



# ALIEN RULE

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978-1-60394-480-9  
New Concepts Publishing  
Lake Park, GA 31636  
[www.newconceptsublishing.com](http://www.newconceptsublishing.com)

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## Chapter One

Shaking violently, Michaela whispered, "I can't do this."

Jessica's pounding heart stuttered at her friend's words. Despite her dark Middle-Eastern complexion, Michaela was noticeably pale. White showed all around the chocolate brown irises of her black-lined eyes. Those same heavy-lidded eyes filled with tears. She held the square speech amplifier with a white-knuckled grip, as if she wanted to crush the metallic box.

Jessica fought to keep the tremor out of her voice. If she betrayed any of her own nervousness, Michaela would surely bolt. "Of course you can, sweetie. You practiced your lines all week."

"Not just the introduction," Michaela sobbed. "The whole thing. Dancing. Having sex. Joining a clan. I can't do it."

Jessica swallowed to hear her own fears spoken out loud. She still couldn't believe she herself would go through with the show, let alone the rest of the plan.

She took a deep breath. *You're safe here on the planet Plasius. No one is going to arrest you for indecency. You won't be punished.*

To her friend she said, "Michaela, you have to join a Kalquorian clan. There's no other choice. You can't stay on Plasius, and you can't go back to Earth. Either is a death sentence."

In the room beyond the heavy curtains they hid behind, Jessica heard the murmurs of conversation grow louder. More people were arriving. How many had the Plasian leader Saucin Israla invited to the show? Her anxiety climbed to an all-time high.

Jessica McInness and Michael-Michaela Blake were among over one hundred refugees from Earth hiding on the peaceful world of Plasius. Only seven months prior, both had been part of the crew of an Earth military transport. Jessica had been a nurse in sick bay, and Michaela had served hungry soldiers in the mess hall. Until events allowed them to seek sanctuary among the amorous Plasians, the two had barely been aware of each others' existence.

Now they were the best of friends. Jessica and Michaela clung to each other with the kind of desperation reserved for those flung together by cruel circumstances. Escaping Earth's intolerant faith-based government had given them both a taste of freedom, freedom neither had ever contemplated in their short lives. When one lived under a totalitarian regime that kept its citizens yoked with fear, liberty seemed an unachievable fantasy.

Tonight's performance was the culmination of their flight from the tyranny of their home planet. Only a handful of the 150 members of the military transport remained loyal to Earth. When the commanding officer had been killed, his throat torn out by an angry Kalquorian, the Earthers made a mass plea for sanctuary on Plasius. Israla, leader

of the Plasians and a woman who lusted for the young virile soldiers, took the desperate humans in.

The Plasians had saved the Earth traitors' lives, especially Jessica and Michaela's. As a woman, Jessica faced more brutal punishment from Earth's patriarchal society than the men. Michaela's situation was even more precarious. With Earth now blockading the peaceful planet, their lives hung on joining the desperate clans of the planet Kalquor.

One would never know the threat hanging over the Plasians' heads from the sounds of easy conversation. Laughter drifted through the ivory drapes that separated the stage and the bare backstage space. There had to be dozens of people out there waiting for the dancing to start.

Jessica knew the guests couldn't all be Kalquorian clans hoping to attract Earther mates. So few ships got through the blockade, and Earth considered Kalquor its bitterest enemy. The majority of the crowd had to consist of Plasians and Israla's stable of young Earther men.

The race of the audience mattered little to Jessica at this point. The worry was in the number of eyes that would be on her, witnessing her perform a dance that would have put her in prison on Earth. Sexually enticing men warranted harsh penalties. Even rape victims on Earth were deemed as guilty as their attackers. If discovered, these 'temptresses' were sentenced to prison terms that always resulted in death before they were fully served. No amount of arguing with herself about the absence of Earth authority could take away Jessica's ingrained terror of discovery.

Michaela's fears went even deeper though they had little to do with the threat of punishment. She wasn't fazed by performance anxiety either. She seemed born to dance. In fact, the only time she seemed relaxed and happy was when she was center stage. The trick tonight would be getting her out there.

Michaela shook her head, her wig's ebony spiral spill of curls flying about with the violence of the movement. "I'd be better off dead. No Kalquorian clan is going to want a freak like me anyway."

Jessica tried to come up with something, anything to settle Michaela's mind so Jessica wouldn't be forced to go out there alone. She knew that the normal platitudes, no matter how sincerely felt, would do nothing to erase Michaela's self-loathing, her conviction she was not worth being loved. Attracting love, or at least lust, was what tonight was all about.

But as conversation in the hidden room swelled, panic blocked coherent thought. She watched with growing dismay as Michaela edged away from the curtain, her desperate gaze skittering towards the door that lead to their dressing room. Jessica grasped her friend's broad shoulders in an effort to halt the escape attempt.

In her bellydancing costume of flowing scarves, the breadth of Michaela's shoulders was the only indication of her dual nature, along with the husky voice that bordered on a tenor. She'd lived disguised as Michael Blake until realizing the freedom to express herself among the sexually adventurous and nonjudgmental Plasian populace. Now she reveled in her female side, defining herself as an intersexual. Most of the expatriate Earthers called her a hermaphrodite and the loyalists referred to her as the 'freak' or 'abomination'. Had her condition been discovered by the authorities on Earth,

she would have been locked up and probably euthanized. According to the Church, Earthers were made in God's image, and Michaela, physically both male and female, would have been seen as demon spawn. Her parents would have been executed for producing and hiding the nature of their only child. Their deaths in a shuttle accident had broken Michaela's heart; paradoxically, it had also relieved the worst of her fear of being discovered. With her parents beyond the horror of brutal executions, Michaela had signed on to the military transport in hopes of escaping Earth permanently. Maintaining the male identity the sympathetic doctor had put on her birth certificate, Michaela had slopped food onto trays in the chow line, learning to curse as colorfully as the soldiers that surrounded her. Men, especially those in the military, could use profanity to their hearts' content. They just couldn't take God's name in vain.

As Michaela strained against Jessica's grip, the lights in the room went out. All conversation beyond the drapery ceased, and Jessica and Michaela were plunged into silent darkness.

The buzzing alto of an Egyptian kawala flute began to play, swirling around them in the blackness. The straining shoulders under Jessica's hands suddenly relaxed as the hypnotic notes filled the air. Michaela shifted toward the curtains, responding to the music's call. In an instant, her shaking ceased. She grasped one of Jessica's hands in her own and gently squeezed. "I'm okay. They may not like me, but I'm going to dance. Damn Earth all to hell, I can dance and no one will stop me."

Speaking into the speech amplifier to those who had gathered beyond the drapery, Michaela's sultry voice wove itself around the music. Jessica shivered to hear her friend's low, sexy tones blend with the mesmerizing notes of the kawala.

"Welcome to the ancient Arabian desert of Earth, where sultans once ruled the kingdoms of sand. It is here you discover the secrets of this lost domain, where the harem princesses performed their exotic dances for the pleasure of the men. Let these maidens entertain you with *Rags Sharqi* as they vie for the privilege of being your favorite."

Michaela's setting of the scene was nonsense, or 'pure bullshit', as the often foul-mouthed intersexual liked to say. Her Middle-Eastern ancestors would have been shocked to hear such blather about harem dancers, but the purpose of tonight was to seduce, not educate. The dance itself wasn't even the true traditional form.

*"I've corrupted the dance so Kalquorian men will be driven to corrupt us," Michaela gleefully informed Jessica as she guided the former nurse through her first awkward lessons. "The so-called 'belly dance' actually came about as an exercise to strengthen abdominal muscles for childbirth. Later it was turned into titillation by certain naughty ladies." Then came the exasperation Jessica would hear too often during Michaela's dance instructions. "No Jessica, the shimmy is shoulders-only. Keep your hips out of it ... that's a totally different move."*

A spotlight illuminated the other side of the curtain before them, and Jessica blinked. Michaela stooped to set the amplifier on the floor. In the light her expression was now dreamy and distant. The music of her mother's homeland had once more rescued her, transporting her from the real world and all its attendant miseries. Jessica's

lungs gusted a heavy sigh of relief. She tensed once more as the introductory music ended on a high plaintive note.

The time had come to take the stage.

Awareness of her bare skin sharpened. She'd never shown any man so much naked flesh. Who knew how many were out there, how many she was about to put herself on display for?

The seductive moves of Michaela's choreography suddenly seemed too blatant. How could she perform such a dangerous dance? If it ever got back to Earth and they were captured...

Michaela, her eyes dark in anticipation of the coming performance, tugged Jessica into place next to her. Her whisper carried in the quiet moment.

"Three steps into the dance and the stage fright will be gone. Let the music take you."

The doumbek and tar drums began a slow, sensuous rhythm. The stringed kanoun and kawala flutes joined in. The curtains opened and Jessica stood in the dazzling glare. Her heart seemed to stop.

The downbeat arrived. Beside her Michaela moved, and the long months of practice sent Jessica into her first steps, spinning and twirling, with long white and gold scarves fluttering behind as she made her graceful way into the room. The silver accents of Michaela's contrasting black costume caught the lights overhead as she matched Jessica's movements.

They reached the center of the room. Around them in the shadows, the audience sat in a semi-circle. They were still invisible to Jessica's dazzled eyes beyond the fall of the spotlight. She executed a final, silk-trailing spin and faced Michaela.

Across the floor, Michaela glowered at her. She was every inch the Saudi Arabian princess her great-great-grandmother had been before the combining of countries and rise of Earth's religion-based government. Black waist-length curls framed her, bringing attention to her sculpted belly dancer's torso. The black and silver beaded bra cupped her young round breasts, lifting them like an offering. Silver slave cuffs wrapped her wrists and ankles, bringing images to mind of being bound helplessly for her master's pleasure. Her girdle hugged her wide hips and matched the bra, and transparent black strips of silk served as the floor-sweeping skirt, through which lean muscled legs peeked.

Jessica's costume was a white and gold version of Michaela's. Her chestnut hair, as straight as Michaela's was curly, was caught back in a gold tiara. They were nearly the same height, but Jessica's willow-thin frame was less rounded than the younger eighteen-year old Michaela's.

Michaela stared at her, an expression of challenge at odds with her cherubic face. In her head, Jessica heard her friend's voice, the coaching she'd instilled with every practice:

*"Half of the dance is in the attitude. In this story, we are wives of the sultan, sisters but still enemies. We both know the sultan's favorite wife rules the harem. She receives the most precious jewels and the finest silks. She receives the pleasure of the sultan's bed. She is adored, set on high, worshipped almost as if she is the sultan herself. If a wife is not the favorite, she is only a slave for breeding. A slave is nothing to the*

*sultan beyond the orifice between her legs. She is a sack of meat, of no more importance than a grain of sand.*

*“Dancing is a tool to capture the sultan’s notice,” Michaela continued, her hips swaying to the softly playing music. “You use it to show him the grace and energy of your body. You show him how pleasing it will be to bed you; indeed you are fucking him without the benefit of contact. Even though you do not touch him while you dance, you must make him feel how it will be when you are writhing beneath him in pleasure as he plunges his aching cock inside you. This is the prize you and I battle for, and there is no mercy between us.”*

Jessica had only been amused before by Michaela’s recitation. Both of them were virgins, never having known carnal pleasures. Their knowledge came chiefly from seeing the open displays of the uninhibited Plasians. It seemed laughable that either of them could simulate real sex. But now, looking into the black depths of the other dancer’s eyes, of the sensual ferocity of her stance, Jessica felt her own sexual instincts come to life ... and a need to outperform her rival.

After all, they were dancing to attract mates that would take them from embattled Plasius and put them out of Earth’s reach for good. As desperate as the nearly extinct Kalquorians were for women who could bear their children, it was still important to attract the best clan one could.

Jessica felt her lips twist her elfin features into a cold smile of challenge. The competition to be the favorite was on.

The tempo of the music altered, and the dancers turned away from each other to face opposite sides of the audience. Though she couldn’t see Michaela behind her, Jessica knew they performed the same steps in perfect synchronization. Michaela had been relentless during practice. Grateful now for all the exhausting hours that provided her with the confidence to perform, Jessica undulated her way closer to the crowd.

The intimate room had been decorated by the dancers so well as to put Hollywood set designers to shame. The heavy drapes were velvet-like, turning the room into a fantasy interior of a desert sultan’s tent. Oriental-style rugs covered the floor. The room was filled three rows deep with guests who reclined on large jewel-toned cushions. Nearly naked Plasian girls, glittering with gems, served the audience drinks and hors d’oeuvres.

Jessica recognized many of the willowy bronze-skinned Plasians. They were of the elite class, advisors to Saucin Israla. Israla herself sat front and center with four Earther males surrounding her. The Plasian leader was already nude, her perfectly proportioned body betraying none of her advanced years. None of her companions were over the age of twenty. Israla’s delight in young, virginal men was legendary.

A quarter of the audience consisted of Kalquorian men. Immense and muscular, not one was under six-and-a-half feet tall. In spite of the size difference, their resemblance to Earther men was uncanny. Theories abounded that the residents of Earth and Kalquor must have a common ancestry; the likenesses were too numerous to be coincidence.

Jessica hid her shock behind the inviting smile she'd perfected in front of her mirror. How had so many Kalquorians gotten through the blockade, she wondered? There had to be at least a dozen, which meant four clans.

Even as she shimmied closer to the first cluster of alien males, the sharp aroma of cinnamon tickling her nose, her body softened and warmed. Moisture crept from the lower region of her body as several pairs of blue-purple eyes raked over her fair-skinned flesh.

The Kalquorians were made of chiseled muscle, their bulging anatomies accentuated by black formsuits. Every Kalquorian Jessica had ever seen had black hair and dark skin similar to Michaela's Middle-Eastern coloring. Except for purple eyes with pupils slitted like cats, the Kalquorians could have passed for Jessica's own race—albeit very tall, bodybuilder Earthers.

Oh, and there was also the matter of the fangs and two penises each man possessed, she reminded herself. Jessica went hot all over at the memory.

She came close to the first clan, three Kalquorians grouped together. Every clan consisted of three men, the Dramok, Imdiko and Nobek. Dramoks were the clan leaders, born commanders. Jessica picked out that man in this clan immediately. His narrow face was smiling in anticipation, but underlying the expression was an attitude of calculating evaluation.

To his left was the Imdiko. His gentle smile and warm eyes spoke volumes about the clan's nurturer. Kalquorians were known for their warrior mentality, but the Imdikos were most suited to pursuits in medicine and caregiving. This one's openly kind face made Jessica like him on sight.

The third man, seated on the Dramok's right, couldn't have been more different. The Nobek's eyes watched her closely, sizing her up like prey. The clan's protector had an aura of barely restrained ferocity. Jessica suppressed a shiver of mixed desire and dread. She'd looked in the eyes of such a man once before. The memory of that threatening Kalquorian standing over her had fed many sexual fantasies since.

All the clan lacked was a Matara, the female childbearer. Devastated by a virus two centuries earlier that attacked the race's X chromosomes, Kalquorian women were now few and far between. Most of the females who managed to be born alive were barren. Kalquor teetered on the edge of extinction, and Earthers were the only known compatible species. Earth's religious dictates banned the mixing of the two races, which had spurred the desperate Kalquorians to seduce and even abduct Earther women to breed with. Now the two planets verged on war, with unlucky Plasius caught in the middle.

Jessica's stage anxiety fled as the Kalquorians enthusiastically applauded her approach. She smiled, swaying and undulating for them, feeling a growing ache in her groin as they looked her over. Their eyes darkened. The Nobek licked his lips and leaned back so she could see his arousal bulging the crotch of his formsuit. Jessica caught her breath at the size of him, and the clan laughed. She grinned back and traced her fingertips up her ribcage and around the outside contours of her breasts, throwing her head back as if the delight of her own touch was more than she could bear.

Over the music, she heard a chorus of appreciative growls from the Kalquorians. Her arms reached over her head, flowing like twin serpents and she leaned toward her



suitors. Still dancing, she beckoned them closer and the three men leaned toward her, smiles expectant, eyes glittering. She tilted her face ever closer, her lips parted as if entreating them for a kiss.

When she felt the warmth of their mingled breath on her face, Jessica suddenly twisted away, spinning twice toward the center of the room, letting her hair lash across the three Kalquorians' faces like hundreds of soft whips. She faced them, letting their appreciative howls and applause wash over her. She tipped them a wink and danced her way over to the next clan.

The next three aliens were seated near Saucin Israla's group. Before giving the clan her attention, Jessica couldn't resist seeing what the ardent Plasian leader was up to.

If Earth's blockade of Plasius bothered Israla, she gave no sign of it tonight. She lay naked on a nest of young Earther men, laughing and fondling eager flesh as they watched the performance. Tonight the bronze Plasian had dyed the furry mane that crowned her head in gold and silver, a complement to the dancer's costumes. She grinned her delight at Jessica as one of her escorts stroked her hairless sex with fumbling fingers. The others eagerly licked and fondled her small, perfectly formed breasts. Although her unlined face and slender figure would have made most 20-somethings back on Earth mad with jealousy, Israla was older than Jessica's grandparents. Jessica knew age didn't hold any sway over the Plasian Saucin. The four youngsters receiving her attentions tonight would be exhausted within the hour and barely able to walk come morning.

Jessica's amused glance slid away from Israla and her boyfriends to look at the next batch of Kalquorian suitors. When her eyes met the clans' she faltered for a brief instant.

The three men she looked at weren't in the same high spirits as the rest of the crowd. They smiled pleasantly, and there was nothing in their demeanor to suggest they weren't enjoying themselves. But they held themselves with a restrained air, almost aloof. Their eyes were sharp on Jessica. She sensed an aura of power, similar to Israla's when the Saucin wasn't covered in young men.

She looked them over as she danced for them. The man seated in the center of the clan didn't have the blue-black hair of the other Kalquorians she'd seen. The long waves flowing past his muscular shoulders were steel-gray where the light reflected. It wasn't the gray of age; his handsome square-jawed face was far too youthful for that. His sensuous lips curved into the slightest of smiles.

He was the most muscular of his clan, and his purple-trimmed black formsuit showed his powerfully built body to advantage. Only the heavy gray boots that came almost to his knees interrupted the clinging fabric of the formsuit. It wasn't hard to imagine running her hands over his wide chest down to the trim waist. He was built like the statues of Greek gods Jessica had seen in an illicit art book back on Earth.

The lean-muscled man sitting to the left of Steel-Hair was handsome too, but in a different way. His coarse black hair was caught back in a long braid, accentuating an angular face. His eyes, as purple and catlike as the rest of his species, slanted upward, giving him a slightly Asian look. A mustache outlined his upper lip and he sported a

goatee as well. It was a dangerous look, and Jessica's stomach tumbled at the thought of being alone with him despite the easy demeanor that betrayed his Imdiko nature.

He wore a loose-fitting blousy shirt that opened to reveal a smooth, defined chest. His black trousers were cut to flatter his long legs. A phrase Jessica once heard popped into her head: a long, cool drink of water. She wasn't sure what that phrase meant, but it seemed to fit the Kalquorian.

The third member of the clan could only be described as exquisite. His long straight hair was a glossy sheet of black. He had high cheekbones, a strong chin, and straight nose. He was too gorgeous to be real, Jessica thought. His expression was almost warm, not nearly as aloof as his clanmates. He wore the same purple-trimmed formsuit as the steel-haired Kalquorian, but his body, while still bulging muscle, was the leanest of all.

None of the men looked like a Nobek. Steel-Hair and Gorgeous Hunk both possessed sharp, watchful eyes, but neither looked like the predator she associated with the most brutal members of the Kalquorian race.

She danced for them, quite well she thought, each move more provocative than the last. And while their stares remained riveted on her, not one of their expressions' changed.

The song was coming to an end and feeling a little disappointed she hadn't garnered a more enthusiastic response from the clan, Jessica moved once more toward the center of the room to join Michaela in the last few steps. They finished with a flourish, and applause erupted around them.

There were many appreciative shouts from all the Kalquorians except the one reserved clan. They simply clapped. Jessica's heart sank. Had she danced so badly?

"Let us see more of the lovely Michaela," Israla called, as had been pre-arranged. Jessica curtsied and swirled off to stand in the shadows.

Michaela's music for her solo began, and Jessica watched with appreciation and more than a little envy. Michaela had been taught to dance by her mother at a young age even though the *Raqs Sharqi* had been outlawed on Earth for decades. So much of Michaela's life had been lived in secrecy; being able to dance in public was freedom she had never thought possible.

*I hope I haven't embarrassed her*, Jessica thought, her gaze drifting to the unresponsive clan. Surely they would be impressed with Michaela's mastery.

A chill raced down Jessica's spine. The steel-haired Kalquorian wasn't watching Michaela at all. His attention was focused on Jessica.

\* \* \* \*

Clajak saw Jessica start when her eyes met his. With everyone's attention riveted on the gyrating Michaela, he allowed a slow smile to spread across his face, a smile for her and her alone.

Despite the shadows she stood in, he saw her blush a delicate pink. His smile grew.

Beside him, Bevau emitted a soft growl in appreciation of whatever moves Michaela performed. Clajak felt, rather than saw, his impossibly handsome clanmate turn to him. Bevau chuckled, and Clajak knew he'd been caught flirting with Jessica.

The pretty Earther flushed even darker. Her elfin face abruptly pinched in anger, and she broke eye contact. Her nose lifted imperiously in the air as she looked away. It was all Clajak could do to not laugh out loud. The girl was a slender little wisp of a thing, but she had spirit. He couldn't wait to get his hands on her.

Bevau's deep voice rumbled softly in Clajak's ear. "I think we offended her by not showing how much we liked her dancing." He glanced at Israla's group. The Plasian leader and one of her young men coupled as they watched Michaela dance. The other young men caressed Israla's body as they too enjoyed the sight of the Earther gyrating her hips at amazingly fast speeds.

Bevau's voice sounded strained as he took in the vision of the Earther male's penis slipping in and out of Israla's tiny vagina. "We should be more like Israla. She doesn't allow her rank to get in the way of a good time."

Clajak shrugged. "We'll extend our apologies to Jessica McInness after the show."

Bevau went back to watching Michaela, who now writhed enticingly before the first clan Jessica had danced for. Clajak held back a snicker as he watched his personal assistant Korkla along with clanmates Raxstad and Govi. All three gustily cheered and applauded the exotic Michaela, their greedy eyes riveted on every sensuous move she made. The cinnamon scent of their arousal hung heavy in the air, and it was no wonder. She seemed to be making love to an invisible partner, her hips grinding against nonexistent hips, her head lolling with ecstatic pleasure. Watching her made Clajak's groin ache agreeably.

"That one is of royal lineage on her mother's side," Bevau whispered.

On the other side of Clajak, Egilka spoke up. "We're not looking for a Matara."

Clajak ignored the warning tone in his Imdiko's voice. "Israla says the intersex Earther is traumatized by living its entire life in secrecy. We are not suited for the seduction of Michael-Michaela Blake."

Bevau's eyes were full of pity as he looked at the Earther who, but for the broadness of her shoulders, looked entirely female. "It dances like it has no inhibitions. I still can't believe Earth would execute that lovely creature simply for being born male and female."

Clajak felt his own anger on behalf of Michaela. "Their religious fanaticism knows no bounds. They see evil in everything, and she...Israla said it preferred to be called a 'she'...has suffered greatly for it. I've given Korkla, Govi and Raxstad first rights to clan Michael-Michaela Blake."

For a wonder, Egilka grunted approval. "Govi and his clan are an excellent choice. His psychiatric work with Earther females has helped many overcome their horror of sexual relations."

*I wonder if Jessica McInness is repressed in her desires,* Clajak thought, and he glanced at her where she stood in the shadows. Her eyes darted away. Ah, he'd caught her peeking. Was this perhaps the game Earthers referred to as 'playing hard to get'? Clajak grinned. He liked games. He loved the hunt, loved it as much as the capture and conquest. Tonight promised to be fun.

"I hear the flesh of Earther women is both snug and yielding all at once. Others have said they've never felt anything so wonderful," he confided to his clanmates.

Egilka sighed, the expression on his angular face both exasperated and resigned. "You should leave her for whatever clan claims her."

"I'm a free man until we clan Narpok. Besides, I've not had an Earther yet."

The other man snorted. "You've never bedded a Tragoom either, but I don't see you racing to add one to your collection."

Bevau made a soft gagging sound. "Don't mention Tragooms and sex in the same sentence. Even Clajak has his standards." His smile turned wicked as he looked towards Jessica. "No clan will mind if their Matara has had the pleasure of the future emperors' attentions. They may even see it as a mark of distinction."

Clajak clapped his Nobek's shoulder with delight. "You like her too? Shall we share or take turns?"

"Since sex without marriage is a death penalty crime on Earth, she's probably still a virgin. My needs tend to be...primal. I'll let you break her in with your gentler hand and vast experience."

Clajak knew better, but he couldn't resist asking, "What about you, Egilka?"

His clanmate's face darkened. His answer was clipped, his tone final. "I have no interest in Earther females, however desirable they may seem."

"At least you concede Jessica McInness is desirable."

Bevau shook his head. "One does not come to Plasius to be celibate, Egilka."

A smile quirked the stern Kalquorian's lips. "I have no intention of practicing such a ridiculous idea. While Plasian females cannot handle us in the traditional fashion of lovemaking, they have eager mouths. They will serve me fine."

Bevau looked towards Jessica again. "That's a terrible waste of a perfectly delicious Earther."

Egilka responded with more of a growl than a voice. "You know how I feel about mixing our species. This conversation is done."

Clajak and Bevau exchanged a look. Clajak sighed and Bevau rolled his eyes. They despaired of ever convincing their reluctant clanmate of Earther women's worth to Kalquor. Even years of failure couldn't dissuade Egilka from his work to restore their women's fertility.

Clajak returned his gaze to the lovely Jessica, who seemed intent on Michaela's every move. He saw her fists tighten and her breath grow quicker as he looked at her, and he knew she watched him from the corners of her bright blue eyes. His knowing grin returned, and he saw her lips tighten in a thin line.

Such a temper she had! He hoped she would be as fiery when he took her to bed tonight.

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Jessica was well into her solo dance, having singled out all the clans for special attention except Steel-Hair's. She'd even made a point to beguile several Plasians. The clans howled and cheered their appreciation, the pungent aroma of cinnamon all but drowning out the musky scentwood burning in one corner. Jessica knew the sharp spicy

scent belonged to the Kalquorians; it signaled arousal for the alien race. She was delighted to know the effect she was having on them.

Meanwhile all the Plasians coupled, overcome by desire. Israla crouched on all fours while one Earther male took her from behind and another plunged his desperate flesh in her mouth. The other two lay exhausted nearby, but Jessica knew the Saucin was just getting started. No doubt she had more men on standby.

Jessica's skimpy panties were soaked from her own arousal. The movements and moans weaving through the shadowed audience excited her. Only one thing ruined the sensual flavor of the night.

The steel-haired Kalquorian and his gorgeous hunk of a clanmate had laughed at her. They had looked right at her, their whispers and grins telling her they found her dancing *funny*.

Now she had to dance for them again. To avoid it, to continue ignoring them would tell them they'd gotten under her skin. It would tell them they'd made her feel stupid and awkward. She'd never give those arrogant alien bastards that kind of satisfaction. The other clans liked her, so what did Steel-Hair and Gorgeous Hunk matter anyway?

She'd show them.

Jessica moved back to the center of the room. *Dance as if you're fucking them* came Michaela's advice. She faced Steel-Hair's clan, skewering them with her eyes. They returned her stare, Steel-Hair and Gorgeous Hunk smiling expectantly. The third man watched too, but his expression was thunderously dark. Maybe he thought his clanmates were mean too. Jessica's heart warmed at the possibility of a sympathetic ally.

As the music began to thump harder, building toward a faster rhythm, Jessica deliberately tore a strip of cloth from her skirt, baring a long, lithe leg. Kalquorians on all sides roared approval, and Steel-Hair and Gorgeous Hunk's smiles grew. Their Imdiko's eyes widened and he licked his lips.

Holding the ends of the fabric in her hands, Jessica approached them, her abdomen undulating as if to beckon the men closer. She was only an arm's length away when she halted before them. Letting go of one end of the scarf, she waved it so it slid across all three upturned faces. With satisfaction, she noted the telltale bulges of their crotches. Their cinnamon-y scent blanketed the air around her.

*They want me*, she thought, and her confidence soared with the music. She left behind any pretense of restraint. Her hips gyrated around and around, her soft fleshy breasts jiggled in their beaded cups as she shimmied, and her hair whipped about her shoulders when she tossed her head with abandon.

She thought of the three aliens surrounding her, pressing their hard, unforgiving bodies against hers, fighting to control her as she struggled against their possession. Her dance became one of wild savagery as she showed them she would not be contained. She had escaped the cage of Earth's repression and she would not be captured again.

But she was one woman and so very small. The three aliens were beasts; strong and ruthless monsters. Her dance reflected a struggle against impossible odds, and even as her movements became increasingly frantic, she showed signs of surrender. She

wound the torn strip of skirt about her cuffed wrists as the strength of her imagined assailants overwhelmed her.

The music came to an abrupt crescendo as she fell to the floor before the seated Kalquorians. Her bound arms lay above her head, her legs folded beneath her, her chest heaving as she looked up at Steel-Hair's clan, her eyes soft with submission. She lay before them, making an offering of herself.

In the seconds it took for the spell of her fantasy to lift, she saw the darkness of the Kalquorians' eyes and the flash of fangs behind their lips. Low-throated growls rumbled from deep in their chests. They looked feral, and Jessica realized she may have gone too far.

Too late, she tried to roll away. But as the other clans wildly applauded her performance, Steel-Hair grabbed her. Faster than she could fathom, he draped her across his lap and his mouth covered hers.

His tongue invaded her mouth and swept her in the kiss, his lips hard enough against hers to bruise. Hot, burning hands roamed over her body, caressing her breasts, the bare flesh of her abdomen, pushing aside the skirt to stroke the insides of her thighs. All the while, Steel-Hair plundered the soft flesh of her mouth, his tongue tasting her thoroughly.

He released her from the kiss, and Gorgeous Hunk's mouth took his place. Jessica moaned as the hands on her body grew more demanding. As Gorgeous Hunk sucked her tongue into the furnace of his mouth, Jessica felt her bra pushed up until her breasts spilled out. A wet mouth warmed one pink nipples mound as a strong hand kneaded the other.

The fingers tracing delicate circles on her inner thighs moved up to slip inside the edges of her panties. Feeling the man's touch on her naked flesh, Jessica's legs parted of their own accord, inviting him to seek further. She cried out into Gorgeous Hunk's mouth as experienced fingers explored the wet folds of her softest flesh.

Teeth gently nipped at her breasts as the Kalquorian's probing touch found entrance. Jessica's hips bucked when a thick finger invaded her body. She'd never dared to explore herself in such a way. Feeling something inside her untried sex was a revelation. She gushed honey over the welcome intruder. Warm pleasure radiated as the Kalquorian pumped his finger in and out of her center. Her abdomen tightened as heat built within her belly.

Gorgeous Hunk's kiss ended. He looked down at her, his breath coming hard and fast. His gaze traveled down her body, taking in Steel-Hair suckling on her breasts and the third clanmate, whose angry expression had transformed to naked lust, working her eager flesh with his knowing fingers.

Gorgeous Hunk returned his gaze to Jessica's face, and he smiled. It was a dangerous smile full of dark promise, a Nobek's smile, but it reminded Jessica of something else; the grins and laughter he'd exchanged with Steel-Hair earlier.

They'd laughed at her, and now they expected her to fuck them.

The ache in her womb grew to desperate need. As much as she wanted fulfillment at the sublime hands of the third Kalquorian, Jessica's anger at the other two brought back her reason. Her wrists still tangled in the gold-trimmed length of skirt, she

pushed Steel-Hair from her tingling breasts. Her nipples pointed upward as if desperate to regain the voracious mouth that had been devouring them. Ignoring the pleas of her body, she clamped her legs together against the third Kalquorian and squirmed to escape the delicious invasion of her vagina.

“I’m not done dancing,” she announced in Plasian, her voice cold.

Three sets of eyebrows shot up at her declaration. “Excuse me?” Steel-Hair said in the same liquid language, his tone disbelieving.

Jessica fought off a shiver at the rich, honey-smooth voice. “I have another dance to perform,” she said, her own voice not quite as firm this time.

“Indeed you do,” Gorgeous Hunk agreed, his voice a deep bass rumble. His big hand reached to cover one of Jessica’s breasts. He gave it an appreciative squeeze. “You will dance for us in our bed.”

His cocky self-assuredness only made Jessica madder. She shoved his hand away and tugged her bra down to cover herself. The men seemed too startled by her sudden rebellion to stop her, and she took the opportunity to untangle herself from them, moving to stand just out of reach.

“I’m not interested in your clan,” she hissed so no one else could hear. Without waiting for a reaction, she spun on her heel and marched toward where Michaela waited in the shadows. Wild applause from the other clans followed her.

“You will be.” She heard the threat in Steel-Hair’s honeyed voice, and her skin erupted in gooseflesh.

“Holy shit,” Michaela whispered as Jessica reached her side. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Jessica.

Thinking how far she’d strayed from Michaela’s precise choreography in the attempt to seduce Steel-Hair’s clan, Jessica blanched. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you kidding? Your dancing was brilliant! You finally discovered the passion of it.” Seven years her junior, the intersexual still managed to look like a proud parent. “I thought that clan was going to fuck you right then and there. You got them really horny.”

Jessica’s smile was bitter as she thought about her victory over the Kalquorians. “That will teach them to laugh.”

Michaela’s delight faded as she uttered a confused “What?”

The music started again before Jessica could answer, and they ran into the center of the room in a swirl of silk.

\* \* \* \*

“What was that all about?” Bevau whispered.

They watched Jessica join her friend in the shadows across the room. Clajak’s erection was almost painful in its intensity, and it fueled a spark of anger. How dare the little wisp of Earther tease him that way!

Glowing, Clajak snarled, “I don’t know, but Jessica McInness will give herself to me tonight.” Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he turned to his Imdiko. “You seem to have changed your mind about Earthers, Egilka.”

Egilka sucked on the finger he’d used on the sweet flesh of the woman so recently in their possession. The Imdiko’s gaze flicked behind Clajak. Following that direction,

Clajak saw a Plasian couple rutting. The male knelt between the female's thighs, working his thin penis in and out of her warmth. Her buttocks propped up on piled cushions, the bronze-skinned woman's head and shoulders rested on the floor. Her eyes were on Egilka. She stared at his obvious erection. Her olive mane of hair waved as if to beckon the massive Kalquorian to her. She smiled and licked her lips in invitation. Egilka grinned and he loosened his pants closure.

"As appetizing as the little dancer is, she's still an Earther. My needs are easily sated by those who won't pollute our race. But since you insist on pursuing her, you'll be excited to know she is indeed a virgin."

His dark eyes riveted on the Plasian girl, Egilka crawled over to her. She reached eager hands to his crotch to help free him from his trousers. Long, deft fingers tugged Egilka's two penises, shining from their own lubrication, to her wicked tongue. He growled softly as she first laved the smaller organ meant for anal stimulation, then the larger one. Neither would have fit in her sexual orifice, but Plasians had a long history of enjoying what Kalquorians had to offer just the same.

Between her legs, the Plasian male suddenly tensed and cried out. The tendons in his long, willowy body stood out as he spent himself. Even as her own lower body spasmed in kind, the female didn't miss a beat in her attention to Egilka. She moaned between licks and sucks on the Kalquorian's rigid flesh.

Her Plasian partner disengaged to fall smiling onto waiting cushions. Another Plasian male quickly took his place, his reed-thin penis slipping into the waiting flesh. His movements were slow and languorous as he watched himself use the willing female.

Bevau licked his lips as he watched, but his mind wasn't just on watching the compliant Plasian get fucked. "So much for royal decorum. I guess we wrecked that with the dancer." He glared at Clajak. "Don't you dare make Egilka stop. Considering the news we got today, he deserves a little pleasure. He's going to be pissed when you tell him his new orders."

Clajak shrugged. "He should have given up trying to fix our females' infertility long ago. The moment we knew the virus had altered not just the chromosomes but also our DNA, it was a lost cause."

The Plasian girl's tongue whipped Egilka's organs in a frenzy. She certainly was talented, Clajak thought. If he hadn't been determined to punish Jessica for her teasing, he would have enjoyed a turn with the gifted Plasian.

"Don't worry about Egilka," he continued, hearing the strain in his own voice. "We'll help him get over the disappointment. His sense of logic and duty will see him through."

"There's never been any doubt about his adherence to his duties," Bevau agreed.

Clajak's lips tightened at the insinuation. To retort would only invite another debate on his tendency to ignore obligations. He refused to waste this night on unwanted responsibilities his clan and fathers would foist on him.

Egilka straddled the Plasian girl's face, and she opened her mouth wide to take him in. She held his smaller penis in one hand, pumping it hard while keeping it from stabbing against her throat as he fucked her mouth with the larger one. She kept her head tilted back so he could slide the entire length of his massive cock in her mouth and down



her throat. Clajak added the delightful scene to the list of things he wanted to do to Jessica. Her first experience with a man would be epic, he promised himself.

As if thinking of Jessica summoned her, the music began again, signaling the final dance. Clajak and Bevau turned from the view of Egilka driving his groin against the Plasian's face to watch Jessica and Michaela dash to the spotlighted center of the room. They faced each other, nearly touching breast to breast, their expressions fierce. They began dancing, their movements a simulated struggle against one another, as if fighting for supremacy. Perspiration made their silken flesh gleam, and Clajak thought of how soft Jessica had been in his arms, of the musky scent that exuded from her pores. He tasted again the sweet mounds of her breasts filling his mouth, her nipples hard pebbles against his tongue.

"Why was she so mad with us?" he wondered out loud.

Behind him, Egilka emitted a low howl, his climax ripping through him. Clajak knew his clanmate liked to prolong his couplings. For the stoic Imdiko to have given up his pleasure so quickly proved how thrilling he'd found the Earther's body. Maybe there was hope for Egilka after all.

Bevau's voice was wistful as he watched the Earthers engaged in choreographed battle. "At least we know she enjoys being touched. Jessica McInness is one less female Govi will have to treat. Too bad she doesn't like us."

Clajak smiled, his eyes roaming over the body his hands and mouth had enjoyed a few minutes before. "Don't sound so disappointed. I'll change her mind about us, and you will have your chance to feel the warmth of an Earther."

The women ended their simulated fight to gracefully beseech the audience for favor. While Jessica went in the opposite direction, Michaela approached Clajak's clan. As beautiful as the intersexual was, as potent as the dance she beguiled them with, Clajak had to force himself to not look at Jessica.

*I will have you, my reluctant Earther. No amount of resistance will stop me,* he vowed.

Egilka, a relaxed smile on his face, returned to his place by Clajak's side. The clan applauded as Michaela danced for them.

## Chapter Two

Jessica raced through her preparations for the rest of the night, high as a kite from the performance's success. No wonder Michaela loved to dance, she thought, sitting down to put on fresh makeup. Once the stage fright disappeared, the exhilaration felt better than any stimulant. The audience's adulation added to the thrill, making Jessica euphoric.

Not to mention her little triumph over Steel-Hair and Gorgeous Hunk. Jessica had settled that score to her extreme satisfaction.

Finished bathing and dressing, Michaela sat next to her before the vanity. The dark-haired beauty was halfway through reapplying makeup when her own high wore off. She ran from the dressing table, crying in harsh sobs.

She crumpled on the nearby lounge, her wails growing louder and more hysterical. Nothing Jessica said or did soothed the dancer.

"Calm down, Michaela," Jessica begged, stroking her friend's arm. "It will be okay."

"How can it be?" she wailed. "I don't know what scares me more; that no clan will want me or one will! What kind of men would clan a freak like me? They'd have to be perverts!"

The door to their dressing room opened. At the soft buzz of the panel sliding, Michaela uttered a little scream, as if expecting a clan of sex-starved Kalquorians to gallop in. It was only Israla carrying a carafe of blue liquid, and she stopped in the doorway to take in the situation. Seeing no imminent danger, Michaela went back to crying.

"I was afraid she'd be like this," Israla said to Jessica, who marveled at the Saucin's appearance. Wearing a loose, see-through tunic of gauzy material, the Plasian looked the picture of regal composure once more. Despite leaving her four exhausted dates scattered on the floor like discarded tissue paper, she looked as fresh as if she'd just wakened from a nap. Jessica gazed in awe at the older woman.

Israla perched on the lounge next to Michaela. She tugged on the dancer's arm, pulling her into a sitting position. "That's enough crying." She poured a cup of the blue liquid into a glass and handed it to Michaela. "Drink this, my dearest. It will help you feel better."

Michaela looked into the azure drink. Her sobs tapered into hiccups, but tears continued to flow. Finally, she raised her eyes to Israla's. "Tell me the truth. They were all repulsed, weren't they?"

Israla's eyes widened. She burst into throaty laughter. "On the contrary! Two clans are eager to meet you. I'm to take you to one of them immediately."

Michaela stared open-mouthed at Israla. Finally she said, "Really? And they know what I am?"

"Silly girl, drink your leshell. Because there are so few Kalquorian women left, the men often turn to each other for intimate companionship. Almost every one of them is bisexual."

"But I'm so... freakish." Michaela took a sip of her drink, then a second.

Jessica groaned her frustration. "No you're not. Stop saying that!"

Israla gave Michaela's hip a light slap like a mother reprimanding a naughty child. "There are many species in the universe that are both male and female. You are not so rare in the grand scheme of things. Jessica, fix her makeup. Korkla, Raxstad and Govi can't see her like this. Their clan is an important one, and Michaela's appearance must reflect their status."

Michaela took another long sip of her drink, and Jessica felt relief wash over her. Leshella went down easily, and it was easy to drink a lot before you realized it. It also relaxed one quickly. The more Michaela drank, the better off she would be.

Michaela obediently widened her eyes as Jessica gave her long lashes a coat of mascara. Her voice sounded almost bright as she spoke. "Do you know this clan? Are they nice?" Nervousness crept back in. "Will they expect me to—" she swallowed hard "—to do things with them right away? Because I can't, I'm not ready—"

Israla shushed her and poured more leshell into Michaela's empty glass. "Govi assured me his clan has no intention of rushing you into sex. He knows you need time to build trust."

"Really?"

"He's a doctor who specializes in helping Earthers overcome the trauma they suffered on your home planet. Many who escaped to Kalquor are now happily mated because of his work. The other two defer to his expertise. You have nothing to be afraid of."

Michaela actually smiled. She'd already drunk half of her second glass. "They sound nice."

"They commented on your beauty. I think you will like them."

Jessica applied ruby red lipstick to Michaela's full pouty mouth. "They'd be lucky to have you in their clan," she added. "I hope this Imdiko Govi will help you see what a wonderful person you are."

Michaela wrapped her arms around Jessica's neck. The alcohol worked magic; the intersexual rarely touched others. "You're too good to me," she whispered.

Israla placed the tray with the leshell on the lounge and stood. She offered Michaela her hand. "Come Michaela. All they wish to do tonight is talk."

Michaela, her expression a dreamy haze, took Israla's hand and got to her feet. She drifted to the door at the Saucin's side. Israla looked back at Jessica.

"I'll be back to take you to another clan in a few minutes. They're very eager to meet with you, Jessica. You made quite an impression."

Butterflies took wing in Jessica's stomach. "Okay," she whispered as the door closed behind Israla and Michaela. She grabbed the clean glass from the tray and poured half the remaining drink into it. *Just enough to keep me from making a fool of myself, but not so much that I make a fool of myself*, she thought crazily as she swallowed the wine-

like beverage. She drained the glass quickly and hurried to the mirror to double-check her own makeup while she waited for Israla to return.

\* \* \* \*

Israla led Jessica down the long dimly-lit hallway of her home's guest wing. Jessica's own room was located off the corridor, but they had passed it two doors back.

"Are you sure Michaela will be all right?" Jessica asked. She rubbed sweaty hands on the skirt of her soft pink dress. She was concerned for her friend's welfare, but she also needed to distract herself from what lay ahead. She tried to remember the faces of the Kalquorians who'd attended the dance, but the only ones she could recall were the members of Steel-Hair's clan. She'd left no room for confusion where her interest in them was concerned, she thought, her chin lifting in defiance.

"The leshellia had her sufficiently relaxed. Don't worry; for Kalquorians, Korkla's clan is remarkably civilized." A devilish grin spread across Israla's face. "Let's talk about who you're about to meet."

Jessica's stomach executed a slow flip-flop, and her heart pounded. She took a deep breath, filling her nostrils with the sweet, heady scent of the flowers that lined the walls in their pretty boxes. The floating globes overhead emitted the dimmest of illumination, giving the humble hallway an air of mystery. Beneath Jessica's slippers feet, the cushioned floor gave softly.

"I'm very excited for the opportunity, but I'm nervous too," she admitted to the tall Plasian.

Israla's naughty smile grew. She was enjoying herself, Jessica realized. "Get ready to be more of both," the Saucin chuckled. "You're meeting only one of this clan. It's my understanding each member wants individual time with you, the better to enjoy. You are spending tonight with the Dramok."

"Dramok...the clan's leader, right? Being with just one man makes me feel better." Some of her tension eased. While being ravished by three lustful Kalquorians at once was fun to contemplate, facing such numbers in reality as a virgin frightened her. Being broken in gradually wasn't as intimidating.

"I haven't told you who he is yet." Israla's eyes sparkled with devilry. "Lucky girl, it's Crown Prince Clajak who calls for you."

Jessica stopped cold. Her eyes widened in shock. Israla laughed out loud at her reaction.

"The son of the Imperial Clan? The next in line to be emperor? You didn't tell me the heirs to the throne of Kalquor would be in attendance tonight!"

Israla nearly danced with delight at Jessica's surprise. "You and Michaela were nervous enough. Neither of you would have danced one step had you known."

Jessica tried to swallow. Her dry throat clicked. A prince! Israla was the Plasian leader, but she was an elected official, not royalty.

The future emperor! *Take that, Steel-Hair*, Jessica thought smugly. Then her face flamed with the memory of the liberty his clan had taken with her during the show. The three princes had no doubt seen how easily she succumbed to the ravishing.

*Maybe that's what got their attention*, she thought. After all, few worlds were as uptight as Earth, and Kalquor had close ties with Plasius, the most sensual planet of them

all. Kalquorian men were not prudes by any stretch of the imagination. She'd seen what Steel-Hair's Imdiko clanmate had done with a Plasian at the performance.

"How do I address the prince?" she asked. Her voice came out weak and trembly. "I've never met royalty before."

Israla waved off her concern. Grabbing Jessica's hand, she tugged her down the hall toward the last door at the end. "Call him by his name. Kalquorians don't stand on much ceremony outside of official meetings. Treat him as he is...a sexy lusty man who is eager to bed you."

Coming to a halt before the door behind which Jessica's future awaited, Israla chimed the visitor announce button. The door slid open without waiting for her to identify herself. She swept into the room, pulling Jessica with her.

"Hello, my friend," she greeted the tall, muscular Kalquorian who stood waiting in the middle of the room. "Here she is."

Jessica's hopeful smile faded as she looked at the Crown Prince of Kalquor. It was Steel-Hair.

## Chapter Three

Israla pushed Jessica forward, propelling her close enough to Steel-Hair that she could feel the heat of his body. “Prince Clajak, may I present Jessica McInness.”

He smiled down at Jessica. The gold-tinged lighting globes overhead cast a warm glow on his dark skin. “Indeed you may,” he answered. His honey-thick voice rolled over her, and she warmed despite her chagrin. He took her long-fingered hand into both his, and lifted it to press to his lips. His purple cat’s eyes held hers captive.

Behind her Israla quietly said, “I’ll leave you to get acquainted.” The door swooshed closed as she left.

Swallowing hard, Jessica pulled her hand free of the Kalquorian and stepped back. “I told you I’m not interested in your clan...your Highness.”

He arched an eyebrow, but his smile never wavered. “That may be, but I’m interested in you. Would you care for a drink?” He turned to busy himself at a gold table, pouring her a glass of leshella.

Jessica folded her arms across her chest, painfully aware of how much cleavage the plunging neckline of her dress revealed. “Why am I here?”

Clajak turned to her, offering the glass. “Because I’d like to get to know you better.”

Jessica kept her arms folded, refusing the drink. The prince’s maddening smile never wavered, and he moved to sit on the biggest lounge she’d ever seen. He put the full glass on a nearby table.

He looked her over, his eyes evaluating as he took in the shape of her body. Jessica stiffened, her temper rising. He looked at her as if deciding whether or not to buy.

*You can’t afford me. I’m not for sale.* Jessica’s nose lifted haughtily in the air.

Clajak chuckled low in his throat. “Let’s start with why you have already rejected me.”

“I don’t like being laughed at. Even if my dancing wasn’t up to your standards, it’s no reason to be rude. I did my best.”

He blinked, and his smile disappeared as he finally regarded her with a serious expression. “I assure you, I did not laugh at your dancing. I found it to be quite pleasing, particularly the second performance.”

She wasn’t buying it. “I saw you and your clanmate whispering and grinning after the first dance. Don’t try denying it; you were both looking right at me.”

His expression cleared. “Ah, you are mistaken, my sweet. Bevau and I were discussing how much we were going to enjoy making love to such a talented woman. The smiles we shared were of anticipation, not amusement.”

Jessica felt horror grow in the pit of her stomach. “You didn’t respond to my first dance. I assumed I’d done it poorly and you were making fun of me.”

His tone sounded contrite. "I am sorry we didn't respond as you deserved. As royalty, we are expected to maintain some semblance of restraint." His smile returned, and he chuckled once more. The masculine sound of it made Jessica's sex tighten. "You undid our reserve with the second dance. We made quite the spectacle of ourselves, didn't we? I don't believe we've ever lost control like that in a public setting before."

Jessica's face flushed with embarrassment. She dropped her gaze. "I owe you an apology for my rudeness."

Clajak's voice was gentle. "It was a misunderstanding, my sweet. There is no harm done. Why don't we start over from the beginning?"

He wasn't sending her away? Jessica's heart lifted, and she smiled at him. "I'd like that."

"Good." He patted the lounge next to himself. "Come sit with me."

She drifted across the floor to perch about a foot away from him on the edge of the seat. Clajak picked up the glass of leshell he'd poured for her and handed it to her. She took it from him then gasped as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he whispered into her ear. "This is nice?"

"Very nice," she answered and raised her glass to her lips to hide her trembling.

He was warm against her side. He placed a hand on her knee, moving beneath the skirt of her dress. He stroked up and down the bare length of her thigh, his hand hot. Her heart thundered and she looked up at him. His eyes were dark as he studied her face.

"You are a good dancer. Have you done it long?" he asked. His breath was warm on her face. If he leaned over just a little, his lips would be on hers. Jessica's sex tickled to life.

"Only a few months. If I'm any good it's because Michaela insists I practice for hours every day. She's the real dancer."

Jessica heard the wavering of her own voice and dragged her gaze away from Clajak. She drank deeply of the leshell, mentally urging its calming effects to hurry, hurry.

"You have learned well." The prince took her empty glass from her hand and placed it delicately on the table. He cupped her chin and made her face him again. "Are you afraid of me, my sweet?"

The drink was finally starting to relax Jessica, but feeling the strength of the massive Kalquorian and her own vulnerability kept it from having the full effect she wanted. Biting her lip, she admitted, "I'm nervous. There are many restrictions against intimate relationships on Earth and the punishments are severe. I'm not over those fears."

"Your religion is quite strict. Does it not promise eternal damnation for—what is it called—'sins of the flesh'?"

"I don't believe in God," Jessica said with a flat voice.

He regarded her with interest. "How fascinating. I was under the impression your people were nearly brainwashed into belief."

"My parents meet with others in secret to study an older form of worship known as Buddhism. It's very different from the Church-sanctioned religion."

“So your beliefs don’t prohibit sexual relations?”

“Only the fear of being maimed and murdered keeps most of us in check.” She looked the prince over again, taking in the sculpted body. “What happened earlier with your clan is the closest I’ve ever been to intimacy. I might disappoint you.”

Clajak kissed her lips softly. The brief contact was enough to send a lightning bolt of desire through Jessica’s body, and her breath caught. “It is always a great pleasure to be a woman’s first. To see her discover all the joys of sex, to watch as her body awakens is a delight. I adore virgins.” He kissed her again, still gentle. “I promise to make your first time an intensely satisfying experience.”

“Please,” Jessica whispered as his kiss traveled down to her chin, along her jawline and to where her pulse beat in her throat. He left a wet trail as he tasted her skin. His arms wrapped around her, trapping her against his chest. Jessica closed her eyes as he molded her softness against his muscled torso.

Against her neck Clajak whispered, “A little pain, my sweet, then much pleasure.” His head reared back, and Jessica saw his hinged fangs appear. He darted forward with a rattlesnake strike, and she cried out as he bit into her throat.

He held her still, and the pain quickly subsided. Jessica’s recollection of her first encounter with a Kalquorian rose, and she groaned to relive the delightful memory.

*She drew breath, readying to scream as the alien kicked the doctor to the side. Moving too fast to be seen, he was suddenly on her, biting her neck, and sending the intoxicant his fangs contained into her bloodstream. Euphoria overtook her. She felt the strength of the male on top of her and knew she couldn’t resist. She didn’t want to escape. Though it meant death from the unforgiving law enforcers of Earth, she wanted the brutal Kalquorian to tear the clothes from her body and press his iron sex into her. She’d give him anything, anything he wanted.*

Jessica sighed as Clajak’s bite took hold, and that remembered euphoria coursed through her once again. It brought her senses alive, and she moved against the Kalquorian prince, rubbing herself against him. He withdrew his fangs and sucked hungrily at the wounds as she writhed, caught up in sensation.

His mouth left her and he laid her full length on the soft lounge. Clajak looked down on her and she reached to stroke the steel-tinged hair, to trace the strong contours of his face, the fullness of his lips. He smiled down at her, his fangs again folded to the roof of his mouth and hidden from sight.

“You are feeling well, my sweet?” he asked.

She giggled. “Very well.”

His grin widened. “Let me have a good look at you. Don’t worry, I will replace anything you lose, except the burden of your virginity.”

He wrapped his great hands on the low vee of her neckline and tore the fabric apart. She lay beneath him naked from the waist up. Her sex gushed honey in response to the violent exposure.

He traced the deep, puckered scar just over her left breast. “What happened to you? This must have been a brutal injury.”

A momentary stab of dread was quickly washed away by her intoxication. “An accident long ago. Everything still functions normally.”



He grinned at her. "I am glad to know it."

He drank her in with his eyes before sweeping his hands over her nude torso. If the scar repelled him, he didn't show it. She arched under his touch, the heat of his hands transmitting to the depths of her womb. He cupped her breasts in each hand, squeezing and molding the pliant mounds as he had earlier during the performance. She moaned to be ravished. Her hands traced his muscled chest hidden behind the slick black formsuit. She wished she possessed his brute strength so she too could tear his clothing away.

His smile was wicked as he leaned over to capture one hardened nipple between his teeth. Her sex spasmed as he bit just hard enough to send a small shock of pain. She cried out. The mixture of pleasure and hurt was intoxicating, and she wanted more of it.

He'd promised intense delight, and he'd already delivered it without the benefit of penetration. She felt faint when she contemplated anything more pleasurable.

Clajak mauled her breasts, gentle one moment, harsh the next as if intuiting her desire for both extremes. He kissed, licked, bit, sucked and slapped the tender flesh, and Jessica's panties soaked with pleasure. Her breath sobbed as she basked under the combined tender and rough use of the Kalquorian.

He left the playground of her now-reddened breasts to kiss and nibble his way down her wasp-thin belly. His fingertips hooked around the top of her dress' skirt, and he yanked at it, determined to bare the hungry flesh beneath. The sound of more tearing fabric filled the air. Jessica's thin panties went with the dress, and she lay naked beneath Clajak.

He sat up, his stare resting on the chestnut swirls of pubic hair concealing her sex. His gaze drifted up her body until he looked into her eyes. He smiled, and his fangs peeked out as he spoke. "Your scent is driving me mad, my sweet," he growled. "Before I lose all control with you, tell me how much you are willing to give."

The combination of leshell and his bite drove away all inhibitions.

"Everything," she moaned, parting her legs in offering. "You can have everything."

"Then everything is what I'll take." With that promise, he knelt between her legs. Taking hold of her ankles, he propped them on his broad shoulders, opening her wide. His tongue ran over his mouth, and his fingers went to the lips of her sex.

She arched against the clandestine touch, and tears ran down her cheeks at the excruciating pleasure the contact brought. To think she could enjoy such illicit pleasures without fear of reprisals!

Clajak parted the folds of her sex, looking at her secret flesh with hungry eyes. He examined her with an almost clinical thoroughness, his fingers tracing every wet nook and cranny. He took her clitoris between his thumb and forefinger, rubbing the button of flesh.

Jessica cried out as intense pleasure tore through her belly. Clajak immediately released the sensitive nub, an animal growl rumbling through his chest. "Easy, my sweet little Earther," he said. "I will not have you exhaust yourself so soon."

"Please," was all Jessica could think to say as she reached for him. The sharp blast of pleasure left her weak and trembling, but some primal part of her brain whispered that it had been only a taste of joys to come.

“Lie still,” he ordered. His palm smacked a warning against one buttock, and the warmth of the strike fed the heat of her sex. She grasped fistfuls of the lounge’s cushions to keep herself under control.

Satisfied with Jessica’s reluctant obedience, Clajak returned to his slow exploration. He traced his finger through the wet slit of her sex and brought it to his mouth. He sucked her honey from his finger slowly, relishing the taste of her. Jessica moaned and her knuckles went white in the effort it took to remain still for his caresses. Again he coated his finger in her juices, and again he tasted, his closed eyes telling Jessica he enjoyed her flavor.

His finger once more ran over her sex, and continued down to trace slow, teasing circles around her anus. Jessica was surprised at the pleasurable sensation; it wasn’t the spearing thrill of her sex, but that part of her anatomy offered a low hum of anticipation just the same.

She knew about the second sex organ of the Kalquorians, knew where it corresponded to the female anatomy. It had been her greatest fear when she contemplated coupling with the alien race, but now intoxicated and eager for pleasure, she welcomed the intrusion of Clajak’s finger as he pressed it inside her nether orifice.

His finger was thick, thicker than the slender penises of the Plasian males she’d seen naked. Her tight aperture wrapped snugly around the invader. She closed her eyes to shut out all but the sensation of Clajak gently pumping in and out of the sensitive flesh. Her hips rose and fell without conscious control in time with his rhythm.

“Good girl,” the prince whispered. “Let your body guide you. Do not judge. Let it tell you what it wants.”

His other hand moved between her legs, and a finger entered her womanhood. She groaned to feel something inside her there, filling up the emptiness she’d lived with for all of her twenty-five years.

Her eyes slit open to see Clajak watching the movements of her body. He held his hands still, letting her consume his fingers at her own pace. She wondered how it looked to him, seeing his brown fingers disappearing into her pink flesh and emerging glistening only to be swallowed up again.

He looked up to catch her watching him. He grinned a dangerous smile and pulled his fingers free of her hungry grasp. She whimpered, but one muscled arm caught her by the waist. Clajak stood, lifting her with him until she hung upside down in his grip. Her arms trailed the softness of the lounge. Her buttocks pressed against his chest and the hard lump of his erection stabbed the back of her head. She felt his face on either side of her thighs, and his breath was warm against her secret flesh. She emitted a groan that came all the way from her womb. She heard him inhale deeply, taking in the sea-salty scent of her. Then his mouth was on her, feasting on the softest part.

She wailed to feel his rough tongue enter her core and his mouth suck at her juices. She thrashed in his grip, unable to keep still as he fed. He held her firmly, keeping her eager sex immobile and at his mercy.

Jessica beat helpless fists against the lounge as warm ecstasy filled her belly. She cried out, but her lungs were no help in releasing the building tension. Her head whipped from side to side, her hair slapping against the thighs of her tormentor.

Clajak's tongue worked her sensitive flesh without mercy, laving her with wide strokes one moment, stabbing into her the next. He flicked the tip against her pleasure button, making her sex spasm with delicious agony. He tortured her with his tongue. The heat built in her womb until it was almost painful, and still he gorged on her.

Jessica's world was all throbbing desire, her entire body consumed by passion. Just when she didn't think she could possibly hunger more, Clajak brought her to a new high.

His mouth closed over her clitoris, and he sucked it deep into his mouth, his tongue whipping over it in a frenzy. The pleasure exploded within her body, disintegrating her, and her ragged screams peeled over and over as she jerked in the alien's strong arms. She saw and heard nothing; mindless rapture tore her to shreds.

Slowly she came back to herself, her sex still pulsing with receding waves of bliss. Clajak lowered her to the lounge. He stood over her, smiling.

"Is it as you had hoped?" he asked, his voice sounding a million miles away.

Jessica was beyond words. She could only sigh, which made the Kalquorian laugh.

He undressed, opening his purple-trimmed formsuit at the chest to reveal smooth, muscled skin. He peeled the top off, displaying broad, sculpted shoulders, corded biceps and a chiseled abdomen. He paused to yank his knee-high boots off then continued to disrobe. His thighs were bigger around than her waist, reminding her once again of how colossal the alien race was.

Jutting thick with arousal, his two penises gleamed with Clajak's natural lubrication. Jessica's sex tightened at the sight of the large organs. She wasn't certain he wouldn't injure her. She wondered if she could handle him.

She was willing to try.

"Kneel before me," he said, taking her by the upper arms. She obeyed, her sex flowing anew at the thought of taking him in her mouth, of tasting his alien flesh. She took a deep breath, letting his cinnamon scent flood her senses.

"I've never done this," she whispered, her gaze locked on the two bullet-shaped organs.

"I will be delighted to teach you."

He put one hand on the back of her head while grasping the larger of his members with the other. He ran the tip of the smooth-skinned cock over her lips, wetting them with his lubricant. She licked the fluid, tasting the sweet spice of him.

"Kiss it as you would my lips," he said, and Jessica did, her mouth slightly parted, her tongue flicking out to tease. He was warm against her mouth, and she kissed his cock again, then again, becoming more passionate. Her hands gripped Clajak's buttocks, squeezing the rock hard flesh as she slid her mouth over the tip of him, wrapping her tongue around his sex.

Sounding strained, Clajak's honeyed voice commanded, "Now use your hand on it while you kiss the other one, my sweet."

Jessica wrapped her hand around the larger penis. "Firmly," the prince coached. "Yes, stroke me just like that. Now your mouth."

Jessica tilted her head to one side to get to the smaller penis beneath her working hand. It had no opening for ejaculation; it had evolved for pleasurable purposes only. Remembering how Clajak's finger had felt inside her anus made her shiver with anticipation.

She kissed and licked, delighting in Clajak's sweet-spicy flavor. At his urging, she alternated between the two organs, both of her hands working his hard flesh. The veins running the lengths beneath each penis throbbed against her palms.

The insides of her thighs were slick with her flowing juices when Clajak pulled away. He looked down at her, his chest heaving with quick breath. He put his hands on either side of her head, pulling it back with his fingers tangled in her hair.

"Lean forward." His voice was breathy, but still filled with command. She did as he directed. "Now I will fuck your sweet mouth," he whispered. His predatory expression lent danger to his face. His fangs reappeared, giving Jessica an erotic fear-tinged thrill. "You feel how when your head is tilted like this, that your mouth and throat are in a straight line?"

"Yes." Her voice was a bare whisper.

"It will help you to keep from choking. Keep your throat relaxed, breath only when I pull out, and you will be fine."

He stepped close and bent over her, angling his larger penis. Jessica opened her mouth wide for him. His cock slid over her tongue, the vein throbbing. He slid in further, past the back of her mouth and into her throat. She stopped breathing, forcing herself to relax against the gag reflex. Clajak's smaller penis ran down the outside of her throat, leaving a wet trail in its path. He continued to fill her with himself until he reached the end.

He pulled back until just the tip remained in her mouth. Jessica took a breath, then Clajak filled her mouth and throat again.

Listening to her lover's breathing come faster, she filled with a sense of pride. The prince was finding pleasure with her, as inexperienced as she was. While she had always thought of herself as a strong, independent woman, she found it exciting to serve him. Hearing him command her to satisfy his flesh made her eager to do so.

After a few minutes of working her mouth slowly, the Kalquorian said, "Now a bit more energy, my sweet."

His pace quickened, and Jessica fought to adjust to the new rhythm. He pounded himself into her throat, emitting growls as he took what he wanted. Jessica's hands left his thighs to bury themselves in her own wetness, pleasuring her sex as the Kalquorian pleased her mouth. The heat in her womb grew, sparking into an inferno. She plunged one finger, then two, then three into herself, matching Clajak's pace. Her sex shuddered with the coming orgasm, spasming around her working fingers. Clajak's gasps grew in volume, telling her he was closing in on his own pleasure, readying to pour his seed down her throat. Her desire grew brighter, brighter, almost there...

Clajak disengaged, pulling free of her clinging mouth. He bent over and yanked her hands from her sex. She cried out and struggled against him, desperate to claim completion for herself. He held her wrists easily, his lips curled in a cruel smile as he denied her the orgasm she'd come so close to having.

“Naughty, naughty girl. Whatever would your Earth government say if they saw you touching yourself like that?”

“I’m not on Earth,” she protested. She ached fiercely, but she was no match for Clajak’s strength.

“Stop fighting me. I have something much better to fill you with.”

At his words, Jessica went very still. She looked at his engorged penises and shivered.

He led her back to the lounge and laid her down. She ran her hands over his powerful torso as he positioned himself over her. Damn, he was gorgeous.

He descended over her, his mouth searching hers out. She opened to his kiss and to the twin prods she felt below. He reached down to position himself, and she moaned in his mouth as he pressed against her openings.

Both their sexes were wet with juices, and he eased himself in. She moaned again as he filled her, her virginal passages yielding to the thick invaders. Pleasure mixed with the ache of taking him in, and her womb stirred with renewed desire.

His mouth left hers. “Now, my sweet,” he said, and a sharp pain blossomed in her belly. She cried out and pushed against the hard body pinning her to the lounge. “Easy, easy,” he whispered in her ear. “It is only the claiming of your innocence. It will no longer trouble you.”

The pain faded, and she quieted. She looked into the dark face of the Kalquorian prince. He smiled at her. “You are better?” he asked.

For an answer, she shifted her hips so that she took him deeper inside. She clenched her inner muscles around him as hard as she could. His sudden intake of breath warned her only a moment before he lost control and plunged his full length into her body. The sudden thrust drove a ragged scream from her.

He rode her hard, punishing her delightfully with his need. She hung onto his neck for dear life as pain and ecstasy blended into a rapturous mixture within her womb. She wrapped her legs around his pounding hips, adding her dancer’s muscles to the strength of his thrusts. The pain was every bit as exquisite as the pleasure his rough lovemaking gave her, and she sobbed with newfound delight.

Her sex climbed towards that peak again, spiraling upward faster and faster. Clajak snarled, his vocalizations becoming more beastlike as he came closer to his own climax. His pace grew more frenzied, feeding the inferno now raging inside Jessica’s body. She slipped ever closer to cataclysmic exaltation, then it crashed upon her, ripping her wide open, leaving her screaming and clawing at her lover’s back.

Clajak roared, his head thrown back to voice his own culmination to the heavens. He ground his loins to Jessica’s as if to fuse them together for eternity. His cock throbbed within her vagina as it filled her with his seed, and she screamed again when another orgasm tore through her.

It seemed to last an eternity, their bodies straining against one another as wave after wave of ecstasy took them. Little by little, they began to quiet, their cries dwindling to gasps, their muscles relaxing, until Clajak collapsed on Jessica. They lay there for some time, Jessica listening to the Kalquorian’s heart thump a bass beat in his chest. She

found it a little difficult to breathe beneath his weight, but she wouldn't have moved him for the world. His body covering hers felt too right.

Finally he stirred, propping himself over her on his elbows. He stroked her cheek, his touch amazingly tender given the strength of his taking. "You are incredible, Jessica McInness," he whispered.

"Right back at you," she murmured. *A lifetime of this. Earth has it all wrong; this is heaven.*

"I did not hurt you?" he asked.

"No more than I hurt you," she answered. "Sorry about the nails in your back."

He grinned. "That is good pain. I like it very much."

"I like what you did too. All of it."

"That was only the first lesson."

Fresh warmth blossomed in her belly, and Jessica stared up at Clajak with mounting anticipation. "The first lesson? You mean there's other stuff we can do?"

He swelled inside her anew and a whimper escaped her lips as he answered. "Much more pleasure, and a little more pain that enhances the pleasure. I see you enjoy both. Shall I show you, my sweet?"

She could tell whether she wanted to or not, the alien prince meant to instruct her. His tendency to dominate made her anxious, but like how pain had increased her pleasure, apprehension now fed her desire.

"I am your devoted pupil, my prince," she breathed.

\* \* \* \*

The sound of a door closing brought Jessica out of slumber. She blinked in the bright light of Plasius' twin suns as they streamed into the bank of windows that made up one wall. For a moment she didn't know where she was.

Clajak appeared next to the lounge she laid on, a silver tray in his hands. He wore a simple blue wrap around his waist. The knee-length garment was similar to a skirt, but it took none of his masculinity away. He smiled down on her, and the memory of the night before flooded back. She returned the smile and sat up.

"Good day, my sweet. Would you like food?" He perched on the edge of the lounge and balanced the tray on his knees. Scratches from her nails lined his defined chest. Jessica winced to see the damage despite knowing the Kalquorian enjoyed the abuse.

"I'm starving," she answered, peering at the breakfast...or lunch, judging by the positions of the suns. She recognized the steamed feshen eggs and nellus-berry juice, but the chunk of meat on the platter, roasted and smelling like heaven, was a mystery.

Clajak pinched off a bit of the meat and brought it to her lips. "Ronka meat from Kalquor. Many Earthers on my planet enjoy it."

Jessica let him feed her the morsel. It had a slightly salty, rich flavor. "Mmmm. It's delicious."

"I'm glad you like it." He continued to feed her as if she was a queen.

*Isn't that what you'll be when Clajak's clan takes the throne? Or will it be Empress? Will my being an Earther keep me from such titles?*

Jessica found she didn't care. Status-seeking wasn't her style; she'd never aspired to gain rank. All she wanted was a decent clan to spend her life with. She hoped she got along as well with the other two.

*If Clajak's clanmates are half as good as him in bed, I doubt I'll have many complaints.*

"I can't believe I slept so late," she said between mouthfuls.

"I consider it a compliment," Clajak grinned. "We had a very good time, didn't we?"

"I know I did." She was glad she'd escaped Earth even though it made her a traitor and kept her from her family. The things the Kalquorian had made her body feel! Her sex tightened at the memory.

He frowned a little as he continued to feed her. "You cried out in your sleep a few times. Did you dream badly?"

She shrugged. "I don't remember," she said between bites. *The old nightmare, but I don't recall having it for a change*, she thought. She suppressed a shudder.

He patted her mouth with a napkin and put the empty tray on the table. "Shall we bathe?"

"Wonderful. But shouldn't you tint the windows? Someone might see."

Clajak chuckled. "We're on Plasius. No one cares, except in a voyeuristic sense."

"You're right. I guess my brain is still stuck on Earth." Jessica didn't really want to put on a public display, but Clajak might think her a prude if she insisted on privacy. Swallowing, she started to rise from the lounge, but he stopped her by gathering her in his arms. He carried her to the bathing basin, where a small waterfall fed the pool.

"You certainly know how to take care of a girl," she whispered in his ear as he stepped into the pool. He set her down so she sat waist-deep in the water.

"I have had much practice," he answered and tugged his wrap off. He stood highlighted in the sunlight, golden light shimmering around his dark body like an aura. His penises stood at right angles from his groin, darker brown than the rest of his skin.

"Do those ever calm down?" Jessica teased as she looked over the stunning alien. The wetness between her legs had little to do with the water she was immersed in.

"You keep me excited," he answered, his expression serious. "I find it difficult to leave your warmth. When I do, all I can think of is joining with you again."

"Really? It's hard to imagine someone as inexperienced as me being exciting to you."

He knelt beside her and stroked her throat, her arms, and her breasts. "Your eagerness makes up for your lack of knowledge. That, and your body is like no other I have ever felt. Your sex yields to penetration, yet clings to mine with such a grip that I must fight for control every moment. I could make love to you ten times a day and I would still crave more."

He leaned over to kiss her upturned mouth. He tasted her thoroughly, leaving her gasping for breath.

He withdrew and gave her a knowing smile. Jessica made no effort to hide the effect he had on her. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He guided her to the waterfall. She leaned back to let it sluice through her hair, and he cradled her. Then Clajak took a lump of cleansing bar from the ledge of the basin and lathered it between his hands. He worked the suds through her hair, gently trailing his fingers through the tresses.

"You possess strength and independence," he observed, "but I think you like being taken care of too."

"I'm enjoying the attention," she admitted, allowing him to lower her backwards to rinse the soap from her hair. When he brought her back up, she said, "I don't give up control easily."

"You respond well to being dominated." Clajak rubbed the soap over her breasts.

"Maybe." Jessica claimed the bar from him and lathered her own arms.

He took the soap away and pinned her wrists behind her back with one hand.

"Definitely," he said, his other hand clutching her sudsy breasts.

She found it difficult to not struggle. She forced herself to allow him to have mastery over her. It was all for fun anyway, she told herself. There was no harm in playing at fantasy.

His skilled touch awoke all her senses, his wet hand taking liberties with her body. She moaned as he rubbed her breasts, and his tongue invaded her mouth in a kiss that made her moan all the more.

His hand slipped down to push between her thighs, to slide two of his fingers into her core. Her hips bucked to take him in as deeply as she could. He held her tight against his chest, his other hand still imprisoning her wrists behind her back. She pulled against his grip, wanting to feel him all over and torment him as he tormented her. He held her captive easily, not even breaking the bruising kiss he punished her mouth with.

*Helpless*, she thought, feeling a twinge of concern. But it was just a game they were playing, right?

In and out his fingers pumped, and he pressed another into her anus. She gushed honey. His hand worked against her sex, sending sharp stabs of pleasure through her belly. Rather than dampening her desire, her anxiety over her vulnerability only fed the bliss warming her.

A vision of being bound in chains rose in her mind's eye, her restraints rendering her powerless while Clajak thrust his sex into hers.

Jessica's heart pounded. *He wouldn't do such a thing. We're just playing a harmless game, that's all. If I told him to let me go, he would.*

She couldn't deny the twinge of fear fed the growing pleasure in her womb, however. His touch exhilarated her more when he exerted control over her. The element of danger, imagined though it was, leant excitement to their play.

She gave in to it. She stopped all efforts to escape his hold on her wrists, offering herself to him.

He responded with a growl, as if announcing his victory. He turned her so that she lay on her stomach on the floor from the waist up, her buttocks hanging over the edge of the basin, and her legs trailing in the water. The towering Kalquorian pinned her arms over her head, and he stood between her thighs. His cocks, burning hot against her skin, rested heavily on her buttocks.



She felt him shift, and the hand not holding her wrists positioned his smaller cock at the entrance to her sex. When she felt the larger member placed against her anus, she stiffened.

"Clajak?" She heard the high-pitched nervousness of her voice. She pulled against his iron grip.

"Relax," came his voice, his honey tone soothing. He tightened his grasp on her arms while his other hand pressed between her shoulder blades, holding her down.

"Show me how much you want me. Give yourself over entirely and feel the sweetness of absolute surrender."

Jessica trembled. Being taken this way would hurt, of that she had no doubt. She couldn't imagine her tightest channel admitting such an immense invader without pain. So why was her body warming to the prospect, her sex contracting with anticipation?

*He won't make me do this. I'll tell him I don't want to, and he'll stop.*

But her body clamored that she did want him this way. She ached to have him inside her, rutting against her helpless body like an animal. Feeling him at the threshold, ready to relieve the emptiness that yawned wide within her, took away all inhibitions.

She screwed her eyes shut as she forced the rest of her body to loosen. "I'm yours to do with as you see fit," she whimpered. She bit her lip against the coming invasion.

"Indeed you are," he said, quiet triumph filling his voice.

He pressed against her, and her nether orifice stretched to accommodate the intruder. Slowly Clajak impaled Jessica, and as the girth of his penis widened, her ass became more grudging in its acceptance. A deep ache began, and she groaned with the growing throb of pain.

"Easy, my sweet," Clajak whispered, his voice coaxing between quiet gasps. Hearing his breathless delight made Jessica want to give him the submission he demanded. She spread her legs as far open as she could, yielding to his need.

He crept into her tight aperture, enfolding his thick penis in her reluctant flesh. Jessica shuddered from equal parts pain and desire. She came close to begging him to stop, but something prevented the words. A need to be possessed, to submit to the strength of her lover overwhelmed the distress of the invasion. She made herself pliant to his animal urges, surrendering utterly to him.

"It is your pleasure to serve me, even as it causes you pain," he said.

The steel in his voice intimated complete authority over her. Her sex clenched around the smaller penis she'd barely noticed through the ache the larger one inflicted. Overwhelming craving left her gasping through her moans. "Yes," she answered him.

"You have no will but mine."

"Yes."

"You give yourself to me, to use as I desire."

Even as her straining flesh begged for mercy, Clajak's smaller cock found a sensitive spot in her vagina. It rubbed against a bundle of nerves, sending a thunderclap of desire vibrating throughout her body. She cried out, "Oh yes!"

"I am your master."

Now there was no line between ecstasy and pain. She strained backwards to take him in, unable to do so because he held her helpless to the floor. Perhaps sensing her intent, Clajak pushed into her faster, forcing himself hard into her writhing body.

"Yes!" Jessica screamed.

"Say it. Tell me I am your master."

"You are my master!" She had only a dim realization of his commands and her responses. Her consciousness centered on the exquisite misery in her loins and the oncoming orgasm.

"You are my slave."

"I am... your... slave," she panted, her body filling with the sweet brightness that would soon leave her shattered in a million pieces. At last his groin met her buttocks, his engorged flesh imbedded in hers.

He held still for an instant, letting her feel the fullness of him straining against the walls of her most secret flesh. Then he rocked back, pulling himself free until only the tips of his cocks remained within. Jessica gasped with mingled relief and loss.

Clajak drove his length into her once more, and she screamed at the delicious torment he inflicted on her. He released his hold on her to seize her hips. He rocked his pelvis, filling then emptying her over and over.

"Harder," Jessica heard herself say.

Clajak growled, and he moved faster, his groin slapping against her buttocks.

"Please Clajak. Take me hard. Take me as hard as you want." She sobbed as hurt and longing grew. She'd never known such craving.

Clajak snarled. He pounded into her, a force of nature beyond control. Jessica shrieked like wounded prey as he rutted against her, a brute gone mad with lust. His sex was hot iron, branding her fragile inner tissues, marking her as his.

Jessica's climax burst through her, a roaring slaving beast in itself. She screamed as fast as she could draw breath. It didn't ease after the first crescendo; the waves of orgasm rolled through her belly over and over, fed by the grunting alien mercilessly working her.

Orgasm after orgasm left her unable to breathe, and spots flashed before her eyes. Her shuddering body began to feel disconnected from her mind, and a gray mist grew to cloud her vision. From a distance away, she heard Clajak's roar. He rammed into her a few more times before collapsing over her, his sexes pulsing.

Jessica whooped air into her starved lungs as the spasms racking her diminished. With a groan, Clajak lifted himself off of her and slipped out. He hefted himself out of the pool and lifted her onto his lap. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I think so." She was still puffing for air.

He kissed her, his lips soft. His body was a warm haven, and she snuggled against him. She wondered how this man, still practically a stranger to her, could feel so right. He looked in her eyes and stroked her hair. She warmed at the tender expression he gave her.

"You have another terrible scar on your back." His brows drew together. "It is as if you were impaled. What happened to you?"

Jessica held back a shudder and made her voice light. "The accident happened when I was very young. I barely remember it." She bit her lip in sudden worry. "Does it bother you?"

"Only that you must have suffered great pain from such an injury. It takes nothing from your beauty, my sweet. I hope you didn't mind I caused you some discomfort with the rougher sex?"

"I never imagined something like that could hurt so much yet feel so good at the same time."

He grinned his devil's grin. "I'm glad I could show you such things. Teaching you has been a delight."

She grinned back. "If the other two are the teachers you are I will be a very happy clanmate."

Clajak's smile froze then faded. "Clanmate? To my clan?"

"Of course. That's why I'm here with you."

He moved her off his lap and stood. "I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding, my sweet. My clan is already betrothed to a Kalquorian female. I'm sorry if you had the impression you were to become our Matara."

She stared at him, unable to comprehend what he was saying. "But you came to the dance. The performance was to attract mates. Israla said she made that clear."

"She did. My clan used the privilege of our rank to join the festivities."

"We slept together. I only gave myself to you because I thought...I thought..."

He shrugged. "You attach far too much importance to sex, enjoyable as it was. Now that we've had our fun, you can move on to choosing a permanent clan."

Horror stole over Jessica. Bile rose in her throat, and she swallowed it back. "You used me." Her voice was small like a hurt child's.

"I seduced you for our mutual pleasure." He wouldn't look her in the eye as he tied his blue wrap about his hips. "You had a good time."

"You used me and now you're tossing me aside like garbage." She was humiliated, and humiliation always made her angry. "I never would have had sex with you if I'd known I was only a toy for your amusement."

"That's not how it was. I enjoyed our time together." Now Clajak looked angry too.

Jessica didn't care about his anger, not when her stomach was knotting with embarrassment. She found her ripped dress and yanked it on. "I was saving myself for my clan. For men I'd spend my life with, not some, some...royal spoiled playboy!"

"I don't know what you're so upset about. Any clan you end up with will have had many liaisons in their past. You should thank me for waking your urges so you can fit in. We're not all uptight Earthers, you know!"

"No, you're nothing like Earthers," she answered, her voice going cold. She clutched the torn front of her dress closed. She looked Clajak full in the face, uncaring at the fury that filled his expression. "You're a selfish brute who cares only about his own animal hungers. You may have a royal title, but you have no real dignity. And any man who would cheat on his fiancée is scum in my humble *Earther* opinion."

His face was a thundercloud. He said nothing though, and Jessica stormed to the door, ready to make her exit. As she walked out, she couldn't resist one last parting shot.

"Hopefully, your betrothed is having as much fun as you. She deserves it, considering what she's ending up with!"

There was still no answer, and as the door snicked shut behind her, Jessica felt her rage already dissipating. Halfway to her room, humiliation returned. Somehow she managed to keep her tears back until she reached the privacy of her suite.

\* \* \* \*

After Jessica's abrupt exit, Clajak jerked on a clean formsuit, his thoughts boiling. It wasn't his fault the silly little wisp had thought she was joining his clan. She should have confirmed his status before opening her legs to him. And to call him a brute and scum! Him, future Emperor of Kalquor, the next ruler of the very planet that offered her a safe home!

He threw himself on the lounge and was rewarded with the scents they had made during their time together. With a muttered oath, he stood back up and stomped to the picture window. He didn't want to be reminded of last night, of how utterly perfect Jessica had felt to his body.

He looked out over the garden with its maze of hedges and stone fencing, arranged in outdoor rooms where lovers could tryst in semi-privacy. It was late in the Plasian year, the coolest time of the unnamed capital city's tropical climate. Flowers bloomed in every shade of the spectrum, decadently flaunting themselves for all to admire. Had Clajak deigned to step outside, he'd be blanketed in their perfumes, rumored to be powerful aphrodisiacs to the Plasians.

Clajak saw none of the beauty before himself. He couldn't keep his mind off Jessica or the guilt overcoming him.

Behind the mask of her anger, he'd seen hurt and embarrassment. She'd entrusted him to release her from the shackles of Earth's overbearing morality, thinking she was giving herself to a man she'd spend her life with. Clajak had studied Earther psychology in preparation of ruling the alien race mixing with his own. He should have known the Earther female wouldn't have had intimate relations for simple recreation. Even the most rebellious of the backwards planet couldn't help but be affected by the strict laws.

*Brute. Scum.* Did she really think of him in those terms? He didn't want to care how she felt about him. But the shame he felt over taking advantage of the fiery-tempered woman wouldn't leave.

Even harder to forget was the exquisiteness of her body. Despite her slight frame, she was soft in all the right places, yielding where a man most wanted to be yielded to. Clajak had been fortunate enough to sleep with two of the rare females of his own kind, and even they couldn't compare with Jessica's pliant sweetness.

Her eagerness to learn was another reason to regret his behavior. He'd expected reticence from one brought up in such prudish circumstances, but she'd been fervent in her desire to please him. It had more than made up for her ignorance. His continuous craving for her shocked him. He climaxed only to be ready to have her again within minutes. Had he ever enjoyed a woman so much?

Now she never wanted to see him again. He'd been through thousands of women of many species and had left each one behind with scarcely a second thought. But this little wisp of an Earther, this Jessica McInness wouldn't leave his mind. She had indeed been remarkable.

*I'll get over it. In a few days, she'll be just another lovely experience to enjoy the memory of.*

He hoped he was right.

A chime announced a visitor at the door, [and –add] then Bevau's deep baritone filled the room. "May we enter, Clajak?"

"Of course." He turned from the window, relieved to be distracted.

Bevau and Egilka came in, looking fresh and rested. No doubt they'd found company of their own to spend the night with, Clajak thought. Both looked around, clearly wondering if their Dramok's guest remained.

"You let her leave?" Bevau asked, disappointment clear in his voice.

Clajak smiled ruefully and sat on the lounge. Again, Jessica's scent hit him, and his senses stirred. His smile faded. "I may have ruined your chances with her, my friend. She was most unhappy when she left."

Bevau arched an eyebrow at him. Egilka, feigning disinterest, went into the kitchen and rooted around for something to eat.

Clajak continued. "She thought we wanted her for our childbearer."

Egilka snorted. "I'm glad you cured her of that misconception." He found a chunk of leftover ronka meat and tore off a bite. Between chews he said, "Many hopeful little hearts will be spared when you finally accept your responsibilities."

Clajak pursed his lips in irritation. "I am in no rush to clan with Narpok. She's not a particular favorite of yours either."

The Imdiko shrugged. "Perhaps not, but we do have our duty." He finished off the meat and sat at the far end of the lounge. "As little as you wish to accept it, Emperor Zarl will not be able to attend his already sparse schedule much longer. It's time to put aside selfish pursuits."

Anger at being forced to endure another of Egilka's lectures made Clajak snap, "That's easy for you to say. You're older and have had your experiences."

His clanmates both laughed. Egilka shook his head. "You've had twice my experience in the fun and games department, my dear Dramok."

Bevau chimed in, his grin fit to split his handsome face. "You've had more fun in your short sixty years than most Kalquorians three times your age."

Their teasing made Clajak angrier. "Don't you start on me too, Bevau."

Egilka's light tone was no help in taking the sting out of his next words. "It's time you accept the inevitable. Grow up and stop being so selfish."

Jessica had called him selfish too. Clajak's temper erupted. "You should talk about the inevitable, Egilka. You've chased the doomed task of curing our women's infertility for decades, knowing full well the hopelessness of the work."

It gave Clajak no shortage of mean satisfaction to see his clanmate's expression harden. "You'll be the first to apologize when I succeed. With just a little more time—"

“You’re out of time,” Clajak interrupted despite Bevau’s warning hiss. “The Imperial Clan and the Council, on the advice of the Medical Board, have cut off all funding to the Fertility Project.”

The color drained from Egilka’s face. “They can’t. I’m so close.”

“You’ve been saying that for years. The hybrid fetuses being carried by the Earther Mataras show no defects thus far. With the first babies due early in the fourth quarter, all medical funding is being directed to their care.”

As the Imdiko’s expression became one of naked devastation, remorse overcame Clajak. *What the fuck is wrong with me? How could I be so cruel to my own clanmate, my dearest friend?*

Wanting to take the words back, knowing he couldn’t, Clajak whispered, “My fathers are all very sorry, Egilka. So am I. I know how disappointed you are.”

A cold, aloof expression, the one Egilka used when he’d been hurt the worst, slid over his angular face. He stood. “The only way you could know is if you cared. Since all you care about is yourself, you cannot possibly understand how this feels.”

He stomped out of the suite. *That’s two today*, Clajak thought, his face flaming with shame. He dared to look at Bevau and wished he hadn’t.

The Nobek’s handsome face was filled with a mixture of disgust and pity as he stared at Clajak. When he spoke, his voice was tight. “You can’t avoid your duties to your clan and people forever, Clajak. Sooner or later, you’re going to have to be the man you fear to be.”

With that quiet criticism, Bevau also left the suite.

## Chapter Four

Jessica's suite, while pleasant, wasn't nearly as opulent as the one Clajak's clan used. Everything from the green lounge to the size of the room itself was on a smaller scale. The paintings on the wall were of journeyman quality and framed in molded synthetic material instead of the polished rare wood. Small lighting globes drifted across the plain ceiling.

She didn't mind. The room was cozy and pleasant in its simplicity. Besides, the fewer reminders she had of this morning's dispute with the Kalquorian prince, the better.

Her windows looked over a side lawn of Israla's estate where a dozen Earther men played football. They all wore the tight shorts Israla preferred despite the cooler temperatures, the rest of their young, slim bodies exposed to the glare of the twin suns. Their game was vigorous enough to keep them warm. Tanned skin shone with perspiration. They might have been an enjoyable sight any other time, but Jessica couldn't help but compare their physiques to that of Clajak's. In comparison to his chiseled musculature, the former soldiers looked unfinished. Their genitals, outlined by the thin fabric of their shorts, seemed childlike.

Thinking about Clajak made Jessica shed fresh tears. She'd never been so humiliated in all her life.

The door chimed, announcing a visitor. Michaela's voice came over the intercom: "It's me."

Jessica hurriedly knuckled her tears away and smoothed her hair back. "Come in."

The door opened, and Michaela hurried in. She stopped short at the sight of Jessica's face. "You're crying. Was it so horrible?"

Jessica was equally taken aback by Michaela's appearance. "You don't want to know. Why are you dressed as Michael?"

The intersexual flushed, but lifted her chin as if challenging Jessica to find fault. Her wig was missing, showing Michaela's shorter tresses. Her hair had grown since they'd come to Plasius. As Michael, she'd kept it cropped close to her head, almost as military short as the soldiers she worked with. Now it was nearly to her shoulders. She'd pulled it back in a ponytail, giving the illusion of short hair again.

Her face was absent of any makeup, and the dark blue shirt she wore accentuated the broadness of her shoulders. The flatness of her chest meant Michaela had bound her breasts. She wore the shirt untucked and her black pants were cut straight in the legs to mask the feminine swell of her hips. She wore men's square-toed black boots.

She looked like a very fashionable teenage boy. Male or female, Michaela couldn't stand to look anything but her best.

She flopped onto Jessica's lounge with a heavy sigh. "I'm Michael in case I run into that clan again. They may as well see both versions if they're going to insist on chasing me around."

Jessica sat next to her friend. She frowned to let Michaela know the explanation didn't fool her. "They already know what you are. If you think they'll reject you as Michael, you're wrong."

Michaela's lower lip trembled. "I can't bear to have sex."

"With them or with anybody?"

A tear spilled over the intersexual's long black lashes, and she swiped at it angrily. "I don't want some men shoving their cocks in me because of some duty to breed."

Jessica took Michaela's trembling hand. "Did the clan you met act disgusted?"

"How could they not be?" She took a shuddering breath. In a low voice she admitted, "They were very kind and praised my dancing as the best performance they'd ever seen. They also expressed sympathy for how I had to hide my true nature all those years."

"So they don't mind you being both male and female."

"They said they would be honored to have such a rare, unique person as part of their clan."

Jessica felt a burst of happiness for her friend. "That's wonderful Michaela! Why are you freaking out?"

Michaela's hand tightened around hers. "They've only seen me as a female, which isn't really seeing me at all. If we have sex, they'll have to come to terms that I have both a cock and a pussy. Won't they be horrified? Anyone else would. Even you and you're my very best friend!"

"I would be no such thing," Jessica assured her, though she wondered.

Michaela continued on as if she hadn't heard her. "Maybe they won't have to see me. I mean, I could get pregnant by other means, right? They could start the embryo in a lab then implant it. No one would have to fuck me."

"I don't know about that. Those Kalquorians are a pretty lusty lot." Jessica couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Michaela turned from her own fears to concentrate on Jessica. "The clan you met hurt you last night, didn't they? That's why you were crying."

Jessica shook her head. "Not in the way you're thinking. I only met the Dramok, who just happens to be the Crown Prince of Kalquor."

Michaela's jaw dropped. "Prince Clajak? You're going to be part of the royal clan?"

Jessica barked harsh laughter even as her eyes stung with the threat of tears. "His clan is already engaged to a Kalquorian woman. I guess he just wanted to do an Earther before he went off the market."

Michaela's temper was almost as quick as Jessica's. Her dark eyes snapped, and she fumed, "He didn't tell you until he got you in bed? What an asshole!"

"Yeah. A total asshole." Jessica relished the profanity.



Michaela stroked Jessica's hair. "I'm so sorry. Here I am, dumping all my shit on you and you're hurting."

Jessica managed a smile. "Your drama keeps me from feeling sorry for myself. Clajak's not worth one single tear anyway."

Her friend groaned. "Damn, Dramok Korkla is the prince's assistant. If I let him clan me, I'll see Clajak's stupid face all the time, and I'll probably have to be nice." She flopped back against the cushions and came back up with a hiss. Her face contorted with pain.

"Are you okay?" Jessica said.

Michaela grimaced as she reached under her shirt to adjust something. "I haven't bound my breasts in months. I forgot how uncomfortable it can be if the binding shifts."

Jessica's door chimed. Startled, both of them shot to their feet. Michaela's eyes were wide. "What if it's Korkla's clan? They said they'd visit me today. That's why I'm here, trying to avoid them." She looked around the room as if looking for a place to hide.

"For heaven's sake, it's probably just Israla looking to see how her matchmaking skills worked out." Jessica headed towards the door. "If it is your new boyfriends, you have to face them sooner or later anyway. You're *supposed* to find a clan."

"They're not my boyfriends!" Michaela edged as far back into the room as she could until she bumped into the far wall.

"Enter," Jessica called.

The door opened, and Gorgeous Hunk, the one Clajak had identified as Bevau, stood over her. The smile on his breathtaking face was tentative, and he held a huge bouquet of flowers in his hand. The sweet aroma washed over Jessica, and the first thing she thought of when she came out of her surprise was, *I'd love to see that face between my legs*. She was instantly wet.

"Hello Jessica McInness," he said with a bow, his voice the deepest she'd ever heard. It seemed to rumble in her body, vibrating sensitive parts. She stifled a groan.

His gaze flicked behind her and he bowed again. "You have a visitor. Greetings, Michael-Michaela Blake."

Michaela came close, her eyes wide. "Damn, he's the handsomest man I've ever seen," she said to Jessica in English. "I thought the dim lighting last night was playing tricks on my eyes, but no, he's fucking hot!"

Bevau grinned at her, obviously picking up her admiring tone. He looked to his right and spoke in Plasian to someone else in the corridor. "Here she is, Korkla."

Three more Kalquorians stepped to Bevau's side. He moved back to avoid crowding the doorway. Jessica also stepped back to stand at Michaela's side. She recognized the newcomers as the first clan she'd danced for the night before. The perfume of the flowers receded, and her head cleared of the rambunctious thoughts she was having about Bevau.

Korkla's clan nodded at her before riveting purple eyes on Michaela. "Good day, Michaela," the tallest one said, his voice gentle as if speaking to a nervous animal.

"Hi Korkla. Govi, Raxstad." Michaela drifted closer to the men. Jessica glanced at her friend, startled by the huskiness of her voice. Her expression was a surprise too.

Michaela still looked fearful, but something else was there also. Something that looked an awful lot like desire.

Korkla took up Michaela's small hand and swallowed it in his larger paw. "You are as handsome a man as you are a beautiful woman."

"Thank you." Michaela's voice was breathy, and she couldn't seem to take her eyes off the clan.

"Israla's garden is in bloom and quite beautiful. Would you like to come with us for a walk?"

"Okay. See you later Jessica." Without a single glance back, Michaela let the smiling men lead her away.

Jessica stared after them, her mouth hanging open. After all the earlier hysterics, she'd never expected Michaela to simply take off like that. Perhaps there was hope for the sad little dancer after all.

Bevau moved to be framed in the doorway once again, and Jessica stiffened. He was just as gorgeous as ever, but most of her lust seemed to have dissipated. Realizing her mouth was still agog at Michaela's abrupt departure, she snapped it shut and glared at him.

"May I come in?" he prompted when she said nothing.

"I'm not having sex with you," she blurted. Her face warmed.

His eyes brightened with amusement, but to give him credit, his expression never changed. "I am sorry to hear that. However, I came to apologize for Clajak's behavior. He should have made our clan's mating situation clear before seducing you."

"Shouldn't he be the one making amends?" Jessica asked, but her voice was no longer unfriendly. She liked that Clajak's own clanmate understood she'd been badly used.

"Yes he should," Bevau answered, his mouth tightening for an instant.

"Come in."

Bevau stepped into her suite, the flowers in his hand filling the room with a heady fragrance.

"These are for you," he said, offering them gingerly, as if Jessica might throw them in his face. "It's an Earther tradition to offer flowers when one apologizes, isn't it?"

She took the short-stemmed flowers from him, inhaling deeply of the luscious fragrance. "Thanks. They're beautiful."

She looked him over, enjoying how his formsuit clung to his muscular body, outlining every bulge. His smile turned wicked, and Jessica blushed. She turned away, hurrying to the kitchen area. She found a bowl for the flowers and carried everything to the bathing basin while Bevau made himself comfortable on the lounge.

While the waterfall bubbled into the bowl, she glanced at the Kalquorian. Damn, he was stunning. She felt warm all over just looking at him, especially in the pit of her belly. He watched her with a calculating expression, and she snatched her gaze away.

"I take it Clajak is still mad at me. As if he has a reason," she grouched.

She put the flowers into the bowl to float prettily on the water. She took another deep breath of the intoxicating fragrance. She wondered if she could find a way to get Bevau naked. It was a shame to keep such a gorgeous creature covered in any way.

"I think he's ashamed but too proud to admit it." His deep voice made her shiver. She carried the bowl of flowers to the table and put it in the center. She stepped back to admire it. "He's a jerk," she said in her own language, her tone light.

"Hopefully, I can give you a better impression of my people," Bevau said, making her wonder if he understood what she had said. She looked at him. He continued, "In his defense, Clajak is young with a tendency to think with his lower regions. He's also under a lot of pressure."

Jessica sat on the lounge with her guest, leaving a foot of space between them. *I'd rather sit on his lap, she thought. Am I becoming one of those nymphomaniacs? All I can think about is getting him between my legs!*

She fought to keep the tremor out of her voice. "Is being a prince so hard?"

"It is when you fear you're not up to being the ruler of an entire empire. One of his fathers, the Dramok of the Imperial Clan, is in ill health. Once one male member can no longer rule, the entire clan steps down. If it happens soon, and it will, Clajak will be the youngest Kalquorian ever to take the throne."

"Isn't that kind of sexist? What makes the Matara less capable so she's not required?" Jessica tried to be angry at the unfairness. Lust took the bite out of her words.

"It's not that the Imperial Matara is considered nonessential. We no longer have enough females to keep to the old ways. Before the virus, all four members of the Imperial Clan had to be in place to rule."

Jessica tried to concentrate. "You said Clajak has more than one father. Is that possible?"

Bevau smiled at her confusion. "When the Matara gives birth, all the men of her clan accept paternal responsibility for the child. Even when it's obvious who the biological father is, all the males assume full rights." Bevau laughed, and Jessica shivered at the deep, warm tone. "Sometimes as a child I wished I had only one father, especially when I'd done something to warrant punishment."

His smile, flashing straight white teeth in his dark face, only made him more stunning. Unable to help herself, Jessica inched closer. "You're a Nobek, right?"

He nodded and shifted slightly, bringing himself a little nearer to her. He propped his arm on the back of the lounge, and she thought of how easily he could touch her, pull her on top of himself.

"I thought Nobeks were supposed to be fierce. You seem so friendly." She thought of the Kalquorian who had attacked her seven months prior, the same man who'd killed her commanding officer. She shivered.

He nodded, and leaned closer as if to impart a great secret. "Among my people, I'm as much an anomaly as your Michael-Michaela Blake is to yours. According to the personality and temperament tests, I'm equally Nobek and Imdiko."

"A warrior and caregiver? That must be confusing."

He shrugged. "My first instinct is to find a peaceful solution to problems unless the danger is immediate. When it comes to protecting my clan, I'm as dangerous as any Nobek. It's what I was trained for."

"No offense, but you're so handsome and smile so much. It's hard to imagine you scary."

He grinned. "That's what makes me truly dangerous. Others have made the mistake of thinking I'm not that great a threat." He mock-snarled at her. "Want to fight and find out?"

She slid close enough to him that their thighs touched. "Such a comedian."

"Laughter can be as disarming as threats."

She looked up into his purple cat's eyes. She felt his breath warm on her face, mingling with the sweet perfume of the flowers. "I like you, Bevau."

His smile remained, but the expression around it turned serious. "I like you too. Is there still no chance of enjoying each other more thoroughly?"

Jessica thwarted the urge to throw herself on him. "What about your fiancée?"

He shrugged. "We're not clanned yet."

"But you will be. That counts for nothing?"

He captured a lock of her hair between his fingers, stroking the soft tresses. "Kalquorians are free to intimately enjoy anyone they wish until the Matara is clanned. Until that happens, there is no expectation of fidelity, especially if it's an arranged clanning."

"So until this woman formally joins your clan, all four of you can have sex with anyone? She's allowed too?"

"That's right." He brought the lock of hair to his nose, inhaling. "No one will think badly of you for spending last night with Clajak. Even if you had been aware of his betrothal, you would have done nothing wrong."

Jessica slid closer until their bodies lightly touched. "Talk about culture shock. I'm glad to know your fiancée isn't going to be breaking down my door in a jealous rage."

"Not Narpok." His face drifted close to hers. "You're safe to explore whatever experiences you wish with my clan. If you're interested...?"

Jessica answered by pressing her lips to his. His arms circled around her, and his embrace undid her completely. She climbed onto his lap, straddling him.

She broke the kiss. "Your Dramok already took my virginity. Since I'm ruined, I may as well enjoy what other men have to offer."

He pulled her close so his lips touched hers while he spoke. "I would hardly call you ruined," he muttered then slid his tongue into her mouth.

He kissed her deeply, his arms iron bands against her back to keep her close. Jessica's skirt rode high, allowing her to rub her aching sex against his rock-hard thigh. Her panties rubbed deliciously back and forth as she pleased herself against him.

"I didn't know Earther women would be so naughty," Bevau gasped as he nibbled his way along her jaw bone.

"Kalquorian men have an uncanny ability to bring that tendency out in me," Jessica answered. She groaned as his teeth nipped her neck near where Clajak had sunk his teeth in the night before. "Bite me with your fangs, Bevau. I like how it makes me feel."

He emitted a low growl and drove his sharp teeth into her flesh. She arched against him with a strangled cry, and clasped his face tight to her throat. The pain was over in an instant, and she smiled as euphoria added to her aroused senses.

He bore her down on the lounge, and she sighed as his weight settled over her. He sucked at the wound he'd made in her throat, pulling and swallowing. Feeling the powerful alien feed on her as his throbbing groin pressed down on hers made Jessica wild to be further possessed. "What do you like? What would you like to do to me?" she asked, her voice breathless with anticipation.

He pulled back to look down on her. He grinned. "I want you up against the wall, your clothes torn to shreds, your legs wrapped around my waist while I bury myself deep in your body."

Her lower regions convulsed. "Oh please," she breathed.

She never sensed him move. An instant later, she found herself crushed between the wall and the handsome Kalquorian, his mouth smashed against hers. She gasped as much at his supernatural speed as the violent kiss he consumed her with.

Bevau leaned back. "Fight me," he invited, his expression eager.

"Fight you?"

"Nobeks like a challenge. Feeling you struggle against me would be exciting."

"I can't possibly have a chance."

"You don't, but I want to pretend I'm taking you against your will." He kissed her, and the gentle brush of his lips was an odd counterpoint to his request. "I like being rough."

A tinge of fear crept in, making Jessica's heart beat faster. With a will of their own, her hips ground against him. "Are you going to hurt me?"

"Do you want me to?" He licked his lips. "No permanent damage, of course. Some women like it. It makes the pleasure that much sweeter."

Jessica swallowed, thinking of how Clajak's forceful lovemaking had driven her crazy with desire. "All right."

She'd barely given her permission before Bevau tore at her blouse with violent force. She cried out and lunged to escape him. He caught her by the throat with a masculine chuckle and held her against the wall. His grip was enough to keep her pinned without choking her. His other hand continued to rip her top apart, baring her bra. He went after that next.

Jessica slapped and punched at the alien beast holding her prisoner. She kicked, her ballet-style slippers bouncing harmlessly off his tall boots.

"Is that all you can do, little girl?" he laughed, clearly enjoying his mastery over her. He ripped her bra from her body, and she cried out in mingled pain and desire. Her breasts quivered free, her nipples hard. Honey gushed, soaking her panties. The tangy sea-salt aroma of her scent mixed with the heady perfume of the flowers.

Bevau growled triumph, slapping Jessica's breasts with a meaty hand. "Oh," Jessica breathed at the sting. She felt her helplessness keenly. She pushed against the Nobek prince's chest with weak hands and wondered what he would do to her next.

His hand left her throat, and he scooped her up with his arm beneath her buttocks. Jessica knew he couldn't help but notice how wet she was. He lifted her so he could bury his face in her breasts. He sucked on one mound hard, drawing as much of it into his mouth as he could while he pinched the nipple of the other. Jessica sobbed as pleasure

rolled hugely in her womb. She pounded tiny fists against Bevau's shoulders and upper back. She pulled his long hair.

He let her yank his head back, getting his voracious mouth off her sensitive flesh. He looked up at her face and hissed. His fangs flashed wickedly sharp at her.

She screamed as his head darted forward again and his fangs sank into the roundness of her upper breast. He pulled back out in an instant, and Jessica moaned to see rivulets of blood seep from the tiny holes he'd made. He licked the blood away, growling deep in his throat.

Bevau stepped from the wall and let her go. Jessica fell the short distance into a pile at his feet. Unhurt, she scrambled on all fours to escape her beautiful tormentor. With a cruel laugh, he caught her by one ankle, and picked her up to dangle upside down in the air.

Her short skirt fell to expose her pink lace panties. Bevau grasped the crotch of the thin fabric and yanked as Jessica thrashed. Scraps of pink fell like confetti to the floor. Her secret flesh was naked and vulnerable to Bevau's whims now.

"Very nice," he said, his voice full of approval. His open palm cracked against Jessica's bared buttocks once, twice, three times. She wailed as her flesh throbbed with warmth. Her sex spasmed.

He dropped her gently to the floor, making sure she didn't hit her head on the way down. Again she scuttled away on all fours, and this time he let her. He followed her with measured paces around the room, pulling his hard, ready sexes free of his formsuit as he stalked her.

"Nowhere to go, little Jessica McInness," he gloated when she looked over her shoulder to see him hunting her. His eyes glittered and his lips stretched over his fangs in a predatory grin. He was all Nobek now, a brute to be feared.

Jessica emitted a little shriek and lurched to her feet, preparing to run. For an instant an iron arm circled her waist then Bevau had her pressed against the wall again.

She fought him as hard as she could, kicking, slapping, and punching, her head whipping from side to side in negation as he manhandled her into position for his first thrust. "No," she gasped, feeling the tips of his cocks at her entrances. She screamed as he crushed against her, holding her writhing body in place. "Please," she begged as he paused, savoring his domination before taking what he wanted.

His hips pushed against her, impaling her moist, eager flesh with his own. He shouted triumph in a beast's howl as he traveled deep into her body. Jessica shrieked at the mingled thrill and agony of the sudden invasion. They cried out together, predator and prey.

Bevau rode her, thrusting his considerable sexes in hard. Jessica held on for dear life, her arms clutched around his neck and legs around his waist. Already she could feel her senses overloading, tipping toward glorious orgasm.

Her legs slid down his waist, letting her calves run over his buttocks. She tightened her grip there and flexed to help him drive into her harder still. Bevau's head fell back, his face filled with bliss at her urging him on.

He let her direct the rhythm of their lovemaking, timing his thrusts to coincide with the squeezing of her legs. She made him take her fast for a little while, feeling her

body rushing ever closer to orgasm. Then, sensing she was nearly there, she slowed the pace, letting them both hover at a steady pulse of pleasure, calming a little, before quickening once more.

All the while he kept her pinned to the wall. With her strong dancer's legs binding his hips, she imprisoned him. Jessica gloried in the sensation of being both master and mastered.

Bevau's breathing came quicker now, and he began to ignore her rhythm. His hands grasped her buttocks, squeezing and molding the rounded flesh. He worked her faster, and Jessica knew she couldn't hold out much longer. A mewling sound escaped her lips, and the Nobek responded with a growl. His thrusts became stronger, and he drove deeper into her than ever before.

Deep pleasure bloomed in her gut, and her entire abdomen contracted in a massive spasm. The walls of her vagina grasped Bevau's cock as if to pull him in even deeper. His howl joined her scream, and he let go of one hip to pound his fist against the wall. Jessica's womb, rolling in huge waves, milked his pulsing penis, determined to suck every drop of seed from his body.

Bevau crushed against her, and another orgasm rocked Jessica. She bit into his shoulder and tasted the tartness of the Kalquorian's blood. They raged and twisted against each other as lust had its vicious way with them. There was no thought, no conscience, no sense of anything but primal urges that had to be met. If anyone had heard them, they would have been convinced a fight to the death was in play.

At last the convulsions calmed, leaving the pair weak. Shaking, Bevau carried Jessica to her lounge where he collapsed, letting her fall on top of him. They whooped for air, trembling from the ravages of their spent passion.

The heady scent of the flowers filled Jessica's nostrils; she looked at the bowl of the pretty posies with blurred vision. *I want more, right now. How much of that damned intoxicant did he pump into me?* she wondered. She felt faint from exhaustion, yet her loins were still ticklish with desire. Bevau softened inside her. She fought the urge to move, to make him hard again. It was as if her sexual organs had a mind of their own and were determined to fuck until she dropped from heart failure.

"Are you all right?" he asked. Her ear was against his chest, and the baritone of his voice rumbled through her entire body. Her vagina clenched and she caught her breath. He laughed. "Are you trying to make up for lost time, little Jessica McInness? I need a few minutes to catch my breath."

"I think I must be a nymphomaniac," she worried. She looked up at his gorgeous, smiling face. "I can't seem to calm down."

"Your clan will be very happy," Bevau said. "Thank goodness there will be three of them to take care of you."

"This is insane." Jessica tried to lift herself off the prince, to get the thickness of his cocks out of her clamoring body. Her arms and legs, still in exhausted shock from the wild lovemaking, refused to do more than twitch. "Damn it!" she swore, barely noticing she'd used profanity.

"Easy love," Bevau soothed. He lifted her off himself, and his organs pulled free. Jessica arched at the friction. "My, you are overwrought. Let me see what I can do for

you.” The alien swapped places with Jessica, laying her on the lounge and crouching over her.

He scooted back and draped her thighs over his shoulders. She sighed in anticipation as his gaze took in her sex. Smiling, he kissed her where she ached most. A bolt of hunger elicited a groan from her, and with a soft chuckle, Bevau put his mouth to work.

As tender now as he’d been brutal before, the Kalquorian kissed and licked her trembling softness. His tongue was scratchy, as catlike as his eyes, and Jessica cooed with the warm sensation slowly building once again. The climb to orgasm was a gentle slope this time. The languorous strokes of Bevau’s tongue, the soft sucking from his lips, the pull of his fingertips opening the petals of her sex for his deepest kisses all took her on a soothing journey to pleasure that rolled through her in tiny, delightful ripples. Her cries were a light sing-song as sweet as a bird’s.

Yet even that orgasm refused to sate her for longer than a minute. She jumped from the lounge in frustration.

“What have you done to me? I can’t keep going like this!”

Bevau looked both amused and mystified. “I’ve never met anyone whose libido was so out of control. It’s as if you’ve been fed an aphrodisiac of some sort.” His gaze fell on the bowl of flowers. “I wonder...”

Jessica stopped pacing and tried to ignore the compulsion to suck Bevau’s penises so he’d take her once again. “What?”

“The scent of these flowers is reputed to enhance Plasian sex drives. Kalquorians don’t respond to them, but perhaps Earthers do.”

Jessica dragged her eyes from Bevau’s endowments to the flowers. “But Kalquorians and Earthers are so similar.”

“There are differences. Maybe you’d better get rid of these.”

“I hate to. They’re pretty.” Jessica stepped to the table and the scent of the flowers grew heavier. She felt a stab of desire so great her knees almost unhinged. She groaned.

“Allow me.” Bevau snatched up the bowl, stepped to the kitchen area’s disposal unit, and emptied the contents into it. He searched around, located the venting system switch, and a moment later fresh air breezed into the room, dispelling the heavy perfume of the flowers.

The demanding arousal weighing in Jessica’s belly eased. She gaped at Bevau. “You were right!”

He grimaced. “Between the bite and those flowers, no wonder you couldn’t get control of yourself. I’m sorry, love.”

The humor of the situation came over Jessica, and she sat down laughing. “Well, it was fun anyway! At least I know I’m not some kind of deviant.”

“You’re not angry? You might not have changed your mind about sex with me if not for the flowers.”

She smiled up at him, able to enjoy the sight of his naked body without needing to ravish it. “If it wasn’t on purpose, there’s no harm done. I’m not sorry I had the pleasure of your company.”



He grinned back, his relief evident. "I'm glad to hear you say that. I've been known to coerce reluctant females, but I wanted to make up to you what happened with Clajak."

Jessica swallowed at his admission of coercion. She imagined being taken against her will by Bevau in truth and her sore sex warmed agreeably.

*I may not be a nympho, but I'm definitely perverted. It's a good thing Kalquorians are so open-minded.*

"Even though it's allowed, I can't believe your fiancée lets you run around with other women. You're amazing," she said.

Bevau sat next to her, his exquisite face twisting in a grimace. "Narpok does not like having sex with my clan. Each of us has coupled with her only once. No one had a pleasant experience."

"Really? And you're still going to make her your Matara?"

"She is the daughter of the head councilmember. As the ranking Kalquorian female, she is the logical choice for Imperial Matara. Unfortunately, she is very young and spoiled. If she doesn't get what she wants, the whole empire hears about it."

"She and Clajak sound made for each other."

"Clajak's not spoiled. He's hot tempered and fights his responsibilities, but he doesn't feel entitled to have everything he wants."

Jessica was fascinated. "How do Clajak and Egilka feel about Narpok?"

"The same as I. She's what you Earthers call a 'necessary evil'." He huffed unhappily. "I can't fault Clajak for putting off the duty of claiming her, or for bedding all the women he has. Once Narpok becomes our Matara, we can no longer seek intimate recreation outside the clan."

*What a shame for such a gorgeous man to be wasted on a woman he doesn't love,* Jessica thought. "Duty can be a real bitch, huh?"

Bevau burst out laughing. "Indeed it is, and I'll soon be clanned to one."

Jessica laughed with him. "Let me know if I can help you enjoy the little bit of freedom you have left."

He leaned over to kiss her. "I will definitely take you up on that, Jessica McInness."

"Just Jessica." She kissed him back.

"I forgot you Earthers have many names. Jessica," he said, and she shivered at the sound of her name intoned by his deep voice. He kissed her again and stood. "I have to leave you for now. Clajak and Egilka had an argument, and I should see to getting some peace in my clan."

"A Nobek as peacemaker." Jessica shook her head as she watched him dress. "You are fascinating, Bevau."

He grinned. "I could say the same of you. I look forward to seeing you again. Should I bring flowers for my next visit?"

Jessica laughed as she accompanied him to the door. "Only if you get plenty of rest beforehand!"

He kissed her again and left. Jessica gathered up her ruined clothes for disposal and found a fresh outfit. She sighed as she dressed, thinking about Bevau.

If only he belonged to another clan. She could fall in love with him.

## Chapter Five

“Do you know about those flowers in Israla’s garden?” Michaela demanded the moment Jessica stepped into the dance studio that afternoon. The intersexual was back in female form, her breasts unbound and pushing at the leotard she wore. Her makeup was flawless as ever, and her curls hung loose to her shoulders.

Jessica unrolled her mat and sat down to stretch. The room was empty but for the mirrors on one wall. “I do now,” she said with a chuckle. “You saw the bunch Bevau brought over—” she stopped and looked up at the grim dancer, whose bare foot tapped angrily against the wood floor. “Your clan took you for a walk there!”

“They are not my clan,” Michaela said between gritted teeth, her hands planted on her hips.

Jessica stood and approached her friend. “What happened?”

Michaela reddened and the anger went out of her posture. She flopped down to her own mat. “Not *that*, though I’d have let them do whatever they wanted with me. And they did want me, Jessica,” she said, her voice turning soft with wonder. “Those formsuits they wear don’t hide a thing. It looked like they were smuggling salami in their britches.”

Jessica erupted in hysterical laughter. She laughed so hard it hurt, and she fell to the floor next to Michaela. After a moment, Michaela joined her, and they rolled on the floor with hilarity. Tears rolled down their cheeks.

Just as they were starting to calm down, Jessica blurted, “Salami!” and they were off again. The sound of their amusement echoed in the space.

Finally the laughter died down to giggles, and Jessica wiped the tears from her face. She sat up and said, “So what did happen?”

Michaela smiled up at the ceiling. “At first the fragrance relaxed me. I wanted to bathe in it, it made me that happy. I almost jumped in the middle of the flowers and rolled around in them. Govi took my hand and held it while we walked, and when I didn’t pull away, Korkla held the other. I looked at their hands, so big and powerful that I couldn’t see mine in their grips. Then I imagined them touching me all over my body, and I got hard and wet all at the same time.

“There was no controlling my arousal, which scared me. What if they saw how I was and were disgusted? My shirt was untucked and hiding the evidence, but I knew if I didn’t calm down they’d see what was going on. So I told them I didn’t feel well and needed to sit down. They took me into one of those outdoor rooms made by the tall hedges. There was a padded platform in the middle surrounded by blue and purple flowers.”

“Uh oh,” Jessica said.

“You’d better believe ‘uh-oh’. The clan sat me down on the platform, and all I smelled was that heavenly scent, and all I saw were those muscular Kalquorian bodies.

Between the aroma and my arousal, I became dizzy and fell back on the platform. Govi leaned over me, saying my name over and over. I grabbed him by the back of the head, lifted myself up to him, and kissed him as well as someone who never kissed a man could.”

“You didn’t!” Jessica clapped her hands with delight.

“I did. The next thing I knew, all three were pressed up as close to me as they could get, and they passed me around, each kissing me, using their tongues ... oh Jessica, it felt so good. I never knew kissing could be that wonderful!”

“They touched me. Everywhere.” Michaela looked at her, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “One of them—I don’t know who because it was confusing with all those hands—reached inside my shirt and pulled my binding away. They fondled my breasts. Their skin was so hot it almost burned. Then they reached into my pants, and I thought, now is when they turn away. Feeling both sexes will be too much for them. But they didn’t run off. They touched everything, and they didn’t hate me for being a freak.”

“You’re not a freak, Michaela,” Jessica said gently, not wanting to stop her friend’s recitation of the momentous event.

“I felt so safe with them after that.” Michaela’s eyes closed, and her smile was that of an angel. “When they pulled my clothes off and saw me for what I am, that’s when I noticed they were hard. I knew they wanted to fuck me, and I surrendered myself to them without hesitation. Seeing them that way, I lost my fear and shame.

“Their hands and mouths covered every inch of my skin. The pleasure nearly drove me insane, and I fought not to come. I dared to touch them, to feel the erections that told me I could find love after all. Raxstad opened his formsuit and put my hand on his naked cocks. The skin radiated heat and imagining it inside my body was better than any fantasy I’ve ever had. I was wicked with my fingers; I wanted him as wild as I felt. When Korkla exposed his cocks, I spread my legs wide to invite him in. He’s huge, and I thought he might rip me to shreds, but I didn’t care. I’ve never wanted anything so bad. He lay on top of me, and he was right there, ready to plunge in. I begged him, whispering ‘please, please’ over and over.

“Then Govi said, ‘Stop. This isn’t right. Michaela is under the influence of something to act this way.’ They argued. Korkla and Raxstad were determined to have me, and I begged them to fuck me. But Govi insisted something was wrong. They finally figured out it was the flowers affecting me, and despite my pleas, agreed it would be wrong to take advantage of my state.

“‘Even if we don’t penetrate her, she still needs release. We can’t leave her this way,’ Raxstad insisted, and the others agreed. So he and Korkla held me, kissing my face and breasts as Govi took me in his mouth and put his fingers inside me.”

Michaela sighed, and Jessica looked at her in fascination. The intersexual’s nipples poked brazenly at the top of her leotard. Her crotch bulged with erection.

*What would that be like, to feel the softness of a woman’s chest against mine with the hardness of a man inside me?* she wondered. Not that she’d ever find out. Michaela had made it clear she preferred men.

“To feel his mouth on my flesh, his tongue wetting me, and his long fingers inside my vagina and ass, pumping in and out...I’ve never felt such bliss. I didn’t last very

long, but fortunately, no one expected much stamina from an eighteen-year old virgin.” Michaela giggled.

“I’m so happy for you,” Jessica said. She stroked Michaela’s hair, much as her sister Lindsey did with her when they shared talks in the girls’ bedroom on Earth. “What happened then?”

“As soon as I stopped moaning they got me dressed and the hell out of that garden,” Michaela laughed. She sat up. “You’ve never heard three men apologize so much. I told them, if you want to apologize for anything, it should be because you didn’t fuck me the way you and I really wanted!”

“Then what happened?” Jessica asked.

Michaela rolled her eyes. “Nothing. A lot of talking, mostly Govi insisting we take it slow because I have too much trauma to jump into the whole sex thing. I guess he’s right; one second I want them to fuck me and get it over with, the next I’m terrified and want to hide on another planet. Govi calls it ‘approach and avoidance’. He says it shows I need more time.”

“Now what?”

“We date, of all things, just like on Earth. They even suggested you come with us to dinner tonight. With you there as a chaperone, I’ll supposedly feel safer.” She smiled and batted her long black eyelashes at Jessica. “Will you? Please?”

Jessica snorted. “Why not? I can’t help you tomorrow though. I have a date with another clan.”

“Good! Did you make sure they’re not attached?”

“That was the first question out of my mouth when they called. What time is dinner tonight? Will we be cutting our practice short?”

Michaela smirked. “You wish. Do your stretching. We’ve only got five days to get ready for our performance at the festival.”

Jessica obeyed, groaning at the prospect of the grueling practices for Plasius’ annual Coming of Age Festival. Israla had asked them to dance on the celebration’s center stage. As nervous as Jessica had been about performing for the Kalquorians, that had been only a taste of what was to come.

*Knowing the Plasians, by the time we perform they’ll be too busy screwing each other silly to notice us,* Jessica thought, comforting herself. She had no doubt the gala would degenerate in a huge outdoor orgy. Still, the thought of the sensuous display she’d be making in front of hundreds of spectators made her stomach churn.

*Too many witnesses. When Earth finds out—*

“I’ve changed some of the choreography,” Michaela said, interrupting Jessica’s fretting. Finished with stretching, she jumped up. “Your performance for Clajak’s clan inspired me. The Plasians will love this. Watch.”

She shoved the mat out of her way. “Music. Song Three for festival,” she called, and the first strains of the kawala flute drifted into the room. “We’ll be wearing chains binding our wrists,” she said, holding her arms over her head as her hips swayed seductively. “Real ones, but not heavy. I already tried them out, and they’ll be no problem.”

She arched back, her body a long curve. Her fingertips brushed the floor, and undulating like a serpent, she straightened again. "The costumes are scanty little things modeled on what the sex slaves of Dantovon wear." Michaela lowered her arms toward Jessica and moved towards her as if dragged against her will. Her head shook from side to side, telling an invisible master 'no'. "The skirts are ragged, as if torn by violent hands." Michaela pulled back, her movements matching the quickening tempo of the music. She danced her struggle against an implacable foe, her body's gyrations desperate and sensual all at once.

Jessica watched carefully, etching the choreography into her memory. The dance was beautiful in its violent energy. As Michaela simulated being overcome and succumbing to another's erotic desire, her body lying limp on the floor as the last note died away, Jessica noted her own arousal. If the Plasians weren't humping their brains out before the Earther women took the stage, Michaela's choreography would no doubt take care of that.

"I inspired that?" she gasped.

Michaela grinned. "Hot, isn't it? There won't be a dry pussy left in the place. Get your ass up and learn it."

They practiced for hours until Jessica could barely stand. She finally collapsed on the floor, her legs twitching from exhaustion. "No more," she wheezed. "You're going to kill me and then you'll have to dance alone."

"We have to get ready for my date anyway," Michaela said. "Wear something nice but don't upstage me, okay?"

"As if I could," Jessica snorted. "I can't stand. I think one of your boyfriends will have to carry me."

"They're not my boyfriends."

"For heaven's sake, Michaela, you already admitted you want them."

"I'm back to avoidance. If you don't go, I'm canceling the date." Michaela crossed her arms over her chest and pouted.

"I said I'd go. You're not sabotaging a chance at happiness because of me." Jessica groaned as she climbed to her feet.

"Such a baby. I'm barely winded." Michaela grabbed a towel and rubbed sweat from her face.

"Give me a break. I was a nurse until seven months ago, not a dancer."

Michaela dropped her drill sergeant attitude. "You're doing very well, Jessica. Thanks for working so hard."

Jessica returned her smile. "It's been fun. I hope whatever clan I end up with lives close to yours. I'd like to continue belly dancing, even if it's just to entertain my three spouses."

Her friend nodded. "I don't want to lose you. You're the closest thing I've had to a family since my parents died."

Michaela was leery about being touched, but Jessica hugged her anyway. After a moment's hesitation, the intersexual returned the embrace.

"See you in an hour?" Michaela's voice was husky with emotion.

"I'll be there," Jessica whispered.

\* \* \* \*

Korkla's clan escorted Michaela and Jessica to one of Plasius' better eateries. It had outdoor dining, and Jessica was glad despite the cooler temperatures. Plasius' second sun was setting, leaving the sky a deep purple streaked with lavender. Lighting globes tethered to the dining tables lent a soft glow over each setting. In the center of the stone-walled area a firepit crackled, mingling the sweet, musky aroma of scentwood with mouth-watering smells of delicious food.

"The service here is good. You don't have to wait long for your food," Govi said, ushering the Earthers through the stone arch of the entrance.

"A smart business, considering how the Plasians are," Raxstad chuckled, his dark eyes looking over the outdoor room. A few moans interrupted the hushed voices, indicating at least heavy petting was going on in the shadowed corners.

Govi laughed softly. "If they have to wait too long, baser appetites take hold." Suddenly the humor went out of his voice. "That's not a good sign."

Jessica looked in the direction of his stare and noticed a lone Kalquorian sitting at one of the tables next to the firepit. He stared moodily into his drink, the angular planes of his face accentuating his angry expression.

"Is that Prince Egilka?" she asked, knowing it was.

"He doesn't look very happy," Michaela said. She looked at the worried clan surrounding her. "Do you want to make sure he's okay?"

Korkla favored her with a relieved smile. "If you don't mind. Thank you."

He led the group to Egilka's table. A bottle of a rust-colored liquid sat before the Imdiko prince, three-quarters empty. He glanced up at them as they came close and drained his glass. He put his glass down, and his too-bright eyes looked them over.

"Hello Korkla, Govi, Raxstad." He looked at Michaela and Jessica, and his lip curled a little. His voice went harsh. "Both of them?"

Korkla colored. "Jessica is our chaperone this evening, my prince."

Michaela whispered to Jessica, "What do you think is wrong with him? Besides the drinking."

"Bevau said he and Clajak had an argument," Jessica whispered back.

Egilka stared hard at them. "Apparently you're not aware of the excellence of Kalquorian hearing. What were you doing with Bevau, *Earther*?"

He said *Earther* as if it was an insult, and Jessica's temper flashed bright. She snapped, "The better question is, what didn't I do with him? For your information, he was quite happy with my company. Whatever your issues, don't take them out on me, *Kalquorian*." She spit the word out with all the venom she could muster.

Govi put a hand on her shoulder as if to warn her. She resisted an urge to shake him off. His tone was soothing. "Is there anything we can do to help you, my prince?"

Egilka poured himself another glass of whatever he used to drown his sorrows. "They took my funding away. All my work is dead. Now I'm supposed to happily hand over the future of our people to *her*—," his baleful glare went back to Jessica, "—and those like her."

Jessica had reached her limit. She smiled sweetly at Egilka, and Michaela, who knew her so well, breathed, "Oh shit."

"Prince Egilka?" she purred, so angelic she could almost feel the halo on top of her head, "Are all your kind assholes, with a few like Bevau the exceptions to the rule?"

His mouth dropped open, and he stared at her speechless, his glass halfway to his mouth.

Jessica turned to her wide-eyed friend. "Sorry Michaela, I'm not sticking around to be insulted by this *gurluck*. Have a nice dinner."

She turned on her heel and stormed to the exit, her head held high. She wasn't sure what a *gurluck* was; she just knew it was the worst insult Kalquorians used. As she walked into the darkening night, she felt a stab of triumph. Let the high-and-mighty Imdiko prince stew over that one!

"I hope I didn't screw things up for Michaela," she muttered to herself. She approached a kiosk where she could call for a shuttle to transport her back to Israla's home.

"I wouldn't worry. Korkla's clan seems to be quite enamored with your friend."

Jessica gasped and spun around. Egilka loomed over her, and she staggered back. Losing her balance, she fell.

He caught her and dragged her to himself. Pressed hard to his chest, she shoved against him. "Let me go!"

He laughed in her face, and she smelled the bittersweet aroma of drink on his breath. "Such a nasty temper to go with that nasty mouth of yours. I think you need taming, girl."

"And I think you need a lesson in manners," she snarled back. "Lesson One: don't insult people you know nothing about!"

"I have a few lessons for you too," he grinned, holding her wriggling body easily. "I'm of a mind to know what it is my people find so irresistible about Earther women."

He tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and walked into the line of trees that bordered the path. Jessica yelled and cursed, pummeling his back with her fists. He took no notice of her struggles, covering the ground with long, blurring strides until they were deep in the thicket of trees.

"Your first lesson, my pretty little piece of fluff, will be treating a prince with the respect he deserves. You will learn not to call me filthy names." Egilka swatted her backside with a hard hand. Heat pulsed from her flesh, and she felt the first stirrings of arousal. Her body's traitorous reaction made her angrier.

"I am not fluff, you self-important piece of alien crap!" She reached up and yanked hard on his long braid.

He rewarded her with a hiss of pain and dumped her on the ground at his feet. She kicked at his shins, unmindful of her skirt riding high up on her thighs. He jumped back to avoid her strike. "You are whatever I choose to call you." The glow of the first rising moon shimmered off his fangs.

She jumped to her feet, her fists clenched. "And you are exactly what I called you at the café. I've known bums on the street with more regal bearing than you have!"

Egilka leaned against a tree and laughed at her. All his anger seemed to dissipate, and she stared at him. What the hell was wrong with him?



Whatever it was, she didn't like being made a fool of. She picked up a stick and threw it at him.

He batted it away and laughed harder. "What a treat you are," he managed between guffaws. "Oh, my little Earther, you are adorable! Alone in the woods with a man twice your size and several times your strength and out of range of any help whatsoever. Yet you rage on as if you could tear me to pieces with your anger alone!"

Jessica looked around as the import of his words struck her. Indeed they did seem to be deep in the dark woods without even the dim glow of the capital city's lights reaching them. Only the rising moon filtered light through the branches overhead. Who knew how far he'd carried her with his Kalquorian quickness?

The stab of fear couldn't make all of her anger go away. "I'm glad you find me so amusing," she grouched. "I suppose it's better than being an object of disgust."

"That temper of yours is something," he said, his laughter easing. "You remind me of Clajak. He can't control his mouth when he's mad either."

"I am nothing like Clajak!" Jessica flared. "He's an immature brat."

"Perhaps." Egilka looked her over, his slanted eyes lingering as if with his gaze alone he could feel her body. "You're certainly lovelier than he is."

"Don't try to get on my good side. I no longer have one where you're concerned." Jessica couldn't deny the fluttering in her stomach at his evaluating stare however. Now that he wasn't sneering at her, his good looks were back in evidence.

"I don't care if you like me, Earther." He pushed away from the tree and glided towards her. "I just want what you've given my clanmates."

"You don't deserve me." Jessica backed away, her footing unsure on the soft, spongy ground.

He kept coming, his fangs peeking out from beneath his mustache. His eyes were sharp. "I'll have you anyway. There's also the matter of punishing you for calling me a gurluck. Yes," he hissed, his eyes traveling up and down her body as he edged closer. "You most certainly must be brought to task for that."

"I thought you didn't like Earthers that way." Jessica looked around for an escape route, but it was growing darker, and only the dim shapes of trees showed themselves. If she screamed for help, would anyone hear her?

"I don't want your kind diluting my gene pool, but to warm my body with... well, that wouldn't be a bad thing. Not bad at all."

*I can't outrun him. If I fight, he might get really nasty.* She tried to ignore the flutter of desire in her belly and stopped moving away. "If I give you what you want, will you promise not to hurt me?"

He halted his pursuit. He looked at her, his eyes glinting in the moonlight that streamed through the trees. "I have no intention of causing you damage." He drifted closer and let his fingertips stroke her hair. The threat went out of his posture and he sighed heavily. "I am drunk and in despair, little Earther. All I've worked for is gone, an entire lifetime of research tossed away by those with the power to do so. I want something warm and sweet to console myself with. Is that such a terrible thing?"

His voice was heavy in the darkness, and despite her overall dislike of the man, Jessica felt a twinge of sympathy. "Let's be clear on one thing: I don't want this."

He took a deep breath. "I smell otherwise. Your body is aroused, even if your emotions aren't."

"I'm giving myself to you to avoid injury. I don't like letting you have me."

"That will serve well enough for your punishment. Still, I prefer you enjoy this, so I'll bite you."

"Just don't leave me out here lost afterward, okay?"

"I'll get you back to your quarters safely," he agreed. Negotiations complete, she submitted as his mouth closed over the side of her neck. His fangs slid into her skin. She moaned at the twin pinpricks of pain.

Egilka withdrew moments later, holding her swaying body upright. His long fingers ran over her lips. "Soft," he breathed. She closed her eyes, enjoying the butterfly sensation of such a delicate touch. Swept up in the bite's euphoria, she ran her hands over his torso. He was the tallest of the clan, his muscles leaner than the other two. She liked the sinuous feel of him.

He bent towards her, and she lifted her mouth to his. His lips stroked over hers, and his mustache and goatee were luxuriant against her face, not bristly as she'd expected.

He kissed her with slow tenderness, as if savoring a fine wine. As his lips moved over hers, her lower body tightened in anticipation. His hands cupped the back of her head. She wrapped her arms around him, feeling the hard muscles of his back. She traced the line of his spine with her fingertips as his hands drifted down her neck, shoulders, and back. His touch slid over the roundness of her buttocks and pulled her even closer to himself.

His tongue slipped into her mouth. He savored her so thoroughly she was left gasping. She'd never expected gentleness from one of his kind.

He stepped back and tugged at her blouse, untucking it from her skirt. She raised her arms over her head, and he lifted the fabric from her. She shivered, the brisk air chilling her.

"I'll warm you," his voice soothed. She sensed movement in the dark, heard small sounds as he undressed. His arms came around her to wrap her in his embrace, and she snuggled into the heat of his bare skin. His penises were hard against their bellies, sandwiched between their bodies.

He returned to sipping kisses from her lips while his hands busied themselves with her bra clasp. He set her breasts free, and the soft mounds flattened against the steel of his chest.

Jessica's hands roamed everywhere she could reach, seeking to devour him with touch alone. Egilka's body was a delight, his hot skin smooth and corded with ropey muscle. She couldn't get enough of feeling his hard body against her.

He kissed his way from her lips down her chin and throat. He paused to lick the hollow between her collarbones, where her pulse thumped hard. He continued down until he buried his face between her breasts. He stayed there for a moment, rubbing his face against her softest flesh.

Egilka took one nipple between his lips and stroked his tongue over the erect button. The light touch sent a violent spasm through Jessica's body, and she jerked in

response. The Imdiko prince chuckled and held her tighter still. He continued his slow tasting, letting his tongue run over her areola before engulfing the eager flesh in his mouth.

He suckled with excruciating slowness, leaving Jessica moaning low in her throat. Her sex pumped honey to soak her panties, and her scent rose in the night air. Egilka growled but continued to maul her in the same methodical fashion.

Only when he'd experienced the one breast to his complete satisfaction did he move to the other. Once more, he took his time, as if he'd never know the softness of a woman again. He was like a condemned man and Jessica was his last meal.

As he fed at her breast, Jessica buried her hands in his bound hair, running her fingers against his scalp. Unlike the smooth, sleek feel of his clanmates' hair, Egilka's was coarse, snarling around her fingers as if intent on capturing her. His hair was as rough as his hands and mouth were gentle. She closed her hands around his skull and pulled him closer, mashing his face against her chest. He responded by sucking her pliant breast deep into his mouth. Jessica's head fell back, and she sighed her pleasure to the three moons hanging over the trees.

Egilka went to his knees, kissing his way down her taut abdomen. When he reached the waistband of her skirt, he tugged it down. His face went to the front of her panties, and she heard him inhale. He moaned against her pubic mound, and she shivered against the vibration. His mouth closed over the soaked fabric, sucking on it and the flesh it covered. Jessica gritted her teeth to keep from screaming with pleasure.

He lifted one of her legs, bending her knee over his shoulder. It opened and tilted her sex forward for his hungry mouth, and Jessica had a moment when she thought the leg holding her up would buckle. She moaned nonstop as he scraped his teeth against the fabric barrier to her secret flesh. Jessica wanted him to taste her naked sex with near desperation, but she also wanted to prolong the sweetness of his slow lovemaking.

He licked, sucked and nibbled, his groans as loud as hers. At last he slipped her leg off his shoulder to slide her panties down her legs. The fabric left wet trails down the inside of her thighs.

He guided her down to lie on the soft ground. "Poor little girl," he whispered as his hands ran over her goosebumped skin. "It's too cold for you out here, and there was so much I wanted to do to you."

He covered her with his body, and she snuggled against him, letting his body heat calm the shivers she'd barely noticed in the delight of his pleasuring. Egilka was better than a blanket, his skin radiating warmth. His cocks lay heavy against her belly, and she parted her thighs. "I'm warm on the inside," she breathed.

She heard the smile in his voice. "I feel the heat coming off you. It draws me in." He shifted over her, his hand positioning his organs to go where she wanted them. She sighed to feel him there, poised to enter her.

He pressed into her, letting her slowly envelop him. He kissed her the whole while, murmuring soft endearments as he possessed her. "Sweet girl, lovely girl. Let me in, little Earther."

She whimpered as her sex yielded to his tender invasion. Like his clanmates, he was long and thick. Yet he entered her easily, and her eager body clutched at his cocks, pulling him in deep, as deep as he could go.

He kissed her with quiet passion as he filled her. She moved beneath him, matching his strokes as he took her. Her legs twined around his.

Sex with Clajak and Bevau had been wild, sometimes animalistic. Jessica adored every second of their tempestuous romps, but this slow, tender lovemaking Egilka shared with her was a revelation. Her passion rose in gradual increments, building with each careful plunge he made. Her hips rose to meet his, falling back when he drew back, matching his rhythm. Their sexes made soft moist sounds as they moved together.

Egilka pulled his lips from hers, his breathing unsteady. "They were right. You Earthers are indeed a joy to couple with."

"You say the sweetest things." The sarcasm was lost in her sighs. She could lay there forever, the Kalkuorian prince's weight on top of her. Her bliss leveled up another notch.

He shifted just a little, but it was enough to change the pressure of his sex against the bundle of nerves inside her. An intense stab of pleasure made Jessica arch against him, a strangled "Oh!" leaping from her mouth. Her nails dug into his chest.

He growled and moved against that spot again. Jessica again cried out and bucked her hips hard against him in reaction. Warmth exploded in her loins.

"What is this?" he breathed in her ear, his tongue flicking to tickle the lobe. He angled his next stroke to rub against the front wall of her vagina even harder. Jessica emitted a thin scream as excruciating pleasure filled her womb. She felt she might blow wide open from the pressure. She raked his chest once more.

"Let's see how much of this you can take," Egilka growled. His movements were still gentle, but he moved faster, stimulating that sweet spot in her sheath over and over.

Jessica shrieked as the orgasm burst through her. She clawed Egilka's chest, and he snarled. She was vaguely aware of his body thrumming with tension as he struggled to keep the same steady pace, continuing to work her writhing body. His breath came in gasps and growls.

Jessica climaxed again, and she screamed anew. She beat her fists against her tormentor's chest as the beautiful agony heaved through her body. The moment that orgasm crested and fell, another exploded.

Jessica lost all awareness of anything but the constant spasms racking her body, lifting her to exhilarating heights. She would descend towards bliss, when another upsurge would convulse her once more. She rode the flood for an eternity, and some small part of her decided she had died and ascended to heaven.

A faraway animal roared, and the mind-numbing pressure feeding the inferno that ravaged her body stuttered, eased, renewed once more, and then stopped for good. The weight over her body collapsed on top of her, and she heard Egilka moan as he writhed.

His sex pulsed like a heart as it pumped his seed into her womb. Her sheath flexed, milking every precious drop it could from him. Otherwise, Jessica lay still beneath Egilka, utterly destroyed. She couldn't move, couldn't talk, couldn't think as her body quivered with its last surges of pleasure.

How long they lay there as their bodies quieted, Jessica didn't know for sure. She stared up at the three moons high in the nighttime sky, feeling the cold breath of the Plasian version of winter on her face. The rest of her was warm under her blanket of Kalquorian male. Her arms and legs were still too weak to move when her mind began working again.

"Egilka?" she whispered.

"Yes?"

"Just checking."

He turned his face toward her. In the moonlight, she saw that a leaf was stuck to his forehead. He blinked as if just waking up. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'll have to get back to you on that. What about you?"

He laughed weakly. "I nearly killed myself holding off. You went insane. It felt that good?"

"Amazing doesn't describe it. In fact, I don't have any words to describe it."

"I might have to change my opinion about your kind. A little."

She huffed at him. "Are we really so terrible? What is it that you have against Earthers anyway?"

The venom in his tone surprised her, but not as much as the torrent of words that spilled from his lips. "You have to ask? Look at what your government has done to its weakest citizens. Most of you live in poverty. Technological and medical advances are withheld from ninety-five percent of your population. You live in identical circumstances as your ancestors did decades ago, some even worse." He propped himself up on his elbows to look down on her. "Half of you don't have your own transportation. Luckier ones ride in cars based on electricity, retrofitted on rusted chassis that once ran on oil! Only the richest and most powerful own shuttles like the ones on every other civilized planet. It's insanity!

"Then there's the religious tyranny you live under and its restrictions on the most natural urge of all: sex. What we just did felt better than anything else in the universe. But if your law enforcement knew what you've done with my clan and got their hands on you, you'd be executed. Not quickly killed either; we know they torture so-called 'sinners' until they die. You Earthers are insane."

Jessica found she could move her arms again. She plucked the leaf from Egilka's forehead and dropped it on the ground. "That's some soapbox you're standing on. You do realize you're painting us all with a pretty broad brush, don't you? It's not fair for you to judge all Earthers for the despicable acts of the powerful few."

"I'll admit some of you attain a semblance of reason. Still, your history is full of such things. Killing in the name of the various gods you've worshipped, just so you can take property and wield power. Your people have done it for millennia, never learning to do better." He scowled at her. "To have such an inferior people mix with my own; it offends me."

She pushed at him, and he reluctantly sat up, his penises pulling free. She felt empty without him but kept it to herself. "You blindly hate people you've haven't bothered getting to know. You're a racist, Egilka."

She stood and searched around for her clothes. She located her skirt and put it on. Egilka watched her, his face shadowed. She could still read the discomfort in his posture.

"I am not a racist. I am stating facts." His voice was arrogant.

"Then let's talk facts." Jessica found her blouse, but her bra and panties were determined to elude her. She walked in a slow circle, scanning the forest floor. "All so-called civilizations have, at one time or another, been guilty of subjugating, murdering and taking advantage of their own citizens. Including the superior race of Kalquorians. Your planet's history is rife with civil unrest. Nobeks once warred against the 'inferior' Dramoks and Imdikos, didn't they? Let's not forget what you've done to other races either. I refer to that nasty business of enslaving the entire population of Joshada once upon a time. How many of those people died working your mines and growing your crops?"

"How do you know of my planet's past? And Joshada was over five thousand years ago!"

"Yet Kalquor is still paying reparations to that world for all the ruin you caused, isn't it? It's taken this long for Joshada's population and economy to approach what they were when you conquered them. You darn near destroyed an entire civilization."

She sneered at him, well aware he could see her in the darkness. "Earth Gov was thrilled to trot out your planet's indiscretions when our people first began having issues with each other. Earthers are brilliant when it comes to propaganda. There's a branch of government that does nothing but dig up dirt on others."

She went back to searching for her clothes. "Ancient history or not, you have to admit Kalquorians have a past as violent, if not worse, than Earthers. Damn it, where is my underwear?"

Egilka stepped close and bent over, picking up Jessica's bra. She'd almost been standing on it. She took it from him. "Thanks. Find my panties and you'll have my undying gratitude."

His voice was grudging. "True, we were barbarians long ago. We've worked past it though, and Joshada is an excellent example of how we have grown. That world will never want for anything as long as Kalquor survives." He picked up a scrap that turned out to be Jessica's panties and shook the leaves from it while Jessica busied herself putting her bra on.

"My people will grow up someday too. We're taking longer to do it, that's all." Jessica slipped her blouse over her head.

"Perhaps. May I keep these?" Egilka asked, holding up her flimsy underpants.

"Please tell me you don't have a collection."

His teeth glinted in the moonlight as he grinned. "This would be the only reminder I've ever held onto of a woman. I've never physically enjoyed anyone so much." He laughed self-consciously. "Nor have I ever faced such a daunting opponent."

"You can have them on one condition."

"What's that?"

"Tell me what's really bothering you about our people breeding with each other."

He stood silent for so long she thought he'd never answer. Finally he blew out a gust of air. "You're worse than Govi. You want to know what breeding with Earthers means to me? It means I'm a failure."

"You haven't earned those panties yet. Keep talking."

"Let me get dressed and we'll start back to Israla's home. I'll tell you my pathetic story as we go."

## Chapter Six

Bevau walked into the clan's suite and stopped short when he saw Clajak sitting naked on the lounge, a young Plasian girl kneeling between his legs. The Dramok prince opened his eyes to note Bevau's entrance and closed them again. "Where have you been?"

The Plasian girl paused to glance at Bevau. Her mouth was full of Clajak's larger penis, and her tiny hands stroked his second. Clajak pressed her head towards his crotch, and she resumed her eager suckling. The wet sounds she made brought Bevau's senses to readiness. She sucked hard enough to create dimples in her cheeks, and Clajak sighed. He stroked the fur on her head, and her olive locks twined about his fingers.

"I've been looking for Egilka. Has he returned?" Bevau drifted across the room, never taking his eyes off the little Plasian's head bobbing up and down. He sat on the table across from Clajak, his knees on either side of the girl's almost non-existent buttocks. The table creaked under his weight, but Bevau paid it no notice. Plasian furniture was built to withstand vigorous use.

Clajak's chest rose and fell quickly; he was getting close. "Egilka's fine. Stop worrying about him."

Bevau pressed his lips together. He reached to stroke the girl's hairless sex. Her hips rose to encourage the attention, and she moaned as his finger circled her tight aperture.

Clajak's breath caught, and he emitted a drawn-out groan. His hips jerked once, twice. The girl drew back, swallowing the first of his eruption. As semen continued to pulse out she lapped up the thick fluid, her tongue quick. Clajak panted as he watched her work. Bevau fondled her trembling pussy, and she mewled her delight without missing a drop.

When the Dramok finished, Bevau patted the girl's hips. She obligingly turned around, her smile bright. Her hands went to his lap, and she busied herself freeing him from his formsuit. Clajak leaned forward to put his smallest finger in her pussy. She sighed as he stroked her, and she succeeded in pulling Bevau's cocks out of his pants. As she had with Clajak, she sucked his larger member into her hungry mouth while her hands pumped the smaller.

Bevau licked his lips as he watched himself disappear between hers. As she warmed him, he said, "Do you have any idea how much Egilka invested in his research? Not just time and money, but his heart too?"

Clajak flushed. He kept his eyes on his finger moving in and out of the girl's sex. "I'll make it up to him. I'm an ass, but you know the two of you are more important to me than anything else."

They were silent for a few minutes. Bevau's quickening breath and the moist sounds of Clajak's finger slipping in and out of the girl's body filled the room. Pleasure



grew heavily in the Nobek's groin. All Plasians were eager for sex, but this one was enthusiastic even for her race. It was a shame she was too small to fuck properly.

Clajak's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Rumor has it you made nice with Jessica McInness."

The thought of how he'd held the Earther helpless against the wall, burying his demanding flesh into hers, brought Bevau close to the edge of climax. His answer came between gasps. "She is an amazing creature. I have every intention of enjoying her at least once more before she chooses a clan." He grunted, his groin clenching as it readied to release his pleasure. "She still doesn't like you though."

"That's too bad." Clajak sounded genuinely disappointed.

Bevau caressed the Plasian's cheek. "Open your mouth so I can see myself filling it."

She complied, her mouth wide, her tongue cupping the tip of his penis. Bevau envisioned Jessica in her place, submissively crouched on all fours before him, her lips parted in anticipation of his climax. That did it; his orgasm roared through his loins. He shouted as he pumped his juices into the girl's mouth, watching it slide down her golden tongue into her throat.

She emitted her own birdlike cries as Clajak's expert fingers took her over the edge. Even while she trembled as if seized by violent chills, her mouth remained open to receive Bevau's seed. Her throat worked to swallow all he gave her.

The last of his juices pulsed into her, and she drew back. Clajak patted her head. "Were you made happy, my dear?" he asked.

Her beaming smile was all the answer they needed, but she nodded anyway. As Clajak chuckled, she collected scraps of cloth that Bevau realized served as her clothing. He blew out a gust of breath. He had to see Jessica again. The Plasian's attentions had only whetted his appetite for the greater pleasures of Earther flesh.

As they accompanied the girl to the door, it opened to admit Egilka. He stepped inside and stopped to see his naked Dramok, the nearly naked Plasian, and the somewhat exposed Bevau before him. The girl came forward and ran her hands over his chest.

He smiled and shook his head, patting her cheek. "Thank you pet, but no. I'm quite done for tonight."

She shrugged and giggled. As she walked out, Bevau realized he hadn't heard her say a single word. Then several scents wafted to him; mixed in with Egilka's natural musk was sour alcohol blended with the woodsy smells of soil and leaves. There was something else too. His jaw dropped in amazement as he recognized the sea-salt aroma on Egilka.

"You smell like Earther!"

Clajak stepped close to his Imdiko and inhaled. His eyes flashed. "You smell like *her*."

Egilka frowned. He started to say something, stopped, and turned red. With a disgusted grunt, he said, "I might as well sample the aliens taking over our planet."

He pushed past them both and went to the bathing basin. He stripped his clothes off, and Bevau grinned to see the deep scratches furrowing his chest. "She likes being sampled, doesn't she?"

Egilka looked down at himself and snorted. He glanced at his clanmates' smirking faces and gave up his pretended nonchalance. His own smile lit up his face with pride. "Indeed she does. I see Clajak carries his own marks of honor."

Clajak brushed the claw marks Jessica had left on his shoulders, chest and abdomen. "My back too," he boasted, turning to show them. "I have more than you, but they're not as deep. I'm not sure who performed better."

"And you, Bevau? Where are your marks?" Egilka slid into the water.

Bevau's chest puffed in anticipation of showing up both his clanmates. He pulled his formsuit off, and they gasped with admiration. "She bit you!" Clajak brushed his fingertips over the perfect oval crusted with dried blood.

"Now that's a true mark of honor," Egilka said, envy in his tone. "What did you do to earn that?"

Bevau and Clajak joined him in the basin. The three men sat in a circle, letting the water soak the day's tensions away. "I dominated her, but I also encouraged her to fight me. She loves a struggle, especially when she's on the losing end." His cocks hardened, and he cursed. "Do you think she's up for more fun tonight?" he asked Egilka.

The Imdiko laughed. "Only if you don't mind her unconscious. She fell asleep in the shuttle, and I had to carry her to her room. Our favorite little piece of fluff is done for the day, my friend."

Clajak snorted. "That *fluff* has a nasty temper. There's nothing soft about her when she's riled."

Egilka cocked an eyebrow at him. "Remind you of anyone else we know?"

Clajak dropped his eyes. "I can't apologize enough for breaking the news the way I did. There is no excuse for my behavior. What can I do to make it up to you?"

A pained expression flitted over Egilka's face for an instant then it was gone. His voice gentle, he said, "Grow up, Clajak. That's what you can do."

The Dramok nodded, and his gaze flicked to Egilka's face. "Is there anything else I can do instead?"

Egilka burst into laughter, and just like that the rift between the two was healed. Bevau felt something inside of himself lift. His clanmates had fought before, but this time had seemed serious. Relief took the last of his tensions away, and he relaxed for the first time that day.

Egilka said, "You can help convince little Jessica to come to Kalquor. Her experiences with you and I have soured her on joining a clan. She refuses to go now."

Clajak's expression went dark, but he tried to shrug it off. "She is only one female."

Bevau fought the tension creeping back in. "With less than two thousand Earther women on Kalquor, we need every female we can get. She has to come."

Egilka nodded his agreement. "She is strong, healthy, and not as repressed as most her kind. She must be clanned."

Bevau narrowed his eyes. "This is a complete turnaround for you, my Imdiko."

He sighed. "I know my duty, distasteful as it is. I guess maybe Earthers aren't all that bad." As Bevau continued to stare at him with disbelief, Egilka flushed. "It's not their fault I couldn't save our people."

Egilka had truly experienced an epiphany. Bevau felt relief along with sympathy for his clanmate. He patted the Imdiko's shoulder. "No one doubts you did your best. Many admired your efforts."

Egilka shrugged him off. "Let's get back to Jessica. It would be preferable for her to come willingly, but we might have to entertain the possibility of taking her against her wishes."

Clajak growled low in his throat. "I don't mind being forceful. Maybe I can collect a few bite marks of my own."

Bevau's cocks swelled their own agreement. He felt again the softness of Jessica's trapped body against his own, her helpless struggles to escape him. "We have a few days to change her mind. When rewards and promises fail, we can resort to coercion and punishment."

"Either way, we will all be very persuasive," Egilka vowed. The three men exchanged devious grins.

*This is going to be fun*, Bevau thought. He hoped Jessica would prove difficult to convince.

## Chapter Seven

Jessica screamed as whirling darkness fell upon her. The roar of the wind pressed everywhere, and she battled against the shredding sky as it pinned her helpless body. “Lindsey! Lindsey!” she cried, reaching for her sister.

Thrashing, she fell off the lounge, tangled in the soft cover keeping her naked body warm. Two of the triple moons remained in the sky, gleaming through her untinted windows and lighting her Plasian quarters.

The dregs of the nightmare tugged at her, making her heart race even as comforting reality asserted itself. She lay still on the soft carpet, fighting to catch her breath.

*Just a dream. I'm safe on Plasius. Past is past, and all is well.*

“After twenty years, I should have outgrown this by now,” she grouched, extricating herself from the linen wrapped around her. “Windows full tint. Lights up half.”

She stood and shivered in the chill. Egilka must have put her to bed; she didn't remember anything shortly after they'd climbed on board the shuttle. After switching the heat on, she fixed herself a cup of coffee scavenged from the military transport. She wouldn't sleep the rest of the night anyway.

She dressed, throwing on a sweater and long slacks. She preferred skirts and dresses, but the cold held on despite the heat blasting into her quarters. She guessed the Imdiko prince hadn't thought about her lesser tolerance to low temperatures. At least he had covered her up after undressing her.

She curled her fingers around the coffee cup, letting warmth radiate into her hands. She sipped it, savoring the smooth, slightly bitter flavor. She had perhaps another week's worth of coffee left if she rationed herself to two cups a day. She sighed. Earth had some things right, and coffee was one of them.

After finishing the drink, she wondered what to do with herself. Dawn was still an hour away, and Michaela was a late sleeper. Even with something to read or a vid to watch, sitting still would invite vestiges of the nightmare to crowd her conscious. Jessica couldn't allow that to happen. She would not let childhood terrors rule her life.

She thought better when she stayed active. Now that she had made the decision to not go to Kalquor, she had to look at her options. Even coffee couldn't tempt her back to Earth, which was at the bottom of her list...well, next to the bottom. Kalquor was the last place she wanted to go. Too many of the men were jerks.

A walk would clear her head of the nightmare and let her consider her choices. She'd explored little of Israla's estate. Michaela had kept her too busy with dance practice. With the household asleep, she could roam the property without anyone to disturb her.

Pleased with the opportunity, she pulled on a pair of boots and a coat made of an alashoo's smoky gray fur. The Plasian mammal's thick hide was stifling in the now-warm suite. Made for the taller Plasian race, the coat reached her ankles. Feeling equal to the Plasian winter environment, Jessica left her rooms.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica wandered the grounds of Israla's estate, skirting the lush garden with its aphrodisiacal flowers. A gentle breeze wafted their scent in her direction from time to time, stirring her senses. Every time she caught a whiff of the blooms, her thoughts went to the Kalquorian princes. How very different they were from one another, yet each man aroused her in his own way. If only Clajak wasn't such a selfish jerk and Egilka a bigoted one. To imagine sharing her body with the clan for the rest of her life...

Jessica growled at herself and set her back to the garden. She didn't want to think about the Kalquorian princes, about how much she wanted them. That might lead to admitting the real reason she was determined not to take her place in any clan.

One moon remained aloft in the sky, a lone sentinel in the last vestiges of night. The silver-white orb was a floodlight, allowing her to navigate the hedges that wound a meandering trail toward the front gates of the estate. She figured by the time she reached the end of the trail and returned to Israla's manor, others would be stirring.

The silvery metallic front gates were for show only; the decorative would-be barriers stood eternally open to admit everyone that chose to enjoy Israla's manicured lawns, marble patios and, of course, the aphrodisiacal garden with its outdoor rooms. When it came to her property, Israla was no different than the rest of her race. Plasians shared their belongings as easily as their bodies; hoarding anything was unknown to them. In Jessica's opinion, it made the amorous race the most advanced in the known universe. They would have made wonderful Buddhists, she thought. If Earth wasn't such a threat to the planet, she would stay.

Rounding a hedge, she gasped. A scarlet-scaled whalha peered at her from the top of the foliage. She paused and stared back, admiring the creature's smooth bullet-shaped head. It opened its toothless mouth to trill a warning before unfurling its bat-like wings and taking flight. The reptilian creature was as big as Jessica, and its beating wings blew her hair back from her face. Clawed hands and feet curled to its belly as it flew away towards the north where the tangled forest bordered the unnamed Plasian capitol. She smiled to hear its melodic call, as tuneful as an operatic soprano. The nocturnal whalha was rare in settled areas; to hear one was supposedly an omen of good fortune. To actually see one meant one's dearest wish would come true.

Jessica wondered what her dearest wish might be now that she had escaped Earth. A vision of Clajak, Bevau and Egilka sprang up in her mind, and she resolutely shoved it away.

"For my parents and Lindsey to join me," she whispered. Yes. Seeing her family again would be the sweetest gift of all, and seeing them free of Earth would be beyond imagination. Like a child, she crossed her fingers.

She continued to wander the looping path. As she rounded another bend, a tall shape loomed before her. She jumped back with a little scream.

“Who’s there?” a rough voice snarled in English. The man’s back was to the now setting moon, making it difficult for Jessica to discern his features. She recognized the green camouflage fatigues as that of an Earther soldier, but he wasn’t one of Israla’s playthings.

Jessica swallowed. It had to be an Earth loyalist, one of the soldiers unhappily marooned on Plasius. That group remained quartered in the transport, now sitting alone in a storage hangar at the space dock. The dozen or so men, older career soldiers devoted to Earth Gov and the Church, kept to themselves. They were rarely seen. What was this one doing on Israla’s estate?

“It’s Nurse McInness from Earth,” she said. “Are you okay? Were you looking for help?”

“We’re all healthy, Nurse McInness,” the man said, relaxing a little. “Though not happy. I’m scouting the enemy, which you seem to have joined.”

Jessica stiffened at the threat in his tone. Her voice icy, she lied with ease. “Under the virtuous command of General Croft, I was comfortable aboard the transport. With him dead, I found it inappropriate to shelter on the transport among men I do not know the intentions of. Saucin Israla has granted me private quarters, the better to ensure my virtue. Earth Gov is welcome to evaluate my actions when I return home.”

She took a step back, as if to demonstrate her reticence to be isolated with any man. She tried not to show her relief when he didn’t close the distance.

“My apologies for doubting your morality, Nurse. With so many treasonous bastards turning their backs on Earth to feed their lusts, I assumed the worst.” He shivered in the cold early morning air. “I keep hoping enough will recant to fly the transport and get us off this decadent planet.”

“None have mentioned anything of the sort to me. The men are awash in sin.”

“It’s that Jezebel Israla. God has a special place in Hell reserved for that one. I’d like to send her there sooner rather than later.” His voice dripped with hatred.

Jessica went cold. She would have to warn the Saucin. With no police force on Plasius, she didn’t know what good it would do, but Israla had to know her life might be in danger.

The soldier’s next words frightened her even more. “I heard the abomination put on a pornographic show for the visiting Kalquorians. Rumor says it performed sexual acts with all of them. That freak must be destroyed.”

Other Earthers referred to only one person as ‘the abomination’. Jessica’s emotions ran the gamut: terror to hear the threat on Michaela’s life, fury at his insinuation she was less than human, and amusement that the still virginal dancer was thought to have rutted with all the Kalquorians.

Wouldn’t the hateful bastard soil himself to discover Michaela was far more chaste than Jessica? She wished she could share that little tidbit with him just to see his expression.

“I can’t confirm the story. I keep to myself. The less contact I have with the godless, the safer my soul,” she said, her tone aloof.

"Amen sister," the soldier answered. "I will be glad to vouch for your piety when we return to Earth. I hope you will do the same for me? I'm Sergeant Jason Fiske." He saluted.

"It will be my honor, Sergeant Fiske." Jessica examined his face, slowly being revealed by the lightening sky. His lined, pale features reminded her of a bulldog. She memorized the heavy jowls, the baby fine graying hair, and the deep-set brown eyes for later description. Everyone needed to be on alert for the prowling soldier.

"Daylight's coming. I've got to get back to the transport before I'm seen," Fiske said. He scowled at the sky as if it was his enemy. "Keep yourself safe, Nurse. If any of the traitors approach you about returning to Earth, send them to me. Tell them they'll be granted immunity for their crimes in return for getting us home."

"Will they really be granted immunity?"

He grinned, but there was nothing pleasant in the expression. "Don't you worry. The exemption lasts only until we arrive on Earth. Proper judgment will be passed, and they will regret their sins for the rest of their very short lives."

\* \* \* \*

Later that day, Jessica was reaching for her blouse when she heard the door behind her open. "Did you forget something Slana?" she called without looking around.

Slana was the seamstress Michaela had hired to sew their costumes for the festival. She'd left only seconds before, having done Jessica's final fitting. When she didn't answer, Jessica turned to see what the Plasian wanted.

Clajak stood in her suite, smiling as he looked over her body, clad only in a lacy thong. Jessica gasped and covered her exposed breasts with her hands. "Get out!" she yelled.

"But I just got here," he answered, his grin insolent. "I must say, I enjoy the view in your suite much more than mine. I came to apologize for our misunderstanding." He moved toward her, his predatory stalk reminding her of the way Bevau had hunted her in this very room.

"I don't care about your apology. I told you I never wanted to see you again." Jessica angled away from him, putting the lounge between them.

He circled the lounge in an unhurried pace, not trying to catch her. Yet. "You also told Egilka you're not going to Kalquor. That's not acceptable, my sweet. We need you."

She measured the distance to the door, knowing the Kalquorian was far too fast for her to escape that way. Running through Israla's house practically naked didn't appeal to her either. Clajak was toying with her, and it pissed her off. "You and Egilka can go fuck yourselves. You've proven to me how undeserving Kalquor is of my services."

She enjoyed cursing at him. Profanity had its uses. No wonder Michaela had such a foul mouth.

"You like Bevau. That bite you gave him was impressive."

"Bevau is the exception. If two out of three Kalquorians are assholes, then the one isn't enough to make up for the rest."

She was behind the lounge, and Clajak was on the other side. He stopped moving. "We will introduce you to the finest clans on Kalquor. You'll have your pick of the most powerful and richest men on the planet."

She snorted. "I don't care if their cocks are made of gold and their balls are diamonds. Money and titles do not real men make. Especially those with royal pedigrees."

Her insult only seemed to delight Clajak. His grin grew broader still. "I see I'll have to find another way to convince you. So be it."

He launched himself in the air, springing at her like a panther. Jessica screamed and tried to duck away, but the Kalquorian's muscled arms closed around her like bands of iron. Clajak bore her down to the ground, letting his weight settle on her.

He pinned her arms to her sides. She lay defenseless beneath him. She screamed again, this time in frustration. "Get off me, you hateful bastard!"

"I only wish to make amends," he said, his expression a parody of innocence. He snuggled his groin against hers, and she gasped to feel him hard. "Let's start with this."

"I don't want you," she snapped, trying to wriggle free. She froze when he opened his mouth wide, displaying his fangs.

"I can change your mind about that," he whispered. His head darted down, and she felt the twin pinpricks against her throat. He stopped short of sinking his teeth into her flesh.

"Don't Clajak," she said, hating to beg him for anything, but hating even more to give herself the way his bite would make her.

"Then shut up and listen to me," he growled against her throat.

"I'm listening."

He drew back so he could look her in the face. His expression was serious as he regarded her. "I am sincerely sorry I let you think you were to be my clan's Matara. I should have had the sense to ensure your understanding of the situation. I think you're a beautiful, intelligent woman, and you have much to offer any clan lucky enough to attract your attentions. Yes I am a jerk, but you shouldn't judge the rest of my people based on my selfish actions. I beg your forgiveness and ask you to reconsider coming to Kalquor."

"It's a pretty speech," Jessica said. "How much practice did it take before you were able to make it without laughing your head off?"

His cats-eyes darkened, and anger flashed across his face. "I meant it, you stubborn little beast. Why does everything have to be a challenge with you?"

"Because I don't like you," she snarled back. "I am not going to Kalquor. Get off me."

A cruel version of his smile spread his lips back, showing her his fangs had unhinged once more. He ground his hips against her, letting her feel how much he enjoyed himself. "You may not like me, but you like what I do for you."

"I don't want you," she answered through gritted teeth. "You disgust me."

"Liar," he whispered.

He pinned her wrists over her head with one hand. The other hand dove down to cup her sex, and Jessica cried out to feel his fingers slipping into her panties to discover



the telltale wetness. The moment she'd seen him in her suite, her traitorous body had clamored for his touch.

"Tell the truth," he mocked her, his fingers running up and down the slit of her sex. "You want to fuck me."

"I hate you," she yelled in his face, writhing in his grip.

"That may be, but you still want my cocks inside you. Tell me how bad you want it," he coaxed, pressing two fingers into her softness.

A groan slipped from her throat as her body thrilled at the penetration. His thumb stroked her clitoris as he worked her with his fingers. She gushed honey.

He leaned down, his mouth brushing hers. "The clan compared notes on what you like," he said, nibbling at her lips. "You enjoyed Bevau holding you helpless. Egilka shared his knowledge about that spot inside that drives you insane with pleasure. I can give you what you want. Beg me to fuck you."

Jessica glared into his confident face and unleashed a string of expletives fit to make even Michaela blush. She kept at it until she ran out of breath.

Clajak didn't blush. He stroked in and out of her body the entire time she cursed him. She couldn't keep her hips from rising to his fingers.

Damn it, why couldn't she stop her body from betraying her?

"Where would a virtuous Earther girl learn language like that?" Clajak wondered out loud. "It is most unbecoming, my sweet. Keep it up, and I'll make it my personal mission to teach you manners."

"Go fuck yourself, gurluck."

She never felt him turn her over. She was suddenly lying on her belly, held down on the floor by one big hand between her shoulders. His other hand descended on her buttocks with a loud smack.

Clajak spanked her hard and fast, holding her down with one hand. Jessica's bottom warmed from the smarting blows, and she screamed. She scrambled to escape, but she was helpless against the Kalquorian prince.

He spanked her until her cries became sobs and she begged, "Please stop, please, I take it back, I'm sorry."

He quit the moment the apology left her lips. Jessica pressed her face against the soft carpeted floor and cried shamed tears. Her buttocks radiated heat that licked through her thighs, her back, her sex and her belly. She shuddered.

"Why won't you let me be nice to you?" Clajak's quiet voice came from above her. His fingers stroked up the inside of her thigh. Jessica stiffened, but she didn't resist for fear he'd punish her again. "Let me be nice to you, Jessica." His fingers brushed against her sex. She shuddered.

"You're soaking wet," he said, his voice surprised. "I have heard of women like you who appreciate discipline. My sweet, it's as if you were born to tempt me."

"I hate you," she said, her voice weak.

"I know. I'm sorry you feel that way." His tone was still soft, and he picked her up and cuddled her against his chest. He lifted her tearful face to kiss her mouth deeply.

Such tenderness after the harsh discipline fed her already heightened senses, and the low rumblings of desire exploded into an almost desperate need. Jessica moaned into

Clajak's mouth and rubbed against him. He responded with a growl and yanked her thong off, leaving her naked in his lap. His hands went all over her, and she was on her back beneath him once more.

His hands worked between them, fighting to free his sexes from his formsuit as he continued to kiss her. His mouth on hers was frantic now. His cocks leapt free of his pants, and he pressed against her with desperation. Her body opened to him, their combined wetness helping him to bury himself in her with one thrust. She grunted at the heady combination of the pleasure and pain the sudden filling of her womb incited.

Clajak held nothing back, his hips jackhammering against her. The sound of his groin pounding against hers was similar to how it had sounded when he spanked her. It hurt wonderfully, this furious taking, and she screamed in a high, thin voice. She clung to the slick fabric of his formsuit, gathering fistfuls of the stretchy material on his chest.

Clajak's head reared about, and he roared as his rhythm faltered, his fangs extended. Jessica gasped as a drop of intoxicant escaped one needle fang to fall on her cheek. The prince's head came down, and he buried his teeth in her neck. Jessica shrieked at the pain. Her body clenched in orgasm.

Clajak screamed against her neck as climax took him. His teeth remained embedded, and Jessica felt euphoria spread throughout her body as he rutted against her. She rode waves of bliss from the orgasm and the intoxicant he pumped into her body. Every moment was sweeter than the last, and her sighs came so continuously she almost hummed.

Even when he fell quiet and withdrew his fangs, Jessica still moved beneath him, rubbing herself against the strong body covering hers. The pleasure came slower and slower, but she rode every warm pulse her womb provided.

At last her body relaxed. Jessica's arms slipped from their embrace around Clajak's neck and flopped bonelessly to the floor. The Dramok prince propped himself on his elbows and smiled down at her. For once the smile seemed genuine, not cocky.

"Did you enjoy yourself, my sweet?"

"Mmm-hmm," she purred. She enjoyed looking at him, this striking alien male who gave her such pleasure. *Too bad he's the biggest jerk ever. I could fuck him every day of my life,* she thought and giggled. Her fingers drifted up to stroke his soft, steel-tinged hair.

"You drive me mad with lust." He caught one hand and kissed each finger, one at a time. "I haven't lost such control since I was very young. I apologize for pumping you so full of intoxicant. You'll be floating for awhile. I'm surprised you're still conscious."

"S'okay," she slurred. "Feels good."

He laughed. "I'm sure it does. You'll be angry with me later though." His look sobered. "What can I do to make things better between us?"

She tried to think about that. Finally, she managed to say in English, "Get over yourself."

"I am unsure of this meaning," he answered in her language.

"Hey, you know how to talk like me!" Jessica said.

"My clan has studied various Earther languages. English tends to be one of the most difficult. Too much slang."

“Really? You’re doing pretty well with it right now.”

“But I do not know what ‘get over yourself’ means. The literal translation makes no sense.”

“It means stop being so high and mighty, like you’re the only person who matters in the universe. Cause you’re not.”

He chuckled and pulled free of her. After adjusting his clothing, he picked her up and carried her to the lounge where he laid her down. He sat next to her.

Stroking her cheek, he said in Plasian, “I’ve been told many times I’m selfish and I need to grow up.”

“Bevau says you’re afraid to be emperor.”

“I think it’s more accurate to say I’m afraid to fail as emperor.”

Jessica reached up to stroke his shining, sleek hair again. She couldn’t resist touching him. “What makes you think you’ll fail?”

He frowned, his eyes going distant. “My people will either breed with yours and create a new race or go extinct in the next 300 years. My clan might be the last to rule our planet if Kalquor doesn’t claim enough Earther Mataras. Obviously the matter of the ill feelings between Earth and Kalquor complicates our survival. We’re on the brink of war with the very people we need to save us.”

Jessica knew she should care about what he said, but under the intoxicant’s influence, she was more interested in the delightful honey-smoothness of Clajak’s voice. “Who is forecast to win if our planets go to war?”

“Our technology is far more advanced; however Earthers outnumber us a hundred to one. It’s impossible to tell who the victor would be.” His face became grave. “The casualties on both sides would be phenomenal. Fighting a war could hasten the extermination of my people.”

“Better find a way to keep from fighting then.” Jessica’s hands roamed down to trace the contours of his chest. She didn’t want to have sex; she was too sore from their rough lovemaking. He was simply too beautifully formed to not touch.

“We hope it doesn’t come to that. Earth is trying to force our hand though.” He sighed, his expression unhappy. “They’ve begun raiding some of our outposts, and this barricade of Plasius is bad business. They’re now threatening to do the same to our other allies.”

“All because of one woman, Amelia Ryan, and the clan that claimed her. If their Nobek hadn’t killed General Croft, you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Nobek Breft’s killing of Croft was just the excuse Earth was looking for to escalate military operations. Breft was cleared of all charges at the inquiry. We couldn’t blame him after what that beast did to his pregnant Matara.” Clajak shook his head.

“Earth thinks it can win a war. Your planet is determined to push ahead with hostilities because it doesn’t want us spawning with your people, and if they can get their hands on the riches of Kalquor, so much the better.”

“Your opinion of us sounds as low as Egilka’s.” She moved on to exploring his broad, muscular shoulders. The man was a living, breathing sculpture. She could run her hands over him all day.

Clajak snickered. "Egilka is licking wounds to his pride. His opinion of Earthers, particularly female Earthers, has changed since he spent time with you. For myself, I can separate the ambitious greed of a few power-hungry Earthers from the general population. Most of your people are being dragged into conflict as unwillingly as we are."

"That sucks," Jessica said in English. In Plasian she complained, "I'm really sore. Can you get me the pain reliever from the kitchen? It's on the shelf over the cooker."

"Of course, my sweet. I'm sorry I was so rough, but sexually arousing an angry Kalquorian can be dangerous business." Clajak brought her the tube of inhalable pain reliever. He shook it experimentally before handing it to her. "Do you use this often?"

Jessica sucked on the reliever. She sighed as the ache of her vagina and anus eased. "Michaela is a brute about dance practice. I can barely walk when we're done."

"The way you've been touching me, I thought you might like another frolic. If you're sore enough to use that, we'd better not."

Jessica giggled. "You're just so yummy, I can't keep my hands to myself. Aren't there any fat, ugly Kalquorians to turn me off?"

Clajak grinned. "If you like us so much, then come to Kalquor and pick your clan."

"Nope, nope, nope." Jessica was speaking English again. "Not gonna happen. Hot, sexy muscles can't weaken this girl's resolve."

"Is it resolve or stubbornness?"

Jessica didn't have an answer to that, so she childishly stuck her tongue out at him.

"That's what I thought." Clajak stood. "If I can't satisfy any other needs at this time? No? Then I will let you rest and recover."

"One more thing, Clajak."

"Yes?"

"What is a gurluck?"

He stared at her, his expression shocked. "You don't know?"

"I said it because I knew it was a good insult."

He groaned. "You are an impossible creature, Jessica. If I'd known you didn't realize what you were saying, I wouldn't have punished you." A mischievous sparkle appeared in his eyes. "Although I enjoyed it, and apparently you did too."

"Pain seems to add to the pleasure under certain circumstances. I'll feel embarrassed later when I'm not high as a kite."

Clajak's grin was huge. "I'm thrilled to know you like such things."

"I can tell." She ogled the bulge in his formsuit.

"If given the opportunity, I'll be glad to spank you again. As to your question, gurluck refers to a man who forces himself upon his own mother. Since Kalquorian men regard their mothers with almost sacred reverence, it's a very nasty insult. If a man were to call me such a thing, I'd kill him."

Jessica's jaw dropped. "Wow, that is a terrible thing to say. I'm sorry I called you that."

He leaned down to kiss her on the lips. "It is forgiven, my sweet. Why don't you learn some less offensive Kalquorian for arguments with your future clan?"

"I'm not going to take a clan. Will you tell Egilka I'm sorry for calling him a gurluck too?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "Yes, Jessica. I will give him your most sincere apologies. No doubt he'll feel much better knowing you intended no real insult."

He left her suite still laughing.

## Chapter Eight

Jessica and Michaela peeked between the curtains blocking the enclosed back area from the stage. The Coming of Age Festival was in full swing, and the crowds were huge. With all the merrymaking, a casual observer would never know a blockade of warships surrounded the planet.

The stage was across from the object that the city was built around. The center of Plasius' unnamed capital was a great stone altar that had been carved so long ago no one knew who its maker had been. Over the altar loomed a forgotten deity carved from the same kind of stone. The figure looked like a cross between a gnarled tree and a willowy Plasian with skeletal wings. The pitted, worn creature resembled the fossil of some horrific demon. It was grotesque in the Earthers' opinions.

The altar was a slab carved with intricate swirled designs. It stretched about nine feet long and six feet across. Flowers banked in piles around the altar as well as the stage, and the enticing scent carried to the Earthers on the breeze. More than once Jessica caught herself unconsciously rubbing her sex under the influence of the blooms.

Hooks studded the edges of the altar, and in spite of the brightly colored flowers surrounding it, it was easy to imagine sacrificial victims chained onto the surface while black-cloaked priests cut their still beating hearts out.

Currently the slab supported two naked Plasians, but neither was dying. A young girl lay on her back with a male hovering over her. Four other males ranged around the altar, each holding a wrist or an ankle of the girl, keeping her spread-eagled.

The girl, so young her tiny breasts had barely formed, looked at the man over her with wide eyes. Her lips were parted, and Jessica saw her immature chest heaving. All around the tableau a large crowd of Plasians gathered to watch. Jessica knew most of them were the girl's family.

The male crouched over her nodded to the men holding the girl's ankles. They lifted her legs, tilting her pelvis up. Then the man readied himself, touching the lips of her small sex with the tip of his penis. Her trembling fingers clenched into fists.

He entered her in a smooth, quick glide, and the girl cried out in a high birdlike voice. The surrounding crowd cheered.

Michaela's eyes drank in the sight. "Can you imagine doing that in front of so many people? And with five men! In front of her family!"

"Israla says the original ritual called for the girl to have sex with all the men of her tribe within one day. Only then could she be considered a woman. One tribe had over fifty men before they changed the custom."

"And Earth thinks bedding three Kalquorians is perverted!"

The girl moaned over and over, her smile pure delight as her partner plunged in and out. She writhed in the grasp of the other men, her hips bucking to greet the slender penis claiming her virtue.

“Hell of a way to lose your virginity,” Michaela breathed. “She’s the last one, right?”

“Number one hundred forty-four,” Jessica confirmed. “That’s how many Israla said had come of age this year. Unless you want to make your downfall official? If this dance doesn’t tempt Korkla’s clan, nothing will.”

Michaela shuddered. “I’m ready to give myself to them, but I hope they’ll take me somewhere private.”

“With the flowers everywhere, you won’t care where they claim you. And if you’re bitten, you *really* won’t care.”

“I’m pretty sure they’ll be looking to bite. Thanks for the tip about pissing off Kalquorians then turning them on. I’m not sure I want to be spanked, but if that’s what it takes...” She shuddered again, her face torn between desire and fear.

Jessica looked at her friend with alarm. “What did you do?”

Michaela watched the deflowering of the young Plasian, sucking her lower lip as the second lover took his turn. “I sent a message to Korkla’s clan telling them I wanted to check out the other two clans, the ones you refuse to meet with. They should have received it by now.”

“Michaela, you adore Korkla and the others!”

“I’m sick of Govi making them tiptoe around my ‘trauma’. They need to fuck me already.”

“Do you think they’ll be mad?”

Michaela barked hard laughter. “Raxstad will be livid. He’s extremely possessive. Korkla won’t stand for it either. Even Govi has to have limits to his patience. Look, there they are.”

Jessica saw the massive Kalquorians threading their way through the crowd of Plasians toward the dance stage. One look into their thunderous faces made her heart stammer. “You succeeded, dear. They look really upset.”

Michaela’s expression was savage in its glee. “If the wind changes direction and takes the flowers’ scent away, I am going to piss my panties in terror. Right now, I can’t wait to get fucked. God, they look amazing, don’t they?”

A roar of approval heralded the Plasian girl’s third partner. Jessica’s mouth went dry as she saw another trio of Kalquorians arrive. “Oh hell, Clajak’s clan is here.”

Korkla’s group gathered at the edge of the stage, and Michaela jerked the curtain shut before they could see her spying on them. She snapped shackles about her own wrists and handed Jessica her set. Jessica’s stomach did a slow roll as she put hers on. The chains were light, but strong. She was making herself vulnerable and knowing Clajak, Bevau and Egilka were in attendance heightened her nervousness. It also excited her.

The crowd outside cheered anew. “Number four,” Jessica announced needlessly. Her stomach groaned. Hundreds of eyes were about to watch her dance. Would it get back to Sergeant Fiske and his comrades? At least she was safe from attack now.

Thanks to Jessica’s warning, Clajak had posted the two Nobeks from the other clans on guard at Israla’s property.

Michaela said, "With the princes here, it looks like we'll both be busy after this performance."

Jessica snorted disdain she didn't feel. "You can have all six of them. I've had plenty of Kalquorian sex to last me a lifetime."

"If it's as good as you say, I doubt you're done with them."

Jessica flexed her arms against the chains binding them close together. "Don't lose the keys to these cuffs. I'll kill you if you do."

Michaela snuck a peek through the curtains. "Baby Plasian will soon be up to her fifth partner. Let's get ready."

Jessica blew out a huge breath and concentrated on warming up for the performance.

\* \* \* \*

"Michaela told them *what*?" Clajak gaped at Bevau.

Bevau crooked a half-smile at his Dramok. "She wants to interview other clans. Korkla has ordered her, um, deflowering immediately following the dance. He wants us to recognize her as his clan's Matara as soon as it's done, even if it's coerced."

"What does Govi say?" Egilka asked, unable to disguise his amusement.

"He wholeheartedly agrees. I'm surprised they're waiting that long."

"I take it we shouldn't get between them and Michaela."

Bevau's expression was full of warning for his clan. "Don't even make eye contact with her when she comes out. We don't want to give them any excuse for violence. Raxstad is itching for a fight."

Egilka shook his head, the merriment refusing to leave. "Those Earthers know how to get themselves into trouble. Let's play it safe and put distance between our clans."

Clajak's group sidled to the far edge of the stage, leaving his aide's clan to glower in silence as they waited for Michaela to appear. It was amusing, but he understood the men's fury with their hesitant Matara-to-be. It had only been three days since his own anger at Jessica had spurred him to spank her like a naughty child, which in turn led him to take her violently. The memory made his sexes stir.

The last Plasian male had finished breaking in the girl lying on the altar, and her family was carrying her off, her naked body held over their heads in triumph. She smiled weakly as she was borne away, a woman at last, free to indulge in every pleasure of the lusty Plasian life. The ritual over, the crowd of aroused Plasians moved toward the stage to enjoy the start of the night's festivities.

Egilka fingered the bouquets of flowers that lined the edge of the stage. "Didn't you say these have a powerful effect on Jessica?"

Bevau grinned at the hopeful note in his clanmate's voice. "Desiring a bit of Earther warmth?"

Before the Imdiko could answer, music boomed from the back of the stage. Clajak felt his heart quicken in anticipation. The dance was beginning.

Michaela and Jessica swept onto the stage, and there was a collective gasp of appreciation among the spectators. Their costumes were stylized versions of what the sex slaves of Dantovon wore. The cups of their bras curved up from the bottom just enough



to cover their areolas. The silver beaded bras held their breasts up like offerings for hungry mouths. Artfully torn filmy skirts showed the lithe muscles of their legs to advantage. The scant fabric also displayed their taut buttocks, left bare by the thong panties they wore. Their rounded flanks invited every man to sink his hard flesh into the tightest of openings women could offer.

Most erotic of all were the chains shackled to the wrists of the Earthers. The metal links made tinny clicks as the women moved, letting Clajak know the binds were real. He licked his dry lips and felt himself go hard. Helpless, they begged to indulge Clajak's most brutal lusts. He had a sudden vision of both bound to his bed, vulnerable to his every whim.

He watched the Earthers with stunned eyes, their supple bodies a feast to behold. To see so much silky skin on display lit every sense he possessed. He longed to climb onto the stage and throw them down, to fuck them until his loins dried as arid as the vast Plasian desert to the west.

Jessica spun to a stop on Clajak's side of the stage; Michaela was close to her own angry but obviously aroused clan. They performed the same dance in unison, a simulation of fighting a stronger, possessive force. Comparing them, Clajak noticed the steps were the same for both, but the mood of each woman made her dance different.

Michaela danced with violent purpose. She stared at Korkla's clan, her teeth slightly bared as she dared them to take her down. Every move, while graceful, filled with barely restrained ferocity. Her entire being said that while she might be conquered, she would not go down without a fight. She would draw blood from those brave enough to claim her.

Watching the ferocious display and Korkla's clan's reaction to it, Clajak felt a stab of jealousy. They would get their Earther Matara and the lifetime of sensual pleasure that came with her. Clajak, future ruler of Kalquor, had to settle for a self-centered woman who tightened with disgust at the slightest touch. He scowled with the unfairness of it all.

In contrast to the fierce Michaela, Jessica's dance was one of fear, a desperate struggle against a forced liaison. Behind the terror was an undercurrent of desire, a wanting that threatened her determination to not succumb. With her wide, blue eyes she begged the delighted spectators for both merciful release and ruthless conquest. Her need to be taken made her every bit as vulnerable as the chains holding her captive.

Clajak swallowed, his dry throat clicking. "She is so beautiful," he whispered. "There has never been another like her."

Bevau's voice was yearning. "If only we could make her our Matara. I would surrender fifty years of my life to make her mine."

Clajak couldn't mask his bitterness. "That could set off a civil war. Narpok's father would never stand for it."

The longing in Egilka's tone shocked him. "Indeed, but such pleasure would almost be worth it."

"*You* would consider an Earther Matara, Egilka?"

His Imdiko kept his eyes on Jessica. "I have been given no choice but to accept the interbreeding of Earthers and Kalquorians. Having enjoyed the delight of that body

consuming mine, it is not such a terrible future to contemplate.” He glanced at Clajak, his eyes dark. “Have you not compared her to Narpok? Which do you prefer to warm your bed?”

Clajak caught Jessica staring at him as she danced. The blue of her eyes was nearly swallowed by her pupils, and he saw the moisture flowing from her sex to wet the insides of her thighs. The need to pierce her was savage.

“Don’t worry, my sweet,” he whispered to himself. “I will give you what we both crave so desperately.”

She couldn’t have heard him, but she recognized the intent. Her eyes widened, and she shook her head slightly. *As if she has a choice*, Clajak thought.

The music ended, and both dancers dropped to the stage, vanquished. Before the first clap of applause could start, Raxstad leapt on the stage and seized Michaela. To the roar of Plasian approval, he swung her over his shoulder and jumped from the stage. She offered no resistance as he bore her to the altar, the rest of his clan following. The crowd of Plasians followed in their wake, eager to see the rarest form of Earther lose her virginity.

Clajak snapped his attention back to Jessica, who had risen to her knees to watch her friend’s abduction. As if feeling his eyes upon her, she looked at him. With a wicked smile, he raised his hand and beckoned her to join him.

Jessica got to her feet, shaking her head. Her chest heaved from the exertion of the dance, and the rosy circles of her erect nipples slipped out over the top of her bra. She took a step back, her trembling muscles poised to take flight.

Bevau stiffened beside Clajak, his attention rapt on Jessica. A soft growl rose from his throat.

She broke and ran to the back of the stage, disappearing behind the curtains. Bevau was after her in an instant.

Clajak and Egilka exchanged a grin before joining the chase. “I guess no one ever warned her it’s a bad idea to run from a Nobek,” Egilka laughed. His eyes were bright with anticipation of what would happen when they caught her.

Clajak let his leer answer for him. He knew his time to enjoy the Earther’s body was limited. He vowed he would make the most of it while he could.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica shrieked as Bevau’s fingertips brushed against her hair. She thought he had her, but the Nobek got tangled in the curtains, letting Jessica elude capture. She jumped down from the raised platform and merged into the crowd behind the stage. Bevau cursed over the loud purr of ripping fabric as the Plasian mob swept her away. They stampeded in their eagerness to watch the spectacle on the altar, and she dashed with them. She looked over her shoulder to see Bevau tear free. Clajak and Egilka burst through the shredded curtains to stand beside him, and the Nobek pointed her out as she rounded the corner and disappeared from their sight.

The tide of Plasians carried her to the middle of the square between the stage and the altar. There they halted, held back by the already assembled audience. Knowing the Kalquorians couldn’t be far behind, Jessica wove through the forest of Plasians, holding at bay the arousal that wanted her to surrender to Clajak’s clan. It wasn’t easy; the

cloying scent of those damned flowers was everywhere, almost thick enough to choke her. Feeling their eyes on her, seeing the naked lust in their faces as she performed had excited her. Her senses begged her to run back to them, to submit to their every craving. Only desire-laced terror at what sensual demands they might make kept her from doing so.

A high-pitched scream filled the air, and the Plasians cheered. Jessica knew it had been Michaela who screamed, and she craned her neck to see through the crowd. Finding a sight line, she gasped at the tableau on the altar.

Raxstad knelt on the altar behind Michaela holding her tight to his body. His face was buried in her neck, no doubt delivering the intoxicating bite that would rid her of whatever inhibitions might remain. Her shackled arms bent to encircle his head. Her head was thrown back on his broad shoulder, eyes closed and lips parted in an expression of rapture.

On either side of her, Korkla and Govi tore at her costume. Govi ripped her bra from her body, revealing young round breasts capped with dusky nipples. Korkla was no more gentle, rending to shreds the skirt and thong concealing her most intimate riches. Suddenly Michaela was naked before everyone, her rigid penis free to curve up tight against her lower belly. Korkla lifted her child-sized scrotum to reveal Michaela's female sex to the onlookers. He spread the soft folds, displaying the pink shades of her secret flesh. A collective sigh of appreciation rippled through the crowd, followed by respectful applause. Murmurs of admiration rose in the air. Tears sprang to Jessica's eyes. Michaela was beautiful, not freakish at all. Her clan was justifiably proud of the treasure they'd gained.

A deep voice shouted out, and Jessica's heart skipped. She turned to see Clajak's clan standing on the stage where she'd performed only minutes before, and they looked right at her. They jumped down and began pressing their way through the crowd.

Jessica slipped through the knot of Plasians, grateful her smaller size allowed her to move quickly through the packed throng. She angled toward her right, determined to get back to Israla's home before Clajak's clan could catch up.

She caught her breath to see a purple-trimmed black formsuit appear between the bronze bodies of the barely clad Plasians. Egilka's face hovered above the crowd, turning this way and that as he looked for her.

*How did he get there so fast?* She turned and headed in the other direction. *If they're flanking me to cut off escape, I'm in deep doo-doo.*

It reminded her of Bevau stalking her in her suite, and her sex spasmed at the memory. She allowed a small moan to escape her as she tried to hurry through the throng.

She spied Clajak ahead of her and Bevau to her left. With Egilka somewhere behind her, there was only one direction left to go: towards the altar with its leering stone god and mounds of aphrodisiacal flowers.

Jessica couldn't help but see what Korkla's clan did to Michaela as she headed in that direction. The chains of the Earther's shackles had been attached to one of the hooks embedded in the side of the altar. She lay prone as the now naked clan fondled, kissed and stroked her helpless body. Michaela's moans were a continuous singsong. Korkla

parted her thighs and knelt between them. His hand moved between their sexes. Raxstad bent to take her penis into his mouth, and Govi drowned her ecstatic scream with a kiss. Jessica's sex gushed honey at the sight.

"I smell an aroused little Earther girl," came Bevau's voice, much too close behind Jessica. "Come out and play with us, Jessica."

She stifled a shriek and dropped to the stone patio, crawling on all fours and darting between long Plasian legs. She hurried until a mountain of flowers, stacked up against the altar, blocked her way. Their aroma cascaded over her, and her sex clenched in beautiful agony. Even if she had a place to run, her legs were now too weak to carry her.

A pained cry carried in the perfumed air. Unable to help herself, Jessica stood to look on the altar. Only feet away, Michaela writhed on the stone, her eyes unfocused as Govi murmured in her ear. Korkla was drawing back, the cock emerging from Michaela's sheath streaked with the blood of her lost virginity. A cheer rose from the assembled Plasians, and shouts of congratulations vibrated the air. Michaela smiled, then groaned anew as her Dramok mate plunged into her body once more.

Jessica groaned too, aroused beyond sense. Her legs gave out beneath her, and she sank to the ground. Strong hands seized her and pulled against an impossibly muscled body. She looked into Bevau's handsome face. Like magic, Clajak and Egilka appeared next to them. Jessica couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry at being caught.

"Don't bite her," Clajak said, his smile spreading across his face as he took in her condition. "The flowers will keep her weak enough for us to have our pleasure, but I don't want her mind muddled."

"Where shall we take her?" Bevau asked, holding her upright with no effort.

"Let's join our friends on the altar," Egilka urged. He ran his fingertips over a nipple she hadn't realized was exposed.

Jessica groaned and arched against the touch, but she managed to protest. "Not in front of everyone. Take me somewhere private," she begged.

Clajak laughed. "Not this time, my sweet. I want witnesses for this."

Bevau tossed her over his shoulder. She struggled, the coming humiliation warming her face. She couldn't, she just couldn't, not with all of the capital city's residents watching! Fiske would find out and tell Earth!

The Kalquorian holding her slipped a finger into her thong, finding her center with ease. His finger dove in, and Jessica stopped raining blows on his broad back, her fists clenching his formsuit as pleasure erupted in her belly. Bevau worked his finger in and out as he carried her up the steps to the altar. She whimpered in time with the rhythm. Clajak and Egilka laughed as they followed. Jessica barely noticed as her body thrilled to the Nobek's touch.

She was helpless to resist when the men stretched her upon the altar, her head at the end opposite of where Michaela was being claimed. The Plasians would have an unencumbered view of both Earthers being ravished, and they cheered louder than ever.

"Now this will be a dance!" she heard Israla call, and more cheers showed the people's agreement.

Clajak grasped the chain between Jessica's cuffs and pulled them over the edge. The clatter of metal against metal told her he had secured her to one of the hooks. She was helpless to deny the Kalquorians anything they might wish to use her body for. Her sex gushed in anticipation.

Egilka appeared next to her, a handful of flowers in each fist. He set the bouquets on either side of her head. The fragrance coated the air around her, and she had no choice but to breathe it in. She submitted to the eagerness of her body with a defeated moan.

The Kalquorians stripped beneath the stare of the stone god to the delighted shouts of the onlookers. Jessica licked her lips, trembling with need as she gazed on the three magnificent bodies surrounding her.

Clajak gripped her by her upper arms and slid her across the slab until her head hung over the edge. His engorged cocks pointed at her face. "Open your mouth," he said.

She obeyed, eager to taste him. Holding the two organs together in his fist, Clajak guided them both between her lips, holding her by the back of her head. Jessica closed her eyes, inhaling the cinnamon scent of him that was every bit as intoxicating as the flowers that surrounded her. She flushed with embarrassment, knowing hundreds of pairs of eyes were watching her accept his sexes in such a manner. Still, she couldn't help but moan with delight as he made her take him.

She opened her mouth as wide as she could to accept both penises. The skin was soft and smooth over the rigid iron that pulsed with its own life. He pressed in far, reaching into her throat before backing out again. His movements were slow and deliberate, as if he would spend hours enjoying the warmth.

While Clajak fucked her mouth, the other men yanked her costume off. A strong hand grasped one of her thighs and lifted it high, opening her so that the gathered crowd could view her sex. Fingers parted her folds, displaying her much as Michaela had been. She whimpered, knowing everyone could see how wet and eager her flesh was. Her belly quivered in anticipation even as fear tried to clench it tight.

Holding her open, the man inserted his finger, slipping in and out for the entertainment of the assembled Plasians. Another pair of hands caressed her breasts as Clajak continued to couple with her mouth. Shouts and applause rewarded the show the Kalquorians put on.

The finger withdrew from her wet core, and the bulk of a man's hips settled between her legs. His sexes homed in on the orifices they were made for. She groaned as he filled her with himself and heard appreciative comments of how flexible she must be to accept Bevau's massive endowment.

Over her, Clajak chuckled. "You impress our audience, my sweet. I hope you won't get used to it. I'm counting on your embarrassment to get what I want from you."

She felt Egilka straddle her torso. The slick length of his penises settled on her chest, and his hands pressed her breasts together to encase the burning hot organs. He slid back and forth between her soft orbs, his lubrication keeping the friction from being painful.

Michaela cried out, her voice strong with release. A Kalquorian roar joined her, and a few cheers mixed in. Underneath the clamor was the hum of mingled moans, sobs

and whispers. The all-night orgy had begun in earnest, and Jessica relaxed a little to know she wasn't the center of attention anymore.

The easing of tension allowed the scent of the flowers to work even greater upon her sensitized libido. Being fucked by three men at once was everything her body craved. Jessica dove into the voluptuous rapture of being helpless while they enjoyed all they could claim from her. She couldn't fight them, and being utterly vulnerable to their demands was delicious in its freedom. There was nothing to do but accept their desires, and she thrilled to let them have her.

Her sex pulsed as she gave herself over to the Kalquorians, the reverberations traveling up her body. She moaned against Clajak's driving flesh as pleasure moved from her womb, up her belly to her chest where Egilka drove against her, to her throat. They groaned in response, feeling her soften to their desires.

They became more demanding in return, thrusting more urgently into her. She fell farther into quiescence, her only need to give them all they required of her. Even her orgasms were gentle, rolling sweetly through her in continuous waves.

The more accepting she was, the harder the men worked her body, and the more compliant she became. Bevau pounded into her, his growl growing in volume as he neared his inevitable end. Clajak and Egilka gasped and grunted in the effort to not lose control. When Bevau climaxed with an animal roar, the other two went still. Their trembling bodies told Jessica they too were very close, and she made herself stay motionless despite the pleasure sweeping through her body.

Once Bevau finished pumping his seed into her, Egilka took his place, entering her with the sigh of a man who'd made it home after a long journey. Clajak extricated himself from her mouth. Egilka pulled her so that her head rested on the stone altar. Behind him, Jessica saw Govi's hips rising and falling over Michaela's. Her friend moaned with pleasure. Overhead, the gruesome stone god leered its approval of the Earthers' sacrifice against the backdrop of star-dusted sky. Tethered lighting globes dug deep shadows into the fearsome visage, giving Jessica the fear-tinged thrill that fed her lust so well.

Clajak swept aside the flowers surrounding Jessica's head, and he stretched next to her. His hands played over her breasts, and she closed her eyes to the delightful sensations he and Egilka gave her. She felt Bevau lie on the other side.

"Are you getting tired, my sweet?" Clajak rumbled in her ear. His fingers made slow circles around one nipple.

"I will give you each a turn," she said submissively. "However you desire me."

"What if we want you more than once? What if we want to fuck you many times in front of the Plasians? What if we want to do more than fuck you?"

She felt a twinge of fear at the calculated tone and opened her eyes. All three men, even Egilka who was driving in and out of her body with enthusiasm, looked down at her with devious smiles. She pulled at the shackles, unable to keep herself from testing them under those stares. "What do you mean?"

Clajak's smile grew. "We want you to come to Kalquor and take a clan. We're prepared to do what it takes to make you say yes."

Bevau chimed in. "This celebration will go all night. You will be the star of the show until you agree to our demands."

Jessica shook her head. "The Plasians are busy with their own pleasure. They won't care enough to watch us."

Egilka chuckled. "Look at the crowd, Jessica. They're fucking each other all right, but all eyes are on the altar."

Bevau shifted so she could look past him to the crowd filling the city's center. Indeed, the hundreds of Plasians now eagerly coupling still watched Jessica and Michaela give themselves to the Kalquorians.

Something about being under such fervent gazes made her body respond. The building orgasm wouldn't be gentle. She felt rumblings of something bigger, as if a great beast was awakening. If Egilka went after that sweet spot now...

As if reading her mind, the Imdiko shifted, rubbing his shaft hard against that bundle of nerves. Jessica cried out and jerked against her shackles. Her entire body shuddered.

"Hold her legs like the Plasians do for the virgin ritual," Egilka said, his eyes avid with excitement. His clanmates hurried to do his bidding.

"Oh please, don't," Jessica begged, knowing her pleas fell on deaf ears. Egilka put his hands under her buttocks to lift and angle her better for his thrusts.

"Come closer," Clajak called, and several Plasians, male and female, gathered around. "Touch her if you like," he added, the grin he gave Jessica ferocious.

Before she could protest, Egilka moved his hips back and forth, rubbing the sweet spot in her sheath with intense accuracy. The beast in Jessica's belly awoke with a vengeance, and she screamed her pleasure to the Plasians clustered around her.

She was dimly aware of long-fingered hands all over her body, of strangers' mouths covering hers as she pealed shriek after shriek. Tongues lapped at her ears, mouth and belly. Fingers pinched her breasts, tugged at her nipples, and stroked her pubic hair. The touches were nothing compared to the lightning bolts of exaltation blasting through her womb. The rapture of Egilka's lovemaking was intense enough to be painful, and Jessica's body jerked with equal parts ecstasy and agony.

Egilka lost rhythm as he succumbed to his own needs. His fangs descended, and from within her haze of tortured bliss, she saw Bevau hold back the Imdiko's rattlesnake strike with one hand around his clanmate's throat and the other tangled in his long braid. Egilka screamed his release to the dark god above. His body shuddered against hers several times before he quieted.

Jessica thought she might faint. When the dizziness receded, she realized the many people who'd surrounded her were gone. Well, not gone entirely; they'd all caught fire from the violence of Egilka's and Jessica's lovemaking and were now in moaning heaps of twined arms and legs around the altar.

Clajak took his place between her legs, and she almost wept to see the calculating look on his face as he pushed into her. He felt amazing as always, and she hated herself for wanting him so much.

"You see?" he said, his strokes long and sinuous. She moaned as her still-eager sex grabbed greedily at his. "The Plasians want to see everything you have to offer."

Your pleasure is like a drug to them, and we will give them all they want until you agree to take a clan."

"That's coercion," she moaned.

"You know," he continued, speaking to Bevau and Egilka, "she responded most wildly to being spanked. I wonder how excited she and the Plasians would become if we bent her over the altar and spanked her until her ass turned red."

Jessica sobbed to see Bevau growing hard again at Clajak's words. Her sheath clutched ever harder at the Dramok prince's cock, responding to the idea of another round of harsh Kalquorian discipline.

"I would love to spank her sweet ass," Bevau breathed. "Count me in."

"Me too, but I need a few minutes," Egilka agreed. He was still gasping, trying to catch his breath.

"I can tell she likes the idea too, despite her tears," Clajak grinned. He licked the salty drops from her cheeks.

"I don't want you to," she said. "I'll go to your damned planet, I'll choose a clan, but don't spank me in front of everyone. It's too demeaning."

"The spanking is too demeaning, or the pleasure you'd show from being spanked?" Clajak asked, enjoying himself. His rhythm quickened, and she caught her breath.

"Spank me in private, if you want. I won't fight," she whispered. Her desire spiked at her words. Damn it, why did she like such things? "You said if I agreed to go to Kalquor and take a clan, you wouldn't make me do more than this in public."

"Yes I did," Clajak agreed, his eyes bright with triumph. Staring into her face he called, "Israla, I need you to bear witness to this Earther's intentions."

Sounding breathless, Israla's voice drifted to them. "State your intentions, Jessica McInness."

Hating herself for not being stronger, Jessica swallowed hard. She said, "I agree to go to Kalquor and join a clan as their Matara."

"Acknowledged."

It wasn't good enough for Clajak. "By her own statement, Jessica McInness becomes a citizen of Kalquor, and a subject of the royal members of the Empire."

"Agreed," Israla groaned.

"As her sovereign, I take personal custody of her." He grinned at Jessica's gasp. "She will stay with my clan, subject to our bidding, until a suitable clan has been located for her on Kalquor. Do you recognize my rights over Jessica McInness, Saucin Israla?"

Before Jessica could protest, Bevau shoved a flower in her face. Egilka held her head still, forcing her to inhale the sweet perfume of the bloom. Her body clenched with oncoming orgasm.

"Whatever you want, Clajak. Keep her in chains if you like." Israla's statement ended in a little scream.

Jessica's shock couldn't overcome her body's response to the aphrodisiac or what Clajak did to her. He angled himself as Egilka had, making his cock rub the best part of her eager sex.



“Mine for now,” Clajak whispered as she drew in a lungful of the flower’s scent, readying to scream her body’s release. “And I will take every advantage possible until I have to give you up.”

He laughed as she bucked in helpless climax beneath him.

## Chapter Nine

“Time to eat,” Egilka announced, carrying a tray from the kitchen area. Jessica watched him approach from the pile of pillows she nested in. She curled in a ball, her knees and head supporting her weight. The gag in her mouth kept her from responding.

Egilka sank down to sit next to her and placed the tray on the floor. “Do you wish her to remain bound?” he asked Bevau.

The Nobek opened one eye. He rested in the basin, the water swirling around his carved abdomen. He nodded, his beautiful mouth curling in a slow smile. “Please.”

Egilka chuckled and untied the gag, carefully removing it. Jessica licked her dry lips. “Water,” she croaked.

“Let me get you in a better position,” he answered. He turned her over onto her back before picking her up and settling her on his naked thighs.

Each of Jessica’s wrists was tied to an ankle, keeping her helpless. Bevau hadn’t tied her ankles together, allowing him to spread her legs wide for his many entries.

She hissed at the soreness of her buttocks lying on Egilka’s leg. Bevau had spanked her soundly that morning to their mutual pleasure. She had climaxed the instant he entered her after the discipline.

Egilka shook his head. “I wish you’d let me put something on that. Your ass is red enough to glow in the dark.”

“The better for you to find me,” she teased. “Where’s my water?”

“Here.” He tipped the cup to her mouth, and she gulped. She liked the gag, liked how it increased her vulnerability to the whims of her sexual partners, but it dried her mouth out.

When she was done slurping, Egilka fed her. She took each morsel delicately from his fingers. The minty herbal desrel, the meaty chunks of ronka, and the sweet nellus berries were a delightful feast after the workout Bevau had subjected her to.

“How is it?” Egilka asked.

“Good,” she said between mouthfuls. “I’m starved.”

He chuckled. “I imagine so. Bevau kept you busy all morning.”

“I’m not done with her yet,” the Nobek announced.

Jessica’s lower regions flexed at the lascivious glare he gave her. She’d been the clan’s guest for the two days following the festival, and they’d done little else but delight her body in ways she’d never imagined possible. She’d been wary at first, but little by little she’d let her guard down. She was now their willing playmate, eager to experience anything they wished to try.

She’d discovered something amazing that she’d only guessed when they’d taken her at the festival. By serving them in any way they wished and completely submitting to their whims, she ruled them all. The more they demanded and the more she gave, the more the men served her in return. They cooked for her. They fed her. They bathed her,

brushed her hair, and massaged tight muscles. They wouldn't accept their own sexual releases until she had at least two of her own. In enslaving her, they were enslaved themselves.

None had left the clan's suite since returning from the festival. Only two calls from Korkla had interrupted their solitude, calls from which Jessica gleaned Michaela had moved in with her clan and was being serviced as well as Jessica was with Clajak's.

The major difference was Michaela was staying permanently with the clan she wanted to be with. Jessica only borrowed this one.

Clajak wandered in naked, his eyes blinking as he left the darkness of the sleeping room. He scowled at Bevau. "Maybe you'll let someone else have a turn," he said, having heard the Nobek's comment. His penises jutted straight out from his body.

His clanmate shrugged. "She can take us both. From the looks of things, she might have to take all three at once."

Jessica glanced down and ogled the sight of Egilka's readiness. She pretended fatigue. "Tell me it's the novelty of Earther sex. If the clan I end up with is like you, I'll be numb from the waist down within a week."

Did the men exchange unhappy looks, or was it just wishful thinking on her part?

Bevau flicked water, his gorgeous face grimacing. "If you knew what our Matara-to-be was like, you wouldn't begrudge us these few days of joy."

Jessica's heart skipped a beat. "Don't clan her if she's so horrible. What's the good of being future emperors if you can't make the rules?"

Clajak joined them on the mound of pillows. He sighed heavily as he stroked her hair. "Personal gain cannot enter the picture if it's not good for all."

"How is having a miserable Imperial Clan good for your planet?" Jessica pointed out.

Clajak smiled at her, but his expression was sad. "Not clanning Narpok would make us powerful enemies. Her father is the head councilman, and he would take it as a personal insult if we refuse her. Such a rift between the royal family and the council could invite serious trouble for all of Kalquor."

Jessica bowed her head, not wanting him to see her face. "So Narpok is one of the few Kalquorian females able to bear children?"

Egilka tossed the empty tray towards the kitchen area. It clattered against the stone floor. He kissed the top of Jessica's head. "Tests thus far have indicated Narpok may be fertile. We won't know for sure until one of her eggs is harvested and evaluated."

"When will that happen?" Jessica asked. Her real question was *how much longer do I have with the three of you?*

Clajak's honeyed voice was heavy with bitterness. "Her yearly ovulation should occur any time now. The final test is the last barrier to her joining our clan."

Bevau stood over them, dripping from his bath. "Once fertility is confirmed, she will be made our Matara."

"And if she's not able to have children?"

"There are eighteen other possible mates, all of which are confirmed viable."

“Oh.” Jessica made her expression bland and looked up at Egilka. “At least the royal line will remain pure Kalquorian for another generation.”

He grimaced and looked away. “I suppose that will be worth the sacrifice.”

Bevau huffed. “The day our imprisonment begins with that frigid creature has not yet arrived, and I don’t want to waste a moment thinking about her. You have finished your meal, I see.” He stroked his eager flesh as he eyed Jessica.

Jessica stared at his rigid cocks, her tongue peeking out to lick her lips. “The food is gone, but I’m still hungry.”

Egilka picked her up, rising on his knees as he lifted her. Clajak moved behind her, sandwiching her between the two men. Jessica’s head fell back on his shoulder, her eyes closing in anticipatory delight.

Egilka entered her with both of his sex organs, filling her to bursting. Clajak’s larger cock pressed into her anus. She shuddered with the wonderful ache as he invaded the tight orifice. Her body softened to them, welcoming the glorious dominance she craved.

Strong hands gripped her head, turning her face to the side. She opened her mouth, knowing Bevau was there to feed her voracious appetite for oral penetration. His penis ran over her tongue, rubbed against the roof of her mouth, reached deep to touch her throat. She moaned at the taste of the cinnamon-sweet lubricant he secreted.

“Her ass is still warm from Bevau’s spanking,” Clajak grunted to his clanmates. “It feels good to bury myself there.”

“Did you hear her moan?” Bevau asked, stroking in and out of her accepting mouth. “Pain and being dominated is as erotic to her as any pleasure. She is such a gift.”

Egilka growled something in his own language. Bevau and Clajak momentarily lost their rhythms, and Jessica whimpered in protest. Having all three men embedded in her helpless body was beyond bliss. She wanted nothing to stop the pleasure.

Clajak responded to his Imdiko in Kalquorian, his voice sharp. He thrust harder than ever into her narrow passage, and Jessica writhed with mingled pain and pleasure.

“Since when do you care about your duty?” Egilka muttered, speaking in Plasian once more.

“Since when do you toss it aside?” Clajak shot back.

“Discuss it later,” Bevau said. “There is a warm, wet mouth sucking on me, and I’m not refereeing an argument right now!”

Jessica rubbed her tongue on the underside of his driving penis in reward. The Nobek groaned, his fingers tightening their grip in her hair. She clenched her lower regions around the other two men, determined to drive all thoughts not connected with fucking her out of their heads. Their mingled gasps and strengthened thrusts let her know she’d succeeded.

Whatever dispute had erupted between the clan didn’t arise again during the glorious lovemaking. The only conversation consisted of whispers telling her of how beautiful her body was, how soft her skin, how warm her various openings, how much they loved fucking her. She rose and fell on Clajak and Egilka’s coordinated thrusts, crying out around Bevau’s driving flesh when orgasm swept through her loins once, twice, three times.

The men came as one, their mingled cries of pleasure ringing in her ears. She swallowed Bevau's thick stream as the other two pulsed their own seed into her nether regions. She wondered what would happen if they got her pregnant. Kalquor was too desperate for children to not let her carry a child to full term. Would that allow her to continue in some capacity with Clajak's clan? If not, would it hurt her chances to find a clan of her own?

Thinking of what the future held, of being with men other than the three filling her flesh with theirs, made tears spring to Jessica's eyes. How could she give herself to another clan when she was in love with this one?

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Clajak sat in the basin, wishing the swirling warm water would erase his tension. Usually climax relaxed him for hours, especially when the sex had been so satisfying.

Egilka's shocking statement while they'd enjoyed Jessica had taken the usual repose away. Clajak tried to wrap his mind around the Imdiko's bizarre turnaround. The same man who'd been so adamantly opposed to breeding with Earthers only days before had actually stated he would clan with no woman but Jessica McInness!

The Dramok stared at the little Earther, now unbound and sleeping on her nest of pillows. A slight frown touched her features as she slumbered. He hoped she wasn't having another of her frequent nightmares, especially the ones that made her scream for help. Sometimes she cried for her mother and father, sometimes for someone named Nicole. Most of the time she screamed for her older sister Lindsey, her voice that of a terrified child. She swore she couldn't remember the dreams, but Clajak wondered.

He relaxed when her mouth curled in a slight smile, the crease between her eyebrows easing. She looked so sweet laying there, her tiny hand curled next to her cheek, tendrils of her long chestnut hair falling over her forehead. Clajak's heart thumped painfully.

"Tell me you can stand to see her with another clan," Egilka said from the lounge. His eyes were sharp on Clajak.

"It doesn't matter what I feel for her," he snapped back. "We have a Matara, and we're bound to honor our responsibilities to her and our people."

"Then you admit you feel something for Jessica," Egilka said. "That's more than you've ever expressed for any woman."

Clajak stared at him, wishing he could deny his clanmate's assessment. In the end, he could only repeat, "It doesn't matter."

"It should. I for one do not relish the idea of spending the remaining 175 years of my life with Narpok. Being younger, you're stuck with her even longer."

"Even with our science and medical means, Jessica will only live another 125 years," Clajak pointed out. "Fifty years is a long time to mourn when she's gone."

"Better to have two-thirds a lifetime of joy than a full lifetime of misery. Besides, new medical discoveries might extend her life longer. It's trial enough existing with Narpok on the same planet. Having her in my home day in and out is a sentence suitable for criminals."

"Why do you think I insist on leaving Kalquor so often?" Clajak grouched.

"We won't have that option once we're clanned with her. Anywhere we go, she goes." Egilka's gaze strayed to Jessica. "I can't do it, Clajak. Not when this gift has fallen into our possession."

"It's out of the question, Imdiko. Bevau, he never listens to me. Talk some sense into him."

Bevau, on the opposite end of the lounge from Egilka, had sat silently through the entire conversation. Now he took a deep breath, obviously steeling himself for the coming argument.

"I too wish to make Jessica our Matara."

Clajak stiffened. "Have you gone mad as well? Pwaldur would set the entire council against us! It would be civil war!"

"I think you exaggerate. Over half the council has claimed Earther Mataras. Not only that, but Pwaldur is not the most popular man in council chambers. There are those who wouldn't mind taking him down a few steps."

Clajak jumped up and stepped out of the basin. He angrily towed himself off. "He's head councilman with the sense to involve himself in projects that make him popular with the common Kalquorian. He's already got strong support for going to open war with Earth in order to secure more Mataras."

"So how can he argue against our taking an Earther Matara for our own?"

"Refusing his hateful daughter will be an insult he won't bear!" Clajak stormed into his private room. He yanked a formsuit on.

Bevau's argument was infuriating in its logic, and Clajak was angry at his clanmate for raising the slightest hope of keeping Jessica for themselves. It was impossible; there were too many barriers to consider it.

Clajak pulled his boots on. He had to get out of the suite, away from clanmates who had lost all sense in the presence of the alluring Earther.

Egilka appeared in the doorway. Fully clothed, Clajak approached him. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. Get out of my way."

"Of course, my Dramok." The Imdiko stepped aside, his expression carefully blank. "But what it comes down to, Clajak, is we think Jessica is worth fighting for. Deep down, you do too."

Clajak left the suite without a word.

\* \* \* \*

Israla's lovely aide ushered Clajak into the Saucin's office, her marbled black eyes raking over his body with obvious pleasure. Normally, the prince would have taken the opportunity to enjoy a ready Plasian mouth, but being with Jessica the last two days made such pursuits pale in comparison.

*The little Earther may have well ruined me for other women,* he thought with surprise.

"Come in, Prince Clajak." Israla rose from a lounge to greet him with an affectionate caress on his cheek. She waved her aide out of the room. "I wondered if you would ever emerge from your suite."

Clajak let her lead him to the lounge. Again, he found himself comparing her to Jessica. Firsthand knowledge of Israla's sensual skills failed to rouse interest from his

lower body. Fortunately, he wasn't involved in treaty negotiations, so he needn't fear insulting her. Israla didn't bother with men too old to be her grandsons unless she had something to gain from it.

They settled down, Clajak sitting stiffly while Israla lounged. "It was not my intention to abuse your hospitality by staying away. I apologize for neglecting my duty to you," he said.

She waved his apology off, her mane dancing with amusement. "Duty falls before matters of the heart...and certain body parts below." She tucked her long legs beneath her body. "What can I do for you, my lovely prince?"

He relaxed in the maternal warmth of her regard. "Matters of the heart indeed. I need your advice as a ruler of people who put love and lust above all. My clanmates have grown emotionally attached to Jessica McInness. Egilka threatens to break the clan contract with our promised Matara, something that could tear my people apart."

Israla glanced out her window. On the lawn outside, young, semi-nude Earther men played the game they called 'football'. To Clajak, it resembled the Kalquorian sport of kurble, except without the poisoned barb spikes that sprang from the ball at random intervals.

Israla chuckled deep in her throat. "Earther women have such power over Kalquorian men. The aliens are intoxicating to your kind." She looked back at Clajak with a knowing smile. "You are not unaffected yourself."

He grimaced. "Everyone is always after me to take up my responsibilities, including my own clan. I accept my duty on this one thing, and suddenly they want me to be selfish."

"It sounds as if you picked the wrong time to behave like an emperor." Israla patted his arm with sympathy.

Unable to sit still, Clajak got up and paced. "What they don't understand is that I'd choose Jessica over Narpok if I was free to do so. There is no comparison between the two women. But the ramifications are huge, Israla. We can't afford for Kalquor to be split, not when we're so close to outright war with Earth."

Israla considered for a moment. "What would your fathers think of Jessica? Do you think they'd disapprove?"

"They're the least of my worries. They'd be thrilled I'm ready to settle down. Once they got over the initial shock, they'd adore her. After all, she's smart and funny. Even that temper of hers is endearing in its fashion. My father Yuder always admired women who had 'bite' as he calls it. He said that's what attracted him to my mother in the first place."

Israla's voice was soft. "My dear prince, you're rambling. I believe you're in love."

Clajak stopped his pacing and stared at her, ready to protest. Somehow the words negating his feelings for Jessica wouldn't come, couldn't come. He realized with shock that Israla was right. He *was* in love with Jessica, and there was little doubt in his mind Bevau and Egilka felt the same.

But his clan was spoken for.

"It doesn't matter," he said, his shoulders slumping. He'd never felt so defeated.

Israla unfolded herself to rise from the lounge and stand before him. She rested her hands on his shoulders, the wisdom of her years settling over her youthful face. “If it was simple lust or infatuation, it indeed wouldn’t matter. But for love, you must dare all. Even an empire is worth the price of such happiness. Why do you think I aided Amelia Ryan and Rajhir’s clan though it put my planet in danger?”

Clajak looked into her black marble eyes, searching a way out of the despair that threatened to choke him. “She despises me, Israla. I can make her body respond to mine, but not her heart. I’ve made too many mistakes to win her now.”

Israla patted his cheek. “In matters of love, all is not lost until death claims us. The greatest mistake you could make is not letting her know how you feel.”

Clajak let himself consider the impossible: rejecting Narpok, inviting the ire of Pwaldur and his allies, risking civil war for a chance at true happiness. And the greatest hurdle of all...convincing Jessica to join his clan.

“If only,” he breathed.



## Chapter Ten

"I hate it," Jessica grumbled.

"Really? Which one?" Michaela asked, her surprised voice bringing Jessica back to her surroundings.

Jessica looked up to see her friend holding up two dresses. They were in a clothing shop, buying wardrobes to take to Kalquor. Michaela held a strapless ruby frock in one hand and a frilly black-and-white-striped one in the other. Both were cut for the sleek Plasian female frame, but alterations would make them fit Michaela.

Jessica sighed. Her head had been churning over the soon-to-come loss of Clajak's clan. She couldn't concentrate on anything else.

"The dresses are fine. Get both," she said.

Michaela smiled sympathetically. Jessica had told her everything, and no doubt her friend knew where the former nurse's mind kept wandering to. "I'm sorry. You've had to listen to me go on and on about my joining ceremony and you can't have the clan you love."

Jessica waved her off and went back to shuffling through a pile of clothes she'd been through twice without really seeing. "Don't listen to me whine. I would never begrudge you your happiness." Determined to put on a happy face for Michaela's benefit, Jessica added, "Your clan is going to love your joining gown."

Michaela's naughty grin threatened to split her face. The gown was sedate by Plasian standards. It consisted of a silver-toned metal collar, from which a halter hung to cover Michaela's breasts. The material was so clingy however, that the shapes of her areolas were blatantly obvious. Tiny chains connected the top of the aqua-colored dress to the 'skirt'...a long slender strip of cloth in the front and nothing to cover the cleft of her buttocks. The slightest shift in position would allow peeks at Michaela's private treasures.

"If the boys get through their vows without stuttering, I'm going to burn that dress," she promised.

"You're incorrigible," Jessica laughed. She would be present for the ceremony and looked forward to seeing the ruckus the gown would no doubt stir.

Michaela's face became serious. "Don't give up on love for yourself, okay? You'll find a good clan, one that will help you get over Clajak's."

"Sure." Jessica kept smiling. She refused to drag Michaela down with her sadness.

Michaela whistled and held up two scraps of cloth. It took Jessica a moment to figure out they were a bandeau top and a skirt. There was barely enough material to make hankies.

"Here you go, Jessica. An outfit like this should attract many options on Kalquor."

“Add it to my trousseau,” Jessica said with joviality she didn’t feel.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica and Michaela walked the city streets, giggling and sipping from small bottles of leshella. The three moons had risen, and their illumination as well as the windows of the buildings around them lit their tipsy way as they journeyed back to Israla’s home. They passed a few Plasians here and there, who smiled and nodded to the laughing Earthers.

They reached the city’s center, and Jessica saluted the stone idol looming over the altar. “Good evening to you, tall, dark and ugly,” she called.

Michaela snickered. “I’m in so much trouble. I told my boys I’d be back before dark. I’m surprised they haven’t come looking for me.”

“You might get a spanking, bad girl,” Jessica tittered.

“I hope so, though my ass seems to be permanently red now. Damn, those Kalquorians are dominating.” The dancer giggled. “Now I’m horny again thinking about their big, heavy hands putting me in my place. I wonder if they know I do shit just so they’ll punish me?”

Jessica wondered if Clajak’s clan would discipline her for being late too. Thinking about draping herself across muscled thighs, her naked buttocks quivering in anticipation of that first heavy strike from a meaty Kalquorian palm, the tattoo of open-handed smacks raining down, burning her ass...she shivered in anticipation.

They passed the idol, and Jessica noticed the stage on which she and Michaela had danced only three days ago had disappeared. She was just about to point it out to her friend when her world exploded.

Pain detonated through her skull, and her body reverberated with dull agony as she fell to the unforgiving stone walkway, her nearly empty bottle exploding on the hard surface. It took a moment for her to realize something had hit her in the head. Michaela screamed.

Her ears roared. A pair of arms gathered around her, turning her over to look up at the black star-blasted sky and Michaela’s shocked face. She heard the scrape of heavy footfalls approaching, and Michaela’s eyes widened. Terror crossed the intersexual’s expression, to be quickly wiped away with fury.

“Get away from us!” she yelled, crushing Jessica against her soft chest.

The steps stopped nearby, and an odor of old sweat drifted over Jessica, making her wrinkle her nose. “Look who we found boys,” a harsh male voice said in English. “It’s the whore and the abomination.”

Jessica turned her head at the familiar voice, and her stomach rolled in sudden nausea. She swallowed and blinked at the sight of Earther males dressed in military fatigues surrounding them. Sergeant Fiske glowered down at her.

“Leave those women alone!” someone shouted in Plasian. The sound of soft weeping and nervous chatter reached Jessica, and she realized a crowd of Plasians was gathering around the Earthers.

*That won’t help*, she thought. Plasians were passive; they didn’t even keep a police force. There was no aid here. As Michaela would say, they were in deep shit.

Fiske turned to address the Plasians. “Anyone who wants to get in our way, you’ll get what they’re gonna get. These two are on their way to roast in Hell for their sins.”

Jessica knew she had to get up and face the danger on her feet, but when she tried to rise, the world tilted like a funhouse. Her stomach heaved, and she twisted to empty it on the patio.

*There’s an offering for you, oh ugly stone god,* she thought crazily. Her world turned gray, and she fought for consciousness as Michaela, sobbing with anger and fear, cradled her in her arms once more.

The hateful faces of the Earthers filled her vision again. Fiske leered at them. “In the old days, whores were stoned to death. It’s a fitting sentence for you bitches who rutted with aliens in full view of everyone. Lucky for us all there’s a quarry just outside of the city. Get them to the shuttle, boys.”

The men moved forward, converging on Jessica and Michaela. “Judgment time, you nasty sluts,” one man said as he reached for Jessica.

Cursing at the top of her lungs, Michaela got between him and Jessica. He slapped her hard across the face, knocking her to the ground. A hand closed around Jessica’s upper arm and jerked her up. She cried out as her shoulder came out of the socket and fresh pain cleaved her head. Her stomach heaved anew, but there was nothing left to vomit.

The air exploded with animal roars. The man dragging Jessica jerked violently and sailed through the air. As she fell backwards she saw Bevau, his face twisted in a bestial snarl, grab another Earther and slam him to the ground in a broken heap.

Jessica never hit the stone patio. Strong arms caught her, and she looked into Egilka’s angry face. He shouted something in Kalquorian as he clutched her to his chest.

The air filled with snarls and high-pitched screams and something that resembled dry branches breaking in half. It took a moment for Jessica to identify the sound as bones snapping.

The fast-moving Kalquorians were blurs as they tore through the shrieking Earthers. Within seconds, the soldiers lay in heaps. Some groaned and writhed in obvious pain, some lay still.

In the middle of the melee Egilka held Jessica, assessing her injuries. Nearby, Govi cradled the sobbing Michaela, clutching her to his chest. Jessica could see him struggling to control his emotions.

He called out, “My clan, my princes, enough.”

Egilka paused in his examination of Jessica to look at the carnage around them. Jessica also looked, gasping at what she saw.

Korkla bent over one Earther, repeatedly slapping the man’s face with one hand then the next. The soldier lay helpless, his head smacked one way then the other, his eyes rolling in their sockets.

Raxstad stormed about the fallen men, kicking any that were in his path. He growled at the screams of his victims as his boots snapped ribs. Nothing remotely resembling sanity visited his bestial expression. Only the seeming inability to focus his

fury on one man saved the injured Earthers from instant death. His rampage took on a strange monotony. Kick. Snap. Scream. Kick. Snap. Scream.

Bevau crouched over another man, his fangs inches from the exposed throat. The soldier's eyes were screwed shut, tears slipping down his cheeks as he waited for the bite that would tear his throat out.

Clajak's hands were wrapped around Fiske's throat, slowly choking the life out of the man. The Earther's eyes bulged and his tongue hung from his gaping mouth as his face turned a purple deeper than the Kalquorian's eyes.

In comparison to the violent scene, Egilka's tone was shocking in its gentleness. "Calm yourselves, Kalquorians. Clajak, stand down and control Bevau."

Clajak ignored him. His fingers sunk deeper still into Fiske's neck, and the soldier convulsed, his eyes rolling. In English the Dramok snarled, "I am killing you slowly, *gurluck*. You dared to harm my chosen mate, and you will die badly for it."

Above his own victim, Bevau growled, "Who made my woman bleed?"

Korkla lurched to Clajak's side, putting a hand still shaking with rage on the prince's bunched shoulder. "My prince, you must calm your anger. Plasius suffers enough without adding more Earther deaths."

Clajak continued to throttle the Earther, his eyes riveted on the dying man's face. The only hint of life left in Fiske was the twitching of his fingers.

Egilka spoke again. "Clajak, we must get Jessica medical aid. She needs you to help her."

That broke the spell. Clajak blinked and looked towards Jessica. The deadly intent on his face fled, concern taking its place. He stood, releasing Fiske to gasp painful breaths. Clajak was at her side in an instant, and she wondered at the tears streaming down his face.

He called, "Bevau, Raxstad, you will not kill them. I order you to back down." Growling curses answered him, but the screams stopped. Moans replaced the piercing cries.

"Egilka and Govi, take care of our Mataras. We will deal with the filth here." To Egilka, he whispered, "She will be all right?"

"I will see to it," Egilka vowed. He stood, and using his supernatural speed, was boarding a shuttle in less than five seconds with Jessica. Cradled in the strong warmth of the Imdiko's arms, Jessica let consciousness drift away.

## Chapter Eleven

The tense trio of Clajak, Korkla and Israla sat on the Saucin's office lounge, the Kalquorians on either side of the worried Plasian. A wrinkled tan sheath, a testament to Israla's hurried dressing, concealed her lissome body. She kept smoothing her long fingers over the skirt. The Dramok thought it more from nervousness than concern about her appearance.

Govi sat cross-legged on a nearby floor cushion, Michaela cuddled on his lap. The dancer had emerged from the attack relatively unscathed, at least in the physical sense. Her pink cheek shone with an anti-inflammatory cream. Most of the swelling had subsided. In contrast, Michaela's wide, dark eyes were puffy and red. She sagged in her Imdiko's arms, wrung strengthless from crying. The emotional pain she suffered infuriated Clajak as much as the physical trauma. Michaela belonged to Kalquor now. She was no less deserving of the respect accorded all Mataras born on his planet. Even something as insignificant as the slap she'd been dealt was too much insult to bear.

Across the room from the lounge, three soldiers huddled against the wall. They were the only attackers who didn't require hospitalization. Cringing with fear, they watched Bevau and Raxstad. The Nobeks, standing over the Earther soldiers, softly growled and showed their fangs. Neither had washed the blood off his hands. Dried, brownish flecks floated to the floor as they flexed their fists.

Four Earthers slept in the Plasian hospital, rendered senseless by pain medication. Seven soldiers were in surgery, their injuries life-threatening. Clajak wished his and Korkla's clan had killed them all outright. The bastards didn't deserve to draw another single breath. The need to make the attackers suffer long, drawn out deaths had stayed their immediate executions. Clajak now regretted the Kalquorian lust for proper justice.

If Israla hadn't insisted they leave the medical center, he might have stormed the operating rooms to mete out such justice. Certainly he and Bevau should be there to await word on Jessica. She was also in surgery under the care of Plasius' top doctor. Clajak comforted himself with the knowledge Egilka assisted in the operation. He hung onto his Imdiko's assurance they would stop the swelling putting deadly pressure on her brain. If she died or suffered permanent damage, no amount of Israla's sensible negotiation would save the attackers. He'd kill every single one of them.

His willingness to commit murder for Jessica told him the depth of his feelings for her. No one outside of his fathers and his own clan had ever elicited such strong reactions. He stared hard at the men crouched on the floor and thought how wonderful it would be to warm his hands in their blood.

"They do not deserve their lives," Raxstad snarled. "By their own admission, they planned to murder Michaela and Jessica."

One Earther dared to speak, his words directed to Israla. "It would have been a legal execution in accordance with Earth's penalties against lewdness and obscenity. They are Earth citizens, bound by our laws."

That earned growls from all the Kalquorians in the room. Israla held up one hand for silence. "You are not on Earth. Your laws have no bearing on Plasius."

Korkla added, "What's more, they are now Kalquorian citizens. All ties with Earth are broken."

Clajak remained focused on his main objective. "Israla, Plasius is blessed with a peaceful citizenry. What little justice system you require is not equipped to deal with such a heinous crime. You have no prisons to contain these criminals. What's more, you can't pass a sentence that will satisfy us. You must allow me to extradite the Earther soldiers to Kalquor since their crimes are against Mataras Jessica and Michaela."

The soldier spoke again. "You know they'll kill us outright, Saucin. More Earther blood will be on your hands. Earth already blockades you for the death of General Croft; what do you think they'll do for a dozen more men?"

"Shut up before I pull your tongue out and eat it in front of your eyes!" Bevau shouted, spittle flying. His beautiful face contorted with rage, rendering him dreadful. The man shut his eyes and cringed.

"Please!" Israla begged, her hands covering her face. Clajak felt a stab of pity for the Plasian leader. She was strong and capable, but violence was something she rarely coped with.

"Ease down Bevau," he ordered. Growling, his clanmate obeyed, his fists clenched in an effort to contain his anger.

Israla lowered her hands, revealing a face pinched with worry. She looked up at Clajak. "This is their fault, not yours, but you understand the position I am in is very dangerous?"

"I will accept full responsibility. You can say I forced you to give them up," he answered.

She shook her head. "I can say that, and you could even make it true. However Earth may still hold Plasius responsible. They are not a reasonable people, as you see." She nodded at the soldiers.

Michaela unfolded herself from Govi's lap to stand. She approached Israla on shaking legs. "May I speak? I might have a temporary solution."

"Of course, dearest," Israla said. She patted the lounge between herself and Korkla, and the dancer settled between them. "You know of course I meant no offense to you when I referred to your people as unreasonable."

Michaela waved the apology away. "No harm. I've been called much worse tonight." Her gaze flicked to the prisoners.

"What is your idea, sweetness?" Korkla prodded, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her tight to himself.

"Jessica told me when Amelia Ryan was captured, the doctor planned to put her in a coma until she was returned to Earth. Maybe that's what you could do to them," she nodded at the soldiers, "if Israla won't let them leave Plasius. At least they won't be able to hurt anyone else until it's figured out what to do with them."

Clajak fought the impulse to protest. He wanted every one of the soldiers to face real justice, Kalquorian-style. At the same time he appreciated the terrible position Israla was in. He watched her consider Michaela's idea and knew by the small smile of hope she liked it.

"We can keep them frozen in cryo chambers," she said, her relief obvious. "They will be perfectly safe, allowing no complaint from Earth. Once Plasius, Kalquor and Earth can come to an agreement on how to proceed, we will give them to the appropriate authorities."

Raxstad punched the wall, his fist leaving a dent. "With the hostilities, it could be decades before we come to terms!"

Clajak managed to keep his own frustration out of his voice, but he was adamant. "The only agreement I will accept is justice for the grievous injury done to my Matara."

Silence descended over the room. Except for the shuddering Earthers, all eyes turned to Clajak. With the exception of the approving smile from Israla, every face registered shock.

"Sorry Bevau. I meant to tell you and Egilka first. It slipped out in the heat of the moment." He laughed self-consciously. "If Jessica will even have us after everything we've put her through."

"Hell yeah she will," Michaela said in her own language, a huge grin spreading across her face. "She's crazy about you guys."

It took a moment for Clajak to translate Michaela's slang. He stared at her in disbelief. "Really? She would have us as her clan?"

Michaela answered him in Plasian, carefully enunciating as if to make sure there'd be no misunderstanding. "She loves you, all three of you. Thinking of being with another clan was torture for her."

Clajak exchanged a look with Bevau. He felt a mirror image of the Nobek's delighted grin spreading across his face. Jessica was theirs!

Egilka entered the room, and Clajak's euphoria dipped as he remembered the injuries suffered by his intended. He stood, trying to read the infuriatingly bland expression on his Imdiko's face.

"She's going to be fine," Egilka announced. "A few days' rest and she'll be insulting us as if nothing ever happened."

Tension drained from Clajak's body. Bevau's eyes closed with relief, and Michaela quietly sobbed against Korkla's chest. Egilka offered them his own tired smile.

"My clan looked absolutely enthralled when I walked in. May I assume we'll be executing these worthless creatures soon?" he asked, motioning to the silent soldiers.

"Not yet," Clajak said. "I have good news just the same. Michaela says Jessica loves us."

Egilka stared at him. His mustache twitched, and white teeth peeked out in one of the few real smiles Clajak had seen him display lately. "She loves us?"

"I want to make her our Matara."

Even the disgusted looks the Earther soldiers dared to exchange couldn't dim Clajak's happiness. He'd get his hands on them later, with or without Israla's blessing.

Egilka's eyes were bright. "Then the other news I have is even better. Guess what the medics found?"

He told them, and Clajak's heart leapt. Even Pwaldur's anger might have little bearing on their clanning Jessica. It was going to be all right.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica returned to consciousness slowly. A warm breeze wafted over her face, bringing the sea salt scent of the ocean with it. She heard the muted rumble of waves rolling onto the shore. No scent of bacon and coffee edged the air, so Mom and Dad were still asleep. Her sister Lindsey hadn't begun to snore softly yet, always the precursor to her waking. It must still be early.

Summertime in Florida was the best. No school, no responsibilities except to put on her full-bodied bathing suit and frolic in the surf all day, broken only by sandwiches, potato chips and soda for lunch. The day would end with Dad cooking burgers on the grill, then a movie or a round of Monopoly at the dining table.

She sighed happily. The only thing keeping her from a perfect morning was the slight headache pulsing behind her forehead.

A man's deep voice intruded, his staccato speech garbled. Jessica's eyes flew open to meet Clajak's intense stare.

"Yes, she is awake. Hello, stubborn beast." He smiled and stroked her cheek.

"Hi, spoiled brat," she said, wondering at the whispery thinness of her voice. Sudden homesickness warred with the swelling joy to see him there.

She shifted and noticed her left arm was encased in wraps and a sling. The memory of the soldiers' attack returned, and suddenly Earth didn't seem so good. "Is Michaela okay?"

"She's fine. We made her leave a few hours ago for some much needed rest. She'll be back soon."

Jessica peered around, not recognizing the room she and the clan were in. She smiled at Bevau and Egilka as they joined Clajak next to her bed. The bed was comfortable but utilitarian. The sheets held the softness of many washings. The rest of the room was soothingly bland, much like the nicer hotel rooms on Earth. On her right was a table with a small vid screen. A pair of sage green loungers flanked a wall of windows. The two suns lit a powder blue sky. To her left, a wheeled tray table, tall enough for her to reach comfortably, waited with a pitcher of water and a cup. Strange machines she didn't recognize but seemed familiar lined the far wall.

"I'm in the medical center?" she guessed.

They nodded. Egilka said, "You're doing very well and should be able to leave tomorrow morning."

The sound of the far-off ocean and the scent of sea breeze persisted despite her being fully awake. "It smells and sounds like home back on Earth."

Clajak continued to caress her cheek, his smile softer than she remembered. "Michaela told the Plasian medics what atmosphere to provide. They believe familiar surroundings with positive connotations help the healing process."



Jessica swallowed the lump in her throat. She wondered what her parents and sister were doing now. She hadn't been able to communicate with them since coming to Plasius. "It's nice."

Bevau inhaled, his expression appreciative. "It smells a little like your new home on Kalquor. You'll be near the ocean there too."

Jessica frowned. "How can you be sure of that? I haven't chosen a clan yet."

The three men exchanged grins. Clajak said, "Michaela says you have."

Jessica's thoughts were a mire of confusion. What was he talking about?

The Dramok straightened and took her hand in both of his. In a formal tone he asked, "Jessica McInness, will you be my clan's Matara?"

She stared at him. She looked at the delighted faces of Bevau and Egilka. She looked at Clajak again. Her heart screamed *Yes! Yes! Yes!* Her mind didn't believe it. "What about Narpok?" was what her mouth said.

Bevau shrugged and answered for all of them. "We don't want her. We want you."

"But you said there could be civil war, that her father—"

Clajak interrupted her. "Let us worry about that. Just say yes."

Jessica wanted to, but one other concern kept her from saying the word she so desperately wanted to yell from the rooftop. She looked at the Imdiko. "Egilka?"

He laughed, a deep rolling sound that filled her with warmth. "I underestimated the power a bit of Earther fluff could have over me." He took the hand Clajak wasn't holding, careful not to disturb the position the sling kept it in. "My heart is yours, my love."

Tears overflowed her eyes, spilling down her cheeks. "And mine yours. If I was sure I wouldn't be the cause of trouble on Kalquor, I would say yes without reservation."

"Then say yes with reservation," Clajak urged. "I'll take it. I have no doubt you will win over my people as you have my clan."

Egilka added, "Besides, we have bargaining power no one anticipated. Something has happened that will knock the protestors on their asses."

"What?" Jessica asked, hardly daring to hope.

"You're pregnant with our child."

Jessica forgot to breathe for several seconds. When she recovered she gasped, "I'm having a baby?"

Clajak's smile shone brighter than Plasius' two suns. "The royal heir. You carry the future Emperor or Empress of Kalquor."

Now Jessica was laughing and crying all at once. She could join Clajak's clan. She could join Clajak's clan!

They joined her in her laughter, all three hugging her gingerly to avoid hurting her. They separated, and Jessica knew she grinned as idiotically as the men. She wiped the tears away and stuck her tongue out at Clajak.

"You *really* have responsibilities now," she teased him.

Clajak's eyes widened in pretend horror before joining in on their renewed laughter.

## Chapter Twelve

With a soft blast of air, the mini-pod carrying Jessica and Egilka drifted right, carrying it away from an Earther battledrone. The unmanned craft, capable of blowing up entire cities, was an impotent hunk of metal in the stasis belt surrounding Plasius. Jessica breathed easier as it fell behind them.

They'd come across many such drones as they navigated the stasis belt. Earth's murderous intent sickened Jessica. She'd always considered her government heavy handed and the Church monstrous in its zealotry. Seeing the fanatical determination to destroy peaceful Plasius infuriated her more than ever. How could they justify threatening an entire population for the murder of one man?

An hour had passed since Clajak and Korkla's clans began the treacherous passage from Plasius to the cloaked Kalquorian transport. It waited for them beyond the blockade of Earther destroyers and battlecruisers. The two clans that had arrived on Plasius with Clajak and Korkla's group would be picked up at a later time.

Next to the flat-bottomed egg-shaped pod that carried Jessica and Egilka was another in which Michaela and Govi rode. Several yards in front of them, Clajak and Korkla navigated the stasis belt in the Kalquorian version of personal space transport suits, or PSTS's as they were referred to on Earth. Bevau and Raxstad led the group. Seeing them traveling in the helmeted suits with no other protective shell appalled Jessica. They looked vulnerable in the vast blackness of space.

Another battle drone appeared in the group's path, and Egilka set off an air blast to clear it. The pod was built for one Kalquorian; he was securely strapped in so he could man the controls with ease. He held Jessica with one arm around her waist, keeping her from bouncing around in the zero-G confines of the pod. She floated several inches off the floor.

Israla had provided the code that allowed them to move freely in the stasis field. They drifted a seemingly haphazard course, resembling debris. The pods and suits were outfitted with boosters, not to be used unless the group was detected. To avoid attention, they steered with small blasts of air. As long as none of the Earth ships pointed a life scanner in their direction, they would never be the wiser anyone had passed through the blockade.

Raxstad's voice came in over the radio. "Leaving stasis belt in twenty seconds."

Jessica swallowed. She leaned close to the window to peer around. She caught her breath when she saw the massive spaceship overhead, just outside of the belt.

"That is one huge battlecruiser," she told Egilka.

He craned his neck to look. "It's only one. The Earthers aren't too worried about guarding this section. We're above the ocean, nowhere near a landing spot."

"Is this how you came in?"

“Yes.” He smiled encouragement at Jessica. “Even if the battlecruiser detects us, it will take three minutes to launch its fighters. We hope to either make it to our ship or retreat to the stasis field in that amount of time.”

Jessica swallowed. Three minutes between life and death seemed an awfully small window. “Who told you how long it takes to launch the fighters?”

“Israla’s Earther boyfriends have been most forthcoming when she asks them for tactical data. They don’t wish to be taken home.”

Jessica thought of all those young men eagerly availing themselves of the carnal pleasures on Plasius. “Mutiny and treason will be the least of their crimes.”

Three quick clicks sounded over their radio. “We’re there,” Egilka whispered.

Jessica bit her lip. The seemingly innocuous clicking had been Raxstad or Bevau crossing into open space. They would now travel in radio silence to avoid alerting the battlecruiser of their presence.

Egilka craned his neck, looking over her shoulder to keep the suited men ahead of them in his sights. He jetted air from time to time to adjust their course. In doing so, the terrible view of the battlecruiser drifted into their window.

The ship’s forward section was a long tube. Two laser cannon arrays jutted from it like wheel spokes. The spokes were segmented, allowing the cannon barrels to aim at multiple targets. The configuration gave it the capability to attack in an almost 360 degree arc.

At the end of cylindrical battle section, the ship flared into a fatter, squatter cylinder. This section contained crew living quarters and docking bays. The aft section was a large rectangular cube, housing the rockets that propelled the cruiser through space. The overall effect was as awkward looking as a pubescent boy, but Jessica knew the battlecruiser for what it was: a frighteningly effective death machine.

They drifted closer until the cruiser filled the pod’s window. Egilka adjusted their course so that they floated parallel to the mechanical beast’s underside.

Miles of featureless metal panels passed by. Jessica had never been claustrophobic before. However, after five endless minutes of stark metallic gray filling the window she could barely draw breath. She gasped for air, and her heart drummed wildly. The irrational thought filled her mind: *if I could just open the hatch door, I could get some air. I’m going to smother in this coffin if I don’t open the hatch!*

Egilka’s arm around her waist pressed her tight. She looked up at him, knowing her eyes were wide with fear. With panic on the rise, his calm face seemed absurd.

“You’re all right,” he whispered and pressed his lips briefly against her cheek. She shuddered, and he opened his mouth. His fangs descended. He looked at her questioningly.

Egilka’s offer sparked anger, but not at him. He only wanted to help her, and she loved him for it. Her ire was for herself. *Damn it, I’m no shrinking violet. I’ve faced worse than this, much worse.*

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to stop hyperventilating. Her shaking eased. She gave Egilka a brave smile and shook her head. He grinned back, and his fangs curved back to the roof of his mouth. “Not bad for a piece of Earther fluff,” he teased.

Moments later they cleared the battle cruiser. Black space embedded with the diamond points of stars filled the window. Jessica felt Egilka's body relax, letting her know how on edge he had been too. Shame for panicking and adding to his tension filled her.

For several minutes they floated along, leaving the battlecruiser behind. Jessica's heart-felt lighter and lighter as the little group went deeper into the void. Soon she would be on her way to Kalquor to live better than a story-book princess: happily ever after with three Prince Charmings.

Something inside the pod *pinged*, and Egilka snarled a single word in Kalquorian. The radio came alive with Bevau's voice.

"We've been detected. Fire boosters and commence evasive maneuvers."

"Time to make a run for it," Egilka said, flipping two switches and punching a button. The pod around them vibrated as the boosters came to life. Jessica watched Govi and Michaela's pod surge ahead, accelerating quickly.

The stars they'd been drifting past began to move faster, and the other pod stopped pulling away as theirs matched speed. Egilka grabbed the steering lever and barked something in Kalquorian. A mechanical voice answered and a free-floating digital navigation chart appeared before Jessica's startled eyes.

Beyond the green-tinged chart, she watched the other pod reach and pass the space-suited Dramoks. Moments later, it raced past the Nobeks. Jessica and Egilka's pod caught up to Clajak and Korkla. A bright streak of light cut through the sky towards Govi and Michaela. Jessica screamed.

"They're firing the laser cannons," Bevau shouted. "Govi, are you all right?"

Jessica wept to hear the Imdiko's voice over Michaela's cursing. "We're fine, just a little singed, I think. Pod operations normal."

Jessica's pod passed the Nobeks as more lasers streamed around them. Raxstad said, "The Earthers almost got lucky. Those cannons aren't meant for targets as small as us."

"I don't want them getting any luckier," Bevau answered. "Clajak, Raxstad, Korkla, bunch up with me. We'll keep ourselves between the battlecruiser and the pods. Hopefully, we'll be a better target to draw fire away from our Mataras."

Hearing half her clan putting themselves in danger sent Jessica's heart into overdrive. "Please be careful," she begged.

She could almost see Clajak's comforting smile when he answered. "Stay calm, my sweet. We're almost there."

The barrage of laser fire ended as suddenly as it began. There was no time for relief however.

"The fighters are coming," Bevau announced.

Raxstad added, "They'll be in firing range in ten seconds."

Jessica gasped. "Ten seconds?"

Egilka chuckled as a spaceship suddenly swam into being before them. An unfamiliar voice, speaking Kalquorian, came on the com. The Imdiko answered in Plasian. "It's nice to see you too, Captain."

"Were they there all along?" Jessica demanded.

“Fighters veering off,” Bevau announced. “The cruiser is coming about. I think they want to argue some more.”

“Our transport waited out of firing range. It can protect us from the fighters, but it doesn’t have the weapons for defense against a battlecruiser.” Egilka piloted the pod towards an opening shaft on the Kalquorian vessel.

The Kalquorian captain’s voice came back on, his Plasian halting. “We ready leaving for you arrive.”

Michaela and Govi’s pod entered the opening in the Kalquorian ship, disappearing from sight.

Egilka tightened his grip on Jessica. “Get ready for gravity. It’ll hit as soon as we enter the docking bay.”

“Pod One has docked,” announced Govi.

“Are we going to escape?” Jessica asked. Their pod swept into the docking bay. Sudden weight bore down on her, and she grunted. She shut her eyes against the well-lit interior, dazzling after the darkness of space.

“Our transport’s faster than the battlecruiser. The trick is getting out of here before the cruiser can get close enough to attack.” Egilka said. She peeked between her eyelids to watch his fingers fly over switches and buttons. The pod thumped to the ground. “Pod Two has docked,” he announced.

He set her on her feet on the pod’s floor and busied himself with the straps holding him in place. Jessica stood on her tiptoes, trying to see through the window. Where was the rest of their group?

“All personnel are on board,” Bevau said. “Bay doors are closed.”

Egilka unbuckled the last strap as a mechanical voice boomed outside the pod.

“What’s it saying?” Jessica asked.

“Stand by for atmosphere restoration,” Egilka translated. “We have to stay in the pod until life-supporting oxygen levels are reached.”

“I need to learn your language,” Jessica grumbled. “How can I be the Imperial Clan’s Matara and not speak Kalquorian?”

“Tutoring will be arranged as soon as we get home. Meanwhile, I’ll teach you a few simple phrases that will help you get by.”

The mechanical voice boomed again, and Egilka released the latches on the pod’s door. He swung it open. “It’s safe to get out now.”

Jessica stepped out of the mini-pod, surprised her shaking legs held her up.

She looked around the cavernous space. Hundreds of pods filled half the room, sitting in rows of military precision. It looked like the biggest, most obsessive-compulsive chicken in the universe roosted there. Jessica had the feeling if she measured the distance between each and every pod, they’d all be the same to the smallest fraction of an inch.

Muted light emitted from the metallic walls and ceiling, the color matching the steel highlights of Clajak’s hair. It gave her skin a strange gray pallor. She glanced at Egilka, emerging from their pod. He too had a metallic cast to his dark skin, and his cat’s pupils reflected silver.

“Stupid asshole Earthers,” Michaela complained, her voice echoing in the space. Jessica turned to look at her friend. She and Govi stared at the top of their pod. The peak of the gray metal egg was black with burn marks. Jessica whistled. It had indeed been a close call. She walked over, Egilka following.

“Why do you get to have all the fun?” she teased with humor she didn’t feel. Michaela’s eyes were wide. “Just lucky I guess. Let’s not do that again, okay?” Govi hugged her. “Never, my beauty.”

Over the ship’s com system, the voice of the Kalquorian captain echoed in the room. He spoke briefly.

Egilka translated for Jessica. “We’re away and clear with no shots fired.”

The last of her tension bled away. She grinned to see Bevau and Clajak approaching, their heads bared of the helmets. In the strange light of the bay, Clajak’s hair shone pure silver. After their harrowing escape, Jessica thought the men had never been more handsome.

Bevau reached her first and covered her face with kisses. She wrapped her arms around the stunning Kalquorian’s massive shoulders. His space suit crinkled like tissue paper. She shivered, thinking how insubstantial the protective fabric felt for space travel, especially with hostile ships firing at him.

Not far away, Korkla and Raxstad embraced Michaela, kissing and murmuring as they reunited with their Matara. They touched her all over, as if reassuring themselves of her wellbeing. She, in turn, clutched at them.

Bevau let Jessica go so Clajak could scoop her up and swing her around. “You sure know how to show a girl a wild time,” she laughed, ecstatic to see him alive and in one piece.

“We can’t let you get bored, can we?” he said and kissed her thoroughly. She molded herself against him, reassuring herself with his solidness that they had indeed survived the dreadful journey.

He broke the kiss to hug her close. Over his shoulder, Jessica saw a door open silently and three men walk in. They were older Kalquorians, their faces lined. They wore flowing robes of different colors: green, blue and red.

The blue-robed man in the middle of the group moved with careful, uncertain steps, his body twisted slightly to one side. Gray strands streaked his black hair. A legless chair followed him seemingly of its own volition, hovering at knee level above the ground. Despite his bent frame, Jessica saw strength in his face.

To his right, the Kalquorian in green robes switched his gaze back and forth between the bent man and Clajak’s clan. He was tall, even for a Kalquorian, his bearing as straight as his companion’s was hunched. His long beard matched his snowy white hair. Jessica liked his warm expression right away.

The third man wore red robes. His eyes were sharp and face unsmiling. He made Jessica think of a watchful hawk waiting for a tasty meal to cross his path. The steel-tinge of his dark hair caught her attention. She patted Clajak’s shoulder to alert him to the arrivals.

“Is that who I think it is?”

At her words, Clajak's and Korkla's clans turned. With the exception of Clajak, Jessica and Michaela, everyone bowed so deeply they almost bent double. After a moment's hesitation, Michaela followed suit. She peeked at the newcomers through the curls that fell over her face.

Clajak set Jessica down, and they echoed everyone else's genuflecting. He confirmed her suspicions as he greeted the elder Kalquorians.

"We are honored to be in your presence my fathers, Emperors of Kalquor."

\* \* \* \*

"I hope our being here is a happy surprise," Emperor Zarl said.

Clajak straightened, noticing the others did the same, the Earthers a second behind the rest. He looked at the men before him, especially the one who had spoken. His initial shock gave way to moved affection. He knew how torturous it was for Zarl to move about on his feet and how space travel taxed his father's damaged frame. That the man had made the journey all the way from Kalquor just to see him brought a maelstrom of emotion. Clajak swallowed the thickness in his throat and hurried to the bent Kalquorian. The Dramok prince touched the back of his hand to Zarl's lined cheek.

"Such an honor can only bring joy, my father." His voice caught.

Zarl smiled and returned the traditional greeting between father and son. His hand was warm on Clajak's face. "It is good to see you Clajak."

Clajak turned to exchange touch with his Imdiko father Tidro. Despite the white hair and beard, Tidro still looked vigorous and strong. Clajak couldn't keep the concern out of his voice, though he managed not to look in Zarl's direction when he asked, "Why have you come? Is all well?"

Tidro patted Clajak's cheek. "Everything is fine. We are sentimental in our old age and miss our son. You stay away too long."

Clajak nodded, dropping his eyes. He turned and stepped away to greet Yuder. The sharp-eyed Nobek Emperor allowed a slight smile to lift the corners of his mouth as he too touched Clajak's face. "I see you brought Kalquor two Mataras. Well done."

Clajak's face warmed in momentary embarrassment, knowing they'd caught him passionately embracing Jessica. As glad as he was to see them, he didn't relish the coming revelation that he'd taken her as his own. "Allow me to introduce the Earthers. They speak excellent Plasian."

Zarl smiled at the women. Taking Clajak's hint, he spoke so they understood him. "I trust these lovelies will not take offense if an old man greets them from a seated position."

Snorting, Tidro took Zarl's arm and helped to guide him to the hover chair. "Old man? What does that make me, ancient?"

Clajak motioned Michaela and Jessica forward. As soon as the Dramok Emperor was settled, Michaela executed a graceful curtsy, dipping her head in respect. Jessica copied the motion.

Michaela addressed them. "We are honored to meet your Imperial Majesties in any fashion you deem worthy. We are grateful for your kindness in allowing us to join your people."

The emperors regarded the dancer with undisguised delight. Tidro said, "Such a pretty greeting. Rise, my dears, and accept our welcome."

"She is descended from royalty herself," Clajak said as Michaela and Jessica straightened. He too was impressed with the graceful salutation. "Dramok Emperor Zarl, Indiko Emperor Tidro, Nobek Emperor Yuder, I present Korkla's Matara, Michael-Michaela Blake. She is addressed as Michaela, if it pleases my fathers."

Zarl bowed his head briefly at her. "Indeed it is a pleasure. It will give me great happiness to welcome you to Kalquor in—" he frowned and looked up at Yuder "—I believe the journey takes six Earther weeks?"

"That is correct." Yuder also nodded at Michaela before switching his sharp gaze on Jessica. "And this one for whom my son has such obvious affection?" He smirked, his amusement at Clajak's latest dalliance obvious.

Jessica's face colored, and she looked at Clajak, her expression hinting at the same nervousness he felt. Clajak glanced at Bevau and Egilka, and they nodded, stepping forward to flank him and Jessica.

*Here we go*, he thought. "My fathers, I present Jessica McInness... my clan's Matara."

The welcoming smiles on the emperors' faces froze. Their gazes simultaneously moved from Jessica to Clajak. The docking bay was silent. Clajak couldn't even hear anyone breathe.

Zarl's voice was careful in its control. "You have made this woman part of your clan?" He looked over the four of them, his gaze coming back to rest on Clajak. "Is this in response to ending Egilka's research?"

"I hope you do not believe us to be so petty," Clajak answered. "We know this will cause difficulties—"

"That's putting it mildly," Yuder interrupted. His face was expressionless, but the temper Clajak had inherited was obvious in his voice.

"We love her," Clajak continued. "She is the woman we wish to spend our lives with."

Yuder stepped forward until his face was only inches from his son's. Clajak was careful to meet the Nobek's gaze without flinching. Showing weakness now would be a huge mistake.

Yuder said, "Jessica McInness, we have long despaired of Clajak willingly accepting a lifelong mate. You must be a treasure indeed to have conquered my son."

Clajak answered, "Indeed she is, my father. She is beyond compare."

Yuder glared at him. "Did you stop for even a moment to think of the repercussions of rejecting Narpok? Of how this decision will affect all of Kalquor?"

Tidro spoke calmly. "They have never cared for Narpok. She would only bring them unhappiness."

Clajak decided he might as well deliver the final blow. "I also have the happy news that Jessica carries our child."

That brought a gasp from Zarl and Tidro. Yuder's eyes widened, and he stepped back. He looked down at Jessica. Clajak felt her tremble, but she returned Yuder's stare with her own steady gaze. *Stay strong*, he mentally urged her. Yuder was a just but



fierce man. While he wouldn't physically harm any female, his words could cut as sharply as his knife. Clajak would have happily traded many of the Nobek's tongue lashings for physical beatings.

He was relieved when Zarl beckoned. "Come closer, Jessica."

Yuder stepped back to his former position next to his Dramok, allowing Jessica to approach. "What would you have of me, my emperor?" she asked.

"Were you aware our son's clan was already betrothed to another?" His tone held no accusation.

"Yes, my emperor. My clan told me they would take no woman but myself as their lifelong mate." She dropped the formality to add, "I swear to you, none of us meant for this to happen."

Yuder said, "But it did because you are in love?" The sneer in his voice made Clajak stiffen.

She looked him in the eye once more. Inwardly Clajak applauded her instincts on showing Yuder as little weakness as she could manage. "Yes, my emperor."

"And these men you have agreed to spend your life with, you find them to be utterly perfect, I suppose."

Jessica stared at him, her mouth twisting. At first Clajak couldn't figure out what was wrong with her, and then it hit him. She was fighting not to laugh.

"Something amuses you?" Yuder's eyes darkened with threat.

"My apologies, my emperor. No insult is intended. To answer your question, these men are far from perfect." A hiccup of a giggle escaped her. "Bevau is by far the most agreeable of the three, but even he can't make up for the shortcomings of the others. I think Egilka is a pompous jerk and Clajak a self-absorbed brat. Bevau has his moments too. He can be a big bully. I spend a lot of time yelling at them."

Clajak's fathers stared at her, nonplused. At last Zarl asked the men, "Were you aware of her feelings?"

It was Egilka who answered first. "Yes, my emperor. I pay little mind to the immature opinions of this bit of Earther fluff."

Clajak couldn't conceal his own grin. "I see her more as a stubborn beast. She is the most obstinate person I have ever met."

Bevau chimed in, "And that temper...whoo!"

Clajak forced himself to be serious. "My fathers, it doesn't seem it would work with our clashing temperaments, but I can't imagine having anyone else as my Matara. Losing her would tear my heart out." Egilka and Bevau nodded. Jessica smiled up at him, her eyes shining.

Yuder relaxed, but he still wasn't satisfied. "And you are prepared to be Empress of Kalquor, Jessica McInness?"

"Absolutely not."

Clajak's heart dropped to his belly. Why would she say such a thing? He opened his mouth to protest, but she waved him silent before continuing to answer.

She addressed all three emperors. "I don't know the language or the customs of your people. I have no right to claim the title Empress simply because I carry Kalquor's

future heir. However, I promise to dedicate myself to learning all I can, to being the Matara my clan deserves. I will not fail the faith they have in me.”

Zarl studied her face. He looked at his clan, then at Clajak. He smiled, and Clajak’s legs wobbled with relief. “You have chosen well, my son and my son’s clan.”

Tidro touched Zarl’s chair, and it floated backwards toward the door they’d entered through. “No doubt your narrow escape has left you all in need of rest,” he said, expertly guiding the hover chair. He smiled at the entire group. “We will meet again for dinner and celebrate your unions.”

Before following his clanmates out, Yuder stared at Jessica, his eyes narrowed in evaluation. “I hope you are ready for the obstacles that await you, Jessica McInness.” Before she could respond, he swept out of the bay, his red robes flapping.

Clajak relaxed with a gust of air.

“That went much better than I expected,” Bevau said.

“But Yuder doesn’t like me,” Jessica said. She bit her lip.

Clajak hugged her, his face beaming. “Actually, he does. You have to know how to read him.”

“I did okay?”

“What is the saying on Earth? You passed with colors that fly.”

“What?”

Egilka laughed, a rare smile lighting his face. “You passed with flying colors. They approve of the match.”

“They do?”

Clajak scooped her up in his arms, hugging her close. “Indeed they do, my sweet.”

\* \* \* \*

Dinner started off pleasantly enough with the emperors toasting the new Mataras and the coming child. Jessica warmed to her new in-laws quickly, particularly Zarl. For all his physical infirmities, his mind was sharp, his wit hilarious.

Near the end of the meal, the conversation turned to serious concerns. The most crucial matter regarded the inevitable showdown with Head Councilman Pwaldur.

“It’s not simply a case of his daughter bearing insult,” Yuder said, his brow furrowed. “The man is ambitious enough to have his eye on the throne itself. Narpok was his door through which he hoped to wield power.”

“There is no proof of that,” Tidro gently rebuked. “Besides, how can he gain the throne with Clajak, Bevau and Egilka sitting on it? Plus he’s clanless. No single person can rule Kalquor.”

“Clajak’s reluctance to ascend so soon has left many debating his readiness. I think Pwaldur has hopes of being a puppet master.”

“I’m no puppet,” Clajak hotly replied.

“We know you’re not,” Zarl answered. “Neither being your emperors nor your fathers has given us any real control over you.”

That earned chuckles all around, but Yuder’s expression remained dark. He muttered, “Pwaldur will use this situation to directly challenge Clajak’s right to rule.”

Zarl smiled at his Nobek, but the warning in his voice was clear. "This is a celebration. Let's not upset the mother-to-be."

That shut down the debate, at least for the rest of dinner. Despite putting on a happy face for the emperors, Jessica spent the rest of the meal fretting.

She contained her anxiety until she and the clan returned to their spacious quarters aboard the transport. No sooner had the door closed behind the group when she whirled to confront them. "Can Pwaldur really challenge our union?"

Clajak seemed unconcerned. He sat on the thick sleeping cushion that took up most of the room and removed his boots. "He can try."

Bevau sank onto the bed next to Clajak. He also pulled off his boots. "Stop worrying."

Clajak stripped off his shirt, and Jessica wanted to be distracted by his muscular torso. Even the half-naked Kalquorian physique couldn't calm her worries, however. "Right Bevau, just snap your fingers and my world will be all sunshine and sweetness." She snorted. "After seeing Yuder's concern, I don't think so."

Egilka was already naked, having disrobed behind her. He tousled her hair as if she was a child before sprawling on the bed. "This is a matter you need not concern yourself with. You are pregnant, and stress must be kept at a minimum. Calm yourself by taking deep breaths."

Jessica's temper took over. "I'm expecting a child, not becoming one myself. Stop being so condescending, you pompous ass."

The severe look Clajak gave her let her know his temper was also on the rise. "Egilka's right. A pregnant Matara has enough to worry about. Now that we're through Earth's blockade and you're safe, all stress is to be removed from your life."

Jessica crossed her arms over her chest and gave him her most obstinate look. "That's not going to happen until this situation with Pwaldur and Narpok is resolved."

Egilka sat up and addressed the other two men. "One of us can bite her, or she can be sedated."

She stomped her foot. "Don't you dare! And stop talking about me like I'm not in the room." She picked up a boot and threw it at him. Stone-faced, he easily batted it away.

Naked, Bevau stood and loomed over her. "You will calm your temper and stop arguing or I'll punish you." The dark promise in his eyes told her he wanted her to quarrel. One corner of his mouth twitched upward, inviting her to incite discipline.

*Damn him* she thought, her insides turning wobbly. What warped part of her made her so eager to submit? It didn't matter how strong willed she was outside of sex; the moment arousal hit, the urge to surrender to their every whim took her over.

Her heart beginning to pound, she said, "You're such a bully, Bevau. No doubt you'll share how to keep me in my place with whatever clan Pwaldur ships me off to."

The Nobek growled through the savage grin that spread across his face. Honey gushed between Jessica's legs at the sight. "Discipline it is then," he said.

Clajak rose to stand next to him. "I'll help you. On your belly, my sweet." His gaze was dark with mingled anger and desire, making Jessica shiver. She had gotten herself in trouble again. Her sex spasmed in anticipation.

She bowed her head and approached the bed. Egilka laid back. His cocks were livid exclamation marks. "You may pleasure me with your mouth while you accept your punishment," he told her.

She crawled between his legs, licking her lips in anticipation. "Ass in the air," Bevau ordered. He and Clajak positioned themselves on either side of her. She dutifully crouched on her knees and elbows. One hand closed over Egilka's smaller shaft, and she used the other to brace herself against the bed for the coming spanking. Her mouth slipped over the Imdiko's large shaft, tasting his cinnamon-y goodness. He smoothed his hands through her hair, pulling it back so he could watch her suck in his flesh.

Hands hiked her skirt over her waist. The men pulled her panties down, leaving her buttocks exposed. She whimpered a little, the churn of fear adding to her arousal. She bowed her backside upwards, offering her flesh to her masters.

Clajak struck first, his hand cracking against her left butt cheek. Pain erupted, and she moaned against the cock in her mouth. Bevau's heavy palm followed on the other cheek.

She concentrated on maintaining her rhythm as she fellated Egilka, working hard to pleasure him. Meanwhile her hindquarters warmed as the other two punished her, their hands beating a rapid tattoo on her flesh. Her mouth and hand never faltered in their work. Neither did she flinch from the torrential blows raining down on her ass. The gasps of the three men told her she pleased them all with her obedience. Even as her buttocks pulsed with pain, her womb convulsed with stabs of pleasure.

"I can't wait anymore Bevau," Clajak groaned. The spanking ceased. The bedding beneath her knees sank as he climbed behind her. He grasped her hips, pushing himself between her thighs. She moaned as his cocks slid into her, the now familiar ache of his invasion delightful.

The liquid sounds of lovemaking punctuated by groans and sighs filled the room. Well schooled in oral pleasuring, Jessica took Egilka deep into her throat, pressing the tip of her tongue against the thick pulsing vein on the underside of his rigid shaft. His hands, buried in her chestnut locks, clenched as he arched against her face.

Clajak lifted her off her knees, angling her so he could penetrate her as deeply as possible. She groaned, awash in pleasure as the length of his larger cock disappeared into her nether orifice. His smaller penis found the nest of nerves in her vagina. It rubbed the tender spot, and only the sweet gag of Egilka's flesh kept her screams muffled.

Egilka's breath caught as her cries vibrated around his shaft. She felt the first pulse as his orgasm began and pulled back until only the tip of his cock rested against her tongue. Still wailing with the sweet agony of her own pleasure, she opened her mouth wide so the Imdiko could watch his spice-flavored seed slide back into her throat.

Egilka roared. He filled her mouth with bursts of his thick semen. She swallowed eagerly. Giving herself to him so completely heightened her own pleasure, and she shuddered anew as climax galloped through her.

Clajak's thrusts grew more forceful, letting Jessica know he too was close. His groin pounded against her sore buttocks, heightening the heady mix of pain and pleasure. Their flesh slapped together louder than the previous spanking. Then he too split the air

with his cries. He jerked hard against her, his fingers digging into her flesh where he held her. She knew she'd wear his marks for the next couple of days.

Jessica collapsed between Egilka's legs, understanding the respite would be brief. Bevau still awaited his turn with her, and he tended to be much more physical than the others. As if discerning her thoughts, Clajak said, "I'm glad I have only one clanmate to service."

"I'm sure she's tired, but she's been naughty." Jessica heard the smile in the Nobek's voice. "Turn her over, Egilka."

Clajak slid out of the way, letting the Imdiko comply with Bevau's request. Jessica lay on her back between Egilka's legs with her head pillowed on his lower abdomen. Bevau crawled over her, his eyes dark with need.

"Hold her wrists," he instructed as he ran his hands over her torso. Egilka did so, rendering her just as Bevau liked her best: helpless.

Jessica liked it that way too. Fresh honey flowed from her as he squeezed her breasts hard, just shy of pain. He bent to gently bite her pebble-hard nipples. She writhed at the attention.

He slapped the mounds, turning the ivory flesh pink. She groaned to be defenseless against him. "You're a very bad girl, Jessica," Bevau chided her. He slapped her breasts again.

"Yes. Very bad," she sighed, inviting more discipline. "I deserve to be punished."

She didn't know why she loved being mastered by her clanmates. Right now it only mattered that she did.

He gripped her ankles and opened her wide. "Beg me to take you."

"Please, Bevau, please make love to me."

"I don't want to make love to you. Making love is gentle, and you don't deserve gentleness. Beg me for what you deserve."

She didn't want him to be gentle either. She licked her lips, eager for what he wanted to do to her. "Please fuck me. Punish me with your cocks. Use me hard as I deserve."

"Keep going." His fangs peeked at her.

"I will give you whatever you want, without complaint. I am yours to do with as you wish. I serve you in any way you see fit to have me. I beg you to accept my surrender, to allow me to prove to you I will obey you in everything."

"I will test you then."

Excitement coursed through Jessica's body. "Thank you," she whispered.

He started with fucking her mouth, straddling her face and alternating cocks while Egilka and Clajak held her down. By the time he had tired of that pleasure, the other two men were aroused once more. Seeing his clanmates in need, Bevau ordered Jessica to crawl to each on her hands and knees and give them oral pleasure. She did as she was told, adjusting rhythm and technique to his dictates. Egilka and Clajak sat back, enjoying their passive roles.

Bevau searched around the room until he found a stiff leather-like black strap. Jessica looked at it, unable to discern what he might want her to do with such an object.

"Crawl to Egilka," he said, gripping one end of the strap. "Straddle him and give him the pleasure of your sex and ass."

"As you wish," she murmured and started toward the waiting Imdiko. A sharp *crack* rang in the air and pain exploded against her buttocks. Jessica cried out in shock and looked over her shoulder to see Bevau swing the strap again.

*Crack!*

She cried out again and crawled faster. Bevau drove her across the bed with his strap warming her ass anew. She reached Egilka, and the spanking ended.

"Take him inside yourself. Fuck him nice and slow," Bevau instructed. She eagerly obeyed, crawling onto Egilka's lap and settling herself on the Imdiko's livid flesh.

"Slower. Let him feel every fraction of your warm, wet pussy, of your tight asshole."

Egilka sighed and closed his eyes as she did what she was told. Her hands gripped his shoulders as she rode up and down the length of his cocks, filling and emptying herself of him so very slowly.

"Kiss him as if you were the one in control. Fill his mouth with your tongue."

She bent to press her mouth to Egilka's, surprised when he resisted her a little. She forced his mouth open with hers, making him take the kiss. She explored, running her tongue over his teeth, twining around its twin, and lapping at the roof of his mouth, careful to avoid nicking herself on his folded fangs.

His hands stole over her breasts, unable to keep from responding to her. Despite Bevau ordering her around, Jessica felt her command over Egilka. She rode the Imdiko so very slowly, her honey pouring over him as he moaned his enjoyment.

She'd been kneeling over him. Wanting even more control, she slid her legs forward until she squatted on the soles of her feet. She pushed at him until he lay flat. Pressing her hands against his chest, she moved over him.

When he grasped her waist, she grabbed his wrists impatiently and pinned them to the bed on either side of his head. He let her dominate, his eyes closing in ecstasy as she took him with slow, steady strokes. Occasionally she wiggled a little from side to side, making him groan aloud. His eager response urged her on, and she rotated her hips in a slow circle as she rose and fell above him. His jaw clenched, and his head suddenly darted forward. She felt a sweet stab of pain as his fangs sank into her upper breast. She cried out, her head falling back as the intoxicant spread through her body.

Her sex squeezed around him, and Egilka's head dropped down once more, shaking from side to side as he fought the threatening orgasm. Jessica stopped moving, allowing him regain control. As soon as his breathing eased, letting her know he was no longer on the brink of climax, she released his wrists. Leaning back, she placed her hands behind her hips, propping herself up on his thighs. The pressure of his penis moved to the front of her womb, where the most sensitive nest of nerves waited.

She moved and cried out to feel his hardness rubbing there. She forced herself to keep the friction slow, prolonging their shared pleasure. Slowly the sensation of impending explosion built, and her gasps mingled with Egilka's. She watched as she

worked him, enjoying the sight of him emerging from her body wet and glistening only to be slowly swallowed once more.

His hand reached down, and his thumb and forefinger closed over her engorged clitoris. She shouted with the electric sensation of his touch. It joined the heavier throb of bliss inside her sheath, and all control fled.

Jessica pistoned above him, taking him violently, every cell of her body reaching for glorious dissolution. When Egilka's hands clamped over her hips, she didn't fight him this time. Instead, she allowed him to pull her even harder down onto himself, driving his length deep inside her.

The orgasm began, and Jessica's body opened wide to welcome it. She screamed raggedly as it consumed her. She hung suspended in its grip for an eternity, and then another swept over her. She was no longer conscious of the man beneath her or of any of her surroundings. All that existed were the convulsions of desire, taking her from the limits of her physical body. She existed only in an infinite universe of white-hot sensation.

The throbs of desire gradually ebbed, allowing the real world to reassert itself. Jessica had collapsed over Egilka's chest, which heaved beneath her cheek like bellows. His sexes still pulsed within her, bathing her insides with his fluid. He moaned as he spent himself. His arms gripped her like iron bands.

"Incredible," someone whispered nearby. Jessica peered to see Bevau and Clajak staring down at them, their mouths hanging open. She had forgotten they were in the room. She licked her lips. They were both hard, and the intoxicant in her system made her insides clench again.

"You're next," she whispered to Bevau.

His eyes widened, and he swallowed. She grinned to see the big, bad Nobek prince nervous. She struggled to free herself from Egilka. With a final groan and spasm, he released her.

She crawled to the edge of the bed where Bevau stood. She slid her lips over his jutting shaft and tugged with her mouth. He let her pull him until he was kneeling before her on the bed.

"What do you want of me, my love?" he asked, his voice wavering.

She took her mouth off him to lick him like an ice cream cone. "Lie down like Egilka," she answered. She was eager to dominate him too.

He did as he was told, his eyes wide with anticipation. She continued to lick him, starting with the bottom of each organ to slowly trace her tongue up the underside to the tip. A drop of sweetness appeared at the tip of his larger penis, and she sucked it into her hungry mouth. Bevau hissed, his fangs showing.

"Stay put," she ordered, pretending the big alien couldn't overpower her and do as he wanted. He hissed again but obeyed. Seeing Clajak watching them avidly gave her an idea.

"Clajak, hold his arms. Egilka, can you move yet?"

A slow smile spread over the Imdiko's face. "Barely, but for you I will manage."

"Hold his ankles then."

Bevau closed his eyes as his clanmates carried out her orders to restrain him. His breath came quickly.

"I can bite him, if you wish," Clajak offered. Bevau's eyes popped open.

"I do wish it."

Clajak's head darted down, and he buried his fangs in Bevau's neck. The Nobek stiffened as if readying to resist, and Jessica slipped her mouth over his cock. Bevau groaned and relaxed, surrendering to them.

Jessica licked him to reward his obedience, her tongue tracing a path from the base of his smaller penis to its tip, down the top of it, and repeating the action with the larger organ. Meanwhile she watched Clajak withdraw from his bite. Rivulets of blood ran from the small punctures in Bevau's neck, which Clajak licked clean with languid strokes. The Nobek hummed a contented sound deep in his throat.

"What does this remind you of, Clajak?" Egilka chuckled.

The Dramok paused in lapping Bevau's blood to grin. "I believe you are thinking of when we forced him to join our clan."

Jessica stopped sucking Bevau's cock long enough to ask, "You forced him?"

Egilka nodded as Clajak returned to licking the Nobek's neck. "Bevau feared with his strong Imdiko tendencies, he wasn't proper emperor material. We knew better and tricked him into our living suite where we ambushed him. Even with surprise on our side, Bevau beat the hell out of us. It took about a dozen bites to subdue him."

Clajak licked the last drop of blood from his clanmate's throat and looked into Bevau's euphoric face with a gentle smile. "We chained him up and spent three days 'convincing' Bevau to join our clan. No food, no sleep; just sex. It was an amazing time."

"It was fun," Bevau murmured. "But I like girls better. Jessica is best of all."

"Indeed she is," Clajak agreed. "What are you going to do with this gorgeous Nobek of ours, my sweet?"

"This," she answered, titillated by the story of Egilka and Clajak forcefully taking Bevau. She clambered on top of the Nobek as she had Egilka, except she faced away from him. "Keep him restrained. It's time this bully got a taste of his own medicine."

The two men chuckled. In front of her, Egilka tightened his grip on Bevau's ankles, watching Jessica avidly. She reached beneath herself to grasp the Nobek's larger cock, guiding it to her sex. His smaller penis touched her clitoris and rubbed against it as she slid down onto its bigger neighbor. She caught her breath.

Crouched over him, she balanced her weight with her hands on his thickly muscled thighs. Instead of building slowly as she had with Egilka, she varied her speed; first steadily rocking to make him gasp, then quicker to bring them both to the brink. She slowed again to feel the length of him filling her to capacity.

"Your ass is beautiful," Clajak breathed behind her. "It's like I'm watching him get fucked by a work of art."

"Let me touch her, Clajak," Bevau begged. He writhed, his ankles slipping from Egilka's grip momentarily before the Imdiko regained control. "Let my hands free."

"That is up to her, my beauty. Only when she gives leave."

"Please, Jessica. Even just one hand."



"We cannot hold him if he loses control," Egilka whispered to her.

She had enjoyed her mastery, but hearing the need in Bevau's voice and feeling the barely restrained ferocity in his clenched muscles gave her a delicious shudder. Intoxicated or not, Bevau would fight them all before much longer. She didn't want him wasting his energy on the other two men. She wanted it all for herself.

"Release him," she agreed, continuing to rock up and down. Egilka let go of Bevau, and feeling the Nobek's hands stroke down her back confirmed Clajak had also released the eager man.

His hands traveled down until they cupped her buttocks. He spread her cheeks apart, no doubt enhancing his view of his penis sliding into her sleeve. She thrust against him slowly, letting him enjoy the show. She moaned to feel his thumb circle her anus, delighting the sensitive flesh. He slid the digit forward, wetting it in their mutual juices, and slid the thumb back to her nether orifice. She arched as his thumb penetrated the tight aperture.

"Fuck me little girl, fuck me, just like that, yes," Bevau whispered as she moved over him. He thrust his hips up to greet her as she rocked back, and she sighed with gratitude. He felt so good. Whatever trouble awaited her on Kalquor was worth this.

"Lean back," Bevau coaxed, his hands slipping from her ass to cup her ribcage. "Like you're going to lie down on me."

She obeyed, letting his strong arms take her weight as she continued to piston her hips up and down. She put her hands down behind her, holding her shoulders up. Her head fell back toward his chest. He held her parallel to himself, thrusting into her. She nearly fainted with pleasure as once again her lover found that most sensitive spot within her.

Jessica was still on top, but it was Bevau who had taken control. She handed it over gladly.

She kept her eyes open, seeing how Clajak and Egilka watched them. Being on display for them as Bevau fucked her excited her even more.

Clajak's organs were livid with need. He came close to them, leaning over Jessica's thighs to watch. His tongue peeked out, and Jessica's breath caught as she realized what he was about to do. She released it in a wail as his face drifted down to her sex to lick her swollen pink bud.

Her womb heaved with orgasm. Beneath her, Bevau also cried out, his rhythm faltering just before his release. As they bucked helplessly in the throes of bliss, Clajak continued to use his wicked tongue on Jessica, sending her ever higher.

When they had quieted, Bevau slipped out and laid her next to him on the bed. She blinked heavy-eyed at Clajak.

"You are exhausted," he observed, his fingertips brushing her thighs.

"You still need me," she answered. She would not succumb to sleep until all her men were satisfied.

He smiled. "Fortunately for this situation, I will not take very long. Relax and leave the work to me, my sweet."

He rolled her onto her stomach and settled over her, kissing the back of her neck with soft lips. She sighed, enjoying the feeling of his weight on her. He wedged his

thighs between hers, and she sighed again as he slipped his larger cock inside her vagina. Her buttocks tilted up a little to greet him.

“No, my sweet, lie very still,” he whispered. “You have done enough work for today.” He kissed her exposed cheek. “Close your eyes. Relax. Good girl.”

She let herself sink into the softness of the bed cushion as the hard-muscled man on top of her slipped in and out with gentle thoroughness. Neither of them took long to find pleasure with each other. For Jessica, this orgasm wasn’t the cataclysmic explosion of the previous two, but it was just as good in its slow, quiet lapping through her body. Her moans were a soft counterpoint to Clajak’s growls.

The clan cuddled around her after they were done, a heap of warm tired bodies. She was drifting off when Bevau asked, “Feeling better about our situation?”

The effects of Egilka’s bite were wearing off, allowing the smallest tinge of worry to worm its way into her mood. “For now I’m okay. I can’t help but be a little scared.”

Clajak’s grip around her tightened. “No one will take you from us,” he vowed. “Sleep now. Rest will improve your attitude.”

She wanted nothing more than to believe him. She tried to trust all would be okay as she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Thirteen

Michaela squinted at the free-floating video screen. She seemed to think peering between slitted eyes would help her decipher the Kalquorian characters written on it. Jessica had already translated the sentence and restrained the urge to coach her along.

Michaela muttered, "Visit... farm... today—no, tomorrow..." Her face suddenly brightened. "I am visiting the farming region tomorrow." She smiled with relief.

Emperor Zarl nodded. "Excellent job, Michaela."

They had gathered in the parlor of the Imperial Suite, as they did every day. Despite the oversized seating cushions made of the softest fabrics, the intricately carved tables of rare woods and polished marble, and a few priceless art pieces from all over the universe, it managed to be a cozy, casual room. Jessica wondered at her ability to be comfortable amid the fine appointments.

Zarl had taken it upon himself to tutor the Earthers on his planet's language and customs. His patience was neverending with the Mataras, even when frustration made them less than completely respectful in the presence of an emperor. Michaela's occasional outbursts of profanity seemed more a source of amusement than shock to Zarl. Jessica was beginning to understand how indulgent Kalquorian men were of their women.

"My clan makes me Kalquorian only speak now," Michaela said in staccato bursts. "The writing difficult still."

"Total immersion in a language is the best way to learn," Zarl said. He changed the sentence floating in mid-air with the flick of a finger. "Your turn, Jessica."

Jessica bit her lip as she studied the writing. In a moment she had it. "Today the council is hearing discussions on Earther Matara health concerns."

"Excellent, my daughter." Zarl shifted in his chair and winced.

In the six weeks of their journey to Kalquor, Jessica had learned the signs of his battered body's discomfort. Her nurse's instincts took over, and she jumped up from the seating cushion where she and Michaela perched. "What hurts?" she asked.

Zarl sighed, but he knew Jessica wouldn't relent until he admitted to whatever aches tormented him. "The right leg."

"Let me elevate it." Jessica snagged another cushion and placed it on the floor before him. She gently took hold of his bent ankles as he lowered his hover chair to the floor. She settled his legs on top of the cushions and checked the chronometer across the room. He was still several clicks away from his next dose of pain medication. Even superior Kalquorian medicine couldn't erase all the hurt the monarch suffered.

He nodded at her, his expression easing. Jessica wasn't fooled. The tightness of the skin around his mouth and eyes betrayed he still felt discomfort. Since there was nothing more she could do for him, she let it go.

She'd been summoning the courage to press him on his injuries for weeks, not because she could help him anymore than his own medics, but because Narpok figured so much in the tale. With the transport scheduled to arrive at Kalquor within hours, it was now or never.

Kneeling at his side, her head bowed in respect Jessica ventured, "May I satisfy my curiosity, my father?"

His fingers brushed her hair with real affection. "You may ask me anything your heart desires, Jessica. The mother of my grandchild cannot offend me."

She looked into his kind, careworn face, her heart warming at his expression. He was nothing like her father, and yet Zarl was almost as precious to her.

"Clajak said you were injured in the same accident that killed your Matara and most of Narpok's parents."

His expression saddened, and Jessica almost wished she hadn't spoken. "Indeed. We might have lost Clajak too, but he suddenly took ill before that trip to Joshada." Zarl managed a chuckle. "I think he pretended to be sick to avoid being shut up in a transport with Narpok. She was already dreadfully spoiled."

"Is she really so terrible?" Jessica prompted.

"I suppose because Narpok was promised to Clajak at an early age she feels entitled to have all she desires. As a small child, she issued orders and made demands as if she was already the empress. The older she gets, the worse she becomes."

"Why were you going to Joshada the day of the accident?"

"My Matara and I had official duties to attend. Yuder was needed at home due to a dispute between two regions and Tidro stayed behind to care for Clajak...even though Clajak was a fully grown man and hardly needed a nursemaid." Zarl gave Jessica a sly smile. Jessica grinned back. Tidro fussed over Clajak as if he was a precious baby chick. She could tell it embarrassed her Dramok mate to no end.

"Narpok and her family came along so our someday blended clans could spend time together. Since Clajak managed to evade the outing, they decided to go shopping. You must have your clans take you to Joshada for furnishings, clothes and such," he told the Earthers. "Their craftsmen are unmatched."

"Pwaldur didn't come along, but I don't know why. I remember his clan was quite put out with him over it."

"How did the accident happen?" Michaela asked. She also kneeled at Zarl's feet, caught up in the tale.

"We never figured out what went wrong." He rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. "The transport lost all power as we entered Joshada's atmosphere. Narpok's father Nobek Mox was an excellent pilot, and he took over the controls when our navigator panicked. He did all he could to land the ship, but we knew we were falling to our deaths. We sent Narpok off in the one escape pod, which was how she avoided injury."

"We crashed. I held my Matara's hand the whole time. I remember thinking it was like the end of the world. The transport broke into pieces all around us, and bodies flew everywhere. Then all was black."

"I don't know how long I was unconscious. I woke to the sound of Narpok screaming. My body was a hellish prison of pain, and I couldn't bear to move, yet I looked to see if my beloved had survived. My hand still clasped hers; somehow I had held onto her through it all. She lay on her back on the ground, staring up at the red sky above us. I knew right away she had died. Even in death, with blood masking her face, she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. I hoped I would soon follow her. Life without her was too empty to contemplate."

Michaela was crying, and Jessica brushed tears of her own from her cheeks. It wasn't just his story or the agony on his face that affected her. It brought back her own terrible memory, the one that insisted on invading her dreams.

*The sun had been put out. The black sky pressed down on her, broken shards of it poking into her body. Nearby her sister moaned. Jessica called to her, but she didn't answer except to moan in a weak, grinding tone.*

*Where were Mommy and Daddy? Had the sky fallen down on them too?*

Zarl continued. "I saw Narpok standing near her dead mother. She stared down at the body and screamed nonstop. Her mind was gone."

"The trauma must have been huge," Jessica whispered.

"She recovered after a few months of intensive therapy. She was fortunate Pwaldur had remained on Kalquor. I'm not sure she'd have come back to her senses if she'd lost all her parents."

He grimaced, and Jessica laid her hand on his. "More pain?"

He nodded. "Our speed has changed. Most can't tell on a transport this size, but I always feel it in my bones."

The door chimed. "Enter," Zarl called. Clajak and Korkla, their expressions excited, came into the room.

They bowed to Zarl. Clajak said, "We're approaching Kalquor, my father. May our Mataras join us in the observation room?"

"Of course." Zarl brought his chair several feet up to hover. "I'll come as well."

Clajak took Jessica's hand in his, kissing her knuckles. "Come, my sweet. Come see your new home."

\* \* \* \*

Disapproving lines appeared on Tidro and Yuder's faces when Zarl entered the observation room. No doubt they knew the pain he endured, but they kept quiet. They flanked his hover chair as it carried him past the clusters of seating cushions and tables. He stopped at the bank of windows that lined one wall. Jessica smiled to see his face light up with pleasure at the sight of his beloved home planet. Tidro and Yuder stood on either side of their Dramok. Each rested a hand on his shoulders with the ease of over a century's companionship.

Michaela also stood at the windows surrounded by her clan. Govi and Raxstad flanked her, and Korkla stood behind her, his hands gently rubbing up and down her arms. The four clustered close enough to touch bodies.

Jessica took her place between the two clans. Her men ranged around her as Michaela's clanmates did, and Clajak's arms wrapped around her to draw her against his body. Bevau and Egilka took her hands in theirs.

Green-tinged Kalquor grew until it filled the windows. The sky brightened as they entered the atmosphere. As they left the void of space, the sound of the transport's engines swelled until their low hum filled the room. The light intensified, and Jessica blinked against the growing glare. She refused to close her eyes. She was too eager for her first glimpse of Kalquor's landscape.

Afraid to disturb the anticipatory silence, Egilka leaned close to murmur, "We can darken the windows."

"I'm okay," Jessica whispered back. She willed her eyes to adjust as the first layer of clouds swallowed the transport.

They broke through after only a second, and another layer appeared beneath them. Jessica finally had an idea of the tremendous speed they traveled at as the clouds rushed towards them. Once more, the ship was enveloped in swirling white and gray mistiness.

Suddenly they cleared the clouds, and the Kalquorian landscape curved before her. She and Michaela gasped simultaneously at the sight of the emerald sea below. Beyond the flat expanse of ocean lay a patchwork quilt of colorful countryside. Dark jewel tones of green, blue, yellow and red stretched across the horizon.

As they hurtled ever closer to the surface, details asserted themselves. White-tipped waves appeared on the flat plain of sea. Monolithic rock formations dotted the pearlescent pink sands of the shoreline. Rearing over the pristine beach, jagged silver-gray cliffs stood like inscrutable sentries. Beyond the cliffs, the patchwork backdrop rendered itself into a rainbow-hued forest.

"It's beautiful," Michaela breathed, her voice awed. She sounded as breathless as Jessica felt.

"Is it what you expected?" Clajak asked his Matara.

Jessica shook her head. "I had no idea."

"Welcome home, Princess Jessica," Egilka said. He squeezed her hand.

They swooped close to the tallest cliff, its craggy face pockmarked by holes.

"There is the Royal Home." Bevau pointed at it.

Jessica searched the rocky top, but saw nothing that suggested habitation. "I don't see anything."

A movement in one of the openings in the side of the cliff caught her attention. It took a moment for the transport to come close enough for her to see someone stood there, watching their approach. "You mean the cliff itself? That's where you live?"

Clajak hugged her closer. "Whenever possible, we avoid disturbing our planet's natural landscape. Most Kalquorians live in the mountains, caves and cliffs of our planet."

Jessica swallowed. She was to live in a cliff? She loved nature, but living in a rocky cavern didn't sound comfortable. She glanced at Michaela, who looked concerned as well.

Before she could pursue further thoughts on the subject, the transport flew into a cavernous opening in the cliff. Stark walls surrounded them, the natural stone as polished as any metallic landing hangar. The transport settled to the smooth floor of the cavern. The engines idled, and dropped into silence.

Zarl's sigh rang in the hushed room. "That's better," he breathed.

“You must rest now.” Tidro’s firm tone brooked no argument. He glanced at Clajak. “We will dispense with the formalities of your return.”

“Of course,” the prince said, raising his voice to drown out Zarl’s weak protests. “You know I despise such needless pageantry anyway.”

“His new Matara deserves a proper welcome,” Zarl insisted even as Yuder took control of the hover chair and angled it towards the door. Clajak’s clan followed the emperors as they left the observation room for the corridor, and Korkla’s clan brought up the rear.

Yuder threw a glance back at Jessica. “Indeed she does, but it may be best to let her get settled before subjecting her to an endless round of introductions and interviews. We don’t wish her to become too stressed in her condition.”

Zarl harrumphed but said no more as they wound through the transport. Jessica fought back a grin. Using her ‘delicate condition’ as an excuse would keep Zarl from making a fuss she wanted no part of anyway. For once she welcomed the Kalquorian notion that a pregnant female had to be handled with excessive care.

The group disembarked, and Jessica blinked in the brightness of the docking bay. She stared around the expansive space. Six small shuttle vehicles, no doubt intended for planet-bound transportation, lined up before the larger transport with military precision. “You’d never know we’re in a cliff,” she said, marveling at the thoroughly modern appearance of the hangar.

Clajak and Korkla’s clan stood back, talking quietly amongst themselves. Jessica and Michaela wandered around, looking at the featureless walls from which lights glowed, the assembled Kalquorians lined up like toy soldiers along one wall, and the opening they’d entered the cliff through.

Jessica looked over her shoulder to see the emperors moving towards the wall where the unsmiling formsuited Kalquorians waited, their expressions uniformly fierce. *Nobeks*, Jessica thought. *The Royal Guard, perhaps?* As one, the group bowed low to the Imperial Clan.

A door in the wall slid open, and a Kalquorian in a blue-trimmed formsuit stepped into the room. He too bowed and hurried forward to greet the emperors.

Jessica turned back to the hangar’s cliff-face opening. Michaela had reached the edge, looking out over the windswept beach and emerald sea. Jessica joined her, inhaling deeply of the salty air. “It smells like Florida,” she said, longing touching her voice. She wondered if she would ever see her family again.

“I’ve never lived near the ocean,” Michaela said. “This is beautiful.”

Korkla silently slid to her side, his arm snaking around the dancer’s waist. Jessica was startled to see his and Clajak’s clans had joined them. “The view from our suite is magnificent.”

Clajak glanced back to watch his fathers leave the hangar. The Kalquorian who had been speaking to them was now headed in their direction.

Clajak leaned toward Korkla. “Unless there’s some emergency that requires immediate attention, all matters are to be vid-or audio-relayed.” He gave his aide a wicked grin. “I wish to devote the next couple days—” He paused pointedly. “—acclimating Jessica to her new home.”

“Absolutely, my prince.” Korkla bowed his head slightly, glancing at Jessica’s blushing face. Michaela snickered, and everyone else seemed to be fighting grins. Jessica fumed, glaring at Clajak.

He started away, but Clajak caught him by the arm. “And see to it your clan postpones any non-emergency duties so you may do the same for Michaela.”

Now it was Michaela’s turn to redden as her clan chuckled. Korkla bowed deeply before hurrying to intercept the aide heading towards them. “Thank you, my prince.”

Jessica looked out at the lovely view of the sea lapping at the pearlescent pink beach. The sky was a soft azure with clouds scudding across the horizon. “Do you get severe weather out here?” she asked.

Bevau answered, “Sometimes, but within a cliff storms matter little.”

“I didn’t think of that. I guess there’s no danger of the roof caving in on our heads then.”

She plucked at the long sleeves of her tunic. The interior of the transport had been kept cool, but the warmer Kalquorian weather made her sweat. “It’s hot.”

“It’s summer here,” Egilka replied. His arm stole around her shoulders and he turned her in the opposite direction. The group walked toward the door the emperors had departed through. Korkla waited for them, and the aide he’d been talking to was already gone.

As they reached Michaela’s Dramok, Clajak said, “I trust we may show our Mataras their new home?”

Korkla nodded. “There is nothing pressing to concern ourselves with. I do have good news to share. Councilman Rajhir’s Matara gave birth this morning.” His eyes were wide. “Fine healthy twins; a boy and a girl.”

The men gasped as one, and Jessica was reminded of how Clajak was one of the youngest of his race. A birth of any kind was a big deal on Kalquor; twins were no doubt a miracle.

“How amazing,” Egilka said, his voice hushed in respect. Jessica thought she heard sadness as well. “They’re the first of the hybrids, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Two other women are due this month.”

“Is Amelia well?” Bevau asked. They were nearly to the door, and Jessica was eager to see what lay beyond it.

“Perfectly fine.” Korkla’s smile was huge at the momentous news.

Govi added, “She has Flencik for an Imdiko.”

“You can’t do better,” Egilka said. “I’d like him to attend Jessica’s pregnancy and the birth of our child.”

The door slid open before them. They crowded into a small, dimly lit room, and the door whispered shut behind them. Korkla said to Michaela, “The house conveyance is voice activated. To get to our rooms, simply say ‘Korkla’s living quarters’.”

A low hum sounded, and Jessica felt an almost imperceptible shift beneath her feet.

Korkla continued. “Michaela, we’ll put you in the system as soon as we reach our rooms. You’ll be able to use your own name then.”

“This is like an elevator,” Jessica said to her friend in English.



Clajak rubbed her back. "You can use the house conveyance to access any room you have clearance for. As princess, you have unlimited freedom except for the Imperial Suite. No doubt Zarl will permit you access to his rooms. He's quite taken with you."

Bevau gave her a proud smile. "All the emperors are. They're impressed with how quickly you've picked up our language."

The humming stopped, and the door opened to a small, featureless room, not much different from the conveyance itself. A closed door waited on the other side.

Korkla addressed Clajak. "If you need us for nothing else, my prince?"

Clajak gave him a very Earther wink. It amused Jessica to see him do it. "Enjoy your homecoming. We will meet in two days."

The men of Korkla's clan bowed to Clajak's. Michaela hugged Jessica. "See you later."

Jessica grinned. "Have fun. Behave yourself!"

Govi took the dancer's hand and led her out of the conveyance. Michaela couldn't resist a parting shot. "Make up my mind—which one?" The door closed between them.

"Clajak's suite," the Dramok chuckled. The conveyance hummed again.

"Can Michaela have access to our suite?" Jessica asked.

Egilka answered. "All her clan does. She'll be given the same clearance they possess."

The hum ended, and the door opened to another empty room exactly like the one Michaela's clan had entered. Clajak gave Jessica a gentle push toward it. "Step forward, my sweet."

She did so, looking at the unrelieved blandness of the space. Behind her Clajak commanded, "Scan and identify Matara Jessica, Princess of Kalquor."

A male voice, clicking with electronic precision, answered. "Scan complete. Matara Jessica, Princess of Kalquor logged into system. Warning. There are two Mataras currently with princess level access to heir suite. Princess Jessica has access. Princess designate Narpok has access."

"Noted." Clajak sighed.

Bevau snorted. "Narpok won't easily give up her clearance. We may have to trick her into the removal scan."

"We'll get to that." Clajak stepped close to the suite door and it opened. He executed a courtly bow for Jessica. "Enter, Your Highness."

Her heart thumping with excitement, Jessica stepped into her new home.

## Chapter Fourteen

“Lights, medium,” Clajak called, and the dark room brightened.

Jessica was amazed once again. No hint betrayed she stood inside a rocky cliff. With its golden beige walls and marble floor, the room could have been in an Earth mansion. Amber illumination lit the room from the ceiling overhead.

Polished wood tables and oversized plush seating were arranged in small conversation areas. A thick rug lay in the middle of the room, the Kalquorian seascape woven into its design. An abstract piece of sculpture, made up of delicate twists of polished white stone, took up one corner. A tapestry hung from the longest wall in the room, its subject another woven pink and green seascape.

“This is the greeting room,” Clajak said. “We entertain small parties in here. There is a larger hall for public functions on another level.”

“It’s lovely,” Jessica murmured. She’d only toured such places on Earth. To now live in such luxurious accommodations overwhelmed her. She felt like a peasant in her simple white lace blouse and matching skirt. She cursed herself for not buying more elegant clothing while on Plasius.

Bevau nudged her with a roguish grin. “We’ll have to build a stage in here so you can dance for our guests.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I don’t think so.”

Egilka’s voice was wistful. “Hopefully, there will be many private dances.”

Jessica rolled her eyes in pretend exasperation, but she couldn’t help but giggle.

They took her on a tour, showing her the formal dining area with its fifteen foot-long polished dark wood table (“Again for personal entertaining,” Clajak told her), and the more intimate but no less richly appointed private eating area for the clan. The tiny kitchen, with only a quick-heating surface and cold chamber, was a shock to Jessica.

“The main kitchen is several levels down,” Egilka said. “Relay your requests using this menu list.” He tapped a console set in the wall and a vid screen appeared in mid-air. A list of Kalquorian writing scrolled across the screen. “English,” Egilka said, and Jessica’s familiar language replaced the Kalquorian characters, detailing the phonetic names of dishes with a description of what they contained.

“Since we’ve brought so many Earth women to our planet, you’ll find a few familiar things on the menu. It’s hard to get real Earth ingredients here, but our chefs have made an effort. They’ve replicated several favorites, including from your particular region of Earth, like pikza, hammer burs and spa—” Bevau stumbled over the unfamiliar words, “spa-tegg-lee?”

“Do you mean pizza, hamburgers and spaghetti?” Jessica fought not to laugh.

“I guess.”

“It’s very convenient,” she said, her humor evaporating. She looked around the space with disappointment.

Clajak hugged her. "You are one of those who enjoys cooking for yourself, aren't you?"

She nodded. "I've been thinking it would be fun to learn to make some Kalquorian dishes, and even cook for you three once in awhile."

"Then we'll have a real kitchen put in for you." He guided her out of the room, the other two following.

"Won't that be a big bother?"

"Of course not, if it makes you happy."

The tour continued, with many more rooms than Jessica had seen in any home. There was an immense room for lounging around, one wall completely open to the outside and looking out over the pink beach and ocean. Jessica inhaled deeply of the sea-salt air, once again thinking of her Florida home and wondering how her parents and sister were doing. The bass roar of the sea and hum of the wind outside only added to her momentary twinge of homesickness.

The library was a happy surprise, its computer banks filled with the major writings of every known planet and translated into all languages. The museum-sized art gallery made Jessica gasp. "You've got a copy of Bernini's 'Hades and Persephone'," she exclaimed, looking at the violently passionate sculpture.

"That's not a copy," Egilka said.

She stared at him. "I thought all Earth artwork deemed sinful was destroyed."

"Many of the masters' pieces were smuggled off your planet and placed in the care of the Galactic Council. Several worlds hold them to prevent their destruction, including Kalquor. The Royal House has nearly two dozen Michelangelos, Da Vincis and Rembrandts, among others."

Jessica was moved. "Lindsey would love to see this."

The tour continued. Sumptuous guest accommodations were spacious, each with their own sitting rooms and lavatories. Each clan member had his own office with banks of vids, computer interfaces and equipment Jessica couldn't guess at.

"This is my room," Bevau announced, the door to yet another chamber opening. Jessica stepped in, marveling at the array of weaponry displayed on the walls. Everything from crude stone knives to the latest technology of crowd-control guns had its place. It was a personal armory fit to make any battalion commander jealous.

She wandered around, startled when a thin slice of wall slid out in front of her. Suspended within it were several formsuits and other items of clothing. Bevau growled in frustration.

"That was supposed to be fixed while we were away. Damned thing pops out any time you get near it."

"You have no bed in here," Jessica said. She looked at the seating area with Kalquorian-sized chairs and a table, a long cushioned bench and a vid-screen, but indeed it seemed as though Bevau had nowhere to sleep.

"This is my personal room, not the sleeping room," he explained, slamming his open palm against the edge of the closet. It slid back into the wall with a complaining whine.

"Oh."

Clajak ushered her out into the corridor. "There are several rooms you can choose from for your own personal use. Take as many as you wish."

"Several rooms?" Jessica asked.

Egilka showed her his room, stacks of charts and mad scientist-looking equipment cluttering the many work surfaces. "This whole level belongs to us. I think we only use about half of it."

A despondent expression covered his face as he looked about the room. He picked up a thin leaf of parchment, notes scribbled sloppily on its surface. "I suppose there's no point in keeping these things anymore," he muttered, letting it go to drift lazily to the floor.

"Is all this part of your research?" Jessica asked.

"It was." He turned on his heel and walked out.

They followed him silently to Clajak's room. In contrast to Egilka's clutter, Clajak kept his personal space obsessively neat. Small archeological artifacts from every known culture lined the walls on lighted shelves. Jessica whistled in appreciation of the vast collection and the museum precision in which it was displayed. "This from a man who leaves his dirty formsuits scattered all over the floor," she teased.

A sleek black table with two matching chairs sat in one corner, and an oversized curved Plasian-style lounge was placed on the opposite side of the room.

Clajak frowned at the shelves and adjusted a Guidinion tribal mask made of bone. He moved it a bare fraction of an inch. "Feel free to redecorate the suite however you choose. Our personal rooms are the only ones we prefer you leave untouched. These are our sanctuaries, particularly when we're pissed off at each other."

Jessica didn't think she'd have the courage to tackle anything but her own space. She was still overwhelmed by the overall opulence of the suite. "I can't fill your room with pink ruffles, Clajak?" she pouted as he adjusted a carved wooden piece that looked suspiciously like a Plasian phallus.

He snickered and gave up on his arranging. Leading them out of his room, he said, "That would be better suited to Bevau."

Bevau took a halfhearted swing at his clanmate, nearly connecting with Clajak's smirking face. They stopped at yet another door that opened soundlessly.

"This is the sleeping room," Egilka announced. His grin looked positively evil.

An opening on the far wall led out to a balcony overlooking the sea vista. Golden sunlight filled the room, and Jessica gasped. "Oh my."

Thick reddish-brown furs covered the floor. She stepped on them, and her slipped feet sank down an inch. An immense bed sat squarely in the middle of the room, large enough to easily accommodate two Kalquorian clans. Its surface was cloud billowy, the velvety gold linens on it entreating her to climb on and roll around. The walls and ceiling were lined with mirrors and midnight blue draperies. Jessica could see herself and the men behind her from every possible angle.

"Do you actually get any sleep in here?" she wondered. The room was an invitation to indulge in every sexual pleasure imaginable.

"It helps to be exhausted," Bevau said, his chuckle rumbling through his chest.

"I think we should introduce you to this room properly," Clajak said, pushing her towards the bed. "Music. Mistrieko's 'Ode to the Sweet Arms of Simbertay'."

A melody drifted in the air, weaving itself in the low roar of the surf outside. Jessica saw dozens of Jessicas move towards dozens of beds with an innumerable number of Kalquorians following her. Her reflections all had the same round-eyed expression as she appreciated how small and weak she appeared next to her gargantuan clan.

Egilka said, "Perhaps the fragrance of Plasian flowers Jessica likes so well? It won't possess the aphrodisiacal properties of the real thing, but the association will have an effect just the same."

The aroma Jessica remembered from her stay on Plasius mixed with the sea-salt air. The mixture of the two was oddly familiar. It reminded her of the mingled scents of Kalquorian and Earther arousal, but with sweeter notes.

Her fingers trailed over the soft bedding. The room was a sensual feast unmatched by anything she'd seen, smelled, heard or felt on Plasius.

Clajak's hands reached around her to cup her breasts. She fell against him, her head resting against his chest. Her repeated image greeted her eyes. The men surrounded her, and again she was shaken to see how small she was next to them. She shivered.

Clajak slowly unbuttoned her blouse. In the mirror, his hands were like bear paws. How had she never seen how big the Kalquorians were? She'd never felt so helpless. She'd never been so turned on.

Bevau sat on the edge of the bed and lifted one of her feet to slide a ballet-style slipper off. His wrists were thicker than her ankles. He took her other shoe off the same way.

Egilka knelt on the other side of her to strip her of her skirt. He tugged it down, letting it whisper to the floor.

Clajak finished unbuttoning the blouse. He opened it to reveal her white-lace bra. She was dressed all in white, like a virgin sacrifice. In contrast to the men's black formsuits and dark skin she was the vision of unspoiled purity.

While Clajak unhooked her bra, Bevau pulled her panties off, again lifting her feet one at a time to free her from the fabric. Clajak slipped the bra straps over her arms, leaving her naked.

Their dark hands roamed her body. Her gaze drifted from one reflection to another, seeing how they devoured her with touch. They too watched the seduction in the mirrors, their wet lips parted.

Clajak whispered, "When we are in our suite and no guests are around, I wish you to remain nude. You are too beautiful to be covered." His hands rhythmically squeezed her breasts.

Egilka groaned, his hands rubbing Jessica's buttocks. "I'll get nothing done when I'm home."

"That's the idea," Bevau said, his fingertips tracing through the honey dampening the insides of her thighs.

Jessica said nothing. She was too caught up in her surroundings, in the sensations, to speak.

They laid her on the bed and undressed. She stared up at her reflection on the ceiling, trying to see herself as her mates did.

Her slight body was taut with lithe muscle from dancing. Her breasts were round and firm, the rosy nipples hard from arousal. Her hair was a chestnut cloud, soft waves cradling her head. Between her legs, matching pubic hair curled in a triangle, the lowest point darker from moisture.

The men, gloriously naked, crawled up onto the bed to surround her. Their size compared to hers shocked her anew. Their thighs were bigger around than her waist. She'd had sex with them more times than she could count, yet she felt a stab of fear at the thought of being taken by these behemoths.

She whimpered as their mouths and hands descended upon her. She tried to draw up in a protective ball, but they held her easily, drawing her limbs out so she lay spread-eagled beneath them. Her eyes locked on the mirror overhead, she watched two dark heads and a steel-colored one move over her helpless body. Hot, rough tongues tasted her skin, teeth occasionally nipping the softest, sweetest parts. They feasted on her slowly, relishing every inch of flesh, every drop of moisture she exuded.

Fear gave way to exhilaration. She watched the muscular aliens in the mirrors take the woman, each position they put her in more erotic than the last. The giant Kalquorians covered the tiny female with their bodies, their buttocks flexing as they drove against her. They sat her on their laps, impaling her with themselves. Arms bulged as they lifted her up and down, making her ride them. They flipped her onto her belly on the musk-scented animal skins on the floor, their groins pressing against her buttocks to make the pale mounds rounder, more pleasing to grip. They tossed her back onto the softness of the bed, pinning her to the velvety surface. Male organs as thick as her wrists plunged in and out of tight pink flesh while the woman cried out with a wide-open mouth. Jessica watched the woman's delicate body accept the demands of the impossibly large males who worked and strained against her, watched her clutch the bed linens in white-knuckled fists, watched her body clench in wild abandon as she screamed with pleasure.

She watched it all as sensation blew up every molecule of her own body over and over. She screamed in tandem with the woman in the mirrors, feeding off the luscious vision of her doppelganger's ecstasy.

The sunlight beaming in from the opening in the cliff face shaded from golden to amber to tangerine as the day waned. At last the figures on the bed untangled themselves to lay limp with exhaustion. Looking at the clan in the ceiling mirror, Jessica decided they looked like bodies tossed about by an unkind windstorm. She thought she might never move again.

Their gasps eased. Perspiration dried. The sunlight turned reddish-orange. Shadows stole into the room. The men each placed a hand on Jessica's body. Clajak cupped a shoulder, Bevau touched a calf, and Egilka buried his fingers in her hair. She still couldn't move.

Bevau suddenly sat up, his entire body on alert. He was on his feet facing the closed door without Jessica seeing him move. "Someone is in our suite," he said.

Jessica glanced at Clajak, who shook his head at her. "It's Nobek nature to be on guard. Only those we know and trust have access to our rooms."

She relaxed for a moment then stiffened as the door opened. Her leaden limbs somehow found the strength to cover her breasts and sex as a woman of Amazonian stature strode into the room.

She possessed the Kalquorian coloring and size. In her long, sweeping, sleeveless dress, she managed to look feminine despite her muscular arms and shoulders. Her breasts were large, ripe melons, her waist tiny in comparison. Her dark face might have been pretty if its expression hadn't been twisted in a scowl. She spied Jessica. Her eyes raked over the Earther's body, and she sneered, unimpressed. Jessica snatched some bed linen to cover herself with.

Her voice, despite the growl behind it, was a grating whine. "What is *that* doing in your bed?"

Egilka eyed her from a prone position, not concerned with covering himself or rising. "This is Jessica. Jessica, meet Narpok."

Jessica managed to sit up, keeping herself covered. "You'll excuse me if I don't stand and shake your hand." Next to her, Clajak chuckled and sat up too.

Narpok glared at each man in turn. "It is one thing to have your dalliances, but I will not tolerate playthings in the bed I am to share with you."

Bevau and Egilka looked at Clajak, who sighed and stood. Gorgeous with nudity, he approached Narpok. To Jessica's surprise, Narpok's face twisted in distaste. She backed a step away, averting her gaze to avoid looking at him.

How could she not gape at his beautiful body, at all of them, so stunningly sculpted, Jessica wondered. The woman must be as frigid as most Earther females.

Clajak bowed his head to her in a show of respect and stayed at arm's length. "Narpok, there is no easy way to put this, so I will just tell you—we have made Jessica our Matara."

Narpok kept her eyes averted. "I am not amused, Clajak." As silence lengthened, she finally faced him, her expression unbelieving. As he continued to look at her without speaking, her shock turned to fury. "You don't dare replace me with an Earther!"

Egilka also stood. His expression was the gentlest Jessica had ever seen. "We offer our deepest apologies. Our hearts overcame our promise to you. We cannot clan you."

"Impossible!"

"We hope you will find a clan who will love and cherish—"

"Shut up!" Narpok screamed at him, spittle flying. Her fists clenched in rage. "I was to be Empress! Kalquor cannot be ruled by an insignificant, puritanical Earther slut!"

Jessica couldn't help herself. "How can I be puritanical and a slut at the same time?"

Narpok turned in her direction, her fangs showing. Bevau's voice was a low warning to the irate woman. "Your anger with us is justified, but you will watch how you address Princess Jessica."

“Princess!” Narpok’s grating whine turned into a howl. She launched herself at Jessica.

Bevau caught her in mid-air while Jessica gasped and scrambled backwards on the bed. Narpok turned her fury on the Nobek, her fists beating a wild tattoo against his flesh. She was bigger than Jessica, but in Bevau’s arms the deposed Matara looked like a child having a tantrum.

“My father will not stand for this!” she screamed as she struggled against him. “You won’t get away with stealing what’s rightfully mine!”

Bevau slung her over his shoulder and carried the flailing woman out of the room, Clajak and Egilka following. After a moment, Jessica trotted after them, too curious to dress first.

Cursing, Narpok was carried through the suite to the door leading to the house conveyance. Bevau paused in the entryway and looked at Clajak.

The Dramok nodded. “Scan and delete access to Matara Narpok.”

Narpok looked up and screamed at Clajak, too enraged for words.

The computer-generated voice answered with no inflection. “Scanned and access revoked for Matara Narpok.”

The door opened, and Bevau pushed his former fiancée into the conveyance. The door shut between them, cutting her howls off.

Jessica looked at the claw marks covering the Nobek’s back, and gasped at the even deeper bloody channels sliced into his chest. He looked down at himself and shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

Jessica crossed her arms over her chest and shivered. “I’ve got a feeling this is far from over.”



## Chapter Fifteen

Clajak watched the gallery fill with citizens of Kalquor. Natives of the planet and Earther Mataras crowded the room overlooking the council chamber. The Government House, dug into the cliff next to the Royal House, always bustled with activity, especially when council was in session. Council sessions were open to the public; the Kalquorian code of a candid government was proudly held to. Still, he'd never seen the gallery so populated. Clajak read the excitement of the citizenry even though he stood at the bottom of the chamber on the council floor itself.

"A large crowd this morning," Egilka observed unnecessarily as he also scanned the throng above. When his head turned, his long braid whispered against the purple robe he wore. A muscle jumped in his jaw, the only noticeable sign of nervousness he displayed.

"No doubt to see our conflict with Pwaldur," Clajak said. He looked at the wide steps of the council chamber where a few blue-robed councilmen sat in small groups, their heads close together as they muttered amongst themselves. Pwaldur had yet to put in an appearance.

Zarl reached up from his hover chair to grip Clajak's shoulder, his face uncharacteristically stern. "You will be well-advised to keep your temper," he told his son in a low voice. "Any show of anger will be interpreted as immaturity."

Yuder added, "Don't let Pwaldur provoke you. It will only aid him if he challenges Jessica's status."

Clajak nodded. He also worried about his short temper. Since expelling Narpok from the clan's suite, he'd been psyching himself for the encounter with Pwaldur. He took comfort that staying reasonable would piss off the head councilman to no end.

Of the six royals on the floor, only Bevau seemed at ease. Resplendent in his purple council robe, the handsome Kalquorian smiled, nodded and waved to familiar faces as they walked in. Clajak knew the source of the Nobek's calm: Jessica was nowhere near the council chambers. Whatever Pwaldur said or did to discredit her, she wouldn't bear witness to it.

She'd surprised the clan by being agreeable when they told her she couldn't accompany them to the session. "Yeah, yeah," she griped without heat, her eyes rolling theatrically. "Poor little Jessica is pregnant, mustn't be exposed to any stress, blah, blah, blah. Why don't you just encase me in a box until the baby is born?"

"Because then I couldn't do this," Bevau growled, shoving his face between her legs. Her shrieking giggles quickly became moans as his mouth and tongue feasted on her secret flesh. He'd kept at her until it was time to go. They'd left her limp and smiling on the bed.

Egilka brought Clajak back from the sweet memory. "I'm surprised Pwaldur isn't here already to rally others to his cause."

Yuder snorted. "He's had two days to do that. He'll make a grand entrance when he feels it's most opportune."

Tidro broke his pensive silence to say, "He loves playing to a crowd."

Zarl's eyes lit up as a weary-looking but smiling Kalquorian approached them, stopping to bow deeply. "Rajhir, how good to see you."

"Greetings to you, my emperors, my princes." The newest councilman and first Kalquorian to father children in thirty years straightened, tossing his head a little to fan his shoulder-length hair from his handsome goateed face. He took Zarl's offered hand in both his own.

"And our congratulations to your most fortunate clan," Zarl laughed. "Twins! Such an astounding development!"

Tidro beamed at Rajhir. "How are the babes and your Matara, my friend?"

Clajak had always found Rajhir to be somewhat stuffy in his adherence to duty, but there was nothing aloof in the Dramok's answering grin. "All are quite healthy, thank you." His glance included Clajak's clan in his apparent delight. "My princes, I have heard the glad news you too are expectant fathers. My congratulations on your happiness."

Clajak's heart sank a little. He'd hoped Jessica's pregnancy would be a surprise he could spring on an unsuspecting Pwaldur.

Bevau answered Rajhir's smile with one of his own. "Do you have any advice to share? We have no idea of what to expect."

Rajhir chuckled ruefully. "Sleep now while you can, my dear Prince Bevau. The infants wake every four hours, wailing to be fed."

"Every four hours?" Egilka seemed impressed and daunted all at once.

"I don't see how Earthers do it with only two parents. You wouldn't think such tiny creatures require that much care but—" his eyes went wide to express his shock.

Chuckling, Tidro and Yuder guided Zarl's hover chair toward a two-tiered dais. There eight high-backed thrones waited, four on each tier. The emperors sat above the council on the top tier. Clajak's clan would sit on the lower tier, at eye level with the tallest step on which council members reclined. The heirs' tier jutted farther out, allowing the princes to see and converse with the emperors with little difficulty.

Egilka looked at Rajhir with concern. "We hope Flencik will be able to attend Princess Jessica's pregnancy. He is the best physician on all known worlds."

Rajhir straightened with obvious pride in his Imdiko, the biggest Kalquorian Clajak had ever seen. For all his size however, Flencik was gentle for his species and every bit the accomplished doctor Egilka proclaimed.

"I cannot answer for Flencik, but I know he'll be honored you requested him to be Princess Jessica's physician. I'll have him contact you before the end of the day."

"Thank you," Clajak said. He was warming to the elder Kalquorian enough to venture a question. "Have you had an opportunity to speak with Pwaldur recently?"

Rajhir's eyes were sharp on Clajak, and his tone careful. "I am fortunate to cross his path infrequently."

The knots in Clajak's shoulders eased a little at Rajhir's choice of words. "I'm sure I will know his mind soon enough, but may I ask what you've heard?"

“He will challenge your decision to take an Earther Matara over his daughter.” Rajhir’s face was empty of expression.

“No surprise there,” Egilka muttered. “What is your sense of the Council’s mood?”

The corner of Rajhir’s mouth twitched. “Over half of us have taken Earthers into our clans. We know how enticing they are, my prince. No one faults your decision, especially since most of us have met Narpok.”

“There are still enough councilmen without Earther Mataras to give us a great deal of grief,” Clajak said.

“Many of those not yet blessed as we are, are on the waiting list. I know of very few who would refuse clanning the Earthers if they were available.”

A bell tolled, its tone deep and low. Rajhir bowed to them. “I will take my seat now, my princes. It is not the Council you should fear, but public opinion. Pwaldur is an expert in how to swing the masses who don’t know him as well as we do.”

Rajhir turned. Clajak watched the Kalquorian stride purposefully to the steps, joining a group of councilmen who loudly congratulated the new father as he sat among them.

Clajak followed his own clan to the lower tier of the dais, where he sat in one of the middle thrones. Egilka sat to his left. The center throne on Clajak’s right was empty, with Bevau sitting on its opposite side.

*When this nonsense with Pwaldur is over, my sweet Jessica, you will sit by my side at Council where you belong. Hopefully, we can nip this in the bud today,* Clajak thought.

Everyone settled in for session, the last murmurs of conversation tapering away, the rustle of robes settling into an expectant silence. Clajak’s gaze flicked momentarily to the gallery. Citizens pressed against the balcony, eager to watch the proceedings. Massive floating vids faced the gallery, ready to translate the session in the various languages of the Earther Mataras.

Above and behind him, Emperor Zarl’s voice filled the chamber. “This regular session of the Royal Council will come to order. Time and date will be noted.” Clajak heard the pleasure in the Dramok Emperor’s voice as he continued. “We have already offered our personal congratulations to Councilman Rajhir on the birth of a boy and a girl—”

Cheers erupted, and Clajak couldn’t help but chuckle. Such news indeed warranted interrupting the emperor. No one would take offense at the outburst. Surrounding councilmen pounded Rajhir’s back hard enough to bruise him for weeks. He grinned, cheerfully accepting the accolades due his clan. It had been his clan who’d claimed the first Earther Matara and discovered the reproductive compatibility between the two races. Everyone on Kalquor was far too aware of the specter of extinction that hung over them, and the birth of two healthy children deserved thunderous applause for the next century.

Clajak only hoped the news of Jessica’s pregnancy would be half as well received.

At last the celebration calmed and Zarl was able to continue. "Let us now extend our public congratulations to your clan, Rajhir."

Rajhir rose and bowed to the Royal Family. "Many thanks, my emperors and my princes. I hope we can continue to serve Kalquor so well. My clan will certainly try."

That was greeted with a roar of laughter and more applause as Rajhir sat back down. *I will have to revisit my opinion of that man being too duty-driven*, Clajak thought, clapping with the rest of them. He was discovering he liked Rajhir.

"Now, onto other business," Zarl said, and everyone calmed once more. The atmosphere was still expectant, but much more relaxed. Clajak's nervousness eased.

"Many, if not all of you, have heard the rumor Prince Clajak's clan has taken an Earther Matara themselves. The rumor is true. Not only that, an heir is now expected. We offer our congratulations to them as well—"

"Congratulations indeed," a low, angry voice interrupted, and all heads turned to the source. Pwaldur stood in the doorway of the council chamber, his wide face grave. Over his shoulder, Clajak spied Councilman Wagnox, standing in Pwaldur's shadow as usual.

Pwaldur strode into the room, his blue-robed figure impressive in its strength. Bigger than most Kalquorians, his size leant him the importance he so carefully cultivated. Despite being middle-aged, he showed little of it, his hair still the solid blue-black of his youth. Only the frown lines etched at the corners of his mouth and forehead betrayed his maturity.

Wagnox hurried behind Pwaldur, his expression secretive. Wagnox always looked like he knew something dirty about everyone's mother, Clajak thought, his distaste for the man rising anew. Wagnox showed the years Pwaldur refused to, silver glinting in streaks through his unfashionably short hair. His face was lined almost as heavily as Zarl's despite being fifty years younger.

Pwaldur stood in the center of the council floor as Wagnox took a seat on the lowest step. The head councilman lost no time in addressing the assembled. His voice and expression were polite though he raked the princes with his dark gaze. "How marvelous the royal line is assured, my emperors, though it be watered down with Earther blood."

Yuder's disapproving voice sounded behind Clajak. "And how marvelous the head councilman has deigned to join this session, though he be late."

Pwaldur bowed low before them. "I was unavoidably detained. I have been blessed with a child of my own, as you know, and she is most bereaved by recent happenings. I had to see to her comfort and care before I could think of leaving my home this morning."

*Here we go*, Clajak thought.

"Did Narpok not receive her weekly allotment of jewels and new clothes? Poor child." Yuder was unsympathetic.

There were muffled snickers and Clajak fought to keep his own expression bland.

Pwaldur allowed some anger to creep in around the edges. "Make light of her pain, my emperor, if it pleases you. The fact remains the princes of Kalquor have yet again abandoned their duty to their people."

Clajak leaned forward, arranging his features into a mask of earnest concern. "I am not aware of these neglected duties of which you speak, Head Councilman. I allow we have broken an arranged clanning with your daughter for a woman we deemed more suitable to our needs, a most regrettable circumstance for which we apologize. But I will hear your allegations of my clan's abandonment of Kalquor."

He knew he was opening the door for a great deal of criticism. Clajak also realized his past had to be put to rest in order to continue constructively into the future.

Pwaldur was more than happy to help. Clajak could almost see him mentally rubbing his hands in anticipation of tearing the young prince down. "You are not entirely to blame, my prince," he said reasonably. "In youth men are easily distracted by pleasures and adventure. In the last fifty years you have spent far more time away from Kalquor than on it."

Clajak chuckled with an ease he didn't feel. "Conducting treaties, negotiating trade routes, and shoring up alliances on behalf of Kalquor can hardly be deemed as neglect."

The satisfaction behind Pwaldur's smile let Clajak know the head councilman thought he'd cornered the prince. "Oh, I know you've fit some official duties in between your frolics on Dantovan, Plasius and half a dozen other worlds where the sex is plentiful and women most accommodating."

"I have earned a reputation, haven't I?" Clajak's smile grew as Pwaldur's slipped away. *You self-satisfied gurluck. You didn't expect me to admit to my past without being defensive, did you?* "I have enjoyed myself immensely, often to the great distress of my fathers and clanmates. But at some point even reckless abandon loses its appeal. One looks forward to the challenges he avoided in the past."

Clajak looked away from Pwaldur to address the council. "I am home. My roaming is at an end. Serving my people and assuring their survival has become the adventure, and the joy of a lifetime with the woman I love is the greatest pleasure I can envision."

Pwaldur's hands thudded together in sarcastic applause. "How very moving, my prince. You'll forgive us if we remain skeptical. It is hard to believe a man of your well-publicized appetites is truly ready to settle down with one woman." He turned away to address the council, though his words were still aimed at Clajak. "If this change of heart is valid, it is tragic your clan has turned its collective back on a woman who was promised to you decades ago, a woman who just yesterday was confirmed fertile and able to produce pureblood Kalquorian heirs."

That prompted a swell of muttering from the council and the gallery above. Clajak's guts tightened at his words.

Egilka answered, his voice steady. "Any child Narpok bears is not guaranteed to be fertile itself. The virus damage remains in the genetic structure of every Kalquorian."

Pwaldur turned on the Imdiko, his thick lips curled in a sneer. "Yes my prince, your repeated failures to eradicate the virus damage to our DNA are well known."

Bevau hissed under his breath. Clajak controlled his impulse to defend Egilka, hiding his clenched fists in the folds of his robe.

Egilka's voice betrayed none of the pain Clajak knew he felt. "Indeed, a cure has eluded me, and by command of my emperors, my work to achieve such is at an end. It is time to move on."

"Placing an Earther on the throne can be delayed for at least one more generation though," Pwaldur argued, his voice suggesting he was the most reasonable person on the planet. "If this Jessica McInness is allowed to usurp Narpok's place, our planet will find itself under the rule of half-Earthers sooner rather than later."

Rajhir stood, and all eyes fell on him. "In two hundred years, the majority of Kalquor's population will be mixed blood anyway...if we are fortunate in our breeding efforts. Why should the Royal Family be different? Why should pureblood Kalquorians rule those who are not pureblood Kalquorians?"

Pwaldur's shoulders were stiff at this argument from an unexpected source. "It is not so much a matter of who rules as who is fit to rule. This woman they've brought back has no training. There is far more to being Kalquor's empress than dropping babes!"

His powerful voice rose in righteous anger. "The role of empress is what my daughter has been groomed for her entire life! She is one of us, not an outsider from a backwards society run by religious fanatics. In the future all of Kalquor will be made up of the mixed races, but it is too early to make that transition in the highest role of our empire. We need strong leadership, and Narpok is ready to take on her responsibilities."

He looked up toward the emperors' tier to beseech them, his expression pleading. "My emperors, you cannot hand the empire to a man who has not yet proven his grasp of responsibility, nor to the naïve alien female who's body just happened to quicken to his clan's seed. As an elected representative of your people, I tell you they will not have it! The crown prince's infatuation is no basis for rulership!"

Clajak had been breathing deeply during the head councilman's emotional rant, keeping his heart rate normal. He answered Pwaldur in a reasonable voice. "Princess Jessica has proven herself capable of learning all she needs to know to assume the role of empress. My clan has no doubt she is up to the task."

Pwaldur grinned at Clajak, and the prince felt himself go still. Whatever the head councilman was about to say, he wasn't going to like it. "Then, my prince, you'll have no problem letting her prove her worthiness to this council. Let her speak on her own behalf if you are indeed so convinced of her abilities."

Pwaldur looked up at the hundreds of faces staring down from the gallery. In English he called, "Come down to the council floor my would-be princess and impress us, if you please."

Clajak jerked his gaze up to the gallery, to the pale female faces of the Earthers mixed with the darker ones of Kalquorians. His breath caught to see Jessica and Michaela, their eyes wide with shock at having been discovered.

Bevau cursed under his breath. Beside Clajak, Egilka stiffened.

Pwaldur grinned even wider as he saw the princes' shock. He shook with suppressed laughter. "Novice, show her down," he called to a Kalquorian page. The young man jumped to be addressed and hurried to carry out his orders.

Clajak's stomach churned with anger at and fear for Jessica. Her presence may have changed everything.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica followed the page down the steps from the gallery to the council floor. She felt sick inside.

She and Michaela had snuck into the gallery, sure they could watch the proceedings without anyone being the wiser. With Korkla's clan back to their usual duties, it had been easy for the Earthers to join the crowds streaming to the council session. They planned to return to the Royal House before the midday meal, keeping their foray a secret.

How Pwaldur discovered Jessica's presence, she couldn't imagine. It was enough he had. She was in big trouble with her clan, and not the kind of trouble she'd come to enjoy. No, she had incurred real penalties this time. She'd seen it on the men's thunderous faces when they'd looked up at her in the gallery.

She entered the council chamber, the floor an immense stretch of space. In the center the massive beast Pwaldur waited for her, his eyes bright with anticipation.

He greeted her in her own language with a heartiness that made her feel even more uneasy, if it was possible. "Come my dear and join me. You don't mind speaking to the Council, do you?"

She did mind. She wished she could look to her clan for support, but she was too afraid of what she'd see.

Clajak's voice rang out, his honeyed voice carrying the undercurrent of anger. "Her place is on this dais with her clan. Come sit next to me, Princess Jessica."

"She will not!" Pwaldur roared at the dais, his face reddening. "I challenge her right to take the throne of the heirs!"

Jessica stood frozen, daring to look at Clajak. Her Dramok mate stood before his chair, glaring down at Pwaldur. Egilka and Bevau remained seated, but they too glowered at the head councilman. Jessica swallowed a lump in her throat. Angry as they might be, they were still ready to defend her.

"We have taken her as our Matara. She is our clanmate and mother of our unborn. Your challenge is without merit." Clajak's control over his temper impressed Jessica.

"I am Head Councilman, a representative of the people. In the interests of the common man, I have every right to question her fitness as his ruler." Pwaldur looked up at the emperors and sketched a very slight bow. "It is within my rights, as set down in the laws of Kalquor, my emperors."

Zarl glanced at Jessica, the weariness in his face much too evident for her liking. "Indeed it is, Pwaldur. How do you propose to proceed?"

Pwaldur gave him a smirk that set Jessica's teeth on edge. "First, my emperor, let her have a translator vid. I wish to question her, and I don't want her hiding behind the excuse she can't understand me."

His condescension grated on Jessica's nerves, and she gave in to the flash of temper that drove back some of her fear. "I understand you fine, Head Councilman. A translator is unnecessary."

He started to hear her speak in heavily accented, but grammatically perfect Kalquorian. Whispers erupted among the surprised councilmen.

His eyes narrowed, and she fought down a tiny flare of triumph. She would not underestimate Pwaldur. She would not.

Pwaldur managed to smile at her, the expression never reaching his sharp eyes. "Excellent, little Earther. I am impressed you've made the effort to learn our language. Let the questioning begin then."

Egilka stood with a rustle of his purple robes. He looked up to address Zarl. "I must protest this, my emperors. Jessica is pregnant and should not be exposed to an interrogation."

Tidro nodded. "I agree. Expectant females are never to be stressed for fear of complications."

Pwaldur waved the concerns off. "If she was Kalquorian perhaps that would be true, but Earthers drop babes by the thousands each week." The smile he gave Jessica was more like a sneer, and she stiffened. "Surely such a strong breed feels capable of answering a few simple questions, yes? Or do you think you'll abort on the council chamber floor?"

Which would be worse, Jessica wondered, rising to his bait and letting him ask questions she may not have good answers to...or falling back on the Kalquorian prejudice of female weakness? Even that might give Pwaldur the ammunition he needed to challenge her.

With no good option before her, she returned his hateful smirk. "If I feel a miscarriage coming on, I'll warn you in time to catch it, Head Councilman."

She saw a flash of anger. The council members again whispered amongst themselves, amusement on several faces. Rajhir quirked a half-smile at her, and he inclined his head slightly. The show of support bolstered her confidence, and she looked Pwaldur in the eye.

Behind her, Zarl sounded not quite so tired. "A few questions, then. In deference to Matara Jessica's condition, you will keep your demeanor respectful, Head Councilman."

Pwaldur bowed towards the voice, but his gaze remained riveted on Jessica. "Of course, my emperor. I would not dream of causing her undue stress."

*I just bet you wouldn't*, Jessica thought. She steeled herself for whatever he was up to.

Pwaldur put his hands behind his back, quiet for a moment as if contemplating how to proceed. Jessica wasn't fooled. This man had no doubt planned exactly what he would say in hopes of getting this opportunity. She knew that as certainly as she did her own name.

The first question seemed innocuous enough. "Females on Earth work much as the men do. What form of employment did you engage in on your home planet?"

"I was a nurse."

His eyes widened in pretended surprise. "I thought you were a dancer. Is that not how you met the princes of Kalquor?"



Having lived in a patriarchal society determined to keep women in subservient positions, Jessica knew the trap he hoped to spring on her. "Dancing is a hobby. It's an excellent way to exercise and stay healthy."

"And entice high-ranking men with power and money?"

Jessica smiled sweetly. "Everyone knows Earther women are temptresses well versed in the seduction of men. How could Clajak's clan, so ill-used to the charms of females, possibly resist me?"

Outright guffaws rang out. "Earther temptresses!" someone laughed, tickled at the notion. Rajhir grinned at her over Pwaldur's shoulder. It made Jessica wonder how repressed Amelia had been when she'd met his clan.

Behind her, Zarl didn't sound so amused. "Head Councilman, insinuations of this kind are not going to be tolerated. Your challenge aside, Matara Jessica is at the very least a candidate for Clajak's clan. You will treat her with respect."

"My apologies. No insult was intended." Pwaldur's creased brow smoothed as he took up his line of questioning. "As a nurse, you must feel qualified to care for a child destined to rule an entire people."

Jessica nodded. "I have experience with newborns. Prior to being drafted into the military medical corps I was a nurse specializing in—" she paused, realizing she didn't know the Kalquorian equivalent of 'pediatric'. "I cared for children from newborns to adolescents."

That garnered a few murmurs of approval. The look on Pwaldur's face informed Jessica he hadn't known her pre-military expertise. He quickly changed tactics. "Very nice. Of course you know nothing of royal duties on Kalquor."

"I have begun training with the emperors and my clan. There is still much to learn."

"Indeed there is. What is your perception of what the role of leadership should be?"

Jessica thought about that one, knowing her answer would be scrutinized. "No one has told me the Kalquorian view of leadership, therefore I must go with my own instincts. Anyone in a position of power should serve the best interests of the people to the utmost of their ability."

"So rulers don't rule, they serve?"

Jessica searched for any landmines to his question. In the end, she had to rely again on instinct. "The wellbeing of the masses must always be the priority, so yes, any dictates of a ruler or rulers must serve that goal."

She dared a glance at Rajhir, who gave her a barely perceptible nod. That and Pwaldur's scowl told her she was giving a good accounting of herself thus far. Her shoulders relaxed a bit.

"You were attacked by members of your own race on Plasius, weren't you?"

The sudden change of subject made Jessica blink. "Yes, I was."

"Badly injured, I understand, with the lives of yourself and your unborn in serious jeopardy."

"Yes."

Pwaldur turned from her to face the council. "According to testimony, your attackers had every intention of murdering you and fellow Earther Michael-Michaela Blake. Only through the intervention of the clans of Prince Clajak and Korkla were your lives spared, is that true?"

Rajhir's sharp stare warned Jessica this line of questioning was real trouble. She swallowed. "Without them arriving when they did, we may have been killed."

Pwaldur paced before the rows of councilmen. "You realize the threat of war between Earth and Kalquor?"

"Yes."

"Becoming princess would make you a prime target for assassins."

Jessica couldn't help the tightness of her voice. She saw where he was going, and it was impossible to stop it. "I suppose so."

Pwaldur swung around to face her, his robes spinning dramatically about his large frame. "Forgive me, my dear little girl, but you've already shown you cannot defend yourself against hostile enemies. How do you expect to protect the royal heir?"

Her answer was low, but the acoustics carried her voice through the chamber nonetheless. "I don't have an answer for you."

"I see." He turned back to the council. "Do we leave our future in the weak hands of this so vulnerable creature, someone Earth will no doubt label a traitor and pinpoint as a target?"

The rustle of robes behind her caught Jessica's attention. She looked over her shoulder to see Bevau standing, his expression dangerous. "They'll never get close enough to harm her or our child. You make it sound as if we'd abandon her to defend herself and the babe, which I assure you would never happen."

"Of course you'd never intentionally leave them unprotected, Prince Bevau," Pwaldur answered. "But as commander of our forces, you know better than most how large the Earther army is. Even with our advanced technology, our assured victory won't come easily. Casualties can't be helped, and putting the royal line on the frail shoulders of this woman asks too much."

Bevau snorted. "She is not as weak as you believe. Since the attack on Plasius, I have been training her in self-defense."

"War could break out at any moment," Pwaldur answered. "Why waste time and resources on this one when Narpok is already prepared? You cannot be selfish, my princes. As little Jessica says, we are here to serve the people."

The council began muttering again, and Jessica heard more conversation above in the gallery. Bevau sat, and his worried eyes locked with hers. Even the emperors were exchanging looks of concern. Pwaldur had made his point. The head councilman didn't bother to mask his smug expression.

Suddenly Rajhir stood, and his strong voice carried over the quiet discussions. "If we are indeed here to serve the people of Kalquor, then we should know their will."

As all quieted, Yuder leaned forward. "What do you propose, Councilman Rajhir?"

“Let Narpok present herself for questioning as Jessica has. The people deserve to know if Head Councilman Pwaldur’s daughter is indeed prepared to assume the duties of princess.”

“Of course she is,” Pwaldur growled. “Only the now-answered question of her fertility delayed her ascension.”

Rajhir gave him an unpleasant smile. “The ability to bear children is the most important qualification for the royal Matara. Because Jessica has not only met but manifested her ability to carry royal heirs, Narpok should prove she is the better choice in the other, less significant categories.”

Pwaldur glared. “I know with all my being she is indeed the better of the two.”

Rajhir stepped down to face him on the floor. “But the people, whom you are so anxious to serve, don’t know Narpok. She has not been a public figure they can assess. Let Narpok present herself for questioning.”

Pwaldur’s lips wrinkled back to show his teeth. “She is not here.”

Rajhir didn’t back down at the show of aggression. “Then let her come for next week’s session.” He looked to the dais and the assembled council members. “We will allow both candidates to present their cases for the clan of the crown princes, after which the people of Kalquor will vote on their preference. The majority vote will decide who shall be our future empress.”

Pwaldur stormed up to Jessica, who tensed at his angry approach. “This one has already given an accounting of herself to the Council.” He loomed over her, and from the corner of her eye, Jessica saw both Bevau and Yuder rise from their seats.

“You forget yourself, Head Councilman!” Yuder roared.

Jessica tossed her hair back and glared at Pwaldur. “Back off. This bitch bites,” she warned. She bared her teeth, Kalquorian-style.

His eyes widened at her vehemence. Before he could shake off his surprise, Bevau stood by her side, growling. Pwaldur put his hands up and backed away.

“My apologies. The unfair treatment of my daughter has made me forget myself,” he grumbled.

“I urge you to find your control, esteemed colleague,” Rajhir said, his voice calm. “As for Jessica testifying on her own behalf today, she was not prepared. You must allow her the same opportunity as Narpok to plan her claim.”

Zarl spoke up. “Who on this council is in favor of Rajhir’s proposal?”

Most of the group raised their voices in assent. Only a half dozen called out against it, to Pwaldur’s obvious dismay.

“It is agreed,” Zarl said, his voice solemn. “In one week, Mataras Jessica and Narpok will appear before this council and the people of Kalquor to answer the question of who is to serve as our future empress. The people will vote immediately following their presentation. This session is concluded.”

Jessica looked up at Bevau. “I am so sorry,” she whispered.

He squeezed her shoulder. “Rajhir has saved our clan for a week with his brilliant maneuver, but the people love Pwaldur. If you don’t impress them at the next session, we will all be sorry.”

## Chapter Sixteen

The rest of Jessica's day passed in nightmarish isolation. The clan sent her home under Korkla's supervision. Clajak's aide had been respectful of her, his anger reserved for his own Matara. Michaela exchanged nervous glances with Jessica before the conveyance doors closed between them, leaving Jessica alone in her suite.

The day crept with agonizing slowness as her clanmates stayed away. Jessica fretted. Surely they weren't so mad as to not come home to her! She'd told them she'd only meant to observe the council's session, not get involved.

But the hours crawled by with no sign, no word from her lovers. The longer they stayed away, the more convinced she became that when they did come home, they would toss her out the door and revoke her access. They would deem Narpok, as cold as she was, less trouble to deal with and give Jessica to a clan she didn't love.

Tears flowed, and her sobs rang through the suite. She wandered from room to room, unable to calm down. Against her will, her feet dragged her to the sleeping chamber. Her many reflections looked back at her, their faces tearstained and stricken. The huge bed mocked her, its rumpled linens evidence of what might have been had she heeded her clan's warnings.

She fell on it, and the scents of her beloveds puffed up from the linens. The cinnamon-spicy Kalquorian aroma surrounding her made her cry harder.

The light from outside turned fiery red with the setting of the sun. Shadows crept in long and dark, and still Jessica sobbed, though her tears had all been exhausted. She buried her face in the bed, in the sweet smells of her clan, gripping the bedding in her fists.

A warm hand gripped her shoulder. Clajak's honeyed voice flowed into her ears. "My sweet, tell me you haven't been like this all day."

Jessica launched into his arms and wrapped herself around his strong torso. She clung to him, grinding her face into his neck. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she pleaded, unable to say anything else.

"Let me," Egilka said from behind. Fingers swept her hair to one side, and the twin stabs of fangs buried themselves in the side of her neck. She cried out.

"Hush now," Clajak whispered. He stroked her hair as Egilka held her from behind, injecting her with the intoxicant that would render her helpless.

"Don't throw me out," she begged, fighting the euphoria that crept through her.

"Why would we do that to our Matara?" Bevau asked, his deep voice a quiet rumble.

Egilka withdrew his fangs and licked at the twin streams of blood that tickled down Jessica's neck. The intoxicant spread through her senses, bringing her desire for the men to the fore and dampening the agony she'd drowned in all day.

"I screwed everything up," she mumbled, loosening her death grip on Clajak's shoulders to run her palms over the wide muscles. His formsuit was sleeveless, allowing her to enjoy the smoothness of his skin. Maybe he'd give her a pity fuck before making her leave.

"You had help," he said and kissed her gently. "You're not going anywhere, my little girl. You're staying right here where you belong."

"Where have you been?" she asked, her voice plaintive with dimly remembered fear. Her hands roamed over him, unable to resist touching the body she loved so well.

"Negotiating the terms of next week's session," Egilka said, and she leaned back against his warmth, liking the feel of his solidness behind her. Her beautiful Bevau stood next to her. She reached for him, wanting to take away the grim look so unsuited to his perfect face. He caught her hand to press it to his lips.

"What terms?" she asked, her voice floating like a dream. His answer wasn't important, only the sound of his voice, of any of their voices. She wanted to bury herself in the sight, smell, sound, feel and taste of them. All her senses begged to be filled with them.

"We will discuss it later." His hands snaked around her to cup her breasts. She arched against him with a happy sigh.

"For now, you need to be taken care of," Clajak said, his overbright eyes blinking hard. He leaned in to kiss her again. She had a moment to wonder at the moisture on his cheeks before his tongue swept into her mouth, taking all rational thought away.

They laid her on the bed and stripped her. Their hands and mouths were tender on the flesh they exposed. She thrilled to the feathery strokes of their fingertips, to the liquid trails made by their tongues all over her body. Even Bevau caressed her as if afraid she'd break. She trembled as his soft lips suckled her rosy nipples, drawing them into stiff peaks.

Clajak propped her ankles on one broad shoulder. Her eyes shut in ecstasy as his flesh parted hers. His hips rocked in a slow rhythm. Jessica sighed as warmth tickled through her loins.

Clajak moved one of her ankles to rest on the other shoulder, spreading her open a little. The change in pressure gave her new sensations that left her gasping. Then he moved the second ankle to join its mate, making his penis rub against other parts of her sheath. Jessica warbled a small cry at the delightful feeling.

He continued to move her legs back and forth, one at a time from shoulder to shoulder, his slow rhythm never faltering as he made love to her. Her excitement built as he shifted her, making her feel him rubbing all around the front of her womb. The other two men continued to caress and kiss her body while the Dramok took her. When her climax rolled over her in lingering, mighty waves, Clajak's head fell back, and he groaned long and loud as her sheath milked him. His hands squeezed her ankles in reaction, but he managed to keep the same unhurried rhythm. Once she fell quiet, he kneeled motionless, letting the last pulses of seed leave him before leaning over to kiss her lingeringly.

"I thought you would punish me," she sighed when his mouth left hers. "I know I deserve it."

“From the looks of things when we came in, you have punished yourself enough,” Egilka answered, his hand stroking her hair. “I think now a bath would do us all a world of good. I for one want to wash this day off.”

The other two men murmured assent. Egilka cradled Jessica in his arms and carried her into the adjoining bathing room.

The bathing room was left natural to the cliff it had been cut from, the rocky space an actual cavern. The oval pit carved in the middle of the floor was more a pool than a basin. With a command from Egilka, hot water filled it. He descended the steps cut into the ground into the swirling water. Jessica sighed to feel the water, heavy with minerals, soothe her tense muscles as the Imdiko lowered her in.

The gentleness of the earlier lovemaking carried over into the bathing the men gave Jessica. Their expert fingers kneaded her flesh, melting knots away. The intoxicant still held her under its power, and her sex eagerly responded any time fingers brushed against it.

Once the bathing was done, Bevau hefted himself out of the pool to sit on the edge. Egilka boosted Jessica up so that her torso lay on the Nobek’s thighs. With a happy moan, she took Bevau’s larger sex in her mouth, his smaller in one hand. He stroked her damp hair as she pleased him, raising and lowering her head over his lap.

Her legs trailed in the water behind her. Egilka lifted her buttocks out of the water and positioned himself to enter her from behind. She groaned around Bevau’s penis as the Imdiko slid into her. His smaller organ rubbed delightfully against her pubic swirls.

Clajak kneaded her buttocks with one hand and reached beneath to circle her clitoris as Egilka made love to her. Lightning sparks of pleasure from her bud melded with the heavier pleasure of Egilka’s cock rubbing the nest of nerves in her vagina. She pulled back from Bevau’s organ to cry out her pleasure. She licked the tip of his penis where a drop of sweet moisture beaded. The Nobek’s hand pressed gently on the back of her head, guiding her back down on his shaft. She took all of him, relaxing her throat so he might feel himself buried to the hilt in her warmth.

Another soft, rolling climax threatened, but she fought to keep from succumbing just yet. She wanted to be suspended in time for a bit longer, the sole focus of the three men she loved. The intoxication made it easy to push aside the knowledge she might only have them another week.

Egilka pulled free to reposition so he might enter both her orifices. Jessica moaned in anticipation of the double invasion. He pressed into her, and her body welcomed him by yielding easily. Clajak’s hand stopped kneading her buttocks to spread the mounds apart. She imagined how it must look to him and Egilka, to see the Imdiko’s thick organs disappearing into her tight openings. The thought, along with the sensation of him filling her anus and womb, tipped her over. Bevau’s grip on the back of her head kept his cock in her mouth as she cried out every pulse of pleasure that clenched her tighter around Egilka.

Egilka gasped as he felt her contractions, but he continued to thrust with a methodical pace. Clajak’s fingers never ceased to stroke her engorged clitoris, and yet

another, stronger orgasm wracked her with delightful spasms. Her hands clutched at Bevau's thighs, her nails biting into his flesh.

Egilka let go with a roar, plunging deep into her to set off yet another climax. Bevau let her head go so her unmuffled screams pealed and echoed in the cavernous space.

Egilka barely had time to extract himself from her limp body before Bevau lifted her from the water and slung her over his shoulder. He carried her to the sleeping room.

Instead of laying her on the bed, Bevau put her facedown on a fur rug on the floor. Jessica stirred and tried to raise herself up on all fours. Bevau's weight fell on her, pressing her back down. His teeth, minus the folded fangs, bit down on the back of her neck. He growled, sending vibrations down her spine.

Jessica submitted, letting herself go limp beneath him. His hands clamped around her hips and lifted them. She expected him to be bestial, but other than the grip his teeth had on her neck, he remained as gentle as he'd been all evening. He guided himself to her, entering her with all the care of the most solicitous lover. Rocking his hips slowly, he slipped in and out of her with ease. She sighed into the earthy musk of the fur beneath her.

Her hips lifted to greet a gentle thrust, and his bite tightened as he growled a warning. The tiny bit of pain made her shiver, and she forced herself to stillness. She gripped the fur in her fists, fighting against responding to her body's demands. Bevau's reaction made it clear he wanted complete control. Jessica made herself go soft with submission.

Bevau felt her surrender. He pressed down on her until she laid flat beneath him. He spread his legs around hers and closed them tight. The position narrowed her sheath, and he groaned with the sensation of her so tight around him. Already a snug fit, Jessica's sex was almost unbearably constricting to his aching cock. He worked to push in and out of her hot center, her whimpering gasps a sweet lullaby to his ears. She poured honey all around his driving length. Her buttocks bucked the smallest bit against him, and he growled again. A sob escaped her as she acquiesced, again falling limp beneath him. Her submission brought him closer to the brink of release, and he fought it off. Nothing would hurry him in this sweet, slow possession of the woman he loved. He would make it last as long as his hungers allowed.

Jessica was close to losing control. Bevau's thickness forcing in and out her tight sex drove her crazy. Her body clamored for crescendo, and only a matter of a few more moments would find her tipping over. Just a little closer...just a little closer...almost there...

Her belly filled with heaviness and spilled over, making her quake beneath the snarling man who rode her. The pleasure shot from her womb all the way up to the top of her head, making her scream. Bevau screamed too, his body straining against hers, his sex pulsing liquid warmth deep within her. He ground tight against her, shuddering as pleasure had its way with him. She writhed against the soft fur beneath her, beating small fists into the yielding rug.

Bevau groaned as the last tremors left his body. He kissed the back of her neck where he'd bitten. She sighed, snuggling back into the warmth of the man covering her. His arms tightened around her. He burrowed his face in her hair.

"I love you," he whispered.

Her heart swelled at the words. Bevau was not a man who spoke them lightly.

He picked her up and put her on the bed. He and Clajak snuggled her between themselves. She felt sleep might come if concern would allow it.

Egilka said, "Have you eaten since this morning?"

She blinked at him. "How can I eat at a time like this, when everything I want is on the brink of being snatched away?"

Clajak stroked her thigh. "You need strength. The next ten days are going to be hectic."

"Ten days? Oh, I forgot the Kalquorian week is longer than Earth's." Three extra days. It still wasn't enough.

Egilka left the room, presumably to fetch food. The other two men petted her, and tears threatened as the intoxicant ebbed away. She angrily blinked them back. Now was not the time to give in to grief. She had to find a way to make the situation right.

"What did you mean when you said I had help making such a mess of things?"

Clajak frowned, but his displeasure wasn't aimed at her. "This vote to determine the princess won't completely be based on how you and Narpok present yourselves. A huge factor will be my reputation versus Pwaldur's."

"What, because you slept with a lot of women? Kalquorians aren't prudes. Why would it matter?"

"My sex life isn't so much the issue. Public opinion for several years has been that Zarl is no longer fit to be emperor."

Jessica scowled. "There is nothing wrong with his mind."

Bevau kissed the frown line between her eyebrows. "No one doubts his judgment or intellect. His body is weak however, and it affects the performance of his duties."

"Duties I should have taken on over a decade ago." Clajak sighed and stopped caressing Jessica to rub his eyes. "My fear of assuming the throne drove me to run away all these years. Now my people believe I am neither worthy nor capable of being emperor."

Egilka entered the room bearing a tray of food as Clajak spoke. "The pain of watching your beloved father deteriorate had a lot to do with your actions." He sat on the edge of the bed and beckoned Jessica.

She sat up and slid to his side, settling into the crook of his arm. He fed her the Kalquorian version of a cheeseburger, a tasty concoction with richer flavor than the Earth original. He tore off small bites to pop into her mouth. She'd grown used to the Kalquorians' insistence they feed her when they dined in private. At first she found it odd, but now she enjoyed the intimacy of the practice.

Bevau sat up and pulled Clajak close. When anyone in the clan showed signs of emotional distress, Bevau's Imdiko tendencies took over. Clajak leaned back to rest against his clanmate's broad chest. Bevau wrapped his arms around his leader, who looked more like a lost child than the future Emperor of Kalquor.



Clajak's voice was quiet as he spoke. "I've turned a blind eye to Zarl's growing infirmities. Jessica, if you could have seen him, how strong he was before the accident..."

For a moment he was overcome. His chest hitched, and he bowed his head as he fought to regain control. His steel-colored hair hid his face. Bevau's grip tightened, but he said nothing.

After a moment, Clajak muttered, "I've always thought if only I'd gone with him that day as I was supposed to—"

Bevau cut him off with a firm tone. "You'd be dead. It was a miracle Zarl survived."

Egilka fed Jessica a French fry that tasted remarkably authentic. "These last few years while Clajak chased girls, Pwaldur became a popular advocate of the common Kalquorian. He never misses an opportunity to ingratiate himself to the populace."

"And goes silent when something's controversial enough to hurt his standing," Bevau added.

Jessica's appetite took a nosedive, but Egilka wouldn't let her push the food away. She grudgingly ate what he stuffed in her mouth. She swallowed and said, "It's impossible to win this, isn't it? I'm so stupid."

Clajak raised his tearstained face to look at her. Remarkably, he found a smile. "Not stupid. You're our stubborn beast. We should have known you'd sneak into that session." He pulled free of Bevau.

Bevau eased back, giving Clajak space and sitting closer to Jessica. "Have a little faith in us, my love. We've set in place a huge public relations push to let our people know who you are. You'll be interviewed and tour the planet's seven largest cities this week in preparation for next week's session."

Egilka placed the food tray on the floor, most of its contents consumed. He drew Jessica into his lap. "Councilman Rajhir is negotiating on our behalf with Councilman Wagnox for Pwaldur, ironing out the details of how the session will proceed. Once he's done that, we'll be able to plan your strategy for the session itself."

"Do you think it will help?" Jessica wanted to know. She yawned as exhaustion settled over her. Perhaps she'd be able to sleep after all.

Clajak shrugged. "You're more likeable than Narpok. Be yourself and Kalquorians will respond to you positively."

Jessica didn't realize she was swaying drunkenly until she overbalanced. Egilka's grip kept her from tumbling off his lap onto the floor. "I thought the intoxicant was wearing off," she said, her words slurring.

"It has. I put a sedative prescribed by Imdiko Flencik in your food." Egilka smirked at her outraged expression. "We start early in the morning, so you need to rest."

"What if Narpok wins? You'll have to clan her then, won't you?" What Jessica really wanted to ask was, *What will happen to me?*

"I can't face having Narpok as my Matara." Clajak's voice came from far away. "You have to win this fight, my love."

Jessica tried to answer him. Before she could, her eyes slid shut, releasing her into oblivion.

## Chapter Seventeen

In the suites Narpok shared with Pwaldur, the haughty beauty stepped into a chamber known only to her. Blueprints of the Head Councilman's home showed no hint of the nook. It was no wonder; the pebble-strewn cavity was more of a cramped space between the rooms than a useable area.

Narpok didn't mind the close quarters. She liked how the jagged rock of cliff surrounded her, embracing her in the illusion of safety. No fortress offered better shelter when she needed to hide.

Soft light spilled into the area from a crack halfway up the wall. Narpok slipped to the thin fissure, her bare feet making no sound on the pitted floor. Despite the niche's constant cool temperature, she wore only thin underclothes. The space offered no barrier to noise. Even the barest rustle of loose clothing might give her away.

The space was dank with the heavy smell of minerals left behind by the damp sea air. To Narpok, it was a pleasant scent, a reminder of the days when her mother had led her into the nook. Pwaldur's Matara liked to spy on him, especially when all her clanmates met in his office.

"Always make it your business to know everyone else's," Matara Ladni had advised her daughter. "Our men find it necessary to shield us from fearsome news, but it is more stressful to be left wondering."

Her mother's advice had stayed with her, and more than ever Narpok needed to know what was going on. The hateful Earther Jessica had somehow supplanted her claim on Clajak's clan. The bitch had invaded the Council's session that morning, but no one would tell Narpok what had happened. All she knew was that she now had to face the Council herself and answer questions as to why she was the better choice for Empress.

Omnipotent Pwaldur had been outwitted by an Earther. Narpok herself had to salvage her claim on Prince Clajak's clan. As unappealing as she found the thought of mating with the crown princes, they were her only hope for salvation. She needed to clan them to escape the nightmare her life had become.

Narpok knelt on the cushion she'd left to save her knees from the jagged planes of the floor. From this position, she peered through the crack in the wall.

The lighting panel covering the wall of Pwaldur's home office made her view of the room hazy, like looking through a window smeared with driving rain. Her father's familiar shape was a dark blob hunched over the square of his soft-colored desk. The greenish light of a vid screen lit the contorted smudge of his face. His thick arms moved with slight jerks, telling Narpok he was writing yet another piece of legislation, a letter, or a speech. Perhaps he worked on something to aid her claim on Clajak's clan. She smiled with affection.

A knock sounded in the room, and Pwaldur's head reared up. Narpok watched as three figures came into the room.

“A rather late visit,” her father said, but he sounded pleased. “Come in and we’ll celebrate our delayed victory.”

Narpok’s surge of happiness at his words crashed as Nobek Marzkli’s growling tone answered. “It’s a bit premature, don’t you think?”

Wagnox’s clan. Narpok couldn’t help but cringe. Her hands instinctively covered her breasts and sex. The three men were almost as well respected as her father, and his closest friends. She always made herself scarce when they came to visit, often hiding in this very room...except when she couldn’t, which happened far too often.

Pwaldur rose from behind his desk and lumbered to the cooler where he kept a few bottles of klog. She heard the clink of cups as he prepared drinks for all. “The fight is already won. This vote next week won’t be who the better candidate for Empress is. It will be my popularity against the heirs’. That damned Rajhir has only postponed the inevitable.”

“I hope you’re right,” Wagnox said. His voice sounded weary and his shape sank into the seating cushions arranged in the middle of the room. “The Earther impressed many members of the council before you pointed out how ill-prepared she is to defend her unborn.”

“But she can produce a child,” Imdiko Styty, Narpok’s personal doctor pointed out. “If it comes out Narpok is actually infertile—”

Narpok gasped in shock. The sound might have given her hiding place away if Pwaldur hadn’t spoken at the same moment. “We agreed never to speak on that. We four are the only ones who know she is barren.”

Not fertile! Narpok fell back from the crack, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. They had lied to her! Now she could never be Empress. And that meant the nightmare would continue—

Marzkli, the main villain in Narpok’s personal hell, spoke again. “No one here will do anything to endanger Narpok’s claim on the throne. But while we are on this subject, how do we know Clajak and the others won’t still clan the Earther if Narpok wins?”

“You mean ‘when’ Narpok wins.” Her father’s chuckle gave Narpok hope. He was protecting her as he always did, putting his love for her over his duty to the Crown. She pressed her eye to the crack again to see his frame leaning easily against his desk. “The ridiculous fools probably will clan their little Jessica. Love makes men reckless, especially where Earther women are concerned.”

“Why does that amuse you?”

“Because it will allow me to challenge their right to ascend to the throne. The rest of the council dares not oppose the will of the people, so they will fall in line with my vote of no confidence. We will snatch rulership first from the princes, next from the emperors themselves.”

Wagnox’s laughter gave Narpok chills. “Whatever clan you back will be the next in line, no matter how the emperors may fight it. Brilliant!”

“You become the Imperial Clan when Zarl finally concedes his health, and Narpok takes her rightful place as empress.” Narpok heard the triumph in her father’s voice.

*Oh no. Not clanned to them...not to those monsters! But if I tell Father...if he knew...they'd kill him!*

Marzklis' voice took on the insinuating tone Narpok knew too well. "Did she have a good dinner tonight?"

Pwaldur rose to get himself another cup of kloq. He sounded apologetic. "Not tonight. I was too busy working on her campaign to prepare her drink."

*What does he mean, prepare my drink?* Narpok was mystified.

Stytyn sighed. "I was looking forward to her company. If the princes do clan her, our once a week visits will come to an end."

Narpok went cold. Was the Imdiko talking about the visits his clan made to her room? In front of her father, whom Marzklis promised to kill if she ever breathed a word about their assaults?

Pwaldur threw his head back as he downed his kloq. "Tomorrow, my friends. I will see to it she is incapacitated for your pleasure. And I wouldn't worry about Clajak clanning her; he's far too selfish." The head councilman chuckled. "Won't it be nice when you are the Imperial Clan and can have sex with your Matara any time you wish? I won't have to drug her for you anymore."

Murmurs of laughing agreement greeted his words. Narpok smashed her fists against her mouth to hold in her horrified screams.

## Chapter Eighteen

Jessica stood on the clan's balcony, looking at the pink beach and expansive jewel-green sea. The roar of the surf filled her ears and the tang of salt in the air reminded her of home. She found no comfort in it.

In the sleeping room behind her, she heard Clajak, Bevau and Egilka in earnest conversation. She couldn't make out the words, but no doubt they continued to plot and plan even though time for that had expired.

The week had flown past in a blur of interviews, speeches, coaching and miles of greeting lines. Kalquorians had turned out by the thousands to get a glimpse of the Earther who had lured the crown princes to her bed. She'd been evaluated and picked apart by the media, which in the end agreed Jessica McInness was not such a bad choice for Empress. But it also opined the crown princes were wrong to toss aside Narpok and the promise of a pureblood Kalquorian heir.

As feared, Pwaldur's and Clajak's merits had been debated, and the Crown Prince found wanting. Egilka's failure to salvage a pureblood Kalquorian race was also fodder for discussion, as was Bevau's rare equal mix of Nobek and Imdiko traits. Most agreed that with Pwaldur's guiding hand, Narpok represented the one hope for a capable Kalquorian ruler.

Jessica sighed, physical and emotional exhaustion wearing her to her very soul. The old nightmare of darkness and howling wind haunted her every night, no doubt in response to the stress she felt. It took away desperately needed sleep.

The clan had returned home from their whirlwind tour last night, and a last-minute coaching session with the emperors and Rajhir had ended only an hour ago. Tomorrow was the council session. A decent night's sleep notwithstanding, Jessica was as ready as she would ever be.

She knew she would give a good accounting of herself. She also knew good wouldn't be nearly enough to sway the Kalquorian populace to her side. Barring a miracle, Narpok would emerge the victor.

Accepting the coming defeat, Jessica worried about a great many things. Chief among her concerns was that her clan would keep her as their Matara despite their people's will. She feared such a decision would tear the planet apart.

Clajak's arms circled her body from behind. She leaned back into his strong, warm body and blinked back sudden tears. Egilka and Bevau stepped up to either side, their arms in light contact with her. They too looked out over the ocean. No one spoke, but none of them seemed to share her dread. To her surprise, the expressions on the three men's faces were relaxed for the first time in days. How could they be so calm when the fate of their clan looked so bleak?

*I have to let them go. For the good of Kalquor, I have to walk away when Narpok is voted in. There is no other way.*

Swallowing hard against the lump in her throat, Jessica said, "It's beautiful out here. It's too bad I haven't had the chance to walk on the beach yet."

Clajak released her and took her hand. He tugged her towards the suite. "A walk with you would be very nice. Let's go now."

Egilka took her other hand, and Bevau followed the three to the conveyance.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica took off her ballet-style slippers to dig her toes in the shining pink sand. She gasped to find it soft, like baby powder. It had none of the grit she'd known on Florida's beaches.

Her arms twined in those of Clajak and Egilka, the group walked along the shoreline, the roar of the surf pounding in Jessica's ears. The overhead whir of transport traffic was lost in the sound. She inhaled deeply of the sea-salt air. She let some of her worries be carried away on the breeze, allowing herself to relax for the moment.

"Is it much like your home?" Clajak asked.

"It smells the same," Jessica said. She looked up in the sky, seeing only half a dozen transports shooting below the clouds. "There are no seagulls though." At the men's questioning glances she added, "It's a kind of bird that lives on the shores of Earth. For me, the air seems oddly empty without their cries. I like the sand here though. It's not gritty."

They walked on, the growing silence between them companionable. It was enough to be in each others' presence. Jessica felt as if she had always belonged to the clan. To think tomorrow could end it all...

The cliffs became shorter and shorter, slowly petering out to disappear into the dunes. Here and there, small ridges of rock rose from the sand, like the spine of a partially buried prehistoric beast. The colorful patchwork of forest blanketed the distant landscape.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing at a darker mass rising from the pearlescent gleam of the beach.

Bevau said, "A small cave."

"I used to play in it as a child," Clajak said, a slight smile of happy memories playing over his expression.

"So you still go there?" Jessica teased.

He grinned back and tickled her until she fell on the ground, laughing and struggling. The men helped her to her feet and brushed the powdery sand from her bare limbs and the sheath she wore. They continued on to the cave.

Calling it a cave gave the hollowed rock credit it didn't quite deserve. The shallow space was little more than an indentation. Its ceiling barely stretched tall enough for Jessica to walk upright. She could see to the back of the shadowed interior. A little boy would indeed enjoy such a spot. Looking at her steel-haired, muscular mate, she found it hard to envision Clajak as that boy.

"Watch your heads," Bevau cautioned as everyone ducked to enter.

A glance around satisfied all the exploration required. Clajak said, "My friends and I used this as our *rebecub* lair. We pretended to lie in wait for sea ships, planning our attacks to steal their goods."

“Kalquor had pirates? Earth did too.” Jessica grinned at the similarity. “When my sister and I played, we used sticks to have sword fights. There was a fake pirate ship on the playground across the street from our house.”

“The *rebecub* stalked the ocean a very long time ago, before the technology existed to capture them easily,” Egilka confirmed.

Jessica sat down in the middle of the sand-swept floor. Her hands caressed the powder-soft substance. “It’s cool in here,” she said, enjoying the break from the Kalquorian summer sun.

The men sat around her, their combined body heat chasing some of the chill away. Hands stroked her all over, and she softened to their caresses. Mouths joined the hands, brushing her bare arms, legs and neck with butterfly-soft kisses.

She didn’t want to ruin the moment, especially since she had so little time left with her clan. She was realistic enough to know a talk could no longer be put off. Sighing unhappily, she dove in.

“You have to do what’s right for Kalquor no matter what happens tomorrow. Promise me you’ll—”

Bevau cut her off with a demanding kiss. His rough tongue swept in to twine with hers, and his hands covered her breasts. She moaned into his mouth as he squeezed the pliable mounds.

Clajak and Egilka also increased the intensity of their seduction. The gentle kisses grew passionate, their teeth nipping her soft flesh. Egilka swept the skirt of her sheath up to her waist, growling in appreciation as he discovered she wore no panties. His exploring fingers found her already wet.

Clajak tugged the straps of the sheath down her arms, baring her breasts for Bevau’s busy hands. His tongue licked delicately at the whorls of her ear, his breath raising gooseflesh on her arms.

Bevau released her lips to mouth the line of her jaw. She ached to submit to their lovemaking without another word. She knew better.

“Guys—”

Clajak growled his frustration in her ear. “Stop fretting. We’ll do what we have to.”

“Which is what?” She pushed against them as best she could, knowing full well they would overwhelm her if they chose to. She still had to try.

They drew back, looking at her with indulgent expressions. “We may as well tell her,” Egilka said to the other two. He stroked her cheek as if she was a child. “If you lose tomorrow’s challenge, we will abdicate the throne in favor of the babe you carry. You will remain our Matara, and the royal line will continue.”

Jessica’s mouth dropped open. “You can’t do that. Zarl can’t wait for our child to be old enough to ascend.”

Clajak rubbed her shoulders. “We’ll ask Rajhir’s clan to act as regents. Assuming they accept, they’ll rule until our child and his—or her—clan is old enough to assume the throne.”

Hope flared in Jessica’s heart for an instant. “Is that even possible?”

A brief flash of worry in Bevau's eyes told her the solution wasn't as cut and dry as they were trying to make it sound. "It's only been done once before when an entire Imperial Clan was killed in a Tragoom ambush. Their child, Clajak's great-great-great grandmother, was old enough to take the throne but not fully clanned at the time. Her uncle's clan ruled in her stead."

Clajak added, "She took over the throne two years later after adding the final member of her clan."

"None of you are dead."

Egilka frowned for a moment. "What we plan is unprecedented, but we're not giving you up." His eyes were dark with purpose.

Clajak murmured in her ear, "We love you, you stubborn beast."

"Won't your fathers be heartbroken, Clajak?"

"They know what it is to love a woman beyond reason. They also know the unfathomable pain of losing her. Even if they protest, we can't face our lives without you."

They were ready to give up everything for her. Jessica's voice choked. "I love you too. I would never ask you to do this."

Clajak smiled down on her and brushed at the tears streaming down her cheeks. "That's why we don't mind doing it. If Kalquor votes in favor of Narpok, they'll never know the greatness of the empress they lost."

Bevau wrapped his muscled arms around her, crushing her to his chest. "You are our Matara now and forever."

She buried her face against his warm skin, inhaling his scent as if she could absorb him in her lungs. When the men touched her intimately again, she didn't resist. All her questions, though not her worries, had been put to rest.

Lips, teeth, tongues and hands roamed her body at will. She sighed at the gentle caresses, cried out with passion at the stinging pinches and nips. When Bevau's mouth fed on her Venus mound, she plunged her hands in his long, silky hair, pulling him closer. Egilka and Clajak each bent to a breast, sucking the soft orbs deep into their hungry maws. Bevau left her sex momentarily to lick the inside of one thigh. As if choreographed, the three men's fangs pierced her flesh simultaneously, and she emitted a small scream that echoed in the small cave. She trembled with helpless surrender as the intoxicant entered her bloodstream to weaken her with euphoria.

Bevau returned to consuming the honey pumping from her body. She lay limp in the others' arms as they disengaged their fangs to lick the thin streams of blood running from the pinprick holes. The feeling of wet, scratchy tongues slowly lapping at her flesh made her lower regions clench. She closed her eyes, lost in sensation.

Once she stopped bleeding, Clajak and Egilka ran their tongues over her, finding new erotically-charged areas she'd never suspected. The hollow of her throat was sensitive, as was the inside of her elbows, the underside of her breasts where they joined with her ribcage, the deep dimple of the scar on her chest, and the cup of her navel. They sucked each of her fingers into their mouths, one at a time, and she thrilled at the amazing sensation.



Bevau lifted his face from her sex, his lips glistening from her juices. Two of his fingers dove into her, searching until he found the sensitive spot inside her sheath. His other hand covered her mound and clitoris, rubbing circles with his palm. Jessica arched, crying out as pleasure leapt from his knowing touch. Clajak and Egilka held her convulsing body easily, watching her succumb to their clanmate's seduction with parted mouths and dark eyes. Their fangs had descended once more, their arousal bringing primitive urges to the fore. They looked at her with hunger more animal than intelligent, and a twinge of fear rose through the intoxication to feed her helpless desire. She screamed as orgasm ripped through her.

When the strongest of the spasms had passed, Egilka and Clajak pinned her wrists to the ground. Bevau pressed his slick sexes into Jessica, feeling how her insides still quaked. Her flesh pulled hard against his as fresh spasms took her over. Bevau hovered over her as if ready to perform pushups. He looked at his lovely little Matara stretched beneath him, her pert breasts pointed up, her tight belly convulsing with pleasure, her eager flesh accepting his. As she thrashed helplessly in the throes of pleasure he took her, his hips thrusting hard against her bucking body. His muscles stood out in corded granite as he resisted the urge to grant his own release. It wasn't easy to deny his aching groin. Her ongoing climaxes made her tighter, more pleasing to his livid flesh. The yielding warmth of her womb sucked at his sex like a hungry mouth. His smaller penis dove into the dark sweetness of her nether orifice.

Seeing her powerless against him brought him ever closer to losing control. She would deny him nothing, and for that he would give her everything he could. She was his woman, a fact he'd never felt so keenly until now.

Jessica sobbed like a child, her face rapturous. *I'm doing this to her*, Bevau thought with pride. He was close now, teetering on the brink, but seeing his mate's continued ecstasy helped him hold off a few seconds more. The last few thrusts were beautiful agony for Bevau as the bliss of delayed release became painful. Jessica's head tossed from side to side, her cries birdlike as her voice started to give out.

Bevau gave one last thrust into her enfolding warmth and let go. His seed rushed through his penis like a flood bursting through a dam. He bellowed as ecstasy poured through his loins. He emptied himself into the sweet cup of his beloved's womb in an endless torrent of thick pulses. Strangled cries announced each delicious throb of release. Never had he climaxed so hard or for so long.

At last he was spent, and he gasped in the aftermath. He kissed the entirety of Jessica's elfin face, letting the light touch of his lips convey his gratitude and love. He pulled himself free of her quieting body and moved aside to watch the other two men gift her with more lovemaking.

Jessica watched Bevau lay in the cool sand a few feet away, his face relaxed and smiling. She'd felt his tension, his refusal to give into his body's demands so that he might pleasure her longer. If fate was kind she would spend her entire life with him, with all three. She would endure anything to remain with them, no matter the cost to herself.

Egilka knelt next to her and picked her up so that she straddled his legs. He stared into her eyes as he lifted her higher, up and over his turgid penises. From behind, Clajak pressed against her, and his hands moved beneath her to position the Imdiko so he

entered her sex with both organs. Her head fell back on Clajak's shoulder as Egilka breached her soft flesh, stretching her to her limits with his thick cocks. She moaned as ache and pleasure mixed in a heady combination to leave her wetter than ever.

Egilka cupped her buttocks in his hands and spread them apart. Clajak pressed against her anus. She opened to him, eager to grant his every desire. He groaned softly as he penetrated the tight aperture, and she answered with a moan of her own.

The slight ache of taking her well-endowed lovers into such restricted confines soon disappeared in the rush of desire. As they penetrated more deeply, burying themselves inside her melting core, renewed ecstasy stirred.

Once imbedded within her, Egilka and Clajak paused, letting Jessica feel the steel of their flesh seated within her body. She closed her eyes.

"How do you want us?" Clajak whispered in her ear. The warmth of his breath raised gooseflesh on her arms.

No shame colored her response. "Take me hard. Don't be gentle," she whispered back.

Inside her anus and womb, the two men grew even harder at her words. She smiled in anticipation.

They gave her what she wanted, their thrusts forceful. Her body wasted no time in responding. She gasped as their groins slapped against her, a rhythmic percussion to the dull hum of the ocean waves. Pain, bright and sweet, bloomed into pleasure, and her gasps turned into throatier moans.

Egilka's broad expanse of chest beckoned, and she licked a slow, sinuous line between his pectoral muscles, up the column of his throat. His breath caught and he lowered his face towards hers, allowing her tongue to travel up his chin to his parted lips. Her mouth covered his, and she sucked greedily at his tongue.

Clajak's hands cupped her breasts, easing their bouncing as the men plunged in and out. His thumbs and index fingers pinched the nipples, making her squirm in delight. She dug her fingernails into Egilka's shoulders. He jerked and growled, baring his teeth at her. His hands clenched at her buttocks hard enough to bruise.

She loved his strength, the animal passion in his eyes. She raked her fingernails down his chest, leaving shallow bloody paths on his dark skin.

He howled, thrusting hard enough to lift her high up, nearly pulling her free of Clajak. Before either could recover, Jessica reached down and behind to score the Dramok's thighs as well. She was rewarded with another roar of excitement and another violent thrust, this time from behind.

The men lost all control, battering her nether regions with their sexes. Snarling like beasts, they took her as brutally as she could have wished. Over their explosive animal cries warbled her higher-pitched keen as she rode their furious lovemaking to the precipice of ecstasy.

She flailed between the hard bodies, joyously trapped with no escape from desire, hers and theirs. Her nails raked their bodies wherever she could reach, and they reacted to her animal abandon with ferocity of their own. Tendrils of pain fed into the maelstrom of violent pleasure, bringing her screaming as fast as she could draw breath. Agony and ecstasy were one, and she drowned in the sensation.

Clajak was the first to climax, and he emitted an earth-shattering roar as his orgasm overloaded his senses. His face darted forward, teeth bared. It was Egilka's shoulder he found, and he latched onto the muscle as if he'd rip the Imdiko's flesh from his bones.

Egilka screamed. His penis pulsed hugely within Jessica's sheath, giving up his seed in a surge of desire. His mouth clamped on the side of Clajak's neck, biting back. The group fell over, the men still biting each other as they rutted desperately with Jessica.

She was crushed to the point where it was hard to draw breath. Bevau was suddenly there, yanking at his clan, pulling the bodies apart. "Stop biting each other," he said, his voice amused. "Sex is not worth dying for."

"Speak for yourself," Clajak gasped, coming back to himself. Blood poured from his wound; Egilka was even worse off. "I'd go out a happy man after that."

"Are you all right, Jessica?" Bevau turned his attention to his gasping Matara.

"Amazing," she answered, still glowing from the tremendous orgasm. She was going to hurt pretty soon, but she agreed with Clajak. It had been worth it.

"You're all going to suffer when the endorphins wear off," Bevau snickered. "Get up and get dressed. Egilka, that bite is going to have to be seen by a medic."

The splayed Imdiko groaned. "The doctor can come to me. My damn legs won't work for at least an hour."

"Get up for Jessica then. You don't want your Matara in distress, do you?"

That got both him and Clajak moving. They yanked on the bottoms of their formsuits, letting the tops hang about their waists. Meanwhile Bevau, now fully dressed, slipped Jessica's sheath back on her limp body. She let him, awareness of true physical misery creeping up on her. She whimpered.

"A little pain blocker will put you right," Bevau soothed as he took her in his arms. She snuggled against him. "I'll meet you in our suite," he told his clanmates as he ducked out the cave. In an instant the scenery flew past Jessica in a blur as Bevau sped with his supernatural Kalquorian speed to the Royal House. In no time at all, they were traveling in the conveyance to their suite.

"Bet you won't do that again," Bevau grinned as the door opened to their home.

"Bet I will," she smirked back. "I'll just make sure there's pain blocker near at hand next time."

"In that case, I want to be the next recipient of my little Matara's savagery," he laughed. "What a show you put on!"

She thought, *I hope we have the opportunity, my love. If I don't find a way to win tomorrow's debate, all your plotting may still fail.*

## Chapter Nineteen

Jessica glanced up at the dais where the princes and emperors sat in the council chamber. Her clan quirked small private smiles in her direction, letting her know she'd done well with Wagnox's questions. Clajak even tipped a wink, an expression he'd picked up from her. If she hadn't been so jacked up with nervousness, she might have laughed.

She'd done as well as she thought she would, which wasn't good enough to earn a victory. Now it was Narpok's turn to be questioned by Wagnox.

Narpok wasn't the ferocious Amazon Jessica had encountered before. The Kalquorian female looked almost shrunken behind her podium across the floor from Jessica. If a muscular, six-and-a-half foot Kalquorian could appear like a beaten waif, that waif would be Narpok. Her eyes were downcast, refusing to look up at Wagnox as he approached her. She even seemed to shrink back a little as he neared.

Pwaldur did a good job coaching her, Jessica thought. What overprotective Kalquorian male wouldn't be moved by such a pathetic display?

She looked at the other Kalquorians assembled on the chamber floor. Rajhir was there, awaiting his turn to question the two women. Also on the floor were Govi, for psychological support should the questioning prove too much for either woman; Styryn, Wagnox's Imdiko and Narpok's personal physician; and Imdiko Flencik, Rajhir's clanmate and Jessica's appointed physician.

Her second encounter with Flencik had been a shocker. She'd noticed him briefly before on Plasius but had been too intoxicated from his Nobek's bite to appreciate the colossus. Jessica thought she was used to the monumental size of the Kalquorians, but Flencik was a behemoth even among his own kind. If not for the gentle expression etched on his handsome, clean-shaven face, she'd have run away from him. Fortunately, Kalquor's best doctor was as kind as he was big, and she soon found herself at ease with him.

Wagnox's nasal voice, high-pitched for a Kalquorian, woke Jessica from her reverie as he addressed Narpok. "Unlike Matara Jessica, you are fully trained in unarmed combat as well as fighting with blades. Am I correct, Matara Narpok?"

Narpok nodded, her eyes still focused on the podium surface before her. "Yes."

"And you have won awards in marksmanship with a variety of firearms, including percussive blasters and laser rifles?"

"Yes, I have."

"So you are infinitely better prepared to defend yourself and any children you bear, should unfortunate circumstances dictate such a need." He smiled winningly at the assembled council and the transmitting devices beaming the proceedings to all of Kalquor.

"I suppose." Narpok looked up at Jessica, the distant look in her cat's eyes clearing for the first time that morning. Her stare was sharp, but without rancor. "One must never hesitate if lives are to be saved. Physical and *mental* preparedness are the key."

"Indeed," Wagnox agreed warmly, still smiling at the assembled group.

Narpok continued to stare at Jessica, as if willing her to understand something. Jessica had caught the emphasis her rival had placed on the word 'mental'. Narpok seemed to be trying to convey something in a code Jessica couldn't quite understand.

Wagnox turned back to Narpok, and the Kalquorian female again dropped her eyes. "Let's discuss some of the other training you've undergone to be Empress of Kalquor."

Jessica knew she needed to pay close attention to the debate, but her mind kept returning to the look Narpok had given her and the words she'd used.

*One must never hesitate if lives are to be saved.*

Her gaze had drilled into Jessica's, the strange blankness in her eyes breaking for a moment of clarity.

*Physical and mental preparedness are the key.*

The words spoken with intensity that promised more than the surface meaning. Was she saying Jessica wasn't mentally prepared? No doubt Narpok wanted to intimidate her with head games, maybe even provoke Jessica into an angry response.

Still, Jessica couldn't shake the intuition she'd missed something. Her rival's intense expression hinted of an appeal, not provocation. Was she begging the Earther to give up her claim on Clajak? Why, when the majority of the population sided with Narpok? The Kalquorian had to know the vote favored her.

*Physical and mental preparedness are the key.*

Narpok had stressed mental preparedness, not physical. The Kalquorian had it all over Jessica when it came to brute strength. Instead, she'd seemingly gone out of her way to point out the Earther's lack of intellectual ability. Or maybe she alluded to a psychological deficit, something she believed Jessica lacked to properly protect herself and her unborn.

*I have news for you, big girl. I'd fight to the death to defend my child. Even if I thought all hope was lost, I'd move heaven and earth to save him or her. I'm no weak damsel, waiting for the cavalry to charge in and rescue--*

The answer hit Jessica like a bolt of lightning. She drew up straight behind her podium with a sharp intake of breath.

Rajhir looked at her, his brow creasing. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Govi, Flencik, and her clan do the same. Exquisitely tuned into any stress she might exhibit, the men were poised to stop the proceedings in an instant.

Jessica stared at Narpok in shock. The would-be Empress continued to answer Wagnox's questions, her voice a monotone, her eyes riveted on the podium before her.

*Why does she want me to win?*

Would someone as reputedly self-centered as Narpok really commit the selfless act of granting Clajak's clan the Matara they preferred? Nothing Jessica had heard of her

rival suggested matters of the heart meant much to her, especially when they interfered with what she wanted.

It made no sense.

*Maybe it's not what she intended. Maybe all she wanted was to play head games with you. If so, it just backfired. Take advantage, Jessica, and win your clan.*

Her heart thumping with excitement, Jessica looked at Rajhir, discovering he still watched her carefully. She stared hard into his eyes, and he frowned. Then she looked toward her rival. She switched her gaze to Zarl, whose sharp attention remained on Wagnox's questioning. Back to Narpok. Again at Rajhir.

His frown deepened, and he shook his head slightly. Again she focused on Narpok and Zarl, and then stared at Rajhir again. She willed him to understand the message she was trying to send. *Come on, Rajhir. You're a smart boy. You can put it together.*

Rajhir looked from Narpok to Zarl, Zarl to Narpok, his gaze calculating. His eyes widened an instant before he bent over his computer, whispering a question to the handheld device. He scanned whatever appeared on his monitor and straightened. The corners of his mouth lifted into the slightest of smiles as he glanced at Jessica and gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

She let go of the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Rajhir thought it had a chance.

"Your questions, Councilman Rajhir?" Emperor Zarl sounded tired, almost defeated.

"Thank you, my Emperor." Rajhir stood and walked towards Narpok. She looked up, her eyes distant again as if not really seeing him. "Matara Narpok, you have stated mental as well as physical preparedness are needed to properly defend offspring."

Narpok glanced at Jessica, and the Earther was startled to see relief cross her rival's features. "That is an absolute," Narpok agreed. Her voice was lighter, as if a weight had been lifted from her.

Rajhir swallowed. Jessica knew he found subjecting a woman to emotional anguish unpleasant, even if he disliked her. "Forgive me for bringing up such a painful subject my lady, but you were involved in a serious accident on Joshada some years ago, were you not?"

Pwaldur rose from his seat, his face shading an ominous purple.

"Yes, Councilman Rajhir. All my parents were killed except for Pwaldur who did not accompany us on that trip."

Pwaldur roared fit to shake the chamber. "I must protest this line of questioning!"

Zarl banged his fist on his desk amid the excited mutterings of the council and gallery. "You are out of order, Head Councilman."

Wagnox waved Pwaldur down, rising as he did so. Narpok's father sank back into his seat, his expression furious. Wagnox stepped toward the dais. "My emperor, everyone knows of the unfortunate crash that claimed most of Matara Narpok's family; the same disaster that took your beloved empress and injured you as well. There is no reason to make Narpok suffer through the retelling of the event."

Rajhir snarled, "You made Matara Jessica suffer through a second telling of the attack she endured on Plasius, and she is with child."

Zarl directed his comments to Rajhir. "You may continue your questioning but keep in mind it is a painful subject. Do not tax Narpok unnecessarily."

Rajhir bowed. "I will be as kind as the subject allows." He turned back to Narpok as Wagnox exchanged a glance with Pwaldur and nervously regained his seat. "You were not injured physically yourself, my lady?"

"I was kept safe in the ship's one lifepod, which was jettisoned just before the crash."

Rajhir picked up his computer and studied what was on the monitor. "Your pod landed near where the ship crashed, which was approximately half a mile from an inhabited village on Joshada."

"That's my understanding. I have no memory of anything beyond finding the bodies of my dead family." Grief appeared briefly on her face to be chased away once more by that chilling blankness.

Rajhir addressed the council. "According her physician's report, the shock left Matara Narpok catatonic. Her mind deserted her, so despite being completely unharmed physically, she was incapable of walking the short distance to that town for help." He looked sympathetically at the Kalquorian female. "My apologies once again, Matara Narpok. I have no further questions for you."

He walked over to stand before Jessica. She swallowed hard. *My turn.* Her stomach rolled over.

"Matara Jessica, you have heard Matara Narpok's testimony regarding her inability to care for herself or others in the face of calamity. That puts you on a level playing field where self-preservation is concerned, doesn't it?"

It would be so easy to say yes and let it go, Jessica thought. She wanted to, more than anything. But she still hadn't won. She knew in her heart the vote still belonged to Narpok.

Her clan's strategy to abdicate the throne was a good one, but Jessica knew getting it to work would be yet another uphill battle. If she could be brave, victory could be theirs this very day. But it meant doing as Narpok had. Jessica had to face her own demons and expose the terror that refused to release its claim on her.

*If I can't do it for myself, then I must do it for my clan and our unborn child. I have to relive the nightmare.*

She looked up at the princes, saw the hope in their eyes. She would not let them down. She had survived the actual horror; surely she could face the telling of it.

Squaring her shoulders, she addressed the waiting members of the council, of all Kalquor. "Narpok and I are not on the same level. Emotionally, I am far better prepared for life-threatening emergencies."

That prompted a cascade of shocked whispers in the room. Rajhir's eyes flashed a warning at her. She gave him a small shake of her head and the merest suggestion of a smile. *Trust me.*

"You will, of course, have to explain this confidence of yours," he said.

"I was very young, only five years old when it happened." Her voice caught, and Jessica shuddered. She shut her eyes. "I'm sorry. I've fought so hard to not remember..."

A sob escaped her throat, and silence descended over the chamber. Expectancy settled over her like a thick, smothering blanket. She could feel the eyes of the crowd in the gallery, on the council steps, on the dais watching her struggle for control. The weight of their stares was suffocating.

An arm slipped around her shoulders, and Jessica opened her eyes to see Govi looking down on her. Behind him, Jessica saw her clan lean forward in their seats, concern sharpening their expressions.

Govi whispered, "You don't have to do this."

She took a deep breath. "Yes I do." Seeing his lips tighten, she said, "Please Govi. It's now or never."

He shot an unhappy look at Rajhir, who leaned forward to whisper, "Narpok hasn't lost this yet. Whatever testimony Jessica can manage, we need."

Govi stared down at her, and his grip on her shoulders tightened. "All right. Proceed."

He stepped away, rejoining Flencik near the dais. He nodded to Clajak's clan and whispered with the giant Imdiko briefly.

At Flencik's nod, Rajhir prompted Jessica. "Please tell us your story."

"There was a—" she faltered. "I don't know the word in Kalquorian." In English she said, "Tornado?"

Rajhir glanced up at the translation vid. "Ah, a *braht*," he said. "Our weather controls have prevented such an occurrence in the last fifty years."

Jessica swallowed. A shudder ran the length of her body. No matter what it was called, it meant the same. Death. Destruction. Impenetrable darkness and pain.

Warmth enveloped her white-knuckled hand gripping the edge of the podium. Jessica blinked to see Rajhir's hand covering hers. She looked up into his kind purple-blue eyes. "What happened, Jessica?" he asked quietly.

She took a deep breath. The room was silent, yet behind the hush she heard the remembered voice of the monster, how it screamed like a jet engine and filled her ears until they popped from the pressure.

"My parents had gone to a friend's funeral, leaving my older sister and me with a babysitter. A big storm blew up out of nowhere—"

\* \* \* \*

Five-year old Jessica stood in the doorway between the den and the screened-in back porch watching the storm. Sudden afternoon storms on summer afternoons were the rule in south Florida, but this one was wilder than most. Roiling dark gray clouds blotted out the skies, and the wind whipped the razor-sharp palmettos without mercy. Rain drummed against the roof of the McInness cottage so loud she had to cover her ears. Lightning flashed to the accompaniment of deafening cracks of thunder.

A chill breeze relieved what had been a broiling hot day. Jessica shivered in her thin short-sleeved top and calf-length skirt. It seemed funny that this morning's stifling outfit now left her shivering.



The sea salt scent of the beach, two blocks away, was carried by the gale, and the little girl sniffed deeply. She loved the beach. She wondered what it looked like in the storm.

Behind her the sixteen-year old babysitter Nicole said, "Jessica, come away from there. It's dangerous to be near windows when there's lightning."

Jessica loved Nicole. Not as much as she loved Mommy, Daddy and Lindsey, but she loved her a bunch just the same. Still, the storm held too much fascination to turn away from. "I'm not near the windows." She wasn't. Not really.

"Come into the den. We're going to play Old Maid."

Nicole knew all the good games, the ones Jessica had a chance of winning against her sister Lindsey who was three years older.

Lindsey piped up. "Can we have popcorn?"

"Sure. We'd better make it now though, before the storm knocks the power out."

"Do you think it will?" Her sister's voice rose in excitement.

"It could. This isn't West Palm Beach with underground power conduits, you know." A momentary lull in the downpour allowed Jessica to hear Nicole grumble, "Stupid electricity. Talk about the Dark Ages."

"I'll go find the flashlights!"

"Come in the kitchen with me, Jessica." Nicole's voice faded as she left the room.

Jessica remained rooted to her spot, watching the storm rage. In the distance she heard what sounded like a jet engine slowly approaching. She wondered what it must be like to fly a plane in the middle of such a storm. She bet the pilot was scared. She sure would be. Better to be safe in her house.

The sound grew louder, slowly overcoming the pounding of the rain. Jessica ventured out a little ways onto the porch. She wanted to see if she could spot the plane as it passed overhead. She wouldn't get too close to the screened windows that let the rain whip into the room, building puddles on the tiled floor. Just near enough to spot the plane if it came close.

The sheets of rain pouring down made it difficult to see any details of the darkened sky. Jessica could hear the jet engine coming closer, its roar growing throatier and filling her ears with pressure. She peered up into the shifting mass of gray overhead.

Movement. Not like a flying plane though. She squinted, as if it would help her see through the rain better. What was that coming towards the house?

A flash of lightning burst through the heavens, illuminating everything for an instant. For a moment all was pale except the swirling mass of gray sweeping towards her. Jessica's jaw dropped. She knew what it was, had seen it in her favorite movie dozens of times. She wanted to yell to her sister and Nicole, but she couldn't remember what it was called.

"There's something coming!" she yelled, unable to take her eyes off the amazing sight. How exciting this was! If only she could think of its name.

Nicole called to her from the den. "Jessica, come in here now. I told you it's dangerous."

Jessica watched the wall of swirling black sweep closer still, the sound so loud it hurt her ears. "It's the Wizard of Oz thing. Look!" she shouted.

Nicole came out onto the porch. "What are you talking about? What is that noise?" She had to yell to be heard.

"You can see it when there's lightning." Suddenly the word Jessica had been searching for came. "It's a twister, just like what took Dorothy to Oz."

She felt proud she had remembered before Nicole identified it for her. At that moment lightning blazed again, showing the cyclone in all its glory. The swirling mass loomed over them, its tail not more than two blocks away. Air sucked from Jessica's lungs.

Nicole screamed and snatched the little girl into her arms. "Oh dear God, save us!" Which was funny for her to say since Nicole didn't believe in God. She went to the Buddha meetings with her parents, like all of Mommy and Daddy's friends. She was part of their special secret club that nobody could talk about.

Crushing Jessica to her chest, Nicole bolted into the den, grabbing the gold and green knitted afghan from the sofa as she ran towards the hall. Lindsey was just coming into the room with the flashlight in her hand. Jessica's sister stared to see the babysitter barreling towards her, a now frightened Jessica bouncing in her grip.

"Get in the bathroom, lay down in the tub!" Nicole screamed. Her eyes round, Lindsey turned and ran down the hall to the bathroom the girls shared. The lights flickered and went off. The beam of Lindsey's bobbing flashlight was their only guide.

The roar of the jet engine was everywhere now, the walls of the cottage creaking ominously. Jessica sobbed in fear as Nicole hit the bathroom a moment behind her big sister. The plane must be crashing on their house, Jessica thought. That was the only reason she could think Nicole was screaming in fear. The plane was going to land right on top of them. Terror eclipsed the hope the twister would take her to Oz.

Nicole tossed Jessica into the tub next to her terrified sister. Lindsey immediately wrapped her arms around her, the flashlight illuminating the surrounding lime-green tiles.

"Lie down! Stay under the afghan," Nicole screamed over the din as she tossed the soft cover over them. Sobbing, the girls obeyed. The hard surface beneath Jessica was cold, and Nicole climbing in to crouch over them was welcomed warmth.

"Hold on!"

Nicole's scream was a whisper in the shrieking air. The world quaked and shook all around Jessica, and the wind bellowed with a deafening voice. The dull illumination from the flashlight showed her Lindsey's face; her sister's mouth was stretched wide in an unheard scream. Jessica's straining throat ached with her own terrified cry, but she couldn't hear herself over the maelstrom.

The bathtub they cowered in bucked. The air sucked from Jessica's lungs and her ears popped painfully. Nicole's weight on top of her shifted, and she felt her babysitter scrabble desperately against them for an instant before lifting away. Then the afghan whipped off to disappear into the swirling darkness.

Jessica and Lindsey clutched at each other as their thin bodies became weightless and drifted upward. Jessica squeezed her eyes closed and fought to draw breath into her

starved chest. There was no room for coherent thought in the maw of the screaming, angry beast that ripped her world apart.

Lindsey was pulled away from her, but in her air-starved agony, Jessica barely noticed. The monster—it could only be a monster—bit into the left side of her chest, its fang piercing all the way through to her back. The pain was dull in her oxygen-deprived state.

The air pressure suddenly changed, and her depleted lungs heaved. Jessica had no time to enjoy the breath. Gravity yanked her down to crash face first into the bathtub, landing partly on Lindsey. Then the rest of the world caved in on them. Jessica descended into a darker realm blessedly free of roaring winds.

She awoke minutes later to the sound of pattering rain. Pain burst through her chest in sickening waves. Large fingers poked her back and legs, pinning her down. She loosed a wail, and the agony worsened. Nausea churned in her belly, and she made herself go quiet, though tears dripped down her nose.

Jessica dared to open her eyes and was surprised she could see. The surrounding light was gray, showing her the chipped surface of the bathtub cradling her.

She slowly twisted her head around to see what kind of monster poked her with its sharp claws. She blinked to see no terrible scaly creature crouched over her, licking its dagger teeth in anticipation of eating her up.

Across the edges of the tub, wooden beams tented overhead, supporting pieces of sheetrock that shielded Jessica from the worst of the now softly falling rain. Splintered bits of wood stabbed downward through the structure, harmlessly poking Jessica.

A whimper got her attention, and she turned her head to the other side. Lindsey laid next her, her body a little crumpled heap of spindly arms and legs. Her eyes were closed in a mask of blood. Jessica shifted and cried out as fresh pain exploded in her chest and back. She looked down and nearly fainted to see a thick length of wood emerging from her chest. Blood framed the splintered shaft, spreading across her yellow blouse in a near-perfect circle. She grasped the stake with both hands. Gibbering with panic, she pulled.

It was a mistake. The pain was incredible, and Jessica barely had time to turn away from Lindsey to avoid vomiting on her.

Her stomach heaved for what felt like hours, and pain bloomed anew each time her guts clenched. Her overwrought body finally succumbed to unconsciousness.

When Jessica woke again, the smell of sick surrounded her, but the pain in her chest and back had miraculously ebbed to a dull ache. Fresh wet warmth made the front of her shirt stick to her skin. She carefully raised herself into a crouch and looked at the vomit covering the ruby stain of spreading blood. Between the hole and mess, the blouse was ruined.

Jessica looked at Lindsey. Blood was all over her sister's face, running into her chestnut hair to bunch it into thick clumps. Her eyes remained closed. She had to wake up. She had to take care of Jessica. That's what big sisters did.

Jessica grabbed Lindsey's shoulder to shake her gently. "Lindsey, wake up. I'm hurt Lindsey. Help me."

Her sister didn't respond. Jessica knew Lindsey was bleeding too much and something was really wrong to make her sleep so deeply, but Lindsey was the *oldest*. She was the one Mommy, Daddy and Nicole always told, "Keep an eye on your little sister, Lindsey. You're the big sister, so you've got to look out for her."

It didn't look like Lindsey could look out for anyone. Someone else would have to help Jessica.

"Nicole?" Jessica drew herself up to a sitting position, scraping free of the jagged shards of wood and careful to not use her left arm. Despite shock dulling the worst of the agony, every movement of her left arm sent a fresh bolt through her chest. Even yelling made the pain worse, but she had to let the babysitter know where they were. "Nicole, we're hurt! Help us!"

There was no answer. Jessica craned her neck upward, willing the teenager to appear overhead where the brightening sky showed the storm was passing. All she saw was clouds scudding beyond the splintered confines of their destroyed bathroom.

Jessica almost had room to stand. She climbed to her feet, pushing aside a thick beam with difficulty. Only using one arm made things hard. Finally it shifted, and she rose on trembling legs. Her head hung down, and she gasped from the exertion.

When she caught her breath again, she raised her face to the gray sky. The surface of the world outside was just above her head. "Help! Nicole, where are you? Nicole!"

When her babysitter still didn't answer, Jessica began to cry in earnest. Was no one going to save her and Lindsey? Where was Nicole? Where were Mommy and Daddy? Had the plane crashed into them too?

"Don't be silly. The plane couldn't crash here and at the church," she hiccupped, imitating the tone Lindsey used when she was exasperated with Jessica. Jessica hated it when Lindsey acted superior, but hearing anything of her big sister, even coming from her own mouth, helped her feel better right now.

Mommy and Daddy were at Miss Patty's funeral. Miss Patty had also been in the secret Buddha club, but they had to pretend she believed in God and the Holy Trinity of Jesus, Mohammed and Moses. People who didn't believe went to jail. So Miss Patty's official funeral was at the government-sanctioned church where Jessica's family went three times a week as required by law.

Jessica knew where church was, knew it was a long way to walk, but Lindsey was hurt really bad and Nicole had disappeared. It would be up to her to get her parents so they could go to the doctor.

Holding onto the shifting boards overhead with her good arm, Jessica stepped up on the rim of the bathtub. She could finally see outside, and pieces of their pretty little cottage scattered as far as the eye could see. Jessica saw their refrigerator lying on its side nearby, its formerly blameless white surface pockmarked with dents. The rest was just so much rubble.

Jessica realized the only way to climb out meant she'd have to use both arms. She sobbed anew, afraid of the pain.

But she was on her own, and big sister or not, Lindsey needed Jessica to look out for her. Jessica thought Lindsey might die like Miss Patty had. That her sister, who

knew all the best jokes and sometimes let Jessica play with her dollhouse, would have to have a funeral in a church they didn't believe in. That they might put Lindsey in a hole in the ground with a stone marker bearing her name. If those things happened, it would be Jessica's fault.

Gritting her teeth, Jessica planted both palms on the debris-strewn ground. Scrunching her face up in anticipation, she jumped and levered herself up.

The wood skewering her chest caught and dragged against the edge of the rubble pile. Jessica shrieked as pain ripped through her upper torso. Fresh blood oozed warmth down her chest and belly. Her elbows threatened to buckle as she struggled to scrabble out of the bathtub, but she somehow forced her arms to hold her.

Jessica gained freedom and fell on her side. Broken shards of glass and splintered wood dug into the exposed flesh of her cheek, arm and leg. The last few drops of the dying storm splashed down on her. She barely noticed in the agony of her chest and back.

After a few endless moments of hell, the pain eased enough for Jessica to sit up. She blinked at the alien landscape that surrounded her.

It was as if a bad-tempered giant had stomped on the little cottage, ground it under his foot, and kicked the pieces around, scattering them like so many toothpicks. So complete was the devastation that nothing besides the tipped-over refrigerator and the half-buried bathtub were identifiable.

Jessica looked for the airplane she'd heard, still unaware the massive roar had been the tornado itself. She saw no plane, but a path of churned-up earth cut across the landscape beyond the remains of her house, disappearing into the next block over.

She picked her way carefully over the shifting pile of debris toward the street that ran in front of the property. She ground her teeth in pain. Every move brought fresh waves of agony, and tears flowed unchecked down her grimy cheeks. The stave of wood jutted before her like a javelin ready to joust.

Jessica felt sure a board sticking out of her chest qualified as one of those lie-down-and-rest times. Whenever she got sick, Mommy always made her lie down to rest. Grownups seemed to think lying down to rest made things better, but being stuck in bed with no distractions only made Jessica more aware of discomfort.

There was no bed to lie down and rest on. She couldn't do that anyway. It was now her job to look after Lindsey. She had to find Mommy and Daddy.

Hers was the last house on the street. On her left, the road ended at a long, private pathway cut into a thick stand of palm trees. The path, never used by the electric-run cars prevalent in Jessica's neighborhood, led to a country club. Nice hover shuttles passed through several times a day. Nicole said the club was for local government officials, the lowest tier of the upper class. She called them 'Wannabees', men who aspired to reach the loftier auspices of West Palm Beach with its mansions and servants.

The country club's path had a sign at the entrance. Jessica, who already knew how to read, saw the sign hung askew from its post. 'Private For Members Only—Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted' it proclaimed in red letters. Jessica wasn't a member. She couldn't go in there, but Mommy and Daddy weren't playing golf with the Wannabees. They were at church.

Across the street was the neighborhood playground. It had been untouched by the storm, and Jessica was glad to see the wooden playcenter, shaped like a pirate ship, was still there along with the swings and teeter-totters.

She turned right towards the other houses on her street. She stopped short to see her next door neighbor's house. Mrs. Goodall, the widowed teacher who lived there, was away for the summer, staying with her mother in North Carolina. Jessica's parents had been keeping an eye on her house while she was out of town.

Half the house was gone. Jessica looked into the guts of the dining and living rooms and a hallway that led into the still intact portion of Mrs. Goodall's home.

Her surprise was only temporary. Shock dulled the horror of the destruction around her, and Jessica started walking down the street. Even seeing the untouched part of the neighborhood, so startlingly normal compared to the destroyed landscape she staggered through, excited only mild curiosity.

Figures approached from the unaffected houses. Mr. and Mrs. Lanier, the retired couple two houses up, were joined by Joe and Ian Hunt, the 13-year old twins from near the end of the block.

No sign of Mommy and Daddy though. Jessica wished their little electric car would appear.

A woman screamed. It was Mrs. Lanier, her hands clapped to her plump cheeks in cartoonish horror as she stared at Jessica. Mr. Lanier broke into a run, his spare body still in good shape from the endless hours he spent landscaping his lawn. As Jessica crossed the line between destruction and the normal world, he reached her, the twins right behind him. He bent over her, his strong chocolate-brown arm circling her waist.

"Call for an ambulance," he called to his wife, who scrabbled in her pocket for her cell phone.

"It's okay, sweetheart. Let's get you where you can lie down and rest," he soothed Jessica, keeping pace as she walked past the owl-eyed twins, their sun-bleached hair standing up in spikes on top of their heads.

Mr. Lanier was a very nice man, though not part of the secret Buddha club. He thanked Jesus, Mohammed and Moses for everything, including the tomatoes he shared with her family. He grew his own in a little garden in his back yard, and Mr. Lanier's tomatoes tasted better than anything available at the grocery store.

Not wanting to be rude to her kind neighbor, Jessica used her best manners. "I gotta go get Mommy and Daddy. Please excuse me, but it's an emergency."

Mrs. Lanier joined them, yelling at her phone to call emergency services. She smelled like fresh-baked cookies. "The child's out of her head," she whispered loudly to her husband as she waited to be connected. Then she yelled on the phone. "Hello, emergency? I need you on Camden Drive right away. A tornado just tore through here, and I got a little girl with a board sticking out of her chest!"

"Hold up, child," Mr. Lanier's grip on Jessica tightened, stopping her. "We'll find your parents for you. You're hurt and you need to wait for the doctors."

"Yes, she's alive. She's walking around covered in blood."

Jessica sighed at the delay. Exhaustion dragged at her, and she still had so far to go. She made herself be patient with Mr. Lanier. "Lindsey's in the bathtub. She's hurt

and I can't wake her up. Mommy's got to take her to the doctor so she won't die and be buried like Miss Patty."

His head jerked up to look towards the ruin of Jessica's home. "Oh help us Jesus, Mohammed and Moses."

"Don't tell me to calm down! This baby's got a two-by-four sticking out of her chest! Get someone here NOW!"

Mr. Lanier knelt before Jessica. He gripped her shoulders and made her look him in the eye. "Sweetheart, think hard for me. Who else was in the house with you?"

"Nicole was babysitting us, but she went away. I think the plane hit her."

Mr. Lanier let her go and snagged the gawking twins by their arms as he hurried toward the zone of destruction. "Joe, Ian, you boys come with me. There's two more girls in there! But be careful, I don't want anybody else hurt. Jesus, Mohammed and Moses, keep us safe!"

Without him restraining her, Jessica was free to find her parents. Her head hung wearily, and she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Apparently done with yelling at the emergency operator, Mrs. Lanier took Jessica's right hand in her soft brown paw. The smell of cookies washed over Jessica again. She loved Mrs. Lanier's cookies, especially her peanut butter chocolate chip ones, but for some reason the sweet scent nauseated her today. She wanted to get away from her grandmotherly neighbor, but Mrs. Lanier was tugging her towards her pretty yellow house.

"Come in here with me sweetheart. You can lie down and rest in my house while we wait for the EMT's."

Jessica pulled against the woman. Why didn't she understand Lindsey needed help right away? "I got to get Mommy and Daddy. I got to take care of Lindsey."

"We'll call your parents when we get inside, okay? You can talk to them on the vid. Mr. Lanier and the Hunt boys are going to help Lindsey. See?"

Jessica turned around, realizing that maybe she didn't have to walk all the way to church to find her parents. Seeing her neighbors crawling over the rubble gave her a surge of hope, but...

"They're looking in the wrong places. You call Mommy and Daddy. I have to show Mr. Lanier where to find Lindsey." Jessica jerked away, and her sneakers slapped against the wet pavement as she ran back.

"Jessica, come back!"

But Jessica had to help Lindsey. She ran back, the pain in her chest unimportant in her determination to do her duty.

"Lindsey! It's okay! I'm coming!"

\* \* \* \*

"...I could have waited for rescue as Narpok did," Jessica told Rajhir and the assembled council. Her eyes streamed with silent tears. Clajak could see her shaking from his seat, and it took every ounce of self control to not run to her side.

"I was just a child and badly injured. I had no training in survival. Yet despite this—" she yanked the neckline of her dress aside to show the puckered scar from her impaling, "—and my lack of preparation for such a situation, I went for help, not just for

myself but for my beloved sister as well. If I hadn't, Lindsey would have been just as dead as Nicole, whose body they found half a mile away."

Clajak swallowed against the heaviness in his throat. To think of what his Matara had suffered at such a young age broke his heart, even as he swelled with pride to know her strength.

The helpless agony in her face let him know better than anything how much she still suffered. Her eyes were far away, seeing a horror he couldn't imagine. With a catch in her voice, Jessica said, "They barely got Lindsey into surgery in time to save her. It was so close—in only a matter of minutes, it would have been too late..."

Her voice ended in a wail, and harsh sobs burst from her lungs. Her legs buckled. Even as he jumped from the dais, Egilka and Bevau at his side, Clajak saw Rajhir catch Jessica before she hit the floor. The clan surrounded her less than a second later. Rajhir immediately transferred the agonized woman to them.

Govi and Flencik gently moved Egilka and Clajak aside so they could attend Jessica. They left her in the arms of the protective Bevau, knowing separating the Nobek from his suffering mate could invite injuries.

Govi spoke soothingly. "It's all right, Jessica. Lindsey survived. You saved her, you did a good job."

Flencik prepared a sedative. "How much, Govi?"

Jessica's choking sobs continued unabated. Her hands covered her face, as if she could hide from the overwhelming terror of the trauma she'd suffered. She shook violently in Bevau's grip.

Govi gave up trying to comfort her. "Put her completely under. She's too overwrought to calm now." He turned toward the silently watching emperors. "Matara Jessica must be excused from further testimony."

Wagnox protested, "I haven't had my opportunity to question her."

Clajak whirled to snarl a warning at the councilman, and he heard his anger echoed by his clanmates, Rajhir, and several other councilmembers. Growls sounded from the gallery where spectators watched. Over the sound, Flencik's voice was firm. "She is done, Wagnox."

Zarl spoke up. "Indeed she is. For the protection of mother and child, the debate is over."

Seconds after Flencik's injection, Jessica faded into blessed unconsciousness. Clajak prayed she wouldn't dream. He brushed his fingertips across her cheeks, trying to erase the tracks her tears had left in her light makeup.

Govi and Flencik stepped away, quietly conversing between themselves. A heavy hand fell on Clajak's shoulder, and he looked up to see Rajhir looking down on him. The usually stern Kalquorian looked as distressed as Clajak felt. "I am sorry I put her through that."

"She volunteered it," Clajak said. "It wasn't your fault."

"If it's any consolation, she may have very well won the vote." Rajhir's gaze darted to Jessica's face, still drawn despite her senseless state. "I hope her honesty was worth the pain."



Behind them, Zarl's voice was heavy with emotion. "The people of Kalquor will now vote for their future empress based on the testimony given."

"My emperor, may I speak?"

Clajak's head snapped around at the sound of Narpok's voice. She had come out from behind her podium, standing in the center of the council floor. She still displayed no sign of her usual haughty demeanor, a strange blankness hovering at the edges of her expression.

Rajhir was quick to say, "Matara Narpok completed her testimony, my emperor."

Zarl considered, his face worried as he regarded Narpok. He sighed heavily. "No doubt the people of Kalquor will want to know what she has to say. Go ahead, Matara Narpok."

Narpok's mouth opened and shut. Confusion crossed her face for a moment, as if she'd forgotten what she wished to disclose. She looked around, her gaze roaming over Clajak, Rajhir, and finally Egilka and Bevau tightly embracing Jessica. Her expression cleared. She turned back toward the dais.

"I retract my bid for the throne. I concede my claim on Prince Clajak's clan to the Earther Jessica McInness."

Shocked exclamations burst from the councilmen and the spectators in the gallery above. Clajak gawked at the Kalquorian female in shock.

Pwaldur was at Narpok's side in an instant, his face belligerent as he grasped her arm. "I object! Narpok is upset by the strain of these proceedings! She doesn't know what she is saying!"

Wagnox and Stytyr hurried to the father and daughter, also reaching for Narpok. She bared her fangs at them, her face bestial.

"Don't touch me, gurlucks!" she screamed.

Gasps rang out among the assembled. Wagnox and Stytyr fell back, fear in their exchanged glances. Narpok hissed at her father, wrenching herself free from his grip. She ran to the dais.

"My emperors, I beg your protection from my father Pwaldur and Wagnox's clan. I don't care if you lock me in a detention cell or send me to another planet. Please, keep them away from me!"

Yuder jumped to his feet, motioning to the royal guards. Five grim-faced Nobeks, moving faster than the eyes could fathom, arranged themselves in a line between Narpok and the three elder Kalquorians.

Pwaldur was beside himself with rage. "This is ridiculous! Narpok is my daughter, my life! My emperors, she has obviously lost her senses and needs the help of her physician."

Narpok turned to stare at him through the protective barrier of the royal guards. The fury in her face disappeared in an expression of horror. "I know what you've done," she whispered loud enough to echo in the silent council chamber. "*I know what you've done.*"

As Clajak stared in shock, he watched something in Narpok's eyes break. The void that had hinted at the edges of her demeanor throughout the entire session swept

over her visage, leaving her face blank. She stood as stiff and unfeeling as a block of wood, the steady rise and fall of her chest the only sign of life in her body.

“Narpok?” Pwaldur’s anger fled before his uncertainty. He took a step toward her, but the growls of the royal guard stopped him.

Govi hurried to Narpok’s side, his arm circling her shoulders. He turned her to face him. Her movements were stiff, and the empty expression of her slack face never changed.

Govi’s voice filled with grief. “Her mind is gone. I must take her to the clinic immediately for treatment.”

“Go,” Tidro answered for the emperors. “Take both these women out of here and give them all they need to recover.”

“I’m going with Narpok,” Pwaldur insisted.

“You are staying here and explaining why your daughter wants our protection from you and your friends,” Zarl commanded, his voice ominous. “If you have done something harmful to a female—”

The room erupted in shouts, the loudest of which was Pwaldur’s as he rushed the guards to get to Narpok. The Nobek guards easily held him back as Govi picked up the stricken woman and carried her out of the chamber.

Howling Kalquorians burst onto the council floor. Clajak watched the gallery above empty of men. The angry citizens stampeded into the room, intent on cornering Pwaldur and his cronies. Royal guards fought to control the crowd.

“Get Princess Jessica out of here, my princes,” Rajhir ordered Clajak’s clan. “You too, Flencik. This could turn into a riot.”

Bevau rose from the floor with Jessica in his arms. He waded through the shouting councilmen and spectators filling the floor. More royal guardsmen burst into the room, quickly setting up a perimeter to contain the flailing mass.

Clajak grabbed Flencik and Egilka’s arms and pulled them after Bevau. He saw royal guardsmen hustle Tidro and Zarl out, and he breathed a small sigh of relief to see two of his fathers safe.

They hurried out of the chamber as Yuder, surrounded by guards and yelling for order, beat on his desk with thunderous blows.

## Chapter Twenty

Jessica came out of her stupor with difficulty. Her whole body seemed to be made of lead, lying heavily in billowy softness. Even her eyelids felt weighted, refusing to open.

A sea-scented breeze wafted over her skin, letting her know she was naked. Gentle fingertips traced the contours of her body. Despite her lethargy, her spirit lifted at the familiar caresses. Clajak, Bevau and Egilka were next to her.

She stopped her silent struggle to open her eyes, enjoying the men stroking her prone body. They touched her everywhere. Occasionally lips and tongues joined their explorations, wetting sensitive flesh. Warm honey flowed from Jessica's sex.

Someone inhaled deeply. Bevau said, "She's responding. She'll wake soon."

Strong hands slid beneath her thighs, pulling them slightly apart. Fingers probed the moist crevice of her sex, slipping against her sensitive pink pearl. She moaned faintly, still unable to move.

"No nightmares this time, only sweet dreams," Clajak whispered in her ear. The fingers delighting her sex were replaced by lips and tongue. The uncompromising strength of the tasting told her it was Bevau who feasted upon her eager flesh. She moaned again as his tongue dove into her core.

The other two continued to stroke and kiss her everywhere else. The roughness of their tongues and the warmth of their hands ignited all her senses. Still she couldn't move, and the now-familiar excitement of being so vulnerable to the dominating Kalquorians added to her pleasure. It was almost as good as when they tied her up.

Bevau sucked and licked as if determined to consume every last drop of sweetness her sex provided. He occasionally responded to her growing whimpers and moans with a growl, much like an animal enjoying the warm feast of a fresh kill. The scent of cinnamon grew heavy in the air, fighting with the sea salt for dominance.

"I cannot wait for her to wake," Bevau said, the words garbled because even as he spoke he continued to pleasure her with his tongue.

"Take her then. She will not mind." Egilka sounded sure of her, and she was glad. Her body begged to be filled.

Bevau's mouth ceased its sweet torture, and he spread her legs farther apart to accommodate his large frame. She sighed her gratitude as his wet sexes pierced her. He slipped his entire length inside and paused.

She relished the sensation of him seated within her body, spreading the walls of her vagina and anus wide with his thicknesses. Apparently he enjoyed it too, because he stayed still for several moments. Clajak and Egilka lay on either side of her, stroking up and down her torso.

"Feel good?" Egilka teased.

"I could stay here all day," Bevau answered. "If there's anything better, I can't imagine it."

Jessica wanted to agree, and she muttered thickly, her words incomprehensible even to her own ears.

Masculine chuckles answered her. "I think she likes it too. Are you waking, my sweet?" Clajak asked.

Again she tried to answer, and again her mouth wouldn't quite cooperate. Bevau shifted, giving her a stab of pleasure.

"Allow me to wake you properly, my little Jessica," he said, moving slowly, so slowly to make her catch her breath.

He drew back until only the tips of his organs remained within her. Then he pressed back in little by little, taking his time. She felt every delicious inch of him invading her womb and warbled her approval.

"You should see how happy you look," Bevau whispered as he continued his leisurely lovemaking. "To know I am the cause of this is greater pleasure than the feeling of your body encasing mine."

She wanted to see him rising and falling over her. Her eyelids fluttered as she struggled to open them. For an instant she succeeded. A thrill shot through her as the faces of her beloveds came into brief focus, looking down at her with gentle smiles. Then her heavy eyes slammed shut again, leaving her in darkness with Bevau's hard strength moving in and out as unhurriedly as before.

"She's coming out of it," Clajak said. His mouth covered hers, kissing her with a thoroughness that spiked her desire. Her sex spasmed, and Bevau caught his breath.

"Don't do that again unless you want me to lose control," he groaned. "I'm already on the verge."

"I wonder what happens if I do this?" Egilka said, mischief in his voice. The warmth of his tongue swirled around the nipple of Jessica's breast, followed by his teeth closing over the tip with a gentle nip. She cried out, her insides clenching around Bevau harder than before.

The Nobek snarled a curse, his hips losing their easy rhythm with a hard jerk. "Stop it!"

"She really enjoys it when we do this to her," Clajak laughed. He pinched the nipple closest to him with one hand while delivering a stinging slap to the other. Pleasure mixed with pain, Jessica's favorite vice, sent her womb into convulsions.

Bevau's control slipped free, and he plunged in and out of her as passion had its way with him. Jessica's spasms grew with the onslaught, and she screamed in unison with him as both tipped over their breaking points.

Bevau's body covered hers, and he groaned in her ear as his sex pulsed. "You heartless bastards," he whispered to the uncontained amusement of his clanmates.

"Nobeks are so easy," Clajak laughed. Jessica heard the thumps of him repeatedly clapping Bevau on the back.

"Worse than adolescents," Egilka agreed, chortling. "Just a little warmth, and the animal takes over. Where's that Imdiko control of yours, Bevau?"

"It's what's keeping me from beating you to death right now," he mumbled back. He sounded thoroughly disgusted.

Jessica opened her eyes. Clajak's merriment softened as he saw her looking at him over Bevau's shoulder. "Hello, my sweet. How do you feel?"

Bevau sat up, any anger he might have felt towards his clanmates gone with her waking. Egilka crowded close.

Jessica had a hard time putting words together. "My head's all fuzzy. I can't move," she finally managed.

Egilka stroked her hair. "You were heavily sedated. It will wear off in a little while."

Sedated? Jessica was confused for an instant, and then she remembered the debate in the council chambers. A wave of embarrassment washed over her as she recalled her hysterical grief. Damn it, of all the times to lose control!

Fear helped clear some of the fog cloaking her brain. Wondering how badly she'd damaged her case she asked, "Is the vote in yet? What happened?"

Clajak soothed her with shushing noises. "Narpok ceded the throne to you." "What?" She fought to understand.

Bevau nodded. "She withdrew her petition to join our clan just before she had a complete emotional breakdown."

Jessica still couldn't comprehend what they were saying. "Go slow. A bunch of brain cells are still snoozing."

They told her about Narpok's surprising reversal and her plea for protection. "The local branch of Global Security is trying to track down Pwaldur and Wagnox's clan. They disappeared in the confusion after Narpok's collapse."

Jessica was stunned at the news of Narpok's mental state. "What do you think happened to her?"

Clajak shook his head, his expression grim. "It's impossible to tell without her being able to answer questions."

Bevau's demeanor was forbidding. "Interrogation might yield results once we have her father and his friends in custody. Tissue samples reveal she's been drugged on a regular basis for some time with a compound that induces temporary paralysis."

Jessica found she could move her limbs a little. She reached for Clajak's hand, and he enfolded hers in it. "Will she recover from her breakdown?"

"There's no way of knowing that," Egilka answered. "We hope so. There are a lot of questions that need to be answered."

Clajak took up the tale. "It was also discovered she's infertile, so Stytn has to answer for falsifying her medical reports. Narpok has no claim to be Empress."

Understanding dawned on Jessica, but she was almost too afraid to hope. "Are you saying—"

Clajak's grin split his dark face. "You are our official Matara and future Empress of Kalquor."

Jessica screamed for joy. "We're really safe? Really, truly?"

"The fight is over, my love," Egilka confirmed. Happiness suffused his usually too-serious face. "You're stuck with us, and Clajak is stuck with being an emperor."

They all laughed. "It's not such an overwhelming prospect anymore, especially with the Matara of my choice next to me," Clajak snorted.

"But we never would have wished the pain Narpok is in on her," Bevau added. Jessica saw anger lurking at the edges of his relief.

"So the question of who Kalquor wanted never went to the people," she said to divert him.

Egilka grinned. "Everything was so chaotic after the session no one thought to cancel the vote."

Clajak echoed the Imdiko's delight with a smile of his own. "You won by a large margin, my sweet. Your story of how you saved yourself and your sister was probably enough to sway the majority. Narpok's reaction to Pwaldur and her collapse only added to the victory."

Egilka became serious again. "Govi wants to help you cope better with the trauma you suffered as a result of the tornado. He has an excellent record treating our Earthers."

Jessica felt herself flush with humiliation. "Won't that hurt our standing with the people? What will they think if their empress-to-be is so weak that she can't handle a few nightmares?"

Clajak's gaze was steady on her. "No one would ever perceive you as weak after hearing your story. You've proven yourself to all."

"Especially us," Bevau said. "There's no reason for you to suffer through the nightmares anymore. Govi will show you how to overcome them."

"Do I get a say in this?" Jessica pouted.

"Only if you agree to it," Clajak growled. He kissed her, the embrace demanding. Her arms, still feeble from the sedative, circled his neck limply. He noted her weak grip and mused, "Having you defenseless has its appeal. What can I do with this sweet, vulnerable body right now?"

Seeing him hard and ready gave Jessica gooseflesh. "Are you big, strong men going to take advantage of this poor helpless little girl?"

"Absolutely," Clajak said. Bevau moved aside to let the steel-haired Kalquorian cover her body with his own. Jessica moaned as he eased himself into her tight sheath. "My Dramok," she whispered, tasting the words now that they were true.

"My Matara," he answered, thrusting against her. His hands cupped her face possessively, and he stared into her eyes while he took what was at last rightfully his.

Her legs wanted to wrap around his waist, but they only twitched in the aftermath of the sedative. Powerless, she lay beneath Clajak, feeling his strength as he worked her to his satisfaction.

"Nothing you can do," he whispered, his smile dangerous and his eyes dark. He knew her desire to be dominated, just as she knew his eagerness for her submission. "You belong to me, my sweet. Now and forever."

"Yes," she moaned. "Oh yes."

He leaned back to kneel, his hands gripping the backs of her knees. He angled her legs up, so that his sex rubbed the sensitive spot that drove her wild. She cried out as he

drove against her, mercilessly pushing her vulnerable body to dizzying heights of pleasure.

Egilka and Bevau bent over her, their mouths voracious on her flesh. Helpless, she could only shudder as the men took all they wanted from her.

Where one orgasm ended and the next began, she couldn't tell. Clajak gave her no respite. He stroked in and out of her, his thrusts unerringly finding the bundle of nerves in her sheath over and over. She sobbed in agonized joy. Her sex clenched at her lover until he at last gave himself over to his own needs, his scream echoing off the mirrored walls.

"What do you want from her Egilka?" Bevau whispered once Clajak's release finished and he collapsed over her. "She's yours to do with as you wish."

The Imdiko's teeth flashed in a fierce smile. Jessica shivered. "Whatever happened to those manacles we held you with when we clanned you?"

Bevau laughed out loud. "I kept them as souvenirs. Just a moment."

He left the room in a blur of movement. Clajak chuckled, his breath warm in Jessica's ear. "This will be fun to watch."

She shifted slightly under him, feeling her limbs coming back to life. Not that it mattered if they shackled her. She warmed with anticipation.

Bevau reappeared, four thick metal cuffs in his hands. Despite Jessica's lack of resistance, Clajak and Egilka held her as he snapped them around her wrists and ankles, adjusting the girth of each so she couldn't slip out.

No chains were required. "Manacles, calculate prisoner size and elevate two feet from ground, vertical X-formation." Egilka's voice sounded breathless.

Jessica gasped as the cuffs levitated, carrying her with them. A few moments later, she hovered upright over the bed, arms and legs spread-eagled.

"Oh shit," she whispered in English, tugging experimentally against the shackles. Neither her arms nor her legs budged.

Egilka grinned and knelt before her. His face was level with her sex. "Perfect," he growled and shoved his face against her mound.

Jessica moaned as he fed from her. His tongue plunged deep inside, massaging her softest flesh with driving thrusts. His hands kneaded her buttocks with bruising force. She trembled to be held open for his attack, unable to defend herself in any way.

When he rose to stand before her, adjusting the height the manacles held her at, Jessica whimpered to see the cruel smile on his face. He took her hard, the forceful thrusts like Bevau's vigorous style of lovemaking.

Egilka swept her hair back and pulled her head to one side, exposing the long line of her neck. He opened his mouth wide, and his fangs descended.

Jessica sobbed in mingled fear and arousal as his face drifted down to her vulnerable neck. The sharp tips of his fangs touched her skin. Even as he pounded his groin against hers in a relentless tattoo, he bit down slowly, making her feel the agony of penetration.

Orgasm exploded, making her jerk in the bonds that kept her spread wide. She cried out, shuddering as euphoria coursed through her body. Egilka held her tight against

his thrusting body, slowly withdrawing his fangs. His tongue laved the side of her neck, licking the blood that pulsed from the punctures.

His mouth covered the wounds, and he sucked hard, feeding on her like a vampire. Jessica groaned anew, another climax building as Egilka's brutal thrusts lost rhythm. He growled, muscles tensing. His grip tightened, crushing her against himself.

Egilka's head fell back, Jessica's blood staining his lips a shocking ruby as he howled. His sex pulsed, exchanging his semen for the blood he'd taken. Her sheath devoured his offering.

After the several minutes it took them to quiet, Jessica looked at her other clanmates. Clajak and Bevau grinned, delighted with the show they'd watched.

"Imagine having both of them doing that to you for three days," Bevau laughed. "Can you blame me for giving in?"

Egilka pulled free of her, his angular features softened by a smile. "It's just as fun now as it was then."

A moment later, Jessica was sitting on the bed, and the men removed the cuffs. When Clajak and Egilka moved to give them back to Bevau, Jessica snatched them away.

"These aren't going back into his private room," she grinned. "They can stay right here from now on, near at hand."



## Chapter Twenty-One

The shrieking blast of a siren tore Jessica from the blackness of sleep. Light blazed from the ceiling of the sleeping room, blinding her. The warm bodies of her clan disappeared from her side in an instant.

“Alarm off, lights half dim!” Egilka bellowed, and the claxon cut out. Jessica’s ears rang as she opened her eyes.

The Kalquorians were already dressed in their formsuits. Before she could say a word, they ran from the room.

“What the hell?” Jessica spluttered, rolling out of bed. She ran to her still undecorated private room and snagged a shift out of the closet. She tugged it on over her head. Sliding on her favorite ballet-style slippers, she hurried out of the room.

Excited voices led her to the greeting room where her clan surrounded Korkla. The color had drained from the aide’s face, leaving his skin with a grayish tint.

Clajak turned to her as she entered, and he rushed over to grab her hand. Tugging her to the conveyance he said, “Good, you’re dressed. Your nursing skills may be required.”

Everyone crowded into the conveyance, and Bevau barked, “Shuttle bay.” Gravity shifted as the conveyance rushed to obey.

“What is going on?” Jessica said. The grim fierceness in the faces surrounding her made her heart race.

Korkla said, “Emperor Zarl has been attacked at his council offices. The reports say he’s in poor condition. That’s all the information I have right now.”

The conveyance door opened onto the shuttle bay, and further conversation was impossible as Jessica was sped to the clan’s personal shuttle. Before she was properly seated, the craft lifted into the air and sped into the night.

Korkla piloted. Seated next to Jessica, Clajak shook, his expression a mask of fury. Across from him, Bevau’s eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling with deep breaths. Jessica saw his muscles tense and relax, tense and relax. She realized the Nobek steadied himself, clearing his head for whatever action awaited him.

Egilka sat next to him, his expression grim. Of the three men he seemed the most approachable.

“Who would do such a thing?” Jessica asked.

The Imdiko shook his head. “Zarl is well-loved by our people. This is unthinkable.”

“You don’t think an Earther—”

“Absolutely not,” Bevau said, his eyes opening. “You are the only Earther with the security clearance to enter his office at the Government House.”

The shuttle already approached the Government House. Moments later they landed in the bay. The instant the door opened, Bevau, Clajak and Korkla were gone, moving faster than Jessica's eyes could follow.

Egilka took her hand, and they hurried together down a long winding hall. Royal guards and members of Global Security swarmed the place, taking only a moment to sketch quick bows as they passed.

Her Imdiko mate pulled her into a doorway where voices spoke in quiet tones. Jessica's gaze went to Clajak and Bevau, conversing intently with Yuder, Korkla, Raxstad and another Nobek wearing the sleeveless red-trimmed formsuit of Global Security.

Jessica's breath caught for a moment as the Nobek darted a quick glance at her entrance. He was the first Kalquorian she'd ever met, Rajhir and Flencik's ferocious clanmate Breft.

The memory of the predatory Kalquorian biting into her throat, leaving her to grovel helplessly at his feet, made her shiver. Breft had given her that first breathless experience of fear mixed with desire. She'd have given herself to him back on Plasius had he wanted her, had his heart not already been taken by Amelia Ryan.

"Over here," Egilka said, tugging her deeper into the room. At the sight of Zarl's broken body on the floor, all thoughts of Nobek Breft left her consciousness.

The Emperor's limbs jutted at wrong angles from his body. Blood pooled beneath his twisted frame. His face, so dear to Jessica, was twisted in a paroxysm of pain. He lay still.

Flencik knelt next to him, a case of medical instruments yawning wide open nearby. The Imdiko worked fast, his jaw set in a grim line. From her work as a nurse, Jessica knew the look. She'd seen that same expression on the faces of doctors who knew the fight was lost but couldn't bear to give up yet. Her heart plunged.

Tidro stood over his fallen clanmate, wringing his hands. He looked up as Jessica and Egilka approached, and an explanation spilled from his lips even before they asked.

"He slept all afternoon, exhausted from this morning's session. I didn't want him to come here, but he couldn't sleep tonight, and he wanted to get some work done."

Flencik glanced up at them. "I'm glad you two are here. The medical shuttle is on its way, but I need more hands right now."

Jessica and Egilka knelt at Zarl's side. "Tell me what you need," Jessica said.

"A miracle," Flencik muttered. He handed her a monitor with two flat lines tracing across it. "He's got no pulse or respiration. Tell me the instant anything changes. My prince, inject a tab of stimulant into his heart."

As Egilka hurried to obey, Flencik pried open Zarl's mouth. The physician fed a long tube into his throat and attached a cylinder to it. With a flick of a button, the cylinder hummed. Zarl's chest rose and fell as the machine fed him breath.

From Jessica's position, she could see the huddled Kalquorians at the other end of the room. She strained to hear their conversation.

Breft's tenor reached her ears. "A maintenance supervisor reported seeing a man in the building matching Nobek Marzklis' description. In the Royal Guard's search for him, they discovered Emperor Zarl."

Jessica's eyes widened. Wagnox's Nobek was behind the attack?

Bevau asked, "What about security monitoring?"

Raxstad answered. "The system went into complete failure an hour ago, moments before Marzklis' presence was reported. It's still down. The malfunction has been untraceable."

Watching Flencik as he injected something into Zarl, Egilka whispered, "Won't the cell regenerator take too long to be any good?"

"To bring him back to life, yes. I'm starting regeneration of the damaged organs to keep him alive should death release him."

"Still no pulse," Jessica reported. "How long before it's too late?"

Flencik swallowed. "He's dead, my princess. I'm making sure there's no attempt left untried."

Jessica fought off tears with grim professionalism. One did not fall apart while still attending the patient. Emotion was for later.

Breft was saying, "Marzklis is an infiltration specialist. He's an expert in disarming security and communication systems."

Bevau's voice was cold. "If it's only been an hour, he hasn't gotten far. I'd like to join the search."

"My prince, your assistance would be most welcome. I know your field is large-scale battle, but your reputation as a tracker and hunter is well known."

Clajak's voice shook with anger. "I'm coming too. I want to be there when you catch the gurluck."

"No Clajak," Yuder said firmly. "Zarl's clan is broken and unable to continue in our duties. You must assume the responsibilities of the Dramok Emperor. We step down in your clan's favor."

Jessica's shock at the rapidly unfolding events was interrupted as the monitor gave a weak pinging sound. A small spike appeared on the otherwise flat line of the heart monitor's readout.

"I've got something!" she said, her hands gripping the machine hard. *Come on, my father. Come back to us.*

Another spike appeared, quickly followed by another. There was a space of a few seconds before it happened again. "Intermittent heartbeat," she reported. "He's not done yet!"

"Another tab of stimulant," Flencik ordered Egilka, who wasted no time injecting Zarl.

Jessica stared at the monitor, willing the spikes to continue. "Pulse is weak, but steady. Involuntary contractions of the lungs between forced respirations. He's trying to breathe on his own."

Flencik shut off the cylinder and disconnected it. Zarl's chest rose and fell slightly as he took shallow breaths.

Egilka ran a medical scanner over the emperor's torso. "I'm reading internal bleeding now that his heart's beating again."

The arrival of four Kalquorians with a hover stretcher allowed Jessica to relax a little. She and Egilka moved aside to let the medics assist Flencik. From the corner of

her eye, she saw Bevau, Raxstad and Breft leave the room, presumably to commence searching for Marzklis.

Flencik lost no time barking orders. "Continuous flow of stimulant. Pinpoint areas of internal bleeding and cut off blood flow to the affected regions. Cryofreeze where you can. Tell the medical center I want a cryo chamber ready for the emperor the instant we get there. Once he's completely frozen, we'll operate."

The medics moved quickly to follow his directions, and in no time they had Zarl on the stretcher. With Flencik accompanying them, the medics whisked the injured man from the room.

Egilka took Jessica's hand again. He addressed the silently waiting Clajak, Korkla and Yuder. "We'll go to the medical center and await word on the Emperor's condition."

Tidro added, "I will go with them."

Yuder said, "Wait a moment. Royal Guard!"

Six Nobeks appeared at his call. They stood at attention, awaiting orders.

Yuder told them, "The crown has passed from the clan of Zarl to the clan of Clajak. Accompany Emperor Egilka, Empress Jessica, and the Imperial Father Tidro to the medical center."

"Yes, Imperial Father Yuder," the guards intoned in unison. They turned their attention to Egilka.

Jessica looked at Clajak, who met her gaze. If he was the least bit reluctant to assume his duties, he didn't show it. Despite his deadly serious expression, his left eye closed in a wink. Jessica took a deep breath and managed a small nod. She was Kalquor's empress now. She must be strong too.

"Keep me informed as to the Imperial Father's condition. I will be stationed at an emergency command post in Global Security headquarters," he said to them.

"You will know all news as we receive it," Egilka answered. He looked at Jessica. "Come, my Empress."

Feeling unreal but determined not to show it, Jessica left with him, Tidro, and a complement of guards.

\* \* \* \*

Jessica stared unseeing at the news vid in the medical center's waiting room. It was the same thing over and over anyway; Emperor Zarl had been attacked, Dramoks Pwaldur and Wagnox, Imdiko Stytyr, and Nobek Marzklis were being sought for questioning, Zarl's clan had abdicated the throne in favor of Clajak's clan, and speculation ran amok that Zarl had died from his injuries. Egilka had muted the vid hours ago to everyone's relief.

The former emperor had been in surgery for hours. Jessica, Egilka and Tidro relaxed in the waiting area as best they could. Conversation had faded away until they all sat silently in the bland, utilitarian room and waited for the news of whether or not Zarl lived.

Near the doorway, the six royal guards stood watch, their eyes ceaselessly watchful. Jessica was impressed with how they never shifted positions, never spoke,

never dropped their guard. Despite the hours that turned night into morning, they remained as vigilant as the moment they'd taken up their posts.

Jessica fought off a yawn, afraid a show of tiredness would be bad morale for everyone else. She shifted in her seat, and Egilka reached for her hand. His fingers twined with hers, and they exchanged supportive smiles. She leaned over to lay her head on his shoulder. He kissed the top of her head.

The guards, already standing ramrod straight, managed to stand even straighter, their eyes intent on the hallway beyond the door. Jessica sat up. A heavy tread approached.

"Imdiko Flencik approaches, my emperor and empress," the captain of the guards announced.

Jessica, Egilka and Tidro stood. Seeing the worry on the white-haired Kalquorian's face, Jessica took his hand. He managed a smile for her.

Flencik entered the room, his posture stooped with exhaustion. A younger medic followed at his heels. Before the physician could speak, Tidro asked, "Zarl?"

Flencik smiled, and Jessica's chest loosened. "He lives, Imperial Father."

Tidro's eyes closed, and he sagged for an instant as if his legs would go out beneath him. He stood up straight again and looked at Flencik, an ocean of gratitude in his expression. "Thank you," he whispered. "May I see him?"

Flencik nodded. "The medic will take you. Let me caution you, the Imperial Father Zarl will not wake for many days. He'll remain sedated for the worst of the healing."

"What is his prognosis?"

"It's too soon to tell." Flencik looked at each of them in turn. "I am certain he should never reclaim the responsibilities of the throne."

Tidro shrugged. "We are quite prepared to relinquish those duties."

He placed his palm on Jessica's cheek briefly before following the medic out, the traditional greeting and leave-taking between father and daughter. She warmed at the affectionate gesture.

Flencik might have been tired, but his evaluation of her was sharp. "My empress, have you been awake all these hours?"

She resisted an urge to be cross. "Who can sleep at a time like this? You're sure Zarl will live?"

"Nothing is ever certain, but he seems determined to do so." Flencik's expression became paternally stern. "All that can be done has been, and you must stop worrying now. I insist for the wellbeing of yourself and your child that you return home and sleep."

"Of course she will," Egilka said in a firm voice. Jessica huffed at him, but secretly she was glad to be bullied. She *was* tired.

"My emperor, I realize you need rest too. However, if it is not inconvenient to do so now, I would like to discuss your research on female fertility." Flencik's face betrayed his eagerness.

“That is a dead path.” Jessica heard the regret in Egilka’s voice and understood it. He’d devoted so much time and effort into his work. Seeing it all tossed aside, even though he had warmed to the mixing of their races, could only be heart-wrenching.

“You’ve had no success with it in regards to Kalquorian women, but I’ve studied your work and it may have applications elsewhere. Some of the Earther Mataras are infertile. Since their reproductive systems are much easier to manipulate than the women of our race, I wonder—”

“Do you really think it could help them?” Egilka’s eyes lit up.

“Based on what I’ve seen of your work, I do. I have an office here in the center. I thought we might sit down for only an hour or so to discuss the possibilities.”

Egilka’s expression shone with excitement. The century-old Kalquorian looked like a child on Christmas morning. He turned to Jessica. “Do you mind if I stay here for a bit, my love?”

She laughed. “Not when you have that look on your face.”

Egilka kissed her soundly in front of everyone before ordering the guards. “Three of you will accompany the empress to her quarters.”

If any of the guards were amused by the Imdiko Emperor’s public display of affection, they didn’t show it. All bowed, and the captain said, “Yes my emperor.” He jerked his head at two other guards, and they stepped to one side, awaiting Jessica.

“When you are ready, my empress.”

Jessica paused long enough to do some ordering around of her own. To Egilka and Flencik she said, “Don’t get too wrapped up in saving Kalquor. You both need sleep too.”

Both men bowed, not a trace of humor on their faces. Flencik said, “As you wish, my empress.”

*I don’t know that I’ll ever get used to this empress stuff*, Jessica thought as she left, flanked by her guards.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Yuder walked into the room serving as Clajak's hastily assembled command center. The room hummed with activity as aides pored over reports coming in from the search parties looking for the fugitives. Tracking programs, statistical analysis, communications and tele-vids kept all information up-to-the-second.

Clajak straightened from his monitor as Yuder approached. Korkla hurried over to join them. Yuder acted as the liaison between Global Security and Clajak, his security expertise proving invaluable to the new Emperor. Never had Clajak appreciated his Nobek father more.

Without preamble Yuder announced, "I have just heard from Tidro. Zarl has survived surgery but is being kept sedated. Imdiko Flencik is cautiously optimistic about his continued recovery."

Despite his relief, Clajak's anger at the attack on his father remained bright. "I still want Marzklis ripped limb from limb."

Yuder's lips thinned with fury. "I would be most happy to oblige you, my emperor."

Korkla looked from one to the other, his expression telling Clajak he feared speaking to the two outraged Kalquorians. He did anyway, knowing his job. "Shall I give media relations the good news of Imperial Father Zarl's survival?"

Yuder shook his head at Clajak. "I recommend not. While Kalquor deserves to know the truth, the less Marzklis and his accomplices are informed, the better. We need to keep them off balance, my emperor."

"I agree," Clajak said. Korkla bowed and returned to his station.

Clajak looked around the room, at the efficiency in which his staff worked. Still he fumed. "There's been no sign of any of the bastards, not since the attack. All this technology, all of our security expertise, and it's as if they disappeared off the face of Kalquor."

Yuder gripped his son's arm for a moment in an uncharacteristic show of affection. "They'll turn up, Clajak. It's just a matter of time."

Clajak watched his father head back out, no doubt returning to his temporary post in Global Security's battle room. Touched by Yuder's kindness and the news Zarl still lived, he swallowed a lump in his throat.

A curse behind him brought Clajak's attention to Korkla. His aide jabbed the controls of his communications vid.

"What's wrong?"

Korkla started to see Clajak appear at his side. He flushed. "My apologies, my emperor. It is a matter of personal irritation." At Clajak's questioning look, he added, "I can't reach Michaela."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to check on her. She isn't at home. It seems she's left the suite without her portable com unit. Again." He blew out a frustrated breath. "For such an intelligent woman she's incredibly forgetful."

Clajak smiled, think of his own Matara's quirks. "She's not with a clanmate?"

"Govi is still at the clinic attending Narpok. Raxstad searches for the traitors with Emperor Bevau and Breft."

Clajak clapped a hand on Korkla's shoulder, allowing the first bit of humor he'd felt since Zarl's attack. "She's probably shopping and spending all your income."

Korkla's communication vid beeped for attention. Chuckling indulgently as he reached to answer it, Clajak's friend said, "My lovely Matara does enjoy the finer things."

\* \* \* \*

While the other two guards waited in the Royal House's conveyance, the captain joined Jessica in the entrance foyer to the clan's suite. "My empress, we will be alerted if you leave your rooms. If you'll inform us of your destination beforehand, we'll be able to do our job with maximum effectiveness."

"Of course. Thank you."

He bowed and backed into the conveyance. The door swished shut, and Jessica was alone. She turned to the suite's door. It whispered open, and she entered the dark greeting room.

Something thumped, and Jessica smiled to know Clajak or Bevau was home. "Lights up half," she called.

As the ceiling illuminated, she had an instant's glimpse of Pwaldur, Wagnox and Stytn at the far end of the room with a bound and gagged Michaela lying at their feet. The next instant powerful hands picked her up and flung her across the room.

She hit the floor hard, driving the air from her lungs. Pwaldur's mocking voice filled the room. "Welcome home, my empress."

Jessica struggled to all fours, looking back at the entrance. Marzklis stood there, his mouth twisted in a sneer. She gulped air and screamed, "Com, call the Royal Guard!"

The traitor Nobek laughed at her. "Communications from this suite have been blocked."

Jessica reached for her portable com before remembering she'd last worn it to the council session. She'd had no thought to put it on in the rush to get to Zarl last night.

Her mind raced, and she looked around, desperate to find some weapon. If she could get to Bevau's private room and his arsenal...

She jumped up and ran for the hallway. Before she got two steps Marzklis had her in his grip. He twisted her arm behind her back, and she screamed in pain.

Wagnox approached them, his eyes raking over Jessica with heat. "Don't hurt her too badly, Nobek. You don't want your new mate incapacitated. Where we're going, women are a rarer commodity than even on Kalquor."

Keeping her arm in its painful position, Marzklis drew her close to his body so she felt his erections against the small of her back. She gasped.

Marzklis rubbed himself against her. "She will make a suitable replacement for Narpok. I enjoy my toys unwilling."



Pwaldur looked at her with real hatred. "You cost us everything we've worked for. Whatever Wagnox's clan does to you won't be bad enough."

Stytyn grinned. "I have many ideas for her punishment, my friend. I can't say I'm upset we failed to take Zarl as a hostage. This one is far more to my liking."

Jessica watched with horror as Pwaldur picked up Michaela's trussed body and slung it over his shoulder. "You can thank your friend here for letting us into your suite. She wasn't willing, but her mere presence was enough to trip the access."

"Leave Michaela alone! You don't need her to get off Kalquor."

Pwaldur reached up Michaela's skirt and rubbed her buttocks. The dancer squirmed, squealing with outrage around the gag. "But I like her. She's such a rare creature to be wasted on the clan of a mere aide. Clajak choosing you instead proves his stupidity." He lifted Michaela's rumpled skirt to bite her thigh, producing more helpless squirming and squeals.

Marzklis' grip tightened on Jessica's arm, and she hissed in pain. "Enough talk. We must leave now."

He pushed Jessica toward the door. Despite the brutal pain in her arm, she resisted until he pressed the tip of a percussion blaster to her stomach.

"Don't tempt me. I've got nothing to lose if I'm caught, and I have no problem taking you and your brat with me," he snarled in her ear.

She heard the desperation in his voice and knew he wasn't bluffing. Her mind racing, she allowed him to shove her into the conveyance.

\* \* \* \*

Clajak frowned as his vid com buzzed repeatedly. Korkla's station was across from his and he sighed to his aide, "Mataras are difficult to reach today. Jessica must have forgotten her portable when we left last night."

"At least she has an excuse," Korkla grumbled. "Sometimes I think Michaela misbehaves because she enjoys the punishment so much."

"Yours too?" Clajak chuckled. "Earther women are wonderful, aren't they?"

They spoke in the low voices of long-time confidantes. Korkla grinned his agreement. "I owe you more than I can ever repay for giving my clan first rights to Michaela."

"I'm glad it worked out for you, my friend. Of course you may curse me if she's half as naughty as Jessica."

"Oh no, my Emperor. When I have to discipline her, I'm even more grateful."

Clajak had to smother a laugh. With the grim work of chasing down the traitors, hilarity seemed inappropriate.

Still, the thought of his hand descending on Jessica's bare buttocks threatened to arouse him. Even now he could feel her weight falling across his thighs, feel the smoothness of her trembling flesh as he raised her skirt and tugged her panties down. The sight of her creamy orbs that begged to be reddened by his heavy palm and the glistening wetness between her slightly parted thighs never failed to thrill him.

The delicious memory made him more determined than ever to reach his beloved. He tried Egilka's portable com and was rewarded with his Imdiko's deep voice almost immediately.

“Egilka, are you and Jessica home yet?”

“I’m still at the medical center consulting with Flencik. I sent Jessica home to get some rest not long ago. Any news?”

Clajak sighed. “Not yet. The traitors are lying low for now.”

Next he called the clan’s suite, hoping to catch Jessica still awake. He ached to see her, even if only on his vid. Long hours had passed since they’d parted at Zarl’s office, and Clajak felt her absence keenly. It startled him to realize how precious she’d become in such a short amount of time. Had it really been only two months since he’d first laid eyes on her on Plasius?

The vid remained stubbornly blank, and he started to hear an electronic voice issue from its speakers. “There is no connection to this frequency at this time. The system is malfunctioning and is being reported to technical repair. Please try your call again later.”

Clajak looked up and met Korkla’s concerned stare.

“You don’t think—” the aide rose from his seat.

“Nobek Breft said Marzklis is an expert at interrupting communications and security systems.” Clajak jumped to his feet and ran towards the door. Terror locked icy claws on his heart. “Alert the Royal Guard. Have Bevau meet me there. I think the bastards have Jessica,” he yelled as he raced out of the room, heading for the shuttle bay.

Claxons split the air before he’d finished speaking. The hallway erupted with Nobeks also running for the dock. Yuder was suddenly at Clajak’s side, rushing to keep up.

As they ran, Yuder said, “The Royal Guard raised the alarm. The traitors have taken Jessica and Michaela hostage. All available units are on their way.”

Clajak growled in response and ran faster. There would be no trial for Pwaldur and his accomplices. They were all dead men when he caught them.

\* \* \* \*

“You will not have the Empress,” the captain of the Royal Guard snarled, his laser pistol unwavering as he aimed at Wagnox.

A dozen of his men surrounded the traitors and hostages in the shuttle bay. The dark intent in every face told Jessica they were determined to save her from her assailants, but not one gun was aimed at Marzklis or Pwaldur. They too clearly feared hitting the Earthers with their fire.

Marzklis’ blaster dug into Jessica’s stomach, and he growled a warning. Pwaldur sneered at the captain. “Your empress will die if you do not give way. Fire at any of us, and we’ll kill her. Look at me, Captain. I do not bluff.”

The captain snarled but said nothing in return.

Stytyn pointed at a large ship docked nearby. “There’s a long-range transport. It will take us out of Kalquorian space.”

“Let’s go.” With the bound Michaela still slung over his wide shoulder, Pwaldur led the way.

The Royal Guard kept them surrounded as the traitors gathered next to the shuttle. Marzklis shoved Jessica at Wagnox and handed him the blaster. Speaking loud enough

for the guards to hear him, he said, "Hold her. If they move in this direction even half a step, take us all out." He grinned at Jessica. "Make sure you kill her first."

Wagnox held her by the throat against himself, the blaster still pointed at her abdomen. "Done."

Marzklis pulled a long slender tool out of his belt and began disconnecting a metallic box attached to the underside of the shuttle. He worked lightning fast, his hands a blur.

"What is he doing?" Jessica demanded.

The captain answered her. "My empress, he is removing the transponder so the transport can't be tracked once it reaches open space."

A soft whir of a shuttle's arrival got her attention. Pwaldur and Wagnox's clan also paused as it landed in the bay. The guards never wavered in their focus on the traitors, waiting for any opportunity to take the group down.

Jessica recognized the markings on the landing vehicle; it belonged to Zarl's clan. "Clajak!" she cried as her mate disembarked with Korkla and Yuder right behind him.

The rage on his expression, though not trained on her, made her stomach knot. His murderous hatred was mirrored in Pwaldur's snarling face. Jessica knew death waited in the wings for one of the men. She watched Clajak's approach with terror.

\* \* \* \*

Clajak surveyed the situation, forcing unwelcome composure on himself. Seeing Jessica pale, terrified and held at blaster point made him want to give in to mindless fury. He burned to rend the traitors into unrecognizable pieces, but giving his famous temper free reign would surely get his Matara and unborn child killed.

Marzklis hissed at him, responding to the homicidal threat on Clajak's expression. Clajak growled back, indifferent to the knowledge he was no match for the Nobek.

Pwaldur spoke quietly to his accomplice. "Keep working. I can handle this fool."

Marzklis resumed ripping the transponder from the belly of the transport, but his attention was now split between his work and Clajak's party, slowing him down.

Pwaldur let Michaela fall to the ground, and the Earther's cry on impact was muffled by her gag. Behind Clajak, Korkla growled at the abuse.

"Easy," Yuder whispered. "Wagnox has to get that blaster off Jessica before we move."

Pwaldur pulled a long, wicked blade from his belt, and Clajak recognized it from Bevau's collection, one he himself had given to his Nobek as a clanning present. The vicious curved knife was serrated in such a way that it would slide easily into a victim and shred the flesh to ribbons on the way back out. Clajak's caution raised another notch.

Breathing deeply to contain his emotions, he told the traitors, "This place is now surrounded by Global Security. There is no escape. Release the Mataras and I will consider mercy." *For all of half a second, just before I rip your throats out.*

Pwaldur's lip wrinkled back, displaying yellowed fangs. "You'll show me mercy? After all I've sacrificed to bring greatness back to our planet, and to what end? So an irresponsible playboy, child of peace-loving weaklings, can take the throne!"

Clajak snorted. "What real sacrifices have you made? You've lost nothing in your greedy pursuit of power until now."

The head councilman's face turned purple in rage. "I lost my entire clan, you fool! For the good of Kalquor, I laid them on the altar to die next to you. You were supposed to be on that trip to Joshada with them!"

A cold, heavy weight dropped into Clajak's stomach. "The accident—"

Marzklis' cruel laughter filled the hangar. "That was no accident. Some of my best work, I dare say."

Pwaldur shook with rage, the blade tracing crazy patterns in the air. "With you and Zarl out of the way, our path would have been clear. Who knows how much sooner we would have discovered Earther women's breeding compatibility had we been in control? Earth and its multitudes of fertile women might now be ours if not for such stupid luck!"

Yuder stepped forward, his face a mask of bestial fury. "You killed my Matara and crippled my Dramok!"

"For the good of Kalquor, for our very survival; something you care nothing for! Otherwise you'd have conquered Earth long ago."

Clajak spoke in slow, clear tones. "Your death will be long and painful, Pwaldur."

Pwaldur assumed a fighting stance, the blade held before him. "Come Clajak. This farce has gone on long enough. Let's finish it."

Clajak snarled, his fangs exposed and every muscle tensing. He would gladly die on Bevau's stolen blade to kill the gurluck before him. He gathered himself to spring on his enemy.

\* \* \* \*

As Pwaldur revealed the shocking truth behind the death of Clajak's mother, Michaela's bound feet weakly thumped on the floor, capturing Jessica's attention. She looked down at Michaela, who due to Pwaldur's movements, now lay about two feet behind him.

Michaela locked her gaze on Jessica's and grimaced. She'd fallen hard where Pwaldur had dropped her, but there was no pain on her face, only grim determination. Jessica couldn't imagine what her friend planned to do tied up as she was, but she twitched a slight nod at the dancer. Whatever Michaela had in mind, Jessica would be ready to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Come Clajak. This farce has gone on long enough. Let's finish it."

Jessica jerked her attention back to Pwaldur and Clajak. When she saw the deadly intent in her mate's face, saw him readying to throw himself at the knife-wielding Pwaldur, she screamed.

"Clajak, no!"

Stytyn's cry immediately followed hers. "Bevau!"

"Kill her!" Marzklis screamed, but he apparently had no interest in waiting for Wagnox to obey. The renegade Nobek launched himself at her, his hands reaching and fangs snapping.

\* \* \* \*

Bevau's roar shattered the air as he threw himself at Marzkli. He'd managed to creep within striking distance when Styty had caught sight of his approach. Breft and Raxstad were elsewhere in the hangar, waiting for the opportunity to rescue the Mataras.

Marzkli was only a hairsbreadth away from snagging Jessica's head for a fatal neck-snapping twist when Bevau smashed into him, driving him several feet backwards. Snarling, Marzkli wrapped one arm around Bevau's waist while reaching for the blade in his belt.

Before they hit the floor, Bevau wrenched himself from the other's grasp, and somersaulted over him to avoid being disemboweled. He rolled into a crouch to face the elder Nobek, his knife comfortable in his fist.

Marzkli gained a defensive posture almost as fast, his sharp blade at the ready and his stare riveted on Bevau. Neither reacted to the sounds of fighting nearby, not even when a blaster went off twice. Their attention was all for each other, for the coming fight to the death.

"The Imdiko warrior," sneered Marzkli. "It will be a pleasure to erase your pretty face. It has been a blot on the Nobek classification for too long."

"You are welcome to try," Bevau tried to answer, the words lost in the growl rumbling from his chest.

Marzkli was suddenly at his throat. The world filled with rage, pain and blood.

\* \* \* \*

When Marzkli came at them, Wagnox instinctively brought his hands up to fend him off. The instant the blaster wavered from her side, Jessica dropped to the ground in a crouch, exactly as Bevau had taught her. She never knew how close Marzkli came to killing her. She scrabbled towards Michaela, her ears ringing with the roars and shouts of Kalquorians.

Her friend was already on the move, rolling fast towards Pwaldur, who concentrated on Clajak. The dancer collided with the back of his legs, and with a surprised curse, Pwaldur fell backwards onto her. Both grunted in pain. The mirror-shiny blade dropped from Pwaldur's grasp to clang on the floor.

An explosion spat up bits of the marble-smooth ground only inches from Jessica's face. She darted a quick glance back to see Wagnox pointing the blaster at her. With a little scream, she rolled away, grabbing the knife Pwaldur had dropped as she went. Another blast ricocheted past her, and then Wagnox shrieked. Jessica looked to see the rogue Dramok flat on the floor with Raxstad on top of him. Michaela's Nobek bent down, his fangs flashing. Jessica shut her eyes to block the sight of what came next.

Cruel hands grasped her upper arms, lifting her into the air. Her eyes flew open to see Pwaldur's snarling face before her.

\* \* \* \*

Clajak stopped short as Pwaldur put Jessica between them, using her as a shield to ward him off. "Get back or she's dead," Pwaldur warned, shaking the little Earther like a rag doll. His meaty paw moved from her right arm to her throat, closing around the graceful column in a choking grip. "I mean it, Clajak. I'll snap her neck in an instant."

Jessica's freed arm jerked, and Clajak saw light glint off something in her hand. Suddenly Pwaldur's eyes bulged as if they would explode from his head. Jessica's arm

moved again, and he screeched. The next instant, she flew through the air, but Clajak didn't dare watch her land. Taking his attention from Pwaldur would be a fatal mistake.

But Pwaldur didn't attack him. He stared down at his torso, confusion and pain mixing on his face as he watched blood pour from the ragged holes in his gut. He looked up at Clajak, his expression stunned. "She stabbed me."

Seeing his enemy bleed sparked the animal savagery Clajak had held at bay. His fear for Jessica's life, rage for the pain Zarl had suffered, and grief for his dead mother rose to bury all semblance of civilization in a red-rimmed haze of bestial ferocity. Baring his fangs in anticipation, Clajak sprang at the former head councilman.

\* \* \* \*

The hard landing on the floor drove all air from Jessica's lungs, and she lay stunned. Yuder appeared at her side almost instantly, his grim face softened by concern. "Are you all right?"

She couldn't draw oxygen to answer. He leaned over her and gently slapped her cheek. "Relax, Jessica. The breath will come. Just relax."

She forced herself to obey, and for a wonder her lungs loosened. She gasped like a beached fish, feeling dull pain throb in her back and buttocks, which had taken the brunt of the landing.

"Good girl. Can you move?"

"I think so." She had to, because they were under attack. She struggled to sit up with Yuder's help.

Korkla approached them with the still bound Michaela in his arms. He set her down on the floor next to Jessica and pulled her gag free. Before Michaela could speak, he kissed her desperately.

Jessica looked at the chaos beyond them and realized the fighting was all but over. Wagnox was most assuredly dead, but Raxstad still ripped and shredded the body into bloody confetti. Swallowing nausea, Jessica looked away.

The sight of Clajak digging an eyeball from Pwaldur's face greeted her. The head councilman lay beneath the new emperor, his arms and legs broken and useless for defense. Weakened screams gurgled from his throat as the growling Clajak methodically took him apart, piece by piece.

Gasping, Jessica tore her gaze from the horrible sight. Clajak's revenge for his mother and Zarl was long overdue, and she didn't fault him for it. Still, she couldn't bear to witness the overdue justice Pwaldur received.

Only the deadly combat between Bevau and Marzkli continued. Ripped flesh hung from both combatants, blood covering every inch of their bodies. Still they fought on, knives and fangs flashing. With the exception of Clajak, Raxstad, and Breft, who stood guard over the crumpled, sobbing heap that was Styty, everyone else gathered silently around the fighting Nobeks.

Marzkli's knife found Bevau's chest, tearing a long furrow into the younger man's flesh. Jessica cried out to see the whiteness of bone peek through before gushing blood covered it. She jumped to her feet. "Why is no one helping Bevau?"

Yuder wrapped his arms around to restrain her. "Because he needs no help. Watch."

The two fighters vanished in a blur of supernaturally fast movement. When they reappeared, Bevau had Marzklis pinned helpless on his belly. Marzklis screamed in rage.

Bevau answered with a howl of animal triumph, his blade held aloft, poised for the killing strike. He paused long enough to snarl, "For those who would harm my Matara, I'm no Imdiko!"

The knife descended, taking the traitor in the neck. Moments later, Bevau held Marzklis' severed head aloft. The other Nobeks, including Yuder, answered his roar in a deafening display.

Jessica was shocked to hear herself also scream in triumph, the bloodied blade she'd stabbed Pwaldur with clutched in her raised fist. Yuder stared, and his face broke into a fierce grin.

"You never dropped the blade once it was in your possession," he said. He pressed his palm to her cheek, the traditional father's greeting warm on her face. "You would have made a fine Nobek, my empress. My daughter," he amended.

"Thank you, my father," Jessica said, touching her palm to his face in turn. She blinked back threatening tears.

"I see we missed all the fun." Egilka hurried across the bay floor toward them, Flencik's bulk behind him. Jessica ran to be enfolded in his embrace. "Are you all right, my love?" he asked her.

"No, but I'm a survivor. I'll get through."

"What shall I do with this one, my emperors and empress?" Breft called. He kicked Stytn, the blow hard enough to knock the whimpering traitor several feet across the floor.

A chorus of growls rose at the question, leaving no doubt as to the vote on Stytn's fate. It was Flencik's voice of reason that kept him alive for the moment. "With the Imperial Clan's permission, I suggest he be taken into custody and interrogated so that we may solve the mystery of Narpok's illness. Her mind might yet be saved if we know the true nature of the abuse she suffered."

"I concur with Imdiko Flencik's suggestion," Egilka said. He looked at Jessica expectantly.

"As do I," she agreed. She'd seen enough carnage to last her another twenty years.

"Very well," Clajak didn't sound pleased as he stepped away from the lifeless remains of Pwaldur, dripping blood gloving his hands. At least he looked sane once more, Jessica thought. "We have a majority from the Imperial Clan on the matter, but do you wish to vote, Bevau?"

The gore-covered Nobek staggered but managed to remain upright as he stumbled drunkenly towards them. His voice was little more than a thready whisper. "I will concede to the judgment of the rest of my clan. It is a unanimous vote."

Egilka and Clajak moved to either side of their clanmate, catching him as his legs buckled. Jessica wept to see her beautiful Bevau so brutally savaged.

Flencik sighed. "My emperors, if you will put him in the medical transport? I need to put him back together before he bleeds to death." He shook his head wearily.

“Surgery on two emperors within hours of each other. I’ll be so glad when this day is over.”



## Chapter Twenty-Three

Two months after the attack on Zarl, Jessica stepped out onto the balcony off the clan's sleeping room. She went to the low rock wall and leaned on her folded arms as she looked out over the moonlit ocean.

Salt breeze lifted her chestnut hair, easing the stubborn heat that held on despite the change to autumn. Her purple coronation robe, made of the softest fabric to ever touch her skin, stirred around her. She smiled as she listened to the sounds of celebration. Various strains of music, cheering and laughter competed with the rumble of the ocean. It had been a good, if tiring, day.

Zarl's presence had been the best part of her clan's joining ceremony and the coronation that followed immediately after. They'd held off both rites in the hopes of his attendance, and Jessica was glad they did. Seeing Clajak's Dramok father sitting in his hover chair, his lined face alight with pride, made the day a true celebration.

The joining ceremony recognizing Jessica as part of Clajak's clan had been a bit too formal for her tastes. It certainly didn't match the raucous affair of Michaela's several weeks prior in which all participants, including Jessica's clan, had ended up happily drunk and undressed. Leshella, the Plasian wine that intoxicated without threatening damage to Jessica's unborn, had been imported just for the occasion. It had been a hell of a party. Michaela's gown delivered the arousing effect she'd hoped for, with her clan reciting their vows around mouthfuls of her flesh.

Still, Jessica understood the need for the restraint of her own ceremony since the clan's coronation took place immediately afterwards. Royalty demanded a certain amount of decorum.

She sensed a presence behind her a moment before Clajak and Egilka touched her. She leaned back against the two men, who each placed a possessive hand on her slightly curved belly. Her pregnancy had been unaffected by the traitors' kidnapping attempt.

"I wondered where you slipped off to," Clajak said, his lips in her hair.

"Was there too much celebrating for you?" Egilka asked.

She looked up to smile at him, reaching up to stroke his chiseled jaw. "I knew you'd find me. I'm ready for a private celebration."

His eyes darkened with passion, and their eager hands caressed her. She softened at their touches, and her mouth opened for Egilka's tongue. They stripped her of her robe right there on the balcony, unmindful of the shuttles passing overhead. Her skimpy underclothes followed quickly, leaving her naked for their explorations. Beneath Clajak's blue robe and Egilka's green, she felt the hard need of their masculinity. She stroked them through the softness of their robes.

One important ingredient was missing, and when Egilka broke their kiss she asked, "Where's Bevau?"

Both men looked around, surprised. Egilka said, "He was right behind us when we went to search for you."

Clajak went inside to check the sleeping room for their Nobek, Jessica and Egilka following him. There was no sign of the missing man.

Before they could worry the door opened, and Bevau walked in. Jessica's heart went in her throat to see her beautiful clanmate, resplendent in his red coronation robe. The loose fabric hid the permanent scars on his chest and arms; souvenirs of his fight with Marzklis that even Flencik's skills couldn't erase. No member of the clan minded the marks. The livid slashes that tattooed him only accentuated his other gorgeous attributes, and he wore his battle scars with pride. No Kalquorian doubted his Nobek ferocity any longer.

Clajak greeted him with, "There you are. We were about to start without you."

Bevau's eyes lit up to see Jessica naked, and he licked his lips. She saw the guarded expression that arousal couldn't erase though, and her heart thumped painfully. "It's happened, hasn't it?"

He came to her to hold her close. "I'm sorry, my love. Earth has declared war on Kalquor."

Jessica buried her face against his chest, angry tears wetting his robe. Earth had protested when it learned one of its own was to become the empress of its sworn enemy. Threats of annihilation had been made should Jessica's rulership be formally acknowledged. Her worst fear had been realized. She had brought her two planets to war.

Clajak and Egilka joined the embrace, surrounding her with their warmth. Her Dramok said, "The people have spoken. They voted to take this risk by making you Empress."

Jessica had insisted on the vote. Overwhelmingly, Kalquorians had pledged their support of the coronation, even in the face of Earth's threats. Still, her heart ached for the coming casualties. "People will die," she said, her voice muffled against the haven of Bevau's chest.

For a wonder, he laughed. "That is the price and reward of war. We are civilized, but at our hearts we are still a warrior race. For most Kalquorians, it is preferable to die in glorious battle than in our sleep." His hand under her chin lifted her face so he could look in her eyes. "The tragedy is we do not wish to harm members of the race that can save us, and we will have to. Armed conflict makes it inevitable."

"It will make us weak," Jessica worried. "Earthers won't mind killing Kalquorians."

"It is out of our hands now. We will do the best we can with the situation given us." He kissed the tip of her nose.

"So let's not drive ourselves insane with 'what-ifs' and 'should not haves'," Clajak ordered. "Our clanning is a joyous event. There will be no sadness attached to it."

The command in his voice, so prevalent now that he'd accepted his birthright, made Jessica smile. "Yes, my emperor," she said, bowing her head in acceptance.

They growled in unison at her acquiescence, delighted with her submission. Where sex was concerned, Jessica was comfortable giving up control to her dominating mates.

*Maybe I'll learn to trust in other matters as well.* She hoped so. It was hard for one girl to carry the weight of the universe.

When she went to her knees, eager to service her men, they obligingly threw off their robes, presenting her with a wall of muscled flesh. She suckled each thick hard cock in turn, her hands busy on the men not warmed by her mouth. Groans filled the air. Warm juices flowed down her thighs.

Never had her lovers tasted so good. She might have licked and sucked all night had they allowed it. Instead, they lifted her from the fur-covered floor and carried her to the bed.

The men were delighted to return the favor of oral pleasure. While Egilka held her wrists and Bevau pinned her ankles, Clajak knelt to the feast. His tongue swirled in circles around and over her clitoris, making her writhe uncontrollably. The pleasure was excruciating. If not for the other two holding her captive, she would have jumped from the bed to catch her breath.

"Please, wait just a minute, Clajak. Just a second, damn it, you're killing me," she pleaded.

He answered her by putting his mouth on her flesh and sucking the sensitive button while lashing it from side to side with his wicked tongue. She screamed and bucked wildly as orgasm burst from her loins.

As the pulses of sensation ebbed, Clajak gave her a final lick and chuckled. "You'll take what you're given, my sweet," he said, his lips shining with her juices. He traded places with Bevau.

Jessica groaned with mingled lust and agony as Bevau's mouth covered her sex. His tongue stabbed into her core, lapping up her precious honey. Over and over, his tongue invaded her softest flesh, sweetly violating her. Feeling the rough silk moving in and out, tirelessly fucking her brought fresh waves of pleasure. Her ragged cries filled the air.

Bevau sat up with a pleased smile. Taking one of her legs from Clajak for a moment, he lifted it to expose a buttock. After delivering a few sharp, affectionate slaps to her flesh, he returned her ankle to Clajak's strong grip and swapped positions with Egilka.

Egilka knelt between her spread thighs. He parted the lips of her sex as far open as he could with his fingertips, drinking in the sight of the secret pink flesh of her womanhood. His cocks were tight to his abdomen as he examined her. Clajak peered over his shoulder to take in the view. Never had she felt so vulnerable. Her sex poured an invitation to the men.

Keeping her spread open with the fingers of one hand, Egilka probed her with the index finger of the other. The long, thick digit entered her, searching the front of her sheath. When he found the bundle of nerves she arched with a low scream.

He pressed a second finger in, then a third. When they were immersed in her all the way, he paused to rub his palm against her clitoris. She struggled against the iron

hold Bevau and Clajak had on her limbs as Egilka drove her crazy, working her with a rhythm of pulling his fingers free to the tips, plunging back in hard, rubbing her straining bud with the flat of his hand, and withdrawing again. He pumped her sex in this manner until her sheath rewarded him with strong contractions. Her head whipped from side to side as pleasure once more had its way with her.

With Jessica satisfied, the men now saw to their own needs. Each took a turn, taking their beloved Matara in the way that suited his temperament. Egilka was slow and methodical, relishing every nuance of Jessica's accepting body until passion took hold of him, making him drive against her with force. Clajak was demanding but thorough, filling her mouth and throat with his thrusting length until lust demanded he sink his iron flesh into her yielding sex. He shuddered as he emptied his seed into her sweetness. Then Bevau satisfied his wilder urges, rutting against her from behind like an animal. Her screams of completion melded with his roars as they climaxed together.

At last sated, Jessica and the men curled together in a tired, happy pile in the middle of the bed. Drowsing in the warmth of their strong bodies, Jessica firmly denied entrance to the worries that wanted her attention. Tomorrow would be soon enough to face the new challenges that awaited her.

Safe in the arms of her clan, the Empress of Kalquor drifted into dreamless sleep.

The End