



# Sleeping with the Enemy

By

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## Chapter One

## Moon Base 2028

The agitation that had driven First Lieutenant Sybil Hunter from her quarters in the barracks to the Cosmos observation center eased as the lack of activity reflected on the huge screens caught her attention. For a solid week, dozens of workers had been carefully going over the hull of the colony ship, searching for micro-meteor holes to patch. The ship—as yet to have its maiden voyage—had been liberally peppered with them during the transition from external shielding to internal, forcing a frantic search and patch operation before the tiny holes could seriously jeopardize the hull's integrity.

They were conspicuous now by their absence. Undoubtedly, they'd finished and withdrawn inside the ship once more to help the others working on finishing the ship's interior.

It was amazing how often the simplest things worked best, Sybil reflected. Not that they knew yet whether it would in this particular case, but every study and every calculation had pointed to a high probability of success. After the finest minds had wracked their brains for a solution to the 'gravity problem' for decades and come up empty-handed, they'd finally decided to give the 'harebrained' solution a try and it looked like it was going to work.

Of course moving an asteroid the size of this one out of the asteroid belt and into roughly the same orbit as the moon hadn't been an easy task by any stretch of the imagination! The fact that it had its own gravity had only made it that much harder, but then there wouldn't have been any point to the delicate operation if it hadn't!

Desperate times called for desperate measures, however. Poised to begin full scale colonization of Mars, they already had over a million volunteers signed up and the buses built a decade earlier to carry scientists, colonists, and sightseers to the moon were woefully inadequate for the task. Although advances in the past decade had resulted in ships that could make the trip to Mars and back three times faster than they'd been able to manage back in the teens and early twenties when they'd established the first bases for scientific studies, ferrying the colonists already signed up for land on the new world was a daunting task. With more people eager to escape the Earth and forge a new life on Mars every day, it had begun to seem an impossible task.

The U.S.S. Cosmos had been the solution, but it had its own problems. Although big enough to carry nearly a hundred thousand colonists at the time, the ship was far slower than the smaller crafts they'd built. It would take nearly six months to make the round trip, and that meant that the colonists weren't going to be in any shape to begin working when they arrived—not at nearly zero gravity. It would take months of rehabilitation to get them in shape even though Mars' gravity was only 38% of Earth's. The combination of 'gravity' suits, which worked in conjunction with electro-magnetic forces, and 'artificial gravity' created by centrifugal force used on the Moon colony wasn't practical, even if it could be done—and everyone had been pretty convinced that it couldn't—not on that scale.

It was critical to the success of the Mars colonization project that the colonists be able to start to work when they arrived. The Mars colonist dormitory/holding/and processing facility was being completed even as the final touches were being completed on the U.S.S. Cosmos. It

was fully stocked to house them for at least a year, but resources were at a premium and would be until the colonists began to produce their own goods. The first colonists needed to complete their personal habitats and begin growing their own food within the first six months or it would seriously jeopardize the chances of the next group and every group thereafter.

So—the harebrained solution thought up by a pseudo-scientist who had no idea what sort of complications might arise from capturing and then building a ship around an asteroid with its own gravity. It had actually made construction of the ship much easier. Flying it was going to be a real bitch, but if they could manage it the colonists would arrive on Mars in excellent condition.

She was to have been a member of the crew that would take the Cosmos on its maiden voyage.

Not anymore!

She shook her head as if she could shake the thought, but it was stuck, had been since she'd gotten her orders the day before.

Her stomach knotted with anxiety. As much as she hated to admit it, even to herself, the 'emergency mission' she'd been reassigned to scared the piss out of her. She supposed, wryly, that it was crazy to be unnerved when she'd been prepared to take a flight on the totally experimental craft she was looking at, but she had confidence that the new design was going to outperform anything built before. She didn't have a hell of a lot of confidence in the hastily re-outfitted ship that was to take her in the opposite direction—to Venus.

There hadn't been a single damned probe launched toward Venus in well over a decade, though! From the time Earth had entered its climate change and the situation on Earth had begun to decline rapidly all eyes were on the Moon and Mars. Neither had seemed like mankind's last hope or a port in the storm before the climate change, but it hadn't taken very many natural disasters to make them look better and better, despite the challenges of living on the Moon and Mars.

A lot of people were still waiting for Armageddon, she thought wryly, but unlike the frog in the slowly heating pot of water, some of the 'frogs' had woke up and discovered they were already in the middle of Armageddon, not waiting for it to arrive.

Shaking the thought, she glanced at her watch, muttered a curse under her breath, and left the observatory. She hardly noticed the transition from centrifugal weight to magnetic as she moved from the observatory into the corridor that connected it to the administration building. It had taken some getting used to when she'd first arrived, but she'd acclimated in the two months she'd been stationed on the moon base.

The shift in 'pull' from overall—the centrifugal force of revolving buildings against her entire anatomy—to strictly external with the drag of magnetism against her grav suit still made her stomach flutter uncomfortably with a sense of weightlessness, but she'd ceased to really notice it. It also wasn't nearly as much of a challenge to step from the corridor into the next revolving structure as it had been at first. With barely a pause to adjust her stride, she stepped from the corridor into the main lobby, glanced around, and headed toward the conference room.

Her crewmates were already assembled in the conference room and they didn't look any happier to be there than she was.

After saluting her superior officer, Major Reed Powell, and exchanging salutes with Corporal Thomas Spencer, she moved toward the conference table where the two civilian scientists who would be accompanying them, Dipak Kushbu and Holly Rains, were already seated.

She'd been training for the Mars mission with Major Powell and Corporal Spencer since her arrival and knew them in a strictly professional capacity. She hadn't so much as laid eyes on Dr. Kushbu or Dr. Rains before, but since Kushbu was east Indian it wasn't difficult to figure out who was who.

Dr. Rains nodded a greeting and moved a hand that shook faintly toward the control of the holographic display in the center of the table. An image appeared that sent a shockwave through Sybil.

Dr. Rains smiled thinly when she'd observed the reactions of everyone at the table. "As you can see, Venus looks a good bit different than it did before. These are the pictures we managed to take with the probe we ... uh ... appropriated before it malfunctioned."

Sybil wouldn't have believed it *was* Venus if the woman hadn't told her.

"Any guesses as to what's going on there?" Major Powell asked sharply, breaking the silence that had held them.

Dr. Rains shrugged. "I can tell you what we think is happening. It's the reason you were pulled off the Mars mission."

Sybil frowned when the doctor stopped, apparently weighing her next words. "Bad news? Or seriously bad news?"

"I suppose that remains to be seen. Maybe it would be easier to digest if I go back a little bit?"

Major Powell's lips thinned, but he nodded to encourage Dr. Rains to proceed. She tapped the keys of the pad and different image appeared—one that was no more recognizable to Sybil than the first had been. "This is an image of Pluto captured a few days ago. The onset of the change was first observed back in 2006. The scientist that first noticed it thought that there was a problem with the images—an error in the data stream. After carefully going back over everything, he finally announced his findings in 2010, but we didn't have anything that far out to help the scientific community understand what was causing the change to Pluto. We haven't had anything since, for that matter, but he finally convinced the scientists in charge of the Inmar telescope sent up to replace the Kepler six years ago to realign the telescope for a better look. These images were captured," she explained, tapping the keyboard to display a progression of startling images.

Noticing tiny, fuzzy lights surrounding Pluto, Sybil narrowed her eyes, trying instinctively to bring the images into focus. "What are those—lights?"

"Ships," Dr. Kushbu said succinctly.

Sybil glanced at him sharply, blinking while she tried to digest that.

"Ships?" Major Powell demanded sharply.

"Alien ships," Dr. Rains clarified.

Corporal Spencer uttered a snorting laugh. "Alien ships? You're talking flying saucers? You aren't serious? My god, we haven't had UFO reports in over a decade!"

Kushbu and Rains shared a look.

"Maybe you can come up with an explanation that suits you better?" Dr. Rains asked tightly. "No one wanted to even suggest the possibility, but it's hard to ignore. Those 'lights' have not behaved like any natural phenomena known to us. Moreover, when considered in conjunction with the undeniable changes we've discovered in Pluto, it seems a high probability that they are indeed alien crafts ... and they are terra-forming Pluto."

Everyone sat back in their seats and glanced around at each other uncomfortably.

“Why would they want to terra-form Pluto? I think that would be a good place to start the questions,” Major Powell said abruptly.

Kushbu glanced at Rains and shrugged. “We don’t have a clue,” he responded. “But the fact remains that our instruments managed to detect changes to the dwarf over the past decade and half that have made it livable—extremely harsh conditions by our standards—but capable of sustaining life and it certainly wasn’t before. It doesn’t just *look* like there’s water on the surface. As far as we can tell, there is.”

Dr. Rains studied her hands, clasped before her on the table. “The government thinks it’s merely a base and their target is Venus.”

Sybil gaped at the older woman. “*That’s* why we’ve been pulled from the colonization project for this emergency mission to Venus?”

“Well I sure as hell don’t follow!” Spencer snapped angrily. “Even supposing you’re right and those are alien ships out there, why colonize Pluto if their target was Venus?”

“We’ve got more questions than we do answers!” Dr. Rains said. “The theory is that they’re using similar technology to what we’ve used to terra-form Mars—except better, because they’re obviously more advanced than we are. It’s pretty much all wild speculation at this point. We don’t have anything to really check out either planet, but look what *we* have managed in little more than a decade! The particle beam we’ve been using to clean up Earth’s greenhouse gasses by transferring them to Mars has not only cleaned up the Earth considerably, but it has transformed Mars—something we expected to take decades longer than it has.

“If we consider that the aliens are doing much the same thing, then it certainly explains the drastic changes in both Pluto and Venus! And, since it would’ve been far more logical to take the gasses they needed from closer planets, then it seems to follow that they must have plans for Venus if they are, indeed, responsible for the changes. The government seems to think so, at any rate, and they’re ... disturbed, to say the least, at the possibility of having aliens on our back doorstep.”

The invention of the particle transporter had been a life-saver—literally. Of course the men working on it had intended it for use to transport living beings from place to place and that was something they still hadn’t figured out how to do. Even the emergence of quantum computers hadn’t, yet, solved that problem, but inanimate objects were a different matter altogether. By the time it had occurred to anyone to use it remove Earth’s harmful gases, it had been pretty well perfected—for that kind of use—and it had slowed the deterioration of Earth’s environment considerably, giving scientists and engineers much needed time to develop alternate energy sources.

Those advances had also slowed the climate change, but it was generally accepted that nothing was going to stop the cycle—it was still a case of too little, too late. The Earth would recover, eventually, but there was no telling how long that might take or how many people would survive.

Of course, the people focused on colonizing Mars had been livid. They’d fought the use of Mars as a dumping ground so ferociously that it had taken nearly three years to implement the plan but in the end, they’d lost. The government always won, and they had no intention of losing this particular battle. It had been pure dumb luck that they’d succeeded in terra-forming Mars at the same time—rather than intentional. Of course, the Mars colony project had intended to use a similar process to terra-form, but they’d planned to use ‘clean’ greenhouse gasses. They hadn’t wanted to risk ‘dirtying’ Mars with Earth’s pollution.

It had come down to a case of 'all's well that ends well'. The fact that the project had dramatically improved Mars in an amazingly short time had brought about a hard shift in the government's stance. New projections were that people would be able to walk around the Mars surface without pressure suits or respirators within the next two or three decades. From viewing Mars merely as a handy receptacle for waste, they'd begun to realize Mars would be even more beneficial as a colony. Natural disasters and diseases had taken their toll, but the Earth's population was still way out of balance. A massive migration to Mars was just the ticket since the Moon was never going to provide much relief in that direction.

No one wanted to admit it, but Apophis had been another strong incentive to focus every effort on colonizing Mars. Due to pass Earth within a year, with everyone poised to implement the plan to divert it to make certain that it wouldn't hit on the next go 'round in '36, it still made everyone uneasy. It would be the first time they'd even attempted to divert the path of an asteroid the size of Apophis.

It had worked with the asteroid they'd diverted for use to build the colony ship, but that asteroid had been a fraction of the size of Apophis—approximately a quarter of the size. Theoretically, it should work just as well with Apophis, and in that case they only had to nudge the huge asteroid a few thousand miles out of its current path, but no one really wanted to base the future of the entire human race on that theory, however sound it seemed.

Not to be too melodramatic about it, but were man's days numbered whatever they did, Sybil wondered abruptly, feeling her belly execute a strange little freefall? She considered herself a realist with a positive attitude, but she'd been born in 2000, grown up in the midst of the Armageddon hysteria that reached a crescendo in 2012 and hadn't actually abated a lot since even though the 'big one' didn't hit in 2012. Was it that attitude of impending doom that had descended upon her? Or did logic and reason fit into it anywhere?

It was the sense of overwhelming odds, she decided finally. They'd faced every trial head on and yet they just kept coming. Every time they managed to dodge a bullet, they discovered another one right behind it, and the realization that they might now have to fight an alien race, that was far more advanced and, one would presume, more powerful, to eke out an existence ....

"Fuck!" Spencer exploded, abruptly surging to his feet. "They're sending us out there to get our asses shot off! They might as well paint a fucking bull's eye on the damned ship, because that's what this is all about—to see just how focused the aliens are on Venus!"

"You're skating thin ice, soldier," Powell growled warningly. "Get a grip if you don't want to end up facing charges of insubordination."

Spencer sneered at him. "So throw me in the brig! I didn't volunteer for this any-fucking-way and I sure as fuck didn't sign on to be used as target practice!"

Powell shot to his feet. "Sit down," he growled. "Now."

Spencer glared at him for a long moment but finally resumed his seat.

The scientists, who'd looked more than a little alarmed at Spencer's outburst, shifted uncomfortably in their own seats as if struggling with the urge to vacate the conference room. "We don't know any of this for a fact," Holly Rains said finally. "I'm sure it's occurred to everyone that it's a possibility that the aliens, if they *are* responsible for the changes, might feel threatened and might shoot us down. You should consider the whole picture, though, before you make any conclusions. Clearly, they're a more advanced race than we are. If we presume that they are behind the UFO sightings and abductions that have been reported over the years, then they'd been here, studying us, for many, many years. If they were aggressive, don't you

think they would've invaded Earth years ago? Long before we had any weapons that might be any possible threat to them?"

Spencer snorted. "Who the fuck would want Earth after what we've done to it? We don't even want it any-fucking-more!"

"Speak for yourself! Not everybody agrees with you on that. Anyway, she has a point," Sybil put in, reigning her own temper in with an effort. "If they'd come purely for conquest, they could've done it. The first sightings date back to around WWII, right? We sure didn't have much to throw at them then—not when we didn't have any space flight capabilities, and the Earth was a much more habitable place then—not nearly as polluted or overpopulated as it is now."

"We developed the a-bomb then," Spencer shot back at her. "They probably thought they'd just wait until we destroyed ourselves and then move in!"

"All of this is pure conjecture!" Kushbu interrupted. "We don't *know* anything—they haven't made any attempt to contact us—and we aren't going to learn anything until we get out there. It's our belief that they're here purely for study, that they're scientists. We believe that's supported by the fact that they've been around so long and haven't shown any aggression toward us. I don't care for the idea of getting my ass shot off anymore than you do. I wouldn't have volunteered to go if I thought there was any real risk in that respect."

Spencer's lips tightened. "You're assuming it's the same aliens that were sighted over the years. What if it isn't? I mean—they spent sixty or seventy years studying us and now, all of a sudden, they decide they want to move in? Give me a break!"

"Earth is still the most habitable planet in this system," Sybil said pointedly. "Besides, they aren't from this solar system. That means they have capabilities far beyond ours, which also seems to suggest they could've looked around for something better, that would take less work to make it livable. I'm inclined to agree with them—that it is scientists and they're more focused on what they can learn than threatening us in any way."

"Maybe," Powell said grimly. "But we've been looking for Earth-like planets since the Kepler was launched back in '09. We've found thousands, and as far as we've been able to determine, they're pretty damned close—nothing we have any hope of reaching with our current technology, but pretty appealing. If they have the technology we believe they do, why focus on our corner of the galaxy—or even our corner of the universe? There must be something particular to our solar system that's drawn them here."

Rains shrugged, smiling grimly. "At the risk of sounding conceited, maybe it's us? Maybe we're just the most interesting species they've encountered?"

Powell studied her for a long moment. "Maybe. And maybe it's the fact that this particular solar system has three worlds within the habitable zone for a species similar to ours. I could be wrong, but I don't recall that we found another system that fits that particular criteria. Granted, all of the real estate needs a good bit of fixing up to make it even close to comfortable," he added wryly, "but they've clearly got the technology to do it."

\* \* \* \*

### Venus, Year 2 Post Sumptra

Anka's expression was grim as he stared out over the landscape of Venus. Although it was a reflection of his feelings in regards to the alien landscape when he first took up his position, the view dimmed shortly after he'd turned to study it and he saw the landscape of his home world, Sumptra, in his mind's eye instead. The scorched ground, barren, rocky slopes, and



molten rivers didn't differ a great deal from his last view of his home world if it came to that, but it differed vastly from the world he'd grown up in.

The world the natives of the system called Earth most closely resembled it—the land, the sky, and the sea, not the cities themselves and not the people.

For a few moments, he indulged the ache inside him that was never far from his awareness no matter how hard he worked, and tried to summon the images to his mind that he'd worked so hard to banish. Ghostly, wavering, indistinct images of his family filled his mind—his mother and sisters and brothers, his nieces and nephews, his lovers and his own children, but they were like smoke. The harder he tried to grasp them and bring them into focus, the more indistinct they became.

A mixture of pain and anger flooded him, churning in his gut like slow burning acid. His throat closed. He'd banished them because he couldn't bear to think of them—gone, all gone—and now he couldn't summon them to him anymore to sooth his loneliness and fill the aching void they'd left behind. Giving up the fierce battle inside after a moment, he turned, sucking in a harsh breath as if he'd been holding his breath or truly fighting a battle. At once, the starkness of the base they'd erected chased the shadows of the past away, but it was almost more painful to look at than the images in his mind ... or the hostile environment of the world the aliens had named Venus.

The irony of that smote him. They had named it for some ancient goddess they had once believed in, a creature of great beauty—the goddess of love. The irony was that this world had been an ugly thing more nearly resembling their ideas of Hades, or hell, even then. From what little they'd been able to discover since they'd begun studying it, it had once been as beautiful, or maybe even more beautiful, than the planet Earth, but that had been long, long ago.

He wondered at the decision to keep the name but supposed no one really cared enough to change it. It would've seemed almost a profanity to have called it Sumptra. Even if it had been anything like their home world had been, even if it one day *became* more like their home world, it would never compare. Nothing would ever come close, because it was the *people* who'd made Sumptra beautiful, who'd made it home, not the land.

Emerging from his dark thoughts, Anka saw his adjutant, Minh, striding briskly toward him. His expression was grim and Anka felt his belly tighten reflexively. Some new disaster, he wondered? Water or food shortage? He dismissed that. There was always a water and/or food shortage these days and he'd already adjusted the rationing. Equipment failure? He couldn't detect anything critical and he certainly would have if a problem had developed with the cooling system or the air or the pressure.

Minh halted before him and saluted. "They've settled into orbit, Sir."

Anka felt his belly clench, pushing acid into his throat. He didn't have to ask who had settled into orbit. They'd been watching the fucking alien vessel ever since it had bypassed Earth and headed straight toward them. "Manned? Or unmanned?" he asked sharply.

"We've counted five life-forms aboard the vessel."

Anka's lips formed a thin line of anger and distaste. "Never underestimate the greed of the species," he muttered. "It was too much to hope they might not notice before we had the settlement established." There was no getting around the fact that they *had* hoped to be firmly in possession before the humans noticed, however. They had been dispatched to the target primarily to oversee the terra-forming process. They hadn't actually expected to have to defend it.

They hadn't *wanted* to be forced to defend it. That was the main reason they'd only sent one detachment of soldiers and scientists to establish a small observation base camp.

That and the fact that they had a damned thin militia to protect their interests.

He frowned. "Just keep monitoring them for now," he said finally. "Keep me posted on any developments. I'll be in my quarters."

Minh looked uncomfortable. "Should I inform base camp ... Sir?"

Anka glared at him but finally forced the angry tension from his neck and shoulders. Their 'leaders', such as they were now, would fall to arguing the best course and would be as useless in arriving at a decision as to how to proceed as they had been about everything else that they'd had to deal with since the disaster on Sumptra. "Absolutely," he ground out, not that he had any intention of waiting upon their decision in this particular case. He would do what he thought best. There were times when decisiveness and quick action was far more desirable than a lengthy debate and worrying about offending the sensibilities of politicians with a puffed up sense of importance. As far as he was concerned, this was one of them. With the fate of their species hanging in the balance, he wasn't willing to take any unnecessary risks.

He was well aware that, in the old world order, his ranking wouldn't have put him in a position to make such decisions, but that was the old order, the old world—the dead world. He was the highest ranking officer among the survivors and it was both his duty and his right to protect what was left of their people—even if it meant displeasing what passed as their ruling body at the moment.

It wasn't an easy decision, for all that. They couldn't afford to make mistakes—any kind of mistake was too costly.

When he reached his quarters, he settled on the hard bunk that passed for a bed and stretched out without bothering to remove his boots, staring up at the ceiling and trying to block out his surroundings. It settled over him like a heavy weight, however, like chains. His quarters were no worse, nor any better, than anyone else's save for the fact that he had privacy they didn't have. He'd been in the holds of derelict salvagers that looked more welcoming, however.

In point of fact, much of the materials they'd recycled to build the base had come from an old salvager, so it was small wonder that was the end result—the feel of being trapped in a filthy, airless hold that was worse than the worst prison he'd ever seen on Sumptra.

Briefly, he allowed himself to wonder if he would've been quite as miserable if they'd at least been able to surround themselves with some comforts, but he didn't dwell on it. What was the point? They were lucky to have what they did. They were grateful for it.

They'd hated every moment of every day since they'd lost their world and it didn't look like they would see a time, again, when things would be better—not in their own lifetime.

He regretted the thought the moment it entered his mind. The one thing he had avoided above all else was thinking about children. He couldn't bear the thought of fathering more and there would certainly never be any more nieces and nephews.

And yet what future did they have without children?

It was amazing that the loss had created such a vacuum in his soul when he had spent so little time with them.

It hadn't actually been a matter of choice. He was the eldest son of the house. He was expected to join the military and distinguish himself. It was tradition, not only within his family, but within his tribe. He'd been eager to leave, though. Despite the strong ties he'd felt for his family, he'd had wanderlust. He hadn't been content to settle in his native village. Possibly, if he had never left to begin with to go off to the university for studies, he would've been, but he

would never know now. All he did know was that once he'd broken the ties that bound him tightly to Kipera and his family, he had been restless each time he'd returned and ready to go again the moment he was called back to service.

If he had been there there would be no agonizing over anything now. He would've died with them and all his troubles would be over. It almost felt like a just punishment to live. They had suffered. He knew they had, but the transition had been brief, the moments of pain and fear relatively few. For him, it seemed endless and it had only been a year now. His life stretched out before him like an endless torture chamber that he was forced to walk.

Lifting an arm, he draped it across his eyes and tried to force those thoughts to back of his mind. He had more important issues at the moment than tormenting himself with his memories and his regrets.

Like the biblical plagues they were so fond of frightening themselves with, the humans were coming and he had no idea how to stop them without further risk to his own people.

## Chapter Two

The cloud cover was still so thick that it was difficult to get a view of Venus' surface even from orbit. The crew aboard the Mars II lander began to get readings after the first orbit, however, that confirmed much of the data collected by the probe that had been sent before them—at least in so far as the fact that the chemical makeup was rapidly changing. Unless there was some problem with the data they were getting, however, the gasses had dropped even more dramatically in a matter of weeks.

The first jolt was the discovery that the levels of sulfuric acid in the cloud cover had dropped drastically. The readings were so significant, in fact, that they ran the data several times and then checked the equipment and took another reading before they concluded that the readings were correct—unbelievable, but correct. Changes in carbon dioxide levels were equally startling. Overall, the chemical changes had resulted in a nearly 50% drop in atmospheric pressure and more than that in surface temperatures. It certainly wasn't 'balmy' and the atmospheric pressure was still dangerously high, but after checking the figures repeatedly, they realized that they *could* land as they'd been ordered to if conditions allowed. The deep ocean explorer that had been modified for Venus' surface since it had already been designed to withstand the pressure of the ocean would be safe enough for a surface survey.

No one was thrilled at the prospect except, perhaps, the two scientists aboard—Kushbu and Rains—but even they were uneasy. They spent a good deal of time speculating on 'natural' phenomena that might account for the sudden, drastic changes, but it was clear to Sybil that even they didn't believe any of the possibilities they'd come up with that didn't include alien interference.

Of course, before the discovery, she wouldn't have believed in the possibility that there was alien technology capable of effecting such a rapid and significant change. She still wasn't sure she completely accepted it, but there was no getting around the fact that this sort change didn't come about without interference. It certainly wasn't natural. Natural changes took place over thousands or millions of years, not in a matter of decades.

They had no real idea when the aliens might have decided to terra-form Venus, of course. It was possible they'd been working on it from the time they'd first arrived and encountered humans in those previously dismissed sightings. That was still only a matter of fifty to a hundred years, however, and it couldn't be avoided that no such changes were detected by the numerous probes that had been sent to study the planet in the late twentieth century.

It was almost easier to believe that some rogue asteroid had ripped the ozone, creating, in effect, a natural pressure relief valve. As farfetched as that seemed, putting it down to alien technology wasn't any easier to swallow. *Something* had certainly made a drastic change in Venus, however, and it hadn't taken long at all to do it.

It was just as well Sybil didn't have the option of joining the landing party or not. She'd been chosen to stay aboard the Mars II and monitor the ship and the ground crew. She didn't particularly like the assignment—being left completely alone for the two days they meant to spend collecting samples—but she hadn't liked anything about the assignment to start with.

She didn't know if it was Spencer's suggestion that had planted the thought in her mind or if she would've felt that way regardless, but almost from the time they'd left the Earth behind, she'd felt like she had a bull's eye painted on her back. It was a relief to arrive unscathed at their target orbit, but not a huge relief. She still felt as if they were being watched.

She was monitoring the landing when that feeling intensified abruptly. Accompanied by a flickering of light behind her, Sybil felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck prickle. Whirling while weightless wasn't a bright idea, but Sybil reacted instinctively to the abrupt certainty of danger. She had time to register an odd phenomenon of light in the cockpit behind her before her momentum carried her across the cockpit and into the hull. By the time she'd fought her way around again, the light had vanished, but there was no relief in that. A solid form stood where the light had been.

Sybil sucked in a sharp breath to scream, launching herself toward the apparition. She collided with it hard enough to carry both of them against the back wall of the cockpit, but the half-formed plan to subdue the intruder came to nothing. By the time they'd stopped moving, she was locked tightly against the intruder instead of the other way around. She hadn't managed to wrap her mind around that or think of an alternate plan of attack when the sudden sensation of stinging ants washed over her. It increased to a burn that was rapidly reaching the point of being unbearable when it was followed by a descent into an abyss of blackness before she could even assimilate what was happening.

A strange, bluish glow met her gaze when she attained consciousness again and opened her eyes. Movement caught her attention before her memories caught up to her and she turned her head automatically toward the motion. Her heart leapt with fright at the discovery that she was surrounded by thin, gray, almost featureless beings barely taller than a child. That paled beside the twin discoveries that her suit and helmet had been removed and she was bound to the gurney she was lying on.

A frantic search of her mind to understand what was happening brought no comfort. The last thing she remembered was discovering an intruder and trying to subdue him before he could attack. Hard upon that memory came others, distant, vague, but substantial enough that she was pretty sure she was looking at, and had found herself in a similar situation to, reports from years ago involving alien abductions.

She sucked in a sharp breath and strained against the restraints when one of the creatures moved closer. Lifting an odd looking instrument, it seemed to wave it over her. "Don't!" Sybil exclaimed sharply, flinching as far from the instrument as she could.

"Scanning," the creature responded in a mechanical voice—in English!

Sybil was shocked enough that it took several moments to sink in that it was scanning her. It struck her to wonder why the voice sounded so ... canned. A translator? As bizarre as it seemed that it could speak English, given the fact that they'd decided the aliens had been to Earth many times, she supposed it would've been stranger if they hadn't figured out how to speak English in that length of time.

It still sent a shiver through her.

"Where am I? Why am I here? What happened to my suit?"

"Why are you here?" the being countered.

Sybil stared at it blankly, but her mind was alive with rampant speculation. "I don't know where I am," she countered. "You tell me."

The creature studied her dispassionately for a long moment and then backed away.

A disembodied voice spoke then, but it was clear it wasn't speaking to her since the language was alien. It was deep and Sybil had the impression it was male, but she realized fairly quickly that she couldn't draw conclusions from anything known to her. The beings she'd been staring at with such horror didn't seem to *have* sexual organs at all.

When the voice ceased, the gray things moved closer once more. Sybil flinched again, but tensed when she realized they were removing her restraints. The urge to attack was so strong she trembled with it, but logic won out. She had no idea where she was, but she knew she wasn't on her own ship anymore. Even if she succeeded in overwhelming the aliens, where would she go?

It still went against the grain to allow them to help her from the table and escort her from the room without a whimper of protest. She tried to comfort herself with the thought that they hadn't killed her when they could have—easily—but it was cold comfort at best.

A narrow, dimly lit corridor adjoined the small examination room. Sybil glanced up and down it when she was taken from the room, but there was little to see beyond the fact that it seemed to go on for quite some distance. There were no windows. She wasn't even certain that there were any doors opening off the corridor, but she finally decided there were, that the thin cracks she could see were joints for sliding doors. This was confirmed, more or less, when the beings halted and an opening appeared. Lights flickered on—the dim bluish ones from the other room—and she was pushed inside. The door sealed shut behind her before she could turn around.

She stared at the panel, trying to control her runaway heart, trying to think.

Why had she been taken? Why was she here instead of dead? Where was she?

A shiver skated through her and she wrapped her arms around herself, wondering if the deep cold she felt meant they were in space or if it was the result of shock and the fact that she had nothing but her underwear on.

And what had happened to the landing crew, she thought abruptly?

Were they here, too? Where they dead? Or were they on the surface of Venus, wondering what had happened in the orbiter?

She shook the thought. She didn't have time to worry about them now. She was on her own and so were they. Not that she could see that that helped her in any way. She couldn't remember a damned thing after discovering the intruder behind her. Had they docked with the Mars II without her noticing?

That seemed unlikely, but what other explanation was there?

The strange sensations she'd felt just before she blacked out surfaced. She felt her throat close with horror, but it seemed indisputable that they must have used something like the particle transporter—on *her*!

Was that the reason for the scan? To see if she was still in one piece?

The thoughts gave rise to a panicked internal evaluation, but she couldn't tell that she was suffering from anything but the cold and she wasn't even sure that was because of the temperature around her.

After a moment, she glanced around uneasily. The room she found herself in was a cube maybe six foot square—make that seven, she decided once she'd looked up at the ceiling and then at the narrow cot attached to one wall.

It was a prison cell, she realized abruptly. It had to be.

The door opened while she was studying the cot. There was no sound, no warning beyond a prickling along her skin from the currents of air and a faint scrape along the metal

floor. She whirled, prepared to defend herself, but the sight that greeted her swept that instinct right out from under her. This was no little gray creature!

Sucking in a sharp breath, Sybil retreated to the furthest corner, plastering herself against it. The being stared at her for a long moment and then took a step closer. The door sealed behind him so fast Sybil barely caught the movement.

She knew the very instant she was trapped inside the tiny cell with the thing though! She would've screamed if she could've found her voice. Instead, she stared at it with wide-eyed horror.

"Why are you here?"

Sybil flinched when it—he—spoke, but she recognized the voice, or thought she did, that she'd heard before. He tilted his head. "You spoke English before."

Sybil licked her lips. "I don't know where I am," she said finally.

His lips tightened, drawing her attention. The mouth was surprisingly human-like, thin lipped but then that particular trait wasn't all that uncommon. She watched it form the next words and caught a glimpse of teeth that looked a bit sharper than she'd ever seen in a human mouth—more predatory.

Like a cat.

She blinked as the impression deepened, flicking a quick, assessing look at the face. The shadows cast by the strange light, she decided, had given her the impression of a monster.

Or maybe she'd just expected a monster?

He wasn't human. That much was certain, but he was surprisingly human-like once she managed to throw off her shock and fear enough to actually study the face. The form was certainly human-like, although he seemed exceptionally tall.

"You know where you were."

Sarcasm laced the comment, sparking another flicker of surprise and the realization that he'd already made the comment once.

"Yes," she said finally, then added, "orbiting Venus."

"Why are you here?"

Sybil chewed the inside of her cheek, trying to decide whether to answer that or not or, more specifically, what would be best to say. "Taking readings of Venus' atmosphere," she replied finally, realizing that it was pointless to try to lie. She was pretty sure they would be able to tell what the instruments on the ship were for.

"To what purpose?"

Sybil felt her first flicker of resentment. "Scientific curiosity," she said, an edge to her voice that stilled the quaver of fear that had laced it before.

Annoyance, she thought, flickered in his eyes briefly, and then suspicion. "You're a scientist?"

Sybil nodded a little jerkily, relieved that that wasn't a lie. "Yes."

"The suit you were wearing looked amazingly military."

She felt her cheeks flush with a combination of irritation and embarrassment that he'd caught her in a lie—one of omission, but still a lie. "I am, but I'm attached to the space program." How much, she wondered, did he/they know about them?

Probably pretty much everything, she realized in dismay. No one worried too much about security breaches in space ... mostly because there was no way to prevent anyone from picking up chatter between the ships and control but also because they hadn't actually expected anyone to be listening.

"But this is not a military operation? This scientific expedition to study the atmosphere of Venus?"

Sybil swallowed convulsively several times. "It wasn't intended as one—no," she lied.

"But that is subject to change very swiftly, yes?"

She blanched. She certainly wasn't in any position to be throwing threats around. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. The ship carries the emblem of the U.S. and you are human. Your species is aggressive and war-like as a whole, and few of the nations of Earth more so than the U.S."

Indignation swelled within Sybil despite her fear. "That's not true! We defend ourselves—ferociously, but we don't start the wars—hardly ever, anyway! And we certainly didn't come here with the intention of starting one! We just came to see what was going on!"

"We?"

Sybil felt like she might faint for a moment. She'd let her emotions run away with her and given away the others! "I mean they sent me to take some readings."

"And the others we captured on the surface?"

Bastard! He'd just wanted to see if she would lie, damn him! He'd known about the others all along! She swallowed with an effort. "They're here?"

Instead of responding, he turned. A hole opened in the wall, he stepped through, and it closed. Feeling abruptly weak after his departure, Sybil slid down the wall and drew her knees up to her chest. She discovered it was impossible to think, though. Her mind kept running back over the interrogation like a hamster on an exercise wheel, examining her responses and his questions until she'd convinced herself that every word out of her mouth had been more damning than the last.

She should've simply refused to answer, but then she hadn't been able to wrap her mind around the fact that she truly was a captive of hostiles!

\* \* \* \*

The woman had almost managed to convince Anka that he'd made a mistake in taking the humans captive—almost. It wouldn't have mattered, though, if the ship they'd taken had been sent merely out of scientific curiosity. The odds were that they still would've seen more than they should and they would've raced back to tell their people—and *then* a military operation would've been launched.

There seemed no solution to their dilemma. It might have bought them time if they had ignored the ship, but he doubted it. The chances were that they would've discovered the terra-forming facilities or the base or both.

Time, he realized finally, was all they could buy. The question was, now that he'd taken captives, just how much time could he buy?

On that thought, he changed course and headed toward communications. Inge and Myune both looked up at him questioningly when he entered. A spark of interest flickered in Myune's eyes that briefly distracted him.

How long, he wondered abruptly, since any female had given him that particular look? He realized he didn't have a clue. He'd been too focused on surviving and seeing to it that his people survived to notice any invitations, too caught up in his grief for that matter. He also realized he didn't particularly welcome it at the moment.



Granted, it was soothing to the beating his ego had taken from the look of horror on the Earth woman's face and Myune was an attractive female, but the thought and a flicker of interest had no sooner crossed his mind than her pheromones struck him like a sledge hammer.

She was in season, looking for a male to breed with her.

"Breeding is prohibited at the present time," he said coolly. "See the med-tech after your shift, soldier."

Heavy handed and clumsy, he thought in disgust when he saw the look of outrage cross her face. She hadn't actually even invited him—not verbally anyway—and it was uncouth to point out her scent, especially publicly and he had a bad feeling Inge's presence made it too 'public' to excuse himself on those grounds.

"I already have, Sir!" Myune responded with bare civility. "I know it's prohibited right now with stores rationed."

Discomfort flickered through him. "Good. I need the transmissions intercepted between the alien craft and their base. Transfer them to my quarters."

"Their base has been trying to hail the craft for over an hour, Sir," Inge volunteered. "Should we block the incoming?"

Anka felt his belly clench. "For now, just ignore it—record it. If you pick up anything suggesting they might be sending a rescue, let me know immediately."

Inge shrugged. "As slow as their ships are it would take them weeks to get here."

"Even so," Anka said tightly.

He was somewhat easier in his mind once he'd listened to the transmissions back and forth between their home base and the ship several times. They're relayed their preliminary findings, but those, fortunately, didn't include the intelligence that they'd spotted either their base or the terra-forming units.

So maybe capturing them the moment they showed signs of making a descent wasn't the stupidest thing he'd ever done? Particularly when a calculation of their path of descent had put them landing less than a mile from terra-forming unit three?

It was just pure bad luck that they'd picked that spot. They hadn't seen anything to report and he would've had to capture them regardless since the odds were almost astronomical that they could've missed it completely. They couldn't afford to let the humans know—yet. Undoubtedly, they were already suspicious, though, or they wouldn't have sent a ship to check it out.

The problem was, what to do with them now that he had them?

Send them back with a warning? It would be a bluff, but he was almost certain the humans weren't in any position to call it. Could they afford an 'almost' certainty though?

Inge had pointed out that their space flight capabilities were still limited. They could count on having a month, at the least, to prepare themselves, but at the rate their situation was deteriorating that would only mean they would be less prepared to fend off an invasion, not more prepared.

He was tempted to drop the matter in the laps of the politicians, but discarded the notion after a very little thought. They might not be in a position to launch an offensive war, but they sure as hell couldn't allow the humans to know that and he didn't trust the politicians to convince the humans it would go badly for them if they *did* attack.

So, the only option was to try to play politician himself.

Wryly, he thought it wouldn't be hard to frighten them away if the women were any indication. Sybil had merely looked at him as if he was a monster. The other woman had had hysterics and had to be sedated before he could even get around to questioning her.

It rankled. He'd tried to convince himself it didn't, but it bothered the hell out of him.

Research had shown they were prone to view anything new to them with deep suspicion if not outright fear and hostility and he knew the humans had never seen any of the ferils. Their reaction was to be expected.

He thought he had been prepared for it. He had, in point of fact, approached them himself for that very reason—because he had wanted to throw them off-balance and keep them that way.

And yet he realized he hadn't really anticipated the depth of their reaction to seeing him. He supposed that was because, although he had never actually met a human face to face, he'd grown accustomed to the way they looked from the years of research that had been done on them. But the fact was that he'd never been repulsed by them—not in a general way, anyway. Not surprisingly, some were far more appealing than others. They were certainly strange in many ways, but the similarities between the two species was such that they weren't nearly as alien to him as some of the species they'd discovered and, because they weren't, he'd been able to adjust his perception of them fairly easily.

But perhaps that was the problem? The similarity raised the expectation of familiarity and the differences between them seemed more freakish and monstrous because of that?

Possibly, he decided, not a comfort or much salve to his ego, but that likely explained it and it was for the best when all was said and done. Wasn't it?

He considered that, not on a personal level, but as benefited them all. Would it be better to inspire fear? Or would that in itself become a threat to the people?

Given the time to establish themselves and grow stronger, the humans would not be a real threat to his people's survival. Technologically, they were a hundred years or so more advanced.

They had been, at any rate, before the fall of their civilization, he thought in disgust. They'd lost so much, though, so many of the people that had built their civilization, built their technology—who was to say they could count on any of the advantages they'd had?

The likelihood was slim, he realized. They were already struggling to rebuild the things they'd had before that were completely familiar to them. Not one thing they'd had to do had been simple or easy. The handful of mechanics and engineers they had now had had to pour over manuals and instructions for hours, days, weeks and sometimes months to figure out how to fix whatever it was that needed fixing. Then, they'd spent hours, days, weeks, and sometimes months searching for a part that would work or could be modified to work.

Life had become an unending nightmare. None of them had realized just how easy life had been for them before and that had been yet another thing to contend with—the fact that they'd become lazy and lax, unused to hard labor, unaccustomed to having to scratch out a living, to having to 'make do', to doing without. They'd had to put down more fights over rationing their resources than anything else.

Regardless of the problems the humans had themselves, an alliance with them could ease things for *them* considerably, but did they dare try it? Was there any chance, at all, he wondered, of forming one?

Despite their typical behavior, the aggressiveness and territorialism he'd pointed out to the woman, their studies had shown that the humans could be amazingly generous hearted when moved by the plight of their neighbors. It was incomprehensible, something they'd never

understood about the humans as long as they'd studied them, but they'd displayed that behavior often enough it couldn't be denied that they had empathy for the hardship of others.

They were at their most dangerous, though, when they knew the weaknesses of anyone they considered an enemy.

Could they achieve a balance? Could they appeal to the humans for some of the things they so desperately needed and, at the same time, convince them that they didn't stand a chance of defeating them and taking what they had?

It was an idea worth exploring, he decided.

The question was, how could they begin?

At that thought, he lifted his head to study his quarters, trying to decide how it would appear to their eyes. Would it seem as impoverished to them as it did to him?

Probably—very likely, he decided. It was oppressive.

They couldn't afford to allow the humans to see just how harsh their conditions were, but he couldn't continue to keep them separated. They were already demoralized enough.

Reaching across his desk, he depressed the com button and summoned his adjutant.

## Chapter Three

"The plan," Anka announced, "is to convince the humans of what we want them to believe before we send them back." He discovered when he'd surveyed his audience that most of the officers were staring at him blankly and annoyance flickered through him. His adjutant, Minh, signaled a wish to speak and he nodded at him.

"Just so that we're completely clear, Sir. What is it that we wish them to believe?"

"We wish to convince them that we are prosperous, strong, and powerful and that any challenge will be met with absolute ruthlessness. We will condescend to trade with them, in the interests of promoting friendly relations between neighbors, but we have staked our claim upon this planet for colonization and will not tolerate any interference."

Most of them merely gaped at him at that announcement, but a few, he was pleased to see, looked thoughtful. Rafi signaled a wish to speak and he nodded at him.

"Given what we know about them, I understand, and I can certainly see a benefit in trading with them, although I'm not sure what we have to offer. However, I'm confused about the plan you outlined to convince them, Sir."

"They understand power and respect it—and very little else. It's essential to our survival to convince them that we have the power to crush them or they will not consider it in their best interests to form any sort of alliance—even to trade. On the contrary, they are far more likely to attack us and take what they want—or try—and we can't afford the attempt that would force us to expend resources in defending ourselves."

"We must convince them that they need us far more than we need them. To do that, we must appear successful. To appear successful, we will need to prepare a place to convince them we are, gather together what we have and set a ... stage to perform on, pool together what we have to make a grand show of prosperity and comfort. We will allow them to have freedom to move around on this 'stage' and examine it as they please."

"Will behave in a cautiously friendly manner at all times and allow them to know that we are open to the possibility of friendship."

He surveyed the group. "Make certain that your people understand this. Anyone who doesn't feel that they can behave accordingly should make certain they steer clear of the humans."

"We will be on double rations until the humans depart. Unfortunately, this will require half rations for a while afterwards, but it can't be helped. Convincing them we're starving isn't the impression I want to convey," he ended dryly.

To his relief, everyone seemed to understand the psychology behind his plan. "Just be certain that you explain everything carefully to your subordinates and have their full cooperation in this operation. And let's make it quick. We can't afford to hold them long."

Dismissing the men and women, he left the conference room where they'd met and headed toward stores to examine the contents. Once he'd discussed the menus for the meals with the head cook, they decided three days was about the maximum they could afford to maintain a show of plentitude.

It would have to be enough, he decided grimly, realizing that it would be pushing the limits to hold them any longer anyway. The humans might, even now, be preparing to send another ship.

They might also have decided that the ship had met with an accident, but they couldn't afford the alternative possibility—that the humans would decide they'd attacked.

It was a fortunate thought. It would give them their first bargaining chip, he realized. If they transported the humans back to their base, they could emphasize their own superior flight capabilities and open negotiations for returning their property as a gesture of good will.

They could take the rations onboard first, though, he realized. No doubt it would be a disgusting mess, but they would've had to have lain in supplies for five for a trip that would take them many weeks, Earth time.

He frowned at the thought. They would have to take other things, as well, if they didn't want it to look like the food was all they were interested in, and that was liable to piss them off, but he didn't see leaving the food.

He wasn't altogether pleased with the results of their efforts. The small observation room they'd set up to allow the humans to see their technology at work—one of the terra-forming units on Venus' surface—looked well enough. It was only supposed to be an observation room, after all, for them to relax, interact, and socialize during their brief stay and if it lacked any particular comfort or aesthetics it was still workable. The same could be said for the mess hall where they would dine. They could, convincingly enough, he thought, put the utilitarian austerity down to the fact that it was a military base.

The new quarters where he'd planned to house them left a lot to be desired, however. They didn't look any damned better than the cubicles where they were now confined—and those looked more like prison cells than what they actually were—standard quarters for housing.

"No one had any furnishings to make the quarters a little more—comfortable?" he demanded irritably, focusing specifically on the women. The women, he knew, were accustomed to making their quarters as home-like as they possibly could and bartered for anything they could get their hands on to manage it.

They met his gaze with feigned innocence.

"We are only suggesting you loan your possessions for a very short time," he added.

"And what if we pick up something from them? They carry all sorts of diseases!"

The sullen, feminine voice, he realized immediately, was Myune. He hadn't endeared himself to her with his comment about her state, but this wasn't personal and she damned well knew it! "We've immunized ourselves against their diseases," he said pointedly. "You know that."

"So the scientists assure us," Hybah, the woman next to her, said pointedly. "How much faith can we place in that, though, when the vaccines have never been tested?"

"They're insubordinate, Sir," Minh said in an under voice. "Shall I have them escorted to the brig and appropriate their belongings?"

Anka threw him a speculative glance but shook his head. "If we threw everyone in the brig for the smallest infractions, there would be more in the brig than outside it," he said dryly. He lifted his head and surveyed the others. "Myune and Hybah have expressed a disinterest in acting for the greater good. They will be expected to keep their distance from the humans. I would like anyone else who feels as they do to express their feelings now."

Everyone shifted uncomfortably. Lonlea lifted her hand a little timidly. "I have a few things that I could contribute."

Relief flooded him. He smiled at her. "Thank you, Lonlea. It is much appreciated. Put them in the women's quarters. They will appreciate them more."

He could have kissed her. Once she'd made the offer, the other women disappeared and brought back some of their prized possessions. To his mind, the accommodations still looked less than inviting, but he decided it would do. It was enough to make it appear that they'd made an effort to offer hospitality.

After some consideration, he decided to send the droids to escort their 'guests' to the observatory. Given the reaction of the humans to their appearance, he thought it might be best to allow them as much time as he dared to come to grips with it.

\* \* \* \*

The hours that Sybil had spent in confinement had done very little to calm her. It had given her way too much time to think of unpleasant things that she might have to face and not nearly enough to accept that she would have to if and when the time came. The appearance of the creepy little gray beings, therefore, sent her spiraling toward panic.

"We are to escort you to the observatory. Please to accompany us without struggle."

Sybil stared with pure horror at the creature that had spoken, wondering if she was the main attraction of the 'observatory'.

Try to preserve what dignity she had left, she wondered?

Or throw caution to the wind and try to fight her way out of her predicament, knowing she didn't have a chance in hell of winning?

She swallowed convulsively several times and struggled to get up from the bunk she'd retreated to and had her answer. She was so weak with fright she didn't think she could manage even a token resistance. That being the case, maybe she should just focus on trying to put up a good front and meet her fate with what dignity she could?

It seemed like cold comfort, and yet, since there didn't seem to be an alternative anyway shouldn't she at least make the attempt not to shame her entire species by showing her cowardice?

She thought they were going to have to support her. Her legs felt like rubber and her knees like water and her upper body felt too heavy to support. She managed, by grim determination, and a horror of being touched by the things, to walk unaided. Her relief was so profound when they reached their destination, however, that she nearly collapsed. Spencer appeared to be unconscious, but Kushbu and Rains were there already and appeared to be unharmed—badly shaken, but alert—and Powell was escorted into the room even as she arrived.

Resisting the urge to burst into tears of relief, she moved as quickly across the room as she could and practically threw herself into Rains' arms as if they were bosom buddies instead of bare acquaintances. Holly hugged her as tightly, conveying the desperation they both felt. "Thank god you're alright!"

"What happened to Spencer?"

Holly Rains pulled away and looked down at the man. "We don't know. He was lying on the floor when we got here."

At that comment, Sybil finally lifted her head to survey the room. She didn't know what to think once she'd examined it. If it was an observatory, where were the windows? For that matter, given the fact that she'd been sure it would be some sort of torture chamber where the aliens could 'observe' while they were dissected, where were the gurneys?

"It doesn't look like I expected," Holly commented.

Sybil sent her a questioning look and the other woman shrugged. "They said it was an observatory."

"I'm guessing both of you thought the same thing I did," Powell said wryly. "Alien abductions leapt to the forefront of my mind, which translated to ... unpleasant medical examinations."

Sybil was about to point out that they still didn't know that wasn't the case, that they might've merely been brought together to wait, when a sudden noise distracted all of them. Glancing around fearfully, they discovered panels along the rounded end of the room were moving, both at the ceiling and upper wall.

Sybil and Holly clutched at one another again, staring wide-eyed as the panels opened slowly wider and wider. Sybil found herself holding her breath, as if that would protect her from deadly gasses. She didn't even realize she'd instinctively sucked in a breath and held it because she'd thought they were about to be flushed into space until it dawned on her that the panels were revealing windows. Beyond the windows a landscape was unfolding before them that was starkly beautiful and breathtakingly deadly.

It hadn't occurred to her that they might be on the surface of Venus, though why it hadn't she had no idea. It should've dawned on her immediately when she saw the other crewmembers.

The realization thawed her and, after a moment, as if by unspoken consent, she and Holly released each other and crossed the room to stand staring out of the wall of winds that offered a wide vista of the planet Venus. On the far horizon, the thick layer of clouds veiled the rising sun. They could clearly see the demarcation of the spreading light as it spilled across the virtually flat plains of Venus, unmoving. It took her several moments to recall that Venus' rotation was so slow that it took almost a full year, Earth year, to rise and set. The building where they stood was on the dark side, facing Earth. When she'd searched the sky for it, she thought she detected the tiny blue globe that was home.

She wasn't certain if she actually had spotted it or if it was wishful thinking. The cloud cover was still thick enough to make visibility of the sky poor. Redirecting her gaze to the landscape outside once more, she studied it with all the wonder of seeing a sight never seen before—at least by her. She'd seen images, of course, but that wasn't the same as actually seeing it—particularly since there was an enormous structure of some sort blocking the southern view.

Sybil studied it, knowing what it had to be, and yet it might have been most any kind of factory she was familiar with. Disappointingly, there was no way to tell anything about the technology represented within the structure ... beyond the fact that it was incredibly effective.

Even giving them that, though, she thought there must be more. Maybe it was just because she was having a hard time swallowing just how advanced they were, but she couldn't accept that one plant would be sufficient to terra-form on such a massive scale in so short a length of time.

She could *see* that the planet was cooling. No doubt it was still blistering hot outside, but she could see the thin trails of lava flow in the distance cooling and solidifying along the edges. Steam rose from newly formed lava rock, making visibility even at ground level spotty. After a while, though, she noticed movement. Drawn by that discovery, she saw a vehicle slowly creep into view. Directly behind it were several others. The vehicles stopped on a nearly perfectly flat plateau maybe a half mile from the building where she stood and shadowy figures emerged.

She thought at first that they must have gone out to take samples and readings, but she realized after a while that they were beginning some sort of construction.

"Clearly they aren't worried about us seeing anything now," Powell murmured after a time. "No idea what that might mean to us, but I'm thinking it isn't good."

Cold washed over Sybil. She moved away from the observation window abruptly, rubbing her arms up and down her bare arms. It was the first she'd noticed that she was the only one of the group the next thing to naked. The others were still wearing their suits—minus the helmets, but ....

Was that because she was the only one that had been transported via a particle beam? Or had they done something she couldn't remember?

Almost as if he'd read her mind, Powell seemed to focus on her condition, his eyes alive with speculation. "How did you get here?"

Sybil swallowed a little convulsively. "I'm guessing via particle transport beam. I'm not sure, actually. The last thing I remember is discovering I wasn't alone. When I turned, I saw an intruder and attacked and then ... nothing until I woke up on a gurney surrounded by those ... creepy little beings."

"The droids."

Sybil whirled at the sound of the voice, meeting the alien's gaze in time to detect what almost looked like amusement. She realized when he spoke again that she hadn't misinterpreted it.

"They were designed by our scientists specifically for study of your world." He shrugged. "They had some notion that the humans wouldn't find them as ... threatening since they were humanoid and small."

"What happened to Cpl Spencer?" Powell asked tightly.

Anka felt a flicker of hostility in response to that he'd detected in Powell, but he resolutely ignored it. "He was ... reluctant to be moved. He was sedated. He is unharmed."

"But still unconscious."

"And still unharmed. If you'd like, we can move him to the quarters we've prepared."

Powell and Kushbu moved immediately to the supine man. Kushbu helped Powell lift Spencer onto his shoulders and the alien led them to the opposite side of the room. A door opened and the men disappeared inside. The alien emerged alone a few moments later and gestured toward her and Holly.

The two exchanged an uneasy look. Sybil didn't particularly want to get any closer, or have any interest in whatever it was he seemed to want to show them, but she also wasn't keen on the idea of ending up like Spencer. After a brief hesitation, she approached the alien man.

"I apologize that we cannot offer private accommodations, but I believe you will be more comfortable here," he said as a door opened, revealing a room perhaps twice the size of the one she'd spent the past several hours in.

She could see as soon as she'd scanned the small room that every effort had been made to make it more comfortable than the room she'd had, she just wasn't sure if it had been specifically for their benefit or if he had, for some reason, booted someone else out of their quarters to offer the room to them. She was inclined to think the latter. The furnishings didn't look military issue. The colorful linens and pillows that covered the narrow bunks inside looked like personal belongings. Of course, she was basing that on her own experience and she had no idea of what their military might be like.

She also didn't know, for a fact, that the group that had captured them was military. She assumed they were, but she didn't know. The facility might be civilian.



"Thank you," she said hesitantly, wondering why they'd been moved and if Powell was right.

He nodded. "I am Anka l'Kartay, Commander of Sumptra's forces ... here."

Sumptra? Undoubtedly their country or world. The hesitation before he'd said here could mean anything, though, she realized, or nothing.

Something did become clear to her as she looked up at him, though. Looking at him made her uneasy even when she was across the room from him. Standing so close was enough to heighten that agitation and create a flutter of butterflies in her belly, making it very hard to maintain eye contact even though it seemed important that she should.

She wasn't certain if the fact that he'd told them who he was was a courtesy or if it was meant to further intimidate them, but she realized after a moment that he was waiting for her to return the courtesy and that there was certainly no reason not to tell him who they were. Captives were not supposed to volunteer any information, but they were allowed to give name, rank, and serial number. "I'm First Lieutenant Sybil Hunter."

He nodded again and his gaze flickered over her face and down her length in a way that was so human-like—so like the assessing gaze of a man—that it threw her further off kilter.

It should have made her skin crawl. Instead, she felt a shuddery, knee weakening sensation filter through her. Dismissing it with an effort, she met his gaze with a hard look when he'd finished looking her over. "I'd like my flight suit back."

Something flickered in his eyes, but she had no idea what he might be thinking. She didn't think if he'd been human he would've been an easy man to read, but he wasn't human and she had no idea how they might perceive things, how their minds might work. It was almost more disorienting to realize that his mind could be so different as to be completely incomprehensible to her.

He frowned, but she didn't know if it denoted deep thought or anger or if the thought was a lie he was concocting, a memory search for where it might be, or even of the language to figure out what she was talking about. He hadn't seemed to have any trouble at all with the language, despite his thick accent—either understanding or speaking—but that didn't necessarily mean he fully understood it. He might have rehearsed the little he'd said to them.

"You are cold?"

She would've liked to think the question hadn't been prompted by the fact that her nipples were tenting the front of her under shirt but she had a bad feeling he hadn't missed much when he'd looked her over. "A little. More importantly, I'd prefer not to stand around half-naked."

He frowned and this time she didn't doubt his confusion. "I had thought the suits were protective gear? You do not need it here. I assure you."

"They are, but I wasn't wearing anything under it," she said uncomfortably.

The comment drew his gaze to the thin undershirt and her panties again. He looked as if he was about to say something else but appeared to dismiss it. "I will escort you to the room where it was removed. Perhaps it is still there. If not, I will see if one of the women has something to offer."

A jolt went through her at the offer. Reluctance immediately descended upon her to allow him to escort her anywhere at all, but she was the one who'd insisted.

She still didn't see why he couldn't send someone for it and have it brought to her, but she didn't want to either show her reluctance to go with him or risk having her request dismissed altogether. For that matter, he seemed in some doubt that it still existed and, whether she needed

it at the moment or not, she certainly needed it if there was any chance of leaving. "Thank you," she managed finally.

He gestured toward the wall where they'd entered. Trying to ignore the shakiness in her belly, she led the way, ignoring the questioning looks her fellow crewmembers cast at her. She wasn't certain which way to go when they'd left the observation room and entered the narrow corridor and sent him a questioning look. He closed the distance and settled a hand lightly around her arm just above the elbow to guide her. The warmth of his hand sent a shiver through her and made her belly tighten more.

"You are cold?"

Sybil gritted her teeth. She was chilled, but she knew her reaction was neither from the contact of his warmth or revulsion. "A little chilled."

"We are on the dark side ... now. The temperature is still difficult to regulate when we must compensate for the excessive heat of this world."

Sybil threw him a look of surprise even though she'd intended to hide her reactions to him by keeping her face averted. "The days here are almost a year long ... Earth time."

"The facility is designed to move. We stay close to the dawn horizon and allow for brief periods of full exposure for the sake of morale, but when it begins to heat up we move into the darkness again."

Sybil digested that in silence. The suggestion that they found it depressing to always be in darkness was a clue about them. She wasn't certain if he'd intentionally revealed it or not, but she found it oddly comforting to learn that they had something in common with the aliens after all. "It is depressing to be in the dark all the time. You begin to really miss the sunlight. I've been stationed at the moon base for a couple of months now."

He flicked an assessing glance at her. "The base receives hours of sunlight every day."

It was a leading question if she'd ever heard one, but it also made it clear that they knew exactly where the base was located—no huge surprise. "True, but it isn't the same."

"As Earth?"

"Or even Mars."

He grimaced. "Nothing is the same as home."

Was he suggesting he missed his home? Or asking if she did? As intriguing as it was to consider that, they arrived at their destination at that moment and she missed the opportunity to pursue it. She halted just inside the door, looking around the dimly lit room.

"Shukala!"

She glanced at him sharply when he spoke, but the room flooded with a harsh white light that explained what he'd said before she could ask. She could see at a glance that her suit wasn't there, but she moved around the room anyway, partly to put some distance between herself and him and partly from agitation about the missing suit. "What would they've done with it?"

His lips tightened. "Very likely they would've disposed of it in the disposal chute. I was afraid of that."

Sybil stared at him in disbelief, wondering if he'd deliberately misled her to get her alone for some reason. "But ... you said they were droids! They wouldn't have done anything without being told to! I don't understand why they took my suit to start with!"

His expression hardened at the accusing note in her voice. "They are autonomous. They would be useless if they weren't."

"They removed the suit to examine you. The transporters were not designed for humans but for us. We recalibrated it using our knowledge of humans, but you were unconscious. I thought it would be best for them to examine you."

Sybil stared at him as that sank in. "It was you ... In the ship."

"Yes."

She didn't know how she felt about that. "We aren't that different," she said a little doubtfully.

He cocked one eyebrow at her. She had the feeling that he was surprised at the comment. "No. We are not, but we are not the same either." He hesitated. "Its standard procedure to dispose of possible contaminants. Very likely that is what has become of the missing suit."

That was inarguable since it was standard practice for them, as well—except she'd been decontaminated before she'd gone aboard, damn it! If they knew so much, they should've known that, too! "You're saying it's been destroyed?"

"Recycled—though not necessarily—not yet." He seemed to debate with himself. "If it is that important to you, wait here, and I will go to the disposal unit and look for it."

Sybil followed him when he turned to leave. "Why can't I go with you?"

He halted and glanced at her. She could tell just from his hesitancy that he didn't want to tell her or that, maybe, he was debating just how much he wanted her to know. Before she could try to press him, an enormous explosion somewhere close by caught them both off guard. Sybil hadn't managed to react with more than a shocked intake of breath before Anka grabbed her, shoved her against a bulkhead, and curled himself around her. She clutched at him instinctively as the explosion shook the building. "What is it?" she gasped fearfully.

"A volcanic eruption," he responded, his voice harsh with his own fear, distracted, threaded with just enough doubt that it flickered through her mind that he wasn't any more certain than she was.

She clutched him more tightly as shockwaves traveled through the wall behind her and the floor. "Oh god! Are we safe?"

"The doors seal automatically," he said absently.

Protecting each room individually, she realized, but it didn't necessarily follow that it would protect them if the room took a direct hit from a volcanic missile. She didn't know how long they huddled together before the shockwaves petered out and her focus shifted from a fearful expectation of imminent death to the body shielding hers. Little by little, though, as the fear began to subside she became more and more aware of him and less aware of her surroundings.

He didn't feel alien to her. He felt ... male, strong, protective. Surprise flickered through her when it dawned on her that he'd instinctively sought to protect her, to shield her with his own body. A tingling warmth followed that that had nothing to do with the warmth filtering through her from his warm body. She became aware of their mingling scents from the warmth they were generating, most particularly his. A wave of dizziness swept through her.

He eased away from her finally and looked down at her. She discovered when she lifted her head to look up at him that they were far closer than she'd realized and yet, once she'd met his gaze she couldn't seem to look away. She felt the heat between them magnify.

His gaze flickered over her face. "Curious?" he murmured in a deep, husky voice that sent a quivering through her.

She swallowed with an effort, commanding herself to turn away, to pull away. Reluctance to do so filled her. "Yes," she whispered.

He expelled a heavy breath, seemed to debate with himself briefly and then closed the distance between them, brushing his lips lightly along hers. She waited for revulsion to set in, tried to summon it, and then licked her dried lips, tasting him when she did and feeling an instant surge of want.

He nibbled at her lips with his, as if trying to decide if he also wanted more, and then abruptly covered her mouth. Her heart slammed into her ribcage, began to surge against it, but it wasn't fear. It should have been, but it wasn't.

There was nothing threatening about his kiss, nothing to dredge up a sense of self-preservation. His touch appealed and his taste appealed even more. She opened her mouth to him in invitation and felt a drugging wave of desire flood her the moment he slid his tongue along hers and filled her senses with himself.

It was wrong, she thought dizzily. She shouldn't feel any of the things she felt, but she was more disappointed when he pulled away than she could recall. For several moments, he met her gaze when he'd withdrawn. She found herself hoping he would want to kiss her again and then he pulled away completely, stepping away from her.

"That wasn't wise," he muttered—to himself, she thought, but he spoke English.

And he was right. It had been stupid, really stupid.

"I will take you back to the others and then see what I can find for you to wear."

She didn't argue. Wryly, she admitted she wasn't exactly cold anymore. She was far more conscious of her scanty attire than before, though.

## Chapter Four

Spencer was awake, completely alert, and bristling with hostility when they returned to the observatory. His gaze flicked over the two of them and then skimmed over her more slowly, insultingly ... accusingly. She didn't believe her 'guilt' had shown until he made her feel dirty from that look. Without glancing at Anka, she strode quickly across the observatory and into the room that had been set aside for her and Holly Rains.

Holly had already claimed one of the bunks. She was sitting up, though, wedged in one corner as if she thought she might be absorbed by the wall behind her. Her gaze wasn't accusing as Spencer's had been—Powell's, for that matter—but there was speculation in her eyes.

Sybil climbed onto the empty bunk since there was no other place to sit and drew the cover up to cover herself.

"Are you alright?"

Sybil swallowed with an effort. She didn't think so. She didn't especially want to think about what she'd done, though. "Yes. I guess. I'd hoped to get my flight suit back, but it wasn't there. Anka said the droids had probably disposed of it in case it was contaminated, but he said he'd see if it was still useable and get me something else if it wasn't."

Holly's brows rose. "*That's* where you went!"

Sybil grimaced. "Not that I think the guys won't be able to control themselves—there certainly isn't anything sexy about the t-shirt and panties!—but I'd be a lot more comfortable with clothes."

Holly nodded. "Why did they take it off, do you think? Did they ...?"

Sybil's stomach rolled, more because she knew immediately that the others were speculating about the same thing than because she felt that she had. "It was droids that examined me. I doubt anything happened."

"But you were unconscious."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sybil demanded angrily.

She could tell from the guilty look that Holly tried to hide exactly what was running through her mind. "Nothing. I'm just saying you don't know and ... maybe that's a good thing."

Sybil's lips tightened. "Suggesting they couldn't contain themselves? I doubt very seriously that they find us the least bit attractive," she said dryly, if not with complete truth. She'd felt Anka's arousal. She didn't think she was mistaken about that. "Anyway," she added, looking away, "from what he said, there are women of their species here. I can't believe they would consider fucking an unconscious woman—especially a different species and one, moreover, that they must consider of inferior intelligence given their advancement."

Shock registered on Holly's face and Sybil felt a touch of satisfaction that she'd elicited it. "There's no need for that kind of language. I find it offensive."

"Too bad," Sybil said tightly. "I'm an adult and free to say whatever the hell I like. And *I'm* offended by your insinuations. You think you're the only one entitled to be offensive?"

Anger flickered across the other woman's face. "I didn't mean to be offensive. I was just ... concerned."

Liar, Sybil thought. Titillated, more likely. "Well I appreciate that," she said caustically.

Holly's lips tightened. "We won't get anywhere being hostile to each other. We need to stick together."

Except they'd already closed ranks, leaving her on the outside. They'd decided she was 'tainted'. They'd seen her flight suit was missing and instantly drawn their own nasty conclusions, and it hadn't helped that she'd willingly followed Anka off.

Fuck her! And fuck them! "I won't argue that, but I'm damned if I can see that it's going to be much help. There are only five of us and no telling how many of them. Aside from the fact that not one of us has a damned weapon, exactly what do you think banding together is going to do? You think we can overpower them? Escape? Where the hell to? Don't tell me they conveniently brought the lander with them so we'd have a way to escape."

She could tell from the look on Holly's face that they hadn't.

"They have ships," Holly said pointedly.

Sybil uttered a laugh that lacked humor. "And you think there's a chance we could get to one, steal it, and actually pilot it home?"

"It isn't beyond the realm of possibility," she said stiffly.

"But it isn't likely either."

"What do you suggest, then?" Holly demanded.

Sybil frowned. "Negotiation. If they wanted to kill us, they could have. There's some reason they're keeping us alive."

"To study us?"

Sybil's belly clenched but she rejected the idea. "I'm not saying that isn't a possibility, but why bother? What do you think they haven't already learned? They can speak our language. They understand it and that means a lot more than simply being able to translate from their language to ours. They'd have to understand us—our customs, our civilization—all of it for the language to make sense to them. Think about it! If they didn't know what a ... home was, they wouldn't use that word and Anka did."

"He told you his name?"

Sybil looked at her in surprise. "You didn't hear that?"

Holly shook her head. "I was staying as far from him as I could and neither of you were speaking very loud. We were wondering what the conversation was about."

Sybil frowned, thinking back, but she hadn't realized that none of the others had been close by when she'd spoken to him. She'd been too focused on him, she realized. She shrugged after a moment. "He's Commander Anka l'Kartay. That's what he said anyway. I don't know why he'd lie."

"Or tell us anything."

Sybil had wondered at that herself, but she didn't acknowledge what Holly was suggesting. She didn't see any point in arguing when neither one of them really knew if he was being truthful or not.

"What else did he tell you?"

Sybil frowned, trying to recall. The truth was she'd been so on edge she couldn't remember anything very clearly. "He just said it was cool because they'd moved the facility to the dark side to cool it from the heat. He said sometimes they would pull into the sunlight because they missed home and it was ... depressing to always be in the dark."

Holly didn't say anything for several moments. "It seems like he said quite a lot."

She was fishing and it irritated Sybil. "Yes, we took a stroll around the facilities and he explained everything—even told me how many soldiers were stationed here and where they were stationed," she said sarcastically. "He was just being ... polite."

"If you say so."

Anger flickered through Sybil. "Why don't you just go ahead and let me in on the workings of your mind? I like to know what I'm being accused of. It makes it a little fucking easier to defend myself."

"You don't have to be so defensive. It was just a comment."

With undertones. Sybil wondered if Dr. Rains just thought she was too stupid to catch the subtle insults and insinuations. "He was courteous enough to take me to look for my clothes," she responded tightly. "I don't see that responding with hostility will get us anywhere."

"I'm not sure being friendly is a good idea."

There it was! The accusation she'd been expecting. "Why don't you handle things the way you think you should and let me worry about my behavior? You aren't my mother or my superior."

Her lips tightened. "I'm just saying it could put you in more danger—all of us."

Sybil stared at her in disbelief. "You're telling me you think being friendly is *more* dangerous than being hostile?"

"I don't think being hostile is a good idea either. Being cautious *is*."

Sybil sighed, leaning her head back against the wall. She supposed a lot of her anger was aimed at herself. Being cautious *was* the best idea—not being friendly to the point of offering an opening for sexual congress! Maybe it had been an unconscious prompting of her survival instincts?

And maybe not. She just damned well didn't know. All she did know was that her reaction to him disturbed her more than his reaction to her ... if possible.

She dismissed it, tried to eject the memory from her mind even though she knew she wasn't going to be able to. So it was stupid! It wasn't as if she didn't know that herself. In any case, Holly Rains was just worried about her own ass! The comment about endangering all of them was telling and at least part of it, she thought, might be hostility because she thought Sybil might be trying to use sex to save herself and it might not work for her.

Not that she thought for a moment that it *would* for her!

So maybe, deep down in her subconscious mind, she'd resorted to the age old weapon women had always tried to use to protect themselves, but it certainly hadn't been conscious!

What worried her was that it might not have been that subconscious prompting. She hadn't really been aware of any attraction to him. She hadn't acknowledged it anyway, but there was no getting around the fact that she was *acutely* aware of him. She'd put it down to fear, understandable fear, and yet even though she'd been scared she couldn't recall even a moment of being repulsed. Shouldn't she have been?

Alright, she *had* been scared shitless when he'd first entered her cell, but it had been mostly the lighting. That had added an eeriness to his alien appearance that had further unnerved her, and it had vanished as soon as she'd seen him in full light.

She could've understood that better if she'd discovered he looked like a human. He didn't—close, but definitely alien. The impression, she realized, was almost cat-like. Not that he looked like a cat and she couldn't think of any feature in particular that gave her that impression, and yet, overall, it was there and it should have bothered her even if it didn't repulse her.

It certainly shouldn't have appealed to her and yet the truth was, he was fascinating—exotic in a way that was a lot closer to appealing than repulsive. She would've liked to think it was just the fact that he was the first alien she'd ever encountered. She knew that was probably part of it—and completely understandable. The problem was, that wasn't the only level of appeal—scientific curiosity. His *maleness* appealed to her—his build. He was tall—very tall, well over six feet in height, she was sure, muscular—in a raw-boned sort of way, as if he should have been a good bit heavier—but his build was still undeniably appealing to her.

Maybe that was partially responsible for the sense that he was cat-like? The leanness? Maybe. The thick mane of hair that fell to his shoulders and grew down his forehead in a wedge-shaped V added to it, certainly. It was no widow's peak, that was for sure, and his hair was gorgeous, thick and streaked with gold, brown, and dark auburn.

It reminded her of a lion's mane, she realized abruptly and maybe that was why her mind said 'cat-like'? The hair and the lean build?

Even his eyes, she realized, were oddly cat-like, slightly tilted, heavy lidded—like a lion.

He had striations on his tan skin she thought abruptly, lighter streaks like stripes along his forearms, even along the column of his neck.

The image that instantly rose in her mind with that memory was ... disturbing, mostly because it was undeniably arousing.

She lifted her head and looked at her roommate. "You're right—caution." She hesitated. "That means in all dealings with them, you know."

"What are you getting at?"

Sybil considered whether she should say anything at all and finally decided, as long as Holly had thought it was alright to lecture her, tit for tat. "We don't know anything about them—and I haven't seen anything to make me believe they're aggressive or cruel—but we don't know that they're a lot different from us either."

"Meaning?"

Sybil gave her a look. "It's safer to be passive."

Holly stared at her blankly for several moments before that sank in. The look of horror and revulsion that crossed her features made her sorry to have spoken at all, but she thought the woman should try to prepare herself mentally. Captive women always had to worry about rape. "I don't believe they would," she added hurriedly. "I'm just saying, it's safer to be passive. It's usually more an act of aggression than anything else and fighting is the wrong thing to do. It only encourages them to more violence."

"Did he ...?"

Sybil resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "No. He didn't try anything." She wasn't sure it would've constituted rape if he had, because she was uncomfortably aware that he wouldn't have had to try very hard to convince her, but that was beside the point. "I have the feeling he hasn't really decided what to do with us ... yet, but I don't think he'd encourage that or allow it—if he knew. We don't know that everyone agrees with him, though."

"You said he was the commander!"

Sybil did roll her eyes that time. "Do you think the base commander is aware of everything that happens on the base? Yes, he would probably hear about it, but that wouldn't do you any good—not if it was after the fact."

"What kind of creature *is* he?" Holly demanded as if she hadn't heard a word she'd said.



Anger surged through Sybil but she tamped it, examined it, and realized why she'd felt it. "I think he's a good man." The kind that would try to protect a complete stranger from harm by shielding her with his own body.

\* \* \* \*

Anka cursed himself for being ten kinds of fool all the way down to the command center. He arrived to find chaos, however, and that, thankfully, distracted his mind for a time. "What happened?"

"The volcano in sector ten blew!" Loka, the captain on duty reported.

"I deduced that," Anka said dryly. "It was too close to be anything else. What's the damage?"

"Damage to the shutters on the southern observation room, Sir! The translucent is cracked but holding. I don't know how long it will continue, though, with the atmospheric pressure. We sealed the room off and I sent a crew out to repair the damage to the shutters as soon as the volcano ceased to bombard us."

Anka nodded grimly. "What's the estimated time on patching it?"

"Within the hour, Sir."

Anka relaxed fractionally. "Send another crew out to examine the hull for any other damage. We can't afford a breach." He scanned the other workstations in the room finally settling his attention on Cerek. "Any damage to any of the terra-forming units?"

Cerek saluted. "I'm still checking, sir. The unit that lies between us and the volcano seems to be working alright, but there was quite a bit of debris deposited around it and there's interference in communications—which could be damage to the unit or simply damage to communications. We need to site check it. Unfortunately, the conditions aren't safe right now for flight and there's a lava river cutting us off from it."

Anka nodded. "Ready a team to go out as soon as it's deemed safe enough. No heroics. We can afford to lose anybody." As he turned to go, he met up with Onur, one of the civilian engineers attached to the project. His expression was eloquent of doom and Anka felt his belly clench in anticipation. "Yes?"

"We lost at least six droids at the new construction site."

Anka ground his teeth to keep from cursing long and loudly. "You're certain?"

Onur looked uncomfortable. "We lost communications with them. No, I'm not completely certain, but it seems likely."

Anka nodded grimly. "Inform me immediately if you manage to reestablish communications. Otherwise, you'll need to take a team out when it's possible to retrieve the units to see if there's anything salvageable."

Onur looked uncomfortable. "I think the damage to the construction site was pretty heavy, as well."

"Very likely that will be more a matter of wasted man-hours than resources. Let me know when you have a full report on it."

He paused in the corridor outside of the command center, trying to decide where to go next. Remembering abruptly that he'd offered to try to retrieve Sybil's flight suit, he headed down to the recycling center. It wasn't difficult to find. The materials it was made of were not like anything that they had. Beyond that, there wasn't actually a lot that made it to the recycler. No one was willing to give anything up as long as there was some use to be had from it.

He hesitated as he retrieved it, an image of her in the bulky flight suit rising to his mind. He supposed it served a purpose, but she didn't need it now, regardless of what she thought. She

certainly needed something, however. From the moment he'd seen her in the short top and briefs that left her more bare than clothed, he had been on fire. He'd refused to consciously acknowledge it, but he wouldn't have done anything as stupid as he had if he'd had an ounce of self-control or resistance. And he wouldn't have as much control now as he'd had before when it was only his imagination working upon him.

It wasn't that he regretted the impulse to try to protect her. Although he acknowledged that it would've been a useless gesture if the hull actually had been breached, the impulse to do so was telling in itself. He hadn't considered that it would be useless. He hadn't considered anything beyond trying to protect her.

Until he'd gathered her into the dubious shelter of his body. Even his fear that they would both be crushed by the atmospheric pressure and suffocated by Venus' toxic fumes hadn't been enough to allow him to completely detach his mind from her then, though.

He hadn't expected to see interest in her eyes when he'd looked down at her despite the way she'd clung to him. He'd expected to see fear, perhaps dawning revulsion when she realized who, and what, was holding her. Maybe it was the unexpectedness of it that had thrown him completely off kilter, but that was little comfort ... now.

He should've pulled away from her.

He didn't even know why he'd felt the urge to kiss her and yet that was exactly what had popped into his mind. It was an Earth mating ritual, not theirs and, as aware of he had been of it, he had never been particularly curious about it, couldn't recall that he'd ever wondered, until he'd found himself looking down at Sybil, what it must feel like when they did that.

It had felt almost like the act of love-making itself, *more* intimate in some strange way that he couldn't quite grasp than many times when he actually had made love to a woman.

He tried to crush the thought and banish it. She wouldn't consider taking him as a lover even if it was possible, and it wasn't—not what he wanted, in any case. She wouldn't understand their customs.

He didn't completely understand the Earth customs, if it came to that, although he knew the mechanics of their various liaisons. With them they were either lovers or mates, together or not. They took lovers, but not in the way his people did. There was no real relationship. There was no expectation that they would form a long term bond, perhaps have children together. They were merely lovers and free to go to another whenever they chose. Their lovers had no rights, no expectations beyond the moment.

Not that lovers on his own world were under any hard and fast obligation to cleave to one another, particularly in the budding of romance. Part of the excitement of it was learning one another and, unfortunately, that also led to disappointment on occasion and one or the other would decide they simply weren't suited.

The chances were that Sybil would even if she understood completely. They were too different. Where would they find a meeting of minds, hearts, and interests?

It was far better not to think about it—especially now. He was too ... needy, little though he liked to acknowledge it. He'd lost too much, been severed from his roots, and he would not be able to handle disappointment well if she rejected him.

He needed to focus on the good of all, on trying to unravel the political mess of preserving what they had left against the aggression of the Earth people. He had to keep his wits about him.

There could be no harm in looking, however, of taking pleasure in the joy of living that only desire for a beautiful woman could engender. For a little while, he could enjoy the pulse

pounding excitement of flirtation with a desirable woman who, if not similarly enchanted with him at least seemed curious. He could fantasize, as long as he was discreet and kept a tight rein on himself.

It would be playing with fire. He knew it would, but the urge was too compelling to completely ignore it. For the first time since the disaster on their home world, he actually felt as if he was alive not merely existing and, as grateful as he was to be a survivor, it wasn't enough.

His decision made, he carried Sybil's suit to the recycling unit and resolutely stuffed it into the hopper. When he'd selected the design that most appealed to him, he programmed the processor and ordered it to be delivered to her once finished. Noting the time to completion, he left the recycling center and went to check the progress of the 'feast' he'd ordered prepared. It seemed propitious that it was expected to be served within an hour after she would receive her new clothing.

Resisting the urge to return immediately to his quarters to examine his own skimpy wardrobe for something that might appeal to her and spend the time while he waited grooming in an effort to attain whatever perfection he could, he headed to his office to review the details of the latest disaster. His dress uniform and a bath would be sufficient. Anything more and the entire populace of the fucking base would be speculating that he was serious in his courtship.

\* \* \* \*

Sybil had mixed feelings when Holly left to join the others in the observatory. She hadn't particularly welcomed Holly's company but it had been a distraction from her thoughts and once she left there was no distraction. Beyond that, she strongly suspected the reason Holly had left was to report to the others and discuss what she might have been doing when she was alone with the aliens.

She didn't like the sense that she'd become an outsider rather than a part of the team, but she wasn't sure that joining the group would dispel what seemed to be a widening chasm. Even if she'd thought it would help, she didn't feel comfortable sitting with them in her underwear. She hadn't liked the way Spencer had looked at her.

The arrival some time later of clothing was almost a relief, regardless of the fact that it was delivered by one of the creepy little gray droids. The discovery that it wasn't her suit as she'd thought dispelled the relief very quickly, though. Shocked at first when she examined it, anger very quickly took precedence. It *was* the material. She was sure of that. It just wasn't her suit.

She wasn't sure what the hell it was! She flung it down on the bunk as soon as she realized it wasn't what she'd thought, holding her anger inside with an effort and mentally berating Anka and the aliens in general.

"They brought your flight suit?"

Sybil glared at Holly unwelcomingly. "What's left of it," she responded tightly.

Curiosity flickered in the woman's eyes. "What's left of it?"

Sybil's lips tightened. "Clearly, it had already been recycled."

Holly moved closer and examined the clothing. Sybil watched her resentfully, but refrained from blasting the woman with her temper with an effort. "It looks like a skirt and some sort of top."

Sybil slipped to the edge of the bed and took it from the other woman. "I might as well put it on—not that it will be any protection, damn it! At least I don't have to run around in my underwear, though."

As simple as the garments appeared to be, it took her a few minutes to figure out how to put them on and she wasn't comfortable when she had. The top had sleeves, but it was backless, which meant removing her t-shirt or looking like an idiot or a prude. It sure as hell wasn't going to keep her warm! And she'd forgotten to ask for her boots! Of course, *those* would've looked absolutely lovely with the outfit!

She looked down at it when she'd finished dressing and was dismayed to discover she looked almost as damned naked as she had before! The top barely covered her front, wrapping only partially around her sides and she had a bad feeling she had side-boob showing. The skirt went to her ankles, but it was slit damned near to the waist of her damned panties on both sides!

Was this what *their* women wore?

"It looks ... uh ... well, it's certainly sexy!"

Sybil glared at her. "Thanks!" she muttered. Resisting the urge to fling it off and cover up in bed again, she stalked from the room. Her arrival in the observatory almost coincided with Anka's return and created a sensation. Powell, Spencer, and Kushbu turned to look at her, did a double-take and then simply gaped at her. She could already feel her face turning red when Anka stepped through the door and came to a halt as if he'd slammed into an invisible wall.

She didn't think she'd ever in her life been as keenly aware of her femininity or as uncomfortable about it. The urge to retreat was strong and instantly at war with the urge to pretend nonchalance she didn't feel and simply find a place to sit—assuming she could without exposing herself. The end result was that she was as frozen in place as a manikin and unable to decide whether to retreat or not.

Powell seemed to recover first, but he looked like he couldn't decide whether to be outraged or pleased that she'd been given something to wear. He flicked an assessing, almost possessive glare in Anka's direction.

Almost as if the three men were mentally linked, Spencer and Kushbu also looked at Anka. She could almost see their hackles rise like a pack of cur dogs that had all spotted a female in heat at the same time—and a bigger dog that seemed intent on marking his territory first.

It was the most bizarre, unnerving situation she'd ever found herself in. Not one of her crewmembers had ever looked at her, or behaved, in any way as if they had any interest in her as a woman. She didn't think they were now. It was pure territorialism because the 'other' dog wasn't a member of the pack.

Ignoring the glares of the male crewmembers, although Sybil couldn't believe he wasn't well aware of the hostility radiating from them, Anka finally bowed slightly at the waist. "I have come to invite you all to dine with us," he said with stiff formality.

## Chapter Five

"I see you brought a fairly sizable escort. Is this an invitation? Or an order?" Powell said grimly, making no attempt to hide his hostility.

Sybil hadn't actually noticed that Anka wasn't alone until Powell's comment. She felt the heat in her cheeks that was just fading flood back in a flash as she shot a quick glance behind him and noticed two men just outside the door.

"It is an invitation that you may decline if it's your wish. If you prefer, I will have food sent to you here," Anka responded coolly.

Powell studied him for a long moment. "In that case, we appreciate the invitation."

Spencer and Kushbu both stiffened and shot him a questioning look. He shook his head faintly, acknowledging he knew they had questions without answering them. Sybil sent him a shocked look herself, feeling the beginnings of anger that he'd arbitrarily accepted for all of them. She didn't give a damn if he was her commanding officer! This situation didn't fall under his purview, damn it!

She wasn't about to add to the tension, however, by arguing the matter. She was uncomfortable enough, anyway, that she didn't particularly relish the idea of drawing more attention to herself.

After glancing around at the people standing like statues waiting to be animated, she moved toward Anka. It broke the spell holding everyone. She saw Anka and the men with him visibly relax. Powell and Spencer surged forward, as if to cut her off before she could reach Anka, and Kushbu, remembering his manners, approached his colleague and offered an arm.

She wasn't certain if Anka was mimicking Kushbu or if the gesture was familiar to him from his own customs, but he offered his own arm as escort. The tension fairly crackled in the air. Ignoring it, she took the offering. "Thank you."

He nodded. "My pleasure."

The response was coolly formal, almost mechanical, and Sybil abruptly felt a surge of amusement. It took an effort to resist the urge to comment on the warmth of the invitation, but she made the effort. "Thank you for the ... uh ... clothing, too."

She would've preferred her damned flight suit, but she didn't see any benefit in behaving in as surly a manner as the others.

"I apologize that I wasn't able to return the suit. You are not particularly comfortable in this attire?"

She managed a weak smile. "It's ... uh ...." Better than nothing? Not very polite, even if it was the way she felt. "Very pretty."

"The beauty lies in the wearer."

Sybil shot a startled look up at his face and discovered that he was studying her without pretense of hiding his appreciation. Her face heated up again. She cleared her throat. "Thank you."

His face relaxed almost into a smile. "The design is favored by the women of Sumptra." During their courtship dances, but he had no intention of telling her that. He supposed, wryly,

that he should have chosen the loose trousers and tunics favored for labor, but he couldn't regret it when she was such a pleasure to look at.

"Well, that's something to look forward to," Spencer muttered in a perfectly audible voice that made Anka stiffen. "You have a problem with us admiring your women? Or you think that privilege should be all yours?" Spencer added when Anka turned to look at him, dropping any pretense of veiling his hostility.

Anka narrowed his eyes at Spencer. Powell cut in before either man could say more, however. "Sumptra ... Is that the name of your home world? Or your country?"

"Sumptra was ... united long ago. It is the name of the home world."

Sybil frowned at the slight hesitation, wondering what, if anything, it denoted. Maybe nothing more than the fact that he was struggling with anger over Spencer's deliberately provoking comments? She might have dismissed it completely except that she noticed that the guards sent to escort them both flicked surprised glances at him.

So he was lying, she decided. She just didn't know what he was lying about. Unification? Or something else?

She was still mulling it over when they apparently reached their destination. A door slid silently open as they approached, revealing a far larger room than she'd seen before ... filled to capacity with the men and women of Sumptra. Sybil's heart instantly leapt and began to pound out her distress.

Anka settled his hand over hers where it clutched his arm so tightly, drawing her gaze.

"There is no danger here, *nodia*, however ... fearsome we might appear to you."

Sybil felt some of her tension ease ... briefly.

Spencer uttered a derisive snort. She knew it was him. Anka fixed him with a cool look but refused to rise to the bait.

As oddly comforted as she was by Anka's assurance, Sybil was never more glad of anything than she was when he'd escorted her to a seat and she could collapse gracelessly onto it. Holly settled with a heavy plop onto the seat just a few chairs down from her, making it clear that her knees had also given out. It took a supreme effort even to make a show of unconcern as she glanced around what looked very much like any other military mess hall she'd eaten in—except that every face was alien, not merely the face of a stranger.

By the time the scrape of chairs as everyone settled had died down, Sybil had managed to calm her racing heart and ceased to feel as if she might faint and fall face first into the dish in front of her—which held what appeared to be some sort of soup.

Instead of settling himself, Anka addressed the crowd—in his language. She exchanged an uncomfortable glance with the others, wondering, as she knew they were, what it was that he was saying. Almost as if Anka had read her mind, he switched to English. "I was reminding everyone that you are guests and should be treated accordingly."

It had certainly taken a lot of their words to say so little, Sybil thought wryly, wondering when they'd become 'guests' or if it was just a polite euphemism for prisoners.

"Are we?" Powell asked.

Anka lifted his brows at him. "I extended an invitation. You accepted."

Sybil studied his face, wondering if he was being deliberately evasive.

"We usually let our guests leave when the party's over," Spencer said with patently false joviality.

Anka didn't try to veil his dislike. "And you shall ... when the party's over."

"So ... will this be like an extended house party? Or will we be leaving soon?"

"Spencer," Powell growled under his breath. "Shut the fuck up or I'll have you up on charges when we get back."

"You mean *if*, right?"

"Tell me Commander Karshay," Holly broke in hurriedly, "what is Sumka like?"

Anka winced when she murdered both his name and the name of his home world. "His name is I'Kartay," Sybil murmured, "and his world is called Sumptra."

Holly stared at her blankly, blinking her eyes rapidly. "Oh! I am *so* sorry! I was never very good with names. Especially... uh ... foreign names. Just ask Dr. Kusha."

"Kushbu," the doctor corrected her tightly.

Anka smiled with obvious effort. "Beautiful to us ... naturally."

Holly gaped at him as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

Sybil lifted her spoon, stared at the liquid in front of her, and braced herself. Almost as if the others were puppets connected by the same strings, the others abruptly turned their attention to their own food. Dipping her spoon ever so slightly into the liquid Sybil brought it up to taste it and discovered that Anka was watching her.

Braving discovery, she slipped the spoon into her mouth.

"It isn't poison, I assure you," he murmured near her ear.

Goosebumps leapt to life along the side of her neck and raced toward her breasts, making her nipples pucker and stand erect. Sybil flicked a quick look downward, hoping against hope that the reaction wasn't as noticeable as it felt. It didn't make her happy to discover her hope was in vain. She swallowed a little convulsively. "It's good."

"You could not have tasted it with that microscopic spoonful."

Sybil sent him a quick look and discovered his gaze was fixed somewhere in the region of the 'twin towers'. He met her gaze when he felt hers. "Would you like to exchange bowls? I should warn you, though, that I'm not terribly popular around here."

Sybil gaped at him until it dawned on her that he was joking. It surprised a chuckle out of her—actually something more embarrassingly close to a hysterical giggle. "In that case, I think I'll keep my bowl, thank you. Hopefully, no one dislikes me enough to poison me."

She'd been too on edge since her arrival to realize just how hungry she was, she discovered. The soup was hot and good even though it wasn't like anything she'd ever tasted before and it seemed to prime her for more. "It's very good." She glanced at him in surprise. "Don't tell me what it is."

He chuckled. "You wouldn't know if I did."

"I guess not," she admitted wryly.

Thankfully, the rest of the crew seemed to enjoy it as much as she did. They focused on consuming the broth and by the time they'd finished seemed far more relaxed.

The aliens, she noticed with some amusement, also seemed less tense. Maybe they weren't as different as they appeared on the outside? Anka had shown he had a sense of humor that she could appreciate, patience in the face of antagonism, thoughtfulness and generosity. These were traits she'd always considered strictly human, and on the high end of the scale at that. Maybe it was pure conceit to believe no other species could possibly have or understand these things as humans did?

The thought prompted a question in her mind and she turned to Anka as one of the 'creepy' aliens removed her empty bowl. "What do you call yourselves?"

His brows rose at the question, speculation flickering in his eyes.

"I guess that was too general. I meant what name do you have for your species?"

He nodded understanding. "*Ferils*."

"It isn't my field," Holly broke into the conversation, "but I'm very curious as to what sort of animals you evolved from."

"You have none on your home world."

"Really?" Spencer said. "You remind me of a cat."

Anger suffused Sybil. She'd certainly thought so, too, but he was going out of his way to be insulting and rude. "You have the worst manners of anybody it's ever been my misfortune to know," she said tightly. "We're guests ...."

"We're captives," Spencer shot back at her. "I don't feel like playing nice with the enemy."

"He's right," Anka interrupted. "The felines of your world are similar."

"Well," Holly put in, "I don't see that that's any more insulting than the fact that ours are primates. It doesn't mean we're ape-like anymore ... not all of us anyway."

"What the fuck do you mean by that?" Spencer demanded.

Holly sent him a look that was part uneasiness and part anger. "It means I don't appreciate your rudeness any more than Lieutenant Hunter. However we got here, we've been extended the courtesy of being treated like guests and I appreciate it. I think you've adequately expressed your objections."

Before Spencer could verbally attack her, Powell intervened. "I'm going to second her opinion, Corporal Spencer and remind you that I've already given warning. I'm going to consider any further outbursts from you as a mutinous disregard of your superior's orders. Stand down, or I will certainly place charges against you at the earliest opportunity."

Spencer stared at him sullenly for several moments and finally shrugged. "Yes, Sir."

The tension that time lasted well into the main course, but whatever it was they'd been served was as delicious as the soup. Sybil was still angry, however, that Spencer had been so determined to cause friction when they'd had an opportunity to foster good relations. Maybe he was right and they were all wrong. Maybe they were nothing but prisoners. Maybe the ferils, as they called themselves, despised them as a species and there was no hope of any sort of friendly relations, but she realized she simply didn't believe that.

If they'd been focused on ridding the solar system of humans, they'd had every opportunity. Hadn't they?

"I almost hate to bring it up ... under the circumstances, but I am curious. You said before that the scientists had developed the droids because they'd believed they would be less ... disturbing to us?"

Anka nodded. "Ironical I suppose."

Sybil smiled faintly since she was the one who'd pointed out how creepy they seemed to her. "I was wondering how long they had been studying us?"

Something flickered in his eyes. He shrugged. "Our people visited your world many times."

"Why?" Kushbu asked curiously.

Anka smiled faintly. "I'm not a scientist. You'd have to ask them."

Sybil frowned, certain he knew and simply didn't want to say. "I suppose you've found a lot of different species? Explored many worlds?"

"Yes, many, and some fairly advanced civilizations."

"And you've ... colonized many worlds?" she asked tentatively.



Anka seemed to wrestle with himself. "The worlds that will bear life have. We've never considered it ... just to take what is already claimed by those who evolved on a world." He smiled faintly. "Animals are amazingly territorial—even those of higher intelligence. We respect that."

Spencer made a derisive sound that made Sybil long to be close enough to punch him in the face. Anka's lips tightened, but he seemed determined to ignore any provocation Spencer tossed at him.

Alien or not, Sybil had to admit his tolerance, whatever his motivation, commanded respect.

She was fairly certain he had some ulterior motive for behaving so graciously. She'd seen a look in his eyes more than once that made it clear that he was keeping his temper on a tight rein and that he wouldn't have minded knocking Spencer's teeth down his throat otherwise.

She was pretty convinced he could do it, too. As lean as he was, there was very little on his tall frame beyond muscle. Of course, Spencer was built like a tank, but he was also far shorter and she doubted he outweighed Anka.

"I have offered the troops a special treat tonight," Anka announced as the droids collected the remains of their meal. "It's been a while since they were allowed much in the way of recreation or socializing. You are welcome to stay and take part as guests, or you may return to your quarters, whichever you prefer."

Sybil's belly tightened with uneasiness. She wasn't certain if it was because she was unnerved at the thought of mingling with the *ferils*, if she was worried about what their idea of fun might entail, or if it was because she was afraid of what Spencer might do, but she didn't know how to respond.

"Corporal Spencer would like to return to quarters," Powell said, giving Spencer a hard look. "I'd like to stay."

Holly looked as uneasy as she felt but she relaxed fractionally at the discovery that Spencer wouldn't be allowed to try to stir up the animosity of the *ferils*. She smiled a little tremulously. "Thank you. I believe I'd like to stay, as well."

She still looked anything but thrilled and Sybil wondered if she'd decided to stay to try to be polite, because she was interested in observing on a scientific level, or if she simply didn't want to be stuck with Spencer. When Kushbu expressed a similar desire to stay, though, she realized she certainly didn't want to be alone with Spencer, even if she was still wary of joining the *ferils*.

When Anka sent her a questioning look, therefore, she smiled and expressed her appreciation at the invitation.

Spencer was sullen as he was escorted out, but once he'd gone Sybil discovered she was able to relax ... even surrounded by the 'enemy', as he'd put it.

They rose from their seats when everyone else did, moving out of the way and watching a little uneasily as the troops cleared the room, stacking most of the tables and chairs against the wall and then setting a line of chairs out so that anyone who wanted to could simply sit and watch.

Anka stood stiffly erect, his hands clasped behind his back, watching the soldiers as they cleared the room and set it up for whatever it was they were about to do. Sybil divided her time between watching what was going on and studying Anka when she thought no one would notice.

It was the first time she'd seen any of the *ferils* besides him. She was embarrassed to admit, even to herself, that she'd more than half suspected that she wouldn't be able to tell one from another. He truly was impressive, handsome even among his own people, though.

Of course, she supposed their concept of handsome might be entirely different from hers, but from her point of view, he was ... magnificent. She wasn't altogether sure it was entirely his looks, however. There was no doubt that he was handsome and well built, even compared to the physical perfection of the other soldiers, who were no doubt also very fit for their species due to their profession. She supposed it was partly due to his position of power, but she actually hadn't thought much about that—or didn't think she had.

She thought it was his personality more than anything else. She couldn't help but admire the traits she'd seen in him even while she wondered if she'd seen the 'real' Anka at all. For all she knew he might be an excellent actor, playing a role entirely for their benefit.

He'd admitted he knew a great deal about them—his facility with their language was proof even if he hadn't—but she had to wonder if it went well beyond that. He hadn't wanted to tell them any specifics about how long they'd studied humans, but they must have gathered a lot of data over the years. They must have studied the human psychology exhaustively.

Then again, even humans had trouble understanding other humans. Was it possible for a people so different to understand an entirely different species?

She discovered when she emerged from her reverie that she was not only staring directly at Anka, he was staring back, a faintly quizzical expression on his face.

He moved closer, coming to stand beside her, but when he spoke he included her entire group. "This is festival, a custom that goes back many generations among my people. It's celebrated at the beginning of each season—Sumptra has four as the Earth does."

Holly looked delighted. "We have pagan rituals that we still observe for the seasons."

A glint of amusement entered his eyes. "You do?" he prompted, although Sybil had the feeling he was well aware of it.

"Well," Holly said depreciatingly, "I don't suppose exactly the same. The beliefs of so many cultures have blended together until it's rather a hodgepodge—a very loose marking of the seasons with ritual. And so many new holidays have been added that celebrate other things, but a lot of the holidays we celebrate now had their roots in pagan rituals."

He nodded. "Ours are a celebration of life and renewal, an appreciation for what each new season brings. It is a time for choosing lovers."

Holly gaped at him in horror.

Sybil whipped her head so quickly to stare at him that she popped a joint in her neck.

His lips twitched. "No one expects any of you to take part," he murmured, his voice shaking with amusement, "Although you are certainly welcome to do so if you would like to."

Powell shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe we shouldn't have stayed," he murmured.

"Maybe I should explain," Anka countered. "You are not about to witness what you would call an orgy. The song and dance is a courtship ritual, but there is no obligation for anyone to chose. There is simply the opportunity to do so, and everyone takes part in them—even elders who no longer have any interest in courting or taking lovers."

Holly cleared her throat, obviously torn between scientific curiosity and a natural shyness that made her uncomfortable with the subject. "But the festival is how ... uh ... when you ... uh ... mate? And then you choose another at the next festival?"

"Sometimes. Those who have no lover, or who are unhappy with the one they chose before, may find another who appeals to them more. For those who have found a lover they wish

to stay with, it's a time to renew their pledge to one another, to enjoy the excitement of that first meeting all over again."

Sybil didn't know about the others, but she was still confused. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of asking him to explain in more detail, however. Fortunately, Holly managed to overcome her own discomfort.

"Then you're saying that you don't have marriage as we do? Or is this something else?"

Anka shrugged. "We do not have marriage as you do." He frowned thoughtfully and finally smiled. "It's rather more like an endless honeymoon. Lovers never live together as your people do. Our blood bonds are strong and we stay with them, with the family we were born in to. Each night males go to their lovers and each morning we return to our own homes."

Powell looked intrigued.

He would, Sybil thought sourly. "I suppose that would keep things fresh," she said wryly, "None of the tedium of day to day life."

Anka's eyes gleamed with more than amusement as he studied her. He shrugged. "It has worked for our people for many generations. We are rarely lonely and always aware that if we fail our lovers we will not be welcome to return and they will choose another."

Sybil stared at him while that slowly sank in. "The women choose."

Surprise flickered across his features. "Of course."

"You have a matriarchal society," Holly exclaimed with sudden comprehension.

"Naturally. As I said—blood bonds—and there is no surer way to follow them. In any case, it is the mother who makes the home."

Sybil and Holly both glanced at Kushbu and Powell with amusement to see how they'd taken that news. Both men looked disbelieving, irritated, and uncomfortable. Sybil could see they were regretting the decision to stay. She discovered, however, that she felt a good deal better about her own decision, not nearly as intimidated by the fact that the males in the room outnumbered the females by about six or seven to one.

There were a surprising number of women for all that considering that it was a military gathering. She wouldn't have thought, given what he'd said about their society, that women would be inclined to want to join the military. It sounded as if, on their world, they held a great deal of power.

Maybe that in itself explained it, though? With power came responsibility. Or maybe it was just customary in their society for all young people, male and female, to serve?

That didn't seem to fit, however, not when the men outnumbered the women—unless there was simply an imbalance of the ratio of men to women on their world? She might have speculated on it longer except that the first strains of music began to play and the soldiers began to form into groups.

The music was lively and so was the dance. It reminded her strongly of old fashioned country dances she'd seen in old vids, although, not surprisingly, neither the steps or the movements were like anything she'd seen. By the time it ended, the dancers were breathless and relaxed enough to smile and talk with one another animatedly.

"Would you care to try it?" Anka asked politely when the next song began and the dancers began to form up once more.

Sybil grimaced. "I don't think I could. I don't know how to dance like that."

"No one expects you to know it."

Sybil chewed her lip, wavering, but it did look like fun. "Promise not to laugh?"

He grinned at her. "I give you my word."

She glanced uncertainly at Powell. He flicked a look at Anka and shrugged. Taking that as permission to participate, Sybil allowed Anka to lead her out to join the closest group. She discovered it was a lot more invigorating than she'd expected, but she was pleased that she managed to follow the steps fairly well. Breathless by the time the song ended, she was more than happy to find a chair and collapse. Anka followed her but disappeared as soon as she sat down. He returned with a glass of water while she was searching the sea of dancers for the rest of her crew who'd disappeared.

She took the glass gratefully. "I'm not nearly as fit as I thought I was," she murmured ruefully.

"I instructed them to turn up the cooling. It's cool enough ordinarily, but we rarely engage in anything quite this vigorous."

For some reason the comment instantly connected in Sybil's mind with vigorous sex. She wasn't certain why unless it was his conversation of before. Ignoring the blush that gave away her thoughts, she smiled at the humor in his voice. "You don't have to stay with me. I'll be happy to sit here and catch my breath."

"I'll be happy to sit with you and catch my breath. I'm not as young as I once was."

Sybil sent him a searching look, surprised to realize it hadn't even occurred to her to wonder what his age might be. He looked young, but how did they look when they *were* older? She supposed, after a little thought, that he couldn't be very young or he wouldn't have attained the rank he held.

He grimaced at the speculation in her eyes. "As it happens, I'm in my prime. That was meant to be humorous."

Sybil chuckled. "And wasted on a human. A *feril* would've known immediately that you were joking."

Something gleamed in his eyes. "Perhaps—maybe not. Maybe I look very youthful for my age?"

"And maybe you look older than you actually are?" she suggested, smiling.

He studied her face. "Maybe."

"How old do you think I am?"

His gaze flickered over her face. "Oh, that's completely immaterial to me as long as you're breedable," he said lightly.

Sybil gaped at him, feeling her face redden.

He chuckled. "I am fascinated by the way your face changes colors whenever you're disconcerted. You do realize that?"

"You mean you weren't serious?" she asked doubtfully.

"I didn't say that," he responded, his lips curling in a smile.

"So ... you were serious?"

"I usually am."

Disconcerted, still uncertain of whether he was joking or not, Sybil studied his face. "You are, aren't you?" she said finally.

It was his turn to look disconcerted. He recovered quickly. "So I'm told. Are you ready to dance again?"

Sybil did a mental inventory and decided she might be able to handle one more dance without passing out ... if she rested a little longer. "The next one."

Nodding, he settled back to watch the dancers.

"Exactly how is it that this works?" Sybil asked after a moment.

He looked a question, but she didn't believe for a moment that he didn't know what she was asking. "The courting you told us about?" she prompted.

"You haven't noticed?" he countered.

She shook her head.

He leaned closer. "Do you see the young man facing Dr. Rains?"

Sybil searched the dancers until she spotted Holly. "Not really. He has his back to us."

"Wait for the turn of the dance."

She studied them, watching the man he'd pointed out intently. Finally the steps carried the group into a half turn where she could see both Holly and the man opposite her in profile. She frowned. "I still don't see ...."

"But his attention is entirely on her. He waits until she finally notices his prowess in the dance steps and then he searches for a smile of encouragement."

Holly finally looked up, did a double take when she discovered the man in front of her was staring at her pointedly, turned first white as a sheet and then as red as fire. Sybil clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle a snort of laughter. "Poor man! He's been slighted."

Anka chuckled. "Ah ... if he were human, perhaps. We *ferils* are made of sterner stuff. He'll try again."

Sybil looked at him, smiling faintly. "That's all the encouragement you need? A smile?" she asked teasingly.

His eyes darkened. "It's a certain smile we look for, a look in the eyes. When a woman looks at a man a certain way it's an invitation."

Sybil felt her face heating up again. She looked away, realizing abruptly what he was saying. Her heart began to thump like a trip-hammer.

"Yes or no, *nodia*?" he asked in a husky whisper.

Sybil swallowed convulsively, trying to decide whether she was more excited or more terrified. As confused as she was, however, the thought of refusing him was almost scarier, not because she was afraid of him, but because she feared she would always regret it.

It still took a tremendous effort to look at him. "Yes," she said a little hoarsely.

## Chapter Six

Sybil wasn't certain if it was her that was shaking or Anka or both of them, but she felt so weak and trembling when she settled her hand in his that she felt downright faint. Almost like a sleepwalker, she rose when he stood and urged her to her feet, following him as he led her from the room.

He paused outside and turned to her, studying her face intently. "You're afraid?" he asked harshly.

"Terrified," Sybil responded before she thought better of it.

Something flickered in his eyes. "It isn't supposed to be that way, *nodia*. Come, I will take you back to your quarters."

"Uh ... but Spencer's there. I don't think that would be a good place at all," she pointed out, struggling to keep step with him as he led her along the corridor.

Anka sent her a sharp look and paused. He shook his head at her. "Not this way, *nodia*," he said gently. "I'll return you ... and leave you alone."

Sybil felt her heart skip several beats. "Don't."

He smiled ruefully. "It's alright, *nodia*. I'm not angry. It's your choice. I told you that."

Distress filled her. "I know that. I can't help ... being unnerved by this, but it doesn't mean I don't want to."

He lifted a hand and lightly stroked her cheek. "Stay the night with me, then. We needn't be lovers. I'll be content to hold you."

Some of the tension left her. "You would?" she asked doubtfully.

"Not really," he said wryly. "But I'll make do."

She couldn't help but chuckle. "You're a strange man, Anka."

"I'm an alien, *nodia*."

Sybil smiled. "No, you aren't. Uh ... I didn't think to ask, but are we ... uh ... compatible? You know ... uh ... that way?"

Anka burst out laughing. "I will be deeply, deeply disturbed if I discover we aren't. I don't imagine I'll be the only one disappointed if that's the case, for that matter."

"You're joking right?" Sybil asked uneasily, trying to decide whether to be relieved or not. That depended, of course, on whether he was joking about not knowing or not. "Where are we going anyway?"

"My place. I think we'll have to break with tradition. I don't think I could sleep with Spencer standing over us, scowling."

'His' place as it turned out, didn't look a lot better than the cell where she'd been first incarcerated. It was maybe twice the size of that room and contained a bed that looked far more comfortable, but it was stark. Anka drew her to his bed and sat down on the edge. She studied his face a little uneasily and finally moved closer, lifting her hands to examine his face with her touch. His skin was smooth and soft. "I like your face," she murmured.

Surprise flickered in his eyes. "You didn't appear to the first time you saw me."

Sybil frowned. "On the ship? I couldn't really see your face."

He shook his head. "When I first spoke to you."

She smiled faintly. "I was expecting a monster and I couldn't really see your face in the light."

"It is improved with more light?" he asked doubtfully.

Her smile widened. Turning to one side, she sat on his knees so that they were face to face. "Much improved."

"Then it isn't my appearance that terrifies you?" he asked tentatively.

Sybil grimaced. "That wasn't really what I meant."

He lifted a hand and settled it at her waist and Sybil realized in that moment that it wasn't just her that was trembling. "What did you mean?"

She shook her head slowly. "It doesn't matter now," she murmured, leaning closer and settling her cheek against his.

"It matters to me," he said huskily.

She dragged in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of his skin. "I was afraid that I was mistaken about you and I'd find out you weren't the man I thought you were."

"I'm not human, *nodia*," he said gently. "I'm not a man at all."

"Don't argue with me," she said teasingly, brushing her lips along his cheek. "You feel very much like a man to me."

He swallowed audibly. "You feel very much like a woman to me."

She smiled against his cheek. "Shall we discover if we're compatible?"

Anka pulled away to stare into her eyes. He saw what he was looking for and moved close once more, settling his mouth over hers. A shudder of pleasure ran through him as he felt the soft yielding of her lips, inhaled her breath, tasted the sweetness of her mouth as he had before. He savored the taste, the feel of her tongue against his own, felt heated need engulf him.

The urge to strip her clothing from her and bare her to his gaze and his touch was like fire pouring through him. His heart hammered so fiercely in his chest he could scarcely draw breath.

Slowly, he cautioned himself. He had all night. He would frighten her again if he wasn't careful. He'd already scared her with his eagerness.

He'd told her he would be content only to hold her, he reminded himself.

If he frightened her, he would be lucky to have that much and it would be sheer torture.

Even knowing that, it took every ounce of self-control he could muster to keep his hands still. After a few moments, he curled his arms around her and slowly leaned back until she was lying on top of him.

She broke the kiss and sat up. Lifting her arms, she untied the knots of her top at the back and then the neck, allowing it to drop between them. He stared at her breasts hungrily, fascinated as much by the color of her skin as the beauty of the rounded, pink tipped globes. Leaning over him, she planted her palms on either side of his head and studied his face. "I let you see mine," she murmured challengingly.

He tipped her onto the bed and sat up. Sybil moved to a more comfortable position and propped her head on one hand to watch him as he stood up and stripped away his uniform. She discovered her imagination hadn't failed her when she'd envisioned what he must look like naked. He was every bit as muscular and well defined as she'd thought—and the striations she'd noticed did indeed crisscross his back.

He settled on the bed again to remove his boots and then shoved his trousers off, sending her a questioning look as he turned finally to face her. She was too busy examining him with her eyes to really notice, however, and she wasn't left in any doubt that they both had corresponding

plumbing. "You look like a big cat," she murmured teasingly when she lifted her gaze to meet his. "A huge cat."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Not if doesn't bother you to be lying in bed with a monkey."

He chuckled. "You don't look like a monkey to me."

She moved closer. "I might surprise you. I don't have a tail to swing from limbs, but I can climb like nobody's business."

They lay nose to nose and chest to chest for many moments, simply staring into one another's eyes. "Is this wrong?" she murmured.

"Does it feel wrong?"

"No."

He shifted closer. "Then it isn't."

Sybil closed her eyes, relishing the feel of his body against hers. It was the most wonderful sensation she'd ever experienced. Anxious now to overload her senses on him, she brushed restlessly against him, explored him with her hands and her lips. He stroked a hand slowly along her back, rubbing his face against hers, cheek to cheek, turning his head to nibble light kisses along her face and neck and shoulder.

"You smell good, Earth woman," he murmured against her shoulder. "Feel good, too."

Sybil dragged in a deep breath laden with his scent. "You do, too, Sumptra man."

He sought her mouth, covered it with his own, and kissed her deeply. Heat pulsed through her. Need began to war with her desire to simply luxuriate in his kisses and his touch. Curling one leg over his hips, she tugged at his shoulders, demanding more. He rolled into the cradle of her thighs, settling heavily, satisfyingly on top of her.

Parting from her lips, he lifted his head to study her face. Feeling his gaze, she opened her eyes lazily and peered at him through half-closed eyes. He held her gaze as he shifted to align his body to hers, watched her face intently as he found the opening of her sex with the head of his cock and surged into her. She gasped in delight as she felt him stretching her, throwing her head back and squeezing her eyes tightly. "That feels ... wonderful."

"I'm not in yet."

She opened her eyes. "Oh."

Amusement danced in his eyes, but the heat surpassed it and the amusement faded as he surged into her again, his expression taut with his need. He paused, expelling a heavy breath. "What is that?"

"What?" Sybil asked uneasily.

He thrust against it—a barrier. "That," he said grimly.

"That old thing? I thought it had died of old age. Ignore it," she said evasively.

He stroked her cheek lightly. "It'll hurt you, *nodia*. I don't know any way to keep from hurting you."

She swallowed a little convulsively. "Don't stop."

He studied her doubtfully for a moment and finally surged into her again. She squeezed her eyes tightly at the burning sensation, panting for breath, infinitely relieved when the burning began to subside. He slipped outward again, leaning down to kiss her, and she felt the heat slowly reigniting inside of her, chasing the discomfort away and replacing it with the pleasure she'd felt before.

Breaking the kiss, he shifted lower still, withdrawing his cock from her completely. Before she could object, he settled his mouth over the tip of one breast. Her belly contracted



almost painfully at the first tug of his mouth. She caught his head between her palms, half tempted to push him away, uncertain, but the pleasure that inundated her settled the matter. By the time he shifted his attention to her other breast, she was writhing beneath him, unable to lie still.

"Anka," she gasped plaintively when he finally ceased torturing her breasts.

Eagerness filled her when he moved upward once more, engaging his body with hers and surging deeply into her channel. It burned, but pleasurable ripples wafted through her, as well. She gasped, lifting her hips when he began to withdraw. Shifting his weight, he caught her hips, holding her so that he could set the rhythm they both needed. She felt the pleasure build inside of her as he stroked his cock along her channel. Squeezing her eyes tightly, she focused on the quakes that promised something wonderful, and she was still caught off guard by the explosion of rapture that abruptly seized her, made her feel as if she actually had shattered into fragments of sheer ecstasy. She gasped, cried out at the sheer magnitude of it, shaking.

He uttered a choked sound that was raw and hoarse. It made her skin prickle all over, made the walls of her sex clench in response. Shuttering as she had, he pumped into her shakily and finally stilled, gasping hoarsely.

Sighing with relief when the convulsions finally stopped, Sybil felt darkness enfold her as she drifted on a cloud of supreme satisfaction. She frowned with displeasure when she felt him withdraw from her and settle on the bed beside her. She could tell he was studying her, but she was too tired to feel like opening her eyes. After a moment, he gathered her closer, pulling her onto her side and holding her against his chest.

"Why me, *nodia*?"

Sybil searched her mind, trying to figure out what he was asking. Finally, it dawned on her. She smiled against his chest. "I was waiting for the perfect man."

\* \* \* \*

Anka had fully intended to make love to Sybil all night once he'd taken the plunge and asked her, completely contrary to any conscious plans he was aware of, and she'd accepted. He knew it was the wrong thing to do given their delicate situation. He'd known that *before* he'd discovered she'd never taken a lover before him.

Afterwards ... well he'd been near catatonic with shock, too stunned by the discovery to begin to sort the disastrous possibilities that might arise from it and, in the midst of trying to figure out just how badly he'd fucked up, sleep had descended over him.

He woke curled around her and desire stirred even before his mind was fully alert. Fortunately, he'd woken to the problem he'd been trying to sort when he fell asleep before he'd managed to waken her. He was still reluctant to stop once he'd begun caressing her sleeping form, nuzzling his face against her to enjoy her warmth and her scent, and yet wariness rose the moment she sighed and moved against him, the entire situation descending upon him like a thunderclap.

He realized that he was still having trouble coming to grips with the fact that she'd been virginal when he knew it was not at all typical for a woman of her age and culture. It certainly wasn't typical among his own people. From the time they reached full maturity they were allowed to take lovers. For many, that was as early as twelve solars. Very few waited until they were even fifteen or sixteen solars. Even in her culture, few of them remained virginal through their teens. At some point, they succumbed to nature, regardless of nurture.

Sybil was *not* that young.

It was true that it was as hard for him to judge the age of humans as it was for her to judge the age of a *feril*. Neither of them had the 'tools' to make that sort of judgment, but he certainly came closer than her. He'd at least studied the exhaustive data collected over the years on humans. Regardless of the fact that he hadn't had enough interaction to simply make an educated guess from their appearance, he had some data to help him calculate. She was an officer in service to her country. Even if she'd gone to school to become an officer, instead of entering service at the lowest rank, it would've taken time to move up. She must be at least twenty five solars, or years as they referred to it, he concluded.

He realized that wasn't actually the question in his mind—not why she had been virginal when she was old enough to have taken many lovers, or at least a few. The question was, why had she taken him?

Because she'd been afraid to refuse?

He feared that might be the answer and if it was, it could be disastrous on far more than a personal level.

Anger flickered through him. He'd done his best to recover the situation when she'd told him outright that she was terrified and he'd seen that she was. He'd tried to sooth her. Why had she refused every attempt he'd made to convince her to simply return to her own people? If she was afraid of him, why hadn't she fled when he'd given her the chance?

He didn't know. He wracked his mind for something he'd read about their psychology that might help him understand and came up empty.

She hadn't *behaved* as if she had never been with a man, damn it! He hadn't discovered it until he'd been inside of her and by then he was lost. There was no point in trying to whitewash it. He hadn't *wanted* to stop. He'd still given her the opportunity to push him away, but when she hadn't he was just so much putty in her hands.

Gods! She would go back to her people and tell them he had raped her and she would have proof that he had. He *knew* she was raw from his lovemaking. She had to be when he'd felt the delicate tissue tear.

He would be fortunate if his people turned him over to hers in one piece when the fallout from his stupidity landed in their laps!

Gods! He was nigh forty solars! She was not even a woman of Sumptra! He didn't see how he could have fallen so swiftly and completely under her spell as to do what he'd done! He might as well have been a complete moron for all the brain matter that he'd used!

What was it about him that drew virgins, he thought in disgust? A good half of the women he had taken as lovers over the years had been. He did not believe for one moment that it was a subconscious desire on his part. It certainly wasn't a conscious one, by the gods! Beyond the fact that they had no idea how to please a man, they were not *mature* enough to form a comfortable relationship.

Not that it would be any help to him to figure that out at the moment! There could not *be* any relationship with Sybil. That was one of the main reasons he'd decided he would ignore the attraction he felt toward her—that and the political ramifications of such a liaison.

*That* had worked well, by the gods!

She had smiled at him, laughed at his stupid attempts at humor, looked him over with frank admiration, and he had completely forgotten everything that he'd worked out so carefully in his mind and allowed her to lead him off by his cock!

Sybil stirred in his arms, dragging him abruptly from his mental rebuke and pitching him into a mild state of panic as it dawned on him that he'd been too busy berating himself to figure out how to handle the situation.

"Is it morning?" she asked sleepily.

"What passes for it here," he responded more harshly than he'd intended. "We slept through the rest period."

She lifted her head and studied him. Her hair—the beautiful sunlight colored hair that he'd admired—was tousled from sleep, her pretty face flushed, her lips soft and inviting and his cock leapt up like the mindless beast it was. "You didn't sleep well?"

He swallowed a little convulsively. "Like the dead."

She smiled. It took all he could do to refrain from leaning down to capture her lips with his own and explore her mouth. "We have trampled the customs of two cultures and lain waste. I should return you to your quarters."

She uttered a half laugh before something horrendous apparently occurred to her. The smile died. Her eyes widened. "Oh god! It's morning?"

"I said that."

She tore from his arms and leapt from the bed so fast he was stunned. "My clothes! Where are they?"

Bemused, he searched the bedding and finally produced the top. She snatched it from his hand and began struggling to tie it while he searched for the rest. He found her panties and the skirt beneath him. Dismay registered on her face when she saw the crumpled clothing. "Oh! Jesus! No way in hell are they going to be in any doubt .... Never mind! Do you have a comb? A brush?" she added, raking her hands absently through her hair.

"In the facilities," he said, nodding toward the wall.

She whirled and dashed in that direction, almost slamming into the wall before he could leap from the bed and prevent it. "The doors only respond to us."

Nodding distractedly, she pulled free of his hold and dashed inside. Still bemused, he watched her as she grabbed his brush and began raking it frantically through her hair. "I could do that for you," he murmured, unable to resist the urge to touch it.

She shook her head. "No. It's fine. I need to get back before ...."

He could no more understand the anxiety that had her dancing with impatience than he'd been able to understand why she'd allowed him in her bed—allowed him to take her into his. He felt her urgency, however, and escorted her as quickly as he could, refusing resolutely to run even though he could tell she wanted to.

They arrived at the quarters set aside for the humans to find Dr. Rains and Ensign Beckt embracing against the wall. Hearing their approach, Dr. Rains pushed him away frantically, threw them a wide-eyed look of horror, whirled, and slammed into the wall when the door didn't open for her. Beckt caught her arm, turning her to face him so that he could examine her for injury. "No! I'm fine! Really!"

She glanced at him and Sybil in dismay as they stopped. "I was just talking to Beckt ... uh ...." Apparently, she wasn't in any condition to cook up a believable story. "I should go."

Sybil glanced at him. "Yes. Good idea! Well ... bye!"

Anka frowned, catching her arm before she could escape. "A moment ...."

"I have to go in!" she growled at him and then forced a smile. "We can talk later."

They were both distracted by sounds of new arrivals and turned to look as Powell and Kushbu strode toward them.

Sybil gaped at the men, too dismayed to be caught outside the observatory with Anka, at first, to really register their condition. Their hair was standing on end, however, a sure sign of bed head. Both men had a day's growth of beard and both of them had bags under their eyes as if they hadn't actually done a lot of sleeping in the beds they'd climbed out of.

Powell's face darkened with color as he reached them. He nodded curtly. Kushbu studied the floor as he passed them. Sybil threw Anka a look he had trouble interpreting. "I need to go in now."

Reluctantly, he released her. Dr. Rains snatched her arm free of Beckett's hold and dashed through the door before Sybil could, nearly knocking her down.

Anka stood frowning at the door for several moments after they'd disappeared and finally looked at Beckett. Beckett looked as confused as he was. He shrugged. Abruptly remembering himself, he stiffened, saluted and headed down the corridor at a brisk walk, leaving Anka in the hall alone and wondering what the hell had happened.

\* \* \* \*

Holly beat Sybil to the facilities and leapt into the shower. After glaring at the woman through the opaque material surrounding the shower for several moments, Sybil left and returned to their sleeping quarters. Plopping tiredly on the edge of her bunk, she stared at the floor, trying to empty her mind. Thoughts swarmed like a flock of carrion feeders, however, determined, relentless.

Foremost in her mind was the 'walk of shame', which she, unfortunately hadn't been able to avoid despite the fact that she'd given it her best shot. She supposed she shouldn't feel too embarrassed about it since she hadn't been the only one, but she couldn't tell that she was any *less* embarrassed from encountering the rest of the crew outside of the observatory. True, they were hardly in any position to make a judgment on her, but that didn't change the fact that they knew exactly what she'd been doing.

It sucked that she'd managed to think up a really good lie to cover herself and had been thwarted from using it by the circumstances!

Holly was still dripping when she left the bath a little bit later. Without glancing at Sybil, she headed for her bed. Jolting to her feet, Sybil headed into the bathroom. When she came out again, Holly was either asleep or pretending to sleep. She wasn't sure which, and she didn't particularly feel any need to rest herself. Discovering the moment she poked her nose out of the room, however, that Spencer was pacing the observatory like a caged lion, she headed back to bed.

For a while after she lay down to stare up at the ceiling, the only thoughts rambling through her mind were of the embarrassing encounter with her fellow crewmembers. Slowly, however, the endless round of questioning what she might have done differently wore itself out and she began to remember her behavior in a totally different light.

What must Anka think of her odd behavior, she wondered?

What *could* he think, she realized in dismay! That she was ashamed of what she'd done and embarrassed that her fellow crewmembers *knew* what she'd done!

God! She wouldn't even talk to him, or look at him!

She hadn't meant to leave him with impression! She'd just been too caught up in her own distress to consider that it might make him feel badly!

She just hadn't wanted them passing judgment on her, whispering behind her back! It wasn't that she was ashamed of him or what they'd done together! It wasn't! It had been ... beautiful! More wonderful than she'd ever imagined it possibly could be!

Tears clogged her nose and throat at the thought that she'd ruined it by behaving like a silly child caught at something they shouldn't be doing and fearful of punishment. God! She was twenty eight years old! She was damned well old enough to make her own decisions about her life! It wasn't any of their business at all! Why should she care what they thought?

She did, though. Actually she didn't, not really, but she did care about being shunned.

They weren't really in any position to look down on her, though, were they, she thought, perking up slightly?

Not that she'd seen that had ever really stopped anybody from doing so. They always found an excuse for themselves.

Angry male voices from the observatory alerted her to the fact that the men had left their quarters. Holly sat up, listening intently. Her alertness made it clear that she hadn't actually been sleeping any of the time.

"What's going on?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Holly was silent for several moments, listening. "Do you think we should go out and try to break it up before they fight?"

Sybil sent her a sour look. "Do you honestly think we could? Anyway, I don't care if they beat Spencer senseless. He's an asshole."

Holly seemed to consider that. "Yes ... but ... What if he beats Powell and Kushbu senseless?"

Sybil blinked at her, digesting that, and then surged off the bed. The last thing she wanted was to end up at Spencer's mercy the way he'd been acting! She didn't know about Powell, but Kushbu was about as big around as a thread! Spencer would mop the floor with him.

Holly, who'd suggested 'they' try to stop the argument before it escalated into a fight, followed Sybil to the door and then hovered in the doorway as Sybil strode into the observatory. Sybil didn't even realize she'd lost her backup until she'd reached the men. "What's going on?"

Spencer, who'd been chest to chest with Powell, snarling in his face, whirled to look at her. His expression was ugly. He looked her up and down as if she was a pile of shit and curled his lips back. "Stay out of it, whore!"

## Chapter Seven

Absolute shock hit Sybil as if she'd been punched. Never in her life, certainly not in her military career, had she been assaulted in such a way. Rage chased the shock in a counter wave. She balled her hands into fists. "What did you say to me, *Corporal*?"

He didn't get the chance to respond. Powell grabbed him by one shoulder and half spun him around to punch him in the face. Caught off guard, the blow was far more effective than it might have been otherwise. Spencer staggered away from the blow, trying to catch himself and lost the battle. Almost the moment he hit the floor, however, he rolled to his feet, uttered a bellow of rage, and charged Powell.

Holly screamed ear-splittingly.

"Have you completely lost your mind, Spencer?" Sybil shouted as he butted Powell with his head and shoulders, carrying him across the room and into the wall. She heard Powell's head make a sickening sound as it struck the wall. His eyes rolled back in his head. He slid down the wall when Spencer released him and turned, fixing her with a deadly look.

Her heart slammed against her chest wall, knocking the breath from her, but she shook it off, assuming a fighting stance. "Don't do anything you're going to regret, soldier!" she said warningly.

Not surprisingly, he was too enraged to listen. He charged her. Sybil waited until the last possible moment. Instead of meeting his charge, however, she leapt out of the way, whirling as she landed and driving her foot into his back. Pain shot through her ankle. Gritting her teeth, she resumed an attack stance, watching Spencer as he slammed into the floor from her blow and then rolled up again. Before he could get from his knees to his feet, the door of the observatory flew open and Anka, followed by two other soldiers, raced inside. Anka caught Spencer around the shoulders and lifted him bodily from the floor as if he weighed no more than a child. Spencer wrestled to free himself from Anka's hold and then abruptly threw himself forward and down, flipping Anka over his back.

Sybil sucked in a sharp breath. Before Spencer could follow through, however, Anka was on his feet and facing his adversary. Spencer had been reduced by his rage to snarling and grunting, but he managed to throw a few insults in her direction as he attacked Anka, throwing three quick punches in succession. Anka blocked each strike and then slammed a fist into Spencer's face. His head snapped back at the blow. His eyes rolled back into his head and he fell toward the floor like a felled tree, stiff as board.

Aghast, Sybil stared down at the man. "Is he ... dead?"

"Not yet," Anka growled, glaring at the unconscious man. He seemed to collect himself with an effort and tamp his anger. "Are you hurt?"

Sybil looked down at her foot. "I think I might have sprained my ankle when I kicked him."

Surging toward her, he scooped her off her feet before she even realized his intention and carried her into her sleeping quarters, settling her on the bed. Crouching beside the bed, he gently lifted her leg, supporting the calf and foot, and studied the knot that had sprung up. His expression hardened. "I'll have a droid scan it. It might be broken."

Sybil didn't object. The pain had started to set in the moment the shock began to wear off. "Do you think Major Powell will be alright?"

He studied her face for a long moment. "I'll check on him," he said abruptly, turning to go.

The urge to stop him smote her as he reached the door but she curbed it. Listening intently, she struggled to interpret what was going on in the observatory, but discovered that Anka and his men were speaking their own language. After a few minutes, she saw one of the men who'd accompanied Anka carry Spencer out over his shoulder. Anka appeared in her door a few minutes later. "Powell has come around, but we'll be taking him down for a scan to check his injuries."

"What are they going to do with Spencer?"

His lips tightened. "He's to be confined ... alone."

She stopped him when he turned to go. "Anka."

He turned back, lifting his brows questioningly.

"I'm sorry about the way I behaved this morning."

Surprise flickered in his eyes. "We'll talk ... later."

Disappointment wafted through her when he'd gone and anxiety. She couldn't tell that her apology had had much impact. Swallowing the sudden impulse to cry for no damned reason at all, she settled back against her pillow and stared at the ceiling.

"My god!" Holly muttered, plunking down on her own bunk weakly. "What in the world happened?"

Sybil thought it was a rhetorical question, but she'd been trying to understand it herself. "I don't know. According to his file, Spencer's had some discipline problems in the past, but nothing like this. At a guess, he spent the night brooding over the fact that he was sent back here while we stayed to take part in the festival and was spoiling for a fight long before we got back. I think that only fueled the fire—the fact that none of us came back until this morning."

Holly cleared her throat. "I got to talking with Beckett—about their culture, you know?—and just completely lost track of time."

Sybil sent her a sour look. "You, too? That's what happened to me—except I was talking to Anka."

Holly's face reddened with anger. "Are you insinuating that I'm lying?"

"Are you insinuating that *I* am?" Sybil shot back at her.

"If that's true, why was Spencer screaming 'whore' and 'slut' at you?"

"Because he has a nasty mind and a fertile imagination?" Sybil retorted angrily. Why the hell was it that men could bed hop as much they pleased and yet the very damned moment a woman took a lover she was automatically a fucking whore? Was that just? Was that reasonable? It wasn't right. It wasn't fair, and yet it was fact of life—always had been, always would be. There were two standards—one for men and one for women. And the worst of it was that women were largely responsible for it! Here was Holly, judging her, when she didn't have any right whatsoever to do so, and instantly believing Spencer just because he said so!

Holly sniffed. "I'm not in the habit of sleeping with strange men," she said stiffly.

"Neither am I!" Sybil said tightly. "Not that I don't have a perfect right to do so if the mood strikes me, damn it! I'm single and I'm an adult and, if I have to take on the responsibilities of an adult, then I *also* have the same freedoms as any other adult!"

"I saw you leave with Anka—we all did."

"So? I saw you drag back in this morning, and Powell and Kushbu, so don't take that 'holier than thou' attitude with me! At least I'm not married!"

"I am not married either!" Holly said angrily.

"Well, I wouldn't brag about it!" Sybil snapped. "What are you, forty? And Powell damned sure is!"

"I *was* married," Holly said defensively. "I'm divorced. It isn't disgraceful for a woman who's been married before to ... uh ... consider finding another husband!"

"Says who?"

"Everybody! Single young women shouldn't ... well, they aren't used to living with a man and it's different when you are."

Sybil gaped at her. "*When* were you born? *Where* were you born, for that matter?"

Holly glared at her but apparently decided to keep the rest of her opinion to herself. Sybil just wished she'd kept *all* of it to herself! She stewed over it for a while and finally realized she wasn't nearly as angry at Holly as she was upset by what had happened between her and Anka.

He'd been cool and polite but he hadn't unbent even a little when she'd apologized. That could mean only one thing as far as she could see—he regretted everything and he was trying to build a barrier to keep her out.

The urge to weep swept over her again, but she beat it back, refusing to give in to her emotions.

She decided after a while that he was probably right. They shouldn't have done it. The situation was already a crisis waiting to happen. Allowing themselves to get emotionally entangled was only going to complicate things further.

Not that she thought *he* was in any danger of that! She couldn't actually blame him for trying to protect himself and the interests of his people, though.

Well fine! If he wanted to pretend it had never happened, *she* could pretend with the best of them, damn him!

The creepy droids arrived about the time she finished arguing with Holly, scanned her ankle and wrapped it. She guessed that meant it wasn't broken. It was just a sprain, which she'd thought all the time—meaning she'd permanently fucked up her tendon. She refused the medicine they offered for the pain. She thought it was probably alright, but she didn't want to take the chance of being knocked senseless and being defenseless.

Of course, it didn't appear that Spencer would be allowed to cause any more trouble, but no one was exactly friendly and if Holly, Major Powell, and Dr. Kushbu were going to be hatching a story to cover their asses, she damned well wasn't going to be left out!

She was left out, though. When meal time rolled around, one of the creepy droids brought her food to her. Everyone else left to dine in the mess hall. Trying not to feel like Anka had ordered it just to steer clear of her, she ate what she could, set the tray aside, and lay down to stew.

Almost the worst of it was that she couldn't even enjoy the night she'd spent with him—not now. It embarrassed her when she finally remembered what she'd said to him—which was probably why he was avoiding her like she had leprosy now!

"For crying out loud!" she muttered angrily. "I was half asleep, damn it!"

Of course she'd meant it—in a way, but she sure as hell hadn't meant to say it! And it wasn't completely true anyway—just sort of. The truth was that she'd had to work twice as hard to make it in the service than she would have if she'd been swinging a dick. Anybody could say any damned lie they wanted about 'equality' but there was really no such thing. She hadn't



*dared* get involved with any of the service men, fearful that it would show up on her record and earn her a reprimand that would go against her the next time she was up for a promotion, or a demotion, or maybe even a discharge. She'd had a few interesting encounters, but never interesting enough to make her lose her head and that went for her time before she'd entered the service. She figured if they couldn't convince her there was no point in 'doing' it.

She certainly hadn't consciously made a decision to 'save' herself! She supposed, after a while, though, she'd begun to think that way, to figure that she'd already missed the boat, so to speak, and she might as well wait until some guy came along that really tipped the scales.

And wasn't it just *typical* that he wasn't even human? Talk about unattainable!

She frowned at the thought, wondering if she'd been subconsciously considering that as a point in his favor. After all, it wouldn't be something that could come back to haunt her. At least, it shouldn't have been. Now she wasn't so certain. Unless everybody else decided to keep their guilty little secret about romping with the aliens, she could be in deep shit! Especially if they were willing to lie through their teeth like Holly, swear they hadn't done a *thing*, and that she had.

Not that they could prove she had, but if they ganged up on her .... Hell, if Powell decided to report her she'd be cooked!

It dawned on her abruptly that there was no way it wouldn't come out, regardless of whether Powell and the others decided to keep quiet about it. Spencer certainly wasn't going to ... unless he decided to use it to blackmail them into dropping all charges against him. Given the situation, his behavior was mutinous, not just insubordination, and his attack on his superior officers, both her and Powell, would also carry heavy charges. He would be looking at spending years in the military penitentiary. Considering his personality, it was almost a foregone conclusion that he'd try to blackmail them, she realized.

So they were screwed!

She sighed, covering her face with her hands, trying to figure out how one innocent adventure in exploring her sexuality could go so nightmarishly wrong! How was it that *other* people managed to have sex without landing in such an awful predicament?

She should've just had the damned thing sewn shut! She couldn't even have sex one damned time without it turning into a fucking galactic incident!

It wasn't fair! It just wasn't fair! And, unfortunately, railing against fate wasn't going to do her any good at all.

Hearing a commotion of arrival outside her door, she immediately thought about Powell and decided to get up to see if they'd brought him back. Hopefully, he wasn't in too bad a shape and he could think what to do. He had more riding on the outcome, after all, than she did. It would be his career *and* his marriage!

She'd only managed to hop about half the distance between her bunk and the door, however, when it opened and Anka appeared in the doorway. She halted abruptly, trying to keep her balance on one foot. His lips tightened. He surged toward her and caught her before she could fall. "I thought, maybe, it was Powell coming back," she said uncomfortably. "Is he alright?"

"He's being treated for a concussion. We need to transfer him to your facilities, however. This is why I came. Your base commander wishes to speak directly to you."

Sybil went cold all over. She gaped at him in horror. "Me?"

He frowned. "You are second in command of the mission and Powell is no condition to speak to him."

Sybil nodded, feeling like she might throw up.

"With your permission, I'll carry you."

There was no warmth in his eyes or in his voice. It was as if he was speaking to a complete stranger. Sybil felt like crying. "I can manage, thank you," she said stiffly.

Uttering an impatient sound, he scooped her up despite her protest. "I told them that you would speak to them in the next thirty minutes," he said tightly. "It will take you far longer than that to hop down to communications. In any case, I need to take you to see Powell so that you can accurately report his condition."

Sybil set her chin at him, but she was far more hurt than angry and looked away almost at once. She would've almost preferred being drawn and quartered, though, to being lugged around by a man that acted like she'd ... betrayed him! Or taken *his* virginity! She didn't know why he was behaving like a complete asshole!

It occurred to her after a few minutes to wonder if he was angry about the virginity thing. She didn't know why he would be. Although she supposed he might've been disappointed in her performance, his behavior seemed a little excessive. He'd still gotten off, damn it! She'd washed the evidence off and she wasn't ignorant just because she'd never actually had sex! Maybe it hadn't been all that great from his point of view, but it wasn't as if she'd left him hanging!

Their arrival at the room where she'd been taken upon her arrival effectively distracted her from her personal problems. Powell looked awful. Anka set her on her feet—correction *foot*—and she used the side of the gurney Powell was lying on to help her balance as she hopped closer to look at him. "Major Powell?"

"Sybil?"

He didn't open his eyes and he'd barely moved his lips, but at least he was conscious and he recognized her voice.

"You look like hell, Sir."

"I feel like hell. The son-of-a-bitch cracked my damned skull."

"Ank ... Commander L'Kartay told me they were going to get you home so you could get the treatment you need there. I'm going to speak to the base commander now."

He opened his eyes a slit. "Watch yourself, Lieutenant."

She studied his face for a long moment. "He's going to demand to know what happened."

"I know."

"I'm not going to tell him a lie, Sir."

Anger flickered across his face. "I didn't suggest that you should. I'm just saying ... watch it."

"Understood, Sir."

"Do you?"

"I believe so."

"I'm depending on your discretion, Lieutenant."

"I'll do my best, Sir."

She debated with her urges for a moment and finally reached to squeeze his hand reassuringly. "You're going to be alright."

Anka was studying their hands when she turned, his expression unreadable. As soon as she started toward him, however, he met her and lifted her against his chest again. She looped an arm around his shoulders that time. It was too uncomfortable to do otherwise, even though she

disliked the sense of intimacy. She was sorry she had when they reached the communications center. All eyes turned to the door when they entered and there was no doubt in her mind that nobody missed a thing.

With every appearance of being completely oblivious, Anka crossed the room and set her down on a chair. He turned to look at the man seated before the console as soon as he'd straightened away from her. "Is the channel open?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Put it on speaker."

Meaning she wasn't to have a private conversation—not that she'd expected to! She wouldn't have minded being monitored. She just didn't appreciate the fact that everyone in the room would be listening.

"We have Lieutenant Hunter," the communications officer announced.

"Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir. I'm here."

"What's this about Powell?"

Sybil's belly clenched. "I didn't witness the entire episode, Sir. I was in my quarters when I heard the argument. When I came out to try to prevent it from escalating, Cpl. Spencer exploded and attacked the major."

"Cpl. Spencer?"

"Yes, Sir."

There was a prolonged silence. "You're being monitored."

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. The hair on the back of Sybil's neck prickled. She chewed her lower lip, refusing to look at any of the Sumpturians around her. "Not that I know of, Sir," she lied.

"Never mind. We'll get to the bottom of this once you're all back. We've arranged with the Sumptrians to transport you all back to base."

Dismay filled her. It should've been a relief. "All of us?"

"Yes. They've agreed to release all hostages."

Shock travelled through her at that. She supposed, after a moment, that that was exactly what they were but it was certainly not an attitude that was going to make it easy on either side to come to any kind of peaceful agreement. "We're not hostages, Sir. We're guests of the Sumptrians."

There was another prolonged silence. "We'll debrief you when we have you safely back at base."

Joy! That was something wonderful to look forward to! "Yes, Sir."

"When will we be leaving?" she asked Anka when the communications officer closed the com unit.

"Drs. Rains and Kushbu are already aboard the craft. They're transporting Cpl. Spencer and Major Powell now."

Sybil nodded. Sighing, she got to her feet. Anka slipped an arm around her. "I think I can walk," she said tightly.

"I think you won't," Anka retorted grimly, lifting her up and carrying her from the communications room.

Sybil warred with her pride and her hurt as he strode down the corridor with her. Finally, the hurt won out. "Won't you at least tell me why you're angry with me?"

His lips tightened. He seemed to wrestle with himself. "I'm not angry."

Sybil sighed. "Fine! Don't tell me. I don't suppose it matters anyway."

Anka muttered something under his breath, but he needn't have bothered. He spoke in his language. "What happened last night between us shouldn't have."

Sybil felt her chin wobble threateningly. "I don't see why not!"

"It shouldn't have because I'm trying to prevent a war here, Sybil."

She sniffed. "It was a beautiful thing ...."

"Don't!" he said harshly. "Don't romanticize it. It was sex, Sybil. It was never going anywhere and we both knew it—at least I thought you understood."

As if she was some starry eyed kid! "I'm not romanticizing! It was great sex."

"Thank you," he said tightly.

She noticed he didn't say it was great sex for him, damn his hide! "Well, if it was just sex, then I certainly don't see the problem. People do that all the time."

"It isn't going to be a problem for you when you get back? The fight between the other two officers had nothing to do with the festival?"

Put that way, he had a point. "Well, it's our problem, damn it!"

"It's *our* problem! Do you think your people won't use it as an excuse to start a war with us when we return you and more than half the crew is injured? *All* of the military personnel who took part in the mission."

"You think we're going to try to blame this on you to save our asses?" Sybil demanded angrily.

He sent her a look that made her long to punch him in the nose.

"It amazes the hell out of me that you even wanted to make love to me if you thought I was that kind of person!" she said angrily.

"Sex."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Fine! Have it your way! But let's not get too nicey nasty about it! Fuck me!"

She thought she saw a flicker of amusement in his eyes. It made her angrier and she subsided into silence, glaring at the space in front of them until she saw that they were approaching a ramp. That distracted her, particularly once she realized that it was actually the ramp into the ship—docked directly into the corridor.

The bottom seemed to fall out of her stomach. He'd said they were going now, but she hadn't really registered it, she realized in dismay. She swallowed several times convulsively and managed to keep from yielding to her emotions, but she was relieved beyond measure when he carried her into a small compartment and set her down. When he'd steadied her, he reached down and grasped the bunk that she'd thought was attached to the wall. With no more than a couple of pulls, he'd transformed it from a bunk to a chair. He helped her into it and pulled safety harnesses over her, fastening them.

"Where is everybody else?"

"Separate compartments."

Her dismay increased. She should've just been relieved that she didn't have to deal with her crewmates at the moment, but it was no comfort to be taking off in an alien craft, without any protective gear, alone. He straightened. "We'll be taking off in a few minutes. Don't remove the safety harnesses until we break free of the planet."

Feeling a little faint, Sybil nodded wordlessly, lifting her hands to grip the restrains. He studied her for a long moment, looked like he might say something and then turned abruptly and left, sealing the door behind him.

Alone with her thoughts, Sybil considered giving in to her emotions for a while, but she was just angry enough, and just worried enough that she might be under observation, to hold it back. She thought it might have made her feel better if she'd indulged, but she had no idea how long the trip would take—not as long as their trip out had, she was sure.

She hadn't realized she might not get another chance to speak to Powell! It occurred to her forcefully now, which meant they were probably going to be separated before they had time to get their stories straight!

Damn it!

She sighed. Well, she'd told Powell she wasn't going to lie and she'd also promised to 'watch herself'. He would be expecting, or should be, that she'd told them he'd had an argument with Spencer that had resulted in the fight. If he hadn't already thought up a reasonable lie to explain it, he would surely be thinking long and hard on the trip home. In any case, she'd told the truth. She hadn't heard the argument, just the loud voices. She didn't know what it was about. She thought she did, but she didn't have to lie about that.

They were going to ask her what she thought had started it, though, she realized. She thought she would stick to the night before when Spencer had behaved so badly he'd been removed. It was the truth and it was enough to have spawned the argument, particularly when Powell had threatened to bring charges against him in front of all of them.

She would've felt a lot better, however, if she could have discussed the matter with the entire group—everyone except Spencer, anyway. Neither Dr. Kushbu or Dr. Rains were military personnel, but they'd been attached to a military operation. They'd be questioned, too.

She was so busy worrying with her thoughts that it was several moments before she realized the faint vibrations she could feel beneath her feet must mean that the ship was preparing for launch. Her belly tightened. Closing her eyes, she focused on breathing slowly and deeply to ease the tension trying to take hold of her. The vibrations increased steadily and then, so abruptly she didn't have time to brace herself, she felt her stomach drop as the ship shot skyward. A wave of nausea washed over her, but she realized the pull of G's wasn't even close to what she'd expected. Surprise flickered through her. Venus' gravity wasn't quite the equal of Earth's but it should still have produced a hell of a force against her.

Either they hadn't taken off at the speeds she was used to in a launch, or the ship had some technology that prevented the occupants from feeling the effects as they should have.

She wasn't likely to find out which, and realized abruptly why she'd been taken immediately to the small compartment. They weren't taking any chances that she might see anything she could report—which was also why she would be confined for the duration. Opening her eyes, she looked around the tiny compartment, wondering just how long she could expect to be confined in it. Days? Weeks?

She shook that thought. If there was anything at all to the old UFO reports, they had the capability of exceeding the speed of light. They surely wouldn't use that kind of speed within a solar system, though, especially if it included folding space—which everyone had always assumed it must. So ... would they make light speed? Or would they be traveling at sub-light? It only took the sun's light eight minutes to reach earth, so half the speed of light from Venus to Earth ....

"This is Commander I'Kartay speaking. Please return to your seats and fasten your safety harnesses. We will be landing at moon base in five minutes."

Having located the speaker by the time he'd finished his announcement, Sybil glared at it. She hadn't even taken her damned harness off!

Maybe it was his idea of a joke?

He hadn't seemed in the mood for humor.

She was still convinced it was an exaggeration until she felt the ship settle with a definite thump against something solid.

The door opened while she was still trying to figure out how to unfasten the harness. Anka approached her and crouched in front of her, pushing her hands away. It took an effort to resist the urge to ask him if they had arrived, but she managed it. She wasn't about to let on how impressed she was if it killed her!

"There is no docking facility here to accommodate our ship. You'll need a suit for the trip to the airlock."

Rising, he moved across the room and opened a locker. The suit he removed was much like the one he was wearing—very much like the suits they all wore in their Venus base. It hadn't occurred to her that they were protective gear. They didn't look anything like the clumsy suits they had to use for protection on the moon—because of the lack of atmospheric pressure.

"Aren't these for the conditions on Venus?" she asked doubtfully.

He shrugged. "They are for any conditions not conducive to life. It will protect you," he said, extending it toward her.

Still doubtful and uneasy, she took it. She paused in the act of pulling it on, however, and decided to discard the clothing he'd provided. Not only did she not relish the thought of being seen in it when she went in to decontamination, she also didn't want it around as a reminder. Anka, who'd been occupied with searching for gauntlets, boots, and a helmet, did a double take when he glanced at her.

She ignored the look, removing both the skirt and the top, although she was actually a little reluctant to discard the latter. She also didn't like the idea of having nothing but her panties beneath the suit, but the thought of having the top around as a reminder was enough to bolster her decision.

The suit was far too big. It didn't surprise her. The *ferils* were a tall race. Anka was no more than average among his own people even if he was damned tall next to humans. "I hope the fit isn't going to be a problem."

"It won't be," he said grimly, holding out the rest of the gear she needed.

She took them and pulled the boots on, taking care to seal them with the suit and then took the helmet and fastened it, leaving the gauntlets for last. Anka checked the fittings behind her. She resented it in a way, but she wasn't certain enough she'd done it right to bet her life on it.

"Wait here."

Sighing, she sat down on the chair. He returned a few minutes later wearing his helmet and gauntlets and her belly clenched. "You're going to escort us inside?"

"I am."

Sybil felt her throat close. "Do really think that's a good idea?"

He sent her a piercing look. "Perhaps not the best, but I intend to hand you over personally."

"Why don't send some of your men?" she asked plaintively.

"I never ask my men to do anything I wouldn't do myself," he said tightly.

"But ... you're the commander!" she said, distressed.

"Exactly!"

Sybil bit her lip. "Damn it, Anka! You're more of a target and you know it!"

"You believe I'll be a target?"

She swallowed with an effort against the knot in her throat. "I don't know. I just ... I just don't want you to risk it. Please don't! It isn't worth taking a chance. You said you were trying to prevent a war. If anything was to happen to you ...."

"If anything 'happened' to any of my men, the end result would be the same," he said grimly. "Make no mistake about that. *None* of my people are expendable."

But *she* didn't care about the rest of them! Not only was that not likely to please him, however, it also wasn't likely to move him. Struggling to take an even breath, she gave up the effort to dissuade him and approached him. When he stepped back to allow her into the corridor, she discovered her fellow crewmembers assembled a little further along the corridor and two Sumpturians. When she and Anka reached them she noticed the corridor behind the group abruptly change. She stared at it, trying to figure out what it was. It almost looked like water. It rippled. As it dawned on her that it must be some sort of field, she glanced behind her and discovered a similar phenomena had sealed off the other end of the corridor. To her right, a door appeared in the wall. As she watched, the ramp she'd used to enter the ship extended and lowered.

Anka lifted her and followed Drs. Kushbu and Rain down the plank. Behind them, the two men she'd seen guided a capsule on wheels where Major Powell lay. A transport, she discovered, awaited them at the foot of the gangplank. A man approached them trailed by two armed squads of men. Sybil recognized the features of the base commander behind the face shield.

He stopped while he was still several yards from where they stood. Anka hesitated and then approached the man. "Lieutenant Hunter's ankle is injured. I will take her inside."

"That won't be necessary," Commander Kendal responded coldly, signaling to one of the men behind him. "Pvt. Yancy! Assist Lieutenant Hunter into the transport."

Yancy saluted, shouldered his weapon and approached.

"I can walk," Sybil said stiffly.

"She can't," Anka instantly contradicted her, tightening his hold on her.

"I can carry you, ma'am, if you'll permit?"

Resisting the urge to glance at Anka one last time, Sybil nodded. "Thank you, Pvt. Yancy." Removing her arm from Anka's shoulders, she reached for the other man. For a moment longer, Anka held her and then he released her.

She couldn't resist glancing back, however, when Yancy entered the airlock with her. Commander Kendal seemed to be speaking with Anka, but Anka was staring straight at her.

## Chapter Eight

The debriefing was every bit the nightmare Sybil had anticipated. It became clear after only a few minutes that they were suspected of something. Unfortunately, she'd been right about being separated. None of them were given the chance to compare notes before they were whisked from the landing site and into decontamination. The science department was so eager to get their hands on the gear the Sumpturians had provided for them that they practically ripped them off. By the time she got out of decontamination, the suit Anka had helped her put on had vanished.

She wasn't anywhere near her peak performance level when she was summoned for debriefing. She was so depressed it took all she could do even to concentrate part of her mind on the questions. Seeing no alternative, she stuck to the truth and merely omitted mention of the most incriminating parts.

Spencer, as she'd suspected, sang like a bird. The bastard! The next meeting she was called to was far more unpleasant and excruciatingly embarrassing.

She was informed that she had been removed from the Mars project until further notice.

She was going to get canned! She knew it and she didn't even care ... much! It was disgusting, though, that she'd had plans that were never going to come to fruition now.

She'd thought that she would retire from service and become a colonist. Her tour would've been up about the time she reached Mars, and it was the perfect way to get there—free of charge. She would've actually been *paid* as a part of the crew. Now it seemed far more likely that she was going to get shipped back to Earth and discharged—probably dishonorably which was going to make it hellish to find a damned job!

Not that there were a lot of jobs to be had back on Earth. The economy was shit. It had been slowly crumbling for years and the frequent disasters were no help in recovery. They would've at least been a boon to the construction industry if the economy hadn't been so bad before, but since there were few people who could afford to rebuild ....

She wasn't sure it was any consolation that they couldn't charge her with anything that was actually criminal and send her to jail. At least she'd have a roof over her head and meals.

She didn't particularly envy Spencer, however, who'd already been transferred back to Earth to face a court martial for assault of an officer with intent to kill.

Her personal worries weren't the only thing she had to agonize about, however. For weeks after the 'incident' on Venus, there were rumors of war. She wasn't informed of anything since she was out of the loop, but it was impossible to keep everyone silent and the gossip was as endless as the speculation. It never actually died down. It was replaced by newer fodder several weeks after her return, however.

The Sumpturians were seeking a treaty with the United Nations of Earth.

Sybil actually believed it when she first heard it, but it didn't take her long to figure out the 'spin'. The powers that be had decided that making war on a race that was clearly more technologically advanced wasn't a good idea even if they were furious that the bastards had claimed Venus. They couldn't afford it either economically or otherwise. They'd decided to offer a treaty to the Sumpturians and *they* had graciously agreed.



Sybil was cautiously relieved. She'd hoped against hope that their government wasn't stupid enough to start a war they couldn't win and make things that much worse for the people of Earth, who were already suffering. She didn't believe it would be anything but a tentative, and very uneasy, peace at best, but it was a start ... she hoped.

Four weeks after her return she was summoned to what she expected to be her final meeting. A decision had been made as to whether she would still be welcome as an officer or if she was to be shipped home and discharged. She was sick with apprehension when she presented herself ... and surprised and not very pleased when she discovered she would be facing a panel.

When she'd been invited to take a seat, she settled shakily and waited for the ax to fall.

Commander Kendal studied her as if collecting his thoughts. "I'm guessing you've heard the rumors that a delegation of Sumpturian leaders will be arriving shortly to begin peace talks?"

Sybil gaped at the man, completely thrown for a loop at the direction of the conversation. "Yes, Sir," she stammered finally.

"As it happens, it isn't purely rumor. Delegates from the United Nations will also be arriving at moon base shortly. The Sumpturians specifically requested the meeting be held here as neutral ground."

She could tell he was just tickled pink about that! "I hadn't heard that."

"Naturally, security is tight," he said dismissively.

The man beside him spoke up when the commander fell silent. "I'm sure you're wondering what this meeting is about. I don't see any point in beating around the bush. We'll need people to liaison with the alie ... uh ... the Sumpturians. Given your previous ... ah ... contact with them we feel that you would be an ideal candidate. That is unless you have objections to dealing with them."

Sybil stared at the stranger, struggling to get her pulse under control. She didn't have a clue of he was. She'd thought when she'd first come in that the panel was strictly military, but then she'd been too unnerved to really look at them. She saw now, though, that he was wearing a suit—the type of suit that had politician written all over it. She moistened her dry lips. "I don't have any objections, Sir. I'm just not certain how I could be of any help. I didn't learn their language, not even a little."

"You were given a crash course on some of their customs from what I understand, however," the man responded dryly. "You at least have some slight understanding of the culture we're dealing with. We've already enlisted the aid of Drs. Kushbu and Rains, and also Mr. Powell ... formerly Major Powell."

Sybil felt the blood leave her face. She hadn't heard that Powell had been discharged, but she wasn't really surprised. Spencer had had his revenge, though god only knew why he'd targeted any of them when they were just as much captives as he was.

She was afraid to ask if she was pending discharge herself. "As I said, I don't have any objections. Despite the circumstances, the impression I gained from my time with them was that they were far more interested in developing their colony than warring with us."

"I've read over the debriefing."

Sybil felt her face heat up.

"You'll report for duty at Congressman Webb's office at oh six hundred tomorrow then Lieutenant. We have a lot of preparations to make and not much time. You're dismissed."

Sybil surged to her feet, saluted the commander, and marched from the meeting room. Her shoulders slumped slightly when she was clear. In something of a daze, she headed back to her quarters, struggling with the hope/fear that Anka might be a part of the Sumpturian enclave.

By the time she'd reached her quarters she realized that was doubtful. Very likely the political leaders would be escorted by the military, but Anka was the commander of the Venus facility. She could think of no logical reason, at all, why he would lead the escort and a lot of very good reasons why he should stay as far away as possible.

Right up until that moment she'd managed to convince herself that she was dealing very well with the unavoidable fact that she was never going to set eyes on him again. The surge of hope was worse than simply accepting, though. When she fell, she fell hard.

\* \* \* \*

The message was clear. Sybil had a chance of redemption if she performed satisfactorily as a liaison. Unfortunately, the job wasn't exactly what she'd expected it to be. It became clear within a few hours after presenting herself to the Congressman that, regardless of the job title, she would not be doing much actual interacting with the Sumpturians. They would be spied on from the time they arrived until they left and her job was to try to interpret every word, expression, and gesture for her government.

Dismay didn't adequately describe her feelings on the subject. Depression was closer and still didn't cover it. She completely agreed with the Congressman that it was critical not to misinterpret anything—for good or ill—but it wasn't as if she knew and understood the culture and thinking of the Sumpturians. She hadn't even been able to figure Anka out and she'd had far more 'interaction' with him than any of the others. The Sumpturians arriving for the talks would be complete strangers.

How the hell was she supposed to understand what 'made them tick' from the minute lesson about their courting process that she'd gotten from Anka? Maybe she would've had something to contribute if she hadn't already supplied what she knew during her debriefing, but since she had ....

The others didn't seem to mind guessing wildly. A good bit of what they did was to listen to Anka's transmissions over and over and argue among themselves about 'undertones' and 'between the lines'. When they weren't doing that, she spent hours going over 'background' noises they'd picked up and amplified and trying to figure out what they were based upon her one and only, brief, experience in their communications center.

She was pretty sure her job was enough to have made her completely miserable even if she hadn't already been. She was so on edge by the day the Sumpturians arrived she was nearly witless. Despite every effort to convince herself that Anka wouldn't be among them, she plowed through the spectators until she found a reasonably good observation point and struggled for a look at the military escort of the dignitaries. Unfortunately, due to the conditions, it was nearly impossible to get a very good look at any of the Sumpturians—or even to tell which of them were the dignitaries and which the soldiers. All of them were wearing suits similar to the one the science department had confiscated from her.

Giving up in disappointment as they began to disappear into the hastily erected conference center constructed nearly a hundred yards from their base of operations, she returned to her quarters to mope and wait for the call to review the Intel collected. The call wasn't long in coming. She was summoned a little over an hour later with the rest of the liaison team to study the images captured of the dignitaries and determine if any of them looked familiar.

As doubtful as she was that she had ever seen any of them, she studied them.

"They all look alike," Kushbu muttered after about an hour of 'flipping' through the images on his viewer.

Anger flickered through Sybil, but she refrained from voicing her opinion of *his* opinion.

"They don't!" Holly snapped. "They're as different as we are."

Kushbu sent her a sour look. "Well, they all look the same to me ... and I'm convinced they could've been at the base."

"I didn't see any of them," Sybil said coolly.

"You're certain?" the congressman's aid, Phil Meachum, demanded.

"I'm sure."

"I don't see how you could be sure," Powell said doubtfully. "Maybe it is bigotry, but they all look alike to me, too."

"The one you spent the night with looked like them?" Phil asked curiously.

Powell glared at him. "The one I spent the night with was a *female*," he growled.

"But you wouldn't be able to pick her out if she was among them?"

Powell reddened. "The males all look alike ... and so do the females. The main difference is the plumbing."

Sybil empathized with Powell's discomfort, but his determination that they all looked alike only meant to her that he hadn't really looked at them. "These are older men," she said pointedly. "All of the Sumpturians at the Venus base were younger—as you'd expect given that they were militia."

"Rils."

Sybil glanced at the man blankly. "What?"

"Not men—rils. That's their word for adult males."

Discomfort wafted through Sybil. "Rils, then."

The aid studied the images himself. "I see what you mean. They do appear to be older. You're sure none of them were at the Venus base?"

"No. I said I didn't see them. We don't know how many Sumpturians were there that we didn't see. We were confined most of the time to quarters. We were invited to dine with them at their festival, but Ank ... Commander I'Kartay explained that it was a courting festival. The elder rils might not have had an interest in attending. Or, they might not have gone because they knew we would be there. Does it matter?"

He stared at her pointedly. "Everything matters. Anything could be important."

There was some reason they were particularly interested in where the dignitaries were located, however, and it made Sybil damned uneasy. "My guess is that most of the civilians and political figures either reside on their base on Pluto or in their ships."

"You know for a fact that they've terra-formed Pluto and colonized it?" he asked sharply.

"No. I'm guessing."

She had a blinding headache by the time they were dismissed. It took all she could do to drag herself back to her quarters and order a dine-in meal. Popping a couple of painkillers for her head, she went in to her private bath to take a hot shower. She was lucky to have a private bath, but it was a long way from 'luxurious'. The toilet and lavatory were actually inside the shower. She supposed it would've been more accurate to say it was a small shower squeezed beside the toilet and lavatory, but the entire room was about the size of a small shower and when she turned on the shower head, the spray covered the room as if she was standing in a dishwasher. She thought it would've been more comfortable to wear goggles, but the hot water

on her face was welcome for a change, even if she did have to sift air through her teeth to breathe without inhaling water.

Stepping out again when the cycle shut off, she shivered while she turned in the air dryer and then pulled a robe on. She'd just managed to rake the tangles from her hair when the buzzer sounded, alerting her to the delivery she'd been expecting. Tossing her comb down, she trudged to the door and opened it. When she had, she simply stared blankly in shock at the man—ril standing outside. It took longer for recognition to sink in than it should have. The instant it did, she poked her head into the corridor, looked both ways, and then grabbed Anka's wrist and gave his arm a yank to get him inside before he was seen.

He curled around her, backing her against the wall next to her door the instant he entered. Sybil's heart was thundering in her ears so loudly she was deaf to all else. "What ...?"

She barely got even the one word out before his mouth settled over hers. Her mind was a morass of shocked confusion, but her body reacted instantly with a roiling cloud of pleasure the moment she felt his mouth on hers and sucked in a deep, satisfying, electrifying draft of his scent. The questions swarming through her mind abandoned her as her entire being focused at once on him, the pressure of his mouth, and his body against hers. She clutched at him blindly, trying to absorb him.

He left her mouth after a few minutes, sucking in a harsh breath and diving for her throat. She was inclined to complain as much as she enjoyed the feel of his mouth on the tender skin since his focus on her throat left her no way to explore him except with her hands, but dismissed the impulse readily when she felt him tugging her robe off. She left off her own exploration eagerly then, searching his suit for the closure. Her mind had turned to mush. Even when she finally discovered the way inside, it took her trembling fingers far longer to unravel the mystery of the mechanics than she'd wanted to devote to it. Finally, she managed it, however. She pushed her hands inside immediately to feel his skin. He was hot to the touch, not merely warm, and a shiver of fresh excitement rushed through her. The muscles along her channel began to clench and unclench a little frantically in anticipation, directing her to her needs.

Abandoning her exploration, she began tugging at the suit he was wearing. He released her long enough to shrug it from his shoulders and dove for her again, fitting his mouth to hers while he ran shaking hands over her. When she caught his buttocks in her hands and pulled his hips closer, arching against him, he switched his focus from her breasts to her buttocks, rhythmically pumping against her for several moments before he tired of the dubious pleasure of mock coupling and caught her buttocks, lifting her from the floor.

Sybil instantly discarded her mental search for a horizontal surface to achieve penetration and focused on the delightful opportunity offered. Curling her arms and legs around him, she began rubbing her exposed clit up and down along his cock. He tightened his grip on her buttocks, guiding her along his shaft for a few moments and shifted his hold impatiently, holding her with one arm while he grasped his cock and guided it home.

Sybil uttered a sound of want into his mouth as she felt the tug on her flesh, felt it slowly engulfing his—too slowly. Impatience fluttered through her. Despite the moisture her body had produced to welcome him, however, her body resisted yielding to him. Apparently, it was equally frustrating to him. He shifted his hold on her, braced her against the wall, and thrust again, slipping inside. Breaking from her lips, he gasped harshly, driving slowly but steadily until he'd conquered her channel.

Sybil sucked a patch of flesh on his shoulder, squeezing her eyes tightly to focus on the exquisite sensation of his possession. It was the most wonderful feeling she'd ever felt and the

pleasure increased by leaps and bounds as he began to move within her and she could feel the glide of his flesh in the most intimate of caresses.

The abrupt, pounding knock on her door nearly gave her a heart attack. She jerked her head up, widening her eyes. It jolted Anka from the moment just as harshly. It took her a moment to recognize the suspicion in his eyes.

"Who is it?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"You wanted dine-in, Lieutenant?"

Anka scanned her face searchingly.

"Yes," Sybil muttered reluctantly. "Could you ... uh ... leave the tray at the door? Uh ... I'm not dressed."

There was silence indicating surprise. "Yes, ma'am. I'll leave it by the door."

Damn it to hell!

Anka studied her, but there was just no getting around the fact that the interruption had totally blown the mood. "I should get that. Someone will wonder why it's outside."

With obvious reluctance, Anka withdrew and allowed her to settle to the floor. "Stay there," she whispered, wrapping her robe around herself with shaky hands and tying the belt.

She saw the man's back as she opened her door and reached for the tray. He turned and threw a glance back at her. Forcing a smile, she waved, snatched the tray from the floor and went back inside.

She could feel Anka's watchful gaze as she crossed the room and settled the tray on the small table she usually used as a desk. Uncomfortable, she glanced around and discovered he'd straightened his clothing. Disappointment flickered through her, but she didn't suppose there was any possibility of recapturing the moment. Damn it! Damn it! Shit! "Have you eaten?"

He shrugged, but approached her. "Earlier."

How much earlier? "Would you like to share?"

He shook his head, but she didn't miss the interest in his eyes as he scanned the covered dishes. "I don't really like eating alone and I'm not comfortable eating in front of anybody," she said tentatively.

He joined her at the table. "I only have one chair, but we could move the table to the bunk."

The moment she made the suggestion visions danced through her head of the two of them cozing up on the bed and feeding one another. Truthfully, she was far more interested in the cuddling and other things than she was the food. When he'd moved the table, though, she took a seat on the bunk and allowed him the chair. "I hadn't realized that you were part of the Sumpturian enclave," she said when he sat down. "I looked for you."

He sent her a sharp look and finally grimaced. "In all honesty I expected you to slam the door in my face."

She might have if he hadn't caught her completely off guard. "But you came anyway."

A slow grin curled his lips. "I figured I was due a door in the face ... and, of course, hopeful you'd invite me in."

She decided not to tell him she'd been far more worried about him being seen outside her door than anything else at that moment. "You haven't worn out your welcome ... yet."

He sent a quizzical look. "No?"

She met his gaze. "I guess I'm a sucker for a pretty face."

He chuckled at that. She liked his laugh, but she was more charmed by the warm color that tinted his cheeks.

"You *do* blush!" she exclaimed, laughing.

He sent her a mock stern look as she removed the covers and began to divide the food, giving him the largest portion. "Certainly not. Don't give me all of your food."

"I'm actually not that hungry." Not for food anyway.

Almost as if he could read her mind, Anka sent her a smoldering look.

"I see your ankle is better."

"Thankfully. I'll have to remember not to use it the next time I need to knock somebody out, though. They're always weak after a sprain. I was thinking about putting in for a discharge anyway when my tour's up."

He sent her a speculative look. "Any particular reason ... aside from the injury?"

"The injury had nothing to do with it. I was thinking about colonizing before that. It's the reason I volunteered for the Mars project to start with. I've been ready for a change for a while. Not that I haven't enjoyed the career, mind you, but I think, maybe, I've outgrown it."

"So ... you're planning to move to Mars?"

She shrugged. "We'll see." She hesitated. "Command didn't consider that I comported myself with the dignity they expect of an officer in what they refer to as the Venus 'fiasco'. If I hadn't already been considering moving on, that would've changed things, anyway. Now it's just one more reason for a career change. It isn't likely that I could look forward to any more promotions—certainly not any time soon."

He frowned. "Because of what happened on Venus? I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry that you're sorry. I'm not."

Something flickered in his eyes. "In that case," he murmured, smiling faintly, "I don't regret it either."

"No? I got the impression you did."

He studied her a long moment and got up, moving around the table. When he settled beside her, he drew her down on the bunk with him. "It's far more complicated than you seem to think," he murmured. Reaching for her belt, he untied it and pushed the robe open, stroking his fingers lazily over her. He left a path of pebbling skin in the wake of his touch. A shiver of delight traveled through her. She watched his expression, studying the details that had faded in her mind in the weeks since she'd seen him.

He looked thinner, she thought abruptly, wondering if he'd been ill. His color seemed healthy, though. Stress? Very likely, she decided, although it would've been nice to think he'd been pinning for her. He had a heavy load on his broad shoulders.

The thought brought her gaze to them and she lifted her hands to rub them along his shoulders. "You're overdressed," she murmured a little hoarsely.

"You're impatient."

"I am."

He lifted his brows at her, but sat up and removed his boots. "You aren't expecting any other callers?" he asked wryly as he reached for the closure of his suit.

Sybil chuckled. Sitting up, she pulled her robe off and tossed it aside. "I'd forgotten that one," she said. "I had other things on my mind."

When he settled beside her once more, they lay on their sides, face to face, simply staring at one another. "What's going through your mind, I wonder?" he murmured.

"Not much. I was just enjoying the view."

He studied her curiously. "You're serious?"

She smiled. "Why would you think otherwise?"

He shook his head at her. "You should have your eyesight checked. You do realize you have an alien in your bed?"

"A ril—yes. You may have noticed I hadn't met a man that appealed to me enough to take him to my bed."

He shifted closer, stroking a hand slowly down her arm, almost thoughtfully. "So you're saying rils appeal to you more?"

"You know that isn't what I'm suggesting."

He grinned knowingly as he lowered his head to brush his cheek along hers. "Just checking," he murmured against her ear.

Sybil sighed with a mixture of pleasure and disappointment. She'd hoped he would give her something, but she wasn't really surprised that he hadn't. She might very well not see him again. Tonight was an unexpected gift of fate, though, and she didn't want to spoil a moment of it.

She didn't truly know why he seemed drawn to her anymore than he understood why and how she could find him attractive, she supposed, when he was so different from her and anything she'd ever known. For her, it was a matter of her senses—pure and simple. He excited them. As much as she appreciated his intelligence and his sense of humor and the other qualities she saw in him, he made her hot and that was why she wanted him.

She couldn't tell him why. She didn't know why. She just knew he did, couldn't deny it.

He seemed to think she had other motives. It was so typical of the male of her own species she wondered just how different he actually was.

Of course it had occurred to her to wonder why he found her attractive and if he actually did or he had some other reason for seducing her. She would've liked for him to dispel her fears, but could he truly do that with words even if he'd tried? Wouldn't doubts linger in her mind because she knew she couldn't possibly be his concept of beauty?

She dismissed her doubts after a moment, determined to focus on the sheer delight of his attentiveness as he explored her slowly with his hands and his gaze until she'd become impatient for more and finally settled to exploring her with his mouth.

She felt no discomfort or wariness when he shifted lower to caress her breasts as she had the first time, only eagerness to feel what she had before. He kneaded them gently with his hands until they were flushed with her pulse, lowering his head to pluck at the tips with his lips only after they'd become so distended his touch was almost as painful as it was delightful. The muscles low her belly clenched spasmodically when he took the first into his mouth and curled his tongue around it.

Heat poured through her. She settled her hands on his head, stroking his hair and then his shoulders and back. Through slitted eyes, she watched his face, studied his mouth as he suckled, feeling the heat climb until she felt like she would go up in flames. By the time he'd decided he'd teased it enough, she felt fevered. She tilted her head back and gasped when he caught her other nipple in his mouth and sucked it, feeling the world go briefly black.

She didn't want to rush him. She wanted to enjoy every moment, but impatience began to ride her, a need to feel him inside of her. "Come inside of me, Anka," she gasped finally.

His head jerked upward. He stared at her face for a long moment and moved over her, adjusting her thighs to accommodate his narrow hips. She'd panted until she'd begun to feel dehydrated, vaguely ill with the dust dryness of her throat.

He remedied that with the heated moisture of his own mouth on hers.

She realized the moment the head of his cock connected with the mouth of her sex where her moisture had gone. She was slippery with need, almost embarrassingly so.

He didn't seem to think so. "You're so wet," he said, his voice a husky growl as he pushed deeper.

It sounded like praise. She was too mindless to be certain of anything anymore ... and unnerved. She began to feel as if she would climax even before he got inside of her. With the best will in the world, though, she couldn't seem to hold it back. He'd barely sank deeply inside of her when it ripped through her. She caught her breath, trying to conceal it from him.

He uttered a throaty chuckle, sawing slowly in and out while the convulsions rattled her. Anger and embarrassment flickered through her, but he dispelled both. "My *nodia*. The next will be better."

Next? She was nearly comatose!

She discovered she wasn't as close to it as she'd thought. He shifted the moment her body had stopped convulsing, rolling to one side and driving into her in long, deep strokes. Her g-spot quivered, reawakening. Uncertainty wafted through her, but there was no denying the steady rhythm was deeply satisfying and within a few moments she felt her body gathering itself again, felt the building tension she recognized.

His muscles began to quiver. His breaths were ragged, harsh against her ear. It unnerved her. At the same time it seemed to reach something deep inside of her, to thrill her in a way that sent her racing upward to her peak again. She gasped, stiffening as the first convulsion hit her.

He groaned, a long, low sound filled with passionate anguish. She shuddered, bucking against him as the next wave hit her harder, crying out. Rolling with her so that she was beneath him once more, he began to drive into her harder and faster, driving her climax until she'd begun to think it would shake her apart.

A profound sense of bliss rolled over her when he finally ceased to pump into her, shuddering and then going limp on top of her. "I'm sorry, *nodia*," he said gustily, shifting his arms to lift some of his weight off of her.

"Mmmm?" she murmured drunkenly.

He uttered a half-hearted chuckle. "I should learn not to make promises. It has been a long time for me, *nodia*."

"Mmm? I came twice."

He rolled onto the bed beside her. "I was intent upon three."

Sybil dragged in a sustaining breath and let it out slowly. "I'm not sure I could handle three."

He curled his arms around her, dragging her close. "We'll see."

"My headache's gone," she murmured in surprise after a few moments.

Anka stiffened then began to shake with silent laughter. "I've always thought sex had amazing curative powers myself."

She smiled against his shoulder. "I took painkiller."

"But all you needed was me, *nodia*."

Her throat closed at his quip. She was beginning to think that was too painfully true.



## Chapter Nine

Sybil had never been more thoroughly exhausted in her life ... or happier about it. Despite his threat/promise, Anka hadn't made any attempt to coax her into another round of sex. He'd slept with her in his arms, though, awakened her several times with the light stroke of his hand or his lips in her hair. Regret had filled her when he finally slipped from the bed and dressed in spite of the fact that she'd found it impossible to sleep deeply or stay asleep with him in her bed.

She hadn't wanted him to leave even though she'd acknowledged that she couldn't afford for him to be spotted leaving her quarters. "You don't have to leave yet."

He leaned over her, bending down to nuzzle his face against hers. "I do. Everyone will be stirring soon."

She sighed her acceptance and her disappointment, but she didn't try to hold him longer. For a little while after he'd gone, she lay awake, and then dropped asleep again just before her alarm went off.

She was a little sore, but even that made her happy, each tiny twinge reminding her of the night they'd spent together.

"You seem to be in good spirits this morning," Powell muttered. "You take a happy pill?"

Sybil felt her face redden, wondering if she'd actually been smiling at her thoughts. "Just trying to brace myself for another tedious day," she lied, grabbing a cup of coffee and leaving Powell standing beside the urn.

The congressman's aid sent her a piercing look as she came in that unnerved her. Surreptitiously, she checked her uniform to make certain she'd put herself together correctly and then nonchalantly checked her hair. She couldn't tell that anything was askew. She set her cup of coffee down at her desk. "Excuse me. I believe I'll hit the lady's room before I get started."

The view in the mirror was something of a jolt. She'd been sure she had concealed the dark circles under her eyes, but she looked like a raccoon! No wonder the guy had stared at her! Dragging a concealer stick out of her purse, she applied it carefully and then checked the fit of her uniform and her hair. She still looked like she'd had a long night, but it was the best she could do.

The aid met her in the doorway on her way back in. "Anything you need to tell me?"

Sybil stared at him blankly, trying to get her heart rate down to something close to normal. "Not that I can think of."

He studied her for a moment and finally moved to allow her to pass, but Sybil was a nervous wreck when she sat down at her desk and booted her system. The tedium she'd expected helped to settle her nerves after a few hours, so much so that by the time she'd had her lunch she was fighting sleep. Shortly after lunch, however, an image flashed on her vid display that brought her wide awake.

"What do you know about him?"

Sybil lifted her head and gaped at Phil Meachum, trying to ignore the stares of the others. Anger flickered to life after a moment, chasing her shock and anxiety. "He's good in bed," she said baldly.

He looked taken aback by her frankness. "Besides that," he said dryly when he'd recovered.

She blinked at him. "I gave a full report."

"I'm not asking about that. I want to know what your impression of the man ... uh ... ril, Commander Anka l'Kartay is."

Sybil's lips tightened. "If you've read the report, you should know we were only at their base camp a couple of days. I don't know him ... except in the biblical sense."

"You were there long enough for him to seduce you," he countered sardonically.

"Yes, about five seconds after I got a really good look at him ... and it took me hours after that to convince him to take me into his bed!"

"You're damned defensive about him."

"I'm defensive about your line of questioning. Maybe if I understood *why* you'd brought this up—again—I wouldn't be so defensive."

"Alright. Good enough. I brought it up because his name keeps popping up—enough that we're beginning to wonder just how powerful a force he is in the Sumpturian political arena."

Sybil gaped at him. "He's a military man. I wasn't aware that he had anything at all to do with politics. What do you mean his name keeps popping up?"

"We haven't made a lot of headway in breaking their language down, but we don't need to in so far as names go. So, unless there's another Commander l'Kartay, this one seems to be on a lot of minds."

Uneasiness filled Sybil, not the least because he'd come under the government's scrutiny. "Well," she said after a moment, "we don't actually know that there isn't, you know."

Meachum wasn't the only one that gave her a look of patent disbelief. Powell, Rains, and Kushbu all looked at her as if she'd grown horns and a forked tail. In all honesty, she didn't believe it either, but she knew it *was* possible.

"What I mean is, we don't even know that l'Kartay is a name as we know them. It could mean anything and there could be any number of Sumpturians with that title, if it was a title. It might be a place name, you know."

"I think the law of averages would rule out the possibility of there being two Commander Anka l'Kartays."

"Oh." Sybil struggled with the dismay that comment caused her for a few moments.

"Well, we don't know in what context that they've mentioned him, do we?"

"No, we don't. But we're interested in finding out," he said pointedly.

Sybil had a very bad feeling that someone had seen him entering her quarters the night before, but she wasn't about to volunteer the information. "I'm willing to try to figure it out if you'll just let me study the vids you're talking about."

"They haven't been released to us yet. All I'm trying to get at this point is a handle on him."

Sybil nodded, struggling to gather her wits about her. "It was clear that the men and women under him held a great deal of respect for him," she said after a moment's thought.

"Rils and rilous," he corrected her. "We feel that it's important to get a grasp of their language."

So they could spy on them more easily? Irritation flickered through her. "The soldiers under his command."

Meachum turned to the others, lifting a brow questioningly. "Do you all agree on that assessment?"

Powell frowned, considering it. "Yes. I'd have to agree with her."

Kushbu and Rains also agreed.

It was the first time they'd all agreed on anything and Sybil almost wished they hadn't given the speculation in Meachum's eyes. "So you're saying they wouldn't hesitate to follow him ... whatever he might ask of them?"

Sybil turned cold. "That's a leap," she said through stiff lips.

Powell shrugged. "I don't know. I wouldn't rule out the possibility that he's some sort of hero to them. It would be hard to say considering how little we know about them."

Sybil wished she'd been close enough to stomp his foot ... and break it.

Kushbu agreed with him. Holly Rains, thankfully, didn't simply fall in with the others. "I don't know much about the military, quite honestly. Aren't they supposed to follow whatever orders their commander gives them?"

"Unless they're treasonous."

Holly gaped at him. "Well! I didn't get that impression at all if you're saying he's some sort of ... budding dictator! He's a very kind and well mannered man, from what I could tell ... uh ... ril."

Sybil could've kissed the woman! "I agree with that. Under the circumstances, considering he could well have viewed us as a threat to Sumpturian security, he was extremely gracious."

Meachum didn't seem the least bit happy at that assessment. The bastard! He should've been relieved. Instead, he *wanted* to think the worst! He shrugged after a moment. "Maybe too gracious? He could also be a master at manipulation. He would've known as soon as they'd examined the craft that it was a scientific expedition. There were no weapons on board."

"There were plenty of cameras, though," Sybil pointed out dryly, "which could just as easily have led to the conclusion that we were there to spy."

"And maybe it did?" said the devil's advocate. "His 'gracious' behavior might have been nothing more than a smoke screen to create that impression to get you to lower your guard."

Honestly! As if everybody in the world—universe—was as paranoid as the American government! "And maybe we shouldn't judge them by ourselves?" she suggested tightly. "As you keep pointing out, they're rils, not men. We don't know how they think. It doesn't seem to me that they're in a position where they'd need to worry about how we feel about them."

"It doesn't, does it?"

Sybil wanted to demand to know what the hell he meant by that, but she didn't need to.

The government was beginning to wonder why the Sumpturian's had been willing to form a treaty and they weren't convinced it was graciousness on their part.

Wasn't it *just* like them to decide nobody would offer such a thing merely to have peace? That they must be worried, or fearful? It made her blood run cold just thinking what they might try if they thought the Sumpturians were vulnerable in any way.

\* \* \* \*

If possible, Sybil had a worse headache that evening as she headed back to her quarters. Instead of popping more painkillers, she decided to try to take a catnap. Her mind was so active she thought at first she wouldn't be able to, especially when she could smell the mingling of her

scent and Anka's on her linens. Eventually, though, the broken rest she'd had the night before caught up with her. She woke to discover she'd slept nearly two hours and the headache wasn't gone. Maybe she just needed food? She hadn't eaten much the night before or at lunch.

The temptation to order another tray was strong. Reluctantly, she discarded the idea. The moment she'd thought of food the hope had instantly arisen that Anka might come back, but it was that very thing that drove her from her quarters to dine in the mess with everyone else. She shouldn't *be* there if he did decide to come back!

She had a bad feeling that Meachum suspected something and it wouldn't be good for either of them to be caught together. Not that she was particularly worried about herself. The Sumpturian enclave was restricted to the conference center, though, even if they did have diplomatic immunity. Anka wasn't supposed to be inside the military complex at all and there was no telling what sort of flap it would cause if he was found there.

Despite her objective in using food as a curative, she found that it only succeeded in dulling the pain a little more. It was tension headache, she decided, not a hunger headache. When she left the mess hall, she headed to the gym for a workout, reminding herself that she was behind in her routine anyway. It took work, and a lot of it, to counteract the effects of micro gravity despite the efforts to create simulated gravity. Without the centrifugal force the rotators created and the workout they got from the magnetic fields, the moon base would've been completely impossible, but even with them anyone stationed for a long period had to work out regularly.

Thankfully, the work out took care the tension. Feeling pleasantly tired, Sybil headed back to her quarters and a hot bath. She was sitting in the middle of her bed combing the tangles from her hair when a strange phenomena in the center of her quarters caught her attention. Her heart skipped several beats as the particles solidified, fear and joy instantly at war.

"Anka!"

He grinned at her expression. "My apologies. There are patrols in the corridor or I would've had better manners than to enter without permission."

Sybil sprang from her bed and rushed toward him, gripping his arms a little frantically. "This is bad! This is really bad! You shouldn't be here!"

He lifted his brows at her but gathered her into his arms, nuzzling her neck. "Does that mean I'm not welcome, my *nodia*?"

Sybil clutched at him. "Of course it doesn't! I mean ...!"

He chuckled. Leaning away, he stroked her cheek lightly. "Yes or no, *nodia*?"

Sybil felt a thrill race through her at the reminder of that night, the first night he'd asked her that. She struggled with the warmth it produced, wrestled with her desire to have him stay and her concern for him. "This is a restricted area. You aren't supposed to be here."

He studied her for a moment. "Then come back to my place with me."

The temptation was so overwhelming she wanted to jump on it. She bit her lip, thinking about it. "I'll be considered AWOL if they try to summon me for any reason and I'm not here. And that could cause trouble, too, especially if they figure out I'm with you."

He studied her face. "You're very worried about this?"

Sybil sighed. "I'm worried about you." She hesitated. "You're here now, though. Stay a while."

Anka led her to the bed and drew her down with him. "Tell me what you're so worried about," he murmured once he'd arranged her against his length.

Wariness flickered through her. "I told you. Don't pretend you don't know that this is a restricted area. I know you have them on your own base."

He shifted far enough away to study her face. "I wouldn't insult your intelligence, *nodia*." He released a harsh breath. "I shouldn't have come."

Sybil wrestled with the thoughts that had been circling her mind ever since the conversation with Meachum earlier. She didn't think they would've taken root and created uncertainty if she hadn't already been struggling with doubts of her own, but she realized she simply didn't want to face the possibility that Anka was trying to use her. "I wanted you to come, hoped you would. I know you'll be leaving soon and ...." She paused, swallowing with an effort against the emotions clogging her throat. "I just don't want to create problems for you."

"That's all of it?"

"It's enough."

"It isn't enough to keep me away. Tell me it will cause problems for you. Tell me you don't want me and I'll go and I won't come back."

Sybil looked into his eyes mournfully, feeling her own fill with tears. She knew what she should say if she truly cared about him. "I don't want you here. I want you to go."

His gaze flickered over her face. "Liar," he murmured. Surging toward her, he pushed her onto her back and covered her mouth with his, kissing her deeply. The glide of his tongue over hers was sheer delight. His taste and scent invaded her like a strong intoxicant, making her dizzy, warm, and completely malleable.

Sybil struggled inwardly, but it was a losing battle. She didn't want him to go. She was too selfish to do the right thing and send him away. All that kept drumming in her mind as she luxuriated in the feel of his mouth on hers was that she only had a little time to be with him and she couldn't bear to give it up. "You'll be careful when you come?" she asked breathlessly when he broke the kiss.

"I'm a cautious *ril*, *nodia*. I'm always careful," he murmured carelessly.

"I mean it, Anka!" she said as he nibbled a trail kisses along her face and down her neck.

"I am deadly serious also," he murmured, plucking at the nipple he found with his lips.

"That feels good."

He smiled against her breast. "Does it?"

"Mmmm."

He moved to the twin peak. "And this?"

"Mmmhmm."

He sucked it briefly and lifted his head. "Where else do you like kisses?"

Sybil opened her eyes with an effort and lifted a hand to touch his mouth. "I like this mouth. I like your kisses. You can kiss me anywhere you want to."

His eyes gleamed. Rolling off of her, he pulled his boots off and then his suit. A wicked grin curled his lips when he climbed onto the bunk again and grasped her ankle. Sybil eyed him with misgiving. Jerking her foot off the bed, he caught her big toe between his teeth and raked them along the tender pad.

Sybil jerked all over and let out a shriek of laughter before she could stop herself. She clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to stifle the urge to laugh hysterically as he systematically nibbled each toe, but she was laughing so hard by the time he got to the pinky tears were streaming from her eyes. "Anka! You madman! Stop it!" she hissed at him in a whisper.

"You said anywhere, *nodia*," he reminded her, grabbing her other foot. She tried to wrest it away from him, but his grip was unbreakable. Instead of raking the toes with his teeth, however, he sucked them one by one and Sybil felt the urge to laugh die. Her belly shimmied.

He sent her a knowing look. "Where else are you sensitive, I wonder?" he said musingly. Sybil swallowed convulsively.

He tilted his head. "You won't talk? I guess I'll have to discover it on my own."

She gasped as he began nibbling kisses along her calf to her knee. "Don't torture me," she murmured playfully.

He sent her a heavy lidded look. "Too late to beg for mercy now."

She wasn't sure she wanted to, or could as he passed her knee and began to nibble along her inner thigh. It *was* torture. It made her belly clench so hard it cramped, but it also sent out electrifying currents of heat. Her back came up off the bed when he reached the apex of her thigh and sucked on the soft patch of flesh at the very top. She grabbed his head between her hands. He caught her wrists, forcing her hands down until he'd clamped them on either side of her hips. She tried to clamp her legs together but discovered he'd effectively blocked that avenue of escape with his body.

"Anka?"

"Shhh," he murmured, leaning down to suck the same spot on the opposite thigh. "Relax, *nodia*."

*Relax?* With his *head* between her legs?

She would've jackknifed upright again when he moved to the cleft between her legs if she could have. She discovered she couldn't. For several moments after he'd begun to drag his tongue along her cleft from her sex to her clit she couldn't decide whether she wanted to escape or not. The moment he caught her clit between his lips and sucked at it, however, she lost any ability to think. She nearly passed out at the jolt that went through her and the wave upon wave of shocks that followed it with each tug of his mouth.

She gasped, panted, struggling to catch her breath, but his mouth and the sensations pouring through her had her entire focus. She felt her body heating toward explosion, felt the tension she recognized begin to build and it still caught her completely off guard when she climaxed, dragging a sharp cry from her. He continued to tease the exquisitely sensitive nub until she thought she would black out and finally lifted his head.

She groaned piteously when he lowered his head to kiss her lower belly and began a tortuous assault upward, writhing beneath his touch as if he was branding her with fire. It *was* tortuous, and yet she couldn't bring herself to beg him to stop, as certain as she was that she couldn't bear it if he touched her breasts.

She *knew* that was his goal.

He caught her arms again when she folded them over breasts, suckling her breasts one that the time with a leisurely relish that forced the breath from her lungs.

"Anka!" she gasped finally. "I can't stand anymore! Please!"

He released the nipple he'd been torturing, studied her face a long moment and surged upward, wedging the head of his cock in her opening. She was far more interested in ending the torment than anything else at that point, but the muscles of her sex had been clenching with such hard spasms they seemed to have permanently clenched together. Penetration was torture in itself, for both of them. He was shaking all over by the time he'd managed to enter her completely.

She came almost as soon as he began to move, groaning, shuddering. He slowed, waited until she'd stopped convulsing and began to move faster, changing the rhythm and the depth until she began to climb again. Dread filled her along with anticipation, but no amount of reluctance was enough to stop the climb toward another peak. She was pretty sure she blacked out momentarily when it hit her.

She was also pretty sure she bit him trying to contain the screams of ecstasy clawing their way up her throat.

She collapsed gratefully, struggling for breath, holding on to consciousness by a thread when he drove into her the final time and shuddered with his own release. He rested a moment, panting for breath and shifted off of her.

She shivered with the loss of his heat, almost too weak to breathe. Pushing one arm beneath her, he dragged her limp form against his own. "Three," he whispered with satisfaction against her ear, nipping the lobe lightly. "Shall I try for four next time, *nodia*?"

"Oh god!"

\* \* \* \*

Sybil didn't even try to dissuade him from staying the following night. She'd spent another miserable day at the job she was beginning to hate, looking forward to Anka's nightly visit with a mixture of hope, dread, and uneasiness. He surprised her again. He curled up with her in her bed, caressed her, talked to her for several hours, and then simply fell asleep.

She didn't ask him about how the peace talks were coming, not because she had any idea, because she wasn't actually privy to such information, but because she was afraid he'd either tell her it was progressing well and he'd be leaving soon or that it wasn't progressing well at all. She didn't want to know when he would go, didn't want to think about the heartbreak in store for her when he did. She also didn't want to consider the possibility that the treaty would fall through and one side or the other would declare war.

Either way, she was going to be heartbroken. She struggled against accepting that fact for a while and finally realized it was useless to try to lie to herself. She loved him.

She just didn't know if the man she thought she had fallen in love with actually existed.

## Chapter Ten

"They'd kick some ass at poker," Powell muttered under his breath.

Sybil dragged her gaze from the vid displaying a live feed of the peace talks and glanced at him. She'd been wondering about that herself. She didn't know if it was because Meachum had planted it in her mind or if she'd actually picked up on something herself, but she'd begun to worry about their apparent ability to simply shut down emotion. Either they were completely unconcerned about the outcome of the peace talks, though, or they were damned good at suppressing and hiding their emotions.

They were as placid as a herd of cows, regardless of the veiled insults the men and women of the U.N. had dropped from time to time.

If she hadn't met the Sumpturians on Venus, hadn't gotten to know Anka as she had, she would've believed they simply didn't *feel* any emotion. As it was, she'd begun to wonder if everything she'd seen on Venus was a charade devised by Anka and ably performed by the men and women under his command.

The impression she'd gotten was that they were as similar to humans as if they'd *been* human and were simply people of a different race and culture. At the festival, she'd seen them dance together and interact just as a group of Earth born young people might, laughing, apparently teasing and joking with one another, flirting shyly or outrageously as their personality dictated. Anka had behaved so *human*-like that he'd completely disarmed her.

And yet there he stood among the Sumpturian dignitaries as stone faced as all the rest, betraying nothing of his thoughts, his demeanor cool but completely relaxed, his gestures the same. There was no sign of tension whatsoever, no stiffness that might betray anger or uneasiness—nothing for them to pick up on.

They knew they were being watched and analyzed, she realized abruptly.

Powell was right. They were playing a game of poker with a race of people that knew them as well as they knew themselves, perhaps even better than they knew themselves, could effortlessly and accurately interpret every eye twitch, every gesture, every word without giving an inkling of what they were thinking or how they felt.

She didn't know if that sudden insight was more unnerving or the fact that it was clear that Anka indeed had a great deal of influence among his peers. Their political leaders deferred to him as often as not and generally consulted with him on matters that were clearly not even vaguely military in nature. She could understand the former. It had become abundantly clear that he was the commander of their forces, not merely of the base on Venus, or he was at least the highest ranking military officer that was part of the Sumpturian enclave. It was surprising but understandable that they'd want him to make any of the military decisions. As for the rest ... either they were unsure of themselves insofar as dealing with Earth people, or the hierarchy of the Sumpturian culture differed drastically from their own.

The President and the members of the U.N. certainly consulted with military command, but they made it clear that it was only advice they wanted. They would make the final decisions themselves. More accurately, the President of the U.S. called the shots. Global economic



disaster had hit everyone, including the U.S., but the U.S. was still on the top of the heap and grimly determined to stay there.

There were interpreters for the U.N. members. None for the Sumpturians, and they were completely unconcerned about how much it unnerved the Earth enclave that they openly and freely discussed their views in their own language.

Meachum was getting nastier by the day. If he was any indicator of how the talks were going, and she thought he was, then the Sumpturians were trouncing their opponents hands down. The first week after they'd arrived the Sumpturians had reviewed the terms so carefully drawn up by committee and rejected all of them—not surprisingly since the government was up to its usual tricks, compiling huge tomes of rambling discourse, interspersed with 'hidden' propositions that had little or no relation to the subject supposedly under discussion. They'd actually *edited* the agreement, removing all of the neat little extras the politicians had thought up to throw in, hoping the Sumpturians wouldn't notice.

The U.N. delegation had been livid, of course, the Sumpturians unmoved. They'd explained with patience that they had terra-formed and claimed both Pluto and Venus and had the right, by Earth laws, of first conquest. They'd also claimed water and mineral rights of the Kuiper belt, mineral rights of Mercury, and the planet Jupiter for fuel exploitation rights and waste disposal.

No one had apparently anticipated that the treaty would entail a division of so-far-unclaimed real estate across the solar system. The U.N. delegation scrambled to catch up, drawing up a second agreement which included proprietary rights of the Earth people to everything else in the solar system, apparently deciding to slug the division out among themselves at a later date. They'd had to send for a group of scientists to help them draw it up to make certain they didn't leave anything out that might be of some importance in the future.

In the end they'd claimed the inner asteroid belt—all rights—all the moons, even those circling planets the Sumpturians had claimed, Mars and Earth, of course, and the remaining planets the Sumpturians hadn't lain claim to. They also wanted waste disposal rights on Jupiter.

The Sumpturians graciously agreed to disposal rights as long as *they* were allowed to monitor what was disposed of on Jupiter and refused to give up the moons circling any of the planets they'd claimed, pointing out that they had plans to introduce a moon into Venus' orbit to help to stabilize the planet's eco-system and also that they intended to monitor Jupiter and would need to have bases there to do so.

The U.N. fell to haggling over the 'choice' outer moons for future colonization or strategic bases of their own at least. By the end of the second week, they'd managed to reach an agreement regarding the disposition of every stone in the solar system. The Sumpturians seemed completely satisfied and, because they were, the Earth people decided they'd been screwed. They weren't sure how, but they were certain the Sumpturians wouldn't have been so damned satisfied if they hadn't come out on top of the battle for the prime real estate. It didn't matter that they had lain claim to parts of the solar system they hadn't even had the chance to reach and probably wouldn't be able to for generations. What mattered was that they didn't like interlopers. They wanted the opportunity to look it over at their leisure and appropriate or discard it according to worth.

They entered the third week of talks with an agreement hammered out, which hit a new hitch when the members of the U.N. pointed out that they would expect to be able to build an embassy on Venus once it was possible to do so in order to maintain the treaty. The U.S. wanted their own Embassy and also petitioned for a military base there.

The two issues were discussed exhaustively but the Sumpturians finally agreed to allow it, both the Embassy and the base, once the President had offered to pay to lease the area set aside as 'American' soil. The actual haggling began when the President discovered that they didn't consider American dollars of any value to them. They would take payment in trade. They pointed out that, since they already had access to pretty much any raw materials they could possibly want and their technology far surpassed any technology on Earth, the Earth people really had nothing to offer but food.

That was a painful negotiation. Nobody wanted to admit that there were already food shortages on Earth, however, due the climate change. They might as well have. They haggled more furiously about the food than they had over the planets. An agreement was finally reached, however, when the Sumpturians agreed to take part of the payment in DNA samples that would allow them to accelerate the development of flora and fauna on Venus.

As relieved as Sybil was that they'd managed to hammer out a treaty, particularly when it had seemed for a while that they wouldn't be able to, she was so depressed over the knowledge that Anka would soon be leaving that it was all she could do to pretend she was pleased about it.

She hadn't seen him nearly enough to get her fill, even though she'd managed to convince herself that what she felt wasn't real. It was more in the nature of a crush, or maybe hero worship like a woman might develop for a man that seemed larger than life, extraordinary—like an entertainer or sports figure or powerful politician. She just needed to work it out of her system and try to break the spell he'd woven over her so that she could see him for what he truly was—probably a completely ordinary individual if not a galactic con artist who'd considered she might be useful to him in some way.

Well, she supposed she had. She'd done her utmost to influence her own government favorably—not that she thought she'd actually succeeded, but she had doggedly refused to put a negative spin on her interpretations.

She hadn't managed to get him out of her head or work him out of her system, though. She didn't think if she'd spent every single night with him since his arrival that she would've been able to, but she hadn't gotten the chance. His visits seemed deliberately random. He'd come the first night he arrived and for two nights running after that and then she hadn't seen him for two days—not privately, anyway.

She was pretty sure that his visits *had* been deliberately random. What she wasn't sure of was whether it was calculated to keep her off guard or if it was to eliminate the risks of predictability if it had been discovered that he was visiting her. She wanted to think the latter but then she was painfully aware that she was eager to explain away her own doubts.

In spite of everything, it was a relief to be dismissed. They weren't even allowed to stay and watch the signing, the most historical signing in the history of the solar system! Sybil was just glad to be able to reach her quarters where she had a little privacy and didn't have to guard her tongue or her expressions anymore. She simply sat staring at the walls once she had, her mind strangely empty for a while. After a time, thoughts and emotions began to trickle back, however, and she began to wonder if this was to be her very last night, ever, with Anka, or if he wouldn't come at all and she'd actually already *had* her last night with him the night before last. Would she even get the chance to say good-bye to him?

She wanted to be alone with him—just one last time—so she could do and say all the completely stupid things she'd been bursting to. She was willing to settle for a public good-bye if that was all she could get, but she had a bad feeling that wasn't likely. They'd kept the Sumpturians carefully segregated the entire time. It didn't seem likely they'd lift that ban now.

She discovered when she'd been summoned to report to her commanding officer that she was wrong. The President had decided to throw a gala to celebrate the agreement—and hopefully to impress them with American wealth and power, she was sure. She and the other liaisons had been invited to attend. Otherwise, it was only the upper crust that would be attending.

She was instantly sorry that she didn't have the outfit Anka had given her anymore. She supposed it wouldn't have been acceptable even if she had, though, and it was just as well she hadn't been tempted to flout convention and wear it considering the snooty would be in overwhelming attendance.

Expecting a dismissal at least from her services as a liaison, she discovered that the real reason she'd been summoned was because she hadn't returned the papers agreeing to serve another tour of duty. Caught off guard, she stammered her way through an explanation for her decision not to sign up for another tour.

He wasn't pleased. She could see that, but she thought she could endure his displeasure for the month or so that she had left. She didn't regret the decision. She was afraid she might eventually, but she didn't at the moment. She was just sorry that she had to stay that long. She would've loved to have been free to brush the moon dust from her boots immediately after the Sumpturians departed and head back to Earth.

To say nothing had turned out the way she'd hoped and planned would've been an understatement, but she realized she also wasn't sorry that she'd been snatched from the Mars mission and sent to Venus instead. Whatever happened, she couldn't regret having known Anka. Her memories might be bittersweet, but at least she would have them and what a tale it would be for her children and grandchildren!

If she ever had any.

Shrugging her depression off, she headed back to her quarters after she was dismissed, determined to spend the time before the gala primping as she'd never primped before. It was her last chance! She was going to knock Anka's socks off if it was at all possible!

\* \* \* \*

Sybil had splurged. Once she'd examined her wardrobe and discarded everything in it, she'd left the base and headed to the Fontainebleu, a luxury hotel for wealthy tourists. More specifically, she'd headed to the clothing stores on the first level for the rich and famous where she'd managed to knock such a huge hole in her savings that she was still suffering from sticker shock when she finally reached the party several hours later. She'd gone one step further and, next to the purchase of the dress, it was the most outrageous thing she'd ever done in her life—she'd rented a room for the night and arranged to have a pickup at the conference center.

She hoped she wasn't going to be spending the night alone in the most expensive hotel room she'd ever rented!

She was such a nervous wreck by the time she reached the security check that she thought she might faint or worse, be sick. Her stomach was a churning mass of nerves, though, and it took an effort to try to calm it when her mind was pure mush. Fortunately, she supposed, she met up with Holly Rains and Reed Powell in the security line. Holly looked like she was in as bad a shape as Sybil was, which mystified Sybil until it occurred to her that the poor thing was probably hoping to meet up with Beckt again.

For all she knew, she realized, Beckt *was* part of the party and had been sneaking into the base to see Holly just as Anka had come to her.

"I'm so nervous," Holly muttered. "Is it hot in here to you? Or is it just me?"

“Actually, I thought it was a little cool,” Sybil responded absently.

Holly stared at her a moment and then scanned the dress that had set Sybil back a quarter of year’s savings. “That does look a bit ... airish.”

Sybil glared at her even though she knew it was true. It had been the closest thing she could find to the outfit Anka had given her, though.

Actually, she thought it was probably a lot more risqué than the one she’d had. The material was certainly thinner and more clingy. It was backless, as that outfit had been, and slit well up one thigh, but it was black.

She felt a good deal better in the black. White always made her feel like a beached whale and she was already suffering self-consciousness over premenstrual bloating. Anyway, she was a blond and white just made her look more washed out—like something that had crawled out from under a rock. “This is a formal,” she said stiffly.

“You look beautiful,” Reed Powell said gallantly.

Sybil reddened, struggling with discomfort over the compliment, but she was pleased to have a male opinion. “Thanks.”

Fortunately, they were allowed to move on just then where they bottlenecked with the reception line. Music had already begun to waft from the conference center turned ballroom long before she reached the beginning of the receiving line and Sybil was in a fever of impatience to get inside, checking her time piece every five seconds for fear she’d turn into a damned pumpkin and miss the transport she’d paid for before she even got inside. A jolt went through her when she discovered that the receiving line was made up of the dignitaries attending and their spouses. She didn’t know why it hadn’t occurred to her, but then she’d never been invited to such an elite gala in her life.

The next jolt came when she discovered that the second half of the receiving line was the Sumpturian dignitaries and included Anka. She almost tripped over her damned dress when she spotted him, which of course didn’t go unnoticed. Powell grasped her arm to steady her. Several women gasped and the President and Attorney General both surged forward to catch her.

Argh! The humiliation of it! She was so embarrassed she thought for several moments that she was going to humiliate herself worse by bursting into tears. Anka’s touch steadied her, however. He took her hand when she reached him and looked her over with unconcealed pleasure. “Lieutenant Hunter, it’s a pleasure to meet you again ... and under far better circumstances. I hope you’ll consider dancing with me later?”

Dismayed as she was by the impersonal formality, she knew he was constrained by the circumstances and was heartened that he’d requested a dance. “Thank you. I’d enjoy that Commander I’Kartay.”

Turning slightly, he introduced her to the man on his right as the Premier d’Zubi. She had no clue of what the tile represented, but she smiled politely, told him how pleased she was to meet him, and moved on. She was greeted by an usher once inside and escorted to the table where her seat was reserved.

She hadn’t realized they would dine first or that she would be appointed a seat. She supposed she should have. That was the way it was done at formal military dinners, but she’d just thought that was because of military protocol to make certain those of superior rank were properly recognized. She supposed when she discovered that Holly and Reed were seated at her table that it was for the same reason—pearls before swine. Meachum was also shuttled to their table.

Wine was served. She hated wine but she was well aware of the beneficial properties for relaxation and it took an effort to restraint herself from chugging it. Powell, seated directly beside her, uttered a snort he tried to disguise as a cough when she lifted her glass and took a huge gulp, then made a face at the bitterness and shuddered. He leaned closer. "It's usually better to sip it slowly."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I know that. I just needed something to calm my nerves a little."

"It *is* unnerving to find oneself in such exalted company," he said wryly. "Too rare a treat to pass up, though."

"Mmmhmm," Sybil agreed absently, having discovered the reception line had finally broken up and everyone was headed to their seats. Anka was easy to pick out among the humans, but not among his own people. All of them were tall, and a number of them a good bit taller than he was. She saw very quickly, though, that her own table was so far removed from his that she might as well have been on another planet. Disappointed, she tried to focus on the conversations of the others at her table.

"What are your plans now?"

Sybil turned to Reed, blinking at him. "I'm sorry! What?"

"I heard it through the grapevine that you weren't planning to re-up."

The damned grapevine sure was fast! "No, I'm not."

"So ...?"

She blinked at him again. "Oh! Actually, I don't know yet. I'd originally planned to become a colonist. Now ... well, I'd thought I would be on Mars when my contract ended and I could get a discharge there. I guess I'm heading back to Earth."

"This is still the jumping off spot," he reminded her. "I'd been considering it myself. My ex-wife had no interest in it, but that isn't an issue anymore."

Sybil frowned. "I'm sorry. I hadn't heard you were divorced."

He grimaced but shrugged. "She wasn't interested in being a civilian's wife. She liked being an officer's wife."

Dismay flickered through her. "Sounds like you're well rid of her."

He chuckled. "I knew our marriage wasn't working a long time ago. Betty and I never did seem to want the same things. I confess I wasn't sure of it until I discovered she was a lot more upset by my discharge than she was by the indiscretion that caused it."

There was a thread of bitterness in his voice that made her wonder if he'd been 'indiscrete' because his wife hadn't seemed to care or if it was other lapses that had created the riff before and the latest was just the last straw. Not that it was her business or it excused his behavior. If he'd thought his wife didn't care about him, he should've dumped her and then pursued other women, not stayed with her and strayed.

"Satisfied men don't stray," he muttered, almost as if he'd read her thoughts.

"Maybe," she countered, "satisfied wives don't either, but there are a lot of people that never seem to be satisfied, no matter what their partner does."

"True. I thought I *was* satisfying her by focusing on my career, though."

Sybil shifted in her seat, uncomfortable with the personal confessions of a man she still thought of as a superior officer, even if he had been stripped of his rank. She was relieved when the servers began to make the rounds, offering a distraction, but she discovered quickly enough that it wasn't much of a distraction. Not that the food wasn't good. It was actually exceptional. The problem was that it was paraded out in such a slow, pompous production that there was

more than enough time between courses for conversation and Reed seemed determined to pursue one.

She *was* seated next to him, but she was also aware that he focused most of his attention on her when everyone else at the table seemed to carry on a general conversation they could all take part in.

The discomfiting suspicion began to grow in her that he was hitting on her. She tried to dismiss it, but it seemed the harder she tried to put distance between them, the more pointed he was.

She was infinitely relieved when the end of the meal was signaled by the President's ascent to the stage where a podium stood. It was the typical political bullshit, but fortunately brief. She was inclined to think everyone clapped so enthusiastically because it *was* brief ... and not followed by a half a dozen more politicians hoping to get a plug in for themselves for the next election.

The strains of dance music swelled within the room as the President descended to the dance floor. Sybil looked hopefully in the direction Anka had disappeared and managed to catch him leading some politician's wife onto the dance floor.

"Would you care to dance?"

Meachum and Powell both asked her at almost the same time. The question in stereo confused her and it was a moment before she realized they were talking to her.

Lovely choices! She disliked Meachum and she didn't want to encourage Powell. She suspected Meachum had motives for asking that she wouldn't like and that Powell was looking for encouragement.

"Maybe I'll just sit this one out," she said with a vague, apologetic smile.

"Come on," Powell insisted, getting up. "You can dance the next one with Meachum."

She didn't especially want to but she also didn't want to make everyone else at the table uncomfortable. "I have two left feet," she said warningly as she got up. "And both of them are wearing spike heels."

Powell chuckled dutifully and ushered her toward the floor. She shivered as his hand slid across her bare back and settled at her waist, trying to outrun it. It was a harbinger of things to come. The moment they reached the dance floor, he pulled her into an intimate embrace. She would've preferred a little more distance between them, but she didn't want to struggle on the dance floor. "Did I tell you you look beautiful tonight?"

Sybil couldn't help but be amused. "I believe you did. Thank you again, I think. I'm starting to feel a little uneasy about my everyday look, though, I have to tell you."

He chuckled. "There's nothing wrong with that either. The thing is I was trying to save my marriage and my career and not notice."

"Except you did?"

He snorted. "I'm not blinded by the uniform."

Sybil frowned slightly. "I know it's none of my business, but ...?"

He didn't pretend not to know what she was asking. "I don't know. Regardless of what you probably think—or Betty for that matter—I wasn't in the habit of cheating on my wife. I guess anybody is susceptible given the right situation."

"And that was the right one?"

He gave her a look. "Don't tell me you didn't feel a certain ... recklessness given the situation?"

Had she? She supposed she had, but was that what had led her to Anka? Maybe a combination of hopefulness that it would earn her a reprieve, fear of the consequences if she ignored the opportunity, and a desperate need to feel alive while there was still a chance?

She didn't think any of that was what had driven her, but she could see where it could have influenced Powell and Holly and Kushbu's decision.

*She* had done it because she had found Anka simply irresistible.

An absurd thought popped into her mind. She'd tried to dismiss it, but it teased her. "You really hadn't ever cheated? Or considered it?"

He sent her a quizzical look. "I didn't say I hadn't considered it. Actually, I think I said I had, probably a lot more than I should have. Fortunately, I didn't have opportunity ... none that didn't carry a healthy risk to keep me on track. On Venus ... want plus opportunity unfortunately brought the wall tumbling down. She was pretty irresistible."

"Really?"

He grinned at her. "Jealous?"

She couldn't help but laugh, but she shook her head. "Don't get your hopes up."

"I will if I want to," he murmured, pulling her closer and carrying her in a swirling flourish as the song ended and tipping her back over one arm.

She caught a glimpse of Anka as her head tipped back. She hadn't realized the dance had carried them so close to him and his partner and it wasn't a discovery that made her happy. She straightened abruptly. "Thank you for the dance, Sir!"

"Not sir anymore, Lieutenant," he reminded her, sliding an arm around her to escort her back to their table. "Unless this is age related 'sir', in which case, I'm crushed."

Sybil sent him a quick look and bit her lip. "That was just a brain ... uh ... melt. I forgot."

Meachum met them before she could get back to the table to sit down. "My dance, I believe."

She might've felt like the bell of the ball except she knew Meachum hadn't approached her because he found her irresistible.

"You look beautiful tonight."

Her smile was a little tight. Honest to god! Couldn't men think of anything else? Even a slight variation on the line would've been appreciated! "Thank you."

"I noticed Commander I'Kartay didn't seem particularly pleased when you danced with Powell."

It would've been hard to say whether the comment thrilled her or unnerved her more. Sybil missed a step and stepped on his foot. "Sorry. If he was frowning it was probably because he was trying to place me. I'm sure we all look alike to them."

"I'm completely sure he has no trouble at all recognizing you," Meachum returned pleasantly. "He did ask you to dance with him tonight when you met up with him in the receiving line."

And where had Meachum been skulking, she wondered? She couldn't think up a response, unfortunately.

"I heard you'd decided not to reenlist?"

Sybil stepped on his toe on purpose that time. "Sorry. Maybe I drank too much wine? I'm really not used to it."

His lips curled in a cold smile. "No comment?"

Sybil smiled coldly back at him. "There's the damnedest grapevine around here! I don't recall mentioning that to anyone and yet Powell knew and you do, too! Isn't that curious?"

"Actually, I overheard the discussion at the table earlier."

"You have exceptional hearing."

He smiled thinly. "I also heard you say you hadn't made plans yet. I might have a job you'd be interested in."

She didn't think so. She'd enjoyed working with him about as much as she enjoyed sitting in a dental chair. "I appreciate it, but I imagine I'll be shipped stateside before the discharge."

"Not necessarily. Think about it. It could be a good career move for you."

"I'm not sure thinking about it will help when I don't have a clue of what sort of job you're offering."

"Meet me at the situation room tomorrow—say about ten—and I'll go over it with you."

Thankfully, the dance ended just then. "I'll give it some thought," she responded coolly.

He gave her a look that chilled her. "Give it a lot of thought. I'd hate for you to miss the opportunity."

It sounded ominous and she didn't think, considering Meachum had delivered it, that that was just her imagination. She would've pulled away from him and left him on the edge of the dance floor except she discovered the damned heels she was wearing weren't made for running. She nearly turned her weak ankle. It was barely a twinge but enough of a wakeup call to inspire caution.

"You alright?" Powell asked when she settled in chair again, dividing a speculative look between her and Meachum, who'd simply walked her to the table, excused himself, and left.

"I'm fine. I just stepped wrong and deeply regret the decision to wear heels."

"You hurt your ankle?"

She shook her head. "It's fine."

"You want to tell me what Meachum said that upset you, then?"

She shook her head again. What could she say anyway? That she'd felt threatened by his manner? Because that was all there was to it—the nuances of his voice. There was nothing *specific* that he'd said that she could complain to anyone about.



## Chapter Eleven

Sybil was tempted to simply leave. She realized she should have known that there wouldn't be an opportunity to be with Anka even if he'd wanted to. He was trapped by his position among the visitors.

She might not have felt quite so badly about it if she'd thought that he actually wanted to be with her and couldn't, but even though she acknowledged the circumstances of their situation, she still felt abandoned and discarded.

She begged off dancing again with Powell on the grounds of the ankle twinge, but she didn't want to sit at the table and watch everyone else dance, and think about who was dancing with Anka and whether or not he was thinking about inviting himself to their room. Worse, what if she did hang around, hopeful, and see him walk out with another woman?

She hadn't considered that—dolt that she was! She'd been so focused on her own need to be with him she hadn't considered for a moment that he might not feel the same way.

After sitting for about an hour, she decided she'd stayed long enough to prevent people from speculating about her early departure and excused herself. "I think I'll head back."

"Want company?"

Sybil sent him a look. "Thank you, but no."

"I was only offering to walk you back."

She studied him. "No, you weren't."

He shrugged, grinning. "No, I wasn't."

Shaking her head at him, she got up. "Night, Powell."

"Night Sybil."

She'd already reached the exit before she remembered the damned hotel room and the transport! Well, didn't she feel like a dumbass! Sighing, she considered the situation for a moment and then checked her watch. To her dismay, she discovered it was far later than she'd realized. The transport she'd arranged should be arriving any time.

She didn't want to spend the night alone in the room she'd gotten for two, damn it! It was for sure she wouldn't be getting a refund, though. Changing directions, she headed back across the conference room toward the hotel transport dock. She'd almost made it when the music stopped and someone tapped on the microphone for attention. Deciding she didn't care, she kept going.

"Our guests have offered an exhibition for us tonight of the festival dance."

Sybil halted abruptly, her heart hammering in her chest as she turned to look back toward the stage. The dance floor began to clear as the Sumpturians advanced upon it. A few moments later, she heard the exotic music she remembered and then she saw Anka, his head lifted as he scanned the audience. Breathlessly, she waited, hoping he would spot her and that it was her he was looking for. He met her gaze and lifted his brows questioningly.

Her legs felt like they'd turned to spaghetti. She didn't think she could make the walk if her life depended upon it. Fortunately, she didn't have to, at least not alone. Anka left the other dancers and strode toward her.

As thrilled as she was, she was also hideously self-conscious when she realized he held the attention of nearly every soul in the ball room as he approached her.

The only thing that could possibly be worse was the nightmarish vision that danced in her head of Anka walking right past her and asking some other woman to dance. Before she could glance behind her to check, however, he'd reached her. He held out his hand in invitation. "You promised me a dance, *nodia*."

She thought she was going to faint. Struggling to catch her breath, she placed her hand in his. "Wait!" she gasped as he turned to lead her back to the dance floor.

He paused and looked at her quizzically, but she wasn't about to try one of their folk dances in spike heels! Kicking them off and abandoning them, she hurried with him to take their places on the dance floor, ignoring the stir it caused when she'd kicked her shoes off.

Someone started the song over.

Sybil glanced up at Anka and smiled, feeling like Cinderella must have felt when the prince asked her to dance—as if she'd suddenly found herself in a magical dream. He smiled back at her as they began the steps of the dance. She surprised herself by remembering most of the steps and acquitting herself with far more grace than she'd thought she could manage considering she was high with excitement.

Even the reaction of the audience felt like part of the dream when the dance finally ended and Anka turned to her, looking down at her with his eyes gleaming. "Will you take me to your bed tonight, my *nodia*?"

Sybil smiled up at him until a sudden thought struck her. Her smile flattened. "The transport!" she gasped.

He looked disconcerted. "The transport?"

She moved closer. "Meet me at the hotel dock. I got us a room!" she whispered.

He looked more confused than enlightened, but he released her and she dashed away to search for her shoes. She'd been pacing the dock for all of five seconds when he arrived. "I thought you weren't coming!"

He made a sound of irritation. "The President stopped me. I believe I may have been rude, but the treaty is signed now. Where are we going?"

Sybil stared at him. "You were rude to the President ... of the United States? Never mind. Like you said, the treaty's signed now."

He looked bemused when she led him to the airlock and from there into the transport. They settled side by side on the bench that faced the airlock.

"Is anyone else ready to return the hotel?" the driver asked.

She didn't know, but she sure as hell had no intention of waiting for them. "No. Just us."

"Hotel?"

"Shhh!" Sybil hissed, anxious now that it looked like they might actually manage to leave without being observed that someone would show up and ruin it.

"Why are we whispering?" he asked, amused.

Sybil shook her head at him. "Watch the safety harness!"

Anka ducked as the bar came up over the back of the seat and secured them, looking at the apparatus, which was actually more like the safety guard on a roller coaster than a harness. "What is this for?"

"To keep us from floating."

He looked startled but the driver pulled out of the airlock just then and his expression was downright comical. "Gods!"

Sybil bit her lip. "No gravity—not much anyway."

"This feels ... strange."

Sybil was about to point out that he'd experienced it when they'd moon walked before when it abruptly occurred to her that they hadn't. She'd just been too upset to think about the fact that she hadn't experienced the micro gravity she should have.

It must have been the suits! No wonder the military had been so hot to get hold of them!

"You still haven't told me where we're going."

"I did. I told you I got us a room."

"So, we aren't going to your quarters?"

"No, because I'm tired of worrying about being caught."

Something flickered in his eyes. "You truly were worried, *nodia*?"

"Of course I was." She looked up through the viewing port at the back of the transport and pointed. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Anka dutifully glanced at the view of the Earth. "Yes, it is."

"It felt so strange when I first got here to look up into the sky and see the Earth instead of the moon."

"When you're on the Earth looking up at the moon, is the moon beautiful?"

"Yes," she murmured. "I guess people always think another place will be better."

"Nothing could be better than being home."

She glanced at him, feeling her throat tighten, partly because it hurt to realize he yearned for his home when he was with her and partly because she ached for his sadness. "Will you go home soon?"

"No." The word emerged harshly. He cleared his throat and glanced at her, smiling a little crookedly. "I have a new home."

One he wasn't particularly happy about. Before she could decide whether to pursue it or not, though, the transport pulled into the airlock of the hotel.

She didn't know *what* she'd been thinking! Almost the moment they stepped from the airlock they caught the attention of everyone they passed. Several people actually ran into things—like other people and the walls. Struggling to ignore the feeling that their 'clandestine liaison' was going to make front page news, she walked briskly across the lobby and headed for the elevators. There were three other people on the elevator and all three gaped at Anka as if he had two heads. Sybil glared at them for their rudeness but they were too focused on Anka to actually notice.

She was more relieved than Randy when they finally reached their room and she used her key to enter. Anka, apparently, had other things on his mind, however. The moment they cleared the threshold he slipped his arms around her and waltzed her back to the wall, pinning her with his body. "I've been wanting to do this all night," he murmured against her hair, nuzzling a path downward to capture her lips.

Sybil had been wanting him to kiss her all night—before the night began, in fact. On the instant, she dismissed the anxiety that had trailed her from the conference center and all the way up to their room. She didn't care if they'd been seen together. She didn't need to keep it secret anymore—not for his sake or for hers.

She kissed him back with all the yearning that had been building inside of her. It almost seemed as if they both caught fire. The heat that surged between them as they explored each

other's mouths was nearly blistering. They broke for a gusty breath of air and met again, exploring cheek and ear and neck and throat with their mouths, dueling for dominance. They began tugging at one another's clothes, impatient to have nothing between them, and then gave up on solving the confusing intricacies of closures and simply tugged clothing aside to touch and fondle.

Anka caught her buttocks and hoisted her up the wall, spearing into her with the head of his cock the moment he had her positioned. She gasped, tightened her grip on him and fought to engulf his heated, turgid flesh. He shifted, bracing her against the wall for better leverage and curled his hips to drive himself deeper. He'd no sooner achieved full penetration than some inconsiderate son-of-a-bitch pounded on the door.

"Turn down service!"

"Gods!" Anka growled under his breath and then bellowed, "Go the fuck away!"

Sybil bit her lip, but the amusement was brief. Amusement flickered in his own eyes, but it was surpassed by the heat of desire as he claimed her mouth again. A sharp thrill went through her at the double penetration of his tongue in her mouth and his cock inside of her. She sucked his tongue a little frantically, feeling her body racing toward culmination as he drove into her over and over, pounding against her g-spot.

She broke the kiss as it hit her, crying out, shuddering as the muscles along her channel convulsed in waves of keen pleasure. He uttered a choked sound, drove deeply and spilled his seed even as she began to drift downward.

They leaned together for a few moments, trying to catch their breaths. Finally, Anka rolled his forehead against hers. "Is there a bed in this room?"

Sybil grinned at him. "There better be for what it cost."

He pulled free of her body, allowing her to slide to floor. "Let's find it," he suggested. Bending abruptly and catching her around the hips, he straightened with her across his shoulder.

Sybil laughed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm feeling savage tonight," he growled, glancing around the room and then heading for the enormous bed.

Sybil gasped when he tossed her onto the mattress. He followed her down, pinning her with his body and then simply studying her face.

"What?" she asked finally, beginning to feel a little uneasy.

"That's my question. What were you doing dancing with Powell and that other wormy man?"

She gave him a look. "You danced."

Something flickered in his eyes. "It was ... required."

She shook her head, lifting her hand to touch his cheek. "It was just a dance."

His eyes narrowed. "It didn't look like 'just a dance'. He was all over you."

Surprise flickered through her. She considered informing him that it was customary and decided to discard the idea. "He danced closer than he should have. It's part of our mating customs. The men are the aggressors. The woman either allows it, if she's interested, or she lets him know she isn't interested. He asked to go back to my quarters with me. I turned him down because I wanted to be with you."

She could tell he didn't like that answer. He rolled away from her after a moment, lying on the bed beside her, one arm draped over his eyes. Sybil turned onto her side to study him, watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

"I didn't like it before I knew that much," he muttered finally.

The urge to tell him she loved him and had no interest in any man made her chest tight with the need and yet she realized that it was pointless to tell him. He was leaving. He *had* to leave and she had to stay. Neither of them had a choice, regardless of how they felt.

And, truthfully, she was afraid of what he might say if she told him. He was jealous, but possessiveness didn't necessarily mean he cared about her. It might mean nothing more than that she'd allowed him to consider her as a possession. He knew she hadn't been with anyone before her and she'd welcomed him with open arms when he arrived.

She didn't honestly know what *to* say. "I wouldn't have told you if I'd known it would make you angry. I only said it because I wanted you to know that I'd made my choice."

Sighing, she got up and scooted from the bed, looking down at her shockingly expensive dress with a touch of dismay. *Not* that she could blame him! She hadn't made any attempt to dissuade him. Far from it!

Irritated with herself, she removed the dress, laid it carefully over the back of a chair, and headed into the bathroom. She stopped abruptly when she'd surveyed the luxury bath. "Anka! There's a ... whirlpool!" she breathed in awe.

Dashing over to it, she studied it for a moment and turned on the water to allow it to fill. Anka appeared in the door just as she shucked her thong and stepped into the water. "It's big enough for two," she suggested hopefully.

He studied her for a long moment and finally looked around for a place to sit and remove his boots. Sybil found a bottle of bubble bath. Opening it, she sniffed it and then poured it beneath the pounding water. By the time Anka had undressed and reached the tub it was almost deep enough to turn on the jets. He climbed in and settled behind her.

"You still mad at me?" she asked tentatively.

He released a pent up breath. Slipping his arms around her, he pulled her back against his chest. "I wasn't angry with you, *nodia*."

He'd given a good impression of it, she thought wryly. "What does that mean?" she asked, twisting her head to look up at him.

"What?"

"*Nodia*."

He nuzzled her ear with his nose and then nipped at the lobe. "Beautiful little star child with hair like sunlight and eyes like a cloudless summer sky," he murmured huskily.

Sybil smiled, feeling her cheeks flush. "No really."

He chuckled. "Little woman with beautiful breasts," he murmured, opening his mouth over her ear.

Goosebumps lifted along her neck and raced down her chest to make her nipples stand up into peaks. She shuddered. "That tickles."

He lifted his hands to cup her breasts, lightly squeezing her nipples between his fingers. "Is that what makes these pretty little buds sprout?" he murmured teasingly. "Tickles?"

"It doesn't sound like that many words. How could it mean all that?"

"Tickles?" he murmured musingly.

"*Nodia*."

"Little golden haired ... monkey?"

Sybil sent him a narrow eyed glance over her shoulder.

He grinned at her. "Adorable little primate?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine! Don't tell me."

He leaned down to suck a love bit at the curve of her neck and shoulder. "Short woman who makes my cock hard."

She chuckled at that. She could see how he might *think* she was short considering he towered over her, but she certainly wasn't 'dainty'.

"No interest in the hard cock?"

Laughing, Sybil got up to face him, pushing his legs together and then settling astride his lap. "Where is this hard cock you keep crowing about?" she murmured, leaning close to nibble at his lips while she explored his chest with her hands and pretended she couldn't find her way. He caught the back of her head with one palm to bring her closer, opened his mouth over hers, and then caught her hand with his other and guided it around his erection.

"Mmm," she murmured against his mouth, tightening her hand and stroking it before she broke from his lips. "There it is ... all covered in flower scented soap bubbles."

Leaning away from him, she turned the water off and punched the button to start the jets. He had a strange look on his face when she turned back to him. "There's a hole behind me and water is shooting out of it."

"Back massage," Sybil murmured, resuming her position and leaning close enough to rub her breasts against his chest while she explored the side of his neck with her lips. "You never have told me why you came here ... your people, I mean."

The question caught Anka off-guard. The suspicion instantly arose that that had been her intention—not that he meant to share. The treaty was tenuous at best and he was well aware they were playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse—his people and hers, perhaps even the two of them.

Not that she'd ever done or said anything to support his suspicions about her, but that might only mean he hadn't caught her. It didn't necessarily mean that she hadn't or that he could afford to trust her.

In any case, he was also aware that her people had had him under constant surveillance. Even if he trusted her enough to speak openly, he couldn't when he knew how likely it was that they were listening.

He certainly hadn't wanted to come to this gods forsaken solar system, so far from the world they'd called home and inhabited by a hostile people they had learned all too well would not welcome them. None of them had. Unfortunately, their situation hadn't left them a lot of choices and of those unpleasant choices *her* solar system had been the best option. They'd had to weigh their limited resources against the odds of survival among the worlds known to them or at least the solar systems that contained worlds with some potential for terra-forming. The worlds that supported life *had* indigenous life and, even with their own survival hanging in the balance they hadn't been able to contemplate taking what they needed and ignoring the needs of the indigenous people, perhaps *because* their own survival was hanging in the balance.

"Why have your people left your world?" he countered.

Sybil leaned back to study his face. She saw no reason not to tell him the truth, though. In all likelihood they already knew, but she'd known that telling him before could be tantamount to treason. The treaty had been agreed upon and signed now, however, and she thought that negated the information being a matter of national, or global, security. "Truthfully? In the beginning it was pure curiosity, the search for knowledge and, for some, adventure and the excitement of discovering new things."

She looked down at his chest, exploring it with her fingers. "Somewhere along the line we went wrong, weren't cautious enough, were too arrogant to care what we were doing or too

ignorant to realize it. Personally, I think we really got in trouble when some stupid asshole with more power than brains thought up the brilliantly moronic idea of wasting—disposing of absolutely everything, no matter how huge a drain it was on resources or how small—in order to build a healthy, wealthy economy. Maybe if it hadn't seemed to be working we would have woke up soon enough to turn things around—and maybe not. Old habits die hard. It took generations to make the mess we did. One generation, no matter how dedicated, couldn't turn it around."

"You're saying colonization isn't a matter of want as much as it is need?"

Sybil grimaced. "Pretty much. Don't get me wrong, a lot of people want to and would have anyway, but they've got more reason to want to with the mess we've made of Earth. And that's a good thing because moving part of the population will give the Earth a better chance at recovering, and more quickly. The exploding population certainly didn't help the drain on the Earth's resources or the pollution.

"Is that why your people decided to colonize, to lift some of the burden of population from your home world?"

Anka caught her hips, pulling her up onto her knees to bring her breasts level with his face and distracted her by teasing first one and then the other pert bud. It distracted him from his dark thoughts, as well. It was the one thing he needed more than anything else and the one thing only Sybil could give him—escape. "We came to conquer Earth, one woman at a time," he murmured teasingly, "and I was fortunate enough to win the first draw."

Sybil smiled against his hair. "You think you've made a conquest?"

He used her position to align his cock with her body's opening and slowly began to press her downward to engulf his flesh, watching her face. It was the only time he knew, absolutely and without any doubt, that she was his, that she was completely honest, when he saw the pleasure on her face. "Haven't I?"

She opened her eyes to look at him as she settled finally and he felt his flesh buried deeply inside of her. Her eyes, as beautiful as a summer's day on Sumptura, had darkened with the expansion of her pupils in desire. She couldn't pretend that. She might gasp and sigh with carefully feigned desire, but her eyes told only the truth.

The glazed look in her eyes vanished as she rose and settled again and there followed an ominous splash of water on the floor beside the tub. Blinking as she emerged from the spell, she glanced in horror at the mountain of bubbles surrounding them. "Oh my god! I put too much bubble bath in the tub!"

He tightened his grip on her and rose abruptly. Sybil nearly tipped from his arms as she struggled to reach the button to turn off the jets. She didn't get the chance to hit the drain release. He stepped from the tub with her.

"Crazy man!" she gasped, tightening her legs around his waist and looping her arms around his neck. "You're going to injure that fine thing if we slip in the soapy water."

She'd hardly gotten the warning out when he skidded. She sucked in a sharp breath that bordered a scream, tightening her grip around his neck as he flung out an arm to avert disaster. Whipping her head around when she heard the impact of his hand against the frame of the door, she stared in absolute shock at his hand, or more specifically the four six inch, knife-like claws that had shot out from his first knuckles and embedded in the wood.

He retracted them, stepping onto the carpet of the bedroom floor and striding toward the bed. Sybil was still in a state of shock, however, as he climbed onto the mattress with her. A shiver skittered through her as he dropped from his knees to lower both of them onto the bed. He

lifted slightly away from her and met her gaze for a long moment. "It isn't as easy to pretend I'm man when you've seen that, is it?" he growled.

Sybil stared at him wide-eyed, trying to decide whether to pretend she had no idea what he was talking about or if she should flatly deny the fact that she was shocked to her core. He covered her mouth in a hard, almost hurtful kiss before she could shake her stupor enough to react in any way, however. The kiss took her by surprise, more because it was rougher than any before. Despite everything, it sent a thrill of excitement through her and acceptance.

Maybe because it was so fierce, as filled with ravening hunger as anger?

Or maybe it was because she realized she'd wounded him in some indefinable way, however unintentionally. She couldn't decide if he was trying to punish her or drive her away, but he didn't succeed in either aim if that was indeed his intention. The assault on her mouth gave way to an assault to her senses as he drove into her relentlessly, lifting away from her only to gnaw on whatever tender flesh he could reach.

She came within moments, shuddering, gasping for breath. He slowed his pace and then rolled them onto their sides and began to increase the rhythm and depth of his strokes until she felt the rise of tension inside her again. Abruptly shifting to tip her onto her back again, he pushed his hands beneath her buttocks to tilt her hips forward. The angle of his strokes sent her spiraling off into bliss again, held her aloft until she was gasping so sharply with the pleasurable convulsions it was closer to a scream.

He slowed finally, allowing her to catch her breath. Withdrawing from her completely, he rolled her onto her belly and sprawled atop her, penetrating her from behind and building the heat inside her with slow, deliberate strokes. She was so weak, so drunk and disoriented from the two climaxes she'd already had, she could barely respond, let alone comprehend when he shifted upward abruptly, lifting her hips into the air and pushing at her legs until she was on her knees. He bit lightly down on her shoulder, just hard enough to produce a sting that incomprehensibly caused a chain reaction heat wave that traveled through her and made the muscles of her sex clench around his cock. He groaned against her ear, covered the shell with his mouth and sucked lightly.

Shivers raced up and down her body, producing a hoard of goosebumps. Her nipples tightened almost painfully. As if he'd anticipated that reaction, he slipped a hand beneath her to tease the tight buds. The third time she came, she seemed to float off into space as if her entire body had exploded into fiery shards. She was barely aware of the shudders that wracked him as he followed her into rapture and then she sank literally and figuratively, flattening out beneath him weakly in the aftermath and drifting toward a dark harbor.

He abandoned her abruptly, rolling off onto the mattress beside her, but even the sudden chill on her damp skin barely roused her from her near comatose state. She shivered, waiting for him to pull her to him as he always had before. When he didn't, she debated whether she was even welcome in the shelter of his warmth. Wounded pride kept her where she was until it finally occurred to her that, maybe, he was waiting for some sign of acceptance. Maybe he needed to be reassured that, despite her shocked surprise at the discovery of just how different he was from her, she still wanted him?

Gathering her strength with an effort, she shifted toward him until she could sprawl limply across him, curled against his side with one and one leg flung across him. He stiffened. For many moments he simply lay unmoving. Finally, he rolled slightly toward her and curled his arms around her. She drifted off with the comforting skate of his hand along her back.



It was the light brush of his lips along her shoulder that roused her toward awareness. She struggled against attaining full awareness, waiting for another caress. Instead, he rolled away from her. She felt the mattress shift as his weight left it and then heard the distinctive rustle of his clothing.

He was leaving! Her heart slammed almost painfully against her chest wall. She tensed, readying herself to leap up, and then forced herself to relax again. He hadn't wakened her. He wouldn't welcome a tearful good-bye.

Swallowing against the emotion that abruptly clogged her throat she lay as still as she could, searching the darkened room for him, listening to his movements as he dressed. When he'd finished it seemed he simply stood staring at her. Hope surged through her that he would come back to her, tell her goodbye, maybe kiss her one last time.

She thought she felt that want in him, but maybe it was only her own desires she felt? After a few moments she heard a faint, unidentifiable sound. The door?

She'd just decided it was when she saw the light. It had already begun to fade by the time she scrambled up to look. She stared at the faint glow where he'd been standing only moments before until there was only darkness and finally lay down again.

The urge to cry swept over her in an inescapable avalanche. For once, she didn't try to fight it off. For once, it was safe to allow her grief and hurt full reign. There was no one to hear, no one to care or judge her for having no control over her emotions. She cried until she was so exhausted sleep claimed her again.

It was the maid that woke her, tapping on the door and announcing that she was from housekeeping. "Come back later!" Sybil bellowed, uncaring of how surly she sounded.

## Chapter Twelve

Anka was still seething when he reached the ship. He didn't know if he was more furious about his 'slip' or Sybil's reaction to it. He supposed it was unfair to be angry with her when he'd gone out of his way to play up those traits they had in common with, or similar to, humans and downplay the things that made them very different. She'd seemed to accept him so easily, though, he'd allowed himself to believe the differences wouldn't matter to her, that she truly did accept him for what he was.

Clearly he was wrong, he thought wryly. The horror on her face when she'd seen his claws was still a painful image in his mind.

It was just as well, he told himself angrily. Sooner or later he was bound to slip up. He *was* what he was. He couldn't change that even if he wanted to and he didn't. He had as much pride in his own heritage as she did.

In any case, that chapter was closed. He would not see her again. He'd done all that he could to help her people come to terms with the fact that they were here to stay. Now he had to focus on making certain they had a place to stay.

Very likely, as angry as the incident had made him, it was for the best for both him and Sybil. He was left in no doubt that he was still a monster in her eyes and she was left with no doubt that he was.

\* \* \* \*

A week passed in abject misery, two. Time seemed to have warped out of shape. In some ways it seemed every day dragged by and then something would jolt Sybil out of her absolute focus on her grief and she would discover days had passed without her even being aware of it.

It was easy to lose track of time on the moon—harder to track it when the days and nights were marked on a clock rather than the rising and setting of the sun. The job she'd been assigned to was a shit detail, but Sybil hardly noticed or cared when she did. In the back of her mind she knew it was the military's way of expressing their displeasure with her decision to take her knowledge and experience out of the work pool, but she couldn't summon much in the way of resentment about it.

She was aware of the ticking clock because of that realization, though. She knew she should be working out a game plan for what she would do when she was discharged, but she couldn't seem to gather any enthusiasm for it and finally decided it was just as well. How could she make plans anyway until she knew what options she might have?

It finally occurred to her that she might ought to explore a few options for employment and she went to the public terminal to look for possibilities. She had a degree in geology, but she thought she had a better chance getting something in management—maybe.

It wasn't until she received a threat, thinly veiled as an invitation, from Congressman Webb's office that she remembered Meachum had insisted on talking to her about a job prospect. Unnerved when she realized she'd missed that appointment and that he'd probably interpreted it as a deliberate snub if not a challenge of his authority, Sybil accessed her calendar and made an unpleasant discovery.

She'd missed her cycle. The jolt that sent through her brought her more alert than anything had in a while and she checked the calendar again a little more frantically, trying to convince herself that she'd just forgotten to mark her last cycle down or she'd miscounted. Her last cycle *should* have started a week after Anka had arrived on the moon for the peace talks. It didn't take a lot of searching to realize she hadn't just forgotten to make a note of it. She hadn't marked it because it hadn't happened.

"Oh god! Oh my god!"

She didn't take birth control even though the military absolutely insisted upon it. She hadn't seen any reason to foul her body with potentially dangerous drugs when she didn't even have sex!

Except she had—with Anka!

Dropping her head into her hands she considered that, but it just seemed so unreal she couldn't grasp it. Sure it had crossed her mind that things had changed—she had a lover. She was having sex. But he wasn't *human*, damn it! He shouldn't have been able to impregnate her!

She struggled to think, to get a grip on her scattered wits. Maybe it was just a fluke? One of those emotional zigs that zagged and disrupted her cycle? It was rare. Her cycles were usually so regular she could've bet on them, but it *did* happen and there was no getting around the fact that she'd had a tremendous upset when they'd been captured.

Except she'd had her damned cycle as usual when she'd come back. It was the one after that that hadn't made an appearance. So maybe she'd had a delayed reaction?

She struggled to accept that as a reasonable explanation and finally discarded it. Anka had beaten the odds and gotten her pregnant. There was no getting around it no matter how hard she worked to dismiss the possibility.

It wouldn't work, she realized abruptly, feeling an odd mixture of relief and deep disappointment. Maybe it *had* happened, but it was bound to spontaneously abort when they couldn't possibly be closely enough related genetically for it to develop. Even if she didn't spontaneously abort, she needed to consider aborting it—for its sake.

She thrust that thought aside. She simply couldn't consider it, not now, not when she missed Anka so much she almost wished she could die and get over the pain. In any case, she sure as hell couldn't go to the base clinic for something like that! Not that it should have mattered about the pills she'd flushed instead of taking them when she was getting out in a matter of weeks anyway, but their reach went beyond the military. She was going to have a hard enough time finding a job. She didn't need a black mark on her record to make it impossible.

Her cycle was due. Maybe it would start and she could dismiss her fears?

Under the circumstances, she decided she really, *really* couldn't afford to 'decline' the congressman's 'invitation'. She was in no state to wage a mental battle, but she had no choice and she presented herself at the appointed time and place.

Meachum received her. She supposed she wasn't important enough to actually speak to the congressman himself.

"Have a seat, Lieutenant."

She would've preferred to stand, but her knees were weak and she felt more than a little nauseous. She sat down.

He made a pretense of ignoring her to study the contents of a file, waiting until she shifted restlessly to address her again. "As I mentioned to before, we have a job in mind that we feel you're uniquely qualified for."

"Actually, I don't recall that you said that. What do mean 'uniquely qualified'?" she asked, feeling the nausea intensify.

"You're ... relationship with Commander I'Kartay," he said bluntly.

Sybil blinked at him, struggling to control the guilty blush trying to climb her cheeks. It was useless of course. "Excuse me?"

He gave her a narrow eyed, assessing look. Instead of saying more, however, he turned the display on his desk. Sybil stared at the screen without any comprehension whatsoever for several moments. Slowly, her brain began to recognize the pixels on the screen and they resolved into an image that sent the blood rushing from her head. She surged to her feet. "How the *fuck* did you get that?"

"I'll give you two guesses and the last one doesn't count," he said coldly. "Did you completely forget military protocol, Lieutenant? Or were you just too preoccupied to think about it?"

"That picture is from the bathroom in the god damned hotel," Sybil snarled, pointing a shaking picture at it. "And it was private! How dare you spy on me when I was off duty and off base!"

"We had Commander I'Kartay under surveillance from the time he arrived!" he growled at her, tapping his keyboard angrily to display one image after another, images captured from inside her quarters.

Under other circumstances, Sybil was sure she would've been so embarrassed she would have crumbled beneath his accusing stare. At the moment, however, she was just plain furious.

"So? Do you have anything to say?"

Sybil's lips tightened. "Could I get copies? I actually didn't get any of the footage myself!"

That set him back but only momentarily. "You still mean to deny you have a relationship with this ... creature?"

It took all Sybil could do to refrain from knocking his teeth down his throat. Anka wasn't a *creature*! He was more of a man than that slimy bastard could ever hope to be! "If you'll notice, we were fucking. Do you consider it a relationship every time you fuck somebody?"

"You want to play hardball? Fine!" He punched up a video and turned the volume wide open. Everything inside of her crumpled as she listened to Anka's teasing voice and watched him caress her. Why hadn't she realized before that his gentle touch seemed so much more than casual sex or even passion, she thought mournfully? She wilted back into her chair.

"What do you want?"

Satisfaction flickered in his eyes. "We want you to continue your relationship. You already have a far better understanding of the aliens than anyone else. The relationship between the two of you should make it easier to pick up on things."

Sybil thought she would throw up. The only reason she fought the urge to puke all over him and his desk was because she didn't want to let him know just how offensive she found his suggestion. It also flickered through her mind that it might make him suspicious of her condition. "Spy, you mean?" she demanded through stiff lips.

His brows rose. "Naturally, we'd expect you to pass on any information you might chance to overhear, but not per se. Mostly we're interested in the possibility that you might have some influence on him in our favor."

"The treaty has been signed," Sybil gasped. "What possible influence could I have on something already done? Even supposing I had any influence with him! Regardless of what you

think, he left me here without a backward glance. Do you honestly think he wouldn't have at least tried to get me to go with him if I'd meant a damned thing to him—beyond bed partner?"

"Maybe, maybe not. He did agree to allow us to put both a base and an embassy on Venus—and that was his concession, by the way. The others didn't seem keen on the idea. Obviously, he isn't totally against some interaction between us .... And that's where you'll come in handy. You'll be assigned to the embassy. You will welcome him to your bed whenever he has any interest and you will find out what you can about them, their intentions .... We would be delighted to get our hands on any of their technology."

Sybil's heart gave a hopeful thump, but she ignored it. She didn't know why Anka had agreed to it, but she thought they were really reaching to decide it had anything at all to do with her. She'd told him she was leaving the service so he wouldn't have expected her to be stationed there and he knew she was military so he'd had no reason to think she might be attached to the embassy in any capacity.

"Technology, my ass! You mean weapons! Exactly how the fuck do you think I'd work that into the bedroom conversation? All that aside, we already *have* enough to kill every man, woman, child, and animal on the planet several times over and I don't have a hell of a lot of confidence in the government's restraint—in fact pretty much none! Do you think everybody hasn't begun to suspect the little covert operations going on under the wire? That they don't think it's damned curious that people are dropping like flies from diseases that come out of nowhere? Or we don't know you aren't above clearing away a little excess population 'for the greater good', which means the rich and fat!

"I'm sorry," she said flatly, although she wasn't. "I'm afraid I don't really have the skills you need for this job. Beyond that, as I said, Anka left. Neither you nor I have any reason to suppose he would consider taking up where he left off even if I went and ... I have other plans."

"Sit down," he growled when she started to rise. "I don't think you understand me. This isn't actually a request. It's more in the nature of a deal—Either you willingly cooperate with your government or your government will be bringing charges of treason against you for not only fraternizing with a potentially dangerous enemy of the United States but passing potentially dangerous information to that enemy."

Sybil gaped at him in disbelief and outrage. "He couldn't ... spit without having it analyzed! You know damned well I never passed any information, harmful or not! And what the hell was the treaty about if not to bind us as friends and allies?"

Meachum came to his feet, leaning across the desk threateningly. "What I know, *Lieutenant*, is that they are the biggest threat this country has ever faced! What I know is that they have technology that makes ours look like a kid's science experiment! What I *know* is that they plucked a moon out of orbit around Jupiter and dropped in orbit around Venus as if they were picking up a fucking ... *ball* and tossing it at a net! What I know is that we have no clue of what their actual intentions are toward us or what they're capable of, but we can guess and it scares the pure piss out of me! It ought to scare you, too!"

"What I know," Sybil screamed at him, "is that they sell medications for paranoia and you ought to take advantage of it! If they had any evil intentions, they could've cut us down before we even knew they were there. Or do you suspect they have the same sort of sick, twisted mind that you do and they're playing some sort of cat and mouse game with us? Does logical thought never cross your mind? Why would they wait if they had malicious intent? Why agree to a treaty with us? What possible motive could they have?"

“What I *know* besides that is that I will give you one chance and one only to redeem yourself and prove your loyalty to your country and your species or you can rot in jail for the rest of your natural life! You can bank on it!

“We made a treaty to prevent being annihilated by a potentially aggressive and far more advanced civilization. You have a week to pack your belongings up and be on the cargo ship carrying the first load of supplies to Venus.”

“What cargo ship?” Sybil asked blankly.

“The Mars vessel. It’ll be loading the food stores that were intended to go out with the next batch of settlers.”

Sybil was too frightened to think when she left. If she hadn’t been moving on autopilot she didn’t think she could’ve made her way back to her quarters. As it happened, she found herself staring at the door without any recollection of having made the decision to head to her quarters or how she’d gotten there.

There was never any question that she would go. She had absolute faith that Meachum would make good on his ‘promise’. She was going to Venus or she was going to prison. It didn’t matter that she knew she was innocent. Despite everything, maybe because of her military training, she’d always been careful to avoid discussing anything potentially sensitive. Anka hadn’t probed her for information. He hadn’t given her any about them, if it came to that. They’d focused on love talk and flirtation.

She had every confidence that Meachum could and would manipulate the avalanche of data he’d collected on her, though.

Anka would know when they sent her *why* they’d sent her. He was no fool, regardless of what they seemed to think.

It made her sick to her stomach to realize that he would instantly figure it out and think she’d agreed to it and sicker to accept that she wouldn’t be able to even try to convince him it wasn’t true. They weren’t going to simply turn her loose now that they had her on a leash. She would be watched, constantly monitored.

After a few days it dawned on her that her period hadn’t presented and she had another problem. Tell them? Or let them find out when and if the baby reached a point in development where it was unmistakable?

They wouldn’t consider aborting it, she realized, even if they knew something was wrong with it. They’d be hopeful the baby would give them an even stronger hold on her, possibility even make it easier to manipulate Anka.

As if!

Most of the time they judged everybody by themselves, a mistake since politicians were like a different species. The rest of the time they ‘fantasized’. She sure as hell couldn’t picture that bastard Meachum getting all starry eyed about having a baby on the way by his lover!

It occurred to her, though, that it was the baby’s best chance and the sooner she left the better. No one knew what the effects of micro-gravity might be on a fetus, even if it was off-set by fake gravity, because no one had wanted to find out. In any case, breeding was quickly becoming socially unacceptable given the problems they were already facing. Instead of congratulating expectant parents, people had begun to glare at them at the very least and often heckle or lecture them about their lack of consideration.

If the baby had been completely human it wouldn’t have gotten a warm welcome on planet Earth. Being only half, assuming it made it to term, would make it and her a pariah.

So she didn’t really have a choice on two counts.

She felt a brief spurt of rebelliousness, but it died a quick death. She had nowhere to escape to. Still trying to figure out what she was going to do once she got to Venus, Sybil packed her belongings. She almost hoped Anka would ignore her. As crushing as that was bound to be, it would make her life easier. She couldn't spy on him if he didn't come near her.

\* \* \* \*

The sheer terror slowly faded as Anka watched the moon glide smoothly into the orbit they'd calculated for it. The cold sweat that had broke from his pores while he watched the mass of rock and ice rocket toward the planet they had already invested so much in dried.

A ragged cheer went up from the crew members at the consoles monitoring the orbital insertion.

Anka allowed them a few moments to expel some of their own anxieties in a burst of celebration before he called them order. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We managed to insert it. We'll need a careful watch to make sure it stays put. I want minute by minute. Any sign that it's beginning to stray and I want to know it immediately."

Everyone sobered and focused on the readouts from their instruments. Anka watched the progress of their new moon for a while and finally moved to the other side of the room where the other half of the group was monitoring the planet. "What's it looking like?"

"We're picking up an increase in spin. So far no new volcanic activity. No sign of stress quakes on the surface."

Anka nodded, relieved, allowing himself a modicum of hope. "Let's keep a close watch. If the calculations were correct we should see a steady increase over the next twenty to thirty six hours in rotation and then stabilization."

He moved to a chair and settled in it. The weakness in the wake of the adrenaline rush left him feeling shaky, but as he watched the monitor and listened to the crew quoting readouts a sense of triumph slowly began to take hold.

They'd done it! They'd feared the feat was beyond their capabilities, but he'd known they really had no choice but to try if they were ever to have a truly livable planet. The atmospheric plants could only do so much, particularly given the fact that there were still a good many active volcanoes on the planet that continued to spew gases that they had to expel.

The sluggish rotation of the planet, though, was part of the root of the problem, creating far too much stress from the sun's gravitational pull. If their calculations were right, the moon would give them the balance they needed to bring Venus' nights and days to a space of time more conducive to plant and animal life.

If they were wrong they would still have to build underground and figure out how to grow food. He didn't particularly care for the fact that they would have to try to develop domestic animals for a protein source, but no one had yet been able to figure out the process of culturing it. Either they'd lost some of their data or it was simply beyond the skills of the scientists they had.

Very likely, it was both. They were poor in almost every resource, but the one they seemed poorest in was skills. They had more politicians and more unskilled laborers than they needed—at least at the moment. They didn't have nearly enough trained soldiers. They had a handful of engineers and mechanics that were so specialized it left enormous gaps in the things they needed, a few doctors and nurses who had *no* specialized skills, theoretical and research scientists that were more interested in collecting data than actually inventing anything ... and the list went on. They couldn't seem to fix any damned thing that broke down without spending

weeks or months pouring over manuals—when they could find them—and even then, more often than not, they couldn't find the parts or tools to do the job.

If their situation hadn't been so desperate, it might have been laughable that their civilization had come so far and then lost virtually everything overnight.

He dismissed the thought. They had the building blocks to survive—assuming they actually had managed to collect a moon to jumpstart Venus' rotation. The planet should cool down enough without the oppressive gases and with a better rotation that they could settle fairly comfortably near the poles. It would still be hotter than any of them were accustomed to, but they would be close enough to conditions they were used to to be able to acclimate themselves to it—as long as they still had the technology to cool their environment when needed. They wouldn't have seasons like the Earth did unless Venus developed a similar wobble on its axis, but that wasn't altogether a bad thing, as hard as it would be to grow accustomed to. They would have more time for growing food and that was the most critical problem they were facing—food shortages.

They had several excellent causes for celebration a few weeks later. Their transplanted moon was stable, Venus had achieved a rotational velocity that made the days a more acceptable fifteen hours, and they got word that the first payment from Earth for their land lease was on the way.

They had mixed feeling about the latter. The food couldn't have come at a better time when the Plutonian colonists were demanding to be allowed to move to Venus, but no one was really looking forward to having humans as close neighbors. Earth was close enough.

Privately, Anka agreed with them. Publicly, he reminded them that they'd agreed to the terms and Sumpturians always honored their word—to the letter and with graciousness.

Unfortunately, although he would've liked to have allowed them to actually celebrate with more than cheers, they couldn't afford it until the Earth people actually did arrive with supplies, and the vessel bringing both the unwelcome neighbors and the very welcome food was crawling between Earth and Venus at a snail's pace.



## Chapter Thirteen

Sybil watched the viewing monitor as the U.S.S. Cosmos settled into orbit around Venus, remembering the first time she'd come to the planet, fearing any moment that the Sumpturians would blow them to bits before they could report back to base. She didn't think there was any chance of that this time, but the knowledge did nothing to tame the nervous quivering butterflies in her stomach. Unconsciously, she lifted a hand and coasted it lightly over the slight mound of her belly, remembering when Anka had appeared on the ship, remembering those first frightening hours on Venus, remembering the first time Anka had kissed her, the first time they'd made love to each other.

She'd had nearly two months to do little besides think and she still had no idea what she was going to do beyond the fact that she absolutely refused to spy on Anka for her government. She didn't believe he was any threat whatsoever to her country or mankind in general and she wasn't going to betray the father of her child.

She just didn't know how she was going to protect their child and protect the father of her child at the same time.

She still had trouble believing there was really and truly a baby growing in her belly even though she'd begun to feel feathery movements that told her she wasn't just getting fat. As time passed she'd ceased expecting any day that she would miscarry and she'd allowed a tentative hope to bloom that it was alright and meant to be. She supposed it was that fear of letting herself accept when it seemed so unlikely that it was possible that made it so hard believe it was real and not some sort of strange dream. Soon it wouldn't be hard for anyone to believe, though. By her calculations she was nearly half way through her term. There wouldn't be any doubt once her belly began expanding, but for now no one seemed to have noticed and she meant to keep it that way as long as she could.

It would give her time to figure out what she was going to do.

It all depended upon Anka, really. If he'd lost interest in her or decided to simply ignore her because he'd taken a new lover then Meachum couldn't expect her to report anything to him. That was the ticklish spot—just how vicious the bastard was. He might decide to have her sent back if she wasn't of any use to him, in which case she might still be tried for treason and god only know what would become of her baby. She thought she might appeal to the Sumpturians for political asylum if he recalled her because she was more inclined to think he would want to punish her than let her go.

She actually thought that might be her best course anyway—asking them to allow her to stay. It might be hellish living among a people completely alien to her, but it certainly wouldn't be any harder on her than it would for her baby to live among humans.

Unless it looked nothing like Anka. She found it hard to hope for that, actually, although she knew that would make her life easier. If it could pass as completely human, she might prevail on the Sumpturian government to take her back to Earth. The only upside to the chaos back home was that it was harder for the government to keep up with everyone than before. Of course, they tried harder than ever before, but between all the disasters that had forced people to

move and the economic situation that also had everyone moving around, she thought she had a good chance of eluding them.

The problem with that idea as a solution was that it could cause problems for the Sumpturians and they might not be willing to risk it for her sake—either by giving her asylum or helping her escape Meachum.

And none of that was going to be an issue if Anka fell into their trap. She'd have to figure out some way to convince him to let her go to his quarters to escape surveillance. Then she could make up whatever she wanted to tell Meachum to appease him.

It was awful to want to be with him and know that every time she was she would be risking discovery. Eventually, he would figure it out and he would hate her. As unhappy as it made her to think of him being with another woman, she thought that wouldn't be as bad as the alternative. She didn't want him to hate her.

Sighing, she left the observation deck where everyone had gathered to stare at the world where they would be living for the next several years and headed back to her quarters. She'd packed her personal belongings up already and had nothing to do but sit and wait and think some more until she was summoned to the shuttle that would take them down to the planet.

\* \* \*

The Earth people were certainly going to think they were delighted to have them, Anka thought wryly as he watched the excited activity of the crew that had been selected to prepare for the 'welcome' festival that had been planned. Not that that was a bad thing, all things considered. If they hadn't been so enthusiastic about the opportunity to party they might've had trouble expressing any warmth at all and that might have created more animosity in an alliance that was already tenuous at best.

He dismissed it. It didn't matter if the Earth people got the right impression for the wrong reason. What mattered was that morale was higher than it had been in a very long time and it boosted his own spirits to see the young people actually happy and excited for a change. It had almost begun to seem as if their trials had turned them into old people, that they'd lost youth along with everything else. They needed the hopes and dreams of the young to build again as much as they needed material things.

Satisfied that the group needed no encouragement or supervision—he'd never seen them work with quite as much enthusiasm—he left the 'conference' center they'd built that was a replica of the one the Americans had erected for the treaty talks. Once the festival was over and the Americans returned to the temporary Embassy they'd constructed, the 'conference' center could be used to house the colonists arriving from Pluto until the real construction began.

It was uncomfortable to walk outside—still. Even so close to the northern pole, the temperature was usually miserable at the peak of the day, the air quality and atmospheric pressure oppressive enough to make any sort of activity a test of endurance, but he crossed the landscape toward their base on foot anyway. Despite the discomfort, it was a pure joy to walk on solid ground, to look up into a sky instead of the deck above, to see a sun and clouds instead of artificial lights and peeling paint.

It was time he chose a new lover, he decided, ignoring the familiar tightening in his chest at the thought as he spotted the first shuttle drop toward the ground like a great bird to circle the landing field they'd cleared and leveled. He had little enthusiasm for it, but he knew damned well that everyone had begun to wonder about his lack of interest in looking for a woman. There was a small community. Gossip was about the only excitement they had to look forward to and it was inevitable that he would become a target given his position. It annoyed him. He

disliked the lack of privacy as much as he disliked the almost proprietary attitude they all had toward him.

Regardless, he thought it was probably as important that they see him in a stable relationship as any of the other things he did to promote the sense of normalcy they all needed. Like it or not, he knew they looked to him for guidance in every aspect of their lives and he couldn't expect them to begin rebuilding their civilization if he wasn't willing to lead by example.

Myune seemed interested in spite of the insensitivity, poor judgment, and worse manners he'd shown when he'd made the comment about her state around the time the humans had first arrived—when he'd first met Sybil. He was going to have to make it clear to Myune, though, that he wasn't ready to father another child. His grief for those he'd lost was still too fresh for him to want to open his heart to another and risk more pain. If she couldn't accept that, then he would choose another. It really didn't particularly matter to him at this point, not when he knew he couldn't have the one woman he truly wanted.

The thought prompted memories he'd fought hard to banish from his mind and he struggled to push Sybil from his mind as he did every time the memories assailed him. He'd closed that chapter of his life. He wouldn't be reopening it.

It was harder to dismiss her than it would've been if he hadn't discovered just how wrong he'd been about her. Right up until he'd seen the surveillance vids, he'd told himself that it was all an act on her part, that she couldn't be trusted any more than any of the other humans. The counterassault she'd mounted against that worm, Meachum, had laid those doubts to rest—even while it raised fresh ones. It was indisputable that she hadn't wanted any part of his plans, but the threats Meachum had made might well change all that.

If she showed, he would know. He hoped to hell she didn't. He hoped she would stand her ground and not cave in to empty threats and give him more regrets, but he wasn't counting on it. He'd had a crash course on just how little faith one could place in humans. Deception and faithlessness seemed to be a part of their nature.

Maybe he needed for her to show, he thought wryly. If she didn't, he would be left believing she truly had cared about him and that was eating him alive, would make it hellish taking a new lover purely for appearances—because that was all it would be.

He knew his people had been convinced he'd only taken Sybil as his lover for political purposes and hadn't questioned his liaison for that reason—because they thought they knew his motives. That was the root of the gossip, the growing suspicion that it hadn't been politically motivated and the only way to nix the gossip and appease them would be to take a new lover.

It infuriated him, but he had to live among them, had to have their respect to continue to lead them, and he had a duty to his people that he couldn't simply discard at will. Otherwise, he would've called them all together and told them fuck off and mind their own gods damned business!

The shuttle he'd been watching settled to the ground at last and he paused, struggling with the urge to change directions and head to the landing field to see what, or who, had arrived. It occurred to him that he had a good excuse. He'd threatened his troop with bodily harm if they let on just how delighted they were to get their hands on the supplies, but they were young and not especially adept at guarding their emotions.

He dismissed the urge and the excuse when he saw the door begin to open. Turning, he strode quickly to the base entrance and went in, calling himself a coward and walking faster. His

heart was beating so uncomfortably fast when he reached his quarters that he felt downright lightheaded—the effects of walking outside, he told himself.

If she was with them, he could be sure he would be forewarned long before the festival. He would have time to brace himself.

He was going to need it.

\* \* \* \*

Sybil was so jittery with nerves she couldn't be still. Her hands shook until it was nearly impossible to apply any makeup to her face without looking clownish. She finally discarded the idea of creating a masterpiece of perfection and settled for a little color on her pale cheeks and a few dabs of mascara to define her eyes.

She hadn't expected the Sumpturians to throw a party in their honor the moment they arrived. She'd thought it might be a possibility shortly thereafter, and worried about it, but they'd been told about the festival as soon as they'd been shown to their living quarters. Already on edge and struggling with nerves, that announcement had only made things worse and, contrary to all expectations, she'd grown more jittery as the time approached rather than more calm.

With the exception of the gala on the moon, she'd never agonized so much over what to wear in her life. It had instantly popped into her mind to wear the sinfully expensive dress she'd bought for the gala, and then immediately occurred to her that that wasn't the best idea for a number of reasons. A lot of the people, including Anka, were bound to remember the dress, which would make it clear that she didn't have an extensive wardrobe—not that she especially cared about the impression it would make on anybody else, but she knew Anka would be there and it mattered what he thought. There was also the likelihood that Anka would think she'd done it to remind him, that it was an attempt to entice him back, and she was not only hoping that wouldn't happen, she didn't want him to think that was why she'd worn it. Beyond that, the moment she struggled in to it, another reason not to wear it became clear. The clingy black fabric that had set off her figure so well that night set off her blossoming shape with equal emphasis.

Her waist had completely disappeared. Right up until she'd skimmed into the dress, though, she'd been convinced her belly was barely noticeable. One look in the mirror disabused her of that notion. She looked like a snake that had swallowed an egg.

She promptly sat down and wept, ruining her first attempt at making up her face. When she'd stripped the dress off and washed her face, she lay down with a cool cloth over her eyes, trying to reduce the swelling of her eyelids. For a wonder, she fell asleep, a side effect of her pregnancy.

She felt a little calmer when she woke. Her stomach till churned threateningly, but not as uncomfortably as before. That lasted until she began preparations again. Something very like fear began to permeate her pores, chilling her to the bone. The panicked thought leapt into her mind that she couldn't go through with it. She wouldn't be able to pretend to save her life—and that was what was resting on her performance—her life, and the baby's.

Calming herself down again with breathing exercises, she considered and discarded everything she owned and finally settled on the black dress again, trying to convince herself that it wasn't as revealing as she'd thought. It was just nerves, just paranoia.

She needed to wear it if there was any possibility that it might draw Anka to her, she realized with a sudden burst of enlightenment. Meacham would *know* if she didn't at least make the effort. Resolve after so much uncertainty went a long way toward calming her and she

finished dressing and left her quarters to gather with the others. Most of them were already in the lobby waiting. She folded her arms over her waist, hoping the purse she'd grabbed would help to conceal her condition as she'd thought it might.

She didn't attempt to join any of the conversations. She knew a few of them by sight since they'd been part of the treaty delegation, but she'd pretty kept to herself on the trip out. She didn't know them any better now than she had before they'd left the moon.

In any case, it hadn't taken more than five minutes to realize that every one of them knew, or suspected, why she'd been included. They made that abundantly clear in the looks and whispers that followed her everywhere she went.

Even if she hadn't already been distraught about her situation and fearful of trusting anyone, that was enough to discourage her from attempting to find a friendly face among them, which was just as well. None of them went out their way to approach her and she thought they would have if they'd wanted to extend friendship or felt any empathy for her situation. It was the silent judgment, where no one actually knew anything for a fact, but had heard something, and then had decided they should be judge, jury, and executioner—because they disapproved of what they'd *heard* about you and accepted it as fact.

That being the case, she was glad when the transport finally arrived to carry them to the building where the festival would be held, despite her anxieties. The relief, naturally, didn't last until her arrival. She was as tight as tension wire by the time the transport docked and they began to disembark.

They'd been told that conditions outside were safe enough to go out, but no one really wanted to test it—not on the word of the Sumpturians, certainly! Of course, even if they had been willing they wouldn't have wanted to expose their finery to the elements.

Ruefully, Sybil acknowledged that she was underdressed by their standards although she'd worried she would be overdressed for the occasion. Most of the Sumpturians had been in uniform the first time she'd attended one and it hadn't appeared to be dress uniform at that. They seemed more inclined, particularly on this kind of occasion, to favor comfort over pomp.

She saw she'd underestimated them as soon as she entered the ballroom. It was clear that they'd donned their best for the occasion. Her heart was beating about ninety miles an hour when she glanced around the room in search of the only person that mattered to her. When she spotted him it was like leaping from an airplane without a parachute. She sucked in a sharp breath instinctively, feeling as if her heart had stopped and the floor fallen out from under her.

He was looking straight at her, but he had the advantage. Clearly, he'd spotted her first. His face was expressionless and she had no idea how he felt about her presence beyond the fact that, if he was glad to see her, he was hiding it excellently well.

The urge to cry slammed into her like a stray bullet to the chest, the shock of the pain shattering her mind and knocking the breath from her before her mind could register that she'd been hit, leaving her confused. The instinct of the wounded animal to burrow into some small, tight space for protection followed upon the heels of the pain.

It was fortunate that she was too frozen to move. She thought she would've turned and fled if not for that.

One of the men, a member of her own party, took her limp arm and linked it with his. "I'll escort you to a seat. They don't seem to have put out place cards."

Sybil stared at the man blankly, trying to figure out who he was and why he'd suddenly begun to behave as if he knew her when she didn't know him at all.

He patted her arm. "Smile."

She struggled to curl her stiff lips into a smile obediently, still struggling with the bizarre sense that she was trapped in a nightmare. She didn't know why he was behaving so familiarly but she was vastly relieved when he helped her to a seat and she could collapse. He took the seat next to her.

"I'm Brant. We didn't get the chance to meet on the voyage over."

Because he hadn't made any attempt to talk to her? She was torn between the certainty that he must be one of Meachum's watchdogs and a flicker of hope that he might actually have come to her rescue out of pure chivalry. "I'm sorry .... Is that your first name or the last?"

He grinned at her. "Sorry, force of habit. Lieutenant Cole Brant, USMC."

Sybil struggled to follow his lead. She had no idea whether he was friend or foe, but she was aware that her odd behavior must be noticeable and a sense of self-protection urged her to try to hide her vulnerability. She smiled back at him. "I'm First Lieutenant Sybil Hunter, Air Force."

"I know."

Her smile flat lined.

"Uh oh. I guess I should've pretended I didn't know, but I asked around ...."

He had the sort of 'angelic' pretty boy looks that usually hid the heart and soul of a devil and completely disarmed everyone around him. Sybil was hardly immune, but she *was* wary. She wasn't certain she believed he'd 'asked around'. "Why would you do that?"

He looked genuinely surprised. He leaned closer. "Have you actually *looked* at the other women on the ship? Prune faced."

It was hardly a compliment and actually a little mean, but his outrageousness startled a chuckle out of her. She clamped a hand over her mouth. She encountered several disapproving looks when she flicked a glance around at the rest of their party. "That isn't nice and it isn't very flattering to me either."

Laughter danced in his eyes. "What? That I think you're be-u-ti-ful ... next to the competition?"

She gave him a look. "Cocky aren't you, pretty boy? You're that certain there's a competition?"

"Why thank you, ma'am," he drawled, although his face darkened slightly. "I'm glad you think I'm pretty."

Sybil shook her head at him, but she was actually grateful, whatever his motives, that he'd distracted her enough to allow her to regain her equilibrium. She was equally grateful to discover that the droids had begun to serve. Whatever he had in mind, she wasn't buying.

"Whoa! What are those things?"

"Droids. Ank ... I was told their scientists had developed them specifically for interacting with humans. They thought they wouldn't seem threatening since they were small and humanoid in appearance."

"They're creepy little bastards."

Sybil smiled with less effort that time. "My sentiments exactly."

"So ... you met any of the aliens yet?" he asked conversationally once they'd been served.

Sybil stiffened, flicking an assessing look at him. He either didn't know her 'history' or he was damned good. "I was sent on the first mission to come here."

"Up close and personal, huh?"

She felt her face heat. She still couldn't decide whether he was just pretending he had no idea or if he really didn't. The comment could have been innocent. She didn't believe it, but then she'd ceased to really trust anybody. "You could say that."

"Where are you from ... originally, I mean?"

Strategic retreat? She responded a little absently, allowing him to lead her where he would while she divided her attention between her plate and surreptitious glances around the room until she finally located Anka once she had bolstered her nerves a little. Without surprise, she saw that the entire American group sat in a knot by themselves and ditto the Sumpturians. Without place cards, everyone had gravitated naturally toward their comfort zone, which meant their own kind.

It was the shape of things to come, she feared, but she supposed the Sumpturians probably preferred it that way. They had no reason to like Earth people and every reason to dislike and distrust them. That might change—eventually—but it wasn't likely to any time in the near future.

\* \* \* \*

The turmoil did nothing to soothe the anger that had been slowly rising toward a boil from the moment the dark haired man had claimed Sybil and escorted her to a table. Despite his grim determination to ignore her presence, he hadn't been able to resist searching for her among the Earth people. That had been his first mistake. He wasn't prepared for the effect seeing her would have on him after so long. He'd thought that he was, but it had thrown him into complete disorder, instantly crumbling his resolve, demolishing the decision that he'd arrived at after a great deal of soul searching and consideration.

He'd thought he'd succeeded in convincing himself that it was for the best for everyone concerned to leave well enough alone. It flickered through his mind the moment he spotted her, though, and felt the familiar yearning to be with her, that it wasn't as if ignoring her would make the problem go away. He knew why she was here, what she'd been sent to do. He really had no choice but to pick up the game again.

On some levels he was aware that his reasoning wasn't nearly as sound as he would've liked to think. He'd considered the situation from the time he was informed that she was among the arrivals. He'd struggled with his feelings for her and realized the game had grown far too dangerous for him to play it any longer. He would make a mistake that he couldn't afford, that none of them could afford.

He didn't think he'd made the decision not to approach her, however, so much as he'd been frozen in indecision, torn by equally opposing forces as to whether or not reason had anything to do with the urge to go to her. He hadn't noticed the man until he'd slipped his arm through Sybil's so familiarly and led her away.

He supposed it was fortunate that shock had prevented him from doing anything unforgivably stupid at that moment. If he'd been able to follow the instant prompting of his instincts he was fairly certain he would've regretted it—not convinced on every level because it would have satisfied something dark and savage within him to have staked his prior claim with violence—but he was also sure the shockwaves from such an action would have brought about just the sort of thing he'd been working so hard to avoid.

The shock that had held him while he watched the *man* walk away with what he'd come to think of as his had given him a few moments to consider, a window to remind himself that he couldn't react on a purely personal level when so much was at stake. He'd hardly known what he was doing from that moment on, however. His mind had been so completely focused on what

was going on between Sybil and the man that he'd had to rely entirely on force of habit and instincts to operate with anything approaching normalcy.

He'd struggled to tear his mind from her and focus, but he couldn't resist glancing toward them over and over and each time he did the anger churned a little hotter.

"Sir?"

Anka turned automatically toward the speaker and stared blindly at his adjutant, Minh, for several moments before he had any idea who'd spoken to him. A frown drew his brows down above the bridge of his nose as he struggled to figure out why his adjutant had addressed him at all. He could see from his expression that Minh was trying to prompt him about something he was supposed to do, but his search turned up nothing.

"Will you announce the festival?"

Anka's mind leapt instantly to Sybil again. Despite that, the prompting pierced both his preoccupation and his rage, resurrecting some semblance of reason. He looked down at the table and realized he'd eaten without any memory of the process ... and he couldn't recall that he'd preceded the banquet with the welcome speech he'd so carefully prepared for their 'guests'. "I haven't done it already?" he asked blankly, feeling discomfort waft through him.

"No, Sir," Minh responded. "I thought you'd decided to wait until after everyone had eaten."

Anka blinked at him, feeling his face heat. "Yes. I didn't see any point in holding everyone back with political posturing."

He surged to his feet abruptly. The moment he did, he caught the attention of everyone in the banquet hall and silence began to fall around him. For several unnerving moments as he stared out over the sea of faces, he searched his mind in vain for the speech he'd prepared and memorized. It refused to be jarred loose. Pasting a facsimile of a smile on his face, he discarded the effort. "My fellow Sumpturians—or perhaps I should say Venetians?—let us welcome our visitors and celebrate our new home with festival!"

Everyone stared blankly at him for several moments after he sat back down. After exchanging puzzled looks, however, they began to evacuate their seats and to clear space in the center of the room for dancing.

"You will be leading the first set, Sir?" Minh prompted him again.

The question made Anka's mind leap once more to Sybil. Fortunately, it also jarred loose a fragment of reason and he recalled abruptly that he'd not only intended to take part in festival, he'd told himself that it was time to take a new lover and make an effort to end the farce of a relationship that he'd fostered with Sybil. It would show her that he was not to be manipulated by her people's machinations. It would show his people that his heart and mind were with them, as always.

He felt vaguely nauseated at the public dismissal of his lover but angrily pushed it to the back of his mind. It had to be public to reassure his people. It had to be a statement that hers couldn't ignore.

"Of course," he said, rising stiffly and resolutely refusing to look in her direction. The excitement of the others didn't soothe him or bring the turmoil in his mind into any sort of order. It irritated him, made it more of a struggle to put on even a pretense of anticipation. It was fortunate that he'd taken part in so many festivals in his time that his body had memorized the steps and responded automatically. His mind wasn't on the dance or the music or any of the attractive young females swirling around him. His mind was on Sybil.



The first dance had nearly ended before he emerged from his preoccupation enough to realize that he'd been too focused on Sybil even to look around for a potential lover. It sent a jolt through him when he discovered that Lonlea, Hybah, and Myune were all sending him smiling signals of interest. Abruptly feeling as awkward as a youth, he missed a step and felt his face redden. All three giggled. It was pure accident that his gaze settled on Myune. In point of fact, he didn't even realize that he was staring back at her so pointedly until she broke formation and squeezed into the set next to him.

Oh gods, he thought, instantly stricken with panic. Of all the women he might have settled upon, Myune was probably the worst choice. It wasn't that she wasn't a very attractive woman. She was. Unfortunately, she was also extremely possessive and prone to fits of temper.

She also took and discarded lovers with a frequency that proved she was either impossible to please or had no real interest in long relationships.

Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, he thought? It would appease the gossips and no one would expect it to last.

With a sense of fatalism, he forced himself to meet her gaze and smile back at her. The instant he did, a commotion near the doors caught his attention. When he looked up, he saw that Sybil had surged from her seat. She met his gaze for a long moment and then lifted her chin at him and turned away, heading toward the door. He felt like he was going to throw up. Before the sickness could swell toward his throat, the bastard that had been all over since she'd arrived leapt from his seat and hurried after her, slipping an arm around her waist.

The fury he'd thought he'd mastered instantly enveloped him and he completely forgot where he was. "Pardon me," he said absently, breaking from the dance and striding toward the man with every intention of tearing him limb from limb.

He was vaguely aware as he plowed through the dancers that he was making a scene, that he'd caught the attention of every soul in the hall, but he was so blinded by his rage that the gaping faces he passed barely penetrated.

He caught up to the pair just as they reached the door. It flickered through his mind that that would've been an impossible feat if he hadn't run, but he dismissed that along with every other attempt by his mind to reassert reason. Clamping a hand on the man's shoulder to halt him, he spun him around. It brought Sybil around, as well, since the bastard still had his arm around her.

"Take your hands off of her," he growled. "Now."

The man released Sybil and shoved Anka's hand from his shoulder. "Back off."

Sybil wedged herself between the two men. "Stop it! For god's sake! Think what you're doing, Anka!"

His gaze flickered to her white face. "Do you choose him?"

Anger, hurt, and distress chased across her pale features.

"Hey, you picked your woman! I picked mine. Get the fuck back."

"Don't, Cole!" Sybil said sharply. "I need to talk to him."

Anka caught her hand tightly in his and drew her from between the two of them. He balled his other hand into a fist, waiting, hoping the bastard would be stupid enough to challenge him.

Instead, he glanced at Sybil. "You're sure you want to go anywhere with him?"

"I'm sure," Sybil said jerkily.

The man glanced from one to the other and finally stepped back.

Disappointment flickered through Anka, but he turned and dragged Sybil through the doors and into the corridor.

“What are you do ...?” Sybil gasped.

Anka shoved her roughly against the wall and silenced her with his own mouth, struggling with his rage. He was aware on some level that he was far too rough with her but the battle between rage and desire was too hot to control. He broke from her lips when he realized that, stared down at her for a long moment to be sure he hadn't hurt her, and then turned and strode toward his quarters, pulling her behind him.

## Chapter Fourteen

Anka hadn't managed to beat much of his fury into abeyance by the time he reached his quarters, but it was wound up so tightly with his desire that he was completely at its mercy. The moment he entered his quarters, he dragged her against his length and found her mouth again with his own. She made some sound but he was in no condition to decipher whether it was distress or desire.

His body interpreted it as desire, however, and reacted by further annihilating any possibility of rational thought. He was peripherally aware of struggling with clothing—hers and his own—but had no idea how he managed to remove them. He was just relieved when he managed to get her on the bed and discovered he'd succeeded in removing any obstacle to his possession. He was aware of another rush of relief when he discovered she was wet for him, but a fresh wave of need washed it from his mind as he felt her flesh close around him. His entire focus shifted to burying deeper, to the need to feel her flesh wrapped tightly around his entire length.

The struggle to achieve his goal almost undid him. He was bathed in sweat and shaking so badly from the struggle to keep from spilling his seed by the time he'd claimed her completely that he began to wonder if he would pass out or come first. The need to satisfy his lover while he was able, before he spilled his seed and lost any ability to give her pleasure, flickered through his mind, but he couldn't hold on to it as a deterrent. His own need overrode everything else. He'd given it free rein too long to check it.

Groaning with a mixture of frustration and burgeoning need, he gave up the effort to try to control himself and followed the urges of his body, setting a desperate rhythm. His body seized abruptly, making him stiffen all over. His belly clenched almost painfully and then began to pump his seed, forcing the air from his lungs in choked grunts.

When it ceased, he felt as if he'd lost all muscle tone. Too weak to support his own weight he sank limply down on top of Sybil. His mind was just so much mush. An awareness of Sybil's panting breaths finally penetrated enough that he struggled to gather some strength to himself and finally managed to pitch himself off of her and on to the bed. The desire to follow the weariness down the black hole beckoning to him was strong but enough consciousness remained for a flicker of thought here and there, and it occurred to him that he'd expressed his joy of Sybil with a complete lack of consideration for his lover. Struggling on to his side, he dropped an arm across her that felt like it weighed a ton and managed to drag her closer.

He would've been happy to leave it at that, but the moment he dragged her against himself he became aware of discomfort—bindings and lumps that shouldn't have been there. Lifting his head to figure out what the hell was wrong, he discovered that he was still wearing his fucking boots and was half in and half out of his clothing. The 'lumps', he discovered, was the dress Sybil was still wearing, knotted in a hard ball at her waist.

Dropping his head back to the mattress, he struggled to untangle the recent events in his mind and thereby lost all interest in drifting blissfully to sleep. With nightmarish clarity a progression of events flickered across his inner eye, producing images he would've far rather not remembered.

He had made a public announcement alright! He had all but challenged the fucking bastard .... No, he *had* challenged him. It was only Sybil's interference that had kept him from making more of a spectacle than he had!

And then he'd compounded his insanity by dragging Sybil to his quarters as if he was some kind of mindless beast and pouncing on her.

He turned his head and cast a wary glance at her face. She was studying his chest thoughtfully.

"I gave you no pleasure," he said flatly, his voice rough with embarrassment, a fresh bout of anger, and the dregs of his own spent passion.

She looked up at him and then looked away. "You did."

It was a lie and he damned well knew it and it pissed him off more. "Who was that son-of-a-bitch?" he growled.

She shrugged. "A soldier. He's stationed at the Embassy."

He hooked his hand beneath her chin and made her look up at him. "You were leaving with him. Did you take him as your lover when I left?"

Shock registered on her face. It was quickly followed by a mixture of hurt and anger. "Exactly what makes you think you have the right to ask?"

He didn't have the right. It made him angrier that he didn't. "Tell me."

Her lips tightened. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you the truth!"

"Sybil," he growled.

"No! I didn't even meet him until tonight!"

"You have travelled two months with the bastard and you have only met him tonight?"

Sybil glared at him in tight lipped silence.

"Powell was your lover!" he said, leaping instantly from his current target to the man he'd seen sniffing around her the night he left.

Sybil blinked at him. "I don't understand you. I don't understand this ... interrogation!"

Because it wasn't rational, he wondered? He'd taken her as his lover because he'd wanted her, but also because it fit his needs beyond the bedroom, the needs of his people. He'd tried his best to be a thoughtful lover, to be generous with her, but he knew he'd still asked her to take him into her bed because he'd seen a possibility of using her to get what they needed. He had no right to behave, or think, as if his motives had been pure.

It was his misfortune that he hadn't been able to also keep a barrier erected between them to protect himself from bonding with her. His weakness toward her that had made him believe that she felt the same bond.

He dragged in a deep breath to calm himself and released it slowly, tamping the jealousy still churning inside of him.

He couldn't have fucked up worse, he realized, if he actually had completely lost his mind! He'd made it abundantly clear to both her people and his own that he was putty in her hands—not that he gave a fuck about their opinion now that he thought on it! To hell with them if they were determined to look upon him as if he was ... some sort of fucking machine, without function beyond supplying their needs.

It was *his* life, too! He had given freely to his people. He had done all that he could for them. He had a right to take something for himself!

In any case, his current situation was enough to deal with at the moment. He *had* behaved like a madman—or a savage!—lost all traces of civilized behavior. If she'd been a Sumpturian woman she would've been screaming assault or she would've already tossed him out

of her room—which was yet another breach! He'd *dragged* her to his room. There was no excusing that complete disregard for her right to refuse him or her comfort in meeting him on her own ground.

He swallowed with an effort, trying to think how to mend the mess he'd made. "I beg pardon," he said stiffly, excruciatingly uncomfortable about having to apologize for his behavior even though he knew he was in the wrong. "Do you want me to leave?"

She stared at him for a long moment and finally chuckled. "It's your quarters."

He felt his face redden but it eased the tightness in his chest that she'd laughed. "Contrary to what it might seem, given my complete lapse of judgment, I know we're in my quarters. Since I didn't give you the option of throwing me out of yours, however, I'm obligated to offer you the option to throw me out of mine."

She studied his face. "It would serve you right, you know, if I did and you had to sleep on the floor in the hall."

"I know. I think public humiliation is probably the least I deserve."

She got up. For a moment his heart sank. Then he saw that she was struggling to remove her dress—which he saw he'd ruined—not permanently, he hoped. "Do you plan to sleep in your boots?" she asked, amusement threading her voice.

Cringing inwardly, he sat up and removed his boots and the rest of his clothing, then lay back down, still half fearing she would snatch her clothing back on and stalk out. Instead, she smoothed her dress and folded it over the back of his chair and then moved back to the bed and climbed in beside him.

He caught her arm, pulling her closer and then curled his arms around her. "I'm sorry, *nodia*," he murmured against her neck, breathing her scent into his lungs gratefully.

She touched his hair, smoothed it, cupped the back of his head. "It was actually exciting—a little scary, but thrilling, too."

He lifted his head to look at her. "And you think *I'm* mad? I behaved like a ... barbarian!"

Her lips curled at one corner. "But so passionate!"

"And so worthless," he said dryly. "Don't ever lie to me again about that, *nodia*! I'm selfish enough. And I was unforgivably selfish in taking my own satisfaction and giving nothing."

She blushed. "I wasn't lying. I enjoyed it."

He sent her a look. "I know what you look like when you're satisfied, *nodia*."

She smiled. "You can make it up to me."

He shifted slightly away from her and ran a hand along her side, frowning slightly when he noticed there was barely any indentation at her waistline. Sybil froze, having been so swept away by his feverish need for her that she'd completely forgotten her condition—forgotten *everything*!

There was amusement in his eyes when he met her gaze again. "My *nodia* is getting plump. I like this."

Oh he was going to *love* it when he realized why his *nodia* was so plump and round! She might have pursued that thought except that his mentioning her roundness brought something into focus that *she* hadn't noticed before. He was noticeably thinner than the last time she'd seen him. The realization threw her into disorder. The fear leapt instantly to mind that he'd been ill or hurt and that accounted for it. When she saw no other signs of either illness or injury, though,

the flattering thought flickered briefly through her mind that the weight loss might have been because he missed her.

Fortunately, before her tongue ran away with her, it also flickered through her mind that she'd noticed a lot of the Sumpturians had the same gaunt look about them. Her belly clenched instantly with sympathy. She knew hunger when she saw it. She'd certainly seen it enough over the years to recognize slow starvation!

The urge to burst into tears assailed her. She touched his face, traced it lightly with her fingers.

He hadn't wanted her to know, hadn't wanted anyone to know. Pride? Or self-preservation? She realized it had been both. They had too much pride to ask for help and were too worried about revealing how vulnerable they were. The pieces that she hadn't known she had been struggling to put together abruptly fell into place and she *knew* why they were here. They weren't conquerors. They weren't curious. They hadn't even come *willingly* to colonize.

They were refugees!

She swallowed the clog of emotions in her throat with an effort when she realized that he was studying her face, must have read something of her thoughts because his own expression had closed. "I missed you," she said finally. "I thought when you left that I wouldn't see you again."

He seemed to relax fractionally. Instead of responding, however, he moved closer and nibbled a trail to her lips. She had to force herself to relax at first, force the churning, unsettling thoughts from her mind, but his kiss carried magic. It always had.

Closing her mind resolutely to everything but his touch, she gave herself up to feeling every nerve within her body responding to him like a flower to the sun, awakening to sensation as if she'd been asleep and numb to the world without his touch. Dizziness assailed her as he explored her mouth and then moved lower to explore her sensitive breasts.

She hadn't realized how tender her nipples had grown with her pregnancy until he closed his mouth around the first to suckle it. Pain warred with pleasure then. She gritted her teeth, forced herself to relax and finally did relax when the pain eased altogether and pleasure took dominance.

He was clearly determined to make amends. He kissed and stroked her until she was drunk, feverish. Without compunction, she began to beg him to give her what she needed and then to demand it.

Chuckling huskily, he positioned himself between her thighs and prodded her sex teasingly with the head of his cock. She reached between them and grasped it, trying to thrust it into the mouth of her sex. He let out a hiss of sound, pushed her away and aligned their flesh, allowing her to acclimate to the pressure as he slowly probed deeper and deeper. She dug her nails into his arms, pulling at him.

"My *nodia* is impatient?" he murmured teasingly.

"Damn it, Anka!" she gasped. "I'm going to come!"

"Not without me," he countered, driving completely inside of her finally and then withdrawing almost out.

She gasped, arching her head as she felt a quivering deep inside of her, waiting for the next pass to set her off. He waited until the spasms eased and then slid inside of her again. Once more the tremors shook her and still her climax eluded her. She began to think he was more intent on punishing her than satisfying her, but even as the thought crossed her mind he settled to

thrusting rhythmically. Within a few minutes, he took her to the top of the mountain and carried her into heaven.

She'd forgotten, she thought dreamily as the convulsions ceased to wrack her, just how wonderful it felt.

He slowed, waited for her to catch her breath and began all over again. Accustomed to it by then, Sybil didn't struggle against the rise of heat, knowing he could carry her all the way as he had before.

"Shall I try for three?" he gasped when she drifted down from her second rapturous high.

"Oh please," she gasped drunkenly, "let me die in peace!"

He uttered a choked laugh, but fell to seeking his own release. She was amazed he found it with her lying beneath him like a dead thing, but she discovered an unexpected bonus to her exhaustion. For once she got to feel what it was like when he came without being so absorbed in her own heat that she could barely take it in.

And she discovered that it was more rewarding in some ways than climaxing herself. She was just regretful that she'd been too focused on reaching climax that first time herself to feel his release with anything but disappointment.

Closing her mind to the dark thoughts fluttering just beyond her reach, she cuddled against him when he rolled the two of them onto their sides and sought oblivion.

\* \* \* \*

Sybil wasn't sorry she'd spent the entire night with Anka. She did regret the morning return to her quarters, however. As luck would have it, Lt. Brant was on duty. Bracing herself, she entered the foyer, prepared to make an apology to the man after the scene she'd inadvertently embroiled him in the night before.

"That worked almost too well. I thought for a little bit there that I was going to have to kick his alien ass."

Enlighten crashed over Sybil so abruptly at Brant's comment that she was too stunned to assimilate it all at once. She'd suspected something was up and it still outraged her to realize that the entire cozy flirtation the night before had been a setup job. There was no denying it also stung her ego, but then she didn't really give a damn about the bastard! "He would've broken you in half," she responded coldly. "Be glad you didn't get the chance to find out."

Anger glittered in his eyes, but he merely shrugged. "All's well that ends well—mission accomplished. I don't suppose you got anything?"

She felt like punching him. "I should've smelled the stench of Meachum on you right off. You'll have to tell your *lover* I was too busy fucking to chat."

Brant caught her arm as she moved to pass him, gripping it tightly enough Sybil had to struggle to keep from flinching. "Oh, I like pussy same as the next man. I just don't like the idea of taking alien leavings, if you get my drift."

"Afraid you couldn't match up? You should be. You aren't half the man he is." Sybil jerked her arm free. "Touch me again and I'll file charges. I'm still an officer, asshole."

"Meachum isn't going to be happy," he called after her as she marched past him.

She barely made it to her private bath before she threw up. She leaned weakly against the wall when her stomach stopped heaving, wondering if it was her pregnancy or just revulsion that had made her puke. She hadn't been sick before, though. She'd felt twinges of nausea from time to time, but nothing like this.

Shuddering, she flushed the toilet and moved to the shower to wash the feeling of disgust off. She discovered she couldn't scour it from herself, though, because it went well beyond skin deep.

Between throwing up and the hot shower afterward Sybil felt weak almost to the point of fainting. It took all she could do to drag herself to her bunk when she emerged. She sat down, thought about it a moment, and finally just lay back, trying to collect herself.

She should've been better prepared, she told herself angrily. She'd worked for Meachum long enough to know how the man operated. There no was getting around the fact that Brant had taken her almost completely by surprise, though.

She supposed that was his specialty and the reason he'd been assigned to keep an eye on her.

She didn't know what made her angrier—the fact that he'd played her or the fact that he'd used her to play Anka.

She was angrier on Anka's behalf, she decided. God only knew what sort of repercussions there might be for him. It made it worse that she was almost certain she finally understood their situation and the motivation behind their willingness to consider a peace treaty.

A sense of pride flitted through her that Anka had so neatly outwitted them at their game. They'd seriously underestimated him.

She wanted to keep it that way, but she knew she wasn't nearly as good at deception or manipulation or even reading people as any of the other players. The only thing that had become clear to her was just how important it was that Meachum never get any clue of the Sumpturians' situation—not before they had time to grow stronger. Anka had been right not to trust them. One whiff of weakness and the government would've been all over them.

She thought the American people would've tried to help if they knew. Despite all of the hardships they'd endured, they still struggled to help their neighbors, anyone in need, and she felt that they would have empathized with the tragedy that had befallen Sumpturians. The government was a whole other breed.

The problem was, she had no clue of how long it might take and she didn't have a lot of time that she could devote to trying help them. She still had the baby to consider and she had her doubts that it would be something she could hide many more weeks.

She shouldn't have had to concern herself about it. The Embassy was officially American soil now and the Sumpturians had agreed that it was sovereign territory. Unfortunately, she already knew that Anka would do whatever he pleased, regardless of the circumstances or the restrictions. He had to have known even before she'd told him that the base was a restricted area and off limits to the Sumpturians and he'd come to her quarters anyway. He would come to the Embassy if he felt like it. She knew it and, unfortunately, Meachum knew it.

There probably wasn't a square inch of her quarters that wasn't covered by vid and sound devices.

Lifting an arm, she draped it across her eyes. She'd thought she might be able to escape once she reached Venus. Right up until she'd realized what their situation was, she'd thought she could appeal to Anka for asylum. Now she realized that he couldn't afford to offer it even if he wanted to.

And she couldn't ask it of him.

She was just going to have to try to beat Meachum at his game if Anka came to her, she realized. She couldn't even send him away without creating problems. If she refused to



cooperate, Meachum would just have her shipped back home for trial and there was no telling what would happen to the baby.

\* \* \* \*

Stripped to the waist to catch whatever cooling breezes happened along, Anka paused to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his face with the dangling sleeve of the top of his uniform, staring at the great machines the Earth people had unloaded that were crawling back and forth across the plain where their base would soon sit. The machines were antiquated to his eyes and they belched stinking fumes into the atmosphere that was still too thick for comfort, but he felt a flicker of envy that they had nothing to compare to them. They could've used something like that—something to cut the amount of physical labor necessary and the building time.

Expelling a heavy breath, he scanned the distant horizon a little further until he spied the tiny habitat that temporarily housed the Embassy—where Sybil's quarters lay. There was activity there, as well. No doubt they had something grand in mind, he thought wryly. The Earth people did love ostentation.

For all the faults he knew they had, however, a lack of industry didn't seem to be one of them. They'd set to work with a will from the time they'd landed. Already there were signs of progress well beyond the leveling efforts.

His thoughts leapt from the construction to Sybil after a moment. He decided he was too tired at the moment, however, to struggle with the tangle. He had to make a decision about her, and soon, but he'd discovered it was easier said than done, especially since it wasn't merely a personal decision but one that appeared to be everyone's business.

He uttered a humorless snort. He'd been too preoccupied most of the day after the festival to pay much attention to what was going on around him. Myune had jolted him out of it when she'd finally managed to waylay him on his way back to his quarters that evening.

Anger flickered through him at the memory. The only reason her ass wasn't sitting in the brig even now was due entirely to his realization that his own behavior had left a lot to be desired. He was well aware that he'd snubbed her publicly, but it certainly hadn't been his intention, and it was only the fact that more people were interested in his personal life than their own that it had been so widely witnessed.

It if had been anyone else, very likely no one at all would have noticed that he'd already signaled his interest before he abruptly dismissed her to chase Sybil down.

Regardless, a flirtation during the dance wasn't a gods damned commitment—not of any kind!—and he was still her commanding officer. He was willing to allow her to express her anger and her disappointment, but striking him was out of bounds, particularly for what amounted to no more than poor judgment and poor manners.

It was a sign of the times, he feared. Their culture, what was left of it, was crumbling under the stress. It wasn't that jealousy and fights didn't occasionally break out between disappointed suitors or slighted females and the object of their interest, but in the times before that was rare. Mating was the joy of life and everyone worked hard to keep it that way. It was one of the main reasons they didn't live with their lovers but rather their own blood. They toiled beside their blood kin in the day to day stress and boredom of survival. Familiarity and routine had its place there, where they had no one to impress. They preserved a little mystery and a lot of the excitement of their liaisons by endless courtship.

The disaster on their home world had severely upset the foundations of their culture along with everything else, wiping out most of the family units and making orphans of most of them

with no harbor to anchor in. And, just as they'd been left with great gaps in skills, they'd also found a serious imbalance in mating partners. There was no stigma attached to women in the military. The custom was that the eldest in every family served and quite often the eldest was a daughter. Regardless, only about a quarter of their entire forces had been female and when they'd lost ninety percent of their forces that imbalance had increased not decreased. It was the same with the scientific community, the second largest segment of survivors and the end result was that one of the most important resources they were deficient in was women.

That being the case, it made Myune's behavior all the more incomprehensible to him. She was young and beautiful and had endless choices among the men. Why she'd singled him out when he wasn't even *young* anymore was beyond him!

Not that he considered himself old—although he was beginning to feel far older than his solars—but he was five and thirty solars!—nigh old enough to have *fathered* the spoiled, evil tempered bitch! He'd had a daughter barely five solars younger ....

Pain pierced his irritation at the wayward thought but, to his relief, it was a milder pain than he usually felt whenever he inadvertently allowed the past to slip the frantic rein he held on it. The sense of loss followed as it always had but that, too, was more bearable.

Sucking in a deep breath past the constriction of his chest he turned away from his memories both figuratively and literally to stare at the progress of their current project. The engineers, he saw, were still scratching their heads over the force field. It had been the first order of business when they'd returned from the peace talks—erecting a protective shield. In part it was to protect their future colony from the forces of nature. Mostly, it was to protect their people from the Earth people building a military base within sight of their colony.

It *still* wasn't fucking working properly and he'd begun to wonder if it ever would!

The soil and water purification units, fortunately, *were* doing their job, but they were going to have to scale up production by a hundred percent if they were ever going to reach a point of *not* living on the verge of disaster. In time, nature would take care of purification. Already they'd discovered signs of indigenous plant life. Water had begun to collect on the ground and stay and brought dormant life out to feed, and those simple, primitive organisms were cleansing Venus to make way for more complex life, but they didn't have the time to spare to wait.

Processed soil already filled the containers inside the greenhouses they'd built and purified water snaked along the planting beds to nurture the seeds they hoped would flourish—if they'd balanced everything as carefully as they thought they had.

On that thought, he left the men he'd been working with abruptly and strode to the nearest of the growing houses, moving slowly along the walk between the beds and bending to peer at the dirt for any sign of fresh sprouts. He'd more than half expected to discover that the seeds the Americans had brought with them would either be no good or simply couldn't be cultivated on Venus. To his relief, he'd discovered he was wrong on both counts. Many of the seeds began to sprout within a couple of days and he discovered as he walked along examining the troughs of dirt that there were new ones today, tiny sprouts with nearly microscopic leaves, but life. Hope and pleasure filled him.

He tried to subdue the first. It was early days. They had yet to see if any of it would flourish and bear fruit but, like everyone else, the budding life gave him badly needed hope for a future. It worried him that everyone who could find an excuse to be there spent much of their free time hovering anxiously over the plants. In the first place, he was worried they might inadvertently sabotage their efforts by over-attentiveness. In the second, just as the plants

boosted morale because of the future they represented, they could wither and die and take morale and hopefulness with them.

Deciding he was going to have to place tighter security on the growing houses and limit access until the plants were big enough to actually be considered a garden, he left the greenhouse and returned to the labor pool.

The arrival of the colonists from Pluto had increased their labor pool considerably, but it had also increased the strain on their resources. They were going to have to work hard to balance the two.

Despite his reminder, he discovered when he returned to work on processing building materials for their construction efforts that his spirits were much higher than they had been in a while. It wasn't until he ended his work shift that he realized it was because he'd made up his mind about Sybil.

It had been a week. That was as much as he could stand, knowing that she was so close. He was tired of waiting for her to come to him, sick of sleeping alone when he could be sleeping in her arms.

They would probably be waiting for him. He knew they would be expecting him to come and they knew by now that their security measures were useless when it came to preventing him from getting to Sybil.

## Chapter Fifteen

Sybil had spent a solid week wavering between hope and despair—hope that Anka would come to her; hope that he wouldn't, fear that he'd taken that woman to his bed and didn't want her anymore; fear that he would come and Meachum's dog would have him arrested for trespassing on American soil.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry when he materialized in her quarters, but when she met his questioning gaze, she did both, uttering a sound about halfway between a chuckle and a sob.

He tilted his head questioningly. "Does that mean that I'm welcome to stay? Or should I leave before you find something to throw at me?"

Sybil sniffed, struggling with tears. "You're always welcome." She surged toward him then, flinging herself into his arms.

He gathered her tightly to him, filling her with warmth, and then found her lips, filling her with heat. She linked her fingers behind his head and dragged him down to nuzzle his ear when he broke the kiss. "They're watching," she warned against his ear on a breath of sound, hoping he could hear her and the watchers couldn't.

She leaned away after a moment to search his face for understanding.

His gaze was thoughtful, almost puzzled and she feared for several moments she'd failed to warn him.

Anka lifted one hand and lightly stroked Sybil's cheek, struggling with the truth that had been staring him in the face all along. Sybil had never deserved the lack of trust or the suspicions that he'd harbored about her. She'd been honest and faithful from the very beginning, even when she'd told him she was afraid. Despite the fact that he'd learned she had good reason to be uneasy, he'd still thought it went beyond that, that at least part of her fear stemmed from a plot to use him or to learn what she could about them to take the information to her own people.

He'd clung to that willful misunderstanding to protect himself, he realized, not because she had ever done or said anything to warrant it.

He swallowed the words that clogged his throat with an effort. They were for her. He'd had to share virtually every moment they were together with the watchers. He wouldn't share his feelings for her with them, as well.

Resisting the urge to let them know that he knew they were watching and fucking well didn't care by flicking an obscene gesture at them, he smiled at her with an effort. "We must stop meeting this way," he said teasingly. "I am too hungry when I see you to properly appreciate the meals."

Sybil chuckled huskily, relieved that he seemed to have caught the warning after all and aroused by his suggestive comment. "I haven't noticed any lack of appreciation."

He gathered her close in an embrace again and then led her to her bed, pushed his boots off, and lay down with her. "Not even the last time?"

"Especially not the last time."

"Now I know you're only trying to flatter me," he retorted teasingly.

Hurt flickered in her eyes briefly, but not so briefly that he didn't see it and feel guilt make his chest tight from the realization that he'd seen it many times, *put* that look in her eyes many times. "I don't know why you put up with me," he muttered.

"It's a job, but somebody has to do it."

He chuckled, struggling for something to say that wouldn't put her in an uncomfortable position when he'd had no trouble doing so before. There was so much he wanted to talk to her about, though, that he's never dared ask. "You're wearing far too many clothes to suit me," he murmured.

She lifted her brows at him. "I thought you wanted to savor your dinner for a change?"

He grinned at her. "By playing with my 'food', *nodia*," he said chidingly. "I can't play when you're so bundled up."

"Maybe I'd like to play, too?"

He promptly released her and rolled onto his back, folding his arms behind his head. "Play all you like, *nodia*. I'm all yours."

Sybil stared at him wide eyed for a moment, completely disconcerted by the invitation. She had no idea what he might like or how she was to go about pleasing him. She'd always let him take his pleasure as he would. She did *like* the comment that he was all hers, though, even if he was teasing. "A challenge?"

He chuckled. "Now that sounds interesting."

It did to her. It also made her uneasy, but she thought he must like much the same things as she did. Otherwise, how would he know so well where and how to touch her?

Practice, she thought dryly, but that didn't mean she couldn't light him up like he did her.

Shifting up onto one arm, she scanned his length. "Am I going to have to work with barriers?"

"You don't want to unwrap your gift?" he murmured, his voice shaky with suppressed laughter.

She surged upward and straddled his waist when he tensed to get up. "You don't think I know how to turn you on, do you?"

"I know you do. I was hoping for a test of my stamina."

"That's a challenge if I ever heard one," Sybil said with a chuckle, reaching for the buttons on her blouse. He watched with interest while she opened it from the neck to the hem and then shrugged out of it. She discarded the bra next.

His arms came from beneath his head immediately and he reached to cup her breasts in his palms. "No," Sybil said, catching his wrists and guiding his arms back to where they'd been. "You get to look, not touch. It's my turn to touch."

She saw his Adam's apple bob when he swallowed. "Can I at least taste?"

She tilted her head, considering it. "Maybe just a little taste." Leaning forward, she placed a palm on the mattress on either side of his head and presented him with one breast. She didn't miss the gleam of triumph in his eyes as he opened his mouth and flicked at the tip with his tongue until it stood tightly erect and then sucked it into his mouth. The heat that traveled from her breast to her womb scorched her. She wanted to linger, to allow the heat that blossomed in her lower belly to grow higher, but she pulled away after only a moment. After a moment's thought, she nudged his lips with the other nipple, demanding he even up the heat.

The desire flowing through her blood stream like warm molasses increased her eagerness to explore him and quashed her doubts. Pushing herself back along his body, she explored his face, his ears, his throat, teasing him by kissing all around his mouth without touching her mouth

to his. He surged upward abruptly, cupped a hand along the back of her head to trap her and kissed her deeply, building the heat within her.

"That's cheating," she said disapprovingly when he released her and fell back.

He wagged his brows at her.

She couldn't help but chuckle, but she turned her attention immediately to parting the front of his uniform from the neck to the waist, roughly, in playful mastery. He frowned at her, but his lips curled upward at one corner. The smile died as she leaned down to nibble a path along his throat to his chest. She sat up again, stroking the sculpted muscles of his chest and finally wiggled further back to reach him better.

His cock was rock hard. He winced when she landed on it. Giving him an apologetic look, she reached down to adjust it. She discovered when she settled again that it fit very nicely along her cleft. On inspiration, she rocked back and forth a few times, watching his face for his reaction. It felt good to her, not nearly as good as she thought it would've felt if they'd had no clothes between them, but nice in a teasing sort of way.

He caught her hips, stilling her movements.

"Did I hurt you?"

He grimaced. "That's a highly volatile stick of explosives, *nodia*. Take care how you handle it. It might go off and spoil all our fun."

Sybil laughed. "Will you be serious? I'm working here!"

"I *am* serious—and deeply concerned."

Leaning down, she bit his pec in playful rebuke, then sucked at it. "You taste good," she murmured. An image of his cock leapt instantly into her mind and she examined the idea with a mixture of uneasiness and excitement. Anka sent her a heated look when she glanced at his face.

"You taste good. Maybe I'll nibble a while?"

"I'm not done yet," she said decisively. Scooting backwards to sit on the tops of his thighs, she opened his suit fully and studied his cock meditatively. It jerked when she stroked a finger along his length and she flicked a quick look at his face.

"Not a good idea—not right now," he growled warningly.

She sent him a look of innocence. "What?"

His eyes narrowed. "Remember what I said," he reminded her as she grasped his cock and leaned down. Ignoring the warning, she opened her mouth over the rounded head and sucked at it experimentally. His hands clamped around her head. She paused, but when he didn't try to push her away, she settled to exploring it more thoroughly.

She hadn't actually caught more than a glimpse of it before. She'd been far more focused on how it felt inside of her—absolutely divine! She decided she liked the way it looked, though, and tasted, and felt in her mouth. It was surprisingly arousing to suck on it, to hear his breath catch in his throat, the way his hips moved when she stroked him with her mouth and hands.

He pulled her away just when she was thoroughly enjoying herself, surging over her and pushing her onto her back. "My turn," he growled.

She sent him a saucy look. "No stamina."

He tsked. "You should know better than to throw out that kind of challenge."

She folded her arms behind her head. "Do your worst."

He sent her a look. "I'll do my best," he promised, coming up on his knees to unfasten her trousers and tug them from her hips. When he'd pulled them all the way off and tossed them aside, he skimmed a look up her thighs to her hips and belly. Sybil tensed when he paused for a long, long moment. Frowning, he flicked a look at her face that was a mixture of confusion and

concern before he returned his attention to her belly. She knew the very instant comprehension hit him. His gaze moved to her face again and this time she saw a flicker of anger in his eyes. He dropped to the bed beside her, heavily, as if the strength had gone out of his legs. His hand was shaking as he lightly stroked her rounded belly.

For many moments he did nothing else and Sybil felt her desire burn itself out. Finally, he rolled toward her. He kissed her breasts and throat. He caressed her, touching her in all the right places, but she had the sense that it was mechanical, that his mind was elsewhere.

She had little moisture to offer him to ease his way when he moved between her thighs at last. It was a struggle for both of them to achieve full penetration but, in spite of everything, heat rose inside of her when she felt him moving along her channel rhythmically. She gasped when she came, clinging tightly to him, but it was more a plea for understanding than from passion.

She wasn't even sure he'd managed to come until she felt the stickiness between her thighs when he withdrew. Relieved about that at least she lay with her eyes closed, more to shield herself from his gaze than from the weakness in the aftermath of pleasure. He moved behind her, pulling her back against his chest. To her relief, he stroked his hands over her the way he always had. It soothed her as it always had.

She'd always wondered what was running through his mind when he caressed her like that. This time, she was almost certain she at least knew the questions in his mind. It worried her that he seemed so ... distant.

He nuzzled her neck after a little bit. "Our experimental garden is coming along nicely," he murmured.

Sybil whipped her head around to stare at him, afraid he'd say more.

His lips tightened. The look his eyes was enough to reassure her that he hadn't slipped and he hadn't forgotten the warning. "I'd like to take you to look at it tomorrow."

Dismay flickered through her, but she forced a smile. "I'd love to see it," she responded woodenly.

He called for her in a transport. Sybil was almost surprised when she was allowed to leave without question. Despite the 'assignment' she'd been given, she would've thought they would be worried about letting her off her leash entirely.

Brant gave her a significant look as she strode past him, but otherwise his only comment was to 'take care'.

Anka's lips tightened, but she couldn't decide if it was because he knew it was a subtle warning or if it was jealousy. "The weather's fine today. If it wasn't so far I would've invited you to walk," he said as he helped her into the front of the transport. "You'll get the chance to do plenty of walking once we get there, though."

Sybil didn't respond. She had the feeling that it wasn't as inconsequential as it seemed, that he was dangling a carrot for Brant, however, and she was afraid to say anything at all.

"I see the construction of the American base goes well," he commented as he climbed in beside her.

"I haven't actually been out a lot. I've heard the equipment, but I wasn't certain if it was alright to gawk. Anyway, heavy equipment is dangerous."

He fell silent as he started the transport. To Sybil's surprise, it was some sort of hovercraft, although it didn't seem to be like anything on Earth that fit that description. This one almost seemed to defy gravity rather than running on a cushion of air.

She glanced at Anka uneasily several times as they crossed the plain, moving closer and closer to the area under construction by the Sumpturians, but he neither said anything or even

acknowledged that he'd noticed her looking at him. She frowned, wondering if he was concerned they could still be monitored or if he was preoccupied. Since she knew it was completely possible that they were still being monitored, however, and she couldn't think of anything to contribute as small talk, she focused on studying the landscape.

The surface still looked more like a barren desert than a living world, but she spotted tiny patches of what looked like moss—possibly. She supposed it might not be anything but grayish-green colored rock, though.

When they reached the area under construction by the Sumpturians, she saw that they'd made headway in carving what looked to be footers for buildings in the hard soil. Anka settled the transport to the ground and switched the engines off. He threw her into confusion when he got out and walked around to help her out.

Settling a hand along her waist, he guided her toward a structure that looked very similar to a greenhouse—any greenhouse that might've been erected on Earth. She saw once they'd entered that that was exactly what it was, sucking in her breath in wonder at the green that filled her vision. "Anka! It's ... beautiful!"

When he didn't answer, she turned to look at him questioningly. His expression was guarded, but there was a hard look in his eyes that told her he was angry. "Why didn't you tell me?"

The urge to pretend she didn't know what he was talking about assailed her. She discarded it, feeling defensiveness surge through her. "That isn't fair! When was I supposed to have told you?"

"When you arrived?" he asked tightly.

She gaped at him in outrage. "Well pardon me all to hell! What was I supposed to do? Waltz up to you while you were wrapped around that damned ... *female* and announce it?"

He flushed. "Maybe when I took you to my quarters?"

"You didn't look like you were in the mood to talk!" she snapped.

He gave her a look. "We spent the entire night together. You could've found some time, surely, to say something."

She looked away. "I hadn't seen you in two months! I didn't think I'd ever see you again." She looked at him earnestly. "I didn't want to risk ... that you'd be angry with me."

"I am angry *now*!" he growled.

She swallowed with an effort. "I see that."

His gaze flickered to her belly. "Is it mine?"

If he'd hit her she didn't think it would've stunned her more. She stared at him, feeling hurt, betrayed, and angry. She thought for several moments that she would burst into tears, but she was too angry to keep it inside. "I don't deserve that," she said hoarsely, struggling to keep her chin from wobbling. "What have I ever done, besides being born human, to deserve your contempt? I've never once betrayed you or even thought about it!"

He caught her when she turned away blindly to stalk off and leave him, tightening his grip when she struggled to break free. "I know that, *nodia*. I'm not sure I deserve it, but there is no doubt in my mind that you have always been faithful to me. That wasn't an accusation," he said, forcing her to turn and look at him. "I wanted you to say it. I wanted you to tell me you were carrying my baby."

"Of course it's your baby!" she sobbed. "I wouldn't *be* here if it wasn't yours! I had to protect it. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to come begging for help when you'd left me there—without a word! Without once telling me whether you'd come back or not, or asking



me to go with you, but I didn't have a choice! They were going to charge me with treason, put me in prison, and take the baby. I couldn't take a chance. I had to come!"

He held her tightly while she cried all over his chest. "I know, *nodia*. I just didn't understand why you'd let them manipulate you into coming. You didn't betray anyone—not me and not your people. I wouldn't have put you in that position even if I'd thought I could."

Sybil mulled that over and finally pulled away to look at him as a terrible thought dawned on her. "You know? *How* do you know?"

His lips tightened. "Do you think your people are the only ones capable of surveillance?" he asked dryly.

Sybil pushed away from him. "You were watching me, too?"

"We weren't watching you!" he growled angrily. "We were watching the politicians and their dogs! We had Meachum under surveillance!" He sighed at the look on her face. "I wouldn't allow surveillance on you."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't want to know if you betrayed me!" he said angrily.

"Which means you thought I might."

He seemed to wrestle with it. "Yes. I thought you might."

Sybil sniffed, wiping her face with her hands. "I guess that made it easier on your conscience to use me."

"Now who's being unfair? Did I ever, once, ask you anything of a secure nature?"

She sniffed again. "No."

"I came to you because I wanted to be with you—and for no other reason. I by-passed their security every time I came. I could've walked through any room on that base. I didn't *need* to be there to breach their security."

She looked up at him hopefully. "You wanted to be with me? That's all?"

He gathered her close. "I didn't seem ... enthusiastic enough, *nodia*?"

"I thought you were just ... horny."

He uttered a bark of laughter at that. "I was. Gods!"

She sighed, enjoying being held by him. "I don't suppose we could spend the day together? It would be really nice, for once, to spend time with you without worrying about every word I said."

His arms tightened briefly. "I wish that I could, but there is more work to be done than we can all do working together. It wouldn't be fair to the others for me to take the day off and it wouldn't be a good example."

Disappointment flickered through her. "I could help," she said hopefully. "I grew up on a farm. I have a way with plants."

He looked uncomfortable. "I can't risk it. If anything was to happen to the plants ...."

She felt the blood leave her face. "You can't think I'd ... deliberately ... sabotage the plants?"

He captured her face between his palms. "I don't, but I can't risk it when the others don't trust you. I can't take a chance of you being accused if anything happened."

Sybil swallowed convulsively. She hadn't realized the other Sumpturians distrusted humans so much. It didn't sound good for her hope that she might find refuge with them. "I understand. I guess you should take me back, then."

He shook his head at her. "Do you think I'd let you go back there?"

Sybil gaped at him. "But ... Anka! You have to! Think! I have to go back ... at least for a while, until ... until things are better here! You need the shipments of food supplies!"

He flushed. "As you see, we're well on our way to having our first crop."

"And you're worried even now that it won't bear fruit! It's alright. I can do this. We can both do it. We'll just play along a little while longer and then, when you're more ... settled here and there isn't the ... threat to the colony that there is now, I can come. The baby won't be born for months yet."

He studied her face grimly. "I know I don't have much to offer you, Sybil, but I swear I'll take the best care of you and the baby that I can. It's all I can do. I hadn't expected it, but it's on the way, now, and I won't risk it or you by letting you go back."

"I'm not worried about that!"

"You should be," he said grimly.

"Is it that bad ... still?"

She could see he didn't really want to tell her, but he came to decision quickly enough to appease the fear that he still didn't trust her. "We've been rationing our food stores since we got here. Between what we have and what the ship brought, we'll be good for maybe six months ... if we're careful. I won't lie to you. It's critical that we begin to grow our own food, and soon. We can't rely on the shipments from Earth. We couldn't even if it wasn't for your situation. There are food shortages there. Don't bother to lie to me. I know how things are there. That's the only reason I'm willing to keep you here—there's a risk for you and baby either way."

"Your people won't be happy for me to stay."

"Your people wouldn't accept me or the baby," he countered.

She didn't try to argue with him. "I never expected ... this. I didn't think .... I guess I just didn't think at all."

"You didn't think I could get you pregnant," he said flatly.

"Don't look at me like that! Have I *ever* given you reason to think, even for a moment, that I didn't ... care for you, just the way you are? We're from different worlds, damn it! I just never thought beyond that."

He shook his head at her. "Fool!" he muttered with amused tolerance. "Didn't you think it ... convenient that we fit together so well?"

Sybil blushed. "I thought it was a wonderful convenience."

He chuckled. "We may well be from different worlds, *nodia*, but you and I ... we're like ... cousins from distant stars. Didn't you wonder *why* we were so curious about the people of Earth?"

She shrugged. "I did wonder what you could possibly have found so interesting," she said wryly. "You're sure your scientists didn't do a little ... experimenting?"

"Not legally," he said grimly. "I wouldn't rule it out, but it was the fact that we were so similar on a genetic level that drew them here to study humans to start with. Before you ask, they never did find the link, but ...." He stroked a hand down her belly. "He's here. That should be proof enough."

Sybil smiled up at him. "It might not be a 'he', you know."

He stroked her cheek, smiling down at her. "It doesn't matter to me. It's ours." Leaning lower, he kissed her briefly. "Let's get you settled. It isn't going to be comfortable, I warn you. My quarters are tight for one."

"You're serious?"

"I have never been more serious in my life—the place is like a box! I can't fall off my bunk with hitting my head on my desk."

"If I'm staying, I'm working with everybody else," Sybil said firmly. "They aren't going to accept me if I sit on my ass while they work ... and it would set a bad example."

Anka studied her thoughtfully for several moments. "You really are good with plants?"

"I really am," she said with determination.

"Let's see just how good you are, then. You can start the first outdoor garden."

She looked at him doubtfully. "What are my chances of success?"

"I'm thinking slim to none," he said smoothly, "but ... surprise me. You always have."

"Do you have a spot picked out?"

"I can give you a general area."

"Well, nothing beats a try like a failure," Sybil said cheerfully.

Shaking his head at her, Anka escorted her to the soldier in charge of tools and told him to issue her what she needed. After glancing around for several moments, he summoned one of the men working on a foundation close by. "Cerek, you're going to help Sybil."

Cerek stared at Anka blankly a moment before he saluted. "Yes, Sir!" He looked uncertain. "What will I help her with, Sir?"

He sent Sybil a look of amusement. "Sybil is going to plant our first experimental garden." He reached toward her and patted her stomach possessively. "You're going to help her and watch out for her. She's pregnant. I don't want her to get overheated."

Cerek gaped at her belly, turning as red as a beet. "Yes, Sir ... what should I do if she overheats?"

Anka rolled his eyes. "Carry her inside, son, so she can cool off! If she faints, it's your ass."

Carrying the tools, they crossed the construction site. Anka stopped on the other side and dropped the tools to the dirt.

"Here?" Sybil asked doubtfully.

He gestured widely with one hand. "Anywhere you like. You have the entire planet."

Sybil sent him a look, but lifted a hand to shade her eyes and scanned the terrain. "At least there won't be a problem getting enough sunlight," she said dryly.

Anka dragged her to him and kissed her right on the mouth. "Don't work too hard. I have plans for the night."

Red faced, Sybil gaped at him as he walked off. Cerek distracted her when he knelt down to collect the tools Anka had left. "Just leave them for now. We have to pick a spot."

He stared at her in confusion. "It's all flat."

Sybil shook her head at him. "We need a little more than 'flat'," she said wryly, striking off.

Cerek dropped the tools and followed her. "I could get a scanner to test the soil."

Sybil glanced at him. "You haven't tested it?"

"We test it every week."

"There isn't much point, then, is there?"

He shrugged. "The scientists think it could be many years before the soil is ready."

"Think? Or know?" Sybil asked absently.

"We know what the conditions were before we began to terra-form."

"We knew that, too—at least, we had a fair idea. We hadn't landed a probe in years. It could've changed, I suppose. It certainly has now." Spying one of the grayish-green patches she'd spotted before, she strode away from him and crouched down to study it more closely.

"We've analyzed that. It isn't edible."

Sybil threw him an amused look. "It's growing voluntarily, though. That means its finding what it needs in the soil. Let's give this spot a try."

Cerek glanced back to where they'd left the tools. "It will be a long way to carry water."

"Then we'll carry it ... if we have to. I'm thinking there's a fair amount of water that collects here anyway or this wouldn't be here."

"It may rely upon the condensation that collects overnight."

"Maybe. Whatever we plant would benefit from that, too, though, wouldn't it?"

Apparently deciding there wasn't any point in arguing the matter any further, he left her and went back for the tools. Sybil had decided on trying a modest sized patch for the experiment by the time he returned. There didn't seem much point in wasting the seed if it wouldn't grow in the soil. Of course, she was going to be really disappointed she hadn't made it bigger if the plants *did* grow, but it certainly seemed like it would be big enough to try a variety of plants.

Once she'd shown Cerek the area she'd marked off, the two of them set to work chopping up the soil.

"Why are we doing this?" Cerek asked when they stopped a little later to sit down and rest.

Sybil threw a weary smile in his general direction. "Ah! A city boy!"

He reddened, but he grinned back at her. "Aside from making new blisters on the old ones," he added.

Sybil studied her own hands ruefully. "Gloves would be nice! It's to make it easier for the plants. The first roots will be critical and they're babies. They won't be all that strong, so we need to make it easy for them to burrow down to the water and food they'll need to flourish. When we have it chopped up good, we'll make hills to plant the seeds so that they get good drainage. If there's too much water, the plant drowns."

He looked out at the terrain doubtfully. "It doesn't look like getting too much water would be a problem."

"It might not be, but a hard rain with this sort of terrain could cause a flood and wash everything away. And those clouds up there," she said, pointing, "are carrying rain unless I'm very much mistaken."

He pulled a flask from the shoulder pack he'd brought with him. "You look like you need a little watering."

Sybil took it. "Thanks!" Ignoring the uneasiness that flickered through her, she took the lid off and took a few sips and handed it back.

"We were immunized against human diseases."

Sybil felt her face redden. "Good for you! Unfortunately, *I* wasn't immunized against anything you might be carrying," she said tartly.

He grinned at her. "You were thoroughly exposed, however. I think you can consider yourself safe. If there was danger of that, you would know already."

Sybil couldn't *believe* he'd made a reference to her liaison with Anka! "You have a point, but it might interest you to know not all of us carry diseases."

"Those you have on your world were eradicated from ours long ago. We were already mostly immune, but they mutate and so we had to have immunities from the new strains."

Sybil stared at him. "Seriously? You had some of the same diseases on your world as we do?"

"Yes. They aren't confined to one world. The seeds are carried across the universe in the dust of comets and asteroids. They've been capable of space travel since long before we were."

Getting up, Sybil dusted the seat of her pants and took up her tool again. It wasn't a hoe, precisely. It looked more like an adze but it worked well enough for chopping dirt even it did look like a woodworking tool. "So ... maybe we all evolved from the same bacteria?" she said, only half joking.

He shrugged. "Very likely." He flicked a look over her that was speculative. "Just differently."

Sybil frowned, chopping at the dirt. "You think we're that different?"

"In some ways very clearly. In others ... not so much."

"But you don't like humans, do you?"

He frowned. "I haven't met many. I haven't decided."

"Well," Sybil said. "At least you're honest."

He paused and looked at her. "Commander l'Kartay trusts you. That's good enough for me."

## Chapter Sixteen

"The Americans are accusing us of kidnapping Lieutenant Hunter and holding her against her will, Commander l'Kartay! I was sure it had to be a simple misunderstanding and now I learn that you have her in *your* quarters!"

Anka ground his teeth together, struggling with his temper. "She needed protection ... from them. She came to me."

Premier d'Zubi blinked several times and turned to look at the other council members as if he doubted his hearing and thought their reactions might help him clear up his misconception. Councilman Mortzay apparently decided to interpret the look as an invitation to join the discussion. "You're saying that she's asked for political asylum?"

Anka considered the question. "Something of that nature, yes."

Mortzay turned and frowned at the Premier.

"Well is she a political refugee or not?" the Premier demanded testily.

"They coerced her to come here against her will, hoping to use her to gather information through me for their government. She's carrying my child. I couldn't allow them to put her and the child at risk."

"Now there is a child, as well?" Councilman l'Bevridge demanded. "How do you even know that it's yours?"

"I know," Anka said tightly.

Premier d'Zubi surged to his feet. "Well, I hope you know that this is a hell of a damned mess, Commander l'Kartay! We have just made treaty with them, gods damn it! You assured us that that would give us time to secure our colony and focus on internal problems—before we all starved to death! We've barely even begun to solve the biggest threat to our survival since the disaster!"

"I'm aware of that. I hadn't anticipated the ... complication, but I have a moral obligation beyond my affection to protect my family—just as I would any man, woman, or child of Sumptura."

"Hadn't anticipated ...?" Councilman l'Bevridge exploded. "You took her as your lover and you hadn't anticipated the possibility?"

Anka's lips tightened. "I assumed she would use protection."

"So you used none to protect *our* interests?" Mortzay demanded. "It didn't occur to you that she might use the opportunity to place just this obligation upon us? It might be laughable if you were some callow youth, l'Kartay. It would certainly be more understandable when the young are so thoughtless and reckless, but it concerns me a very great deal, I don't mind telling you, that our lives are hanging on your experience and judgment when you obviously have none where this ... *female* is concerned!"

"May I remind you, Councilman, that it was the capture of the crew of the Mars II that gave us the opening, and the leverage, we needed to negotiate a treaty with the Earth people to start with? And that it was the bond formed between Lieutenant Hunter and me, because I had taken her as my lover, that convinced her to support the Sumpturians throughout those

negotiations? We may or may not have succeeded in securing a treaty with them at all if she hadn't been willing to give us all the benefit of the doubt and refused to misinterpret our motives.

"She has befriended our people and she is in trouble because of it. I have sacrificed as much or more than anyone here. I have worked as hard or harder than anyone here for the greater good. I will not sacrifice Sybil and my child because it would be *easier* for everyone for me to do so. If she was Sumpturian we wouldn't be having this discussion. You would have accepted that we are responsible for her welfare and that the greater good is not more important than the individuals that constitute it!"

"If she was Sumpturian we wouldn't *have* to be discussing it!" Premier d'Zubi snapped testily. He sat back down, drumming his fingers on the table in front of him. "Not but what I see your point. I don't mind telling you that it disturbs me that you have taken an Earth woman as a lover at all, politically expedient or not, and spurned good Sumpturian women in the process! Our society is crumbling! We have little left beyond our traditions of the old world. You are an example for our young people! Before you know it we will have all of them clamoring for Earth lovers and dragging them into their quarters and then our traditions will fall by the wayside like everything else!"

"What traditions do you perceive that we have left?" Anka growled furiously. "Without Sybil and my child I have *no one*! I have lost my mother, my siblings, their children! I have lost my lover of fifteen solars and the children we had together! What do I have left to build upon? What do *any* of us have to build our old traditions upon? There are maybe a dozen matriarchs among us and *they* have lost their families!"

"Do you mean to begin to dictate who we chose as our lovers? Because the moment you do, you have also done your part to destroy the very traditions you believe you're protecting!"

"I chose Sybil because I wanted her and she wanted me—It was *not* politically motivated—on *either* side! She did not get pregnant to bind me to her. She was terrified when she discovered it and forced by that circumstance to do something repugnant to her to protect the child we'd made together.

"She wanted to go back and pretend to help them so that she could help us and I refused to allow it. She knows as well as I do that the treaty is shaky at best, but it is signed and they have all agreed upon it. The Americans cannot break the treaty without just cause and they cannot use Sybil as just cause when she will dispute their claim that she is being held against her will!"

To his relief, the members of the council exchanged thoughtful glances and fell to considering what he'd said. "They will want something in exchange—mark my words!" the Premier said irritably.

Anka relaxed. "I've considered that. The atmospheric unit number twelve has broken down again and we have no parts to repair it. We will offer them that. They will be delighted to get the technology and very likely they can fix it. As long as they believe that we will keep the treaty and they can wheedle more technology from us from time to time, they'll be happy."

Premier d'Zubi scowled at him. "You think too much like the humans," he growled.

Anka shrugged. "I have to be able to get inside their minds to deal with them."

Mortzay grunted irritably. "Just don't begin to behave too much like them! What do you plan to do with the woman? It's unseemly to keep her in your quarters. It simply isn't done! And you can't expect to preserve the relationship when the two of you are under the same roof, so to speak."

"We will have to work harder to preserve it," Anka responded. "Housing is one of the many shortages and until we have permanent residences there isn't an alternative."

"What about the matriarchs?" I'Bevridge suggested. "Perhaps one of them could be persuaded to adopt her? The poor things are lost without their families to cluck over and beyond that, they are too old to live alone. They need young people to help with the chores, or will when they are assigned to housing."

Reluctance immediately tightened in Anka's belly. It was ... strange to live with his lover. He would've never considered it before, but it was also true that he'd lost his own family and he was reluctant to give up the closeness of living with someone again—however uncomfortable that could be at times. "I think they'll have plenty of young people to choose from to adopt," he said finally. "But that's something that will have to wait."

\* \* \* \*

Sybil searched Anka's face worriedly when he joined her in the storage unit where the seeds were kept after his meeting. To her credit, she didn't ask him anything in front of Cerek, who was with her, sorting through the seeds the Americans had provided.

She lifted one of the packets and shook it. "They took these damned things right off the shelves! None of them have been altered in any way for the special conditions here. We'll be lucky if any of them sprout!"

Anka instantly felt a surge of both anger and anxiety. "We used the same seed in the greenhouses."

Sybil looked at him in surprise. "I hadn't thought about that. Maybe the soil is more similar to Earth's than I thought even if the conditions aren't?" She shrugged. "I've picked drought resistant plants indigenous to the hotter regions on Earth. I'm sure these are our best bet."

Anka gave Cerek the bucket full of seed packets and sent him ahead.

"What did they say?" Sybil asked breathlessly the moment he was beyond hearing.

"We will negotiate."

She'd expected as much and she still had to struggle with the churning fear that surged inside her. It was going to be worse if she had to go back. She'd shown them she'd never had any real intention of doing what they wanted. They'd ship her directly back and probably to jail.

Anka tapped her chin, forcing her to look up at him. "Trust, *nodia*. I will protect you ... whatever it takes."

Sybil swallowed with an effort and nodded instead of telling him that putting himself in danger wouldn't make her happy either.

An elderly Sumpturian woman joined them when Sybil and Cerek made it to their garden project. Sybil had noticed her slow progress toward them and wondered at it. She hadn't realized the woman had them in her sights until she upended the empty bucket she'd carried out and sat down on it.

She looked Sybil over with frank curiosity and began to babble at her in her native tongue. Sybil stared at her dismay. "I'm sorry. I don't understand your language."

"She said we were doing this all wrong," Cerek translated and then spoke to the woman.

The woman snorted in disgust.

"What did you tell her?"

"That you couldn't speak or understand *hiutzu*."

"I'm guessing that's your language? I suppose I should try to learn it," she said a little doubtfully. Smiling at the older woman, she held out her hand. "I'm Sybil Hunter."



"We don't shake hands," Cerek said in a low voice. "You smile and bow politely."

Sybil reddened. "Sorry." She tried to comply with Cerek's suggestion.

The old woman snorted again. "Look like cow squat!"

Cerek uttered a snorting laugh and tried to pretend he was coughing when Sybil sent him a narrow eyed glare. He shrugged. "She's old. They figure they've earned the right to be rude. You should watch the way the other young *rilous* greet older *rilous*."

"Oh god!" Sybil muttered. "Don't tell me! You have different greetings for everybody?"

He considered it frowningly. "I guess so ... sort of. It's more a ... variation. You bow one way to elders and a different way to peers. And then a little differently if it's someone of great respect."

"They'll think I'm being rude for staring."

"Well, I guess I could show you," he said a little doubtfully.

The elder woman obviously wanted in on the conversation. She spoke rapidly to Cerek, no doubt asking what had been said. Clearly, she understood just enough English to be insulting!

"She wants to know why you aren't wearing a hat to protect your skin for your lover."

Sybil stared down at her arms in dismay. "I don't have a hat."

The old woman promptly removed her own and handed it over when Cerek had translated. "You use. Me old. Look like ...," she paused, frowning, "*mertirz* anyhow."

Cerek chuckled and the old woman swatted him.

Sybil bit her lip. "What was that about?"

"She said I was disrespectful for laughing."

"What's *merirz*?"

Cerek turned red faced. He cleared his throat but finally shrugged. "It's a bad word. Well, not polite to use."

"How do I say thank you?"

He demonstrated the correct bow and said, "*Shumitzfa*."

Sybil tried to mimic him, but could see from his face that she didn't pull it off very well.

The old woman confirmed it, uttering another snort and then babbling at Cerek. "She said I looked like a she-man and you looked like a man-she."

"Her polite way of pointing out that you look effeminate when you do that and I look like a man trying to be woman?" Sybil guessed dryly.

Cerek looked surprised. "Exactly!"

"I think I'm getting the hang of figuring out her insults."

Sybil had no idea why the woman had singled her out for insults, but she stayed and pointed out what they were doing wrong all the way through the process of planting. Anka arrived just as she was contemplating knocking the old woman in the head. The old woman immediately went into a tizzy, leaping off her bucket and standing between Anka and her. Sybil simply stood gaping while they argued. Finally, clearly disgusted, the old woman wandered off with her bucket, flinging insults, Sybil didn't doubt, over her shoulder as she left.

Anka looked at her with amusement. Jerking a dismissal at Cerek, he helped her up.

"What in the world was that all about? I didn't say anything to upset her! I swear! I was really careful."

"She was offended that I showed up when you were working," Anka said, laughter threading his voice.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The ... uh ... lecture was for me. On Sumptra, we live in the home of our mothers. My sisters would never have allowed their lovers to see them working in the garden and their lovers would've had better manners than to show up before they'd had time to groom themselves."

"Oh," Sybil said in dismay, wondering abruptly just how bad she looked. It didn't take much imagination when she could see she was filthy from crawling around in the dirt.

"I told her that you were always beautiful to me."

Sybil couldn't help but be pleased. "What did she say to that?"

He grimaced. "She said that I was a fool and I should send you to live with her. She would be willing to adopt you as her daughter and teach you how to be a good Sumpturian woman."

"Oh! That was so sweet!" Sybil exclaimed, dismayed at the notion.

"I told her that you were my Earth woman and that I was content to learn your ways."

"You are?" Sybil gasped, thrilled beyond measure.

"Shall I shock the pants off everyone and prove it right here by kissing you?"

It was tempting. "I'm filthy and sweaty," she said pointedly.

He looked down at himself ruefully. "Me, too."

Sybil chuckled. "I wouldn't mind that ... but I don't like being dirty, you know?"

"I told her that I would speak to you about a possible compromise," Anka said, slipping an arm around her waist and guiding her toward the transports waiting to take the workers back to the habitat.

"What sort of compromise?"

He frowned. "You will be more comfortable living among us, Sybil, if you understand our language and our ways better."

Sybil's heart leapt. She knew nothing was settled yet, though. There was no point in asking if it was. "I'm willing."

"It would mean that you would spend your days in her company."

"Oh."

He paused, stroking her cheek. "I don't want you to be a good Sumpturian woman. I like you the way you are."

"You'd like being able to talk to me in your own language, though, wouldn't you?"

His lips curled up. "Maybe. There is a certain advantage."

She gave him a look. "Yes, but it's *your* advantage, not mine!" she said tartly.

He looked uncomfortable. "You might overhear things you'd rather not."

Sybil sighed. "You think I can't tell when they're talking about me now? There are some things that don't really need translation. You can tell from expressions and gestures and even body language."

"So ... what am I thinking?"

Sybil laughed. "What you're always thinking!"

He sent her a mock glare. "I don't always think about that! You have dirt all over your face, by the way."

"Oh! And you just *let* me flirt with you like I looked good!"

"You're cute even with a dirty face, *nodia*."

"Well! I don't want to be cute, damn it! I want to be sexy!"

"Sexy, too."

"Right!"

"I'll prove it the minute we have a little privacy."

"No you won't! I'm taking a shower first!"

She got a crash course on just how determined Anka could be when they got back to his quarters, but she discovered the grime didn't make it any less exciting.

\* \* \* \*

Coward that she was, Sybil had hoped she could avoid the unpleasantness of dealing with Meachum about her supposed kidnapping. She didn't object when Anka explained that it was necessary for her to be present during the discussion. She knew he was right, but that didn't make her dread it any less.

She was vastly relieved, though, when she discovered the discussion would be conducted via satellite. At least she didn't have to be in the same room with the bastard!

It occurred to her as she walked with Anka to the communications center that the conference would offer them an opportunity that she hadn't immediately considered—the chance to make sure her side of the story was heard by someone other than the people who'd blackmailed her to start with.

"Can we broadcast to several satellites at once?" she asked Anka as they reached the center.

He looked at her curiously. "We could. What are you thinking?"

Sybil gripped his hand tightly. "I'm thinking I'd feel better, much better, if more than a small panel of government goons heard the discussion. As long as it's closed to everybody else, they can say anything they want to, even alter the recordings to make them work for them. The best way to keep them honest is to make it where they can't put their own spin on the talks."

Anka still looked unconvinced. "You're saying broadcast it where the public can watch and listen?"

"Yes. There can't be a cover up if everything's out in the open."

He frowned. "It's risky, Sybil. They could refuse to discuss this at all if they discovered what was happening. We need to come to an agreement."

"I know we do, but don't you see? They could double-cross us if they get to tell the story their way. Who knows what they've leaked to the press? Or how everyone on Earth sees the situation? They could be scaring everyone with lies and using fear to get people to agree for them to do whatever they want to do! They've done it before!"

"And if they've leaked that bullshit about me being kidnapped, a lot of people could be scared and angry about it. I'm more interested in reassuring everyone back home that it isn't true than Congressman Webb and Meachum! They don't give a damn about me!"

He studied her doubtfully for several moments but finally nodded. "I hope this doesn't backfire on us, *nodia*."

The suggestion that it might increased her uneasiness, but she was sure—as certain as she could be—that anyone as underhanded as Meachum could be counted upon to stab them in the back if possible. She couldn't think of any other way to insure that it wasn't possible.

Of course, as insurance went, it still wasn't fool proof. They could still come up with a lie to bury her attempt to get the truth out, but she didn't see any other possibility.

Inside the communications room, she was introduced to the Premier, whom she remembered meeting before, and two councilmen she didn't remember. Anka moved to the communications console and spoke to the officer there. When he returned, he spoke quietly to her. "We've linked to two other satellites, but one will be out of range shortly. I instructed Inge to watch for another and link with it when possible. I hope you're right about this."

She wished he'd quit saying that! It was undermining what little confidence she had in her idea!

Congressman Webb's face appeared on the large vid display at the front of the room. Any doubts Sybil had entertained that the transmission was two way vanished when the Congressman looked directly at her. "Lieutenant Hunter. It's good to see you. How have they been treating you?"

"Very well, Sir," Sybil said a little stiffly.

He looked at the other men in the room with her. "You may speak freely, Lieutenant. We're watching over your interests."

"I am speaking freely, Sir, and you wouldn't do me much good from Earth if I wasn't."

He frowned. "They haven't coerced you in any way? I notice you look a little .... Your skin looks burned."

"It's sunburn, Congressman. I've been working in the garden, and, no, I haven't been coerced. The report of my abduction was entirely wrong. I'm here because I want to be."

He frowned, looking down as if he was studying something on his desk. "The report I have says otherwise. According to this you were taken against your will from the Embassy, which is American territory, I might add and a breach of the treaty agreement so lately signed!"

Sybil gaped at him in disbelief. She'd expected that they would try to twist everything she said to make it sound as if she was afraid to tell the truth and she was *still* too shocked for several seconds to react. "That is a bald faced lie!" she said angrily. "Anka didn't even go inside the Embassy! He asked for me at the door. Ask Lt. Brant! He was on duty! For that matter, check the security tapes!"

Congressman Webb's face was stony. "The report was filed by Lt. Brant."

"Well, he's a damned liar!" Sybil glanced at the Premier. "Don't look if you're squeamish," she said warningly just before she jerked her top up and her trousers down to fully expose her blossoming belly. She turned to give the Congressman a profile view. "I'm here because Commander Anka is the most wonderful man I've met in my life, because I *want* to be with the man I love and I want his baby born here, among his people. I was *invited* to live with them."

Anka settled his hand over hers. "I don't think you needed to do that, *nodia*," he said, laughing. "I think they would've figured it out."

"They would've said I had something stuffed in my shirt!" she said testily. "They know you didn't kidnap me. They're just trying to wiggle out of the treaty they made!"

Anka glanced at the Congressman questioningly. "Are there any more questions you'd like ask my woman?"

The congressman looked like someone had shit in his mouth. "I think we're satisfied," he said tightly, "... on that score. Since Lt. Hunter claims that she left of her own free will, however, there is the little matter of her being AWOL."

"Not unless someone forged my signature on a new enlistment, Congressman Webb," Sybil said tightly. "My tour was up before I left the moon for Venus and I refused to sign up for another tour."

"I'll look in to that," he said through gritted teeth. "You're dismissed ... for now."

Sybil turned to look up at Anka. On impulse, she rose to her tiptoes and kissed him full on the mouth. She hadn't actually intended to give him more than a peck, but Anka had other ideas. "I'll remember to take my hat with me when I go to work in the garden. I wouldn't want them to accuse you of staking me out in the sun."

Anka shook his head at her, but he smiled.

She turned and waved at the congressman. "Hello everyone back home! Don't worry about me. I love it here. Venus is growing more beautiful every day!"

Anka glanced back at Inge. "You can cut the feed to the other satellites now."

The congressman looked blank for several moments and then turned so red Sybil more than half expected him to explode. She turned to the Premier and the other two councilmen. "I apologize if I embarrassed you. I just had to be sure they couldn't twist this into something it isn't."

The Premier and both councilmen assured her that they hadn't minded looking at all, that it was a lovely display of womanhood.

## Chapter Seventeen

Grandmother Lonlea, the elder who seemed determined to adopt her whether she wanted it or not, and Cerek were waiting for her in the corridor near the quarters she'd been sharing with Anka. Grandmother began to fuss immediately that it was late and it would be hot by the time they got to the garden.

"It's always hot, Grandmother," Sybil said, smiling. "I had something to take care of."

"Dis more important," Grandmother informed her in broken English. "Today you start learning Sumpturian ways! You work. I teach."

"Oh joy!" Sybil said wryly.

Grandmother swatted her. "Respect elder!"

Sybil bit her lip and glanced at Cerek.

"Foul temper," he mouthed at her.

"I read lips!" Grandmother said, swatting him.

Sybil couldn't honestly decide what she thought of the old woman. She also couldn't figure out why the woman was determined to attach herself, but she learned very quickly to be grateful for it. Not only was she careful to make certain Sybil didn't make any serious blunders in her ignorance of the customs of the Sumpturians, but she was quick and fierce in defending Sybil if she thought anybody slighted her.

She wasn't terribly happy when she discovered she was expected to move in with Grandmother, but she didn't argue. Poor Anka could hardly walk through his quarters after he'd retrieved her belongings from the Embassy and she knew it had to be miserable for him. Besides, it wasn't as if she'd actually had the chance to get used to sharing his quarters and she had her own space when she moved in with Grandmother.

In any case, Anka came over almost every night to spend the night with her.

It was more comfortable for both of them, she told herself, and it wasn't as if they spent their days together anyway. Anka was busy on the construction site and she was busy tending the garden—not that there was much to tend. Only about half of the seeds sprouted and of that half, the majority withered shortly after poking little green sprouts from the dirt.

Deciding they were just getting too much sun, she and Cerek built a little tent with a tarp so that they could shade the plants through the hottest part of the day. The few plants that remained perked up, but the stalks grew long and spindly, making it clear they either weren't getting enough water, or nutrients, or both. Either that or there was something in the soil that prevented them from thriving. Only a couple actually produced blooms and most of those simply fell off.

She felt like crying when Anka finally came to check her 'experimental' garden. He crouched and studied the plants, frowning.

"They didn't do well, I'm afraid."

He lifted his brows at her. "They grew."

"I guess you could say that," she said glumly.

Straightening, he patted her cheek and grinned at her. "You grew plants on Venus that were cultivated for Earth, *nodia*. You're an amazing woman! Don't give up on me now. We'll have to *learn* how to grow here. It isn't Earth and it isn't Sumptra."

Heartened by his praise and his confidence in her, Sybil went back to study the seeds and chose different plants to try. She managed to coax a double handful of undersized vegetables from her third experiment. Fortunately, the greenhouse garden fared much better. While it couldn't be said that it was a huge success, it did produce enough to supply the colonists with a few fresh vegetables at each meal.

The Sumpturnians had a festival to celebrate their first harvest. Sybil enjoyed it—all of it except the part where Myune wallowed all over Anka trying to entice him to her bed. If she hadn't looked and felt like a beached whale by that time, Sybil would've had to be restrained from pulling her hair out.

As it was, all she could do was glare daggers at the bitch and sulk. She was slightly appeased when Anka returned to the table and sat down with her—but still miserable. Grandmother had told her in no uncertain terms 'no more fucking till after'—just that bluntly. Worse, she'd also informed Anka. He was allowed to come and stay a while, but not sleep with her and Grandmother made it clear that she was guarding the henhouse. If they got too quiet, she poked her head in the door.

It was enough to drive Anka into Myune's arms, she was sure.

She didn't know why Anka tolerated the tyrant!

So she'd grown rather fond of the old woman! She still didn't appreciate being told when she could have sex, damn it! And she certainly didn't appreciate being told she couldn't!

Unfortunately, the damned doctor agreed with her.

When she finally broke down and cried about it, Grandmother scolded her. "Fool! He no go anywhere."

"But that bitch, Myune, is just waiting to pounce on him! I see the way she looks at him!"

Grandmother sniffed. "That one fool, too! Wasting time. Anka your man. He wait."

Sybil sniffed. "You really think so?"

"I think you fool! No tease him! He horny enough!"

Sybil glared at her. "Well, I'm horny, too, damn it!"

"You want him poking baby in head?"

Sybil uttered a snorting laugh. "No."

"Baby no like neither! He come out to see what happen!"

Sybil sobered. If Grandmother was worried about sex putting her into premature labor, she was right to scold. It wasn't as if she had much longer to wait anyway.

Grandmother patted her. "No worry 'bout Anka. No worry. He love you, girl. Tell you all time."

Sybil felt her heart swell at the first part of Grandmother's speech, but then fresh doubt crept in. "He's never said he loved me."

Grandmother rolled her eyes. "Say all time, *nodia*. Means beloved."

"It does?" Sybil asked wonderingly, breathless with the thought that she was telling the truth.

"I told you learn *hiutzu*, girl! Then you know like everybody else!" She snorted in disgust. "Him tell whole world and you fool, you don't hear! Him build fine house. Big house. Me and you, we move in before baby come."

\* \* \* \*

Sybil was never more glad to have anything over with in her life—or more exhausted from her labors! The choked wail that cut through the silence that had fallen over the room was the sweetest sound she'd ever heard.

"Is it alright?" she gasped wearily.

"This is a *fine* boy!" Grandmother Lonlea informed her. "You did a very good job!"

Sybil laughed with sheer delight. "It's a boy?"

"Yes—a very fine boy! The ladies will adore him."

Sybil laughed when the elder waggled her brows salaciously. She lifted her arms hopefully when Grandmother moved away from the foot of the bed with the wiggling bundle. "First I clean him up!"

Sighing, Sybil dropped her arms, watching anxiously as Grandmother directed the nurse who'd attended her with the doctor. The doctor massaged her empty belly and appeared to be satisfied. "Shall I invite your lover in?"

"Yes, please."

Anka looked like he'd delivered the baby himself when he came in. His complexion was so gray it alarmed her. After glancing toward the two women and the squalling baby, he moved to the bed and dropped to his knees awkwardly, more as if they'd given out than if it was by choice. He caught her hand, squeezing it. "He's beautiful."

"You saw him?" Sybil asked eagerly.

He blinked at her. "I got a glimpse."

Sybil was a little peeved. She hadn't even gotten a glimpse of him yet! The thought had barely registered, though, when Grandmother brought the baby to the bed and very carefully laid him between her and Anka.

Sybil looked down at the face of her son and fell in love immediately. "He's ... adorable! He looks just like his daddy!"

Anka looked disconcerted. He smiled a little uncertainly. "He does?"

Sybil sent him a look and scooped the baby up, bringing him to her chest. He began to calm down almost instantly, further endearing himself to his proud mother ... and then began to search her chest a little frantically.

"Oooh! He has a good appetite, that one!" Grandmother exclaimed proudly. "Give him the breast girl."

Sybil felt her face heat, but she shifted the baby until she could unearth a breast. "I sure hope he knows what he'd doing, because I don't ..." He made a snorting sound when he felt the nipple touch his cheek, whipped his head around, and chomped down on it, pulling on it for all he was worth and kneading it with his tiny hands. Sybil winced, turning redder. "I guess he does."

Grandmother beamed at them for several moments and then turned and shooed the doctor and his nurse from the room.

Sybil smiled tiredly at Anka when they were alone. "You look so tired, sweetie. Bad day?"

He dragged his attention from the baby and looked up at her. "I think yours was rougher than mine," he said wryly. "I should be asking you that."

Sybil smiled wanly. "It wasn't as bad as I expected," she lied, "and it was worth it. He's so beautiful!"

His eyes gleamed. "You think he looks like me?"



"Yes, I do," she said, chuckling.

Anka folded his arms on the side of the bed after a few minutes, settling his head on them. "He's strong," he murmured.

"You're telling me!" Sybil said jokingly, shifting the baby to one arm so that she could stroke Anka's hair.

He closed his eyes. "I've missed you," he murmured. "I got used to having you in my bed."

"I've missed you, too. I thought you wanted me to stay with Grandmother," she added tentatively. "You said it was traditional."

He sighed irritably. "It is ... but I don't have to like it."

"Then we don't have to do it," Sybil said pointedly. "It isn't as if it will change things, you know. I have friends—not many but more than I had before. Myune is the only person here who seems to positively loathe me. So, I still get some nasty looks from time to time. I see a lot more polite smiles—because of you."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, shaking his head. "Maybe at first. Maybe they gave you a chance because of me, but they like you and respect you because of you. Do you regret ... coming to me, *nodia*?"

She smiled at him lovingly. "Not even a little bit. Not for a moment. I think you're the most wonderful man ever born and I'm the luckiest woman alive."

As sleepy as she was, she was sorry when Grandmother came back to remind Anka not to stay long and keep her awake. He leaned over her to kiss her and then hesitated and leaned down to kiss the baby. "May I come tomorrow?"

She smiled sleepily. "I love you. You're always welcome to me, Anka."

Grandmother tsked. "Improper! Say to him, maybe!"

Sybil opened her eyes and grinned up at Anka. "Ask me tomorrow when you come."

Anka grinned at her and let Grandmother push him from the room. She surprised him by stopping him before he could leave. "Let me see that face!" she demanded.

Sighing, Anka bent down to her level.

She studied his face seriously for several moments and finally patted his cheek. "Just as I thought! You are hopeless, Anka l'Kartay and so is your woman! Tomorrow, you come and bring all your things. You stay in that room!" she added, pointing.

Anka stared at her in surprise. "You want me to move in?"

Grandmother caught his face between her palms. "You aren't weary so much as your spirit is heavy with sorrow and loneliness, my son. There are too many empty arms and too many wounded hearts in this place, *nodio*. You come and stay here with us and we'll be a family together, yes?" She shrugged. "Besides, we need a man to lift heavy things."

Anka chuckled. "I have to wait until tomorrow?"

She pursed her lips. "Ok. Tonight! Don't wake my daughter or my grandson, mind you! And no complaining about squalling babies!"

"No, Grandmother." He hesitated. Scooping her up, he kissed her soundly. "Thank you, Grandmother ... for taking care of Sybil and my son."

She wagged her finger in front of his face. "No fucking till she better! I'll beat you with my broom I catch you sneaking in there!"

Anka reddened, but he laughed. "I'll behave," he promised.

The End