets himself go."

Timon decided to be insulted. "Just because you've been reprogrammed doesn't mean you have to be so defensive."

Darius didn't answer, just turned away so the guard wouldn't see the anger on his face. He closed his eyes, blotting out sight of that closed door.

Oh no? I've always questioned why Dr. Marx placed religion in my database. I thought it foolish but now ... Please, God, help me control my passion for Rebeka Spearman. Otherwise, it may be disastrous.

* * * *

Stalking through the sitting room to the bed, Philip set Rebeka on her feet beside it.

The room was better lit than her own, and more elaborate. Remembering the woven-cloth walls and unfinished wood of her home in the mountains and the animal skin coverings on the beds, she felt a thrill of anger. This room had probably been her father's when he was Counsellor, taken over by Lieutenant Hamilcar, and rebuilt and refurnished through the labour of captive carpenters, potters, and weavers.

Everything in this room, she wanted to tell Philip, should be my father's and you shouldn't be about to put me into his bed, Earthman.

"Now. Prepare to perform your marital duty, wife." Philip gestured towards the bed, the movement short and sharp.

"I didn't mean it that way," she said quickly, looking up at him with what she hoped was an apologetic but innocent gaze.

During her long and boring wait, she'd decided the best way to win over Philip was to adopt the air of a trusting innocent—someone wanting to please, but sometimes awkward and saying the wrong things—which wasn't that difficult, since Rebeka, in spite of her present aim of killing him, was essentially exactly that.

Besides, he should understand about saying the wrong things, shouldn't he?

"No?"

She could see him relax a little. He'd been insulted, but didn't want to be angry with her, didn't want that emotion to spoil his night ... or his sleep.

"No. I-I ... forgive me, Philip. It's awkward, because I really don't know what to say just now. I've never been in this situation before."

"Thank God for that. Because I haven't, either. Being married, I mean," he added. "Let's not say anything, Rebeka. Then neither of us will have anything to regret."

In what seemed an afterthought, he kissed her. Not another chaste little kiss as he'd probably always give her when others were around nor the tentative, experimental

ones she'd received in the garden but one which suddenly became so intense, that, for just a moment, she wanted to fight him and pull away.

Its suddenness overwhelmed her, as did the burning flush washing over her. Her skin seemed to tingle.

Philip's lips travelled from her mouth to her throat, tiny nibbling kisses that sent little sparks down her spine.

He put his hands on her waist, fingers warm through the thin fabric of her shift, their heat sinking into her flesh. There was a startling quiver that seemed to radiate from his grasp and travel downward, causing a sudden dampness between her thighs.

Rebeka put her arms around Philip's neck, pressing her body against his. Without warning, he pulled away and raised his head.

"I'm insane. I think ... Yes, I must truly be insane."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've known you only two days, and I would swear, from all I've read and heard, that I love you. Perhaps that lily's perfume really *does* work."

Rebeka smiled and reached up to touch his cheek. She slid it behind his neck, drawing his head down and as she did, her brother's words came into her mind.

Pull him towards you and stab upward.

She pushed the words away, refusing to think about that, raised her lips to meet Philip's as he kissed her again.

This time when he released her, she began to untie the ribbon at the neck of the night-shift.

"Duty calls, my Lord.' She said the words with a smile this time.

"Wait." His hand caught hers, pushing it away. "Let me."

Letting her hands drop to her sides, she stood still as he pulled open the little bows, one by one. Then, he slid the shift off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

There was a sudden chill as the sheer cloth left her body. Rebeka stifled a shiver. She had to force herself not to cringe and cover herself with her hands.

Philip kissed her again then released her. He stepped back. He looked down. "Good God, what's *that*?"

"What?" Rebeka was startled.

"That!" His hand waved vaguely at her torso. "You look as if you fell into a vat of flower petals."

Her fingers touched the painting on her breast. "I-it's beauty markings."

"*Ugly* markings is more like it. On your face, too. Are they tattoos?"

His tone implied he hoped they weren't.

"N-No, they're painted on."

"Then they're about to be washed off." He seized her hand. "Come on!"

"Y-you don't like them?" Rebeka startled herself by pulling away.

She was surprised. Eliusian men were totally aroused by the colours and fragrances of body paint, but Philip looked appalled, almost repulsed.

"No!" He looked back at her again, gaze moving to her breasts. "I ... Yes ... maybe ... perhaps this one." He gestured

at the large crimson flower petals adorning her left breast.
"Yes, I *do* like that. Especially the way your nipple forms the centre of the flower. It ... It's very tit-tillating."

His mouth quirked and he made a face at the pun.

Rebeka put her fingers to her mouth, affecting a timid giggle.

"Turn around." He wagged one finger in a spiral. "Let me see the rest of this artistic monstrosity."

Obediently, she spun in a tight little circle, stumbling as a hand stopped her movement when he discovered Anemoni's violets.

"I like these, too." A forefinger touched the stem of the centre blossom that seemed to be rising from the crevice of her buttocks.

The finger stroked the tiny painted flower gently. Rebeka shivered and stood very, very still.

"Do you have any more anywhere? In hidden places I need to search for? On the soles of your feet, the insides of your thighs?" The finger pressed in slightly. "Between these plump little cheeks?"

She turned to face him again, shaking her head.

"Who did these anyway?"

"My father's wives."

"That's all right then. I wouldn't like the idea of some unkempt artist-type touching you *there* with his brush."

Was he jealous? Already? That was more than she could hope for.

"Still it seems a waste of effort since they're going to be hidden under clothing most of the time."

"But that makes my entire body a *hidden place*," she explained. "Don't you see? It's our secret what's under my clothes, and when we're in public, you'll look at me, and—"

"I'll look at you and think of that little violet sprouting from your ass, and you'll look at me, and—"

"And think what?" Rebeka retorted. "So far, all I've seen of my husband is his hands and face. Tell me, Governor, is there more?"

"Quite a lot more," he replied with a very obvious leer. "As you'll soon find out, unless of course, you prefer just to think of how my hands touch you and how my face looks as I kiss you. Otherwise, I can offer much more interesting sights."

He smiled at he said it and shook his head. Rebecca couldn't know he was laughing at himself and what he thought of this romantic drivel he was spouting. It wasn't what he really wanted to say; he wanted to be direct and brutally vulgar in telling her what he wanted from her, yet something kept the harsh words from escaping. His men would have turned away in disgust if they could have heard him, he decided, but apparently, it was the right thing to say, if the look on his wife's face was any sign.

Philip was very surprised at his own behaviour. *Perhaps this is what Darius tried to teach me.*

"You're the first man who's seen my body." She reached up and tugged at the top button on his tunic. "You'll be the first man I've seen, also." *Darius doesn't count.*

That made him smile, and there was total conceit in his expression.

Each one thinks he's the only man in the world. Rhedora had told her. *You must keep him thinking that, Rebeka.*

Somehow, she got the tunic unbuttoned. He helped her pull it off, shrugging his arms out of the sleeves, tossing it on the floor next to her shift.

Then, they were kissing again and struggling with his shirt, mouths locked together, not wanting to separate long enough to remove it properly.

The buttons wouldn't slide out of the loops. Desperately, she wrenched at them. There was a tearing of cloth. She felt Philip make a laugh-sound against her lips as he ripped the garment away and threw it somewhere.

Fingers caressed her shoulders, stroking down her back. One hand moved across her ribs, slid under her breast, seized it, thumb rubbing across the nipple.

Rebeka gasped. Her whole body seemed to react to his touch. It felt as if it was burning!

"I'm afraid I'm about to smear your stepmothers' artistic endeavours," he whispered.

"Go ahead."

She pulled away to look down, fascinated by the sight of the pale globe of her breast captive in Philip's palm. Her skin was tingling, her breast felt swollen, the nipple erect and bright pink.

The heat settled in her heart, then began to spread, trickling into her arms, her legs. It flooded through the rest of her body. Even her fingers and toes felt singed. *Oh, gods, so this is how desire feels.*

She looked up at Philip, saw that he was smiling, not with the triumph of male conceit, but as if he were pleased that he had brought the bright colour to her flesh. When he lowered his head and touched his tongue to her nipple, she almost cried out.

"Philip!"

Her words were strained as she cupped his chin, and pulled him up to face her.

He looked surprised but expectant.

"I-is this a Terran custom?" As he frowned, she went on, "Does the bride stand naked and the groom with his *trou-sers* still on?"

He smiled at her pronunciation of the alien word.

"While they make love?"

"It most certainly is not," came the husky answer. He coughed slightly, seemed to be having trouble speaking. "I-In deference to your innocence, I was a-attempting to restrain myself."

She slid her hand inside his waist band, slipping the button open, moving her hand around his hip and down the back of one thigh.

"Oh, please." She was startled to realize she was about to burst into delighted laughter. "Don't restrain yourself on my account."

The next thing she knew, they were on the bed, and Philip was as bare as she, and their bodies were pressed together. He kissed her again, tongue invading, capturing and twining around and around her own, while Rebeka responded, with little moans muffled against his mouth.

Her hands roved gingerly over his body, surprised at the smoothness of his skin. Fingers walked down his flanks, rested upon them, kneading gently.

He raised himself to place his body over hers. She drew in a deep breath. She hadn't expected him to be so heavy. Something thick and rigid pressed against her thigh...

The swiftness with which she moved, legs separating as if under their own power, surprised her. She felt Philip wedge himself between her thighs, one hand fumbling to seize his member and fit it against her.

It's going to hurt. She tried to move her legs, make herself as wide as possible. Held her breath. *Maybe then it won't hurt so much.*

Rebeka closed her eyes and tightened her embrace around Philip's shoulders. The next moment, her eyes flew open as he thrust inward. Hands gripping tightly, she muffled her cry against his shoulder, biting into his flesh to keep from sobbing.

When he pulled away, she took a deep breath that was almost a gasp and looked up at him, saw the shock in his eyes.

"You bit me!" He sounded as if he couldn't believe it. Touching his shoulder, he stared at his fingers. "Damn, I'm bleeding."

Then, he began to laugh.

"Oh, God! it's only fair, I guess. I hurt you, you hurt me. We've both shed blood tonight."

Rebeka didn't answer, just stared at him.

He reached between them, fingers probing gently, brushing against the inside of her thighs. She moved a little uneasily, afraid whatever he was going to do would hurt also.

When he raised his hand, she saw the stains on his fingers. He rubbed them against the little bite mark on his shoulder.

"There! Now, we're one blood, wife."

"No." She shook her head, leant forward and pressed her mouth against the wound, licking away the blood. "Now, we're one blood, husband."

He gave a sound that was almost a growl, startled at how the sight of the smear of his blood on Rebeka's mouth aroused him. Quickly, he gathered her into his arms.

Rebeka relaxed against him. The pain was gone, disappearing as quickly as it had come, and she knew it would never happen again. It was replaced by a startling wave of desire, a wish for Philip to complete the act he'd begun.

What did it matter if it had hurt? That was past now.

She wanted to feel him inside her, wanted to do the things her father's wives had taught her.

She wanted him.

Gently, he began to move, sliding in and out of her body. She could feel the little ripples of pleasure as his body penetrated hers, moving into her very core, then just as quickly retreating.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she imprisoned him within her, so he couldn't escape again. He began to push against her, faster ... faster...

Rebeka moved one hand to the end of his spine. *Press there*, Simi had told her. *When he's ready, press, and he'll get more pleasure than he can imagine.*

She found the little depression, just at the parting of his buttocks, circled it gently with her fingers. The thrusting became faster, Philip's body moving furiously. She could hear him exhaling, drawing in breath and not seeming to let it out.

She pushed upward to meet his thrusts, at the same time, pressing down on the little dimple with all her strength.

With a cry that seemed to be ripped out of him, Philip climaxed. She was certain the guard and Darius heard, and maybe even the men in the barracks in the lower levels—perhaps even the townspeople—but she didn't care.

Not at all.

Tonight, let them envy the Governor.

Raising himself on his hands, he continued to push against her, body still spasming, eyes tightly shut. And then...

Philip collapsed against her, turning his head to press his lips to her breast. His eyes were half-closed, the green gaze sleepy with satiation, his face reddened by the blood coursing through it.

Rebeka wondered if she looked the same. Some of the heat was disappearing from her body but the most wonderful feeling of lassitude was creeping over her. She could feel his heart pounding against her breast as he took another deep breath. When he moved away to lie beside her, she didn't want him to. Heavy as his body had been, she had enjoyed its weight and its warmth.

Briefly, she felt cold.

Gathering her into his arms, he pulled up the blankets and lay back, kissing her temple. "There, Mistress. Duty accomplished." Then, in the space of a breath, he was asleep.

Enthral him, pleasure him into exhaustion, and then while he sleeps, kill him.

If Philip went to sleep that quickly after they loved, it would be easy. She could do it *now*.

But this wasn't the time. She and Darius had to have more preparation, horses ready, the android somewhere besides outside the door with Philip's guard. Later, once Philip was completely and totally trusting, when Darius could once again move about the palace halls with impunity.

Abruptly, she was aware of another sensation in the lower part of her belly ... not desire this time, but a full bladder.

How inconvenient.

Pulling herself from Philip's embrace, she stood up.

A hand shot out and caught hers.

"Where are you going?" His voice was brusque, no sleep in it at all.

"I..." She touched her stomach. Strange, she was standing here naked, he'd been inside her body, yet she was embarrassed to explain. "I need t..." She gestured vaguely towards the open doorway of the bathing room.

"Oh." He released her hand.

She disappeared inside, went past the pool to the tiny niche beyond where chamber pots and basins and pitchers were located, did what she had to do, washed her hands and face and returned to the bed.

Philip was still awake, welcoming her back into his embrace.

"You woke quickly," she said.

"When there are people who'd be happy to knife you while you sleep, you learn to do that."

"But you have guards."

"There's always the chance someone could get past Timon or Bram."

"A-aren't they both at the door?"

"Bram's on the terrace."

If Darius was to meet her on the balcony, they might have to kill Bram also.

"You're well-guarded then."

"I have to be. The only other way in here is through the fireplace."

"Is that why you keep a fire burning, even in this warm weather?"

"Exactly."

She allowed herself to be snuggled into his arms again, his cheek resting against the top of her head.

"God, you're delicious, Rebeka. I'm sorry I didn't come to you earlier so we could have done more of this tonight, but I had duties other than marital ones to worry about."

She didn't answer, just lay still in his embrace, but even as his breathing deepened and softened, she lay awake.

This isn't going to be as easy as we thought.

* * * *

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

And so I married Philip Hamilcar. I found this stranger who was now my husband to be a contradictory and puzzling man—sometimes arrogant, often crude, definitely ill-mannered, yet capable of great gentleness, possessing a surprising naïveté ... and as I learned these things, I became more and more determined not to carry out my father's orders.

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Chapter 11

Rebeka awoke to the sensation of lips pressed against her cheek. "Stop that!" Rolling over, she struck out with one hand. It collided with something which gave a soft grunt of surprise and she opened her eyes to see Philip looming over her, a hand to one cheek.

"Remind me never to do that again!"

"Philip, I'm sorry!" She scrambled to sit up, clasping the covers to her breast. "I-I was dreaming that I was home, and thought you were one of my brothers."

"Do your brothers always come into your room while you sleep and kiss you?"

"Not anymore, but when I was small, they were always doing things to keep me awake. Mother told me that whenever she put me down for a nap, they would find some excuse to wake me up—pulling off my nightgown, stealing my blankets. Father finally put a stop to it when I was twelve."

"From now on, I'll make certain you know *where* you are and *who* I am before I give you a goodbye kiss."

"You're leaving?" For the first time, she saw that his hair was damp and his face slightly flushed—the water in the spring must have been very warm this morning—and he was wearing boots and riding clothes.

"Duty calls, my sweet." He appeared surprised as he used that little endearment. "I'll never again speak that word without thinking of how enjoyable last night was."

"Then don't go." Rebeka dropped the covers, noting with satisfaction that his gaze immediately went to her breasts.

"Stay here with me."

"Can't." He took several steps backward as if to get out of tempting range. "It's a four-hour ride one way and my men are ready and waiting."

"But I want you here." She flung the covers away, curling her hands into fists and shaking them in a parody of a child's tantrum that make her breasts bounce enticingly, then slid her legs over the edge of the bed, kicking against it. She looked up at him and smiled. "Please?"

A little too quickly, Philip sat down on the bed beside her. The flush now spreading over his face wasn't the result of a hot bath.

"Of course, I could delay my departure a while." He leant towards her and kissed her, one hand gripping a bare shoulder while the other touched her waist and slid around the curve of her hip to her inner thigh.

Rebeka drew in a deep breath. In that moment, she wanted nothing more than for Philip to shed his uniform and get back into bed with her, but delaying the Governor and keeping him from his responsibilities wasn't the way to gain his men's trust.

"No, Philip." Regretfully, she pushed him away. "Duty. Remember?"

"Damn duty! It can wait a little longer."

She was already moving out of reach, so he stood up, taking a deep breath and carefully adjusting the tunic of his

uniform, one hand sliding down the front of his trousers to assure himself that his momentary lust wasn't showing.

"Where are you going?"

"To the mines. That problem I mentioned? I have to—"

She had a sudden thought. "Take me with you."

"Nothing doing." He didn't hesitate to refuse her. "An *angelica* mine's no place for a woman."

"Why not?"

"Rebeka, this is no picnic I'm going on."

"Why couldn't it be?"

"What?"

"You'll have to eat when you get there, won't you?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Have your cook pack lunch for two."

Suddenly, she was enthusiastic about her plan. She'd heard about the mines from her father and Master Martin, but to actually see them ... She'd get out of the palace, stay in Philip's company, and get a first-hand idea of just how her people were being treated.

"I know it's in the mountains, but surely there are trees somewhere nearby. We'll find one and have a meal together after you do whatever it is you're going there to do."

"It'll be a long, hot, tiring trip."

"I know how to ride a horse, Philip."

"There'll be just me and my men." He continued to attempt to dissuade her but now didn't sound particularly sincere, she thought.

"Then I'll feel doubly safe, won't I? I brought my riding clothes with me and—do you have sidesaddles?"

He shook his head, brightening as he thought this might deter her, but now she felt certain he really wanted her to come with him.

"It doesn't matter. I can ride astride now that I don't have that tedious maidenhead." She gave him a smile and stood up. "Where's my trunk?"

Silently, he gestured across the room.

That morning as soon as he woke, Philip had ordered two androids to bring her trunk from the balcony suite. It now sat in front of a tall chest between the windows.

Rebeka ran across the room. Throwing back the lid, she bent over, rummaging through the trunk's contents. "Oh, dear, everything's so disarranged."

Digging through layers of clothing, she began to toss garments onto the floor. With a cry of triumph, she found her boots, standing up to pull them on with many tugs and stamping, bending over to tie the strings that tightened them around her ankles.

"Very nice." As she straightened, she felt a soft pat to her buttocks, accompanied by a brief squeeze. "I'm becoming very fond of that little violet. Why don't you come with me looking like that?"

"I want to feel *safe* among your men, remember?" She smiled up at him.

"Yes," he answered softly. "I'm afraid I might have to fight a few duels if anyone other than I saw you this way."

He didn't sound particularly regretful, she thought, more like he wished someone could see her so he could brag that

she belonged solely to him. She had a feeling he was enjoying their teasing little conversation as much as she was.

"What's this?" He leant over to pick up a tiny swath of cloth, rubbing the sheer material between thumb and forefinger.

"Those are my riding breeks." She pulled it from his hand.

"Riding breeks." He repeated the word as if he was certain he'd misunderstood. "And what function could something so skimpy perform?"

"They protect my ... my..." Briefly, she struggled for a word that wasn't indelicate. "They protect my backside when I ride."

She slid them on.

"Lucky things! To be so close to that little backside." He caught her about the waist, mouth close to her ear. "I'm looking forward to getting close to it again very soon!"

Pulling out of his embrace, she found the riding dress. As she thrust her arms into the sleeves, she heard movement behind her. Buttoning the front, she turned with a flourish. "There! I'm ready."

"Not quite." Philip was standing before the dresser. "Here." He held out a comb.

Rebeka ran it through her hair. She handed it back to him, reached into the trunk and found a clasp and hastily fastened it so her hair hung down her back in a single thick ringlet.

"Come, my Lady!" He held out his hand.

A faint grumble from her stomach made Rebeka ask, "W-we are going to breakfast first, aren't we?"

"Oh, surely," came the sardonic reply. "I wouldn't want you feeling faint again." Calling to Bram, who appeared in the terrace doorway, Philip led Rebeka towards the inner door.

"Mistress Hamilcar will be accompanying us to the mines," he told an astonished Timon, ignoring Darius' disapproving scowl as successfully as Rebeka did. "See that a horse is saddled for her."

They started down the hallway, Darius and the twins following.

* * * *

As they neared the mess hall door, Timon and Bram stopped, stepping away from Philip.

The two guards standing at the door, walked forward and took their places.

"Where are they going?" Rebeka asked as she turned to see the twins walking away in opposite directions.

"Timon's going to the stables, Bram's headed for home, probably," Philip told her calmly. "Changing of the guard, Rebeka. They can't be with me twenty-six hours a day. They do have other interests besides my welfare, you know."

She must have looked surprised because he went on, "Bram's wife gave birth only a few months ago, and he spends every minute he can with his new daughter."

"B-Bram's married?"

For some reason, she'd thought the twins unattached, envisioning them as accompanying Philip on his forays into the West End, willingly participating in orgiastic group couplings with the whores of his choice.

Philip nodded.

"B-but that makes Alexander a grandfather." She couldn't keep the shock out of her voice. She wondered just how old the Governor-Regent was. He hadn't looked as old as her Uncle Talbot, whom she knew was three years younger than her father.

"And he's pleased by the fact, though he pretends otherwise." Philip shook his head. "The things that will make a man proud. God!"

He stepped back to allow her to precede him into the mess hall.

Rebeka walked through the door and stopped.

The room was no longer empty. There were men seated at most of the tables, eating and talking. It took several seconds before someone noticed her.

"My God, the Governor's got a woman with him."

Rebeka wanted to bolt from the room and hide somewhere. She actually took a step backward bumping into Philip who had entered behind her.

"Who the Hell is she?"

"You haven't told anyone?" Rebeka looked up at Philip, voice hot with anger.

He shrugged. "Haven't had time."

In the meantime, Alexander, seated at one of the far tables, had gotten to his feet.

"Laddies, this is the Governor's wife." His Scottish burr was thick as he offered them an explanation. "Show her a little honour, now."

He might still be dubious about Philip's marriage, but no matter what his own opinion of the girl, the lads would show her the respect her position as the Governor's Lady demanded.

There was a thunderous scraping of chairs as the men got to their feet and turned to face her. Abruptly, thirty-two pairs of eyes were turned in her direction.

Climbing into his own chair, the Governor-Regent stepped to the table-top. He raised the goblet he held.

"To Mistress Hamilcar!"

In a single movement, all turned and picked up their glasses, holding them aloft.

"To Mistress Hamilcar!" was repeated in a deep-voiced chorus. Each one drank from his glass, then they all stood there—simply looking at her in curiosity, she imagined—wondering who she was and why the Governor had married her.

Not everyone in the palace would have been aware of her father's arrival here the day before, she realized.

Leaning over, Philip whispered, "Say something."

"I ... uh..."

"Very articulate, Rebeka."

Throwing him a quick glare, she turned to smile at the assembly.

"Thank you so much! Please, go on with your meal." She turned to take Philip's arm and allow him to lead her to the head of one of the tables, smiling as she hissed at him, "There. Was that articulate enough?"

He smiled. "It was passable."

A short dark man was seated at the table, three younger men—who looked so much like him they had to be his sons—sitting across from him. He stood up as Philip neared.

"Governor."

Philip guided Rebeka to stand beside him.

"This is Roberto Martinez, our communications officer, but we call him Sparks." Rebeka gave him a questioning look and he explained, "It's the custom to call all radio-communications people by that name. He was the *Edison-Interspatial* rep aboard the *Condor*."

It was apparent the older Earthmen had more manners than the younger ones, for Sparks looked over at his sons, nodded at the boys and made a gesture, and they scrambled to their feet with slightly embarrassed smiles.

"Mistress Hamilcar." He took Rebeka's hand, bowing over it.

Rebeka smiled at him. "Are these your sons?"

"Luis, Juan, and Diego," He indicate each with a nod of his head.

"Are you Sparks Junior, then?" she asked Diego who was standing closest to her.

He laughed, the dark eyes sparking. She'd never seen eyes that shade of brown before, and thought of Taryn's eyes which were the light colour of smoky topaz. "Not me. That's Luis." He indicated the brother at the end of the table. "I'm the youngest."

"The youngest who's allowed above-floors," Sparks corrected. "I have two more sons and a daughter below-

levels. My Maria is determined to become the Governor's first female comms-op."

He and Philip laughed, as if this was an absurdity.

"Oh, really?" Rebeka's tone made Philip look at her with a frown. "That's very interesting."

"Rebeka," he began, warningly, but she went on as if the rebellious thought he expected had never crossed her mind, "Please, gentlemen, be seated and finish your meal. Don't let me interrupt."

They sat down and resumed eating.

Philip motioned Rebeka to a chair, and, at a prompting look from Darius, pulled it from the table and held it while she sat.

Obedying Rebeka's orders, the android was now dressed as the others, in a uniform-like tunic and trousers tucked into riding boots. Philip regarded his new appearance with a slightly puzzled frown.

Rebeka turned to look at the android. "Your new clothes fit you well, Darius."

"Thank you, Mistress. But if I may be truthful, I find them confining and uncomfortable. They chafe and bind in ... certain ... places."

"No place important, I hope?" Rebeka tried to look sympathetic and failed.

There was an uncharacteristic hesitation before Darius spoke. "Let me just say that if I were a human, there might be cause for alarm from my woman."

Rebeka laughed. She couldn't help it.

Philip turned away slightly, his shoulders shaking.

Darius bit his lip and remained prudently silent.

Before Philip could sit down, the servants were bringing their plates, and Rebeka saw the two replacement guards returning from the kitchen with them.

"Well, isn't this nice." Picking up her fork, Rebeka began to eat.

Philip didn't answer, just seized his own fork and tucked into his breakfast as if he were starving.

Sparks, she noted, was eating slowly and quietly, as were his sons.

"I've the public announcement system ready," he told Phillip, who nodded but didn't stop eating.

* * * *

"I didn't expect you to want to come with me this morning," Philip told her, by way of apology. "Otherwise I'd have notified everyone of our marriage yesterday. As it is, I've put it off as long as I've been able, I guess."

Put it off? Rebeka forced herself to bite off the acid-tipped words that were ready to leap off her tongue.

They were standing on the balcony of one of the higher levels of the palace, looking out over the city of Ulea itself.

It was from this specific balcony, Philip explained, that all announcements concerning the people of the city were made.

Now Sparks, who was busy pressing pressure pads and turning knobs on a small communications unit made into the balcony railing, handed Philip a small, round disk.

"We're ready, Governor."

Taking the disk from him, Philip nodded, and Sparks picked up a second disk and pressed a small red button.

Immediately, there was a loud, discordant scream from the machine, echoing out across the city, repeated twice more. Below, they could see people stopping in the streets and looking up at the palace. Startled by the noise, someone actually dropped a package and scrambled to retrieve it.

"Attention, people of Ulea." Roberto aimed his voice at the disk. "This is an announcement of importance from the Governor."

He looked over at Philip who raised his own disk.

"Beginning at dawn this morning, a peace treaty between the representatives of the United Terran Federation and the Eliusian tribe, namely, myself and former Prime Counsellor Alcin Spearman, has been effected. From this date, all hostilities have ceased, and the Elius will be allowed to enter the city of Ulea unharmed." He glanced at Rebeka, taking a deep breath. "Further, to strengthen the tenets of this treaty, I have taken as my wife the daughter of Alcin Spearman."

He hesitated slightly, then, shrugged as if he'd said all he needed to.

"That's all."

Below them, people were beginning to huddle in little groups, no doubt discussing what a surprise this was, and what it might mean to Ulea itself.

Philip handed the disk back to Roberto.

"Make certain everyone on duty has a copy of that announcement sent to his communication-unit," he ordered. "Especially the guards at the gates. Don't want any eager

Elusians trying to ride through and getting shot because someone didn't know."

* * * *

I've spent the entire morning explaining who Rebeka is!

No matter which hall they went through or which stairs they went down, someone would always appear, eyebrows would go up, and he would have to introduce her before the person said the wrong thing.

It angered him a little. He'd never brought one of his whores back to the palace, no matter how much pleasure she might give him, so why did everyone automatically assume he'd done exactly that? Could it be they didn't believe he knew any marriageable young women? Or that he might marry?

Or was it simply that everyone in the palace knew no father in Ulea would allow his daughter to be alone with the Governor, not after the disaster between Philip's father and mother?

And why was everyone still looking so disbelieving? Hadn't they heard the announcement?

Whatever the reason, Philip was beginning to wish he had a small sign which he could hang around Rebeka's neck that read: *No, she's my wife. As of yesterday.*

When they came out of the palace and into the courtyard where the mounted guards were waiting, it wasn't any better. Though he was expecting they would remain silent—being outside in the courtyard, they had no excuse not to have

heard the announcement—someone muttered, just loud enough to hear, "She's a neat little bed-dolly, isn't she?"

Glancing at Rebeka to see how she had received that slightly off-color compliment, he saw that she was smiling, and decided not to attempt to discover who was so free with his remarks. Rebeka apparently had other ideas.

Letting her gaze swept over the six men, she said, "I see my fame has preceded me. It's a pleasure to meet you, too." and was rewarded with a collective laugh. She gestured at a sedate-looking little bay held by a soldier.

"Is this my horse?"

Stepping between her and Darius as the android started to help her mount, Philip lifted her and swung her into the saddle, then looked over his shoulder at his wife's bodyguard. "Get yourself mounted, and let's go."

Briefly, it looked as if Darius would disobey, reminding him once more who he took his orders from, but the android simply nodded and caught at the reins of a nearby horse.

* * * *

Rebeka didn't complain, Philip had to say that for her, though it was a hot, dusty day, and the ride was definitely boring. Looking around with the interest of a child, she made soft little exclamations about the clumps of brush, the trees at the rim where the foothills began, the purple-blossomed spurge creeping across the valley floor, even the bright red dirt under their horses' hooves.

"Master Martin told me our soil is red because much of Tusteya was once covered in ice and that parts of Terra are the same way," she commented.

Philip started to answer, only to have Darius interrupt.

"Master Martin is correct. There are several states in the original continent of the United Terran Federation which have dirt exactly this colour and consistency, almost clay-like in its content, as a matter of fact. I believe it has something to do with the glaciers that covered that territory during one of the Ice Ages Terra was afflicted with while a prehistoric planet."

"Thank you for the geology lesson, Darius," Philip rapped out, adding sharply, "But I think my wife was speaking to me."

"Actually, I—" She got no further as Philip turned to her, his manner abruptly solicitous.

"Are you comfortable? Do you need to stop and rest or for any other convenience?"

A little startled as his seeming concern, she shook her head. "I ... no, I'm quite comfortable, Philip. Thank you."

Shooting Darius what was very evidently a triumphant glance, and making Rebeka frown as she wondered if something was happening that she didn't understand, Philip fell silent.

There was quiet for nearly an hour, broken only when Rebeka began to hum a song, singing to herself under her breath.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, a hundred feet are
marching,

Tap, tap, tap, a hundred feet are walking,
Hop, hop, hop, a hundred feet are dancing,
As we move on through Life!

"That's a round, isn't it?" Philip asked.

She nodded. "It's a song my mother and the others used to sing to me when I was a baby."

"Not to put you to sleep, I hope?" He gestured behind him. "My men don't need to be lulled any more than is already happening."

"No, it was merely to keep me amused."

"It would sound better if it were sung as it should be." He looked over at Darius who was slumped in the saddle, eyes half-closed to keep the dust off his iridic surfaces. "You know that song, don't you, Darius?"

"Most certainly, Governor." The android came awake and straightened. "It was one Mistress McIntyre sang to—"

"We don't need a recitation of where you learned it." Philip cut him off. He nodded at Rebeka. "Mistress, if you would be so kind as to start?"

Wondering where this was leading, Rebeka again began to sing.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, a hundred feet are
marching.

As she finished the first verse, however, she was startled to hear Philip, in a very decent baritone, begin it over again.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, a hundred feet are
marching...

Then, Darius, voice perfectly melodious, picked up the
verse and all three were singing the little round as it was
supposed to be sung.

From behind them, one of the guards also joined in, and
suddenly, everyone was singing.

They sang the round twice over, and as they finished, and
the last voice trailed off into silence, Rebeka began to laugh.

"Oh, Philip, Darius—all of you." She turned in the saddle to
include the men behind her, receiving a number of good-
natured grins in return. "That was wonderful. And it certainly
seemed to make the time go faster, didn't it?"

"That it did, Mistress," agreed a voice. "Because here we
are!"

Before them, loomed the slopes of the foothills where the
Tusteyan *angelica* mines bore deep into the mountain itself.

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Chapter 12

Tying their horses to the hitching posts at the foot of the mountain, they climbed the narrow steps hewn into the side of the slope.

"They don't carry the ore down these steps, do they?" Rebeka asked, pausing to look down at the ground so far below them. Suddenly, she felt slightly dizzy.

"No." Philip turned to offer her his hand.

Gratefully, she took it, his touch making her feel just a little steadier.

"The ore is lowered in baskets attached to pulleys." He gestured upward. "See?"

Looking up, she saw a heavy derrick hanging over the edge of the cliff, attached to a movable framework that could be moved backward so the loaded baskets could be attached, then swung outward to hang over the ground again while the *angelica* was lowered to the men waiting below with wagons to take it to the smelting plants on the northern side of Ulea.

It took only a few minutes to reach the ledge where the mine office was located.

The men ahead of them headed for a long bench situated under a scrawny-looking pine protruding horizontally from the rising mountain-wall. It offered the only shade on the cliff ledge, and they were already sprawled beneath it by the time Philip reached the top.

Guiding Rebeka towards the bench, Philip focused on the men sitting there. "I'm certain you two can make room for Mistress Hamilcar, can't you?"

His tone indicated that they should—and would.

"Yes, sir! Sorry, Mistress." Nodding apologies, they got to their feet, dusting off the worn wood and bowing her towards it.

Rebeka seated herself, smiling her thanks at both of them.

By now, the others had arrived and were lounging against the granite wall or leaning against nearby rocks and boulders, wiping their foreheads with their sleeve-covered arms.

Darius took his place beside Rebeka. Compared to the others, who were already wilting in the bright sunshine, he, and his uniform, looked cool and crisp.

"I'll be back soon," Philip told her. "Stay here."

Without waiting for her reply, he turned and walked to the small building where the mine foreman waited.

It was little more than a three-walled shack, the front open so she was able to see both Philip and the foreman as they went inside. Beside her, one of the soldiers was speaking to the other and—without the least shame—she eavesdropped.

"Some of us are going to the Blue Blossom to hear Steven on our next day off. Why don't you and Atilda come along?"

"Fine. 'Tilda's been complaining we haven't gone anywhere since the wedding."

"And how long has that been, now?" It was asked in a teasing tone, as if he couldn't remember anything so trivial.

"Four weeks tomorrow," the other answered with a grin.

"Hey! You and the Governor, you're both newlyweds. Maybe we should invite him and his Lady, too."

"Ah, I doubt he would want to..." They turned away, and Rebeka couldn't hear what else they said.

All she could think was that if they *had* been asked to join a group of young people from the Palace for a night of merrymaking, she would have done her best to convince Philip to go. From what Darius had told her, and all she had seen so far, Philip kept himself socially isolated from anyone his own age, with the exception of the twins. Apparently, whatever carousing he did, he did alone.

"I must do something about that." She added that to the other plans she was formulating about the Governor.

The guards continued speaking in low voices that became a hypnotizing drone, several of them actually dozing in the sun. Even Darius looked sleepy, so Rebeka let her attention wander towards the mines themselves.

Three irregular mouths gouged out of the mountain wall gaped in the sunlight, armed guards stationed on either side. About them, protruding from the granite, were large metal pipes, their upper sides covered with tiny shields, air vents leading into the mine shafts themselves.

Breaking from the line of men, two miners pushed a small wooden cart holding a hanging lantern into the darkness. Behind them, two more followed, doing the same. With a start, Rebeka saw they were totally naked, their bodies pale, shoulders oddly hunched, and in a moment, she understood why. The mines were deep within the mountain, ventilated

only by the pipes which had been thrust hundreds of feet into the great granite interior to allow fresh air to enter.

It must be stifling inside.

On the other side of the mine entrance, other men were leaving. They also pushed carts, loaded now with rocks containing *angelica* ore, which they carried to the wagons parked near the derrick, dumping the contents into the wagon-beds before going back inside. Heads down, shoulders slumped in even more fatigue than those entering the mines, their bodies were covered with white dust, powder residue generated as the ore was drilled from its bed. Mixing with their sweat, the *angelica* particles had dried into a solid mass, encasing their backs and shoulders within a shell that gleamed like marble in the morning sun.

They looked like giant tortoises walking on their hind legs. The thought shocked Rebeka. *How can they move, carrying those heavy shields on their backs?* How could they remove them? By bathing? Were they even allowed to bathe? The shells looked as if they would have to be chipped off with a chisel.

She had wanted to see the mines and now, she was regretting it, because she never really understood what the men forced to work there were going through. Now, there were a great many questions she wished to ask Philip and more items placed on the growing list of grievances against the Earthmen.

She couldn't bear watching that moving, suffering line. Rebeka shut her eyes, forcing herself to think of nothing, listen to nothing. The men's voices became a soft monotone,

the squeak of the carts' wheels a minor annoyance, the sun too warm...

A hand touched her shoulder.

"Rebeka?"

She looked up into Philip's green eyes.

"I'm going to inspect the mines, now. Then, we'll have lunch."

"You're going inside?" She sat up.

"You aren't expecting to go with me, are you?"

She shook her head, calling as he turned away. "Philip, be careful!"

Looking back, he smiled at her, then followed the foreman to the first mine.

* * * *

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty!" A kiss brushed her mouth.

Smiling, she opened her eyes. He was a large silhouette between her and the sun. "I wasn't asleep. I was just resting my eyes."

"Of course." His tone was indulgent. "Are you hungry?"

She nodded, glancing past him to the still-moving line. Were *they* hungry? When were they allowed to eat?

"Yes. I—"

He moved slightly and she got a good look at him.

"Oh, gods!"

He was covered in *angelica* dust—hair, face, clothes.

She began to laugh. "Philip, your hair! Y-you look like Darius!" They both glanced at the android who stared back at Philip a moment before smiling slightly.

"Yes, Your Excellency, your hair is the same colour as mine now!" There was a slight smirk on the well-formed lips. "Too bad the *angelica* dust didn't make you as handsome as I am."

Rubbing his face with his forearms, Philip laughed also. He dusted his tunic and pants-legs, then ran his hands through his hair, shaking his head. *Angelica* dust flew into the air, then settled back again.

"Sorry, Rebeka. Guess I'll just have to stay this way until I can have a bath."

"It's all right," she assured him. "I'll just pretend my husband is some doddering old greybeard." She caught his arm, saying solicitously, "Darling, be careful, no loving tonight. Remember your arthritis."

Darius snickered.

Philip stared at her for a moment, looking so perplexed she was certain he'd never been teased before. Then, he gave her a crooked little smile.

Shaking his head, he called to the others, who roused themselves enough to obey. The sun was almost overhead now, so hot they had all fallen into some form of doze.

"Open your packs, men. After we've eaten, we start back." He took Rebeka's hand. "We'll go further up the mountain. There are trees a little higher."

Darius took a step forward.

"And you'll stay here. I think I can protect my wife if she needs it."

The android's eyes moved from Philip to Rebeka, and as she nodded, he sat down on the bench, saying, with more than a little insolence, "Yes, Excellency."

Ignoring his tone, Philip led Rebeka up another set of steps cut into the mountain wall, to a ledge on top of the mine.

Above them, the mountain rose higher, broken here and there by naturally flattened ledges through which the long air pipes were clearly visible, breaking the monotonous grey of the mountain's face. At a jumble of rock from a ledge which had broken and fallen away, Philip selected a dark slab of granite to use as a table, lifting Rebeka to sit upon one end of it.

She settled herself and turned to look out over the valley. From there, they could see the red soil bright against the dark rim of trees surrounding it and thickening into forests nestled against the foothills. In the distance, Ulea's whitewashed walls gleamed, reflecting the noonday sun.

Rebeka was reminded of how the sun shone off the carapaces on the workers' backs. She forced herself not to think of that, concentrating on the scene spread out before her. It was difficult.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"Surely you've seen the city before," Philip said. "My men tell me Ulea is visible from anywhere in the foothills."

"I imagine it is, if you're allowed to go into the foothills. Most of the women and children aren't. We're fairly sheltered. Only the warriors are free to come and go."

"So, when you came to marry me, that was the first time you'd ever left the village?" He sounded as if he didn't believe it.

She nodded.

"And you were scared to death." He made that a statement.

She shrugged, and became very busy unpacking the little parcel.

"As scared as anyone would be who was going to a strange place expecting to marry a man she'd been raised to fear. Here, have a sandwich." She dropped one into his hands and picked up another, biting into it and chewing rapidly to forestall any more questions along that line.

For several minutes, they sat there eating, neither speaking.

When the shrill note of the whistle rent the air, Rebeka jumped, swallowed, and began to cough. None too gently, Philip pounded her back.

"Oh! I-I'm all right," she protested. "Not so rough, Philip. You'll break my ribs."

"Sorry. I forgot." He stopped, looked apologetic. "I mean, I don't usually hit women. I don't usually hit anyone."

"You're a lover, not a fighter, then?" She managed a teasing grin.

He grinned right back. "Oh, I can fight if I have to but I much prefer doing the other."

Abruptly, she was serious. "Philip..."

He finished his sandwich, wiped his hands on the legs of his trousers and looked over at her expectantly.

"Do you have someone you love?"

"Of course I do." His answer was matter-of-fact. "You."

"That's not what I meant." The look she gave him said his answer was very important.

"Rebeka..." For just a moment, he hesitated. "You want me to tell you the truth, don't you?"

She nodded, steeling herself for his answer. If Philip loved someone else, the plan forming in her mind, that would fulfil her father's scheme and also save her husband's life, would be doomed.

"Yes, I do love someone."

Rebeka closed her eyes. *Oh, no.*

"You." He kissed her.

She was so relieved, she began to giggle.

He pretended to take offence. "God, I'm glad I didn't say I was besotted with you. You'd probably go into hysterics."

Picking up the canteen, he held it out to her. "Drink?"

Smiling, she took the canteen from him.

"Rebeka..." Now, he looked completely serious, gaze so stern she felt uneasy. "Be assured I have no one else, and even if I did, even if I didn't care for you, I'd be faithful. I swear."

"I know that, Philip."

"It would be too complicated otherwise," he added, completely spoiling the mood he'd created. In spite of that, he seemed to be expecting something more from her, for he waited a moment, before asking, "And you...?"

"And me ... what?"

"Will *you* be faithful, too, Rebeka?"

She turned an outraged face to his.

"Don't insult me, Philip. I'm not going to dignify that with an answer." She forced herself to swallow her anger. This wasn't the time to discover how much temper her husband

had, not when the sheer edge of a cliff was only a few feet away.

"I'll take *that* as your answer then!" Oddly, he seemed satisfied.

"What was that noise just now?" Better to change the subject.

"The meal whistle. For the workers."

"What do they eat?"

"I don't know." He shrugged as he took the canteen back. "Soup or porridge, something liquid."

"Porridge? How can that be nutritious enough for the work they do?"

"It's laced with vitamin powder." As if that made the scanty meal acceptable.

"How long do they have to eat?" Now that the subject had been broached, she intended to get all the information she could before Philip changed it.

"Why the interrogation?" Another shrug. "How long does it take to down a cup of soup?"

"They don't get to rest, or to relieve themselves?" She managed not to blush as she asked it.

"If they eat fast, they do. If not, they piss while they work. That's one reason I didn't want you going into the mine," he added, as if just remembering something. "It's a very dirty, very smelly place."

"But that's so unsanitary," she protested. "Don't they get any rest time at all? Surely, allowing a few minutes—ten, fifteen—in the morning and at night?"

"Rebeka," Philip took a deep breath as if reasoning with an argumentative child. "If I allowed the workers fifteen minutes twice a day to do nothing—why, in a week that would be four hours wasted ... at the end of a month there would be one hundred and twelve hours of work that hadn't been done." He realized he was still holding the canteen and got every busy replacing the cap. "We'd fall more behind than we are all ready."

"No, you wouldn't."

"And how do you arrive at that bit of logic?" Though his face was stern, she felt he was ridiculing her. "I'm no mathematician but even I know that no work equals no work!"

"Don't you see?" Now was her chance. She *had* to make him understand. "If the men are allowed time to rest, they'll be able to work better because they won't be as tired. Production in the mine would go up, not down. Feeding them better wouldn't hurt, either."

He looked unconvinced.

"Think about it, Philip. Working inside a mountain, the air barely breathable, filled with angelica dust, stinking of urine and sweat..."

He *had* thought about it, while he was in the mine, grateful that he wasn't bothered by the closeness, but feeling an unexpected stab of pity for the workers, to be forced to live in that claustrophobic, stifling atmosphere without being able to leave when they wished to.

"...hot. What's the temperature inside a mine anyway?"

"I don't know, and I don't care to." He looked suspicious. "Is this why you wanted to come with me? To condemn our mining operations?"

"Not exactly." Truthfully, she hadn't even thought about it until she actually saw the workers. "I was just curious, but now that I've seen how things go—yes."

"Rebeka, because of that explosion last month, we're behind in our quota now." He was going to change the subject, brush off everything she'd said. She could feel it. "We've got to catch up so when the *Condor* returns, we'll have the amount of *angelica* waiting that they expect."

"And what happens if you don't?" she demanded, sliding off the rock to look up at him. "If you say, *Sorry, I don't have the thousand kilos*—or whatever the amount is—*you wanted, I only have eight hundred*? Will they just leave orbit and fly away? No, they'll take the eight hundred kilos and be grateful. What can they do to you if you haven't met that stupid quota? Shoot you?"

He looked startled.

"I doubt that. After all, *you* aren't a member of the Terran Federation Navy. You simply inherited the Governor's chair from your father because none of his men wanted the responsibility."

"How did you know that?" Even after five years, Philip still harboured some anger that none of the adults, none of the men who had called themselves his father's friends, had stepped up to take over when the Lieutenant died. Only Alexander had stood by the fifteen-year-old who suddenly found himself Governor of Tusteya, but even he, too, had

tried to shy away from being officially recognised as the Governor's Regent, though he guided young Philip from that time forward.

"Darius told me."

"Darius talks too much."

"Never mind that." Reaching out, Rebeka placed one hand on his chest, as if to calm any anger he might be about to show. "Please, Philip. What do I have to do to get you to even consider what I've said?"

"You're serious, aren't you?" He sounded surprised.

"Very," she assured him.

"Tell me then, what would you do? To get me to think about what you've said?"

"Anything!"

"Anything?" He managed a slight leer. "Are you attempting to bribe a member of the Governor's Office, Lady?"

"No."

His sudden teasing encouraged her a little.

"I'm attempting to bribe the *Governor*. Tell me, what would it take?"

"Quite frankly?" He seemed to think about that.

She nodded.

"All right. I wouldn't mind a nice, slow toss about now."

That startled her. She'd expected him to demand a kiss or a hug, but not that he'd want to have sex. "What? Now? Here?"

"Right." He nodded, suddenly eager. "Now. *Here*."

"But," she gestured vaguely. "I-in the open like this, with everyone below us?"

"No one can see us, Rebeka, and I want you very much. Out here in the open ... naked ... free and windblown and sun-warmed."

His words made her shiver. No one had talked to her that way—ever—and what was so frightening was that what he said made her want it, too.

And if it would help her people...

She nodded. He caught her by the waist, setting her on the flat rock, then pulled himself up beside her, but when he kissed her, forcing her to lie against its granite surface, she pushed him away.

"I-I'm sorry, Philip, it's just too hard."

"Can't be." He shook his head and kissed her again. "I haven't gotten started yet."

"No, dummy." She struck his shoulder, right where she had bitten him, realized it as she saw him wince slightly. "This rock. It's too uncomfortable."

"Oh. That. Yes," he agreed with a sigh, pushing himself up on one elbow and wincing as it met the rock's surface. "Sadly, I agree. Although I was willing to tough it out if you could." He looked up. "The sun's a little too direct. Wouldn't want you to get a bad case of sunburn, or me, either, for that matter. Having a sun-blistered butt might take some explaining! Shall we postpone your bribery attempt until later tonight?"

Jumping from the rock, he helped her down, and together, they packed up the remnants of their lunch. Then, taking Rebeka's hand, he escorted her back down the path to where his men sat.

* * * *

On the way home, Rebeka was very quiet and thoughtful. Philip had hinted he'd think about what she said. She was very aware he would probably just brush her ideas aside like a bit of useless litter from an air-filled mind—she already had a good idea what he thought of a female's mental capacity, and was simply humouring her so he would have another pleasant little episode in bed tonight.

But if he *did* listen...

If she could get Philip to reform his father's laws, treat her people fairly and justly, and allow them more freedom, there would be no need for him to die...

And now that she had meet him, she realized—as rude and opinionated as he was—that Philip's survival was the thing she wanted most of all, almost more than she wished her people to be free of the Earthmen's yoke.

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Chapter 13

Back in his office, Philip rushed through the items placed before him, tabling most of them to be studied later. He wanted to think about what Rebeka had said.

Is she right? Would it matter, in the long run, if the ore quota was off by several hundred kilos? For that matter, would the Federation be so exacting that it had to have the amount documented, down to the last kilo? How much should be waiting for the *Condor* on its return?

Would men given a total of an hour a day to rest, eat, and relieve themselves actually work better, produce more?

There was only one way to find out, but was it worth the risk?

What if he went back on his previous decision, and simply closed the mine, and, when the injured workers were healed, re-opened it and put his wife's suggestions into play?

Taking a deep breath, he punched one of the buttons on his intercom.

"Sir?"

"Get Morrison for me, please."

* * * *

An hour later, he was standing in his suite, looking triumphantly at Rebeka who was arranging a bouquet of flowers in a vase.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "I picked some of the flowers in your father's garden."

"No—it's your garden now, too. I just don't want you wandering too far inside it."

"Why? Are there wild animals running loose?"

"No, but the garden is fairly large and you could easily get lost." He picked up the cup sitting on the end table by the couch. "What's this?"

"I had a bit of a stomach ache. Probably from all that riding." She explained. "I thought some hot tea might ease it."

He returned the cup to its saucer.

"You look tired," she commented.

"I am, a little. In case you didn't notice, I don't particularly like to ride ... horses, at least."

She chose to ignore that little innuendo.

"I've been meaning to ask you. Why did you go to the mine? You could have used one of your communication devices and asked the foreman what you wished to know."

"Because I wanted to escape the palace for a few hours." He looked guilty. "And I wanted to inspect the mine, make certain the safety measures were being enforced properly. I don't want another incident like that gas explosion. If I have to force more men into the mines, I might have a rebellion on my hands."

"Oh, Philip, surely it wouldn't come to that."

"No, I don't think it will." She had meant his making more Uleans work the mines. He chose to believe she was thinking about an uprising. "Not now."

"What happens now?"

He ignored her question, saying instead, "I'm sorry I wasn't here for dinner tonight."

"I suppose I should get used to that." She gave a little shrug. "After all, it isn't the first time, and I daresay it won't be the last."

"Did you miss me?" It was asked hopefully, not sarcastically as he'd done on their wedding night.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did." She looked as surprised as he at this admission.

"I brought you this by way of apology." He took something from his tunic pocket, holding it out to her. Looking rather anxious as she took it.

A bracelet, fine *angelica* wires twisted and braided together, five glowing blue opals imprisoned within the strands.

"It's beautiful."

"It was my mother's. The only thing I have of hers, as a matter of fact. I-I thought my wife should have it."

Taking it from her, he opened the little clasp and slid it onto her wrist. Rebecca studied it carefully before she spoke.

"Philip, sometimes you can be so thoughtful. I think that's one of the things that makes me love you."

"Really?" He sat, rather abruptly, leaning against the couch, arms resting on its back. "In that case, after you learn what I did today, you're going to be mad about me."

"Why?" She planted herself in front of him, looking down with a smile. "What did you do?"

"I closed the mines."

He made it into such a flat statement that for a moment, she was certain she'd misunderstood.

"You ... what?"

"Yes." He was smiling, almost grinning, like a child who's done something clever and knows it. "Closed the mines. I thought about what you said and took it one step further, decided to give everyone a rest ... let the men see their families, the sick heal ... and reopen with your suggestions firmly in place. In a few weeks, if it all happens as you believe—and I think it will—then I'll release the conscripted men to return to their homes."

"Oh, Philip." Rebecca put her hands to her mouth. Briefly, her lower lip trembled. Perhaps, just perhaps, her plan was going to work after all! "Thank you."

He beamed. There was no other way to describe the look on his face, as if never in his life, had someone been proud of anything he'd done, or told him so.

"Now." He caught Rebeka around the waist and pulled her onto his lap. "I'd like to collect that bribe owed me."

* * * *

She awoke pressed to Philip's chest, wrapped in an aura of warmth and security. Moving slightly, she felt the tug of her night rail where it was caught between their bodies.

After they made love, Philip had asked her to put on the filmy garment. He liked to feel it between them, he said, to sense her warmth flowing onto his skin through the fabric's thin weave.

"Is this gossamer?" He caught the hem between thumb and forefinger as she snuggled close.

"*Gos-sa-mer*? I never heard that word. It's made from river spider's silk." She turned to kiss the underside of his chin. "What is gossamer?"

"It's the fabric of the Little People. That's a tribe of magical folk on Terra." He settled her next to him, resting his cheek against hers. "It's said if you bind a man's heart with gossamer, he'll love you forever."

She thought about that. "And a woman?"

He shrugged. "Never heard what happens if you bind a woman's heart. Perhaps women are too fickle and it only works on men."

Then, he was dodging the harmless blows of her little fists before they began to laugh together.

"I'm serious, Rebeka," he went on, when they were settled again, and nearly asleep. "You've captured my heart, and I can truly say it's something I never, ever expected to happen, especially in the way it did—but I'm glad it has."

Rebeka didn't answer. She was touched by his statement, and beginning to understand, just a little, why Philip acted as he did. He was lonely, isolated from everyone and everything, and she was probably the first person other than Darius with whom he was able to reveal how he felt about things. She hadn't lied. She did love Philip, and she hoped things turned out as she wanted them to, so their love could grow and mature, and Philip would live to love her forever.

Pushing back the comforter, she sat up, sliding from the bed.

As usual, the moment her warmth left him, he awoke, one hand reaching out to catch a handful of nightgown.

"And where do you think you're going?"

"It's morning, Philip. Where do you think I'm going?" She nodded at the bathroom and started towards it, pulling the fabric from his hand.

"Rebeka." His voice sounded shocked. "There's blood on the sheet."

She stopped, turned and looked down at his pointing finger and the red splotch under it.

Oh, gods! *Her stomach ache!* So it wasn't from a hard day's ride ... she'd forgotten to keep track.

He was on his feet, arms around her, holding her close.

"Did I hurt you? Was I too rough?" Not waiting for an answer or an explanation, Philip began to accuse himself.

"God, I'm sorry. I was just so eager to love you. I should have been gentler. I'll call the physician..."

He reached for a robe on the foot of the bed, shrugging it on.

"Philip, wait! I don't need a doctor, it's just my Time."

He had already turned away, calling Bram's name, and as the sentry appeared in the terrace doorway, Rebeka fled for the bathroom's shelter as fast as she could.

"Philip, is something wrong?"

Taking his arm, Philip pulled him towards the entrance to the suite, opening the door, and beckoning to Timon. After a moment, Darius, standing on the other side, followed Bram's twin.

"It's Rebeka..." Philip began. He could see the twins tensing at the concern in his voice, Darius turning a scowl upon him. "She-she says she's not hurt, but I think ... She's bleeding."

Bram and Timon exchanged a startled glance, then looked back at him, visibly relaxing. Behind them, Darius began to laugh softly.

"You're laughing?" Philip burst out. "My wife's in there possibly bleeding to death and you're laughing, you mechanized bastard."

Darius' laugh cut off in mid-chuckle. "Relax, Your Excellency." The title was spat out sarcastically. "She's not dying."

"And you're certain of this?"

"Of course." Bram broke in, wondering again about this odd rivalry Philip and the android seemed to have where Rebeka was concerned. "It's perfectly natural, Flip."

It was a sign of the young guard's concern that he called Philip by his nickname.

"It just means she isn't pregnant." He frowned. "Why am I telling you this?"

"Don't you know?" Timon demanded. "For God's sake, Flip, you're twenty years old. How could you get as far as you have with women and not know about *that*?"

"Damn it, Tim!" Philip flushed. "Remember who you're talking to."

"Yes," Bram ignored his outburst. "I thought Father explained all about human reproduction to you."

"He *did*!" Darius cut in, caustically. "But apparently, he didn't explain enough. I offered to do it, but the great Alexander McIntyre had to take over and louse things up. As usual."

"How dare you insult our father like that?" Timon turned on the android.

"Yes, since when do you get away with saying such things?" Bram demanded. "Father has always looked after Philip."

"Will you three shut up?" Philip hissed at them. "I don't want the entire palace knowing I'm ignorant about the workings of the female body. Yes, Uncle Lex told me the so-called Facts of Life. He told me how a man's body works, and what to do to pleasure a woman, even about self-relief, but he never ... *ever* ... mentioned something called a woman's *Time*."

"Apparently, he didn't think you were ever going to become involved with a woman who might be in danger of becoming pregnant," Darius remarked dryly.

Philip ignored him. "You two, I take it, know all about this?"

He got twin nods.

"Of course, we *are* a lot older than you, and more mature, too." Timon smirked with the superiority of a twenty-five-year old.

Philip glared at him.

"And *I'm* married," Bram reminded him.

Darius was watching the exchange with interest. *Strange, how young the Governor has become since Rebeka entered his life.*

"She's going to need some things," Bram went on, practically. He started down the hall, saying over his shoulder, "I'll ask Eppi if she can supply them."

"And she's going to want to move to another room until it's over. Some drek about being *unclean*." Timon shook his head. "That's bunk. Keep her with you, Philip, even if you can't do anything for a while."

"That's right." From the turn in the hallway, Bram spoke up again. "This is a real test, Philip. If you can have her in your bed and just cuddle her and that's all."

He shrugged, then turned and strode off down the hall.

Behind him, Darius shook his head and made a slight *tsking* sound.

"Darius, I'm warning you." Philip turned on the android. "If you breathe one word of this to anyone, especially to Rebeka, I swear I'll have you dismantled. Do you understand?"

Holding up both hands in a placating gesture, Darius forced himself not to smile. "Philip, I swear, no one will find out from me and I especially wouldn't say anything to Rebeka. I'm to ensure her welfare, not embarrass her with tales of her husband's ignorance."

"That does it." Philip drew back his fist.

Timon caught his arm just as Bram reappeared, bearing a small wooden chest which he thrust into his friend's hands.

"Here! Give this to the Mistress, and let's forget any of this ever happened." He pushed Philip back inside, pulling the door shut.

* * * *

"Rebeka?"

She was in the tub, up to her neck in suds.

Carefully, he set the little chest on the tub's edge. "Bram's wife sent this. It should have whatever you need."

He wondered what the chest contained, then decided he didn't want to know.

"Thank her for me, would you, please?" She made no movement to get out of the tub, so he sat down on the ledge.

"I think I owe you an explanation."

"No, no you don't." She'd had time to do some thinking while she hid in the bathroom, and although she hadn't heard any of Philip's conversation with Darius or the twins, she realized now that he had no idea what was happening. "I understand."

"Do you?" He tried to look nonchalant, failed completely, decided to bluff. "I didn't intend to give the impression that I was ignorant. It's just that..." He paused a moment, biting his lip, before lying valiantly. "I ... Well, I've never seen it, that's all. Knowing and actually seeing, are two different things."

You didn't know about it at all. Suddenly, Rebeka felt sorry for her husband. In spite of his exalted position, and the power he held, Philip was in some ways more ignorant than she had been before Master Martin's instruction. How, she

wondered, had it happened, and why? Was it because his father had died at the wrong time in his son's life?

"Of course," she said, and made certain there was no condescension in her voice.

"So, you aren't pregnant then." He made it a statement. She shook her head.

"Did you want to be? I mean, would you like to have my baby, Rebeka? I..." He looked away, as if embarrassed by his own question. "I'd never really thought about it before, but I'm beginning to think I'd like that."

Rebeka didn't answer, just sat in the suds, eyes as downcast as his own, until Philip went on, in a slightly disappointed tone, "I-If not, well, I'll make certain it doesn't happen. As soon as we can ... when is this over, anyway?"

"Five days," she said. "That's all."

"*Five* days!" It sounded like a lifetime. He stood up, studying her face a moment. Then, he leant over and brushed a finger against her cheek. "Your artwork is fading."

He sighed quietly.

"I suppose with a few more baths, it'll all be gone."

"Yes."

"Too bad. I'll miss that little violet." For just a moment, he looked thoughtful. "I'll get out of here and leave you to do whatever it is you're supposed to do."

He started out, then turned back. "By the way, you're not moving to another suite. You'll stay here."

"Yes, Philip." She made her voice totally obedient, even injected a little pride at his insistence.

He turned and walked out, head up, step firm, a man who had used his authority over his woman.

* * * *

"This should be sent to the laundry," Rebeka dropped the nightgown into the wicker hamper by the bathroom door.

"And we need to change the sheets."

"I'll call for one of the maids." Philip, who had dressed while Rebeka was in her bath, reached for the bell-pull by the bed.

"No need," Rebeka was opening a nearby cabinet as she spoke. "We can do it ourselves."

"You want *me* to make a bed?" He looked insulted.

"Why not?" She pulled off the comforter, tossing it onto the floor. The other bedclothes followed. "You sleep in it, don't you? Here."

Unfolding the sheet, she flung it over the mattress.

Catching the opposite edge, Philip held it a moment, then just a little awkwardly, copied her motions as she dropped the sheet to the bed, smoothed out the wrinkles, and tucked it in. When she opened the top sheet, he reached for it and repeated the action.

"Does Counsellor Spearman help his wives make their beds?" His voice was just short of being a grumble.

"No," Rebeka replied. "But since he can't sleep in four beds at once, he has a good excuse. There!" She returned the comforter to the bed and placed the pillows atop it. "All done!"

Gathering up the sheets, she stuffed them into the hamper also.

"I should be going." Philip was standing at the door now, giving a good imitation of a man being pulled in two directions. "Do you want me to stay? How do you feel? I'll stay." He made it sound final.

"No." She placed a hand on his arm, was startled to feel it trembling slightly.

Until that moment, she'd had no idea that a threat to her, whether real or imagined, would upset him so. Gods, things were certainly moving fast.

Too fast.

"You go about your business. I'll just take it easy today. You might have some tea and toast sent up for me. I really don't have much appetite right now."

"You? Without an appetite? You're sure you're not ill?" He managed a smile.

"Absolutely." She kissed him and pushed him towards the door.

"You know..." He paused with his hand on the door handle. "This may be a good thing, your not being hungry."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything, but the way you eat, I'm certain in a few weeks you'll weigh more than I do. Cutting down on your food-intake for even a few days might remedy that."

One of the pillows came sailing towards him. He ducked as it struck the door and bounced to the floor.

"Get out of here."

Laughing, Philip obeyed.

* * * *

When Darius came in a few minutes later, Rebeka took one look at the android's face and said angrily, "I don't want to hear one word out of you. I don't know what Philip told you, but I can imagine, and I'm certain you did nothing to help."

"Mistress, you wound me." Darius looked hurt, one hand touching his heart. "To the quick."

Then, he sat down opposite her, and burst into laughter, ignoring the angry scowl she gave him.

"Oh, Rebeka, if only you could have seen. That poor, ignorant boy. Yes, that's all he is, you know ... a *boy*, really." Darius shook his head. "I told the Lieutenant I should be the one to instruct Philip when he turned thirteen, but, oh no. His good friend, Alexander, had to be the one. A *real* human, and not an artificial one who couldn't possibly know the meaning of love and affection—and what the Hell do they have to do with sex, anyway?" Abruptly, Darius looked angry, surprising both himself and Rebeka. "Only Alexander should tell his son about the changes going on in his body."

He stood up, beginning to pace.

"Well, *Uncle Lex* did it, alright! But he didn't bother to say a word about the changes in a *woman's* body, and how they might affect young Philip at some time or other. He just steered him to women who didn't care whether he knew or not."

He stopped, realized he was nearly ranting—and of the variety of emotions he'd just displayed—and sat down again.

"My apologies, Mistress, for rambling on like that. God, I'm beginning to agree with Lord Chesterfield. *The pleasure is momentary, the position ridiculous, and the expense damnable*—and that's *not* a glitch!"

"I've had enough apologies for today, Darius." She was silent a moment, before asking, "It hurt you a great deal, didn't it, that the Lieutenant allowed Lex to supplant you during that important moment in Philip's life?"

"Of course it didn't," he lied. He had to keep her from becoming suspicious. "No more than what happened today really amused me. I was simply concerned with how disastrous Philip's ignorance might be. Were you understanding, Rebeka?"

She didn't answer.

"Yes, I think you were and I'm glad about that. If it had been some other woman than you, someone less caring—"

"I know."

She might have laughed at him, ridiculed him, stating that a husband should be aware of these things, implying what he didn't know affected his manhood somehow.

He shook his head. "As difficult as it is to believe, Philip is a very *sheltered* tyrant."

"Darius. You're a fraud."

"How is that, Mistress?" He forced himself to look puzzled. *God, has she guessed?*

"You pretend to be so jealous of Philip, saying you don't care what happens to him, being rude to him, laughing at him, but deep down inside, you have some kind of affection

for him. I don't know how. I know you can't possibly feel such an emotion, but there's *something*, isn't there?"

"Rebeka, I may as well confess to you now—"

There was a knock on the door and to Rebeka's call, a Vanda maid, bearing a tray laden with a teapot, biscuits, hot buns and toast, and pots of marmalade and jams, entered. Philip apparently had hopes his beloved's appetite would soon return.

Placing the tray on the little table where Rebeka and Philip often ate together, the girl left the room.

"What were you saying?" Rebeka got up and surveyed the items on the tray, selecting a roll and smearing it liberally with peach jam. Biting into it, she turned to look at him. "You had a confession?"

He just couldn't tell her.

"I-I promised Philip I wouldn't say anything to you about this episode so I'm a liar, as well as being a fraud."

"Don't worry about it," Rebeka told him, pouring herself a cup of tea. "I won't tell."

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Chapter 14

"Philip, why aren't there any women working in the palace proper?"

"There are. Most of the servants are women."

They were having dinner on the balcony with Bram nearby, on guard but far enough away not to be able to hear their conversation.

She watched in astonishment as her husband pulled out her chair and waited for her to be seated, taking her napkin from the table and draping it across her lap.

"No, I mean working for *you*. Sparks' daughter, for instance. Why couldn't she be a comms-op like her father?"

He looked surprised as he dropped into his own chair and picked up his own napkin.

"You've answer your own question, Rebeka." Carefully, he unfolded the large linen square and placed it on his thighs. "She's a *female* and the United Terran Federation doesn't allow women within its ranks. I notice your appetite's returned."

Picking up a biscuit, he buttered it generously, biting into it.

"Don't change the subject. This isn't the Terran Federation," she reminded him. "This is Tusteya, and we've always allowed an individual to rise as high as possible regardless of gender."

"Oh? And how many female scientists and physicians and engineers are there among the Elius' ranks at this very moment?"

"The Elius is the warrior caste. We produce soldiers and politicians."

"Well, the Vandas or any of the other tribes, then." He finished the biscuit and reached for another.

"None, but that's just because the Federation decimated them during the attack. Most of our professional people of both sexes were killed by the *Condor's* guns, and those who survived soon forgot their training as they fought to stay alive." She regarded the piece of ham on her fork.

"Reproducing became more important than what degree someone held."

He dropped the piece of biscuit he held onto his plate.

"Congratulations, Wife." The words were cold. "You've not only killed my appetite but made me thoroughly ashamed of what my people did to yours."

"I didn't intend to." Nevertheless, she didn't look apologetic. "And *my* people are also *yours*, Philip. Don't forget that."

He didn't answer, just retrieved the biscuit and finished it.

"Have you ever asked if there are any people living in Ulea—existing as bricklayers or gardeners ... or even some of the men in the mines—who have advanced degrees and enough higher education to be employed in the palace?"

He shook his head, looking thoughtful as he chewed slowly. "You mean I might actually have a brain surgeon lugging *angelica* ore?"

His words were just short of sarcastic.

"That might be a slight exaggeration, but ... yes, something like that."

"Then, he'll be very handy if we have a cave-in, won't he?" He swallowed and picked up his water glass. "We could have used him when that gas pocket exploded."

"Congratulations!" She had to laugh. "You very neatly distracted me from my original question."

"And what was that again?" He frowned as if trying to remember. "Oh yes! Why don't women work up here? Well, quite frankly, Rebeka, wouldn't they be a bit of a distraction? Some little sweetie jiggling her boobs or her ass in front of her partner during a midnight changing of the guard? Probably be more than the guard changing if that happened. And if a man was teamed with his wife, and they'd had an argument, wouldn't it probably carry over into their work? God, that'd be chaos."

He shook his head and reached for the salt shaker, liberally sprinkling his eggs.

"Besides, it's irrelevant. Most of the women are satisfied with their lot, and certainly none of them are trained to work in the upper levels."

"Except Spark's daughter," she reminded him.

"Well, she's only ten, so there's plenty of time for her to become disinterested! Probably as soon as she discovers boys."

For several moments, Rebeka was silent, frowning a little as if lost in thought. "By the way, your manners seemed to

have undergone a change. Thank you for helping me be seated just now."

"My pleasure, my Lady." He directed a smirk at the android. "Darius, it appears the etiquette you taught me has finally been put to good use."

"I'm gratified, Your Excellency." Darius bowed, placing one hand over his heart. His words were sarcastic but he smiled with satisfaction as he spoke.

"Do you have any objections to my meeting some of the women in the lower levels?" Rebeka asked.

"You aren't planning on inciting them to riot or anything, are you?"

"No. I promise. I'm lonely, Philip."

"I see. Tired of my company already, are you?" He sighed. "God, you're as fickle as the rest."

She ignored that. "Other than the servants, I haven't seen another women since I've been here, and while you and the twins are very handsome, and can converse very intelligently when you put your minds to it, I would like to see another *female* face. There are times when a woman needs another woman to talk to." She decided not to remind him of that morning.

"Hm." He had obviously thought of it, anyway. "No, I don't mind if you visit any of them. Bram's Eppi, for instance ... or his sister Alexandra. I think you'd like her. Uncle Lex actually wanted me to marry her." He smirked slightly. "Maybe I should have. I wonder if I could be allowed more than one wife?" He changed the subject as Rebeka glared at him. "Shall I ask Bram if—"

"Actually, I was hoping we might have a party."

"A *party*?" He repeated the word as if he didn't know its meaning.

"Yes ... and invite the men and their wives and older daughters. So I could see who belongs to who, so to speak."

"A party." This time, his voice was thoughtful.

"Or a dance. My father told me they used to have wonderful balls in the palace when he was Prime Counsellor here."

"Rebeka, we've never had a party or a ball or any kind of social function in the palace." He said it with a certain distaste, making it sound like something very akin to an orgy.

"Never?"

He shook his head.

"Then don't you think it's time we did?"

"It would certainly be something to break the monotony." He didn't sound very encouraging.

"We could even invite some of the townspeople. Those friendly to the Federation, of course." Suddenly, she was very enthused with her idea. "The First Counsellor of the Astorii—he's still alive, isn't he? The head of the construction guild, perhaps. And, oh, I'm sure you can supply me with a list."

"Rebeka, I don't know if that's such a good idea." Philip looked doubtful. "Inviting the First Counsellor, I mean. Possibly the others, but him? No."

"You sound very definite about that. Why not?"

"Mainly because he's my grandfather and he never really forgave my father for forcing my mother into marriage and then letting her die." He looked ashamed.

"Your father didn't have anything to do with her death," she protested. "She ran away, didn't she?"

"Yes, but she wouldn't have done that if she hadn't been made to marry an alien." He lowered his voice as if making a confession. "I've never even seen my grandparents."

"Oh, Philip, that's so sad."

His expression changed to one of indifference. "Can't say that I missed them. They certainly didn't break down the palace gates trying to see me. How about yours?"

"My mother's father is still alive. He joined our tribe when the Ryneans were overcome by your father's forces..." Her voice trailed away. She just couldn't seem to keep from reminding Philip of what had happened. "Perhaps it's time you two met. After all, the worst he can do is refuse to come!"

Philip set down his fork, staring at her. "What is it about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You ask a question, then make a statement, and suddenly, I find myself doing and saying things I never expected to. All right, Rebeka, have your party. I'll get Morrison to find you a copy of the roster of Terran families, and I'll also have Uncle Lex make up a list of compatible Uleans. God, he's going to explode when I ask him. Probably accuse me of being hen-pecked and half a dozen other emasculating terms."

Nevertheless, he looked amused.

"Tell him it's your idea if it'll help. To introduce me to everyone, since—even with your announcement—there's been

such a confusion about it. I'm perfectly willing to let you take all the credit."

"All the *blame*, you mean."

"When can we have it?"

"A month from now, how about that?" Pushing back his chair, he held out his arms. "Now, come over here. I want to try some of that cuddling Bram was talking about."

* * * *

"Philip..."

"Hm?"

"May I ask you something?"

It was later that night. The cuddling had gone rather well, Rebeka thought. At least, Philip seemed satisfied, although she'd been a little shy about sitting on his lap and kissing him with Bram and Darius, smirking slightly, standing so near. After a few moments, the guard had nonchalantly strolled to the other end of the terrace, reaching out and catching the android's arm and practically dragging him along. They had stayed there until she and Philip had gone inside.

It was obvious both Rebeka and Philip were both eager and impatient for her Time to be finished.

Now, they were in bed, and, from the soft snorts coming from under the down comforter, her beloved husband had settled firmly into sleep.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," came the sleepy answer accompanied by a wide yawn. "What could you possible want to know at this time of night? What time is it, anyway?"

As if it had heard his question, the clock above the fireplace suddenly struck two o'clock.

"Thank you," he mumbled.

"Philip, that was the clock."

"So?" He didn't open his eyes. "It doesn't hurt to be polite."

"You must still be asleep, if you're talking to inanimate objects."

"I'm awake enough to wish you were inanimate," came the irritated mutter.

She pulled away slightly so she could roll over to look at him. "W-what do you do? When you go to the West End?"

"Rebeka..." In the dim light from the fireplace, he looked a little uncomfortable.

"I'm not going to get angry or condemn you as a libertine or anything. I-I just want to know."

His expression told her it was none of her business but, familiar by now with Rebeka's persistence, he said, "I ... Well, I go to one of the Houses, usually the Gilded Lantern or the Blue Swan, pick a woman, pay, we go into one of the cells, and ... Do I have to go on?"

"Do you have the same woman every time?" she persisted. "Do you have a favourite?"

"Not really. There are two I liked—notice I'm using the past tense here—because they had good techniques, and could make me come in a way that would sizzle my toes, but..." He broke off irritably. "Why are you asking me this anyway? It's not exactly the proper kind of pillow-talk between a husband and wife."

"How do you know which pillow-talk is proper?" she retorted, turning her back and settling herself against him again. She deliberately wriggled a little so her backside brushed against his belly. Automatically, his arms closed around her, pressing her against his body. "I was just wondering if you ever took any of them into the city. You know, to one of the clubs or to a restaurant or anything like that."

"That's not allowed. Customers can't take a girl from her House."

"I see. Have you ever taken *yourself* to a club? Maybe you and the twins? Done some drinking, perhaps gotten a little drunk, danced on the bar-top, or something equally wild and scandalous?" She couldn't even imagine that and laughed as she asked.

"Sorry to disappoint you ... but no. I don't drink, remember? And as far as I know, neither Timon nor Bram have done any of those things. Uncle Lex kept a pretty tight rein on those two, even picked out Bram's wife for him."

That surprised her. Bram, especially, looked as if he would rebel against any kind of parental interference in his life.

"Uncle Lex sounds like a petty tyrant."

"I thought I was the only tyrant around here." There was a quick kiss to the top of her head. His arms tightened as he began to nuzzle her neck.

She refused to be distracted, just settled herself a little more and reached back to pat his cheek. The nuzzling stopped with a loud sigh.

"So you've never done any of the things my father told me he did before he became Prime Counsellor? That he said all young men should do before they grow up and become mature adults?"

There was a slight silence as he considered that. "I ... no, I haven't. As a matter of fact, I only visit the West End about once a month. W-when I can't stand the tension any longer. I guess I'm a pretty poor excuse for a libertine, aren't I?" Briefly, he sounded regretful. "Does that mean I'm not grown up yet? Have I missed out on a lot of things? Damn. Now I'm married and it's too late."

Again, she rolled over, touching his face. "Philip, we could still do some of it. Well, not the drinking and climbing onto bar-tops, but you and I could go out, go to a club, dance."

"Oh, I'm not much of a dancer, Rebeka. Don't dance, actually. Never had anyone to teach me. Darius drew the line at *that*."

"Who cares? We could still go, and have some *fun*."

"Fun?"

"Yes, you do know what fun is, don't you? You laugh and enjoy yourself and afterward, think back on it with pleasure."

"I thought that was called sex." He began to laugh. Quietly, of course, so the guards wouldn't hear. The last thing he wanted was Bram hearing loud voices and barging in, demanding to know what was wrong and seeing the Governor and his Lady naked and in each other's arms.

"Philip—"

"I'm sorry, Rebeka, but I can't do that." He didn't sound the least bit regretful, she thought.

"Why not?" Unconsciously, she ran her fingers through his hair, brushing back the long curls that had fallen over his forehead as he slept. A strand caught in the wires of her bracelet and she began to fiddle with it, trying to free the pale hair.

"I'm the Governor, Rebeka. Uncle Lex says I have to retain a certain detachment. I can't allow the Uleans to see that I'm just as human as they are." As the hair came free, he pulled away, sitting up to seize his pillow and pound it into a softer shape. That done to his satisfaction, he lay down again. "After all, I'm an *alien*, one of the dreaded Earthmen." There was sarcasm in his voice. "I have to keep my distance, maintain a distinct amount of fear and a sense of callousness. Although that may already be shot to Hell since you cozened me into closing the mine."

"Coz ... I did no such thing." Rebeka wasn't certain whether he was teasing or not.

"And they must never know how terribly, damnably lonely it can be." That statement was delivered in a whisper.

"You don't ever have to be lonely again, Philip. Now that I'm here." She kissed his cheek.

She hoped she didn't sound like a mother reassuring a frightened child.

Apparently, Philip thought she did.

"Rebeka," his voice rose. "You're making me into such a weakling. I'm beginning to wonder how I managed to survive before you came into my life."

"Very badly, I think." She glanced towards the terrace.

Bram's silhouette was visible through the door. It paused a moment, then started back down the terrace, not reacting to the sound of their voices.

For several minutes, they were quiet, and soon, Philip began to snore again.

* * * *

"Philip..." This time, she woke him with a prod of her elbow into his ribs.

"Unh!" He came awake with a gasp. "What the Hell did you do that for?"

"May I ask you something?"

"No!" Rolling over, he drove a fist into his pillow and buried his face in it.

"Philip..."

He raised his head. "What more could you possibly want to know? Damn it! I was asleep."

"I just want to talk a little more. You know, pillow-talk?"

"We've been pillow-talking," he reminded her, and added just a little peevishly, "Now, it's time to sleep. I thought since we couldn't do anything else, I'd at least get a full night's rest tonight."

Rebeka wasn't to be deterred. "This is about something you said before. Let's just pretend we didn't stop talking and go on from there."

He didn't answer.

"Philip?"

"Oh, all right." Rolling over, he sat up, and pushed his pillow against the head of the bed, then leant back against it,

drawing up his knees so they made a tent under the sheets, and rested his elbows against them. "What is it?"

"You said you don't drink."

"That's right." He reached over and extracted her own pillow from under her head and placed it near his, then beckoned to her. Rebeka sat up and leant against him.

"And the day we were married, you said it was because of your father."

"Rebeka..." His voice held sudden frost and she realized she was stepping into forbidden territory. "I really don't want to get into that at this time of night—or any other time, for that matter."

"What did you mean?" She allowed a little hurt to enter her own voice, as if his anger had injured her feelings.

"All right, little Mistress Snoop. Since you obviously aren't going to let this go until you know it all! Damn, you're as tenacious as-as..."

He released her, threw back the covers and slid his legs over the side of the bed, sitting with his back to her. In the semi-lit room, he was a large, dark shape silhouetted against the fire, head bowed, shoulders slumped.

There was a long sigh.

"My father was a drunk, Rebeka. The great, fearsome Tyrant of Tusteya was nothing but a hopeless drunk. After my mother was killed, he turned to Ulean whiskey for solace. Oh, he was all right during the day but at night, when he was alone, or with me, he'd sit in the garden and drink, and then he'd rail about her. How she betrayed him, how she chose to die instead of live with him. After that, it was more whiskey

and more hatred spilling out. He hated all women, would never trust one again..."

...and if you're smart, son, you'll never trust one, either.

How many times had he heard the Lieutenant say that?

"A-and then, he'd cry that he wanted to die, too." He turned slightly, and raised one hand, curled into a fist.

Rebeka stiffened. *Is he going to hit me?*

"Well, it took him fifteen years, but, finally, he got his wish." Philip struck the pillow, driving his fist into its softness with such force that it made the headboard shake. "And left behind one son who had been indoctrinated never to believe in love and who was forced to take his place as the object of hatred in the hearts of an entire race."

He struck the pillow again, harder this time.

"You really loved your father, didn't you?" She touched his shoulder.

"Rebeka, I worshipped him. Even when he was so miserable and desperate, despising my mother ... hating the Federation for abandoning him ... I tried to be a good son and do what he said, to believe what he told me." He looked at her and she was certain she could see unhappiness glowing in his eyes, even in the dimness. "I avoided any woman who might place responsibility on me. Nearly broke Alexandra's heart. I forced myself to tell her I didn't care about her at all when actually I ... The only women I had anything to do with were ones who would put no demands on me at all, and I could pay my money, have my pleasure, and then just walk away."

Getting to his feet, he moved away from the bed to pace in front of the hearth, bare feet not making any sound that might alert Bram.

"I tried to be as stern and unforgiving as he had been, but I was weak, and I knew it. Uncle Lex helped me become stronger, but I knew I'd never be like my father had been before he met my mother."

He flung himself down on the couch, hands to his face.

"And *you* aren't helping!"

Sliding from the bed, Rebeka ran over to him, kneeling before him, her own hands over his. She didn't say anything, just stayed there looking up at him, waiting for him to finish. There was more Philip wanted to say, she was certain.

Finally, he raised his head.

"I saw first hand how loving a woman could make a man degenerate into a weak, snivelling wreck." His voice was very, very soft now, but filled with so much pain it was startling. "It shamed me to see him that way, and made me that much more determined never to fall into that trap."

Rebeka's heart sank. *No matter what he says, he'll never allow himself to really love me. Even if he wants to, he'll be afraid he'll become like his father.*

His next words were a surprise.

"...and then I was given a little Eliusian hostage, and suddenly I was doing everything I'd sworn never to do." He broke off with a slight laugh. "Is it any wonder I question how I feel about you? This happened much too fast."

He pulled his hands free of hers, reached out and touched her cheek. "God, I didn't intend to say all that. Are you a

witch, Rebeka? Have you enchanted me? What did you do to me, woman?"

"I think you trust me. You know you can say whatever you want to me and I'll never tell."

"You'd better not." His smile gleamed in the firelight, but there was no threat in the words.

"You've missed out on a lot of things, Philip, and I'm going to help you make up for lost time—starting with our party."

"That party ... I don't know, Rebeka." The doubtful tone was back. "I'm beginning to have second thoughts about that."

"Don't."

She allowed herself to be pulled to her feet and onto his lap. Philip's skin was cool and as her own warm flesh touched it, she shivered.

He pulled the decorative shawl from the back of the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"It'll be just fine. Oh, I do have one small problem, though."

"Just one?" He touched her head, pushing it against his shoulder.

"I don't have anything to wear."

"Women *never* do." There was a loud snort, muffled quickly as he looked guiltily at the door. Bram's shadow wasn't visible. "Very well. You can take Darius, and go into the city. He knows where all the shops are. Deplete the treasury, if necessary, and buy yourself everything you need to dazzle our guests. I'll just raise taxes to replenish it. Oh,

and be sure and buy some kind of cosmetic that'll cover that face paint."

"I thought you decided you liked it."

"I do, but now that it's starting to fade, your face looks bruised. I don't want people thinking I beat you." Gathering her into his arms, he stood up and walked back to the bed, where he placed her among the pillows. "And now, do I have your permission to get some sleep?"

She didn't answer, waiting until he was settled beside her before she spoke again.

"Philip?"

"Hm?" She could feel him tensing, ready to become angry if she insisted on beginning another conversation or to relax into sleep if she chose to remain silent.

She leant over and kissed him on the mouth.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure, my Lady." He brushed fingers against her breast. "Now, come here and snuggle against me so I can sleep warm."

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Chapter 15

With a frown, Darius took the package Rebeka held out to him and placed it on top of the others he was balancing in his arms.

"Is that the last one?" he asked, hopefully.

"Of course not! I'm only half-way through my list."

"My God, Rebeka, it's *just* a party," he protested. "Just *one* night, and for that, you need only *one* dress and perhaps a matching pair of slippers. Why are you buying so much stuff?"

He twisted slightly to dodge an oncoming Ulean, shifting his hold on the packages to steady the top one which slid to the edge of the stack and threatened to fall to the cobbles.

"Men and androids! Think you know everything! It appears you're as well-informed about women as my dear husband is."

It was all she could do to keep from laughing out loud. *I'm so happy.*

Truthfully, she'd been a little fearful of going into the city, even with Darius hovering behind her, but the party was now only a few days away, so she had to do her shopping. The shopkeepers had been polite, helpful, and completely incurious as to the identity of this little stranger in their midst. Several of them mistakenly guessed she was an Eliusian come to Ulea to shop under the protection of the new armistice, as others of her clan were doing.

Rebeka hadn't told them differently.

"One dress?" Smiling at the android, she went on in a teasing tone, "One pair of slippers? What about underthings? Perfume, cosmetics, jewellery, fans?"

"Never mind," he interrupted wearily. "I'm sorry I asked. Where to next, Mistress?"

There was a faint growling sound. Rebeka placed a hand on her midriff. "I think I need some lunch."

"Of course!" Darius agreed. "You'll definitely need sustenance to complete this gruelling task."

Rebeka ignored that.

"Where would be a good place to..." She didn't give the android a chance to answer. "I know. That place I heard those two guards talking about while we were at the mines. What was it called? the Blue ... uh ... Bird? No, the Blue Flower?"

"The Blue Blossom," Darius supplied, patiently.

"Yes, that's it." Rebeka smiled at him. "Let's go to the Blue Blossom and have lunch."

She turned and started down the thoroughfare, only to stop and look back when she realized the android wasn't following her. "Come on, Darius! I'm getting really hungry."

He didn't move. She came back to him.

"What is it?"

"Mistress," Briefly, he looked uncertain. "I-I don't think it would be wise for you to go to the Blue Blossom."

"Why not?"

That was the wrong thing to say. Now, she was curious. *Damn it, I should have suggested some other place, distracted her somehow.*

"Is it disreputable?"

"Well ... no."

"Do they drug the patrons' tea and rob them and toss their bodies over the city wall?"

"No, Mistress." The admission came with just a little irritation as he saw she was ridiculing his concern.

"Is there a back room filled with ladies from the West End trying to earn some extra spending money?"

She was laughing at him, believing he was being too protective.

"Of course not. The whores are confined to the West End only. An establishment that did otherwise wouldn't last long. One complaint to the Governor and the proprietor would find himself pushing a cart into the mines."

That stopped her for a moment.

"That sounds a little excessive but since you say the owner doesn't do that—"

"I-I really don't think His Excellency would want you to go there." It came out lamely. Briefly, Darius wondered just how much opposition his programming would allow him to give Rebeka, and if she insisted on going to the diner, if he was permitted to pick her up and carry her bodily away from it.

"Then His Excellency should have told me so himself." She looked up at him, suspicion on her pretty face. "What's wrong with the place, Darius? What's the real reason you don't want me to go there?"

He hesitated just a moment too long.

"I thought so. You don't have a reason. Very well!" Rebeka nodded. "Come, Darius."

She whirled, making a forward gesture with one hand. "To the Blue Blossom."

Telling himself he would probably regret not following his instincts by carrying the Governor's lady back to the palace, Darius followed her.

* * * *

Rebeka could see nothing out of place in the little dining hall. It was small, cozy, and she supposed that, at night, with candles on the tables instead of the overhead lights blazing, it would be fairly romantic.

The entrance looked the same as the other buildings. a large glass window with flowers and birds etched into each corner, in this case, large blue flowers, and the name *The Blue Blossom* set directly in the centre in elaborate, swirling script. There was a doorman who bowed as they entered, although he did raise an eyebrow at the package-laden android, and smile slightly, his expression changing back to a stolid stare as Darius scowled at him.

Once inside, Rebeka paused in the little alcove, peering into the dining room itself.

There were about fifteen small tables, each one large enough for only four people. Several had customers sitting at them, eating and talking and enjoying their noonday meal.

The walls were decorated with murals in bright flat colours depicting Tusteyan myths. Rebeka looked up at them, mouth slightly open.

"This is one of the few places that wasn't destroyed in the attack," Darius said softly, as if he didn't want anyone else to hear. "Only a few of the murals were damaged."

He nodded to the one on the ceiling, showing a winged man with flowing blond hair who was flinging an armful of flowers into the air. Elea, the messenger of the gods, the flowers representing divine words being tossed to the mortals below him.

"That one, for example—it's a restoration. The entire roof was gone."

Rebeka looked up. "Why Darius, he looks like you."

She would swear the android flushed slightly.

"Don't think of me as a messenger of the gods, Rebeka. I'm nothing of the sort." He looked a little angry. "Philip's father found several artisans who survived the attack and commissioned them to help with the rebuilding."

"I hope they were well rewarded for their work. That painting is truly beautiful."

"Oh, they were rewarded all right." Again, Darius's voice was heavy with irony. "They were sent to the mines as soon as they finished here."

She turned to stare at him in concern.

"Tusteya needed miners more than it needed artists, he said."

"B-but there are artists here. The palace is full of statues and paintings, and the marketplace—"

"Yes," Darius agreed. "But that's Philip's work, and Alexander's. It seems the Scot is a dilettante, and once he

became the power behind the throne, he attempted to give the Arts and their makers more freedom."

"You don't like Lex much, do you, Darius? You always call him by his real name—Alexander. Why?"

"There was a famous ruler in Terra's Ancient Times, Rebeka—*Alexander the Great*. He conquered all the known world by the time he was thirty. When Ensign McIntyre began speaking for the Governor in his last days, I thought of that other Alexander, and wondered if he would try to seize the governorship for himself. Quite frankly, it surprised me that he didn't. I think Alexander McIntyre is a would-be dictator himself and only his loyalty to Philip's father kept him from taking over when the Lieutenant died. The fact that he's extremely fond of Philip probably helped, too. I'll admit he's done a good job of guiding the boy, but in some areas, such as that business with you a few days ago..." He hesitated slightly then went on quickly as Rebeka avoided his gaze. "He's done more damage than good. Philip is almost a recluse in his own home, isolated, introverted. The only time he seems to come to life is when he's not in Alexander's presence, and until you came along, the only time that happened was when he went to the West End."

He sighed.

"You've already done a lot towards changing that, Rebeka, and for that I thank you. It's just a pity that ... now that he's found someone ... he has to die."

Rebeka looked startled. Briefly, she had forgotten why she was in Ulea. Darius' blunt statement brought home again what she was to do, and also her determination not to do it.

"Let's not talk about that right now. It'll spoil my appetite." Turning, she selected a table and sat down without waiting for the android to pull out her chair.

Setting the packages in another chair, Darius stationed himself behind her.

* * * *

It was still early in the day and there were few waiters on duty. For several minutes, Rebeka sat there—looking just a little annoyed at being ignored—before a small man in tradesman's robes, a white apron over it all, came hurrying over.

"My apologies, Mistress! I was busy in the kitchen and didn't realize you were here. How may I serve you?"

Smiling, Rebeka accepted his apology. "I'd like some tea, please, and a cup of soup."

"Ah! We have potato and carrot stew today."

"I-I don't recognise those name. What are..."

"They're Terran vegetables. The Earthmen brought the seeds with them. They grow very well here, and are very tasty. I gather the two are staples back on Terra." He paused, head cocked to one side inquisitively. "But how could you not know about potatoes and carrots if you live here in Ulea?"

"I-I haven't lived here very long."

"Wait. You're Eliusian, aren't you?" As she nodded, he went on, "It's been only a short time since the Armistice was announced. Well!"

He clapped his hands together as if delighted.

"You're our first Eliusian customer in thirty years. I'm looking forward to seeing more of your people in my little hall. I had many friends among the Elius. Did you come to shop or is your clan moving back to Ulea?"

"I-I'm doing some shopping today," Rebeka admitted, lowering her voice. "I already live here."

The proprietor leant forward to catch her words.

"I-I'm the Governor's wife, you see, and—"

She didn't get any further.

"You're Alcin's Spearman's daughter?" the man exclaimed. "Why, I knew your father well."

Rebeka relaxed. "Really?"

"My, yes! When he was Prime Counsellor, before the attack, he was a regular customer. Once a week regular as clockwork. Really liked my wheat bread soup."

Rebeka smiled. How many times had she heard Alcin complaining about the stews they had to eat, made from wild rabbits and roots dug out of the hard, red clay? He would tell her about eating wheat bread soup in a little dining hall in Ulea, and how he wished he had some at that moment.

"Yes," she said. "I remember him speaking about that."

"How is your father? Will he be coming back into the city do you think, now that there's peace?"

"I suppose so. Eventually." A wave of sudden homesickness flowed over her, disappearing as the diner owner seized her hand and bowed over it.

"Mistress."

"Rebeka," she corrected.

"Mistress Rebeka, you have honoured me by coming here. I'll see to your lunch myself." Releasing her hand, he turned and ran to the door connecting the dining room with the kitchen.

* * * *

The soup was delicious, though she thought the bright orange disks amusing.

"Those are the carrots," Darius explained.

"I like the potatoes," she commented, chewing contently. "They taste a little like water-pine roots."

"As Master Leonus said—"

"You know his name?"

"Apparently, since I just used it. As Master Leonus said, they're a staple, and can be prepared many ways. I'm surprised you haven't been served them at the palace yet."

"Perhaps Philip gave orders that I was to be served Ulean dishes until I become accustomed to the richer foods here. We don't eat quite so lavishly in my village, you know." She spooned another mouthful of soup, chewed and swallowed, closing her eyes a moment. "The tea's good, too."

As she picked up her cup, there was the sound of music at the door behind her. Looking around, Miranda saw a young man dressed in brightly-coloured robes, standing in the alcove.

"Oh, God, it's Steven." Darius muttered.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, Mistress. He's the entertainer here. I had hoped he wouldn't be playing today! He..." Darius stopped so suddenly she was startled.

Rebeka looked back at the young man.

He was holding a stringed instrument and strumming it lightly, leaning forward to listen to the vibration of the chords, blond hair braided into troubadour locks falling over his face.

Once it was tuned to his satisfaction, he began to play a soft Ulean ballad, as he strolled around the room to the few tables where the other diners sat.

"Isn't that beautiful?" Rebeka murmured. "And so unusual, having a minstrel entertain the guests. I don't suppose there are many wandering minstrels in the city now, are there?"

"Not anymore." Darius muttered. "And there should be one less."

His answer was so vehement Rebeka frowned at him but she was so enchanted by the beauty of the minstrel's singing she didn't ask why he disliked Steven so.

The young man continued to circle the room, pausing at a table to play part of a song, singing sometimes. He had a clear, mellow baritone that Rebeka was startled to realise reminded her a little of the way Philip had sounded as they sang the round on the way to the mine.

At last, he made his way to her table.

Smiling, he sang and played an entire song.

Rebeka was completely enthralled. When he finished, and stood there just a moment longer, looking down at her with a smile, she wondered if she was supposed to pay him for his performance.

Smiling back at him, she held out one hand, whispering to the android, "Darius, give me something for—uh ... Steven, is it?"

He bowed, acknowledging his name, but said, as he straightened, "I couldn't take pay from someone so beautiful, Mistress. It's been an honour to sing for the Governor's Lady."

"You know who I am?" Now that he was so close, she realized he looked very familiar, and she frowned slightly. "Master Leonus didn't."

"Master Leonus keeps himself in the kitchen too much." He laughed, tossing back a braid that had fallen over one eye. It immediately slid back into place. He reached up and brushed it away with one hand. "I, on the other hand, ply my trade from one end of the city to the other, and I was one of the first to see the Elius' caravan which brought you here, four weeks ago."

His eyes, green as pieces of emerald, twinkled slightly, and Rebeka was struck again with the feeling that she had seen Steven before.

"So, you see, my Lady, you've honoured me twice."

Then, he turned and started another circuit of the room, never once repeating the same song.

Rebeka looked after him thoughtfully.

"Mistress," Darius grimaced at the anxious tone in his voice. He coughed, and went on, more quietly, "If you're finished, we should go."

"Shh!" She waved him away. "I want to hear that song Steven's singing."

Listening intently, she sat there until the song was finished. Once it was done, Steven walked to the centre of the little dance floor, and bowed, and the other patrons tossed coins to him. Setting his instrument against the counter of the little bar, he picked up the coins, then walked back to stand there and count them into his purse.

Not liking the way she was watching the minstrel, Darius was gathering up the parcels, urging Rebeka to leave. "It's past noon now, Mistress. If we've got so much more to buy—"

"Yes, of course." She got to her feet, looked from him to the minstrel. "Wait for me, Darius. I'll be right back."

Before the android could protest, she was walking across the dance floor to where Steven stood.

The minstrel turned as she approached, his smile delighted but slightly inquiring. As Rebeka spoke to him, however, his expression changed to one of total surprise. He shook his head but after they talked for several minutes, he took a piece of chalk from the menu board on the wall and scribbled something at the bottom of the board, nodded to her, and bowed again.

Rebeka returned to Darius.

"Rebeka. what did you say to him?"

"Nothing to worry you."

"Rebeka, *what did you say to him?*" he repeated sternly, like a father confronting a fibbing child.

"I simply wanted to thank him again for singing such a beautiful song," she answered, and hurried through the doorway, nodding to the doorman who bowed as she walked

Earthman's Bride
by Icy Snow Blackstone

past. "Come on. As you said, we should hurry. The afternoon will soon be gone."

Feeling that no good would come of his Lady speaking with the minstrel, Darius reluctantly followed her.

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Chapter 16

Opening the parcels, Rebeka placed the dresses she had bought upon the bed, spreading the full skirts so they lay like brightly-coloured fans upon the gold counterpane. Between one garment and the next, she had strewn the jewellery—necklaces, earrings and bracelets—and spider's-silk stockings and wispy bits of underwear she couldn't resist.

Then, she stepped back and just stood there, looking over her treasures with a deep sigh.

On a nearby chest, the perfumes in their glittering glass bottles and the scented soaps she had purchased were arranged in rows.

Oh, it's wonderful! She had pretty, new clothes, they were going to have a party where she could wear them, and she would meet the other women who lived in the palace and make some new friends.

Laughing to herself, she began to dance around the room, spinning and turning, as she raised her arms as if holding an imaginary partner. Could Philip dance? He'd said he didn't, but he might just be too shy ... it was still difficult to think of the Governor as being *shy*. Well, if he didn't dance, she'd teach him.

Tonight.

The thought of Philip whirling her around the bed chamber as she taught him the steps of a waltz made her smile.

Stopping, she ran back to the bed, reaching out to hover over the dresses indecisively. *Which one to choose? The*

green one? The blue? The shopkeeper had said that one matched her eyes. They were all so beautiful. Perhaps she should ask Philip to pick one for her. She wanted him to approve of what she wore.

The door opened, footsteps crossed the sitting-room, and the subject of her thoughts came in.

"I heard you were back, and had bought out half of the marketplace, according to Darius."

"Darius exaggerates. It was only a *quarter* of the marketplace."

He looked at the open, empty boxes piled around the foot of the bed and the mounds of crumpled parcel paper in front of the fireplace, waiting to be burnt.

"Well, it certainly looks like *half*. Guess I'm going to have to raise taxes to replace the small fortune you spent today."

"Oh, Philip, you don't mean that." She missed the teasing note in his voice. "I didn't really spend so much."

"No, of course, I don't mean it," he denied. "I'd have to have a better reason than my wife's spending habits for raising taxes before the end of the year."

"What happens at the end of the year?"

"The taxes automatically go up ten percent."

Rebeka was outraged. "Whose idea was that?"

"Blame my father and Uncle Lex for that one," came the answer, just as she expected. "I've always been of the opinion tax money should be spent on the city itself, not simply hoarded in the palace treasury, but—since it's made of fifty percent *angelica*—they decided it would be an extra

bonus for the Federation, to melt down and extract the metal. So far, I haven't been able to get my uncle to agree with me."

"But you're the governor, surely you can over-rule Lex."

"Uh ... that's a very technical point, Rebeka." He looked just a little embarrassed—and also angry—as if he'd thought the same thing more often than he wished to admit. "I'm the governor, yes. But on Terra, a man isn't considered an adult until he's twenty-one, and, in case you didn't know, I'm presently only twenty. Since the palace is considered to be a part of Terra now, we abide by Terran rules, so any law I wish to make has to have Uncle Lex's approval as Governor-Regent."

"So you really haven't been responsible for the way the Uleans are being treated?" There was a sudden trembling inside her as she realized Philip wasn't accountable for the curfews, taxes, and other ill treatment the Uleans had received, that her father wished the death of the wrong man.

"I bolstered my ego by letting you think I did. *The fearsome and mighty Governor*. But the truth is, these five years, I've been simply a figurehead, and a mouthpiece for my Uncle Lex's pronouncements."

"What about your closing the mine?" A sudden fear wavered through her. Would Philip's decision be obeyed?

"I expect to get a bit of back-talk about that. A lot, actually. Since I did that on my own—sneaked it out, in fact—haven't even mentioned it to him." He looked proud of his subterfuge. "I'm going to announce it at your ball, probably startle quite a few people but frankly, I don't care. I'll be

twenty-one in five months, and I don't see that I'll think any differently then from how I think now."

He waved one hand in a dismissing gesture.

"He can't override you, can he?" Abruptly, Rebeka was worried for the miners.

What if Alexander went over Philip's head, ordered the mines reopened, the men forced back to work? Having gotten a little taste of freedom, would they decide to rebel at his orders being nullified? What if they were killed, what if—

"He'd better not try." There was an odd threat in Philip's voice.

"But what if he does?"

"I'm one of the Second Generation, Rebeka, and most of us are just waiting for an excuse to rebel against our elders." She could have sworn there was anticipation in his voice, as if he were looking forward to the day they found it.

He changed the subject.

"Now, about this ball. Uncle Lex attended quite a few receptions and things while he was at the Academy, and he tells me there's more to it than just inviting a group of people in to meet you ... I also have to feed and entertain them. This is getting complicated."

"I'll speak to the kitchen help," she offered. "After all, as your wife, I should be doing most of the arranging, anyway."

"No, Lex has already done that, except the entertainment. He hasn't decided exactly what to do about that, yet." He looked just a little chagrined. "He's treating this whole thing as some kind of ridiculous idea. *Humour the boy and give him his party.*"

For just a moment, he sounded bitter.

"Oh, he doesn't have to worry," she said. "I took care of that myself. Today."

He gave her an indulgent smile. She was going to have to tell him to stop that. He treated her as if she was a child, and it was ridiculous and annoying since he was only three years older than she.

"And how did you manage that?"

"While I was out shopping, I had lunch at the Blue Blossom dining hall—"

"Wait a minute! You went to the Blue Blossom? That wasn't such a good idea!"

"That's what Darius said, but I still can't see why. It's a very nice place." She shrugged away Philip's protest.

"Anyway, there was the most talented young man singing there. His name is—"

"—Steven." Philip interrupted. "Steven Tamsin—God, Rebeka, please don't tell me you hired *him*."

"Do you know him?"

"More than I'd like to. He's my brother!"

She didn't know which was more surprising, his words or the look of utter hatred on his face.

"I don't understand. Your mother died when you were three days old. How can he be your brother?"

Nevertheless, she knew that it was true. It was the reason Steven had looked so disturbingly familiar. He resembled Philip. The blond hair, the green eyes, even their voices were similar.

"My father didn't become celibate just because his wife ran away, Rebeka. Steven is my half-brother, and I will not have that bastard set foot inside these walls."

Rebeka blinked at the anger in his words. "Why not? Surely, if he's your brother—"

Philip sighed, speaking the words as if he'd said them many times before. "The last time Steven and I were together, we swore that if we ever met again, we'd kill each other. As far as I'm concerned, that threat still stands, and I don't intend to let this so-called social function turn into a blood bath."

Studying the shock on Rebeka's face, he went on in a determined and furious tone, "As a matter of fact, it might be better if we don't have it at all. Considering the danger to me—from Steven and possibly all the Uleans who'll be in attendance—I'm beginning to think this whole thing is a very bad idea."

"Philip, you can't!"

That was the wrong thing to say.

"Yes, I can! And I will." He took a step closer to her, shaking a finger at her as if she had been disobedient somehow. "I've tried to ignore your tendency to snoop, my dear little wife, putting that pretty little nose of yours into all the places it doesn't belong ... like badgering me to close the mine."

"I didn't badger—"

"That idiotic drivel about a woman being able to work alongside a man."

"It's true! You just don't want to adm—"

"I've made excuses for you to Lex when he complained, tried to be tolerant because you're young and because your world has been turned around so in recent days. I even accepted your suggestions about the mine because I thought they had merit, but this time, you've meddled a little too much, Rebeka! It wasn't your place to hire anyone."

Philip's voice was rising in anger. He seemed to become more furious as he talked. "From now on, you won't make a decision without discussing it with me first, and until further notice you can consider yourself confined to our suite."

Shocked into silence, Rebeka stared at him.

"As of now!" He turned towards the door. "I have to get back to the office. I've wasted enough time away from it, as it is."

Before she could recover enough to say anything, he stalked out, heels making an angry rapping on the floor.

As the outer door slammed shut, Rebeka walked slowly into the sitting-room, throwing herself onto the couch, face in her hands.

How had it gone so wrong? One minute, they were so happy and now, he was angry, so angry!

The door opened.

"Rebeka, what happened?" It was Darius, concern in his voice. "Philip stormed out of here like a bat out of Hell."

"Oh, Darius..." Shaking her head, she raised a stricken face to his. In a moment, he was around the couch and by her side.

"Sweetheart, what's the matter?" Neither of them seemed to notice that little endearment. All Rebeka could think was that Darius would make everything all right again.

He always does. Somehow.

Taking a deep breath, she told the android what had happened.

"...and now, he's angry with me. Darius, I didn't mean it. I just wanted everything to be perfect. I didn't know who Steven was." She looked up at the android. "But *you* knew, didn't you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was hoping it wouldn't matter. That their long-standing hatred might have mellowed now that they're both adults. It appears I was wrong."

"Yes, you were wrong, and I'm the one who's suffering for it." Strangely, Darius didn't answer, as if he didn't resent her accusation.

Putting his arms around her, he sat down on the couch.

Rebeka leant against him. Pressing her face against his shoulder, she began to sob very quietly.

"Shhh." Gently, he began to stroke the dark curls. "Don't cry."

"Oh, Darius," Her voice was muffled against the fabric of his tunic. His touch was so soothing, so comforting. "What if I've lost him because of my stupidity?"

"If you've lost him, it doesn't matter." The hand touching her hair slowed its movement. It slid to her shoulder, warm against her skin, and began to touch the back of her neck in slow, gentle circles. "You still have me."

"I know—and you can't imagine how that comforts me, but—"

"I want to do more than comfort you, Rebeka."

"What does that m—" Rebeka raised her head, staring at him uncertainly.

"Shhh." Gently, he brushed the hair back from her face, one fingertip stroked down her cheek, across her lips, stopping her question.

He kissed her.

For just a moment, Rebeka didn't move, simply sat there, motionless in his embrace.

He pulled away long enough to whisper, "I love you, Rebeka," then began to kiss her forehead, cheeks, throat.

Rebeka didn't answer. Couldn't. Coming so quickly after Philip's accusation, she felt too dazed to believe what was happening. It was only when he slid her gown off one shoulder and pressed his lips to her breast that she came out of the haze which had wrapped itself about her.

"Darius, no! W-what are you doing?"

He raised his head. "Showing you how much I love you, Rebeka."

"No!" Putting her hands on his shoulders, she pushed him away, sliding off the couch to stumble out of reach.

He didn't move, just sat there, the blue eyes stunned. "For God's sake, don't reject me now." The words were whispered. "*I love you!*"

"You can't love me, you're a—"

"A robot? An animated piece of metal who has no true emotions?" She'd never seen such an expression on his face. Anger, desire...

...betrayal...

Sliding from the couch, he landed on his knees before her, reaching for her hands.

"Master Martin *lied*, Rebeka. I have emotions. Too many of them. And they're killing me!"

She shook her head, just stood there staring at him, biting her lip as his grip tightened.

You could kill someone with those hands. She'd said that to him the day they met.

"And I've reached my limit of trying to stifle them. I love you, Rebeka. And I need to show you how much."

"Darius, you don't know what you're saying."

"I know exactly what I'm saying. I've wanted to say it for a long time. I was forced to stand there and let you touch me ... do you know how much it hurt me when I finally reacted? And that day you asked me if Philip would want you ... God, Rebeka ... your body is so beautiful." Darius blinked, his cheek gleaming damply.

Oh gods, are those tears? She couldn't believe it. Didn't want to.

"I watched you marry him ... saw him carry you into his bedroom. Can you imagine how it's tearing me inside to know what he does to you at night ... to know ... If you've lost him, it doesn't matter. Let me love you, Rebeka." He still hadn't raised his voice, continued to speak in that strange whisper,

but the most frightening thing of all was that he didn't appear threatening as he looked up at her.

If anything, he was *begging*.

"I can't." Even as she said the words, she realized with a rush of emotion that confused her that she wanted to tell Darius to take her in his arms, to hold her and love her and make her forget Philip and what she'd come here to do.

Instead, she pulled her hands from his grasp and backed away so he couldn't touch her. "Even if I've lost Philip forever, I have to be faithful to him. I love him, Darius. I'm sorry."

And she was ... truly, truly sorry, that she had to hurt him so.

"Then I've made a fool of myself, haven't I?" He took a deep breath, let it out, closed his eyes briefly. "Very well, if that's the way it has to be."

He got to his feet, and began to unbutton his tunic. She could see that underneath it he wasn't wearing a shirt as the other guards did. His synthetic skin gleamed golden against the dark fabric.

"What are you going to do?"

With Darius standing where he was, she knew she'd never reach the door. He'd be on her before she could take two steps. Bram and Timon had gone with Philip. Even if she screamed, no one would hear.

"If I can't have you, Rebeka, I don't want to go on feeling." He had the tunic open now. "I refuse to suffer this way any longer!"

In spite of her fear, the anguish in his voice made Rebeka pity him. She forced herself to stand still.

Pulling the tunic away from his chest, he touched just under his left arm. There was a small brown discoloration like a little mole, a tiny, round pressure pad.

She'd never noticed it before. That day in Master Martin's office ... why hadn't she been aware of it?

As Darius brushed his fingers over it, a flesh-coloured flange flew up, revealing a small slot in his side.

A little disk ejected and Darius pulled it from the slot, pressing the flange closed again. Once more, only the button, like a blemish, was visible.

"I have just enough residual emotion left to tell you this, Rebeka." Though his voice was calm, he spoke quickly, as if he couldn't catch his breath. "I've loved you from the moment I opened my eyes and saw you in the garden, but I won't accept the pain that comes from a love which has been rejected."

Smiling slightly, he looked down at the little disk. Held between his thumb and forefinger, it appeared very small.

"Man is not the sum of what he has but the totality of what he does not have, of what he might have ... I'll never have what I want ... so I choose never to have anything, never to feel this way again."

Turning, he tossed the disk into the fire.

"No!" Seizing a poker, Rebeka attempted to rake the disk from the flames. Already the edges were beginning to melt and twist. She struck at it, trying to drag it onto the hearth.

Darius pulled her away from the fire. He took the poker from her hand, tossed it onto the hearth, and then he kissed her.

She knew the moment his emotions were depleted, felt him die...

The creature holding her removed his cold lips from hers, released her, and stepped back.

"My apologies, Mistress. That was unseemly behaviour." The voice was a monotone. "Please forgive me."

"O-of course." She wanted to ask if he was all right, forced herself not to say the words. There wouldn't be an answer. Not now.

"I'll return to my post." The android closed its tunic, straightened it, and gave a stiff little bow.

He seemed to glide rather than walk to the door, opened it and went out.

It shut with a sound that was as loud as a thunder crash in the shocked stillness of the chamber.

For several seconds, Rebeka stood there, staring at the door. Slowly, she sat down on the couch, hands clasped together, staring at the fire and the blackened lump of molten plasticon that had been Darius' love.

* * * *

The door opened and closed. Rebeka didn't move.

Not seeing her distress, Philip took a step into the chamber and burst into a continuation of his previous anger.

"Damn it, Rebeka! I haven't done anything wrong, so why the Hell do I feel as if I should apologise?"

She didn't answer.

"It's bad enough I'm still confused about the way I feel about you, and until I get my emotions sorted out, I'd really

appreciate it if you'd behave yourself! Lex is going to see my decision about the mine as a challenge and I don't need a meddling wife getting in the way."

She continued to stare into the fire.

"I've decided to go ahead with the party, by the way." Still talking, Philip took another step. "I gave it some more thought and I believe it's a good thing, getting acquainted with the Uleans. I should have done that long ago, but it's not too late."

When she still didn't reply, he came around the couch, and stopped in front of her.

"Rebeka, did you hear me? I said..." Then, he saw her face. "What's the matter? You look as if you just lost your best friend."

"I think I have." She didn't look at him. "Philip, I've killed Darius!"

He looked shocked, glanced at the door and back at her.

"No you haven't. He's at his post."

"No, he's not." Blinking, she turned from her contemplation of the fire. "Darius is dead. I killed him!"

"Rebeka, what are you talking about? Darius is standing outside with Timon, very much alive."

"That isn't Darius. That's a-a piece of metal with no heart and no feelings." Looking up at Philip, she allowed the tears gathering in her eyes to trickle down her cheeks. "Darius is *gone*, Philip."

"Tell me what you're talking about." He sat down beside her, taking her hands. "You're not making sense."

"I was upset after you left," she explained. "Darius tried to comfort me, and then ... h-he told me he loved me!"

She broke off, turning her head, eyes closed.

"He kissed me."

"My God, he didn't harm you?" Very aware of the android's physical capabilities, Philip was startled into sudden fear.

She shook her head. "I rejected him, Philip, told him I loved you, and even if you never wanted me again, I'd still be faithful, and he ... Oh, Philip, he destroyed himself!"

"I don't understand." Philip looked puzzled. "How could he destroy himself? He's still here."

"He took out that little disk containing his emotion program."

"His empath chip?" *Oh God, if Darius destroyed the chip...!*

"I didn't know he had that, I swear. Master Martin told me he didn't have any emotions, that he couldn't feel, and any reactions he displayed were just simulated for my benefit. I believed him ... and now..." Taking a deep breath, she wiped at her eyes with shaky fingers. "He destroyed his empath chip. Threw it into the fire."

"That's ridiculous!" Philip refused to believe it. "Darius would never do that!"

Silently, she opened her right hand, holding it out to him. On her palm lay a twisted, misshaped lump.

"My God!"

"Is there any way it can be salvaged? Can it be repaired?"

He shook his head. "If we were back on Terra, perhaps—but here we don't have the knowledge to do that. Darius'

maker is the most brilliant roboticist in the Federation. None of our people have the technology to do what he did."

He touched the lump gently.

"Darius was so proud of that little piece of plasticon. He once told me it contained his soul. Father said he was as close to being human as any android could be, and now—"

"And now," Rebeka finished for him. "Because I refused to love him, he's gone."

"Rebeka, I'm sorry."

"I'm going to miss him, Philip."

"I'm going to miss him just as much as you are," Philip said softly. "After all, he was my best friend and teacher for the first fifteen years of my life."

He put his arms around her and they sat there, letting the silence of the room close around them.

After several minutes, Philip spoke up.

"It's not like he's really dead, you know. He's still here. He's just changed and, well ... isn't that better than not having him at all?"

"I-I guess it is." She sounded unconvinced. "But it's going to be hard, seeing his body walking around, but knowing Darius isn't really there. Expecting him to laugh or make some sarcastic remark, and if he does, realizing it truly *is* a simulation! It's going to be so sad, Philip."

"Rebeka, let's go outside." Standing, he pulled her to her feet. "The torches have been lit, and I'd like you to walk in the garden with me. I-It may sound callous, but we've so much to talk about ... the ball ... and everything."

"Philip, I don't..."

It did sound callous—and totally unfeeling—for him to expect her to think about the festivities, of an occasion which was supposed to be so joyous and reunite Philip with his Tusteyan family, while the guilt over Darius and the void left in her heart was still fresh.

Then, she understood. Philip was trying to distract her ... and himself.

It's not like he's dead. We can't really mourn. Perhaps it's best to go on. After all, no one else need ever know ... With that thought came another, more hopeful one. *Darius is the only other who knew what I came here to do. Perhaps that memory was lost along with his emotions. Perhaps now I won't have to worry about killing Philip...*

Wanting to escape the bed chamber and the memories it would hold for days to come, Rebeka walked with her husband onto the terrace.

Holding tightly to Philip's hand, she allowed him to lead her into the garden.

* * * *

They say when one door closes, another opens. Marrying Philip opened one door in my life. Losing Darius closed another. I will never forgive myself for hurting him so that he chose to become an unfeeling machine rather than suffer, but what I told the android was true: I will love my husband forever, though it cost me my best friend. I made my choice and I will always believe I made the right one ... Do I dare hope that the threat to my darling is also gone?

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About Icy Snow Blackstone

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The original Icy Snow Blackstone was born in 1802. Two hundred and five years later, her great-great-great-great-granddaughter began using her name as a pseudonym for her romance novels. A voracious reader since the age of six, the present Icy Snow loves speculative fiction and horror, and has a 500-book library which continues to grow. Her writing reflects these interests, as well as weaving in her other vocations of dancer, school teacher, and medical assistant into her tales. Because she is also an avid fan of Poe, Alfred Hitchcock, and Neil Gaiman, many of her stories contain a twist which makes them deviate from the expected into bizarre and sometimes comical climaxes. A graduate from a well-known Southern University, of all her occupations, she likes writing best of all. Currently, she has three novels under contract with Lyrical Press, one of which—*Earthman's Bride*—was the recipient of the 2008 Maryland Romance Writers Reveal Your Inner Vixen Award for Speculative/Other Fiction. Under the name "Toni V. Sweeney," she has books listed on amazon.com, and writes horror novels as "Tony-Paul de Vissage." More about Icy Snow may be found at www.tonivsweeney.com.

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