



# My Loving Enemy

By

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Dedication:

Thank you to my dear friend and critique partner, Kathy, for telling to never give up writing, and to my loving husband and son who believed in me and gave me the time to write.

## Chapter One

*"Sarrah ... Sarrah, can you hear me?"*

*"We're losing her ...."*

Every cell in Sarrah Malone's body screamed with pain worthy of an axe-murder victim. Burning sensations sizzled down the nerves in her neck and through her back as she lay pressed against something hard, uneven, and too cold. She could barely breathe and didn't dare try to move. Even her damn hair hurt.

The research team's calculations had been wrong. The experiment on dimensional transfer hadn't occurred as predicted. No one had listened when she'd found the hostile variable. They'd all been too excited about the success of the project being ahead of schedule, too busy writing acceptance speeches and planning press conferences to promote the new method of transit.

Her mind drifted, and darkness threatened to close in. Sarrah fought for clarity. Again, the grim memory snaked into her conscious...screams, fire licking up to the ceiling....

*Alarms blared.*

*The research team scrambled to their stations.*

*"Power's surging through the conductors."*

Sarrah blinked to focus in the semidarkness. Tears left wet tracks from her eyes down the sides of her face. How long had she lain here in silence? One hour? Two? Her stiff body ached like she hadn't moved in days.

The media would have a field day with these unexpected results from the experiment. Headlines all over the known system in two dimensions would broadcast the team's blunder. They'd lose their work contract. Private funding would be rescinded. Rabid reporters hungry for a top byline would ignore what was best for law-abiding citizens. The disaster would provide more fuel to the rebel group's demand to revoke sending criminal lifers on a one-way journey to hell.

Gathering courage, Sarrah inched her head up and frowned. Several of her colleagues appeared in the room around her, their bodies transparent. They stared wide-eyed and fearful, their faces pinched with concern, their white lab coats covered in burn marks and crimson splotches. Their mouths moved. Disconnected sounds echoed. Sarrah couldn't understand their words or why they reached toward her then backed away terrified. Her heart slammed against her breast, the pain stabbing into her awareness.

"Help." Her whisper cracked, and she labored to breathe. They had to hear her. She lifted a hand to the nearest man and dizziness spun her, churning her empty stomach. "Someone, please...."

*"Containment levels are spiking. Shut it down now, or the new transfer unit will overload!"*

*"Protective shields are deteriorating."*

The ghostly images wavered, faded, leaving nothing except dank, musty air.

"No, wait ...." Sarrah groaned and dropped her head back to the floor, staring up at a damaged fluorescent tube light that would never shine again.

*"Evacuate."*

Sarrah turned, but an explosion hurled her to the floor.

She blinked. "Caroline?"

No monitors beeped. No computers hummed.

"Henry?"

No updated reading flashed on the main system screen every thirty seconds. No interns rushed to do the project head's bidding. Where was everyone?

"Dr. Louin?" Suspicion nibbled at the corner of her mind. "Is anyone here?"

Rising panic threatened to strangle her. Slowly her mind processed the information. She forced down the thick knot in her throat and blinked back welling tears. "Oh, god, no...."

She couldn't be the only one left. Her team--the people she'd known and worked with for years, sharing ribald jokes, birthdays, the pictures from last week's vacation--were all gone. Closing her eyes a moment, she thought she heard Caroline's faint laugh. But quiet overrode the unearthly sound.

Sarrah ignored the pain of loss squeezing her heart and inhaled deeply. Main backup power had failed. The elevator would be useless, programmed to lock down in emergencies to maintain control and restrain any aggressive elements. She was trapped two stories underground with no electricity.

Carefully she turned her head toward the only light source. A single, dim, yellowish shard stole in through a small recessed shaft up near the ceiling that allowed ventilation into the room, lending an eerie ambiance. Dust motes skied along the slender ray to the floor. A glow, she knew, from the vintage WW-III street lamp outside that she passed to and from the government building where she worked. Only for a few minutes each day with the sun just past its zenith, light reflected through the lamp and bounced downward to her level through the long aluminum shaft.

But that couldn't be right. This room only looked like her lab. It was a bad dream, and she'd wake up soon. She had to. The alternative was unthinkable.

She rolled to her side, shuddering at the extreme possibility of what might have occurred. The muscles in her arms cramped when she pushed up to stand. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her hands gripped the back of a chair for support, slipping on patches of greenish slime. Everywhere, failure pressed in, and destruction mocked her. Dr. Louin shouldn't have accepted the less than perfect prediction. She should've insisted he listen to her findings. The team's enthusiasm had made them careless.

Her gaze wandered further. Tarnish covered metal tables and tall filing cabinets. Streaks of rust stained the lab equipment. Cabinet doors displayed shattered, jagged glass panes. Once in neat rows where Henry had always diligently maintained them, broken bottles and beakers now sat on the storage shelves.

How was this possible? Had the variable she'd found caused an accident? Though this looked like the room where she'd worked for five years, past experiences with dimensional travel had taught her things weren't always as they seemed.

Gritting her teeth then biting her bottom lip to keep it from quivering, she eased to sit at her computer and pressed the power button. She couldn't bury the knowledge that her discovery

might have prevented her team's downfall. If her research was intact, she could retrieve the figures and solve the problem.

The computer remained silent.

She leaned back, staring at the blank screen. All her findings were locked up, the evidence stuck on a hard drive of the inoperable machine.

What could she do without her research notes? Speculations without facts didn't fly with authorities. They'd never listen to her.

Sarrah dropped her head back against her chair and covered her face a moment with her hands. Exhaustion tugged at her eyelids. What had happened was just a prelude to a greater problem if another experiment was attempted. This disaster couldn't be allowed to be repeated. Somehow, she had to find the strength to continue, to understand for certain why the accident had occurred and tell someone. But from the evidence, she was afraid she was too late.

A noise outside the only door in the room roused her attention. Rusty metal creaked as the door jostled, trying to open.

The rescuers had found her!

Excitement shot adrenaline through her, and she tried to stand. Instead, a coughing fit seized her, forcing her to bend over her lap. When the heavy door swung wide, she glimpsed a flash of white, like the bottom of a long lab coat.

"Doctor...", she started in between spasms, pushing herself up so her saviors could more easily find her.

A dark-haired man stepped inside the room, and he was nothing like she expected. In mud-caked combat boots, he strode in as if he owned the world, stopping a moment in the single light shaft.

Blinking away tears, her eyes traveled up over jungle-print camo pants hugging his well-developed thighs and cradling an impressive bulge she tried to ignore, to his naked, flat, tight stomach. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, fighting to stifle her coughs. The man's extreme vitality reached out to her, and even fatigued, Sarrah's body tingled with excitement. Her eyes tracked up further over a sleeveless lab coat that had seen better days and gapped open, hanging over an old flack vest he'd hadn't bothered to close and that framed the most perfectly muscled chest with six-pack abs she'd ever seen.

\* \* \* \*

"Well, now. No one's called me that in a long time." Adam Templar watched Sleeping Beauty, as he'd dubbed her in his mind, struggle to stay upright amidst gasps that shook her voluptuous body. She had a strong spark of life still in her. It was good she fought to keep it. He crossed the room to a side table and, with a sweep of his hand, he cleared the dirt and old papers at one end to the floor. When he glanced back at her, the fact that she'd finally awakened eased the worry about her from his mind. He'd watched her for the past three weeks, and she'd finally come out of her limbo stasis.

"Sorry. I thought ...."

"Common mistake." He plopped a drab, green backpack on the table and unzipped the main pocket. "Forget it."

Concern about her health lingered with him. From her respiration, she didn't seem too bad off. Not like the other one he'd found after the dimensional rift closed. Poor guy never had a chance. Out of the corner of his vision to his right, Adam saw the woman slowly rise and hold

on to the desk for support. Her body trembled, weak from shock and extended immobility, and she was probably dehydrated.

"Where're the others?" She looked toward the door.

Adam unloaded his canteen and a medical pouch, placing them next to the pack on the table. "Other whats?"

"The rescuers? My research team?"

He hated being the bearer of bad news. She wasn't going to like the answer. But she had to know the truth. He took a deep breath and pulled a file folder from another pocket of the pack. "You're looking at him, sweetheart."

"But, there were five people in here with me." She took two steps and lost her balance, stumbling forward.

Adam moved quickly, barely catching her in his arms before her knees hit the floor. "Not when I got here."

As he straightened, their full body contact made his breath hitch, and he tensed. Sweat broke out on his forehead. The few seconds her breasts pressed against him and the heat seeping from between her legs touching his thighs was all it took to ignite a molten lust in his groin. He hadn't experienced such a strong urge in years, much less done something about it with someone instead of with his own hand.

The woman stared up at him like she'd never seen a man before. Or maybe it was the way his semi-hard cock fit so perfectly in the V between her thighs. *Down, boy.*

"Please," she broke the spell between them.

"You're okay now." Under the single, narrow ray of dim light that fell diagonally over her face he saw through the dirt and grime. She was younger than he'd originally thought. Young and eager, like another lab technician he'd once known. He eased her to a safe arms-length away and cleared his throat. "I really need to locate ...."

"I must let them know I'm here and find out what happened."

Better she found out now than later. "Cascade failure. Total melt down."

She blinked, still staring as if he'd sprouted another head which, given the strangeness of this dimension, was entirely possible. "I shouldn't be alive."

Helping her to stand, he guided her back to her chair and retrieved his canteen. "Do you have a name?" He squatted next to her and unscrewed the cap.

"S-Sarrah. Malone. I'm a research assistant." He nudged her bottom lip with the edge of the canteen. Her full lips puckered when she wrapped them around the opening and accepted the cool liquid.

His groin tightened, and he dragged his eyes from Sarrah's mouth, shoving away the mental image of that same mouth wrapped around his throbbing cock. "Well, Sarrah Malone, I'm Adam. I need you to sit quietly while I do some work."

She gripped his biceps with surprising strength for a post-stasis victim. "You're going to leave me here alone?"

At her sudden wide eyes and pitiful tone, a tiny smile pulled the corners of his mouth. He extricated himself and moved back to the table, opening the medical pouch. "I don't plan on it, unless you want me to."

"No," she answered too quickly, drawing his glance. She licked her lips and ventured a smile, renewing the rush of heat through his belly. "I--I mean, all my work is locked in this

computer. I need to find a way to restore power and get the information out.”

He could open the damn thing and take out the hard drive. But he sensed her independent determination and didn't think she'd appreciate how easily the fifteen second process would be to cut the wires and yank out the palm-sized device.

Again kneeling in front of her, he reached for her eyelid and pointed a penlight. “Hold still.”

She jerked back. “What's that?”

“It's okay.” He opened his hands, displaying the light and a temp-strip. “I'm just going to check your optical response and make sure your body temperature's normal.” Unlike his own.

Sarrah let him momentarily place the temp-strip on her forehead and check her optical response with the penlight, and he was relieved she tested almost normal. But when he reached into his pocket and drew out an adhesive slip with a tiny injector, she pulled away.

“It's just a few nanytes with antibiotics that will help your body repair itself faster.” He pulled out another slip, pulled a paper off one side and stuck it on his forearm. “See? It's a precaution to fight any possible infection and boost your energy.”

She stuck out her arm and pulled up her sleeve, wincing at the tiny sting when he applied the slip. “You didn't answer me about what happened to my team. Did everyone make it out okay? Where are they?”

Adam had hoped to forestall giving her any more information until she'd rested and was more emotionally stable. She was hungry for details, but he couldn't have her distracting him right now. “I'll answer whatever you want me to after I've finished.” He moved back to the table, replacing the items in the medical pouch and opening the file folder.

“Something bad happened, didn't it? I mean, other than the accident?” Her tone was pleading, almost desperate.

He turned to a filing cabinet that looked a hundred years old and leaned to one side. He couldn't lie and tell Sarrah what she wanted to hear. “Look, if you're going to stay here, at least be quiet so I can finish my work, okay?” The second drawer screeched as he tugged it open, making her flinch.

“Adam, how long exactly has it been since the accident?”

“You really don't want to get out of here, do you?”

“All I asked was ....”

“Do you know where there's a tool kit? I'll need a screwdriver and wire cutters.” She had mentioned needing her hard drive. If he gave her a job to do, it would distract her from her questions.

“Henry kept one in the bottom drawer of his desk. But I don't see ....”

“Get it, and go sit at your computer. I'll walk you through how to open it.”

“You can do that?”

“It's not rocket science, sweetheart. You just need to know what to do.”

Adam shuffled through the folders in the drawer, stopping to pull one out and flip through the pages. Satisfied, he closed it and placed it next to the original folder he'd brought and continued his search.

“What do I do now?” Sarrah's voice cut through his concentration.

He'd almost forgotten she'd woken up. In the past as he'd worked, she'd always been quiet, as if asleep. “First, unplug the cables from the back.”



She moved the keyboard aside and pulled the eight-inch square computer closer.

He added two more folders to his growing pile and wondered if she'd ever used one of the old-fashioned computers that were five times larger than the newer models. It didn't matter, though, how old her system was, just that they'd be able to extract what she needed.

"Done yet?" he asked, shutting the noisy drawer and replacing everything in his pack.

"The cords are disconnected. My computer's so small—can't I just take it with me?"

The hope in her voice reminded him of when he'd first arrived in this place and been too naive to realize the severity of the present situation. He could let her take the computer. But then it would be a race between them who'd figure out the correct answer first to the dimensional instability. If they took only her hard drive, it might not be compatible with his system, and she'd want to return for hers. Her delay would gain him the time he desperately needed. The means to have her running in circles for a solution would be easy to fabricate. He'd be able to conclude his own research and permanently close the dimensional portal.

But he sensed Sarrah was intelligent enough to figure out he didn't want her to succeed. She might even try to send a warning through the unstable dimensional rift back to Terra-Alpha. And she'd hate him if he managed to beat her to the solution and found she couldn't go home.

Adam hoisted his pack up on one shoulder and dragged another chair to sit beside her. Indecision gnawed at his conscience. "Let's see what's inside and how we can get it out, shall we?"

Sarrah scooted her seat over to make room so he could see.

He removed the top cover and one side. As he'd thought, her drive wasn't a compatible model. Should he damn her life to save potentially thousands more, or sacrifice the dregs of humanity that political injustice had sentenced to this dimension, just to save her?

"What do you think?" Her hand gently settled on his, sending an electric frisson up his arm and out to his extremities. Hope sparkled in her eyes.

Damn, he knew he'd regret his decision. "We'll take your computer, and I'll rig up a new power source."

"Thanks. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"I think I have a good guess." He screwed the top and side back on then walked around the room winding up several long cables into coils over one arm. "Find a bag or something to carry it in."

"Why?"

"It's the only way to get it out of here." She frowned at him in confusion, and he clarified, "The only way out is to climb the emergency ladder in the elevator shaft."

Working quickly, he at last had the additional cable length he needed for more power. Turning, he saw Sarrah watching him, a pack hanging from one hand. "I took the tools too."

He nodded and moved to the door. "Things are different up top from what you probably remember. Don't be surprised by anything, and stay alert."

"Okay." She stepped towards him, wobbling a little.

He reached out and grasped her elbow, steadying her. "You sure you can climb? It isn't such a long way up, but you've been in stasis."

She inhaled and squared her shoulders, her breasts thrusting up, making his mouth dry and his hands ache to fondle her nipples. "I'm ready when you are." A blush stained her cheeks.

He nodded again, averting his eyes from the tantalizing sight and switching his headband

light on so he could see as they exited the room. Down the hallway, he stopped at the open elevator shaft. Repositioning all but one coiled cable over his head and diagonally across his chest, he turned to Sarrah. "Hold your arms up so I can tie us together."

She did as he asked, and he looped the cord around her waist. "Afraid I'll get away from you?"

"Huh?" He looked up, broadsided by the sweetness in her smile as well as the teasing in her voice. Even covered in dirt, she radiated a rare inner beauty. His fingers fumbled, and he pulled the knot tighter, wishing instead he could pull her to him and taste the richness of her full lips. Damn, he had to get a grip. "In case you slip, I don't want you to fall down the shaft."

He tied the opposite end of the cord to his mesh pistol belt and helped her shift the pack from one shoulder to her back. "Okay, let's go. There's ten feet of cord between us, so don't step on the slack or get tangled in it. But don't get so far behind it pulls tight. Try and stay the same distance from me at all times until we reach the top. And don't look down."

She looked down the opening into the obsidian pit leading to the many sub-levels, pulled back, and shrugged. "It's too dark. I can't see anything down there."

He eased into the wide shaft, securing his footing on the nearest rung of the ladder. "Wait until I climb three steps, then get on."

Adam moved slowly, hearing Sarrah's small grunt of effort as she swung her body out over the black maw. One foot, then two.

"Okay, I'm on."

They'd climbed a dozen rungs, almost one floor, and she stayed with him as instructed, when he heard a sound. "Wait."

"What?"

"Quiet. I need to listen." He heard her respiration increase, could sense her mounting fear in the dark. "Hang on."

"Why--ahhhhh!"

Air rushed up from below, and shrieks loud enough to wake the dead preceded hundreds of flapping bodies.

He looked down at the same time Sarrah's foot slipped off the rung and she fell. "Sarrah!"

## Chapter Two

Adam grabbed the cord when she swung free. Several creatures nearly smacked into him as he held on to her dangling form. "They won't hurt you! Catch the ladder with your hands."

Panting hard, her eyes wide with fright, she obeyed and caught the ladder in a death grip.

He quickly climbed down and pulled her close, careful to keep her between him and the rungs. "It's okay," he uttered softly, stroking her back, lending her the unspoken comfort of his strength.

"Oh, Adam!" She clung to him, her hands twisted into small fists clenching the soiled white cloth of his lab coat, her face pressed to his sweaty, bare chest.

"The bats are on their way up for their nightly bug hunt. They won't bite you." Gradually her trembling subsided, and her hands relaxed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

He tipped her tear-streaked face up with a forefinger, noting the exotic green of her eyes for the first time, reflected in his headband light. "No reason you would know. I should've mentioned it, but I didn't realize how late it is. Are you ready to climb again?"

Her lips parted, but no words came out. She glanced back down and tears flowed again.

He had to distract her, keep her mind occupied so he could stay focused, and she'd be able to climb. "Why don't you tell me what happened before the accident. What do you remember?"

"I...we were checking our calculations, getting ready for the experiment."

"Go on. What happened next?"

She licked her lips and shifted her weight on the rung. "I reviewed my equations, because I kept thinking they were wrong since I was the only one to mention a problem I'd found."

"Tell me while we climb." Adam helped her face the ladder, urging her to climb ahead of him. "Then what?"

"I told the project head, Dr. Louin." She climbed up a rung. "He was so busy overseeing everything and answering questions from the select group of reporters we allowed in the room to view the experiment, I guess I lost my confidence."

"So you blew off the problem." He climbed behind her, keeping a steady pace.

"When he pointed out we'd already had twenty successful computer simulations in a row it didn't seem important."

They passed a large letter "B" on the wall next to a partially opened elevator door. Adam frowned. That level had been closed when he'd come down earlier. Who the hell had followed him? He listened briefly again then climbed another step. "Were there other tests?"

"Forty-two total."

The heavy twisted metal cables hanging in the shaft swayed gently. He shined the light up around Sarrah's body, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. "Wind must be kicking up. How did the other tests go?"

"Half were failures. It wasn't until Dr. Louin plugged in an extra set of equations that we got the results we needed. Something he did wasn't right. I just have no idea what it was." She stopped climbing and leaned in.

Adam moved up behind her. "You okay?"

"I'm getting tired."

He glanced up again. "It's not much further. Think you can make it?"

She glanced at him with a sweet smile that made his balls tighten. "I'll do whatever it takes to get out." She resumed her position in front of him, her ass wiggling past his face.

Holy shit. Their situation was precarious enough without any more distractions, but he admired her courage. Little by little they ascended, reaching an underground parking garage.

He pulled up and ahead of her. "Hang on a second. Let me check it out first," he whispered, hauling himself onto the cracked concrete floor then helping her out.

He shined his light around the area. Dilapidated hover-mobiles half filled the garage, rusting where they were last parked. Large potholes surrounded by razor-sharp concertina wire were left over most likely from last month's gang war he'd heard about.

A stone skipped across the ground to his left. Adam turned his light.

An old newspaper page tumbled in the breeze, and a long shadow quickly moved away.

"What is it?" Sarrah whispered behind him.

"Probably a rat." He hadn't realized she'd crept so close to him and a protectiveness surged inside. Reaching around, he untied the cable from them both and dropped it to the floor, then tucked her under his arm. "Grab my belt, and stay close. We're going to move fast."

She gazed up at him with such trust he couldn't resist tracing one side of her jaw with a forefinger then planting a quick kiss on her lips that jolted sparks through him. "Let's go."

After a few minutes of weaving around old junkers that were nothing more than crumpled piles of rusting metal, they reached the street as dusk descended on the city. He kept Sarrah close, zigzagging in and out of shadows, in between buildings. Keeping watch in all directions, he expected to be followed as usual. When he was sure they had company, they stopped in an alley to stand their ground.

He shoved Sarrah into a recessed doorway, pressing her against the side to keep her immobile and shielding her with his body.

"Wha...."

He clamped a hand over her mouth. "Quiet."

Ten feet away, footsteps echoed. By their solid heavy strides, he judged it to be five or six adult males.

Sarrah's heart hammered against his solar plexus, and her hair tickled his nose. Her body temperature rose as her hands clutched his lab coat.

Not good. He didn't need her passing out now. Go away, he thought to the intruders.

But their steps came closer.

\* \* \* \*

Sarrah could barely breathe under Adam's tight hold on her mouth. Sandwiched between him and the wall, she had a difficult time determining which pressed into her harder, the jagged bricks or his powerful body. Not since the day Henry had caught her in the hall and made his awkward but sweet advance had any man been so bold.

The footsteps grew louder.

Adam's muscles tensed, his concern almost tangible. Their lives were probably in danger. As capable as he seemed, she suspected he'd be able to keep them safe. Whatever he had in mind, she had to let him do it. Seconds ticked by as she waited for his plan to take shape. Her eyes wandered over his smooth chest, and her fingers itched to caress his bronzed skin and roam over his wide shoulders, which surprised her. The nanobots were already working their technological magic and making her better. She inhaled deeply of him. Instead of repulsing her, his natural scent of soap and man strangely teased her. He was such an exquisite specimen of masculinity. All she could do was stare at his chest and wait.

"That you, Templar?" a gravely voice asked.

Adam undulated his lower body against her, making her gasp behind his hand.

"I'm busy," Adam responded over his shoulder. "Beat it, Cooper."

Sarrah immediately discerned what he wanted the man to believe, and she silently forgave Adam for this bold intimacy. Wanting to help him, she wiggled her arms loose from between their bodies and snaked them up around his neck, then wrapped a leg around his left hip and thigh, making sure his coat pushed aside and her receptiveness was in full view.

He lifted one dark brow, searching her with his dark, chocolate brown eyes. She nodded, and he removed his hand from her mouth.

He winked at her. Then he threw his head back and grunted. "Get lost before I hurt you!"

Gravel ground into the concrete under several pairs of feet. One by one, she heard them stop moving.

"Why don'tcha share? I don't mind sloppy seconds," the man laughed, joined by several more howls.

At that moment, Adam's hardening cock touched the sweet spot between her thighs and she shuddered. Tension coiled inside, and her supporting leg grew weak. She didn't stop rocking her pelvis against him to keep up the act, but had no idea how to keep from being a dead weight around his neck.

As if sensing her dilemma, he eased a hand down to her butt and held her up against his body. His heat radiated into her where his erection rubbed her clit, spurring her towards an incredible precipice.

An unfamiliar click sounded next to his right hip.

"Whoa, man, I didn't mean nothing." Feet shuffled, presumably backing off. "No need to get violent."

"Like I said, Cooper," Adam grunted again for emphasis and continued rubbing against her. "Get lost."

Pleasurable sensations sizzled through her, and she clenched her hands in Adam's dark, shoulder-length hair. Burying her lips against his chest, she stifled the sounds of her pleasure so he wouldn't be distracted. To get away from these thugs, she had to see this charade through. She prayed that with her growing strength, she could hold back the threatening orgasm as long as Adam's bravado held out.

Before she could stop herself, a moan escaped. Giving in to temptation, she licked his brown nipple with the tip of her tongue, enjoying the salty taste of his skin and the strong rhythm of his heart. A groan flowed from deep inside him. He moved faster and her breaths came quicker. She couldn't ignore her body's response and gave in to the fire burning through her by

caressing her hands up and down his back.

Adam's breathing accelerated and he raised his right arm and pointed a sawed-off rifle behind him. Readjusting herself, Sarrah peeked under his arm.

Six burly unwashed men waited expectantly.

Adam's movements between her legs quickened, and her breath caught.

He glanced at her, keeping his weapon pointed. "Get away now, Cooper!"

"Don't stop," she whispered. "Kiss me."

He glanced at her again and arched a brow, never missing a stroke on her body.

"To make it look good." Panting, she drew Adam's head down. His lips hovered a mere inch from hers, parted, ready to take possession of hers.

He pulled back and yelled to the men. "Best fuck I've have in a while. If you value your balls, get lost before I shoot `em off." He lowered his aim.

"Hey, now ...."

"Go blow yourselves!" She felt Adam's body tense between strokes. Sweat rolled down his face, his heart racing against her breasts.

She tightened her arms around his neck and dragged her other leg up around his waist, hooking her feet together, pressing herself on his hard cock, feeling his delicious heat through the wet crotch of her pants.

"Beat it!" Adam fired.

A man's scream tore through the twilight. "You son of a bloody pox-ridden, gorilla-fucking whore, I'll kill you!"

The men's boots clattered against the pavement as they fled, the one man streaming curses until their noise faded in the distance.

Adam lowered his gun, slowing his rhythm, his breath hot on her face. "Sarrah."

"Adam...." She swallowed between pants.

"I'm sorry I didn't ask if you wanted this." His breaths came as fast as hers, his pace slowing almost to a stop. "No time for...."

"We shouldn't...."

Tension crested inside, her eyes widened, and her hands gripped Adam's shoulders. "Oh, God...."

"Oh, hell with it." His mouth crushed hers in a passionate kiss that seared her soul, and he slowly stroked her clit once more.

Sarrah's body clenched, then she exploded. Exquisite orgasmic waves rolled through her as she moaned into Adam's mouth and sagged against him while he held her safe and secure.

After what seemed like an eternity, she dropped her legs from around his waist and raised her head from where it had fallen on his bare chest. Patiently he waited, no male superiority or mockery in his warm gaze. Just honest admiration that made her cheeks burn with shame.

She turned her head away, but Adam caught her chin with his finger, forcing her to look into his eyes. "That was a brave thing you did. Cooper and his men are known for their careless sport with women."

Sarrah glanced over his shoulder at the vacant alley. "Can we go now?" How could she have been so brazen? She'd never done anything like that before, much less in a public display. What would this man she hardly knew think of her now?

"Don't be embarrassed, Sarrah." He seemed to read her mind, then inhaled deeply of

their mingled scent of sex and leaned next to her on the building to steady himself. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"I know, but...."

"I'm not going to apologize for giving you pleasure." He reached down and adjusted his pants, reminding her he hadn't taken the extra time to satisfy himself. "Granted, it's not the way I'd have liked our first experience to happen. But I intend to make it up to you."

Her body quivered with tiny aftershocks. And anticipation. "Shouldn't we leave? There might be other nasty people around."

"Yeah, right." The softness in his expression vanished, and he launched off the building. With a quick stride, he headed up the street. "If you value your life, don't lose me."

## Chapter Three

Adam raked the hair out of his eyes with his fingers and shoved it behind his ear. What the hell was he thinking, putting Sarrah in that kind of position? He'd put them both at risk, knowing nothing about her or how she'd react in a dangerous situation. She could've gone into hysterics, leaving him with no alternative except to fight their way out, which would not have been in their best interest. Damn. He should've blasted Cooper and his men when he'd had the chance.

Behind him, Sarrah trotted to keep up with his quick pace through the dirty, cracked city streets. It would be best to keep proverbial distance between them and gain her trust and access to her data. When the time came, it would be easier for her to push him away.

"Could you slow down a little, please?" she called from behind. "I can't keep up this pace much longer."

Adam stopped abruptly and turned.

Sarrah smacked into his chest, and he grabbed her arms. "Hey, careful."

She yanked away, clutching the pack with her computer. "I can take care of myself, thank you very much." Setting the pack down next to her, she brushed a stray chestnut hair from her face, then pulled off her shoe and dumped out several tiny pebbles to the ground.

Adam watched her slip her foot back into the worn, brown leather, adjust her short lab coat, and reposition the pack on her other shoulder. "I'm okay now."

"Then we can go?"

She frowned. "What's your problem? Did I do something to piss you off?"

He turned and continued walking at a slower speed. "We need to get to shelter and secure ourselves before nightfall."

Sarrah stopped abruptly. "If this is about you not having an orgasm .... "

"Look, you don't know me, so don't assume my sexual practices are open for discussion." He spun around. Her confusion was the opening he needed to plant doubts and distance himself from her, and he planned on taking full advantage. "I'm not used to answering to anyone or having someone around to drag me down."

She gasped, wide-eyed at his disclosure and backed away a step. Tears brimmed her eyes, and she chewed her lower lip. "I thought--I'm sorry I'm a burden."

"I wouldn't exactly call it that."

He felt like a first-class heel. She'd been nothing but concerned, even helpful, since he'd found her. She didn't deserve his attitude. She wasn't part of this world, and from what he could tell, she probably had no idea how this reality worked. She was just another reason he had to complete his work and close the dimensional portal permanently.

"Adam, please, let's not fight." Her voice quivered. "I'm tired and mixed-up about things. I want to find the answers and go home. Is that so hard to understand?"

Unfortunately, he understood all too well what she meant. He turned away. "It's almost dark. Let's go."



\* \* \* \*

Sheer determination kept her moving. The later twilight grew, the closer Adam stayed to the walls of the buildings, skirting open intersections and gaps between the structures, watching every direction around them. As Sarrah trailed his steps, ghostly faces of her colleagues swam in her mind. Their voices were as real as the broken pavement under her shoes. She wasn't used to walking so far, and her muscles screamed for her to stop. Carolyn, the workout junkie, had badgered Sarrah about keeping herself fit and had invited her many times to aerobics classes, always mentioning the convenient six day a week schedule the gym offered.

Sarrah swallowed hard, wishing she'd at least given it a try. Her legs were lead weights, and she knew she'd be sorry in the morning for this multi-mile hike.

The silence between her and Adam grated on her nerves. His change of attitude frustrated her. What had she done to provoke him? Over and over she replayed every minute since their meeting in her mind, finding nothing wrong with her actions. Had her initiative and provocative actions ticked him off? Her bold manner of jumping in to help with Cooper and his men?

Dr. Louin always said she was too outspoken, that she needed to learn her place on the team and stay within those boundaries. Maybe Adam thought the same way.

"I'm sorry," she ventured to his back. "I shouldn't have tried to help you back there. I was wrong."

He didn't acknowledge her.

"Adam?"

He started to glance back, then changed his mind and kept walking.

Sarrah's hackles rose. "Excuse me, but where I come from it's polite to at least respond with a grunt when someone apologizes."

Before she could blink, he spun around and pinned her arms and legs to the building with his hands and muscular thighs. He was so close, his warm breath fanned her face, and his low rumbling growl vibrated against her, sending a thrill shooting through her body to the place between her legs. "I'll answer when I get damn good and ready. Do you understand?"

Her gaze dropped to his sensual mouth, and she licked her lips, wishing he'd kiss her. "Why are you doing this?" Inhaling made her breasts press his bare chest, and her nipples puckered.

His obsidian pupils flared, and she knew he'd felt her reaction. She almost sighed and rubbed against him, but when he didn't respond with an advance, she refrained. For years her research had demanded her full attention and total devotion, and she hadn't been able to enjoy true sexual interest in a man. Without real encouragement, Adam had her yearning for his naked flesh against hers, the strong length of him settled between her spread thighs, his weight on top of her.

Logically she knew animal instinct and pheromones drew her to this Alpha male. She wanted the sensations of his hands stroking, his mouth kissing and tongue licking all over her body, his hard cock sliding inside her tight wetness, pounding inside her over and over until they both screamed with gratification.

The thought of their coupling made her squirm between him and the brick wall. Why did she have to become so aroused around him when she shouldn't want to?

A shadow moved behind him and a stone skittered.

Adam spun fast and pressed her again to the wall with his back, pulled his shotgun, and blasted into the darkness.

Sarrah jerked, her heart racing.

A heavy thunk hit the ground.

She swallowed. Her fingers dug into the jagged brick wall behind her, abrading the tips. She ignored the pain, the scent of gun smoke, forced herself to breathe slowly as she watched Adam move to check the victim a few feet away and then return to stand before her. An odor of sweat and dirty blood wafted with him.

He was a killer. She should be afraid for her life, yet something about him didn't add up.

His gaze narrowed. "Like I said, you don't know me, Sarrah Malone, so let's get one thing straight. Do what I say, when I say it, and never question me."

Templar.... Cooper had said that name. Familiarity ran through her mind, but she couldn't recall why.

Then the reason ran over her like an eighteen wheeler truck. Her mouth grew dry, her eyes widened. "Y-you're Adam ... Templar? The ...."

"Murderer."

\* \* \* \*

God, he'd wished Sarrah hadn't made the connection until he'd seen her research data. He didn't like the look of horror playing on her beautiful heart-shaped face. However, he couldn't change his past. "Now that you've figured it out, you're scared as hell of me."

"No, I...." Sarrah shook her head. "You just killed that man."

"Before he killed us. Life here is barbaric, ruled by base desires and needs. You learn quickly to deal with it like I did, or die." He holstered his rifle on the outside of his right thigh and backed away from her several steps. "I'm not going to hurt you."

A hundred thoughts flitted across her face. She was probably trying to figure out which news-vid report better fit him so she could mount a defense.

"I believe you."

The one thing he didn't expect from her. "On what grounds? Like I said, you don't know me."

She moved slowly to him, gazing up into his eyes. "If you're the same man I've heard about, I've read lots of things, most of which I don't believe. Especially after what you've already done for me."

"The orgasm doesn't count."

"Men are so dense." She shook her head, and her shoulders sagged a little. "This is a harsh place. You didn't have to rescue me from the lab. I don't know if I could've climbed the elevator shaft by myself. If sex was all you wanted, you could've taken what you wanted and left me behind. Then you protected me, shielded me from Cooper and his men when you could've joined them and screwed me for real."

"Or I could've given you to those men, walked away and never looked back while they raped you. You could've screamed your lungs out as they used your body any way they wanted and hurt you without a second thought, Sarrah. I could've enjoyed every damn minute of it."

"Only if you really were the man the media said." Her chin rose a notch. "My point is, you didn't, Adam. I don't think you could purposely harm anyone without a damn good reason."

How the hell was he supposed to respond to that? He needed Sarrah to be cautious, even

hate him. Now if he couldn't find a way to put her off, he was afraid he'd have to take drastic measures. "If you're done, we're here."

He turned and walked the short distance to the hidden stairs, descending into the dark. Her soft footsteps followed. Unlocking a door at the bottom, he led her through a maze of seemingly never-ending twists, turns, and stairs guaranteed to confuse a rat with a photographic memory, finally entering the little piece of hell he called home.

"You can use the end of the workbench." He tugged a long string and an overhead light went on, swinging gently back and forth from where it hung from the ceiling, then he pointed towards one end of a horizontal door with peeling, dirty green paint propped up on saw horses. She looked askance, and he rolled a high-back, torn leather chair over for her to use. "Plug your computer into the blue electrical cord."

He dragged over another make-shift chair made of an old wooden packing crate and a car seat. Watching her slowly pull her computer from the pack, he wanted to shove her hands aside so he could delve into retrieving the data himself.

She plugged in the machine. "I'm ready." She smiled, and his pulse jumped.

He moved the pack aside and connected a monitor. "Turn it on so it can boot up."

Pressing a button, her computer hummed to life. "It's an older model, so it always takes a few minutes."

"Well, I know what we can do in the mean time."

He sensed her watching as he rose and crossed the room. Opening a cabinet, he took out two mismatched coffee mugs, grabbed a towel off a counter, and returned to sit next to her.

"What's that for?"

Reaching under the bench, he brought out a plain brown bottle and pulled the canteen from his pack, opening both vessels. "Face me."

Sarrah obeyed, keeping an eye on his hands as he poured some of the bottle's contents into the cups then splashed water on the towel. "Adam, how did you know about the cascade failure?"

As he moved to wipe a smudge from her cheek, his hand stopped in mid-air. "Evidence in the lab."

"Everyone was evacuated, right? You never did say why they didn't come for me."

"Here." He handed her the cloth and pointed to her face. "Maybe you'd better do this yourself. The bathroom's not much, but it's that way," he indicated to the left with a nod.

Tears pooled in her eyes, magnifying their brilliant green color. "They're gone, aren't they?" she barely whispered.

How much emotional trauma could she take? Should he tell her what really happened? Would it help push her away from him? "Your team, the good people you worked with, are all free from pain now."

"No one survived?"

"I'm sorry, Sarrah."

"No," she turned to her computer and pushed the enter button repeatedly, failing to speed up the processor. "They must've evacuated when they found out about the cascade failure. That was the plan. We all went over it."

Adam placed his hand over hers, stopping her motion. "Does this place look like the world you remember?"

She dragged her eyes to him, silently pleading for the truth. "Where exactly am I? I need to know. I deserve to know." A tear slid down her cheek, and his chest tightened.

"You're on Terra-Beta. The permanent home for violent convicts sentenced to life without possibility of parole. The lab accident you remember occurred three weeks ago. You've been in limbo stasis until today."

Trembles shook her body, and she cleared her throat. "Then I need your help. I have to find a way to reverse the events and go home."

"We don't even know if your data's intact."

"It is. I'm sure of it." She wiped her nose with the cloth. "Dr. Louin didn't listen, but I know I was right. The variable was unstable. Why didn't they listen to me?" She banged her fist on the table, jostling his research notes, files, various pens and pencils, sloshing the contents of one of their cups, and rattling her computer.

The monitor's picture wavered and went black.

"Oh, no ... no, this can't happen!" Her fingers flew over the keyboard then she turned to him, finally at the breaking point. "I can't stay here. Adam, please, help me go home!"

Adam pulled her onto his lap and wrapped her in his arms. A torrent of fresh tears and pent-up anxiety flowed out of her. "Let it all out, sweetheart. We'll figure it out." He stroked her hair as she pounded his chest with her fists as if her being there was totally his fault.

In a way, maybe it was. If he hadn't trusted Benjamin Louin six years ago, he wouldn't be here either.

\* \* \* \*

Sarrah felt like the weight of the world poured out of her. Drained beyond belief, she held on to Adam as if he was her lifeline and she'd plummet farther into hell without him.

Dead. They were all dead. Images and sounds of what had happened in the lab, the voices of her friends, the explosion, all rushed back to haunt her. It wasn't fair she was the only survivor.

"One percent," she muttered into Adam's chest, shaking her head.

"What?" Adam pulled back to see her better. He'd shifted her in his lap sometime during her hysteria, holding her gently. "Do you remember something?"

"There was a supposed one percent chance the experiment wouldn't work. He said it didn't matter. Our simulations were proof enough of success. I'm not nearly as smart as him, but why didn't he at least listen?"

Adam raked a hand through his shoulder-length hair. "That's easy. He wanted you dead."

Sarrah shook her head, fear stabbing her heart. "Why?"

"You knew too much."

"They knew what I did."

"You found the hostile variable."

Sarrah stared up at him. She hadn't told him the specifics. How did he know?

"You must've searched the archives. Found supporting evidence for your theory before you presented it to Dr. Louin. Being a thorough scientist, he knew he had to cover his tracks and present a sure success to get additional funding. You had to be silenced before the information got out to jeopardize the project."

Adam implied her being here was deliberate. That he knew about the problem. "The

variable suggested the chance of a mutated time dilation. I read a report dated six years ago entitled Temporal Compression And Incursion Theory. The idea was, it possibly affected the wave patterns in the time dilation field of the event interface created for dimensional travel. It was written by a Dr. Templar."

"You don't want to go there." He dropped his arms from around her. "We should take a break, get cleaned up. A shower will help calm your nerves."

Suddenly, putting distance between her and Adam sounded exactly like what she needed. Being so close to him not only reminded her of her own cowardice and failure, his masculine appeal tempted her too much to lower her sexual guard. Neither of them belonged in the other's world. Any relationship, however casual, would only lead to disaster.

"Don't forget, there's work to do."

She eased off his lap. "I won't be long."

All the way across the room, Sarrah felt his eyes on her until she closed the rickety door between them. Turning, she leaned on the wooden barrier with a heavy sigh. How did he manage to make mush out of her resolve not to want him so badly?

Quickly escaping from her clothes and shoes, she stepped into a bathing stall and twisted the old-fashioned two knob system. The round, rusty showerhead spewed frigid streams, and she screamed.

The bathroom door burst open, the curtain yanked aside.

Sarrah plastered her back against the wall and panted from the icy shock.

Adam towered over her, half naked, his legs spread in a wide stance. His belt hung unbuckled, his pants zipper completely lowered. A narrow line of exposed dark hair ran from his navel down to the top of a thick patch of curls and an impressive bulge pushing at the fabric crotch, leaving little to her imagination.

Oh, heavens!

His hungry eyes slowly raked her entire body, drank in every feminine nuance, then moved back to her face before he whistled appreciatively and turned around.

She grabbed the shower curtain and wrapped it around her.

"Sorry," he offered over his shoulder. "I heard you scream, and I thought something was wrong."

"I'm fine. I didn't expect the water to be so cold."

Facing her again, he glanced down. "I see. I'll be outside if you need me."

She nodded, and he left the small room. The water warmed against her back, and when she moved to adjust the temperature, she realized the curtain was plastered to her entire front leaving nothing to the imagination.

Her face grew hot. Adam had seen her from head to toe in all her naked glory. And she'd gaped at him like a shameless hussy. She wanted to crawl into a hole. What else could go wrong?

She straightened the curtain, easing under the warmth, letting the droplets cascade down over her. Bringing the half-used soap to her nose, she realized the woodsy scent was the undertone of Adam's own personal scent.

Inhaling deeply, she lathered her hands and ran them over her body. Adam had touched her with such care. It had been far too long since her last lover in college, and just the glimpse of his cock pressing his pants made her squirm. She closed her eyes and slid her hands down her

hips, up the insides of her thighs, then cupped her breasts, imagining his hands were there instead of hers. She made small circles around her nipples, lightly squeezing them until she moaned.

Increasing the water pressure and temperature, the delicious spray stung her skin and breasts as she continued to fondle them. The water beat down on her face and mouth, heightening her craving for Adam's kisses. Lowering one hand down her stomach, she imagined his fingers there instead, loving the wet patch of hair at the apex of her thighs.

Sarrah sighed and worked the soap into her curls, and her imagination took over. The fantasy became Adam as he stood behind her and slowly parted her pussy lips, then slipped his fingers inside through the slick suds to incite a growing ache. He would capture and claim her sensitive bud, expertly manipulating the little flesh to increase her arousal.

Another moan escaped as she rubbed back and forth on her clit, over and over. Adam would know exactly what to do. She kneaded her breast harder, adding more stimulation to the stinging drops beating down. It wasn't enough. Spreading her legs further apart, tilting her pelvis forward, she reached back to circle the sensitive opening of her vagina that poured out a wetness of its own.

Her pulse quickened. Her fingers returned to rub her clit, vibrating the swollen little bud faster and faster, then dipped backwards to rotate in quick circles, forward, harder, and faster still. She panted, squeezed her nipples, her eyes closed. So close to the edge, almost there.

Strain made her hands quiver. Leaning back against the wall, she arched her back and tilted her body up to the harsh spray. The water beat down, her fingers unrelenting on her needy clit, throwing her over the edge into an orgasm that shook her for several minutes.

Still panting, she opened her eyes and rinsed the remaining soap from her skin. Adam had said a shower would calm her nerves.

It didn't relieve her tension for wanting him.

## Chapter Four

A half hour later, Adam heard the bathroom door open and Sarrah pad barefooted on the wood floor. From under the bench where he worked, he looked back, stunned to see her slender bare legs as she moved toward him. "Holy Mother of...." He leaned out and glanced up as she sat in the chair he'd offered earlier.

"My clothes were damp, and I found this hanging on a nail in the bathroom." She smiled and dropped her eyes to his blue shirt, the top two buttons unfastened. "I hope you don't mind."

He clenched his jaw, not trusting his voice, and shook his head.

"Thanks. I was afraid it might be your only one."

Adam pulled a deep breath and ducked back under the table. "I have two shirts. You're welcome to that one as long you want it."

She rolled the chair in, her right knee next to his head. He inhaled soap and woman. The memory of her soft curves sparked a fire in his libido that singed his nerves.

Damn. He'd already had one icy sponge bath to rid his craving of her, even relieved a bit of frustrations by masturbating.

He picked up a wire stripper and set to work connecting another cable, ignoring the awakening jerk of his cock. "You should have a picture on the monitor."

"It's there."

"Type your password and see if you data's intact." He waited, listening to her delicate tap-tap-tapping on the keyboard. She sighed heavily. "I'm in. Let me find the program."

More tap-taps commenced. He finished splicing the wires and moved his tools aside. "Anything yet?"

His eyes wandered from her dainty foot to her knee, taking in the sleek whiteness of her skin. He'd spent so much time in the sun his body was bronzed dark by contrast. Unable to resist, he ran a hand up her smooth shin.

She jumped. "Adam?"

His lips and tongue followed his hand, gently placing light kisses and licks on her flesh all the way up to the inside of her knee.

Sarrah's breath caught, and he looked up to see her hands grip the edge of the table. She shifted her knees to one side so she could see him. The primal scent of her arousal called to him like an ancient Siren's song. "I don't think this is the best time for distractions."

He pushed her chair out a few feet and kneeled before her. Her face reflected her need for him. Desire danced in her half-closed green eyes, her lush pink lips parted, waiting. Gleaming under the overhead light, her wet chestnut hair fell over her shoulders to her breasts. Without the dirt, she was more attractive to him than he'd thought possible.

He rubbed his hands slowly over the tops of her thighs up over her hips, noting she wore no panties. The instinct to take her flared low in his belly, and he reined it in tight. He didn't want to scare her with his desire. "Last time, I didn't ask if you wanted what I wanted to do to you."

"You also said this is a barbaric world." The tip of her tongue moistened her lips, drawing his gaze.

"It is barbaric." His groin felt on fire, his cock hard and throbbing with almost excruciating pain. "This time, I'm not going to ask either."

Leaning up, he brushed her lips with his own, softly nibbling, coaxing them to open for a gentle sweep of his tongue. "Give yourself to me, Sarrah. Let me make love to you tonight."

Trepidation and excitement flashed on her face. He saw her appraisal of him, obviously unclear on whether to indulge her own erotic cravings or fear his domination of her body with his greater physical strength. Her breathing accelerated, pushing her nipples against the shirt.

Adam had waited long enough and dipped his head, nibbling her inner thigh.

Sarrah gripped the arms of the chair and closed her eyes, accepting his advances.

Reaching up under the shirt, he stroked down her hips, running his thumbs over her hipbones, then circling his hands back up on the outside of her legs to repeat his actions. Tiny moans escaped her, and he gently bit down then blew on her reddening flesh. Slowly kissing and teasing his way up her inner thigh, her pulse raced by the time he reached his destination.

Adam glanced up to see her eyes still closed and lifted the cloth up to her waist leaving her bare to his appraisal. Shining chestnut curls fresh from her shower beckoned his attention. He raked his fingers lightly through her hair, watching the curls spring back to their place on her feminine mound. Her core radiated heat and a strong sexual demand.

"Come here," he pulled her hips forward to the edge of the seat and spread her knees. "Relax, I won't do anything you don't want."

Sarrah blinked, her breasts lifting the shirt now pooled at her waist.

He trailed a finger over her exposed stomach, feeling her shudder. "Like that?"

She nodded, biting her lower lip.

"Oh no, I want to hear your pleasure." He eased a finger into her mouth, freeing her lip.

She sucked and licked him, wrapping her tongue around the tip like he wanted her to do to another part of him. His cock jerked, knocking against the bottom of her chair. But the momentary discomfort vanished, replaced by need coursing through his veins.

Taking a moment, he looked at all of her, open and waiting for him, lovely and mesmerizing.

He ripped open the shirt, taking one breast into his mouth before she could respond, suckling, laving the dark peak, moving to the other breast to do the same, and kissing his way down to the part of her that was truly all woman. His breaths came fast, his heart pounded, his tongue sliding down those dark curls and delving in to find her treasure.

Sarrah arched her back, moaning when he licked her clit. He knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her, and he was more than willing to give in. At least before he made her hate him, she'd have the sweet memory of this one night that he made love to her. Inching his hands under her ass, he lifted her center to his mouth. A fountain of thick, sparkling juice welled and flowed from her pussy and he lapped at the seeping drops, making her squirm under him.

She jerked once, and he tightened his grip on her hips, pressing his face into her and easing his tongue inside her body.

His cock throbbed in pain, begging so much for attention he reached one hand down taking hold and squeezing the base a few seconds to stall his own need. Slowly he pumped his closed hand up and down his hard length in rhythm to the motions of his mouth as he thrust his



tongue into her pussy again and again.

Sarrah panted furiously, and he eased away to allow her tension to subside a little.

"Adam," Sarrah whispered between breaths. "I need you inside me."

In answer, he took possession of her clit, sucking and licking as he eased one finger slowly inside her. She moaned and whimpered under him, unable to stay still as he moved his finger in and out. Adding another finger made her almost jerk off the chair. He continued licking with long, languid stokes, from where his hand pumped, up to her curls then back down. Easing in a third finger, he quickened his pace in and out, stretching her to better accommodate his large girth.

"Please, I can't hold back much longer!" Her head rolled to one side.

"Alright, sweetheart," he said against her satiny pink flesh.

Unfolding himself, he stood and dragged her up into his arms, crushing her body to him and carried her to a stack of old mattresses, settling her down in the center. His mouth tenderly slid over hers, his tongue gaining entry to explore her honeyed depths before ending the kiss. He stood and discarded his pants, looking down upon her. In his torn shirt that fell open to her sides, Sarrah was the most enticing woman he'd ever seen.

Opening her eyes, her hungry gaze fell to his jutting erection. Her mouth made a little "O" of surprise and she rose to her knees to inspect him, stroking him with her fingers.

"Huge...gorgeous," she uttered, then wantonly wrapped her lips around him.

Adam groaned and clenched his fists, never dreaming her gentle sucking could feel so exquisite. As she worked him slowly in and out of her mouth, heat raced up his cock from her wet lips. Watching her as she kneeled before him, he was in heaven with every thrust into Sarrah's mouth. She worked every inch of him, swirled her tongue around the turgid tip, pumping faster and sucking harder on him as he had done to her. When he thought he could stand no more, she cradled his balls in one hand, lightly squeezing and kneading a rhythm to her mouth on his erection, making him want to explode.

Tossing his head back to stare at the water-stained ceiling, his hands gripped her hair, somehow maintaining as he pulled out. Growling deep he lunged for her, caught her in his arms and rolled her to her back, kissing her as if they'd never see each other again.

Her legs circled his waist, and he entered her slowly until he was all the way to the hilt. "Ahh, sweetheart."

She arched her back then tilted her hips up rubbing her clit on his public bone to stimulate herself as he pulled out and pushed inside again.

"More," she said between kisses.

They moved in a synchronous dance, and he sensed she knew exactly how to please him. Leaning down he suckled her nipple and felt her squeeze him inside. "Mmm, I like that." He sucked again and thrust in a steady pattern.

She panted, tossing her head side to side, her hands roaming up his arms and down over his back to squeeze his ass and draw him closer to her.

"Look at me, Sarrah."

She opened her desire-glazed eyes.

"We're going to come together." She felt so good, silky smooth, like tight velvet around him.

"I don't know if I can." Her body trembled.

"Ah, sweetheart, trust me, you will." He grabbed her hips, and his strokes became more vigorous. Faster he thrust, riding her hard, hurtling them both higher. When Sarrah moaned, he fondled a breast, reveling in her voluptuous curves.

Her breath caught, and her body trembled. "Right...on the edge."

She was close, but he wanted her to soar over the edge with him. "Not yet," he ordered as if she could stop her arousal from growing. He sped up his thrusts until he rammed in and out of her repeatedly. He was close now, his body straining toward the ultimate end.

He felt her pussy squeeze him with first pulse, and he moved his hand to her curls finding her swollen clit.

She grabbed a handful of the sheet next to them.

"That's it, sweetheart, enjoy the ride." His strokes became vigorous, pulling almost completely out to plunge back into her over and over as his fingers rubbed against her.

She threw back her head and screamed her orgasm at the same time he climaxed inside her, pulsating to her rhythmic clenches and sending them both soaring to the stars.

Panting, he shuddered and collapsed on her body, exhausted and content. His eyes drifted shut as he cuddled Sarrah and savored the welcomed alien warmth that was the aftermath of their love-making. Savored every bit of it, and carefully tucked it away for the future. When the time came, he would hate making her despise him. But he had no choice. She had to stay safe. He needed the data in her computer as much as she did. He would stop Ben Louin's quest for power, and the man would never know what hit him.

That thought firmly in place, Adam relaxed for the first time in weeks, until he heard faint footsteps outside his door.

\* \* \* \*

Adam opened his eyes and listened. There it was again, a soft scratching at the front door. Sarrah stirred and snuggled closer, her hand resting on his chest and his own casually resting on hers as if it always belonged there. He didn't want to examine the curious fuzzy feeling too close that her natural action invoked inside him.

Careful not to awaken her, he kissed her shoulder, relishing the perfume of sex clinging to her flushed skin and wishing the intruder hadn't chosen such an inopportune moment to visit. With a huff, Adam's mood morphed from contentment to annoyance as he slid out from under the thin sheet and off the lumpy mattress to pad barefoot and naked across the room to his hidden arsenal. Silently extracting an eight-inch long Bowie knife, he moved beside the door to listen.

Another scratch, then the knob jiggled. Few people knew this was his home, and even fewer that he'd booby-trapped it. Whoever wanted in had to be either brave or have a helluva death-wish.

On the other side of the door, the footsteps retreated then returned as if the owner had second thoughts. Adam held his breath and listened harder to determine if the intruder was trying to force an entry or just curious.

A low moan pulled his attention back to the bed, Sarrah reaching out to his empty space. After he took care of the trespasser, he'd be glad for the warmth of that sexy woman and her curvaceous body pressed to his the rest of the night.

The knob turned slowly, the tumbler audibly clicking to the unlock position.

Adam waited a millisecond after the door started to move, then he yanked it open, jerked the intruder inside by the collar and threw the smaller form face down on the floor, and landed

on top with his knife pressing the left jugular. "You picked the wrong night to get me out of bed, unless you want to get bagged, tagged, and dumped with the rest of my garbage damn quick," he whispered into a shell-pink ear.

The intruder's shallow breathing barely moved his greater weight. "Then do it quick, or get off me."

Adam immediately recognized the muffled voice and removed the knife from the smooth throat, yanking off the gray and blue striped knitted cap. Sable hair tumbled over faded, denim-covered shoulders. "Dammit." He quickly lifted himself and turned the unexpected visitor over, straddling her body.

A grunt issued, her gaze somewhat amused, but no protest followed. "Well? What's it gonna be?" Her smile was pained and lopsided.

Adam raked a hand through his hair, his gaze drawn to a wet, crimson patch glistening on the fabric of one of her shoulders. "Who'd you tangle with this time, Belle?" He carefully lifted the jacket away from the wound.

Belle flinched. "Doesn't matter. I know where he's going."

He peeled back the denim and pulled away the corner of her plaid flannel shirt, grimacing at the gaping hole that leaked blood every time Belle's heartbeat pulsed. "This needs more than just a little attention."

"Okay." She coughed, and Adam noticed her face growing paler with each breath. "I need a nap anyway."

"If you plan on regaining your strength, you need more than a nap. More like a week to recover."

She tried to push up to sit but fell back. "I want a second opinion."

Before she could protest further, he picked her up and deposited her in the make-shift chair by his computer. "Belle Preston, you're the stubbornest woman I've ever met."

Another low moan came from his mattress, drawing both their attention. Belle's eyes raked him from beard stubble to bare feet, a slight smile tugging the corners of her mouth when her gaze hesitated below his waist. "I interrupted something, huh?"

A protectiveness surged inside him. For a reason Adam didn't yet comprehend, he felt responsible for Sarrah's well-being. "Leave her out of this." He eased down Belle's jacket from her shoulder then reached for her shirt buttons.

She leaned away, grabbing the flannel. "I'll do this. Get whatever you need to patch me up."

He moved across the room and grabbed his camo pants, yanking them on. "You're going right back out, aren't you?"

"When did you become so shy?" her smooth voice followed him.

"Just like you to avoid answering me." He snatched up gauze and tape and collected a tiny pot of home-made, brownish herbal salve, thick thread, a curved needle and alcohol, a syringe and vile half-full of clear liquid, returning to set them on the bench then kneel between her legs.

"You know, you've just deprived me of a nice distracting view."

"Who did this, and what'd he steal, Belle? Viable memory? Food strips? Water? Ammo?"

"Adrien Zamora stole my stabilization program."

Adam paused a moment, taking in her full meaning. She'd told him about her plan two years ago to learn computer programming from several old college textbooks she'd found in the back office of an abandoned convenience store. Then she wanted to write a simple code sequence enabling her to predict possible energy vortexes foretelling the opening of dimensional rifts, but he didn't believe it possible. "You sure?"

"I'm here bleeding, almost half naked, and we're not having wild monkey sex. What do you think?"

From her idea's inception, he'd never believed it would work. Like earthquakes and lightning strikes, there was no way to accurately predict a vortex, much less be able to understand how to open one. Bounty hunters usually didn't have time to indulge in cerebral activities. But Belle was never one for staying inside a stereotype.

"Did you get a chance to test it?" He carefully wiped the edges of jagged, torn flesh on her shoulder with a sterile antiseptic wipe.

She flinched, sucking air through her teeth and gripping her thighs with her hands. "Hey, got any anesthesia around here?"

"Sorry." Adam retrieved the unlabeled, amber bottle he'd forgotten about earlier on the table, handing it to her. "This'll dull the hurt."

Belle up-ended the bottle like a pro, swilling three gulps before righting the vessel and drawing a deep breath. "Thanks. And, no test. I'd just completed the last calculation when I got a message Cooper was in the neighborhood. I was out after him and got knifed when Adrian broke into my place and took it." She took another swig, wincing at the burn Adam knew slid down her throat.

He finished wiping her wound clean then examined it. "The blade glanced off your collar bone. It's gonna take several stitches to close. The blouse has to go."

She unfastened the three remaining mismatched buttons, grimacing as she shrugged the shirt off and dropped it around her waist. "I was set up."

Her nakedness stoked memories of their bodies sprawled together, sweating and pounding out raw animal sex that had always been satisfying at best. They'd been fuck-buddies since they'd first met, needing only an occasional, safe coupling with no strings or romantic illusions attached. Better friends than lovers, he knew they'd eventually part company, and had once. Almost. But Belle had come back to him and never spoke of the break-up that had depressed her for months. Strangely, this time he remained unfazed by her slender waist and gently-weighted, up-thrust breasts with their tempting, chocolate-colored nipples. Sarrah seemed to be the wedge that would separate him from Belle.

He blinked, clearing his carnal thoughts about a woman he thought of only as a friend and filled the syringe, injecting her with microscopic nanobots he'd programmed for bio repair and kept for emergencies, the same kind he'd given Sarrah. He knew Belle could smell the sex clinging to his skin from the recent bout with Sarrah, but Belle wasn't a woman who pried.

"What does Zamora want with your program?" Pushing the curved needle through one torn edge of flesh brought a clean red drop of blood welling on her skin then another as he pierced the opposite side, slowly drawing the first stitch closed until the two sides met. "He must be working with someone else."

Belle reached a forefinger and lifted his chin to look into his eyes. "You really like her, don't you?" She glanced towards the bed.

He stopped in mid-knot. "She has nothing to do with this. Just someone new to Beta I picked up." He finished the knot and took a second stitch.

Belle brushed the side of his face with her hand then dropped it to her lap. "You're a shitty liar. A knight in tarnished armor who can't resist a bitch in distress."

"You should know," he muttered.

"Cut the sweet talk, and hurry up. I've got a man to catch and my program to get back. And remember, Adrian seldom works alone."

Adam tightened the second knot and clipped the thread. "He's tricky. You heard what he did to Davenport and his army last month?"

She sipped the fiery liquid again. "Dav got stupid. Shouldn't have tried scare tactics. It just made Adrian mad. By the way, another piece of Tabor showed up today."

"Hopefully it's the last one. Gimme that." He wrapped gauze around her wound, then took the bottle and dribbled several drops on the five neat stitches crisscrossing Belle's shoulder.

She jerked back, almost turning over her chair, her back arched, her hands shaking as they gripped under the seat, but she finally sat back hard sucking quick breaths between her teeth. "Dammit, that hurts!" She grabbed the bottle from him, yanking her shirt up over her shoulder.

Adam leaned back in his seat, watching her re-button the plaid flannel shirt, strangely unmoved by the sight of her naked breasts. He frowned. A beautiful, willing woman had always made him randy. But not this time. Still, as her occasional business partner and lover, he owed Belle and didn't want to see her hurt. "You're going back out, aren't you?" he repeated the unanswered question from when she'd first arrived.

"What, no third degree?"

If he let her out of his sight, she'd be off after Zamora alone. In her weakened state, he might kill her. Adam couldn't let that happen. She'd covered his back too many times to count.

He glanced at Sarrah, wondering if the nanobots were making her sleep so soundly. If his luck held and he locked everything and reset his traps, he could be back and in bed beside her before she awoke. "Give it a couple of days, and I'll go with you."

"And in the meantime he uses my program to escape and cause havoc in my world."

"You don't even know if it'll work."

"I have to believe it will. It's all I have left." Belle rose to replace the bottle on the worktable and pulled on her knit cap.

He crossed his arms and waited for her to ask the question he knew ate at her since she'd spotted Sarrah.

Belle looked toward the mattress, finished shoving the last button into the buttonhole, grabbed her denim jacket from the floor, and then started for the door. "Keep her safe, Sir Knight," she tossed over her shoulder with a lop-sided smile.

## Chapter Five

Sarrah watched Adam spring up from the chair. His hand closed over the tall, sable-haired woman's hand on the doorknob, stopping her from leaving. That she didn't flinch from the familiar gesture made Sarrah's stomach clench. She strained to hear their low conversation, catching only sounds of their almost inaudible voices across the room. He leaned close to the woman, speaking so soft Sarrah couldn't make out his words, then tilted his head.

Was he kissing her ear?

Sarrah buried her face in the flat pillow ripe with a mixture of her and Adam's scents and fought the lump rising in her throat.

What did she expect? What could she say? Should she question Adam about turning to another woman after he'd made passionate love to her? A tightness grew in Sarrah's chest and emotion swelled in her throat. Apparently Adam hadn't been as satisfied as he'd led her to believe.

Tears stung her eyes. Of course a sexy, handsome man like Adam, even with his caustic edge, would have a lover. She should've expected it. But the realization stung anyway, the brief hour of passion they'd shared now tainted by the fact she'd been only a casual sexual diversion.

She peeked again at the couple conversing in hushed whispers and took shallow breaths as not to break the quiet. She could never hope to compete with the tall, exotic woman for Adam's attention.

Sarrah swallowed the thick lump in her throat. She wouldn't cry. She couldn't. She had no claim on him, hadn't even known him one day. Still, after years of dedication to her work at the cost of any kind of personal relationship or even association, in the back of her mind existed the slight hope she might find someone special who would see beyond her appearance to her inner qualities. Someone she could converse intellectually with and respect.

Adam might be an analytical genius and genuinely interested in helping her find a solution, but he'd better not expect her to be a momentary plaything when his exotic lady-love was gone. Going from sex with her on a lumpy mattress to kneeling between another bare-breasted woman's legs was intolerable.

This wasn't her world, and Sarrah had to find a way home. Adam had been kind enough to let her bring her computer. Now it was her turn to retrieve her research and figure a way out.

A click of the front door drew her attention. Adam looked back at Sarrah, and she froze. After a few moments, he moved to the door and exited behind the woman.

Sarrah yanked the sheet down and climbed off the mattress. Adam might like her, but that was all. She squashed the unrealistic impression there had been more between them. How could he care when they'd only just met? Damn her feelings. At least she hadn't made a fool of herself. Whatever he thought of her, she couldn't do nothing and wait around for him to return. She had a power source for her computer and had to try and find a solution.

She found her clothing and donned them, easing her lab coat over the plain shirt and pants as she walked to Adam's workbench. Computer components, organized bundles of wires,

old motherboards, and tools lay in a precise formation. She reached for the pack on the floor she'd brought, pulling out Henry's small toolkit and laying it open next to her computer as she settled in the still-warm chair the woman had vacated. Ignoring a lump of pain in her chest, she checked the connections as Henry had taught her, then having no idea what else to do, she jiggled the wires inside her computer where Adam had left off the cover.

The machine hummed, and the monitor blinked to life. Horizontal lines scrolled vertically, but she could read enough of the screen to find her files. Finally, success when the main folder opened.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Since she had no idea when Adam would return, and there was no printer, she committed the information to memory until she came to the last page. The final calculations where she'd located the hostile variable were garbled into unreadable machine language, and it was imperative they were correct for the transfer unit to work correctly. Fortunately, she remembered keeping her preliminary figures and filing them for reference. Unfortunately, her notes were in the lab.

She switched off her computer and sat back. She had to go back for them, though going alone wasn't the best thing to do. There was no other option. Finding her shoes and a flashlight, then covering the pillows on the mattress to make it look as if she were still asleep, she exited Adam's loft. She made her way down the dark stairway and through the twists and turns, undeterred when she made several wrong turns and had to back-track before exiting to the street.

Staying in the shadows, she dodged prowling thugs and reprobates, using the examples Adam had taught her to get through the streets to her destination unmolested.

She leaned against the rough, brick government building to catch her breath. One fluorescent light across the street hung down off the pole by the wires, but still shone bright. Entering through the squeaky double-doors, she ran down several hallways to the underground garage, switched on her flashlight, climbed down the elevator shaft to the second subterranean floor, and found the lab.

The heavy metal door swung open with a loud screech. In her flashlight beam, dust and dirt curled up from the floor where the stale air moved. After a few minutes to catch her breath and calm her nerves, she located the filing cabinet partially opened. An eeriness crept over her. Someone had obviously not taken time to put things right, and it hadn't been meticulous Adam.

\* \* \* \*

"Well, he was here." Adam searched yellowed pages of notes scattered over every horizontal surface of the semi-dark, dirty hotel suite, scrutinizing every line for even the tiniest piece of information that could point them to Adrian Zamora.

"Astute deduction, Einstein." Belle kicked over a chair.

Slim beams of moonlight drifted in through the glass-less French doors from the once majestic balcony garden and played along the ripped, threadbare carpeting. A page corner under a frayed hardback book fluttered in the mild breeze, capturing and beckoning his attention.

"I should've known this would happen." She huffed and planted her fists on her hips. "That damn chameleon's disappeared again."

"He'll turn up. Always does, just like a cockroach." He lifted a page to get a better look under his headband-light. "Seems he couldn't get your program to work."

Belle joined him, reading the smudged printout over his shoulder. "The safeguard worked."

Adam folded the paper into quarters and stashed it in his left lab pocket. "Password encrypted?"

She smiled her classic seductive smile, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "More than that. I also put in a recognition bomb at the beginning of the sequence."

Adam frowned. Seemed she learned more from the old books than he'd given her credit for. "So you added a time limitation."

"On the first five lines, yes. The user not only must provide a correct pass code, he has to act on each line within a specific number of seconds. Anything else would kick the bastard right out of the program and lock it down rendering it into unusable machine language."

"And you learned this by reading a book?"

She looked away. "Not exactly."

"Ahh, right. Picked it up in the ol' neighborhood before you got here. Okay, you're the expert tracker. What now?"

Belle examined the amount of collected dust on the desk, then a plate of discarded food. "Adrian hasn't been gone long. Couple of hours. He's going to need to replace the fried sequence circuit on his motherboard before the program will reopen itself."

"Meaning he's sent his minions out to scavenge for the part," Adam headed for the door, "which leaves me with time to try and complete my program before he does and figures out he could revive the transfer unit in the lab."

At a quick jog, they traveled in silence until reaching his building again and navigated the maze to his home in record time. Hopefully, he and Belle would be able to access Sarrah's computer and figure out the last bit of information to plug into his formula.

Sarrah. A mental image of her lush body and open arms made him hot and ready for her again. God, how he wanted to be with her at that moment instead of data-fishing in a sea of stupidity and filth. Just the thought of loving her again made his cock so hard he almost couldn't see straight. He liked the idea of a woman with a brain in a temptress' body. The thought of her curves in his hands and her wet heat squeezing tight around him made him sweat.

"You okay?" Belle broke the silence as they entered his apartment.

He glanced toward the curvy form on his mattress. Sarrah still slept. "Fine. No problem." Keeping his back to Belle and straightening the tight crotch in his pants, he yanked the chair out and plopped down at Sarrah's computer, bringing it to life. "The monitor crapped out earlier ...."

The screen blazed to full color.

"Looks fine now."

Adam frowned. Electronics didn't just fix themselves. He looked back at the form in his bed. Sarrah was where he'd left her. Maybe it'd been a glitch or nearby power fluctuation his surge-protector hadn't caught that had affected the monitor. He pulled up the main programs menu, scanning for the new data files. "Whatever it was is gone now. Let's see what we have here."

A warm, wet sensation trailed down his ear, making him shiver. He shrugged away from it.

"You used to like that." Belle straddled his lap and faced him. Her hands stroked over his shoulders, down his bare chest and taut nipples, to his tight abs and waistline. "She won't know. Or she could join us, if you want."



"I don't think you understand how crucial her data is."

Her fingers stroked his thighs, and his body went rigid as every nerve ending tingled. She cupped his erection through the fabric.

He clenched his fists next to the keyboard so as not to shove her hand away. "Hellova time to get horny."

"Any time, for you." She gently squeezed the bulge in his pants then rubbed him up and down.

He groaned. His body reacted when his mind didn't want to. This time, he removed her hand to her thigh. "I need to see her research notes to make sure my suspicion is right. If it is, I'll add her work to mine then my theory to reconstruct the time-rift and heal the dimensional matrix will work."

Belle backed off, her expression a mixture of caution, surprise, and disappointment before she masked it with her usual confidence. "You're that close to the answer?"

"Bet on it, hon." Over her shoulder, he opened the research folder on Sarrah's computer, searching through the files.

"Then you at least owe me one last time." Belle took his face in her hands, pulled his head to her and pressed her lips to his. Gently at first, then demanding as she silently asked for entrance. Her tongue quested in his mouth, licking, entwining with his, tickling as she circled his lips and sucked on the bottom flesh as if memorizing him. Her warm breath fanned his cheek, familiar and comforting. Pleasurable, but different from Sarrah's inexperienced responses that had totally enchanted him.

Belle never asked for more than he was willing to give. She'd never been like that, always knowing when to back off, even when it left her unfulfilled, even when she became like a feline in heat.

Adam pulled his mouth from hers and raised his hands to her shoulders, bypassing her breasts. "I can't give you any more than a kiss, Belle. Don't get stupid and risk getting hurt or gang raped when your cravings send you looking for gratification."

He had never hurt Belle and never would, unlike most sexual deviants on Beta. Her desires were straightforward, honest and totally carnal, totally hedonistic. "And keep your voice down. Sarrah's not as adaptable as you. She's had a difficult time here."

Belle traced his jaw line with her finger. "I won't wake her up if you don't want me to. Promise," she whispered. "Just fuck me quietly, Adam, and get it over with."

Her body's perfume wafted to him, signaling her readiness to be mounted and willingness to be rode. Desire washed over him. She was primal and sultry, but he couldn't give in to her charms. "Not this time."

Her eyes were fathomless pools of darkness and reluctant realization. "She won't know."

"But I will."

He understood Belle's need. His was the same, though he didn't want to frighten Sarrah with his intense sex drive.

"Damn you...." Belle's eyes closed, and her head dropped forward as she exhaled a long breath of warm air. "I can't help the way I feel. The thought of you leaving here and me staying behind is too permanent, too final."

"We both knew this would happen."

"That doesn't make it easier." She stood, turning away from him to stare at the faded

wood wall and tugged at her shirt to straightened the tail over her womanly hips.

He glanced at Sarrah's quiet form on the bed and then to her computer monitor. If she'd already found the data, he needed to add it to his calculations to close the dimensional rift before she figured out what he planned.

"Don't let the urges control you, Belle. Remember to stay away from murderers, thieves, and cutthroats, okay?"

Turning back to face him, Belle's expression was now guarded as a slight smile played at the corners of her mouth.

"We're so much alike, you and I. Maybe too much. You need someone different, like her." Belle inclined her head towards the mattress. "Let her help you, Adam."

He glanced at Belle and nodded. They were alike and would never speak of their sexual relationship again, now that he had Sarrah. "She already has. When I mentioned the hostile variable, she knew exactly what I meant. She wouldn't admit what she'd found, but I saw it in her eyes."

"If she's that smart ...."

"She is."

"... you could be home in a few hours." Belle drew up the second make-shift chair then settled back in the seat.

"Or back to square one groping in the dust for clues." He read through the notes on the screen, scrolling through page after page for a few minutes, then sat back and speared his fingers through his hair and exhaled with relief. "This is it. The solution."

"You're smiling. A rare sight these days." Belle turned his computer on. "Where's your sync cable?"

"Won't work. The infra-red won't either. Her machine's too old. I'll have to transfer the data manually."

"Do you even have one of those old writable CDs around?"

"Check in that box," he pointed to a three-sided cardboard container next to his computer. Everything he'd wanted the past six years was about to become reality. His program would work, the rift would be permanently closed, no more innocents would end up on Beta, and the real murderer for his crime would be stopped.

Belle handed him a five-inch wide, shiny silver CD. "Hope it isn't full."

Adam inserted a connection from an external drive to Sarrah's computer.

A shock raced up his arm, and sparks flew. "Shit!" He jumped back from the bench and dropped the cable, rubbing his hand.

"I guess it'd be too late to tell you that cable wasn't grounded."

"Thanks a million. I should've checked it."

"Too excited to think straight, darling?"

"Ha, ha." Yeah, excited about finally seeing Ben Louin getting what he deserves. Adam grabbed a leather glove from the container and succeeded the second time to connect the cable to the computer, then stuck the old-fashioned, over-sized disk into the drive and powered it up.

The file wrote then verified a clean copy.

He pulled out the connection and reinserted it into his machine. Belle scooted back, and he took her place in front of the machine, pulling up the new info and transferring it to his hard drive.

“How do you expect to heal the rift? Doesn’t the transfer unit have to be working?”

“It does. The explosion only damaged the outer plasti-flex shield and main casing, not the internal components.” He copied the data to a mini strip drive and pocketed it. “Let me tell Sarrah we’ll be back after we find your program.”

Adam moved to the mattress, caressing the low valley up to the high curve. He frowned. “Sarrah, sweetheart. I have to leave for awhile, but I’ll be back soon. Sarrah?” He pulled back the cool sheet revealing only fluffed pillows. Damn.

“Adam?”

He stood and strode past Belle to the front door, fear gnawing his brain. “She’s gone. And we have things to do.”

\* \* \* \*

Sarrah shrugged off the unearthly feeling of being watched and hunted through the mess of papers in the first cabinet drawer. Nothing was where it should be and made her search more difficult.

Each file she looked at with the familiar handwriting of her colleagues brought ghosts of her friends and former life invading her solitude. By the end of the last drawer, her heart ached with loneliness, and her notes were still missing. She glanced around, her flashlight creating shadowy movements through the long room. The tarnished central metal tables showed recent signs of being wiped clean for use. When she’d met him, Adam had only used one end of a table and had been looking through a cabinet. As far as she knew, he only searched for computer information. Who else had been here?

In the corner hung Henry’s dead English ivy, further evidence of failure. She blinked away hot tears. The gangly intern had once made a clumsy pass at her and nervously yanked two buttons off the front of her blouse when he tried to grope her breast. Now he was dead and gone. Like everything she’d known.

If only she could remember that last line of code. But the answer lie just out of her grasp, and she had no clue where to begin to solve the problem. Basic procedure dictated a thorough investigation and analysis of the situation. When the authorities were satisfied, another research team would be assembled to correct the problem and try again. Besides Dr. Louin, she was the only one who’d known about the hostile variable plus had the computations to back up her word.

She rubbed her temples with her fingers. She should have made him listen. How could she get home, much less warn them not to attempt another experiment?

Adam was smart and would probably help her figure it out. The image of the dark-haired woman with him swam in Sarrah’s mind. She couldn’t impose upon him any longer than necessary. He had a life of his own in this harsh world, and someone else to stand beside him.

She was on her own.

Breathing deeply, she moved with renewed determination to the corner work station next to what remained of the large, four-person capacity transfer booth where she’d stood when the accident occurred. She shuffled through more files, not finding any helpful information. In the disarray, her half page of hastily scribbled notes could be anywhere.

She dropped to her hands and knees, checking in the scattered manila folders. Several pages with Carolyn’s beautiful cursive script littered the floor, partly covering stains that retained a slight chemical odor. No help there.

A spot of bright green caught Sarrah’s attention. The four-leaf paper clover with a

missing leaf taped to the upper left corner of her computer monitor. Dragging herself to stand, she reached a trembling finger and touched the little shamrock, not daring to wonder how it had survived.

The answer slammed into her brain, almost knocking her to the tile floor. *The stabilizing pattern is wrong.* That's why she'd kept the three-lobed leaf Henry had given her. Adrenaline zinged through her. The key should be a triangulation wave, not the parallel two-way path the end equation was based upon.

Sarrah pitched toward her desk in excitement, grabbing the solid edge to steady her balance as she plopped into her chair. Thank god she'd been too sentimental to throw away the torn little clover. Now she had a clue to work with. She had to go back to Adam's apartment to get her computer then try again to re-establish the last line to her calculations. If she hurried, she could be home in a few hours instead of waiting for rescuers from her reality to find her, or waiting as someone else worked the data recovery from the accident, someone else who might steal her work and take the credit.

That notion stuck like a thorn in her foot. She hadn't contributed thousands of hours to the transfer project for someone else's glory.

But hadn't Dr. Louin taken her input and disregarded her efforts saying it was an acceptable margin for error?

Maybe he wasn't the genius their superiors believed. She'd been the only one on the team who'd questioned the final data. She'd never rushed around like other assistants and interns to do the project head's bidding, kowtowing when he expounded in front of the media upon his newest discoveries she knew belonged to someone else. Remembering made her fume and want more than ever to go home to confront him.

A shuffling noise in the hallway drew her attention. Chills raced up her back, and she quickly ducked under her desk and pulled her chair in front of her.

The door screeched open, male voices speaking in low tones about a sequencer.

Sarrah waited until their footsteps were across the room before she carefully pushed out her chair and crawled to the door and out into the hall. After the incident with Cooper and his men, no way would she be seen by anyone if she could help it.

Her heart pounded. Cold sweat trickled down the sides of her face as she ran to the elevator shaft, swung out over the black pit, and caught the ladder. Her hands shook, and she lost hold of her flashlight, watching helplessly as it plunged into the darkness. She had to get out, and climbed higher and higher, ignoring the burning pain in her arms and thigh muscles and gaining the garage floor. Then she ran through it and the building and out into the dark night. Half a block away, she stopped in an alley to catch her breath, surprised she wasn't more tired.

A pair of black gloved hands grabbed her from behind as a sweet-smelling cloth pressed to her mouth and nose.

## Chapter Six

"Looks like Cooper's got another one." Adam pulled back from peering around the corner of a building down the street from where the old lab was located. He had Sarrah to worry about and couldn't get involved with another rescue. He sensed the wrongness of his inaction, but not why.

"She should know better than to be out after sunset." Belle tugged an arm guard midway up her left arm and fingerless, leather gloves on both hands. "Bad things happen to good girls."

Adam stifled a chuckle. "You should know."

"Up yours."

"Quiet--here they come."

Three men hurried across the street, not bothering too much to conceal their presence from the other roaming gangs in the vicinity. Now that the men were closer, Adam saw the woman being carried wore a short lab coat, not just a light-colored shirt. His heart jumped in his chest.

"That's Wetzel, Adrian's gopher, not Cooper," Belle whispered beside him. She drew her modified Magnum compound Altitude bow from the short, narrow bag on her back she'd retrieved from a hiding place outside Adam's building. Then she bolted the weapon tight where she'd modified it to fold in the middle to be more compact.

Adam watched the men move to the unlit sidewalk across the street and into the shadows. "Didn't you say Zamora needed a sequencer?"

"Yep. And it looks like he's going to try to persuade your girlfriend to make my program work."

"Can she?"

"Maybe. But he's too impatient to wait for her to figure it out." She strung the bow, then tested the tension, wincing. "He'll want instant results, which she won't be able to give him."

Adam watched her cautious movements. "You can't draw that bow with a hurt shoulder. You'll bust the stitches."

"Watch me."

He already faced the possibility of losing Sarrah when he tried to correct Louin's mistake. Adam didn't want to lose Belle also. "Stay here. I'm going after her."

She grabbed his arm. "Hold it, lover boy. Adrian's as desperate to get out of this hell-hole as we are, and he probably sent out several teams to locate that component. His men could be anywhere. Out in the open, we're sure targets."

Adam raked a hand through his hair. How did this get so complicated? Why didn't Sarrah just stay in his apartment? "Do you have a plan?"

Belle grinned. "Give me a second." She walked from under the cover of the shadows into the middle of the street.

"What the hell are you doing?" Adam stood rooted, his mouth gaping. The woman was certifiable!

She grinned over her shoulder.

He shook his head. The three men were in big trouble.

"Hey, boys, want a woman that's alive and kicking instead of that skinny sack of turnips?"

"What the ...." One man turned, his eyes widening.

"Shit!" A second man pulled his .45 pistol, targeted Belle's chest with his red laser sight, and fired.

She leaned to one side, and the shot missed her but grazed Adam's left cheek and ear.

"Dammit!" Adam slapped his hand to his ear, pulling it back to see blood on his fingers.

"Whatever the hell you're doing better have a fucking good reason," he spat, knowing she couldn't hear him.

Belle dropped to the broken pavement and rolled out of the line of fire, knocked an arrow, then shot and struck the gunman just above the knee.

He roared his outrage and fell to the ground, his hands clasping his injured leg.

His two companions fled, not bothering to conceal their direction, and the wounded goon hobbled behind them to catch up.

Adam hurried to Belle, offering a hand. "And you pulled that little stunt because...?"

When she turned to him, her eyes widened. "You were supposed to duck."

"Thanks for the warning." He helped her to her feet.

"Are we going to follow them, or did I give us away for nothing?" Not waiting for an answer, she turned and walked in the same direction as the men who had Sarrah.

Adam moved up beside her at a quick pace. "Do you always have to be so rash?"

"Do you always have to ask?"

"One of these days ...."

"It'll get me into more trouble, I know." She glanced at him with a half smile.

Fearless as always. Adam tore off a piece of dirty hem from his lab coat and dabbed at his ear. "I was going to say, I won't be here to help you."

She shrugged. "You didn't have to come this time."

Adam pointed ahead as their quarry turned right and out of sight. "They're going toward Market street."

"What, no third degree?" She rolled her injured shoulder, a brief frown marring her brow.

Apparently, she wasn't as well as she wanted him to believe.

She stopped and put her hand on his arm. "I know when to keep my mouth shut. And I will be careful, okay?"

"Since when?" He searched her eyes for signs of the familiar humor she usually found in dangerous situations, finding none. His unease turned into full fledged worry. What wasn't she telling him about Zamora? "You can't take him out alone. Give it a couple of days so you can heal, and I'll go with you."

"An in the mean time he uses my program to escape and cause havoc on my world."

Good point. "You don't even know if it'll work."

"I have to believe it will. It's all I have left."

He met her dark gaze with a frown, then moved away and kept walking.

Belle picked up her pace next to him. "They'll probably head for Liberty Square and the

subway. Try and lose us down there."

For the moment, the issue of her recklessness was dropped.

She pulled another arrow from her quiver.

"Honestly, Belle, how's the shoulder?"

"Do I really have to answer?"

They stayed a half a city block back from Zamora's men but kept them in sight.

Adam didn't like the way Sarrah's arms swayed like a rag doll where they hung down the bigger man's back. It was best she was unconscious so her feisty defiance wouldn't get her into more trouble.

As Belle predicted, the men crossed Liberty Square. But instead of descending into the subway system, they turned west toward the industrial district. "Why didn't they try and lose us?"

The man carrying Sarrah rubbed her bottom with his meaty paw and grinned to his companions.

Adam restrained himself from rushing out and pounding the man's face to a bloody pulp.

"Zamora wants us to find him."

"Yeah, I could see that if it was only me after him. But what's he want with you?"

"It's a territorial thing." Adam checked his shotgun, adding two bullets into the empty chambers. "I've always had good luck sniffing out information, parts, and computer components, and this area is a technological gold mine."

A few more twists and turns through several streets, and the two thugs entered a warehouse with Sarrah.

Adam stopped under the shadowy cover of the next building. "Hey, where's the third guy?"

"Hiding, probably." Belle moved up next to him. "Okay, here's the plan."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Who died and put you in charge?"

"Adrian's got my program."

"And he's got Sarrah."

"Don't get personal. You'll get sloppy."

"When the hell have I ever gotten sloppy?"

"When has your girlfriend's life been at stake? You really care about her, Adam. I've known you a long time, and you can't hide your secret from me. Plus," she pointed to his ear.

Adam huffed and conceded. He hated it when Belle was right. "There's only one door. We don't know the layout or if there's a trap. I'm open for suggestions."

"Saying that hurt, didn't it?" Belle grinned as she collapsed her Magnum bow and bagged it, hiding it behind a pile of old wooden crates, then she started toward the building.

"Wait for my signal. Then come get her."

"Not again." He grabbed her arm, stopping her. She looked back at him. The finality in her eyes hit him like a punch in his gut. "Belle ...."

"Listen to me, Adam. This isn't a suicide trip. I want to go home too. I'll make damn certain I have a way out before I let anyone see me. And it'll be easier to get her out if I go alone. You'll only piss Adrian off, and he'll take it out on her." She leaned back against the building, as if a weight had settled on her shoulders. "God, now you've got me making speeches."

He'd known Belle long enough to know she'd keep her word. How could he argue with solid reasoning? "And Sarrah?"

"He's got a weakness for smart women. She'll be safe enough."

Again Belle was right. Waiting made him chafe for action, but this was the only way to get Sarrah back alive.

Belle started toward the building the men had entered, smiling over her shoulder. "If you're worried I'll spill your little secret, I know when to keep my mouth shut."

"Since when?" Sarrah already knew how he felt. Again he wondered what Belle wasn't telling him. A cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck. "You can't take him out alone."

One corner of her mouth pulled up in her characteristic half-smile, and she turned to face him, walking backwards. "You were right about the stitches. Those little doctor-bots you injected me with are doing their job, and it hurts like hell."

"You sure you'll be okay?"

She walked back and planted a light kiss on his lips. "You're sweet to worry, but we don't belong together. She needs you more than I do."

\* \* \* \*

Sarrah fell, her head hitting something hard as a rock. Stars shot like fireworks behind her eyes. Half conscious and still fuzzy about what had happened, she moaned and put a hand to the back of her neck, rubbing to ease the pain and the oncoming headache.

Her arms were yanked up. Cold objects circled her wrists and snapped shut.

She cracked one eye open. She was in an office lit by one bright, overhead light, and one thug from the lab moved away from her to stand with his friend and guard the door. Across the room, a bald man sat at a metal desk and was connected by wires to a computer.

He turned away from working on the guts of the machine, his eyes glowing yellow, then fading to a normal human appearance. "Ahh, you're awake. Now you can help me. I'm Adrian Zamora." He disconnected a cord at the nape of his neck and another from his left forearm.

"You had me knocked out and brought here to get my help?" She rubbed her eyes and sat up straight. She'd never seen an actual cyberoid and had thought the technology still experimental and highly unstable. The kind of person who would consent to artificial computerized implants and the possibility of being fried from the inside out had to be insane, and that scared the hell out of her. "You could've asked."

Adrian swiveled his chair to face her. "Charming, as I suspected you would be, Sarrah."

"How do you know my name?"

"I too am in the field of research."

"And what are these for?" Sarrah raised her arms slightly and nodded at the wrist bands.

"Insurance."

She dropped her hands to her lap. "They're not the kind of bracelets that are in style this summer."

"Don't get smart-alicky with me, girl." His eyes narrowed and glowed briefly.

He reminded Sarrah of a predator about to pounce, and she didn't want to do anything to provoke him. "What do you want from me?"

"Complete a simple task, and you may go free." He stood and walked around the desk to her. The scents of rum and tobacco wafted with him, and the gold loop in one ear reminded her of an old-fashioned pirate. All he needed was a parrot and black eye-patch.



"What makes you think I can do it?"

"Adam's not the only one who knew you were in the lab. We found you also, about the time of your accident. I just had to wait until you woke up from stasis to enlist your assistance."

"Why wait? You could've brought me here before that."

He shook his head. "Believe me, my men tried. You were in between dimensions. Trapped. Their hands passed right through your lovely body when they tried to pick you up. They thought you were a ghost, until I explained apparitions are never stationary for long."

She hadn't been here or on Terra-Alpha, but caught in the middle of transit. That was why Adam had also waited and hadn't moved her. "What is it you want?"

"Given that you were found in the lab, I assume you understand the ins and outs of research?"

"Of course. Cataloging data is part of what I do."

He rose and moved to her, forcing her to look up at his towering height. "Verifying and coding the information?"

Her chest tightened, and she glanced to her lap. "My entire team had a hand in that part."

He grinned and rubbed his hands together. "And translating that data into computer code?"

She didn't like what he implied. "What exactly is it you think I can do?"

He leaned down to her, his face almost nose to nose with hers, his hands gripping the arms of her chair and trapping her. His pale, icy eyes pierced into her as if he could read her thoughts. "You know computer code. I want you to help me fix a program."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Time doesn't concern me unless it causes a delay. I don't like delays. They make me impatient. It's a quirk of mine."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Consider it more of a promise. One I wouldn't enjoy keeping." He stroked the left metal cuff around her wrist then dropped his gaze to her breasts, making no attempt to hide his lust. "But then, there are other methods of persuasion."

She glanced at the door. The two goons who'd dragged her to this place hovered like automatons awaiting orders. She wouldn't get anywhere until she at least tried to help Mr. Tall, Bald, and Cyborg. "What sort of program is it?"

He stood straight, holding out a hand toward the computer where he'd been. "Please, sit. I haven't the knowledge to unravel the mystery. I believe you'll have better luck."

Sarrah sat in the offered seat and scrolled through the end pages on the screen. "I don't understand all this. It's garbled and makes no sense."

"That's not the answer I want to hear," he whispered so close to her ear, she jerked to one side.

"I don't know anything about this. Where did you get it?"

"Let me be very clear. It is crucial this program runs properly, or I doubt you'll enjoy the consequences."

A brief electric shock jolted her and raced from her wrists up her arms, over her body.

"Why the hell did you do that? Get these off!" She clawed the wrist cuffs.

He ignored her. "When you're finished. It is imperative this program works for me. Now, shall we start again?"

She was right, the guy was crazy. "Torturing me will get you nowhere. You may as well kill me now, because I won't help you." She sat back, folding her arms under her breasts.

Adrian walked to a dirty, half-broken window, staring out with a half-smile. "I don't intend to kill you. But I might decide not to be so lenient with him."

*Him?* Sarrah moved to stand next to Adrian. Her gaze followed his out the third story window down to the open warehouse floor to a dark-haired man in camo pants hanging limp between two tall posts, his bare back covered with crimson stripes.

She gripped the dirty sill, heedless of glass fragments cutting into her fingers. "Oh my god, you can't—didn't ...." Her hand flew to her mouth. How could she have forgotten Terra-Beta was populated by ruthless criminals?

"A shame. He was a brilliant man."

"Was?" She grabbed his arm. *Please let that not be Adam down there!* "Tell me he's not dead."

"Your compassion is touching for someone you hardly know."

Know, not *knew*. "I'll work on your program, do whatever you want." Sarrah hurried to again sit at the computer. How could she possibly make sense of gibberish when she didn't have a basis to extrapolate from? She didn't even recognize what the program was for. "Let me try again, but please, don't hurt him any more."

"Good, good." Adrian's eyes glowed again then faded.

A gentle pulsing wave rippled up her arms and expanded in her chest to radiate through her entire body with near-orgasmic sensations.

He moved behind her and stared over her shoulder, his hands caressing up and down her upper arms. "Remember, with just a thought, I can control your brain-waves to the point of pain or pleasure."

"I-I can't think with you breathing down my neck." Maybe if she stalled, she could find a way to slip away.

Adrian straightened and moved away. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

"Don't people here ever sleep?"

"When there's a matter I want an answer to, I rarely sleep until I find the solution. Try again. And this time, go back a few pages."

Sarrah nodded. At least she could get an idea of what he expected the program to do. She scrolled back, reading through the previous pages of coding. "It looks like this is supposed to calculate the existence of...."

Crap. Adrian Zamora was smarter than he looked. But if he'd found a way to predict energy vortexes, that meant he might've also found another way to open dimensional rifts. The program would enable violent criminals to return to Terra-Alpha. She couldn't let that happen.

"I see you understand what the program is for. Now, correct the coding."

Adrian had hurt Adam, and helping repair this program was not a good idea. "You said I could go if I helped you?"

He nodded. "Like the vast majority of people trapped here, I only wish to leave. But unlike the majority, I was sent here unjustly."

Home. That desire she understood. But his reason didn't impress her as sincere.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "I can't do this in one night. It'll take time to analyze properly."

He spun her chair, pressing his face close to hers, his eyes a bright, glowing yellow. "You don't have time, if you want *him* to live."

Another shock jolted her, twice as strong as the first. "Okay! I'm not like you. I need rest, sleep, food." She rubbed her wrists and numb fingers, fighting tears. How could anyone be so cruel?

"I'll get you what you need. Until then, I have the perfect place for you to rest."

Another shock grabbed her body and she fell to the floor, unconscious.

\* \* \* \*

Sarrah opened her eyes to see a large janitorial closet. She checked the metal cuffs on her wrists, pulling and tugging until the skin turned an angry scarlet and drops of blood sprang up in dotted lines along the scrapes.

Adam had warned her this was a dangerous place. She should've listened. The mostly bare shelves gave her no help on how to escape. No windows provided clues on the time of night or day. The only door was probably locked from the outside. She had no hairpins or bubble gum or a nail file to try the old-fashioned way of fabricating her way out.

She propped herself up against one wall, heedless of the grime. For the third time in twenty-four hours, she wondered how long she had been unconscious. Adam didn't even know she was here.

Pain swelled inside her chest. How much more would she lose before she was finally able to go home? The only things that mattered were saving Adam and getting back to warn her team about the hostile variable. But she had zero options.

*Think, Sarrah!*

The door flew open, and she jerked her attention on whoever had come to get her. "Get in, and don't try anything stupid," a man's voice ordered.

The woman from Adam's apartment sauntered inside.

Sarrah's eyes widened. If the woman was here, maybe ....

The woman faced the door and smiled, planting her hands on her hips and thrusting out her generous breasts. "Don't flatter yourself. If I wanted out, there'd be no trying."

"We'll see about that." The door slammed shut, the lock clicking.

The woman turned and scanned the room, moving to one corner and grabbing a broom.

"You're going to sweep?" Sarrah watched her turn the broom head up and examine the wire wrapping.

"Please tell me you're not going to question everything, because I'm not in the mood, and we don't have time." She dug into the back of one black leather boot.

"Um, okay, I won't. But I might be able to help if I knew.... "

"Trust me, you can't." She pulled out a pocketknife. "It's safer. I'm Belle, by the way."

"I saw you in Adam's apartment. Why did Mr. Zamora torture him?"

"It was a fake-out." Belle laughed once then opened the knife, fidgeting with the wire on the broom handle. "Whoever Adrian has, it isn't Adam. They hate each other. Adrian's smart, but Adam thinks before he acts so he won't get caught." She worked the knife blade under the tiny nail, popping it out.

Of course this woman knew Adam's business. The fact they probably shared everything from casual glances to the latest technological find made Sarrah's gut tighten. Though technically she'd been the other woman, she could never come between Adam and Belle.

Sarrah dropped her gaze to the floor, suddenly not wanting Belle to guess what had taken place earlier that evening. "Look, after we get out, I'll leave. I won't come between you and Adam. I just want to go home."

Belle stopped unwinding the wire from the handle and glanced up, arching up one dark eyebrow. "You think ...."

"What's that for?" Sarrah nodded at the curling metal tangle trailing to the floor.

"I came to get you out. Adam's waiting across the street." Belle dropped the broom and moved to the door, carefully threading the wire above the knob between the door and frame. The coil reappeared two inches below where it went in.

"He's here?" Sarrah watched Belle feed in the wire, then she grasped both long ends.

Belle glanced at the cuffs. "I wondered what happened to those."

"You know about these?" Sarrah held them up.

"They were mine, before Adrian got his hands on them."

Sarrah quirked an eyebrow.

"I used them in my job--never mind."

"What is he? I mean, he looks human, but he's not."

Belle glanced at her. "You know about cyborg technology and that a biobot is more machine than human."

Sarrah nodded.

"Adrian's a cyberoid. He's still more human than machine, but with no sense of right and wrong."

"Why? Can't he be fixed?"

"He did it to himself. On purpose. Just let me worry about him. Okay, stay behind me, and whatever happens, follow my lead." Belle pulled gently until a click opened the door, then she flung it open.

"Hey!" one guard yelled, turning.

Belle threw a hard cross-punch to the man's jaw and kicked a second man in the stomach, sending him sailing against a corridor wall.

"This way." She took the guns from both guards and jogged down the hallway.

Sarrah ran to keep up. Her lungs burned her and legs hurt, but she didn't question Belle's obviously trained capabilities.

"Hold it right there," Adrian's voice came from behind them.

Sarrah stopped the same time as Belle, who turned a seductive smile on the man holding them at gunpoint.

"I thought you were smart enough to know not to try and escape, Belle." Several guards joined Adrian. "You disappoint me, my dear."

"I know about the coding." Belle angled herself directly in front of Adrian. "You want me to correct the program then let her go first."

Sarrah looked from Belle to Adrian and back. "Do you know what he'll do to you?"

"Absolutely."

Adrian smiled and threw a small, silver cube to Belle, his eyes glowing. "Unlock the cuffs."

There was so much Sarrah wanted to ask Belle and no time. "You can't ...."

"Don't worry about me." Belle quickly passed the object over the metal bracelets,

unlocked the magnetic release and removed them, and then tossed the cube back. “Your turn.”  
Adrian sighted the scarlet laser beam on Belle’s heart. “Put the cuffs on.”

## Chapter Seven

Adam was alive! Sarrah stumbled out the warehouse door, jerking from Wetzel's grasp and barely managing to catch herself before she hit the ground. One glance back at his lecherous smirk fueled her into a run.

His belly-laugh followed as she crossed the cracked, two lane road and ducked into an alley between the buildings.

A shadow moved in the pre-dawn light, and she jumped and screamed.

A hand shot out to grab her. "Sarrah!"

"Adam...." His voice sent ripples of joy through her. She fell into his arms, pressing her nose to his chest, nuzzling and inhaling the comforting scent of him. "I thought Adrian hurt you."

His embrace tightened. "I can't believe you went off by yourself after I warned you about this place." He raked spread fingers through his hair and blew out a deep breath. "I've been so worried. I want to keep you safe, but I can't if you don't listen."

"I saw you and Belle. I didn't want to cause problems."

"Your female side is showing." His rumbling chuckle vibrated her body, making her very aware of his muscular body and the fact he wanted her. "Let's get out of here before he changes his mind."

She lifted her eyes, frowning. "He'd do that?"

"Let's not find out." He pulled her with him, keeping one arm around her waist at all times until they reached his building.

Adam opened the door, and Sarrah pulled back. "We can't just leave Belle behind."

"She knows how to deal with Zamora. She'll be okay."

"You're not worried?"

"She's more capable than I am where he's concerned."

"I thought you'd want to help your lover."

He pulled her into his arms. "I have."

Before she could speak, his lips covered hers, eager, soft and demanding. Her heart sang, and her knees went weak. She needed this, even temporarily. Adam wanted her, believed in her. He picked her up, carrying her through the darkened twists and turns, then slamming his apartment door behind them and laying her on his mattress.

"Adam ...."

"Don't talk." He tore off his lab coat and vest. "Just be with me, Sarrah. I need you tonight."

She needed him too, more than she imagined. She knelt and reached up, tugging loose his belt, pulling his pants down over his hips. The fragrance of man and desire spurred her to comb her fingernails through his pubic hair.

He groaned, leaning in, tilting back his head. "God, Sarrah...." His erection rose out towards her.

She licked the tip of his cock, stroking her tongue up and down his length, reveling in the velvet smoothness. He tasted so wonderful, salty and creamy and delicious. She took him into her mouth, and he groaned then rocked back and forth. She needed this very personal connection, the closeness between them. Needed to belong to him, to be mastered by him, loved by him....

He pushed her coat and shirt aside and fondled her breasts. Never in her life had she imagined a man's touch could feel so good, and she sensed they were connected on more than a physical level. He'd shown care and concern for her, compassion and understanding. To be wanted so much, even beyond the lust, was a dream come true.

She eased her mouth back up his cock, sliding her lips to the sensitive head, kissing him. "I need you inside me, Adam."

His hands trembled as he helped her undress, and they were both naked. "I can't seem to get enough of you."

She lay back, totally exposed to his gaze, unafraid and unashamed. He came to her, his weight a comfort on top of her. After she returned home, she'd find a way to bring him back. This man was no criminal, and she had to prove it.

"Wrap your legs around me." His warm lips kissed a trail from her mouth to her breasts, suckling and gently nibbling her until she wanted to scream. "Patience, sweetheart. We don't have to rush this time."

Sarrah's vision blurred, and a lump grew in her throat. How could she tell him he was wrong? She pulled Adam's head back up and kissed him deeply. They didn't have time. She had to finish her last calculation and solve the problem of the hostile variable.

His erection pulsed against her stomach, and his fingers rubbed her clit.

She moaned into his mouth when he pushed a finger inside her, arching her back so her breasts pushed against his chest. Sweat slipped between their bodies, and she panted, wanting more, thrusting her hips upward to ride his hand.

Adam ended their kiss, his heartbeats as rapid as hers. "Maybe we don't have time after all." He settled between her thighs, his fingers stroking up to circle her breast.

She shook her head. "No, I don't want to wait. I want you now!" She grabbed his head and pulled him to her.

His mouth covered hers again, hard and demanding, his arms embracing her tight as his cock drove into her wet pussy. He moved slowly at first, then at her urging quickened the pace, pumping in and out over and over.

The pressure built inside, and she couldn't get enough. Higher and higher she climbed until her breath caught and she tore her mouth from his. "Make me come the same time as you." She reached down between them and rubbed her clit.

Faster and harder, panting, writhing until his body jerked, he threw back his head and spilled his hot seed inside of her.

The sound of his groan and feel of his pulsing orgasm sent her over the edge, causing her to come hard in wave after wave until she was exhausted. Finally, Adam's breathing became deep and even, and she relaxed and eased out from under him. Reaching a hand, she stroked the dark hair from his forehead. *Sentimental fool.*

She stood quickly and pulled on his torn shirt she'd worn earlier that evening. If she hurried, she could finish her work and be away before Adam awoke. He'd be angry, but he'd

figure out this way was best.

Sarrah shakily moved to sit at the table. Sore and satisfied, contentment flowed through her as she scrolled through her calculations and added the final line. "It works, but...."

The correction produced an unexpected time anomaly. She sat back. Was it possible to change what had happened to her?

Adam pulled up a seat and sat down, stark naked, looking at her monitor. "You found the variable."

Surprised he hadn't slept longer, she smiled at him as calmly as she could, considering her heart raced at his nearness. Now her leaving would be more difficult. "At the end of the calculations, the fluctuations skewed the time dilation field."

He pulled the keyboard from her and angled the monitor so he could see better. "And you got stuck in stasis on the event interface."

"Because of the temporal differential." She leaned in closer, again checking her figures to verify his summary. The man was pure genius. "Synchronizing both sites in the field should solve the problem."

He sat back, folding his arms over his muscular chest. "Why do you really want to stop the experiments?"

Her smile disappeared. "I don't think ...."

"I don't suppose you would." His gaze turned accusing.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She swallowed, remembering his report she'd read at the beginning. He knew her analysis was correct. He'd done the research years before her, before she'd known and read his report. "I have no reason to ruin my career and destroy all hope of a safer method of transit."

"Sarrah, this may be a one-way world, but I'm not stupid." He rose and pulled on his pants.

"And I have no reason to sabotage the project. I believe in my work and its benefit to society. I need to go back and warn them about the experiment. Please, trust me. I could use your research and apply it to my current data. Terra-Beta doesn't have to be one-way."

"You'd want to bring back vicious murderers? Like me?"

"What about the innocents sent here?" He'd been careful and gentle with her. How could he hurt, much less murder, someone? He'd nursed her, protected her from harm, shared his body, and showed her what it meant to truly make love. "I don't believe you killed anyone."

He advanced, a deadly gleam in his chocolate eyes. "Sweetheart, in this dimension it's not survival of the fittest. It's whoever has the most guns wins. Never forget that."

"Adam, you're scaring me." She jumped from the chair and moved behind it.

He stalked closer, and she backed away. "I'm surprised you found any trace of my work at all, or the report I wrote that I never got to finish the night of the first accident."

"Adam, I believed in you. I thought you cared for me. Tell me I'm not wrong."

"Sure I care, sweetheart." He took another step, grabbed her wrists, and pinned her to the wall. "Like I told Cooper, you're the best fuck I've had in a long time. And I'm about ready for more." He rocked his groin against her.

Sarrah cringed, tears brimming in her eyes. This couldn't be happening!

Adam pressed his muscular body against hers, rubbing her sensitive nipples until she wanted to scream. "Do you want to know what happened six years ago? I headed the first inter-



dimensional transit research team. We calculated everything, down to that same hostile variable. And you know what? My assistant, Ben, convinced me the one percent didn't matter."

Sarrah stopped squirming. "Ben?"

"Yeah, good old Benjamin. Dr. Louin now, I think you said. He set up the experiment, invited the press, and worked out the scheduling. An ambitious junior researcher edging for a promotion. He just didn't count on that one percent getting in his way or that one of my interns and I switched workstations in the lab at the last minute. There was an explosion. A tear that threatened the integrity of the permanent dimensional vortex we'd established. In the middle of it all, Jeremy was killed instead of me."

Could Adam's story be true? She had to get home. "I really don't need to know all this. I can find my own way back to the lab."

Adam laughed, the sound harsh and grating on her nerves. "Lady, even if you could find the dimensional hole in that place, you have no idea how to navigate out of that kind of a vortex."

"I'll figure it out." She swallowed hard. How could she have been so wrong about him?

Adam backed off then, his dark eyes growing cold. "And when Cooper catches you, what then?"

Sarrah pushed away from the wall, grabbed her clothes and ran to the bathroom, jamming a mop handle across the door. Tearing off his blue shirt, she threw on her pants, shirt and lab coat, then propped open the window with a broken board.

"Sarrah," Adam knocked on the door. "Come out like a good girl and let's have some more fun."

She looked over the window sill at the dizzying height in the early morning sun. There had to be a way out. The knocking became pounding, Adam's yells becoming louder. She heard him hit the door trying to break through.

A plank splintered and she cringed, squeezing into a cubby hole by the floor under a cabinet and dragging a towel over her.

Adam's fist punched through wood, and he removed the mop. "Sweetheart," he called in a sing-song voice, "where are you?"

She pressed a hand to her mouth to keep silent. Her stomach growled from hunger, and she hoped he hadn't heard. She peeked out and saw him move to the window and glance outside. After a few minutes, he exited the bathroom and walk out the front door.

Sarrah scrambled out of the bathroom. He knew where she would go and had a head start, but maybe, just maybe, she could outsmart him.

Disconnecting the monitor, she yanked the power cord from her computer, shoved it into the bag she'd used before, along with an extra power pack and Adam's penlight off the bench, and ran for the door.

After half a city block, she rounded a corner. It wasn't that far to the lab, only a couple miles. Even in the dawn she could make it if she stayed close to the buildings like Adam taught her.

She was grabbed from behind and dragged into an alley.

"Hey, Cooper, it's Templar's whore!"

Sarrah screamed and thrashed. "Let go of me!" A hand groped her breast, and she leaned up and bit down as hard as she could.

Cooper slapped her across the face. "Damn, bitch! I'll show you your proper place. Bruce, Whipp, hold her down." Two thugs pinned her arms and legs, and Cooper reached for his pants zipper.

She screamed. "I don't belong in this place!"

The men laughed.

"Can't you come up with a more original excuse?" Cooper dropped his pants and knelt between her legs, yanking her shirt up and tearing her pants down to the crotch. He grabbed her panties, scrapping his fingernails on her skin. "Oh, yeah, I can smell that sweet pussy already."

Heedless of his considerable weight, he dropped on top of her, knocking the breath from her lungs. Her knees were pulled apart and she squeezed her eyes shut ....

A sudden explosion rocked the area, making her flinch.

"My ass!" Cooper howled, scrambling off her.

"I'd be careful where you stick that thing, Cooper."

Sarrah's eyes flew open.

"Dammit, I'll kill you, Templar!" He yelled, holding his buttocks with both hands.

"Whipp, Bruce, let her go, or you'll be next."

They released her arms, and she stood and stepped into her torn pants.

"Over here." Adam motioned her to him.

Did she dare, after what he'd said? She'd been so naive, so gullible to believe he might actually have sincere feelings for her. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered, moving next to him and holding her pants up.

"I have my reasons. Get behind me," he answered quietly, then handed her his belt and addressed the men. "Okay, party's over. And I'm getting real tired of telling you boys to get lost. Next time, I'm just going to fill all of you with buckshot and be done with you."

The men ran up the street, Cooper hobbling and shouting obscenities.

Adam grabbed her arm. "You're coming with me."

She struggled, determined to continue. "Damn you, Adam Templar, I'm going home, and you're not going to stop me!"

Twisting her arm free, she grabbed his left biceps, flipped Adam on his back, and ran like hell.

## Chapter Eight

Sarrah climbed down the elevator shaft, feeling her way with her feet and hanging on for dear life.

Why had Adam changed? She ached inside, missing his tenderness, his touch that branded the memory of him on her flesh and the way their bodies entwined so perfectly and fit together. Despite his betrayal, the sensual promises he fulfilled brought a rush of heat through her body.

She reached the open doors to the second sub-floor and pulled herself through. She wouldn't think about him any more. They'd spent a glorious night of passion together, and it was over. She had her life to return to, her team to warn.

A clatter sounded behind her in the shaft.

He'd followed her!

She turned on the penlight, ran the length of the hallway, and shoved against the heavy lab door. When it didn't budge, she fell against it, her strength depleted. Tears flowed, and she pounded her fists.

The door swung wide on creaking hinges, and she landed with a thud on the cold floor.

"Sarrah," she heard Adam call.

She stood slowly, her eyes adjusting to the dim interior. After several moments she saw the destruction where seemingly only yesterday she'd worked with her team. Racing to her station, she yanked her computer and the extra power pack from the bag, fumbling the cords until she finally got them connected. She had to go back to her own world.

Her computer hummed and the monitor beeped. She waited for the initiator program to engage the transfer unit.

"Sarrah, I know you're there." Adam was much closer than she'd expected. Too close.

She ran to the heavy door, shoving against it. Slowly it gave under her slight weight, moving a few inches before Adam burst through.

"There you are."

She backed away, wishing he wasn't so fast, wishing she'd gotten the door closed, wishing she'd never met him. "Leave me alone. I'm going home."

"I know. I just wanted to say goodbye." He stepped into the room.

"No!" She rounded a table, glancing at her computer. "Not again, Adam. Stay away from me. I know you didn't mean those nice things you said. I know you don't really care."

"Sarrah, please listen ...."

Her computer beeped, and the transfer unit activated.

She quickly typed the last line of corrected information and then hit save. "You can't stop me from leaving. If you try, there'll be hell to pay when you get to Terra-Alpha." She stepped inside the broken unit.

Vertigo spun her, and the room changed. Ghostly forms appeared and disappeared, caught in a swirling vortex. The room tipped, and she lost her balance, falling to the floor.

Adam reached out to her--then he vanished.

She shook her head to clear it.

Alarms blared through the bright lab.

The research team scrambled to their stations as reporters exited to safety.

"Power's surging through the conductors," Henry said, moving to the emergency cut-off switch. "Do I shut it down, Dr.?"

"Not yet, let's see if the variable stabilizes," came the reply.

Sarrah raised her head as sparks flew from one side of the transfer unit she lay next to, igniting a nearby computer.

Carolyn screamed then grabbed a fire extinguisher, working quickly to put out the flames licking up to the ceiling.

"Containment levels are spiking," the intern, Chad, reported. "Shut it down now, or the new transfer unit will overload!"

Henry was immediately by Chad's side double-checking the updated information.

"Protective shields are deteriorating. "

"We must evacuate."

Sarrah watched, almost unable to believe it was happening all over again. "Wait--I know how to solve the problem." She pushed up and moved to sit next to Henry at the computer. "It's the hostile variable causing a mutated time dilation field in the event interface. Synchronizing both sites will enhance stability." God help them if Adam's solution was wrong. "Where's Dr. Louin?"

"Dr. who?" Chad quirked an eyebrow at her.

Caroline joined them, the extinguisher clutched in her arms. "Levels are dropping into a normal range. Containment's stabilizing."

"The synchronization worked." Henry grinned at Sarrah.

She watched the readings fall out of red into the green safety zone.

"You did it." Caroline let out a heavy sigh of relief. "You saved us all from disaster. But how did you know?"

Sarrah swiveled her chair and stood, mechanically placing one foot in front of the other, moving to the door to leave the room.

"Sarrah, can you hear me?" Caroline's voice sounded as if it was coming from a tunnel. Sarrah felt dead inside. She was home.

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Sarrah closed the manila folder on her desk containing the Temporal Compression And Incursion Theory she'd just reread. She missed Adam so much, any connection to him soothed her bruised spirit. He'd been right, and she'd stopped the accident from reoccurring.

Three knocks sounded on her office door.

"Come in."

"Hello, Sarrah." Adam Templar, clean shaven, in a crisp white lab coat, and devastatingly handsome, entered and closed the door behind him.

Her heart beat wildly, his voice like manna from heaven. "How?"

"The anomaly that resulted from the hostile variable you found affected the time sequence in the transfer unit."

"A time-rift in the dimensional portal?" Was it actually possible? Had Adam changed

life as everyone knew it?

"Your theory was exactly what I've been looking for all these years. But I had no idea how to reconstruct the equation until I saw your notes. All I had to do was redefine the parameters of dimensional transfer. The unit became a time machine."

"So, the variable changed in the sterile environment. How did you control it, even test it?"

"Simple adjustments and tweaks." He raked a hand through his hair. "And, when that didn't work, I gave the unit a swift kick. Sarrah, you helped me more than you can ever imagine by giving me the data."

The fact he'd used her still smarted. She'd trusted him with her data, her body, and finally her heart, and he'd thrown it all back into her face. Did she dare believe him now? "What about paradox?"

"Incongruities in different realities always occur. Whether they're true depends upon how much contradictory data that reality holds as fact. Since I didn't exist on Alpha six years ago after I was sent to Beta, I was able to move freely without fear of crossing my own path. I planted a few clues about the first experiment pending further investigation on the hostile variable." He nodded toward the folder on her desk.

She quickly reopened the report to the cover page.

Today's date, instead of the one six years ago, stood out in bold, black letters.

"You time-traveled back and changed the past."

"I set things right."

"Where's the report from the first experiment?"

"There never was one. I filed a situational action report instead. When I went back, I also made sure Ben couldn't conceal evidence about Jeremy's death so I would be blamed. When everything fell into place, I was transported back here as if the tragedy never occurred."

Henry burst through the door.

"Here are the readings you wanted, Dr. Templar." Adam took the clipboard, and Henry grinned. "Oh, I guess you two want to be alone to work on your report."

Adam shoved him out, shut the door, and smiled at Sarrah. "You made it possible for me to catch the real murderer. My assistant, Ben Louin, confessed to the accidental death of Jeremy in the first experiment."

She took a deep breath, hope hovering inside her. His sincerity had a ring of truth, the facts he laid down verifiable. "You remained the project head, and he went to Terra-Beta."

Adam nodded. "He'll be up for parole in another year. Thanks to our current team, dimensional travel is now stable and two-way."

She rose and moved around her desk to him, looking up into his dark eyes. A tiny spark of life sprang to life inside her heart. "You never lost your job or were convicted?"

"Never happened."

"Why are we the only one's that remember?"

"Perhaps because we were both directly involved with the accident. Maybe because we had the same goal, or because we had the solution in both realities. It's one of the Universe's mysteries."

She wanted to believe him, wanted to be back in his arms and feel the warmth of his lips and naked body against hers. That he waited patiently for her answer was additional proof of his

honesty. "Adrian didn't beat you to the solution after all."

Adam shook his head then took her hands. "You have no idea how difficult it was and how sorry I am that I had to deceive you. When I realized you'd found the answer, I had to take the chance to make things right. But I didn't want you involved in case I was wrong. I had to make you believe I didn't care, make you hate me enough to leave me behind. Whatever it took, I had to keep you safe."

"I should hate you, Adam. But I don't. I knew something about you didn't add up."

"Then you forgive me for everything?"

"Absolutely not."

Disbelief shone in his chocolate brown eyes, and he frowned.

"Why should I forgive you for excluding me in important research? We're on the same team, remember?"

He grinned, his arms circling her and pulling her to him, his cock hardening against her. "Well, you know what they say about research."

"Remind me ...."

His lips met hers in a passionate exchange that sizzled through her body. And much later, she realized the explosive results and satisfaction good research with a great partner could bring.

THE END