



The Spawning

By

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Chapter One

Vibrations from the bass were already working their way up through the pavement, penetrating the soles of Detective Miranda 'Randy' Hart's impractical but sexy high-heel sandals and rattling into her system before she had covered three quarters of the distance between her car and the popular nightspot that was her target for the night. Her heart thrummed in time to the beat, or at least it seemed to, pumping the blood more rapidly through her, producing a heightened awareness of everything around her, a level of excitement that seemed almost equal parts nerves and anticipation. Flicking a practiced 'casual' glance at the smattering of other cars parked in the back of the rear parking lot, at the deep shadows created by the lone security light near the building, she wondered a little wryly if the music itself had set off the adrenaline rush or if it was 'the hunt'.

And, if it *was* 'the hunt', was it her feminine side anticipating the possibility of finding that perfect man? Or the detective in her hoping to catch a predator?

Ordinarily, there wouldn't have been any question in her mind. The detective side of herself saw far more action than her feminine side, had risen to dominance long since, suppressing the softer side that she'd been forced to realize was a weakness she couldn't afford if she wanted to stay alive and relatively sane. It helped that her personal life had only been a series of disappointments that had gradually worn down her optimism to the point that she no longer had any real expectation that there *was* a 'perfect man' out there for her.

There was still the sporadic twinge of interest when she saw a man that appealed to her on at least a physical level. Occasionally, she even gave in to the emotional and physical need to find release in a warm, male body, but without expectations, without the starry-eyed little girl dreams she'd indulged at one time that it was, or could be, more than what it appeared—a raw, animalistic coupling to assuage physical needs. About the most that could be expected of that sort of liaison was a few days, weeks, or months of pleasure and aggravation that slowly degenerated until it was more a trial than pleasure of any kind.

The search for a life partner with cool logic produced even worse results because then there wasn't even passion to hold it together.

There was still hope, though, she realized. Deep down she'd never really given up entirely on the dream that one day, when she least expected it, she was going to walk smack into the one man that did it all for her. The white knight that thrilled her to her core with no more than a look, drove her wild in bed, intrigued her with his intelligence and complex personality. And, at the same time, gave her a sense of unshakable security because integrity was so deeply ingrained in him that trust was a matter of course.

She didn't really believe that, but she still hoped, and it was that tiny hope that accounted for a little of the excitement thrumming through her because she felt so feminine tonight. She'd indulged herself in an orgy of primping she rarely took the time for. She'd donned a slinky black dress, sexy high-heals, just enough make-up to

highlight her best features.

Even the pistol tucked in a thigh holster didn't diminish the glorious sense of femininity she felt as she strolled across the parking lot toward 'single territory' where she knew there was at least some possibility that man that was just the right 'fit' might be waiting to be found.

She shook the thoughts off as she reached the corner of the building, struggling to suppress the inappropriate sense that she was just a woman seeking a mate. The night was all business and she'd do well to remember that if she wanted to wake up tomorrow with a whole hide.

Her backup was sitting in an unmarked car three rows over. He eyed her assessingly for so long that amusement flickered through her. She was going to rag him tomorrow about not recognizing her—because she could see he didn't, could pinpoint the exact moment when it dawned on him.

Mildly annoyed that he hadn't immediately recognized her as the same woman he worked with every day, she lifted a hand as if to smooth her hair and shot him a bird. He was glaring at her when she glanced in his direction again.

Prick, she thought, feeling slightly mollified.

Ignoring him, she scanned the main parking lot. The pickings were slim tonight, she thought, feeling vaguely deflated. Of course it was still early, but it wasn't 'prime night' either and wasn't likely to get terribly busy even if the club *was* one of the most popular in the city.

All business again, she focused on her purpose, grappling with the fresh spurt of adrenaline that flooded her bloodstream as she spied the entrance.

Without a doubt, there was no greater 'rush' than knowing she was closing in on quarry—a combination of sheer terror and fierce satisfaction that always arose regardless of the potential for danger. Truthfully, though, she had no sense that she was closing in on her quarry, felt none of the 'vibes' she'd learned to expect that told her she was close.

The painful fact was, she was pretty damned sure she wasn't any closer to figuring out what was going on than she had been when she'd been given her current assignment. If there was any sense of urgency whatsoever to account for the surge of her heart rate it was the fact that time was against her, and she hadn't managed to come up with a damned thing, not one lead beyond the club itself, and even that was a long shot.

More than a dozen women—that they knew of—had disappeared in the past two days and nobody had a clue of why, of whether the same perp or group of perps were responsible, or what, exactly, they meant to do with the young women.

They had their suspicions and it was possible they were right on target, but it had been her experience that the most obvious possibility turned out to be a dead end as often as it was on target and, what was worse, tended to act as blinders if one wasn't damned careful.

In this case, it was nothing short of a miracle that they'd tumbled to it as quickly as they had. Ordinarily, they probably wouldn't have even picked up on the case so quickly. People went missing all the time and, in general, when it was an adult, it turned out that they weren't actually missing at all. They'd just decided on impulse to take off with someone—friends or a new acquaintance—and reappeared a few days or a week later. It was so commonplace, in fact, that they wouldn't even entertain the possibility that a person actually might be missing until they'd been a no show for at least three

days.

The police chief's daughter had been one of the first to disappear, though. Nobody had quite dared to suggest that, maybe, she'd found a man that appealed to her when she was out 'clubbing' and had just decided to take a few days to get to know him a little better. They'd gotten right on it—and discovered in the course of their search that a bare minimum of six other young women had also turned up missing the same night from various nightspots around the city—Carol, Captain Sloan's daughter, and two of her friends, Lynn Patterson and Joy Freemont had all disappeared together. The captain had found Carol's abandoned car behind the club she'd told him she intended to visit that evening.

Almost a half dozen others were 'maybes'—women who'd pulled a similar stunt before and hadn't been reported as MIA, yet, because they were still expected to turn up alive and well and tired from their little weekend adventure.

Despite the doubts that had plagued them about the chief's daughter, that many women going missing all on the same night just didn't sit right. Especially when not only had not a single one turned up by evening of the following day or even called to touch base with anybody that knew them but nearly a dozen more had vanished the following night.

No bodies had turned up.

Nobody had actually expected that they would—certainly not if the cases were connected and, oddly enough, they seemed to be. Serial killers, thankfully, didn't seem to be 'in' to wholesale slaughter.

It had to be a white slavery ring. Even Miranda was inclined to accept that a ring must be working the area, despite her tendency to discount the most obvious. Nothing else would explain such a massive disappearance of young—mostly blond—white females.

No doubt, at least some of the cases weren't connected at all, but just as surely the majority were.

Although she doubted he would agree, they were damned lucky that the chief's daughter had been among the first. Otherwise it could have been weeks, possibly months, before they'd become aware that someone was stalking and taking young women from the city and, by that time, the perps would almost certainly have moved on.

Because the one thing all, or at least most, of them seemed to have in common was that they were all single women living alone and, in far too many of the cases, they hadn't had anyone to report them missing. Every one of the women that had vanished had been out clubbing.

Reaching the door to the club at last, Miranda pulled it open and stepped inside. Instantly, a wall of music crashed over her, the assault so loud it set her eardrums to rattling. She glanced around the small vestibule, noting the woman behind the counter and the two bouncers that stood like matching bookends on either side of the 'gateway' to adult land.

Leaning close enough to the bullet proof cage the woman stood behind to hear the woman's demand for the cover charge fee, Miranda pulled a bill from her purse and passed it through the small slot provided. Wondering if the woman had any idea how ineffectual her 'safety cage' was, she moved away from the window as soon as she'd collected her change and stuffed the bills back into her evening purse. One of the

bouncers held out his left hand in silent demand, a stamp poised in the other.

Miranda flicked an assessing glance over both men as she extended her right hand and waited to be stamped and tagged with the neon wristbands the club used to differentiate legal from illegal drinkers. Unable to detect even a spark of interest in either man's eyes, she glanced at her wrist as the one tagging her finished, abruptly feeling a strange sense of uneasiness sweep over her.

She wasn't a habitual clubber. She was single and she had been the rounds a few times, but it was hard to get away from the fact that the club scene seemed to be more of a route for hook ups than anything else.

Not that she was against an occasional hook up. Sometimes it seemed the best way to juggle a demanding career and the need for companionship when it couldn't be ignored anymore, but she rarely even had time to indulge those needs.

Oddly enough, though, she felt a sudden threat in being tagged, despite her familiarity with the practice.

She wasn't certain why, but she pondered it as she passed between the bouncers and paused just inside the club proper to allow her eyes to adjust to the cave-like interior.

With little surprise, but a good deal of disappointment since she knew she was early and it wasn't a 'peak' singles night, she saw at a glance that the club was a long way from packed.

There were still an impressive number of barflies hunched around the long bar and scattered throughout the dim interior.

Wryly, she wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing. It would certainly make it easier to attract the kind of attention she was looking to draw, but it seemed a little less likely that her quarry would be working the bar when the pickings were not only slimmer, but the chances of attracting attention to themselves was higher.

They were brazen bastards, though, she reminded herself. Even the thugs that ran the white slavery rings were generally a good bit less blatant about shopping than the perps she was looking for—which was the one thing that bothered her the most about just accepting the most likely scenario in this case.

Moving to the bar after a moment, she ordered herself a mixed drink, glancing around to study the patrons while she waited to be served. She noticed a few interested glances cast in her direction, but nothing particularly pointed. Most of the men were either perched at the bar, nursing their drinks, or gathered around the pool tables in the backroom.

When she'd collected her drink, she debated briefly whether to climb onto a stool and give her feet a short break from the sexy shoes that were already killing her or to troll and finally decided to troll. She hadn't gotten nearly as much interest as she'd hoped.

Of course, from what she could see, the only females in the place getting any attention were the ones wearing the wristbands that clearly marked them as legal to screw but illegal for drinking—eighteen to twenty.

How convenient that the management had found a way to mark the young does for the bucks!

Ignoring the pinch of her shoes, she strolled around the club, pausing now and then to study the dancers on the floor. She wandered toward the backroom to watch the pool players awhile, and then back to the main club. Four hours later, the club had filled, her feet were killing her, and she still hadn't been approached.

Jeeze! What did a woman have to do to get a little attention these days?

Strip naked and wave their tits?

Roll back the clock, evidently.

Either she looked like a cop or nobody twenty one or over was getting any action.

She was putting her money on age discrimination. Even the men that were clearly thirty and up had no eyes for anything but the tender young things.

Disgusted, she decided to call the night a bust and headed for the exit, wondering uneasily if the kidnappers had already collected all the women they needed or wanted and had moved on.

There were a few loiters outside the club when she exited. A patrol car was parked just outside to pick up the drunks. She didn't recognize either officer and, in any case, she was undercover. With barely a glance in their direction, she struck off across the parking lot, headed toward her own vehicle, which she'd parked in the rear—not because the lot was overflowing when she'd arrived but because all the abandoned vehicles they'd found that belonged to missing women had been parked in isolated areas.

She tensed as she rounded the side of the building and moved beyond the view of the patrolmen and the few patrons that had been in the lot. Chances were, this was where she was going to run into trouble if trouble had spotted her—and marked her.

The thought shifted her mind to the neon wristband she was still wearing, and she abruptly realized why that circumstance had bothered her even though she knew it was standard practice at clubs.

She'd been tagged. Anyone that spotted her would know that she'd just come from a club, was probably at least a little tipsy if not downright drunk, and that she was most likely single since she was a female and far fewer women who had attachments showed up in the singles clubs than men.

The thought had barely completed the circuit in her brain when she abruptly found herself spotlighted.

She jolted to a halt, blinded, startled. For just a split second her mind leapt to the conclusion that she'd been marked by a police chopper. Even as it clicked in her mind, though, that she didn't hear the very distinctive sound of a helicopter—in fact didn't hear anything—her mind leapt in another direction entirely, to the realization that she'd been tagged, hunted, and bagged. Her mind had just shifted to the gun she had strapped to her thigh when she blacked out.

Adrenaline spiked in her system as she jolted toward consciousness and her mind—temporarily suspended—completed the instinctive move she'd attempted before blacking out. She groped for her weapon as her eyes flew open. In one corner of her mind, she knew it was the wrong move. She needed to assess her situation before she acted, and yet her mind was completely disordered by the transition from consciousness to blackout and abrupt awareness again.

She reacted instantly and instinctively to the certainty of threat.

And she was still too sluggish to move with any swiftness or surety of coordination, shoving awkwardly upright, grabbing for the butt of her pistol, and whipping her head around to target the threat almost at the same time. A wave of dizziness washed over her as she scanned the small, shadowy room. She blinked, trying to clear her mind of confusion and focus her eyes.

She'd nursed one drink throughout most of the night, had drunk no more than half

of the second. Her reflexes shouldn't have been affected to such a degree as to make her head swim with so little motion, and yet it did.

She nearly dropped her pistol as she dragged it out of the holster and staggered to her feet, wavering as she gaped at her surroundings, or more precisely the thing she saw coming toward her. Her mind refused to supply her with an identification of the thing—mechanical, metallic, threatening in its very strangeness.

Jerking her pistol up, she fired at it. The bullet made a dull clanging sound as it impacted with the thing, the sound registering as not quite that of metal against metal, though she thought that was what it should've sounded like.

Robot—her mind registered that. She just couldn't grasp why or how it was even possible that she'd found herself faced off with a robot—the most bizarre looking thing imaginable at that—not humanoid in appearance or even anything that fit the catalogue of Hollywood representatives stashed in her mind.

The robot stopped. A hissing noise slipped past the dull roar in her ears from hours of being pelted by music loud enough to cause permanent hearing loss.

She'd barely had time to assess the fact that she'd been transported from the parking lot to where ever this place was too quickly for her hearing to recover when she felt darkness fall over her again. The last sound she heard before complete nothingness engulfed her, and that with a vast sense of despair, was the sound of her pistol hitting the floor at her feet.

A buzz of voices was the first thing Miranda heard as she drifted toward consciousness again. This time the transition was slower. She lay with her eyes closed for some time, a faint frown between her brows from the pain she'd become aware of and the struggle to figure out where she was and what she was doing there.

She was laying on something hard, and she was cold.

The 'hard' she could understand since the last thing she remembered was heading toward her car in the parking lot. The chill confused her.

It was a muggy summer's night. Why would she be chilled?

Air conditioned room?

And who the hell were the people she could hear murmuring around her?

Not people, she corrected after a moment—women. All of the voices she heard were women's voices.

Opening her eyes, she stared blankly at the smooth surface above her head.

"She's come around," somebody said close by, drawing Miranda's attention.

She couldn't seem to focus her eyes at first but gradually the dark blob she was peering at through the strange glow of light resolved itself into individual shapes and she realized she was staring at a fairly large group of women, most of whom were staring back at her.

Her confusion deepened rather than lifting. "Where am I?" she croaked as her gaze finally met that of a woman who looked to be around her age, in her late twenties.

Something flickered across the woman's face—stark terror. Her voice was shaky with it when she spoke, although it was obvious she was struggling to preserve at least a surface calm—whether for Miranda's benefit or her own Miranda couldn't tell. "We don't know ... exactly."

Miranda frowned at her as the woman's eyes slid away. She was lying. It was one of the first things they taught at the academy—people who lied generally shifted their

gaze away from their interrogators—the left indicated probing memories, the right indicated fabrication.

Miranda felt for her gun.

“It’s gone.”

She glanced at the other woman who’d spoken.

“Whatever you’re looking for, they took it.”

Pushing herself upright, Miranda ignored the group of women, glancing around the room. It was a cell. Her mind registered that right away.

What it wasn’t was a jail cell, which ruled out the possibility that she’d found herself thrown in with a group of hookers even if it wasn’t for the fact that they certainly weren’t dressed as hookers.

They were all wearing identical shifts that were almost hospital-like, but the only hospital-like environment that she knew of that would include locking up the patients was a lunatic asylum.

She shied away from that assessment. They looked frightened—every face pale and tense—but there was nothing but fear in their eyes, not insanity.

“How did I get here?” she asked finally.

“One of the robots brought you.”

Miranda’s head snapped toward the speaker, but she couldn’t tell which of the women had spoken.

Not that it mattered. The moment the woman had said it memories had flooded her mind. A bizarre sense of unreality settled over her. She remembered the robot. She’d known that was what it was even though it had thoroughly rattled her that the thing had seemed so ... purposeful—so real, not toy-like, not like some remote controlled bucket of wires and bolts that moved with the awkwardness of a person trying to manipulate a ‘body’ not their own. “What the fuck is going on here?” she demanded, feeling a surge of anger and fear.

The women all looked at each other and, almost as if some silent communication had passed between them, they began to disperse. Moving back to the bunks that lined the walls of the cell, they settled on the lowest bunks in little frightened knots.

“We were hoping you could tell us.”

Glancing toward the speaker, Miranda discovered it was the same woman who’d first addressed her. The woman smiled shakily. “I’m Deborah Moss.”

Miranda stared at her, feeling a flicker of recognition for the first time. Coldness swept over her when she finally realized why both the name and the face seemed familiar.

She was one of the women who’d gone missing.

Scanning the faces of the other women, she also recognized the captain’s daughter, Carol Sloan, her two friends, Lynn Patterson and Joy Freemont, Mary Jane Carter, Stacy Smith, and Jan Hutton. All in all, she counted nineteen women—twenty including herself, though she didn’t recognize any of the others—because they hadn’t made it to the ‘list’.

Aside from looking scared half to death, she didn’t see any obvious signs of mistreatment—which was at least some relief. White slavers generally beat the hell of the women they took right off to show them who was boss.

After studying the women, Miranda finally swung her feet over the side of the

bunk where she sat and examined herself. They were right, she saw without much surprise but with a good deal of dismay. Everything she'd had was gone—her weapon, her identification, her clothing, the fucking high heels from hell. A vague sense of nausea washed over her.

The wonder of it all was that she was still alive. They had to know—whoever had taken her—that she was a cop.

Why was she still alive?

She was still reluctant to give up her own identity, but what was the point in trying to maintain secrecy? “Detective Miranda Hart,” she responded finally.

The admission caused a brief flurry of excitement before it dawned on all of the women that their ‘rescuer’ was locked in the cell with them.

“You would’ve had backup, though, right?” one of the young women said hopefully.

Captain Sloan’s daughter, Carol, Miranda realized. “Right,” she muttered instead of pointing out that her backup obviously hadn’t managed to catch up to her or the perps or she wouldn’t be where ever it was that she was now. She didn’t particularly want to dwell on that unnerving circumstance herself.

“You were looking for us?” another woman asked.

Miranda nodded, standing up and moving around the room to examine it. There weren’t any bars—no door that she could see. How the hell had they brought her in?

“The robot dragged you in through the door,” one of the women answered her thoughts, pointing to a blank wall.

Miranda moved toward it, examining it closely, and finally turned to search the room for the woman who’d spoken.

“She isn’t crazy—not unless we all are. It brought us all in the same way.”

Miranda glanced at Deborah again when she spoke. She’d been among the first to go missing. “What do you remember?”

Deborah shrugged. “Probably not much more than you do. I’d been out clubbing. The place was packed, and I’d had to park at the far back of the lot. I decided to leave around midnight—even though everything was still hopping. I never made it to the car, though. I’d just realized that I was completely alone when I was caught in this blinding beam of light. The next thing I knew, I was here. Everybody else’s experience was pretty much the same.”

Miranda glanced around at the other women for confirmation, but she didn’t really need it. Not only had they already come up with that scenario regarding the missing women—at least the part where they’d been snatched on the way to their cars—but it was pretty much like her own experience. “Any idea where ‘here’ is? Any theories?”

The women all exchanged uncomfortable glances.

“Yes,” Carol Sloan responded. “But you’re going to think we’re all crazy.”

“Try me,” Miranda said grimly.

Carol gnawed her lower lip. “We’re pretty sure we’ve been ‘taken’.”

Oddly enough, Miranda didn’t feel any urge to laugh. She did feel perfectly blank for several moments before she managed to come up with a definition that seemed to fit the connotations. “‘Taken’ as in ‘the rapture’?” she asked cautiously.

“Taken as in aliens,” Deborah said flatly.

Chapter Two

Trying to ignore the sick feeling in her stomach that had nothing to do with a suspicion that they were all crazy and everything to do with the fact that the answer seemed a lot more believable than it ought to, Miranda studied every frightened face that met her gaze until she'd made the rounds. Finally, she looked at Deborah again. "What makes you believe this has anything to do with extra-terrestrials?"

Deborah's face crumpled. "The beam of light? The robot? The transport room we all woke up in when we first got here? The door none of us can see until that damned robot shows up with somebody else!" she finished, gesturing to the blank wall Miranda had examined.

"You think we were beamed aboard an alien vessel?" Miranda asked slowly, trying to wrap her mind around it. At the same time, a dozen questions and doubts rose and tumbled around in her mind. There was no sense of movement ... at all. She didn't feel pressure like she always had when she'd been in an airplane or even when she went up in a particularly tall building. She felt gravity pulling at her, not a sense of weightlessness, and it felt 'normal', not artificial in any way, not less than or more than she was used to feeling.

Deborah let out a huff of irritation. "Why don't you think about it a while and let us know what you come up with?" she snapped angrily.

The problem was she couldn't think. Her head felt as numb as the rest of her body.

Well, not numb in the sense that she was unaware of the chill. Her feet felt like blocks of ice from the little walking she'd done, and her entire body ached as if she was coming down with the flu. But numb as in clueless, confused, and unable to process the little bit of information that seemed to be getting through to her brain. After merely staring at the frightened, angry woman for a moment, she nodded, looked around until she identified the cot she'd woken on and headed toward it.

It was actually more like the floor than a cot. The moment she sat down, she realized there wasn't even a thin mat covering the hard platform let alone a mattress of any description. The 'blanket' she pulled up to cover herself with wasn't a blanket either. It felt more like plastic sheeting or Mylar.

She lay staring up at the platform above her for a while, trying to sort her jumbled impressions, memories, and the comments the women had made and finally surprised herself by falling asleep.

She was awakened by a stir in the room that she identified as a wave of hysteria even as her eyes snapped open.

The robot she'd shot the day before, or one just like it, was standing in the center of the room. "Move to door to be processed," the robot intoned in a strangely mechanical voice, sounding like the pieced together recordings of a human voice arranged and rearranged to say different things.

Startled gasps went up from some of the women, frightened little squeals from

others, but beyond that, their only response was to scramble as far from the robot as they could get and cower in terror. The robot swiveled toward the knot of women at one end of the cell. A beam of light about the circumference of a pencil shot from its boxy head, hitting one of the unfortunate women in the forefront. She jolted all over in spasms as if she'd been hit with a taser, her eyes rolling back in her head. When the beam ceased, she dropped to the floor, still convulsing.

Screaming, the other women in the room leapt up and stampeded toward the opening that had appeared in the wall. Miranda bailed out of her own bunk. Still punch drunk from being awakened so abruptly, she stared blankly at the woman on the floor as the robot moved awkwardly toward her prone form on its three mechanical legs. A pneumatic arm extended toward her, the manacle like hand clamping around her ankle. Miranda stared in horror at the thing as it turned, dragging the unconscious woman behind it.

It halted when it spied her. "Move to door to be processed."

Swallowing convulsively, Miranda headed toward the opening. She discovered when she'd emerged from the cell that she was in a long, curving corridor that seemed to go on forever.

It was clogged with women, far more women than those who'd shared her cell with her. Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest, but she couldn't seem to assimilate what her eyes were telling her.

She counted fifty women before the curve in the corridor cut off her view. Wondering whether there were even more around the bend, or if there was some blockage ahead that had resulted in the 'jam', Miranda glanced uneasily behind her as the robot dragged the unconscious woman from the cell and stopped behind her, cutting off any hope of retreat.

Not that it had occurred to her until that moment to consider it.

Struggling against the fear that was trying to edge past the shock that had cocooned her, Miranda surveyed her surroundings. Except for the floor, which was flat and as smooth and seamless as glass, the entire corridor had the curvature of a tube. There didn't seem to be an obvious source of light. The ceiling itself just seemed to glow with a strange greenish-yellow light that Miranda found uncomfortable, that seemed to prevent her eyes from focusing properly.

There was nothing else to see beyond the robot Miranda was acutely conscious of behind her, but she wasn't anxious to study it after she'd seen what it was capable of.

No one on Earth had anything like it.

She knew that.

She was as certain as she could be that she would've heard something about such a technological breakthrough as a robot fully capable and armed as a guard, a robot that at least appeared capable of assessing the situation on its own and reacting.

It was still impossible to accept the completely unacceptable explanation Deborah had supplied her with.

She wasn't certain if that was because it just wasn't logical or because she just didn't want to.

She'd shuffled forward several yards before she heard a faint groan behind her that alerted her to the fact that the woman who'd been knocked out was coming around. She flicked a glance over her shoulder as she heard the gasp that followed.

"Your cooperation will be appreciated," the robot said. "Get up and stand in line with the others."

The woman whimpered, hysteria edging her voice.

"I'd do as it says," Miranda murmured warningly as she met the woman's gaze.

For several moments she wondered if the woman was even rational enough to grasp the warning, but she clamped her lips together and, when the robot released her, she scrambled to her feet and bolted into Miranda, nearly shoving her into the woman in front of her.

"What are they doing? Where are they taking us?" the woman babbled, digging her fingernails into Miranda's arms.

"I don't know. None of us know," Miranda responded, trying to disentangle herself from the woman, then added in an attempt to soothe her, "They want us alive. We wouldn't be alive now if they didn't have some use for us. Try to stay calm."

The woman nodded jerkily, but her eyes were still wide with terror. "You think?" she whispered hoarsely, an unmistakable note of pleading in her eyes.

Miranda didn't have a clue and what was worse, the woman's hysteria was beginning to infect her and every other woman within hearing. "Some of the women have already been here a couple of days," she pointed out, as much to reassure herself as everyone else.

It *did* seem to reassure them—even reassured her—and she didn't have a fucking clue of whether she was right or not.

It seemed logical, though, she told herself. They'd been kidnapped. They, whoever, or whatever 'they' were, wanted something.

She discovered when she'd shuffled forward several more yards that there was a door beyond the bend. Every twenty minutes or so, by her best guess, it opened silently, the robot standing at the front of the line shoved a half dozen women through, and then the door closed again.

Miranda's stomach knotted with fear.

As hard as she tried to convince herself that there had to be another explanation for the situation, the presence of the robots—and no humans besides the captives, the strange lights, the unfamiliar materials that surrounded them—everything seemed to point to the unlikelihood that anything human, from Earth, could be behind their captivity.

She tried to direct her mind away from her churning bowels and the aching bladder she hadn't noticed before, wondering how many hours had passed since she'd been kidnapped. The full bladder indicated at least three or four, but then she'd had one and a half mixed drinks before she'd left the club.

She'd visited the lady's room before she'd left, though.

Her hearing seemed to have returned to normal. That usually took several hours.

She'd been knocked out, though, twice—and she'd slept at least a few hours. The sluggishness she felt seemed to be the aftereffects of not enough sleep, but could have been the result of the alcohol in her system and/or whatever they'd knocked her out with.

She managed to occupy herself with trying to calculate the time until she reached the doors that had caused the slow build of hysteria inside of her until it was all she could do to refrain from screaming and trying to claw her way over the robot behind her. She almost felt let down when the doors slid open and she discovered she'd been shoved

inside what looked almost like a community bath.

It would've looked more like one and banished much of her terror if she hadn't discovered a spider-like robot on the other side. "Empty bowels and bladders and then proceed to the decontamination showers," the thing intoned in the same eerily mechanical voice as the other robot, lifting two arms/legs and pointing to either side of the room.

As jolting as that order was, it was nothing compared to the discovery that more robots were waiting to 'assist' in the evacuation. Miranda discovered she was terrified enough by that time that her bowels had turned to water. She didn't *need* a fucking enema, but she got one anyway.

Weak and thoroughly rung out from the experience, her legs felt like jelly as she was herded with the others to the decontamination showers, sprayed down with something foamy from the top of her head to the bottoms of her feet, and then hosed off.

Her eyes and nose were still stinging when she was blasted with air that drove the excess fluids from her skin but still left her damp and shivering as she was shoved through another door that appeared just beyond the decontamination area. The woman at the very front of the line balked when she saw what was beyond the door.

A robot clamped a manacle-like hand on her wrist and snatched her through, dragging her toward one of the waiting gurneys. Knowing it was useless, they all fought. And it *was* useless.

What followed was an examination that was more nightmarish than anything Miranda had ever experienced and painful enough she wondered if it was actually intended as torture. She was stabbed with needles, every orifice thoroughly examined, including her sex. She was clamped to the table so that she couldn't actually see what was going on 'below', but her legs had been clamped into something frighteningly similar to the support stirrups of a gynecologist's table and when her womb spasmed painfully she knew they'd removed her IUD.

She didn't know why, but the pain in her belly on top of the pain still radiating through her from her bowels was too pervasive to allow for much thought. She was just relieved when the poking and painful prodding finally stopped and the clamps opened.

A robot grasped her wrist, half lifting, half dragging her from the table.
"Diseased."

The pronouncement pierced her shock sufficiently to capture her attention. Miranda glanced around in time to see a robot dragging one of the women out a different door than she and the other women were being herded toward. Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest, although she wasn't actually aware of what had caused her fear to spike, whether it was some vague awareness of the woman's fate or just fear of what her own was to be.

It seemed frighteningly significant, though, that the woman had been pronounced 'diseased' and promptly separated from the rest of the herd.

She *felt* like a herd animal—an animal being led to the slaughter.

She tried her best to close her mind to that terrifying thought.

Each door had seemed to lead them all deeper into nightmare, though, and Miranda discovered the third door was no different. She saw as she was dragged through it that she'd stepped into a cavernous warehouse-like room filled with strange lozenges that seemed to be on some sort of rotating shelves. She struggled mindlessly against the

grip on her wrist, fought for all she was worth as the robot, with the single-mindedness and complete lack of emotion of a machine, dragged her to one of the lozenges, shoved her inside, and closed the lid.

She began battering against it the moment she was released, screaming, cursing—making so much noise she didn't hear the hiss of the gases entering the chamber, had no awareness that she was being knocked out until the cloudiness enveloped her mind and she lost tone in every muscle. Terror filled her briefly as she felt the liquid filling the coffin she'd been shoved into and then even that floated away.

* * * *

Miranda woke to the horror of drowning. She flailed mindlessly, trying to drag air into her nose, opening her mouth, even though she could feel the icy jell that seemed to envelope her, *knew* even through the madness of fear there was no air to breathe. Abruptly, her chest heaved. She gagged, coughing up the thick jell that had surrounded her only seconds before.

Something hard clamped around her wrists and lifted her, making it feel as if every joint in her body separated as she was hoisted clear of the pod. She was still too mindless and too beleaguered with the effort to expel the jell in her lungs, however, to have more than a fleeting awareness of being lifted and then lowered again. Her feet touched something solid, but although she tried to brace her knees instinctively, she sprawled on the hard floor as soon as she was released, coughing, gagging, and sputtering until she finally managed to heave in a lungful of air.

Something clamped around one of her wrists again, lifting her. Blinking, trying to focus her eyes, Miranda struggled to get her feet under her when she felt the pressure on her shoulder joint increasing to the point of agonizing pain.

"Move forward."

She'd barely managed to lock her shaky knees to keep from collapsing again when she heard the order. Shivering from the cold, her entire body feeling as heavy as if she'd just climbed from a pool after hours of swimming, thoroughly disoriented, Miranda nevertheless responded to the command, taking one trembling step forward with a tremendous effort. She couldn't see, couldn't fully open her eyes for the gluttonous mess that kept trying to slide into her eyes with every blink. Lifting a hand with an effort, she tried to wipe her eyes but discovered there was as much of the jelly like substance on her fingers as there was on her face.

Squinting, she finally managed to fix her gaze on the naked back of the woman in front of her and staggered in a drunken path behind her, halting when the woman stopped, shuffling forward again when the woman moved.

She was barely aware of passing from the room she was in into another room until she was blasted with water that was nearly as icy as the sticky jell that coated her skin. The temperature took her breath. The water, pelting her from every direction, managed to make it up her nostrils and into her throat, strangling her.

The robots herding them, drove them all into a clumsy run once they'd emerged from the 'shower' and been briefly blasted with air nearly as frigid as the water. Still weak, half blind, thoroughly bewildered, and coughing and choking from the water and the remnants of the jell their lungs continued to expel, the group slipped, skidded, and collided with each other, the walls, and the floor until they ran out of anywhere to run to. Huddling in a terrified, shivering mass, most of the women were either wailing loudly or

weeping quietly when the doors shut behind them, sealing them into a profound darkness that might have been a tomb for all any of them knew.

The wails became screams as the 'room' they were in abruptly fell. It was the first Miranda had felt any sense of motion since she'd awoken to the nightmare, but she was one of the few who didn't scream—mostly because she was just too terrified even to find her voice. The screaming was deafening, reached a fever pitch and rolled around them in waves as they continued to fall endlessly.

The most prolific screamers among them were hoarse long before the 'room' they were in began to bounce, shake, and jolt as if some giant held them and meant to shake them to death. They tumbled about the room, colliding painfully with each other and the walls, ceiling, and floor, over and over until gravity plastered them to the floor.

Or rather the ceiling.

They made that discovery when the 'can' holding them abruptly decelerated and they all landed on the floor in a crumpled tangle of bodies, groaning in pain—those still conscious enough to manage at least that much.

Miranda was too stunned even to attempt movement at first, too wary that she might discover they actually hadn't stopped falling to consider trying to disentangle herself and get up. Instinctively, though, her mind performed an internal inventory for damage assessment even while it struggled for orientation that would tell her which end was up.

She hurt in too many places to catalogue and at that she still thought she might be better off than many of the others. She was conscious. She was pretty sure many of the others weren't, might not even still be alive.

It occurred to her after a time that they couldn't have fallen regardless of what it had seemed like. The fall hadn't just *seemed* endless. It had lasted a very, very long time and, that being the case, they would all certainly be dead if whatever it was they were in actually had fallen.

The door where they'd entered opened. Blinding light and a warm gust of air spilled inside.

Miranda blinked at the sudden assault, her eyes watering.

"Please stand and exit in an orderly manner."

Rage abruptly surged through Miranda at the calm, indifferent command after what they'd just endured. If there'd been any way in hell she could've managed it, she thought she would've pounded that hunk of fucking metal and wires into a pulp. It took her several minutes even to extricate herself from the women around her and find a spot on the floor to place her feet that wasn't already occupied with some part of someone's body. Groaning, one by one the women around her also began trying to right themselves.

"Please exit in an orderly manner or I will begin firing randomly in twenty seconds, nineteen, eighteen"

Screaming hoarsely, three women stumbled toward the door in a blind panic and wedged themselves into the opening. Right behind them, frightened near witless herself, Miranda gave the nearest one a shove that broke the clog. She nearly rolled down the gangplank as she stumbled out behind the woman, still unable to see very clearly and caught completely off guard by the discovery that the floor beyond the 'room' was no longer a level corridor, but a sharp incline.

A chorus of weak, hoarse cries followed as the remainder of the women

scrambled to obey before the robot started firing on them. Several women were knocked down in the stampede to comply and either stepped on or tripped over by the women shoving behind them. In the melee, it was many minutes after she'd reached the ground before Miranda collected herself enough to look around and when she had she couldn't assimilate what her senses were feeding her about her surroundings.

The heat was the first thing that really penetrated her mind but even that was slow in coming because the chill from the jell and the hosing had penetrated bone deep and it took her mind minutes to register something it would've recorded instantly under most circumstances. It took longer to recognize that the difficulty she was having breathing was from the humidity—not from the painful bruising of her ribs or the residual aftereffects of having her lungs filled with fluids ... or jell, whatever it was that she'd been packed in for the trip.

She wasn't on Earth.

Her mind told her that even while it scrambled madly to try to identify her surroundings with information stored in her brain that was totally useless to her now. A jungle surrounded them, but it was no Earth jungle. Beyond the familiarity of colors—shades of green, gray, and brown like she'd never seen, but still colors she knew—there was nothing that even vaguely resembled any plant—flower, shrub, tree, or grass she'd ever seen in pictures or otherwise.

As soon as she'd noted the alien landscape, she lifted her head to scan the sky, staring at the enormous orange ball and the murky, sulfurish-yellow sky until she was jostled by one of the other women. She glanced around at her traveling companions, then, wondering if she wore the same completely bewildered expressions they did, wondering if her eyes looked as vacant.

One of the three legged bots she'd encountered in the bath/horror room, she saw, was affixing manacles around the right ankles of the women while another busily threaded a chain through the eye of each. She watched them dully for several moments before she lifted her head to look around again.

A jolt went through her, penetrating the fog of her chaotic mind when she realized that one of the 'robots' she'd dismissed wasn't a robot at all. It was ... a being, a very alien being, in a spacesuit. She stared at it, trying to wrap her mind around the newest assault to her senses, wondering if her mind had simply shattered at some point.

After a few moments, she realized it—the thing in the suit which, although humanoid, reminded her most strongly of a lizard—was assessing the condition of the women and counting heads. When that dawned on her, she looked around to assess them herself.

Bruised, battered ... and naked, dazed, but with the beginnings of fear in their eyes, she discovered they were all looking around hopelessly just as she was.

She had no idea whether the group included everyone that had been driven into the 'cell' or not. She didn't notice anyone that hadn't been in the cell with her at first, but there had certainly been more women than the original group she'd been confined with when they'd been 'packed'. Turning slightly at that thought, she looked back up the ramp.

The ship that had transported them to the surface of the world was a clunky, battered-looking thing that looked as if it had seen a great deal of use—maybe more than it should've seen.

It was a ship, though, clearly a space going vessel.

She was almost surprised that she didn't feel any surprise.

Maybe her mind *had* broken? She felt oddly detached—in mind, at least. Her body was throbbing from so many assaults that it seemed one mass of pain, not excruciating pain, but certainly at a miserable level. She supposed by that that she'd arrived miraculously unhurt—nothing broken or damaged beyond repair.

She moved forward when she was ordered to and allowed the machines to clamp a manacle around her right ankle as it had the others. When they'd been chained together, the alien fell in behind one of the robots, which appeared, from Miranda's perspective nearly at the end of the line of women, to be flattening the jungle growth and creating a path for them all to follow.

When she reached the edge of the clearing where the ship had landed it seemed that supposition had been borne up. The freshly crushed vegetation was still sticky under her bare feet. It was prickly, as well, uncomfortable and in some places downright painful to trod on. She tried to watch for sharp splinters after the first one she stepped on.

The wondrous sense of detachment that had gripped her began to dissipate as they were engulfed in the alien jungle. She thought, if it had been a jungle on Earth that it would've given her the creeps. The strangeness of the trees and plants and the possibility of equally alien creatures slithering through the bizarre foliage—and the possibility of something big enough and ferocious enough to eat them—only made it more unnerving. She felt her skin prickle despite the heat and the humidity, glancing fearfully to either side of the narrow trail for any sign of threat.

They'd been trudging for at least thirty minutes when Miranda spotted a wall rising above the jungle. Her heart thudded dully in her chest with uneasiness as the realization slowly sank into her that they'd come at last to the destination the aliens had had in mind from the time she'd been taken.

Now, for better or worse, she'd have the answers she'd set out to discover the night she'd gone to the club to try to find out what had happened to the women who'd gone missing.

Much good it would do her or any of them!

There were gates in the wall—gates that stood open, banishing the thought that had popped into her mind that it was some sort of prison, or at least a fortress. The lizard-man stopped at the gate, apparently counting heads as the robots continued to herd them forward until they'd all passed through the opening in the wall.

Limited in her movements by the tether on her ankle, Miranda stopped when everyone else did, lifting her head to stare assessingly at her surroundings. There wasn't much to see. The place seemed deserted and there wasn't anything dotting the broad courtyard where they'd halted beyond three containers that reminded her of the large, open trash bins she'd seen at construction sites. Two of them appeared to be full almost to overflowing with something, but she certainly couldn't identify it.

Lizard-man followed them into the compound, looked around, and finally pointed to the wall they'd passed through. Miranda turned to look. Seeing that the wall had cast deep shade over a wedge of the bare dirt, she headed toward it with a sense of relief.

It was short lived. The fucking chains on their ankles made sitting in any real comfort nearly impossible and damned awkward to achieve. Finally, though, they all managed to sit, their backs against the cool, if uncomfortably rough, stone wall. The

coarse soil wasn't particularly comfortable against bare buttocks, if it came to that, but all in all, it was the closest to comfort any of them had had since they'd been snatched from the storage pods they'd been transported in.

Weak and shaky, Miranda drew her knees up and propped her cheek on them. The temptation to close her eyes and yield to the weakness and just sleep was aborted when she discovered that the courtyard gave way to a vast expanse of water. It was hard to say what sort of water—possibly man-made—or at least artificial. The walls of the fortress, she saw, extended well out into the water, encompassing perhaps three times the area of the courtyard itself—which became beach-like in her mind. The water was relatively still, though, probably due to the walls.

She was still scanning the water, trying to ignore her parched throat when she saw something bob up in the water. Her eyes instantly focused on it and then she saw several other 'things'—heads, she realized after a moment. As she stared, dumbstruck, she saw necks, chests, torsos and then legs as the man-like creatures seemed to walk, not swim, out of the sea.

A ripple of uneasiness stirred through her and the other women around her, but she was too completely focused on the beings to notice the reactions of the others to any great degree.

The first thing that struck her was the color of their skin—golden, but more yellowish than brown—which was sharply contrasted by the black hair slicked back from their faces and gathered at their crowns to form a long 'pony tail'. The chests and shoulders were broad, everything, she saw as they emerged, bulked with muscles as if a herd of body builders were marching unhurriedly from the sea. It wasn't until they'd emerged enough that she could see that, unlike their upper bodies which were obviously bare, their lower bodies were encased in britches of some kind that she returned her attention to their faces and discovered they'd been spotted.

The creatures halted on the edge of the beach, tension in every line of their massive bodies. After several unnerving moments, the majority seemed to dismiss them, heading toward the containers she'd noticed before. One of them separated from the others, though, striding directly toward them.

* * * *

Khan noticed the machines first. Every fiber of his being tensed at the sight of them, the sense of threat that washed through him surpassed only by the rage that followed. It occurred to him after a moment that the machines were nothing like the things belonging to their hated enemies, the Sheloni. That didn't necessarily mean they were less of a threat, and it was certainly no less of an offense that they'd encroached on territory the Hirachi considered their own.

It might or might not mean, however, that they could be more easily destroyed.

Having noted every detail that he could from where he stood, he dismissed them for the moment and turned his attention to searching for the beings they belonged to.

His gaze slid over the cringing, pale skinned beings along the wall and settled finally on the one clad in an environmental suit similar to those worn by the Sheloni. He wasn't nearly tall enough to be one, however. If he had been, he would certainly not be standing nonchalantly by what was obviously his captives. He would know that it was more than his life was worth to appear in a Hirachi stronghold so poorly defended.

The presence of the captives pegged him as being of their ilk, regardless,

strengthening his distrust and dislike, though doubt had begun to percolate through him that threat was intended, whether he felt it or not. Everything about the creature's posture suggested he expected to be welcomed.

He was propped negligently against the stone wall behind him and the machines seemed to be focused entirely on watching the captives, not ranged around him for his protection or situated in a formation of defense.

Signaling the others to continue with their work, he strode toward the intruders to discover their business.

* * * *

Focused on the one striding toward them the moment he separated from the others and moved purposefully toward them, Miranda's heart clenched in her chest, squeezing the air from her lungs as he approached closely enough for her to fully appreciate his size.

They were giants, she thought, feeling a jolt of shock roll over her—not just massively built, but tall—six and a half feet, bare minimum. The one approaching them had been taller than the others standing near him, which had caught her attention even before he started toward her group, but she could see he was easily six eight or ten, which meant the others had to be at least six and half at the shortest.

She might not have noticed with the distance that still separated them, because he wasn't disproportionate as so many of the very tall men she'd seen were. He didn't have the stretched out looking torso that made him appear as if his body had out grown his arms and legs, or the stork-like legs and gangly arms and 'normal' sized torso that gave some very tall people the appearance of a water-bug. His arms, legs, and torso seemed, in fact, perfectly balanced and proportioned.

It was the size of his parts that brought home the fact, without anything to measure him against, that he hailed from a tribe of giants.

Dragging her attention from the powerful legs, arms, and chest, she focused on his face, trying to discern his features, which, at a distance at least, had seemed as human-like as his form, fully expecting as he drew nearer to discover they weren't at all human-like.

She discovered she was wrong. His nose, eyes, and lips, at least from what she could see, were formed like human features, not distorted in any peculiar way. He looked as completely human, in that regard, at least, as any man she might have met on the streets of the city. The face itself was a collection of sharp angles and planes—his cheekbones high and distinctive, his forehead a broad, flat slope to his hairline, his chin boxy rather than rounded and almost belligerent in the jut of it, his jaw line as squared as his chin.

His ears, she discovered with a jolt of surprise, were pointed.

Her overall impression, despite his strange skin tones, despite her absolute certainty that he was as alien as the creature that had kidnapped them, was that he was a remarkably attractive being. His powerful, beautifully male body certainly didn't detract from that impression, but neither did the face that went with the body.

* * * *

Khan wasn't certain what made him alter his direction. Truthfully, he wasn't even aware that he had, at first. As he drew nearer to the group ranged along the far wall of the compound, however, began to discern the manner of beings they were, his entire

focus shifted from confronting the alien to inspecting the 'cargo' he'd brought with him.

It wasn't just the jolting discovery that it was females—strangely colored miniature females—though that certainly caught his attention the very instant his gaze flickered over them and was snagged by the glimpse of clearly feminine genitalia. An odd sense almost of awe swept over him the closer he came to them and the more certain he was that he wasn't merely imagining that the tiny, almost ethereal creatures were almost Hirachi-like in face and form. If he hadn't been so stunned, he thought later, it would've been obvious to all, especially the gods damned trader, that he was beyond intrigued by them. Enthralled might have come closer to the mark, though he wasn't certain that was strong enough.

The glimpses of full, rounded, pink tipped breasts disabused him of the brief suspicion, and anxiety, that they were children, not adults, though—as tiny as they were.

Tiny women—not young children, he realized with a relief that was almost dizzying.

Ignoring the lizard-man completely, he strode directly toward them. Jolting to a halt when he was close enough to thoroughly appraise them, he scanned each woman slowly, struggling with the fascination that grew more pronounced in him the longer he studied them. Huddled as they were, he could tell at a glance that not one would stand more than breast high to him, and yet they weren't misshapen or disproportioned. They were, in point of fact, very pleasingly proportioned for females of any race, tiny, but beautifully made. Even their faces were pretty, as pale as they were, as obviously frightened as the poor little mites were.

It was as well, he thought wryly when he saw the alarm in their eyes, that he hadn't gone any closer, though he couldn't claim any forethought in it. He'd stopped to struggle with the urge to grab the nearest and thoroughly examine the miniature body parts to see if they were as flawless, and still fully functional, as they looked.

He couldn't decide whether or not he liked their coloring, though. The pinkish white skin seemed almost as strange to his eyes as the pale hair—and their pale eyes. That was startling. For several moments he wondered if they were blind, but he noticed almost immediately that they could see him quite clearly.

Obviously a little too clearly to suit them, he thought wryly, wondering briefly if they were as disconcerted about his size and his skin tones as he was theirs. Somehow, he doubted they were as captivated as he was—something about the way they trembled alerted him to that, he thought with a touch of sarcasm to cover his sense of disappointment and irritation.

And he *was* captivated, however disconcerted he also was.

Dragging his attention from the two he'd focused on when he finally noticed their reaction wasn't quite the delight he'd felt, he scanned the others.

One near the end closest to the gate caught his eye as he did so—almost literally knocked the breath from him. Her skin was much like all the others, but her hair—it glowed like fire in the sun's rays. As fascinating as he'd found the hair of the others—warm, golden shades near the color of Hirachi skin—warm like flickering fire, hers was the deeper shade of the hottest flames of a fire.

He felt oddly lightheaded as he studied her, as stunned as if he'd caught a jolt of the electrical charge from a thunderbolt—not quite comatose, but not far from it, he realized when he'd finally managed to gather some of his wits.

He was almost as amazed that no one seemed to notice he'd been struck witless as he was to realize he had been—that it had taken no more than the connection of his gaze to her to completely short-circuit his brain.

He could no more have prevented himself from moving closer to her to study her than he could've ceased to breathe. He wasn't even aware he had until he found himself crouched in front of her, studying her almost face to face, so close her scent tantalized him, not just her appearance, so close he could see flecks of gold in eyes the color of summer grasses, so close he could see that the texture of her skin looked as smooth and soft as the petal of a flower.

The urge to touch her moved through him with a nearly irresistible force. He tensed every muscle to fight the impulse, but the effort left him feeling drained, dizzy, left his mouth and throat feeling parched with the dryness of desperate thirst.

She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. As certain as he'd been when he approached her that he'd find she wasn't nearly as wondrous as she'd seemed from afar, he saw that she was even more perfect than he'd imagined. Want settled in his belly like fire, the desire, the absolute desperation to possess her.

It shocked him.

It shook him to his core when he recognized it for what it was.

He'd never felt such a fierce need to possess any *thing*, let alone a thinking being. They were not to be possessed, could not *be* owned. They belonged only to themselves and only shared whatever part of themselves they were willing to share.

He was repelled that the thought had even occurred to him, but he couldn't shake it, regardless. It didn't go away because he knew it was wrong. It didn't even diminish.

* * * *

Regardless of her ability to appreciate the surprising, but interesting, even attractive, aspects of the alien approaching them, it threw Miranda into complete disorder when, instead of heading directly to their captor, he veered toward them. Thankfully, he stopped to study the women at the far end from where she sat, but his interest, in any of them, was still unnerving.

She wasn't the only one unsettled. The ripples of uneasiness from the women nearer to him seemed almost to telegraph through the chain that bound them together. She *felt* their urge to take flight as surely as she felt her own natural instincts toward fight or flight, confronted as they had been with a being so completely alien, and so totally threatening in size alone.

It didn't stop there, however. As handsome a creature as he was, there was that about him that screamed barbarian. The breeches and boots that covered his lower body seemed intricate enough in design and craftsmanship to suggest some familiarity with civilization, but the long flowing hair, the extensive tattooing across his bulging upper chest muscles, and the rings that pierced his male nipples, to say nothing of his imposing 'presence' and hard, unsmiling, almost fierce features, suggested more than a passing familiarity with purely physical contests of strength and aggression.

After studying the women closest to him with a thoroughness that made even her uncomfortable, despite the fact that it wasn't her that held his attention, he lifted his head, scanning the rest of the women with far less intensity, almost what amounted to disinterest considering the focus he'd directed at the women at the end. The modicum of relief she'd felt that he seemed more interested in the blonds vanished when his gaze

reached her and stopped, zeroing in on her with the piercing, unwavering intensity of a laser sight—or a predator.

That latter impression intensified when he straightened abruptly, his entire body tensed with alertness, and then began to move toward her without so much as a flicker of interest in any of the women between them.

Briefly, the hope arose that it wasn't her that had caught his attention, that she was mistaken and he was actually looking beyond her at Carol, or maybe at Deborah, who sat on her other side. He wasn't. He didn't pause until he was directly in front of her. When he sank to his knees, she found herself nearly face to face with him, discovered he was so close she could feel the warmth of his body, hear a faint waffling of his breath as if he was struggling to control his breathing.

Instinctively, if not consciously, she recognized it for what it was—desire. Despite her uneasiness, her body responded, warming to that barely discernable sign of sexual interest more strongly even than it reacted to the darkening of his golden eyes as his pupils expanded until there was no more than a thin ring of gold around the darkness.

Her heart, which had seemed to freeze in her chest as he stopped in front of her, jerked to life, ran away, pounding hard enough it put her lungs in greater distress. She found herself panting slightly for breath, her mouth and throat as dry as dust and still so frozen at the look in his eyes that it wasn't until he finally released his hold on her by shifting his gaze that she could move her own.

As aware as she was that he was examining her with a thoroughness that couldn't possibly miss any flaws, her own focus was on him.

He wasn't just human-like in a vague sort of way, she realized with a strange sense of unreality, of being outside herself and oddly detached. His individual features were pleasingly shaped and proportioned and formed a whole that was inescapably handsome—remarkably appealing—breathtakingly attractive.

She was completely certain she'd never seen a human male any more, or even *as* handsome, or as thoroughly devastating to her senses.

Reluctant, vaguely disbelieving of her senses or at least her perception of them, she studied his features again, the slash of straight, black brows above his deep set eyes, the exotic shape and tilt of his eyes, the long, straight bridge of his nose that ended in compact but slightly flared nostrils, the strong cheek bones beneath his eyes, the narrow lips that formed his hard mouth. She couldn't find fault, though, either with their initial appeal to her or her perceptions.

The ears were intriguing, though she couldn't see them that well when he was looking directly at her—as well proportioned as everything else about him, set close to his head—but pointed, elf-like, though there damned sure wasn't anything else about him that was the least bit elf-like.

His shoulders stuck out on either side of his head at hard right angles, straight and strong, without a hint of a weak slope. His chest was downright massive, impossibly broad, the muscles as well formed and defined as a body builder who focused diet and exercise to achieve anything approaching what she knew, absolutely, was natural to him. His arms were no less endowed. She thought the bulging muscle of his upper arm was probably as big in circumference as her thigh—and her thighs weren't skinny by any means.

She'd allowed her fascination in him to lead her gaze downward, along the

rippling muscles of his belly to the disconcertingly impressive bulge of his sex before she caught herself and looked away.

He didn't seem to have any such reservations, she discovered. He examined everything exposed—which was most of her despite her efforts to cover herself with her arms, hands, and legs—with the same piercing intensity as he had her face.

Wryly, she thought she should appreciate the fact that he at least seemed *as* fascinated with her face as he was her body.

A frown twitched his dark brows together when his gaze settled at last on her ankle, though. Reaching toward her, he curled his hand around the chain that bound her, tightening it until she saw his knuckles whiten with the pressure.

For a moment, pure rage contorted his features, but fear had barely hit her when he erased the expression. Lifting his head, he studied her a moment longer and then glanced down the line of women until his searching gaze found the lizard-man. Straightening to his full height, he approached the lizard-man.

She saw when he stopped before the other alien that she hadn't been far off in her guess about his height. The lizard-man was around six feet tall and the other alien topped him by half a head.

"What manner of beings are these?" he asked the lizard-man, gesturing toward them with his hand.

Total shock rippled through Miranda when she realized she could understand him. She felt the same shock vibrate through the other women, saw it in their faces when they met her gaze.

The lizard-man almost seemed to smile. "Earth females."

Another jolt of surprise went through Miranda—not because she'd understood him. The robots had obviously been programmed with their language, which certainly suggested the aliens who'd programmed them knew it. It wasn't even because he sounded like the robots—as if he was using some mechanical device to translate.

It was the fact that he knew *exactly* what they were. How could he know they called their world Earth when he hadn't, as far she knew, questioned a single one of them? The robots hadn't.

The language, she supposed, he might have collected and translated through broadcasts, but the chances seemed remote that he would've learned in that way that their world was called Earth.

"Why are they chained?"

There was menace in the question, and it was obvious the lizard-man detected it at once. He shrugged in an uncannily human gesture. "They are slaves—purchased for trade," he added hastily. "I couldn't allow them to wander off into the jungle and get eaten."

A furious denial instantly sprang to Miranda's lips, but never emerged.

"Purchased? Or stolen? They didn't come with you willingly or there'd be no need for chains," the alien growled.

The lizard-man's eyes narrowed. "I'm an honest trader," he said somewhat defensively. "I traded for them. Their government was happy to take the technology I offered in return for them. If you will look, you will see they are all healthy, breedable females. They were tagged for me for pick up. I was told exactly where to find them and when to look, otherwise I couldn't have collected such an exquisite selection so quickly

or so easily.” He shoved his hand into one of the pockets of his space suit and produced a handful of colorful strips that Miranda instantly recognized as the wristbands the clubs commonly used.

She stared at them in dawning horror as what he’d claimed slowly sank into her mind and completely obliterated the urge she’d felt to furiously deny his lies. A wave of nausea washed over her, but she wasn’t certain if it was rage that inspired it or recognition of a completely unacceptable truth.

The black haired alien turned to survey them, his expression eloquent of distaste. “Their own people sold them?”

“I have a bill of sale if you would like to see it—though, of course it’s in their language. The Vernamin will vouch for me. It was they who suggested the Hirachi might be interested in acquiring females. I was told to speak with Khan, the leader. May I assume that you are he?”

He stiffened and turned to look at the trader. “We trade with the Vernamin. It does not follow that we either trust them or consider them friends. You would’ve been better informed of our needs if you had approached us first.”

Turning from the trader, he strode down the line of women again. Reaching Miranda, he bent down, caught her upper arms, and hauled her to her feet before she could even assimilate what he had in mind. He stared down at her, his expression grim, though something flickered in his eyes that seemed to belie the contempt in his hard expression. “They are ... pigmies! This one is not much more than waist high to me and some are even smaller!” He curled his fingers around her upper arm, spanning it and then some. “Weak—strange to my eyes. I am certain they are beautiful to their own kind—but not as beautiful as our own women! Not strong, capable of bearing strong warriors. Mayhap not even breedable for the Hirachi at all!”

The trader looked disconcerted and then angry. “I was told you would find them appealing.”

“They lied to you!” Khan growled.

“They *are* compatible for breeding,” the trader insisted. “Many have already bred with Hirachi males and produced good stock! They appealed to other Hirachi males ... and I have seen to it that they can speak the Hirachi tongue and understand.”

Khan’s gaze flew to the woman’s face—the woman that made him lightheaded just looking at her, that he’d chosen to use as an example purely for the fact that it would give him the opportunity to touch her as he’d so desperately wanted to—that he’d just thoroughly insulted. Never, that he could recall, had he so effectively made such a complete ass of himself. He felt his face heat with acute discomfort as he studied her expression and found confirmation of the trader’s claim that he wasn’t particularly fucking delighted with at the moment. Briefly, he scanned his memory to discover just how damning his remarks had been, but he didn’t get far before he realized he didn’t particularly *want* to remember what he’d said when he’d thought there was no way any of the women would understand him.

Dragging his gaze from the woman, he focused on the trader again with an effort. “The spawning is not a time when a Hirachi male thinks with his brain,” he growled uncomfortably. “If creatures such as these were all that were available”

“Not such as these ... *just* like these. It took a great deal of time and effort to track them to the source. They were thoroughly examined and tested to assure quality

and also that they were *exactly* the same as the others genetically so there could be no doubt that they were compatible for breeding.”

“Why did you not track our own females?” Khan demanded testily, reluctantly releasing his grip on the woman’s arm and striding away from her when pulling her closer held a lot more appeal and he began to realize that temptation might get the best of him.

Something flickered in the lizard-man’s eyes as Khan joined him once more, but he merely shrugged. “I tried. The Sheloni would not barter for the location of the world they stole the Hirachi from.”

Unable to resist, Khan turned to study the women assessingly, his gaze moving with a will of its own to the red headed one he coveted so much he could taste it in every pore, so much he was having a hell of a gods damned time trying to maintain even a semblance of only mild interest. “To whom do you mean to trade them if we have no interest?”

The trader studied them through narrowed eyes that made him wonder just how successful he’d been in hiding his absolute fascination. When he spoke, though, Khan felt himself relax fractionally—briefly.

“They do appear a weak lot. I’m not certain they would be of much use to anyone for labor. I suppose I would have to see if any of the other tribes of Hirachi on this world were interested and, if they are not, then I will have to settle them in a brothel somewhere. They have a certain appeal, you will admit, despite their strangeness. I would not mind fucking one myself—though, of course, they are completely unsuitable for breeding for my people.”

Khan’s expression tightened. “Is this all that you have?”

“There were a few that were diseased and had to be disposed of. Which part do you find least appealing? The size or the color? I believe they come in other colors. I only selected these because their own people assured me the light ones were most desirable. They may have steered me wrong. I had not considered that. They seemed honest enough and eager to trade. I should have considered that they might want to unload the most abundant, or least desirable. I’m certain that I can find at least a few that are sturdier, perhaps a bit taller, although these seem to be average for their species. Would you prefer I collect another selection and return with them?”

Miranda couldn’t quite interpret the look Khan bent upon the trader, but it seemed to make the trader uneasy.

“What would you require in trade?”

The trader turned to study the bins. “One load of *jasumi* for the lot of them?”

Khan’s face tightened. “Those are promised already to the Vernamin—three bins—and we have not even reached full quota yet.”

The lizard-man licked his lips. “A half a load then ... since I can see these are not just what you want. I will bring a better selection when I come again and more, and then, perhaps, we can discuss a full load?”

Khan’s hands clenched and unclenched as if he was contemplating wrapping them around the trader’s neck. He leaned closer. “It is the custom among the Hirachi that the females *chose* the males,” he said in a low growl through clenched teeth. “The only thing more repellent to the Hirachi than an unwilling female is *slavery*, trader.”

The trader looked uneasy, but he managed an off-handed shrug. “Next time I will

be certain to bring *volunteers*,” he said with an oily smile. “And be assured that I will see to it that they are far more desirable.”

Chapter Three

"He is a trader," Khan growled when he met the questioning gazes of the men that had congregated at the far side of the compound, waiting for word regarding the interlopers.

He debated for a moment whether he could master the urge to pace off his agitation, but finally sat down to face the others, wryly certain that he would find the calm he needed if he put his back to the timid little creatures behind him.

"With slaves to sell," Gerek said flatly, drawing his attention.

Khan's lips tightened. "With slaves to sell," he affirmed grimly.

Gerek's expression twisted with disgust. "The slimy bastard!"

"Are they as strange looking up close?" Teron asked, struggling to keep his voice and his expression neutral when the truth was he'd barely been able to contain the urge to move closer to see them better.

Khan met the other man's gaze, wrestling with his reaction to the females—the one of the red hair most particularly. "In face and form they are very like our own females, despite the strange color of their skin, their eyes, and their hair," he said finally.

Teron's brows rose. "What color are their eyes?"

Khan frowned, but for the life of him all he could recall was the color of one pair of eyes—green. "All different," he muttered finally, recalling that he'd noticed that much, at least, primarily because it was as strange as they were. Why would they all have different colored eyes? "You can see for yourself. Go to the trader and tell him I sent you to examine the females. I didn't see any sign that he'd beaten them, but they're all bruised and scraped up—obviously not well cared for even if they were not deliberately mistreated. You should make certain none of them have injuries that need to be treated."

"It will be hard to treat them if they can't understand. I wouldn't want to frighten them more if they're as timid as you say," Teron said doubtfully.

Khan felt his face heat with discomfort. "He brought them specifically for us. He has taught them our language." He chose to ignore the eagerness that entered Teron's eyes when he nodded, rose, and strode across the compound, stifled the urge to inform him not to let his eagerness get the better of him when he examined the red headed one.

They would think him mad.

He wasn't so gods damned certain that he wasn't.

"Specifically for us?" Gerek asked sharply.

"The Vernamin are undoubtedly aware that we're nearing our spawning season. I have to suppose they thought it would prevent a disruption of the supply of *jasumi* if they accommodated our needs," Khan said dryly.

Gerek stared at him blankly for a moment before anger surged through him. "It did not occur to those stupid bastards that we were more likely to kill one another over that pathetic handful of Halflings over there? They are not even a fourth of our number!"

"Nor half our size," Khan said pointedly, "besides *not* being Hirachi, not warriors,

not strong, and incapable of breeding a new generation of strong Hirachi!"

"They can not breed with us?" Adar demanded indignantly. "Why would the fool bring them if they can not even breed with us?"

"They are unsuitable," Khan said testily. "The trader assured me they were compatible ... but I would not trust that slimy bastard as far as I could pitch him. Most likely they will have us killing one another to get to them and then those who do manage to claim one will find no fertile soil for their seed—and if they *did* breed we would end with Halflings."

"So ... you did not trade for them?" Adar asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

Khan scrubbed a hand over his face. "He wants half a load of the *jasumi*."

All of the men within hearing began to murmur among themselves. The general consensus, however, seemed to be a certainty that it was a bargain and an equal certainty that they were going to have to work three times as hard if they were to make up the loss.

Khan didn't hear a single objection even though he knew they couldn't possibly have seen the females well enough to account for their eagerness in acquiring them.

A good part of it was their revulsion of slavery. After what they'd endured themselves, none of them would willingly turn their back on any thinking being that had been enslaved by others.

That didn't account for the eagerness, though. Nothing accounted for that except the fact that the slaves were females, promised for breeding, and he doubted any of them had been capable of much thought once they heard that.

"They will not choose us—even if there were not many, many reasons why we should ignore any interest in them," Khan said flatly. "I saw the way they looked at me ... at all of us. We are monsters in their eyes."

The men glanced at each other uncomfortably.

"Well ... that is that, I suppose," Adar said finally, tamping his disappointment with a strenuous effort. "If they found you repellent it isn't likely any of the rest of us will appeal. What are we to do with them?"

Khan shook his head. "I do not know. I could not in good conscience allow that bastard to take them away again, though. He is as cold blooded as the gods damned Sheloni ever dared to be—admitted very coolly that he had disposed of the diseased ones. Offered to go back and find females more suitable to us. It was all I could do to refrain from ripping his head off there and then. If he returns with any of *our* females I *will* kill him. He said he did not know how to find our home world, but I don't trust that either.

"These females ... their people sold them to him, so he claims. I saw shock in the faces of the females but not disbelief. Beyond their obvious physical weaknesses, I can not say that I am favorably impressed with their people as a whole."

He considered for a moment but finally shrugged inwardly. They were bound to see for themselves. "Despite their strangeness ... they're really very beautiful creatures. It is so odd to find myself thinking that when I am completely certain that I should feel nothing but contempt—they are small and weak and timid besides—understandable, I suppose, when they must know their physical limitations, but still repugnant—or something that *should* be repellent to any Hirachi."

"It is because we're nearing the spawning season," Gerek said uncomfortably. "No doubt, if the change were not already upon you, you would feel just as you should."

Khan eyed him doubtfully. “Mayhap,” he said, but he wasn’t nearly as certain as he would’ve liked.

Not that it mattered. There’d been no admiration in those beautiful green eyes, only fear ... even before he had made a complete ass of himself and insulted her—all of them. The gods damned trader *might* have mentioned that they understood before he had enumerated their many flaws! No doubt the bastard had thoroughly enjoyed it, for he must have known, or at least suspected, that *he* would try to bring the bargaining price down by showing his contempt for his offerings!

“They will not be safe from us once we enter the spawning season,” Adar pointed out.

Khan nodded. Lifting his head, he surveyed the walls of what had once been their prison. “These walls will protect them well enough ... if we close off the access from the sea. We’ll need to see to it that they have plenty of food and water. I doubt they could fend for themselves in that respect and, in any case, it won’t be safe for them to leave the compound until the season has passed.”

Gerek stood decisively. “We will have to work fast, then, if we are to protect them and also fill our quota for the Vernamin. Mayhap we can trade with them for some comforts for the females? If they are as fragile as you suggest, they are bound to need a good bit of coddling.”

* * * *

It shouldn’t have come as such a shock to hear the wormy bastard call them slaves. Miranda had suspected all along that the disappearance of the women meant they’d been swallowed into the maw of some white slavery ring.

But it *was* a shock—mostly the breeding part!

Sex slaves, she understood—but *breeding*?

And alien slavers?

It wasn’t enough they had to deal with the Russian mob snatching young women and using them in their brothels? Now they had aliens stealing women and hauling them across the universe to sell them for *breeding*?

With these giants? *Good god!*

If their cocks were even *sort of* proportionate to the rest of them

If that wasn’t unnerving enough on top of their sheer mass, they looked like barbarians. She wasn’t exactly sure what had given her that impression—unless it was the proliferation of tribal tattoos and piercings she’d noticed on the one called Khan—but, right or wrong, that was definitely the impression she’d gotten.

She didn’t see a weapon of any description among them—primitive or otherwise—but then they looked like they could rip Godzilla apart with their bare hands.

Maybe it was a matter of tribal pride to kill things with their bare hands?

It was hard to decide whether the thought of being left to these men was more terrifying than the possibility that they might refuse delivery and she and the others would be traded elsewhere—or disposed of like the ‘diseased ones’.

Neither possibility appealed at all, but she couldn’t think of any way to escape. She didn’t have her weapon and even if she had she doubted it would be the least bit effective considering what she was up against. The robots could blow her head off, she didn’t doubt, before she could even lift and fire.

She didn’t even know what to hope for!

She thought, though, that if these Hirachi decided they weren't buying she was going to have to take her chances on trying to escape when the trader took them back. If they removed the chains once they reached the ship, she might have some chance of outrunning a laser in the back and hiding in the jungle. She didn't know what she'd do if that actually worked and she didn't wind up dead, but she didn't think she could face any more of what she'd already faced—with the certainty that it could get even worse.

Realizing after a few moments that there was actually no way to plan an escape beyond the decision to try to make a break for it if the opportunity presented itself, she transferred her attention to the barbarians. Certain they must be discussing whether or not to trade, she tried to focus on their faces to see if she could tell anything about their expressions that would give her a hint of what her fate was to be. It was useless. They were too far away for her to see them clearly enough.

Their body language wasn't very helpful either.

Khan had made it crystal clear he despised slavery, though. She wasn't certain what to make of that, whether to consider it a point in his favor or a nail in her coffin.

She thought, maybe, it was both. It had been pretty obvious from the things he'd said as well as his attitude that he wasn't favorably impressed with any of them, which seemed to indicate that he not only despised slavery in general, but he felt contempt for any beings weak enough to become slaves.

She supposed she couldn't argue with his reasoning, but she still resented it. If she'd been given half a chance at defending herself, she thought she could've at least made it hard for the bastard to take her even if she'd lost in the end.

She wasn't certain what to make of what had at least appeared to be a particular interest in her, either. She wished she had a clue. Right up until he'd decided to use her as an example of all that was 'flawed and undesirable' about the 'pigmies' she'd thought he was attracted to her. That had certainly disabused her of the notion, though.

It seemed unavoidable, however embarrassing, that she'd been the one totally entranced and too stupid with it to gauge his interest with any degree of accuracy.

No doubt he hated the fucking hair!

Unfortunately, although he seemed very human-like in a lot of ways, he'd obviously been working hard to keep his true thoughts to himself. Everything he *had* said, she realized, could be put down to an attempt to barter for a better deal.

He'd been pretty damned convincing, though. The trader certainly seemed to have fallen for it.

She didn't actually realize that she'd been studying Khan's back to the exclusion of all the others until movement to one side of him drew her attention away from him. Her belly tightened when she realized another one of the aliens had risen and was striding toward them.

Not Khan.

He wasn't going to buy them. The depth of dismay she felt made it clear that, regardless of the fact that she'd thought she couldn't make up her mind, she actually *had* been hoping he would agree to the deal.

The man went directly to the trader. "Khan sent me to examine the females," he said coldly.

The trader's eyes narrowed. "I assured him they had been thoroughly examined." "Before or after they were injured?" Teron asked tightly.

The trader turned to look them over. "They walked here."

Teron lifted his head and looked pointedly at the robots. "They may have been too frightened to complain."

Shrugging, the trader gestured toward them. "Look for yourself, then," he said testily.

As Miranda watched, suddenly hopeful again, the Hirachi stepped way from the trader, crouching before the first woman. "I am Teron, a healer for my people. Are you injured in any way, little one?"

The woman's chin wobbled, and no wonder. His face and his words were kind, and it was the first kindness any of them had been shown since they were taken. She shook her head. "I don't think so ... just bruised, I think."

He tilted his head. "You need not fear the trader. Tell me if you are hurt."

She glanced at the trader uneasily and finally held out her hand. "I think my finger's broken."

Frowning, he took her hand very carefully in his and studied the digit for a moment before he examined the alignment of the bones with his thumb and forefinger. His lips tightened. "It is broken. Do you have any other injuries?"

She shook her head.

"I don't have anything with me. Let me check the others and then I will go and get something to hold the bone in alignment so that it will heal properly."

Miranda dropped her forehead to her knees, struggling with the urge to cry. After the horrible nightmare they'd endured she was afraid to even hope he really was as kind and gentle as he seemed, afraid to hope that there might actually *be* hope. She was still struggling with her emotions when she felt a light touch on the top of her head. She lifted her head and met his gaze.

His eyes were alien and still the kindest she'd ever looked into.

Teron swallowed with an effort as he gazed into her eyes. As moved as he'd been by the pain and fear in the eyes of the others, he'd managed without a great deal of difficulty to maintain his role as healer, to set aside the flicker of interest he'd felt in a purely male way as he carefully examined their hurts, to ignore a desire to explore them in a purely un-healer-like way. This one ... she took his breath. He couldn't imagine how Khan could've looked at her and still discounted them all as merely 'strange'. She *was* exotic, but it only seemed to strengthen her appeal.

It took an effort even to recall how he'd come to crouch before her, let alone what his purpose of being there was. "Where are you hurt, little one?" he managed to ask her finally.

Miranda sniffed, struggling with the urge to wail like a child and throw herself at him. "I don't think I'm really hurt," she said finally.

He placed a finger beneath her chin and tipped her head up, studying her forehead.

Miranda studied his face. It was as alien to her as his eyes, and still a very appealing face. Like Khan's, it was a strong face, almost harshly angular, and yet the very manliness of it made it extraordinarily attractive.

"I think this is just a bruise," he said quietly, lightly touching the knot Miranda hadn't even realized she had on her forehead. Settling on his knees, he slipped his hands beneath her hair, tracing the back of her neck. "Is there any pain here?"

Not exactly. She was beginning to feel some warmth a little lower, though. She cleared her throat, vastly uncomfortable with the realization that she was as physically attracted to Teron as she had been to Khan. Well, maybe not quite as much—she didn't feel as if her brains had been scrambled, just lightheaded and achy and much too fascinated with his hands—but a hell of a lot more than she should've been. "Not really."

He tilted his head, studying her curiously and finally lifted her hands one at the time, examining her fingers, her hands, and then her arms. The scar on her upper arm caught his attention. Releasing her hands he stroked a finger lightly over it.

"It's old," Miranda said, her voice croaking. "A perp I was trying to arrest tried to cut my throat. Luckily, I was a little faster."

He met her gaze for a long moment, speculation flickering in his eyes, and finally transferred his attention to her legs. She resisted when he caught her ankle and lifted her foot, more because she knew it would expose her sex than because she objected to him examining whatever he wanted to. She was too damned eager by half, for him to touch her anywhere he wanted to and any way he wanted to.

Either he didn't notice her resistance or he ignored the brief battle. He lifted her foot and examined the bottom and then set it carefully on the ground and examined the mate. "You have a sprain, at least ... possibly a break."

Miranda looked down in surprise. "I was wondering why it hurt."

He sent her a strange look. "It is against your custom to acknowledge injury?"

Miranda lifted her brows at him, staring at him blankly. "No."

He touched her cheek almost caressingly and rose. Turning without another word, he strode briskly back toward Khan.

Seeing him, Khan rose and met him halfway.

"They have been badly battered," Teron said tightly, struggling with the anger that had been building in him from the moment he'd begun to examine the women. "Mayhap it is only that they are so fragile anyway, but the gods damned bastard could see that only to look at them. *I* could see it. I didn't even have to examine their little hands or test their tiny bones to see it. He has left them baking in the heat—their delicate skin is burned—and they have had no water. I could see that from the dryness of their lips ... nor much food from the look of them, though it's hard to say when I'm not the least familiar with their species."

Khan nodded grimly, not surprised, but still angered. "I will finish with the trader and send the gods damned bastard on his way ... after I have discovered what he knows about how to care for them. Tell Gerek to bring them water and Adar to bring food. The others should go out again. We'll have to work longer days to make up for the *jasumi* we must part with."

Teron hesitated. "The one with the red hair has the mark of a warrior."

Khan's belly tightened the moment he mentioned the red hair, but the comment took him by surprise. It took an effort to refrain from turning to look at her. He had no wish to insult Teron by showing he doubted his word, but he couldn't envision it. He had touched her. She was the softest thing that he had ever felt. He had lifted her to her feet—the wonder of it was that he had not tossed her clear over his shoulder when he had for she had been so unexpectedly light he'd used far more force than was necessary. She was as lovely as the day was long and he'd seen strength in her intelligent eyes, seen it in

her self-possession when he'd studied her, for she'd been the only one of all of them that hadn't instantly begun to quiver in terror when he approached her. But a warrior? He simply couldn't imagine it. "The mark must have been from something else," he said finally.

Teron shook his head. "She told me that a perp had tried to cut her throat, but that she was faster. He sliced her arm instead."

"What is a perp?" Khan asked, thoroughly mystified.

"I did not ask that, but nothing, certainly, that translates into our tongue." He frowned. "I did not ask about the mark, for that matter. I noticed it when I examined her. She seemed ... discomfited. She said that it was old and told me how it had happened."

Khan considered it, doubtful but thoroughly intrigued—as if he'd *needed* anything to further arouse his interest in her, he thought wryly. "Mayhap it is the truth. If the females are so small then it seems logical that the males would be, as well, so that they are better fitted to one another as it is with our females. And, if that is the case, then they would be more equal and more capable of holding their own with their males."

* * * *

Miranda watched Teron and Khan without any attempt to hide her interest when they met and stopped to confer, wondering if the doctor was giving him a detailed list of all of their injuries and how that might effect the bargaining situation. As far as she was concerned, they'd all been lucky considering what the trip down from the frigging ship had been like. It was nothing short of a miracle that they'd managed it with nothing more than lumps, bruises, a couple of sprains, and a few broken fingers and toes.

It said a lot for their resilience in her book, but she doubted Khan would see it that way.

She stiffened when they'd finished their conversation and Teron continued toward the other side of the compound while Khan headed toward them. Despite a budding resentment toward the leader of the Hirachi who'd shown so much contempt for them, her heart almost seemed to take on the same rhythm of his rapid stride.

At first glance, she couldn't see anything about him that really set him apart from the others and wondered why and how he'd come to be their leader. He was certainly as muscled, as tall, and as yellow as the others—maybe a little taller and broader than the average Hirachi, but she couldn't see that he seemed significantly bigger than the men that surrounded him. His hair, purely black, had been gathered tightly to the crown of his head and tied there and even so the long lock hung half way down his back—but the others also appeared to have black hair, and they wore their long hair the same.

He was clothed the same.

As he drew nearer to their group, though, she decided it was his bearing that set him apart. He moved with surprising grace for such a giant of a man, but beyond that, with the strength of purpose and confidence of a leader of other men—aliens—monster aliens. A strange quivery sensation went through her as it occurred to her to wonder what such a being must be like—to be looked up to and respected by the frightening looking horde at his back.

* * * *

"Do you believe what he said?" Deborah asked in a whisper, her voice husky with tears.

Dragging her gaze from Khan with an effort, Miranda stared at her for a long

moment. "Who?"

"The trader. Do you think there could possibly be any truth to his claim about ... buying us?"

The rage Miranda had fought to tamp when she'd finally gotten over her shock resurfaced. She'd been struggling with denial ever since, but she knew in her heart and soul that the bastard had spoken nothing but the truth. They'd been sold out by their government. What were a few women, after all, when compared to whatever fucking technology they'd gotten for nothing? "I'd like to say I don't, but, unfortunately, I do. Why would he specify the government if he hadn't negotiated with them? Why not just claim it was an individual? Or a chief, or something like that? It isn't like the Hirachi would know the difference—they don't know anything about us.

"Do you think there's any other way he would've known that single women could be found wearing those damned wristbands outside of clubs on the weekends? It isn't like he could blend in and discover it himself. He has to wear that suit. He can't even breathe the same air that keeps us alive."

She shook her head in disgust. "He was *told*. You have to appreciate the sheer cleverness of it! They didn't even have to tag us themselves—didn't have to dirty their hands at all, and since most of us are single, not nearly as many people left behind to complain about our disappearances.

"Beyond that, he said he was *specifically* told to pick up the 'fair ones'. The Russian mob targets fair women for the slave trade. *We* thought it was a Russian gang when we began investigating because of the profiles of all the victims."

"The fucking bastards!" Carol muttered tearfully. "Those slimy, rotten, fucking, blood sucking bastards! When people hear about this"

"That's the real beauty of it," Miranda said tiredly. "People never will hear about it, will they?"

The comment silenced both of them. She was just as glad. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to think about it. There was nothing she could do to avenge herself or the others or find justice for what had been done to them. The hate would eat her up if she allowed it to ... or she could let it go and focus on survival, and that was what she knew she needed to do—survive, because it was important to her to live regardless of how difficult it might be.

And because she saw it as the only way she could triumph over what they'd done to her. They'd never know, of course, and obviously didn't give a fuck one way or the other—for all those bastards had known the damned lizard might've wanted them for food!

In any case, she felt like hell now that the worst of her fear had worn off and the shock. She was thirsty and had begun to feel nauseated from the nearly unbearable heat. Of course, it might not be the heat. It might be nothing more than sheer emptiness. She supposed while they'd been packed into those things used to transport them they must have been given some sort of life preserving nutrients, but they'd certainly been well cleaned out beforehand and they hadn't been given actual food since.

How long since she'd eaten, she wondered?

She had no concept. She doubted she would have even if not for the pod they'd frozen her in. Everything had happened so quickly from the time she'd been snatched that she'd been in a constant state of shock, unable to completely assimilate one shock

before she was hit with another.

Resisting the urge to simply lie down in the dirt, she glanced surreptitiously toward the Hirachi enclave.

The Hirachi males, for all that they'd shown every indication that they viewed the Earth females the trader had brought with contempt, certainly seemed fascinated with them, she thought uneasily. Every time she dared a glance in the direction of the powwow that had been going on between the Hirachi since their arrival nearly an hour before she saw that the majority of the males were either staring at them openly or, at the very least, constantly casting curious looks at them.

"What do you suppose happened to their women?" Carol asked uneasily.

Miranda had wondered herself, but it wasn't something she wanted to speculate about. "From what the trader said, it sounded like the Hirachi were kidnapped and brought here themselves. Maybe they only brought men? Or maybe, in spite of what Khan implied about their women being 'warriors', they didn't survive the trip? Or died since. This doesn't look like a terribly hospitable planet."

"The trader said something about the Hirachi being traders, didn't he?" Deborah murmured.

Carol stared at her. "I don't see how that would explain that there aren't any women around—because there aren't. I haven't seen a single one—unless they look just like the males. Maybe they only have one sex?"

Miranda glanced at her. "The trader said he'd brought us as breeders," she said pointedly.

Carol turned white. "Oh my fucking god! With that? With those ...?"

Miranda studied her in disbelief for a moment. "What did you think he figured they'd want us for?"

"I just meant, maybe they're ... like colonists, or something," Deborah said a little stiffly. "And that was why there weren't any women."

"Why wouldn't he bring them some of their own women if that was the case?"

"Good question. So far we're doing a lot better on the questions than the answers," Miranda said dryly. "I'm guessing we're going to find out."

"What if they don't want to trade for us?" Deborah said anxiously. "What do you think the trader will do if they don't want us?"

That *also* wasn't something Miranda wanted to think about. She shook her head. "I don't know, but I feel so bad right now I can't think straight."

Chapter Four

"Remove the chains from them," Khan said when he'd reached the trader. "We are agreed that we will take them in exchange for a half load of the *jasumi*. We will also require something to clothe them in and a device to determine what food they may safely eat. Do you have such a device?"

The trader looked irritated, obviously reluctant to give anything else in exchange for the females. "If you mean to breed them anyway"

"They are delicate. Our healer says the sun burns their skin. We need something to protect their skin," Khan said flatly.

Frowning, the trader finally nodded. "I have something to cover them. I do not know why you need anything to determine if the food is safe. They are intelligent beings. They will know what they can eat."

"On their own world. Not this world."

"That was not part of the bargain!" the trader said angrily.

"It *is* part of the bargain," Khan growled menacingly. "I will not barter half a load of *jasumi* for such weak creatures without at least some assurance that they will not sicken and die the moment you are gone!"

Anger tightened the lizard-man's features for several moments, but finally he allowed the tension to ease. "I have a device," he grumbled.

Khan relaxed, as well. "Good. We will go to your vessel to fetch what I need while your machines load the *jasumi*."

"You are certain you want the chains removed?" the trader asked doubtfully. "They are skittish and liable to run if you release them before you have had time to break them in."

Khan's upper lip curled in distaste. "Remove the chains."

Shrugging, the trader ordered the robots to remove the manacles and chains. He was just as glad Khan hadn't insisted upon keeping them. He was certain to need them again and it would offset the additional bartering items.

* * * *

Miranda's heart seemed to leap right up into her throat and try to choke her when she overheard the argument between Khan and the trader. The very moment she'd heard Khan order the chains removed it had leapt into her mind that he'd presented her with, quite possibly, her only chance of escape.

She was tired and weak, now, true, and her feet were cut and sore beyond the fact that Teron had said she had a slight sprain, but she'd managed to walk on it. She thought she might be able to sprint at least to the edge of the jungle and disappear.

Her heart thundering in her ears, she swiveled her head just enough that she could gauge the distance between herself and the gates. There were no guards, she saw, and she'd seen that the majority of the Hirachi had begun to migrate once more toward the sea—apparently to collect more of the *jasumi*, though she didn't particularly care as long as they left.

Khan was still standing with the trader, had in fact said that he would go with him to the ship.

The robots would be occupied unloading the *jasumi* that had been traded.

Closing her eyes again once she'd determined that she was no more than fifteen feet from the gate, she forced herself to take relaxing breaths. She lifted her head from her knees after a few moments and surveyed the scene as casually as she could.

The trader, she saw, had ordered one of the robots to return to the ship for a bin to hold the *jasumi*. One was busy unfastening the manacles and removing the chains. The third was heading toward the bin it was to unload.

Discovering her heart rhythm was becoming more and more erratic, Miranda closed her eyes briefly, trying to regain control of her heart rate, forcing herself to take slow, even breaths, although she felt for several moments as if she might pass out from the effort. Khan, she discovered when she glanced his way again, hadn't moved, damn his hide! He seemed determined to watch until the damned robot had finished.

Containing her anxiety with an effort, she focused on watching the robot herself, but she could feel the tension growing inside her the closer it came. By the time it reached her, her heart felt as if it was pounding a hundred miles an hour.

Khan, the difficult beast, took that moment to move, striding down the line to stop for several uncomfortable moments and stare at her as the robot finished and moved to Carol.

"Gerek and Adar will bring food and water. Do not wander beyond the gates. The jungle is dangerous."

Feeling his gaze on her, Miranda lifted her head, trying for a look of innocence since she couldn't think straight and couldn't decide any other way to disguise her thoughts. He frowned thoughtfully but apparently dismissed whatever doubts had crossed his mind and followed the trader to the gate.

Relief flooded her. She relaxed fractionally, watching until he disappeared from view and then counting off the seconds and minutes in her head. She'd made it to a count of five minutes when she saw three of the Hirachi heading toward them—the healer and two others—Khan had called them Gerek and Adar—all loaded down with their 'mercy' gifts. Anger flickered through her.

Five minutes—even as long as Khan's stride was, she doubted he'd gone far enough yet even to lose sight of the gate. She debated risking it anyway and then discovered she'd wavered too long. The three Hirachi reached them. Teron headed toward the first woman, however, settled the bag he carried down and examined her broken finger again. The other two headed toward the center of the group but, before she'd relaxed, she saw that the one carrying what looked like it must be some sort of water bottle formed from leather, was heading in her direction while the other, the one with food, was making his way back toward the doctor.

Her throat closed as she stared at the women who lifted the bottles and drank.

She was so thirsty! Maybe she should at least wait and grab a bottle before she tried to make a run for it?

"I could not find many of these. You must share between two. Don't try to drink too much at once or it will make you ill."

Miranda watched him, listening as he repeated the instructions each time he stopped, waiting, her focus divided between the water and the chance of escape. Finally,

he stopped in front of her and held out the last container. He didn't repeat his instructions as he had each time before. He looked directly at her, but his gaze seemed unfocused, distracted.

Miranda was far more interested in the water, though. Swallowing with an effort against her bone dry throat, she took the bottle and studied it. The neck had been formed into a spout and something had been used as a stopper to seal the water in. Even as she pulled the stopper out it occurred to her that Carol was probably just as thirsty as she was. No doubt if she made off with the water they'd get her more, but it might take a while if they gave chase, and she was pretty sure they would.

Reluctantly, she handed the bottle to Carol. "You drink first."

Carol grabbed it eagerly, nearly snatching it out of her hand, turned it up, and squirted the water all over her face.

She could see from the alien's expression that he was torn between a desire to laugh and irritation. "You must take care not to squeeze until you have the spout in your mouth," he said, his voice a little shaky.

Carol glared at him and tried again—successfully, gulping the water until he reached for the bottle and then struggling briefly with him to keep it when he tried to take it away.

Miranda felt like choking her. Not only had she tried to drink the whole damned thing, but she'd wasted god only knew how much by squirting it all over her face. Taking the bottle when he finally offered it to her, she tipped it up as he'd instructed and filled her mouth, swishing the moisture around a moment before she swallowed.

He was studying her approvingly when she lowered the bottle and glanced at him a little irritably, wondering why the hell he was crouched in front of her instead of leaving. With more reluctance than before, she handed the bottle back to Carol. Instead of watching her while she drank, though, she glanced casually down the line to see what the other two Hirachi were up to.

It didn't help her feelings to discover they'd been moving steadily closer while she and Carol and the 'waterboy' had been fighting over her bottle of water.

And he didn't seem inclined to move either, damn it!

Taking the bottle when it was handed to her again, she slid another glance at the approaching Hirachi. It was now or never, she decided abruptly. Tipping the bottle back, she took another drought. Instead of handing it to him when he reached for it, however, she slammed it into the side of his head as hard as she could. Fortunately, since the bottle wasn't really all that hard, the Hirachi had crouched in front of her. The blow was enough to knock him off balance.

Shooting to her feet the moment he teetered and began to fall, clutching her bottle/weapon to her like a football, Miranda leapt over him before he even hit the ground and raced toward the gate as fast as she could fly. All hell broke loose behind her, but she'd expected it. She just hoped she could make it into the jungle and hide before they'd gathered their wits enough to give chase.

Pain shot up from her sprained ankle every time her weight came down on it, worse now because she didn't have the 'support' of the damned manacle, but she gritted her teeth and determinedly ignored it beyond trying to make sure she didn't twist it again. She could favor it, maybe, once she'd managed to reach the cover of the jungle.

The women were screaming like banshees as she skidded around the gate.

Uncertain of whether they were cursing her for leaving them behind or shouting encouragement, she risked a quick glance in that direction as she rounded the gate.

The Hirachi she'd hit was still sprawled in the dirt, staring at her with a look of bemusement and what almost seemed like admiration on his face. Teron, hands on hips, wore a similar expression. The third man had recovered enough to throw down the food he had and charge after her.

Panting for breath, Miranda careened through the opening. She caught a glimpse of Khan, far down the trail now with the trader.

Fuck! Dismissing the discovery that she was now caught between two of them when she'd been sure Khan had had enough time to get too far to be a problem, she charged full tilt toward the jungle. The foliage sliced at her bare skin as she plunged through the barrier it created. Ignoring the sting, she forced her way deeper for a few moments and then changed directions, hoping she hadn't gotten turned around and would find herself heading directly toward the path Khan was on.

Behind her, she heard a shout from the 'caterer' and a response from Khan ahead of her.

Either he could bellow really loudly, Miranda thought uneasily, or he was closer than she thought he should be. Between their bellows and the noise they were making thrashing through the brush, it seemed pretty obvious they were closing in on her. Reversing directions again, Miranda charged toward the path—or where she thought the path lay, hoping she could race across it and into the jungle on the other side. She hadn't wanted to go that way. She knew it most likely led to the sea—unless the body of water she'd seen wasn't an ocean at all.

With a mixture of relief and dismay, she broke from the jungle and stumbled across the beaten path within a few moments—dismay because she was a lot closer to it than she'd realized. It seemed obvious the vegetation was so thick she'd be lost in a very short length of time. She wanted to elude the 'masters'. She didn't want to get so hopelessly lost that she couldn't find her bearings, couldn't find her way to food or water.

She didn't have time to think, or worry, about it at the moment, though.

Dismissing the fear, she bounded across the path and into the vegetation on the other side. Despite the thundering of her heart in her ears, however, she heard crashing sounds so close behind her she expected any moment to be grabbed.

And she still screamed when two arms snaked around her.

Dropping to her knees before the arms could close tightly enough to cage her, she slipped through his grip, rolled between his legs and, jerking her knees to her chest, drove both feet into his legs just at the back of his knees. Unfortunately, he'd already begun to turn toward her. She managed to buckle his knees, but instead of landing on them facing safely away from her, he began to topple toward her.

Screaming when she saw the mountain of flesh crashing toward her, Miranda tried to roll out of the way. The thick foliage prevented it, allowing only enough room for her to roll onto her side and no further. Before she could manage to get her arms and legs under her and shove to her feet, he crashed into her, taking her down with him.

Stunned, Miranda inventoried herself for anything that might be crushed, maimed, or mangled. Either she'd managed to clear the majority of his weight, or he'd twisted away from her even as he fell—maybe both. In any case, she discovered she'd only been clobbered by one hand and meaty forearm. Grunting with effort, she tried to wiggle out

from under his arm and jump to her feet again. His arm tightened. Gripping his hand with both of hers, she tried to peel his fingers back. She thought she'd succeeded, briefly, but then discovered he'd only lifted his hand to get a better grip. Which they both discovered wasn't as easy as it might have been due entirely to the fact that she was slick with sweat by that time and as slippery as a greased pig—loathe though she was to consider that metaphor in conjunction with herself.

Squirming and shoving at him, she managed to claw her way almost free of him even as he rolled to try to add his weight to tip the scales in his favor.

His face landed in the crack of her ass.

The moment she felt his nose spear between the cheeks of her ass, Miranda reared upward, twisted around, and popped him on the top of his head three times before he managed to grab her wrist. Khan lifted his head, narrowing his eyes at her. "Gods damn it, woman! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Miranda glared back at him. "Guess!" she snarled.

Briefly, he looked taken aback at her vehemence, but then a scowl descended over his face.

Miranda discovered he could 'do' rage like no one she'd ever seen in her life.

Maybe it had to do with the fact that he was closer to seven feet tall than six and about as broad across the fucking shoulders as she was tall?

"Did you catch her?"

"Yes!" Khan snarled in response to the question of the other man, who sounded like he was somewhere behind them.

"Is she hurt?"

"Not yet."

Miranda's eyes widened.

There was a pregnant pause from the other Hirachi. "Khan?"

Khan heaved an irritated breath. "Go back to the compound, Adar, and make certain none of the other little fools decided to take a stroll through the jungle."

Shifting his grip from her waist to her arms, Khan rolled onto one hip and dragged her to him, studying her face almost curiously as his anger began to dissipate. "Why did you run?"

Miranda debated whether honesty was the best policy or if sarcasm might get her killed. He seemed to have his temper under control, however. "I thought the chance at freedom was worth the risk," she said finally.

His dark brows drew together. It was confusion that clouded his eyes, however, not anger. "I freed you."

She gave him a look. "Thanks," she said dryly. "I'll just be going now, then."

A mixture of anger and amusement flickered in his eyes. "You would not survive one night in this jungle," he said finally.

"I considered that. I thought it beat the alternative."

He studied her for a moment, his expression growing steadily angrier as that sank in. He tamped it with obvious effort. Getting to his feet abruptly, he clamped one hand around her upper arm and stalked through the jungle, following the trail he'd trampled down in his chase. Miranda kept up the best she could, trying to maintain her dignity. Her ankle was killing her by now, though, and she didn't have the adrenaline rush to help her ignore the pain.

Either he ignored it or he was just too furious to notice it until they'd regained the path. Uttering an irritated breath, he released her arm, looped his arm around her back, and scooped the other beneath her knees. She grabbed his shoulders instinctively to keep from falling as he swung her into the air. Uncomfortable when she found herself almost face to face with him, she considered removing her hands, but there was no where to put her arm except around his neck.

She tried to ignore the fact that her position squashed her left breast against his chest, the hard muscles beneath her palm, the tickle of his swinging hair as it brushed across the back of her hand and arm where it rested along his back.

She tried not to look at his hard, angry profile, or study his 'elf' ears, tried to ignore the heat of his body and the fact that her damp skin clung to his. She did her best not to breathe deeply because every time she did she felt his intriguing scent winding its way deeper and deeper inside of her and felt a warming shimmy begin in her belly.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," she said finally.

He turned his head to meet her gaze briefly and looked away again.

Miranda swallowed with an effort, realizing she'd offended him a lot more deeply than she'd realized. A spark of anger followed the guilt.

He hadn't made any bones about the fact that he found her, and all of the women, completely unappealing! Why should she worry about wounding his ego?

In uncomfortable silence, he carried her back to where Teron was tending the last of the injuries, bent over to settle her gently on the ground, and then straightened and left.

Miranda watched him as he strode away, relieved that he didn't seem inclined to punish her for running, confused about it if it came to that. The 'caterer', Adar, she remembered, blocked her view of him by crouching beside her, and she dragged her gaze from Khan to look at the man uneasily. Amusement danced in his eyes to her surprise. "You run very fast, little warrior. I would like to see how fast you can run uninjured."

Miranda felt her cheeks reddening.

Teron uttered a disapproving snort. "The ankle is worse."

Miranda glanced at him. Apparently noticing even though he was focused on wrapping Lynn Patterson's knee, he slid a glance at her. His gaze flicked over her. Shaking his head, he returned his attention to his patient.

When Miranda looked at Adar again, she saw that he was holding out a flat looking disk that she supposed must be used as a dish. There were several completely unidentifiable food-like substances on it.

"The other females did not seem to care for the food, but it's all that we have just now," he said almost apologetically.

A guilty blush climbed Miranda's cheeks as it occurred to her to wonder if she'd given her thoughts away. She managed a smile as she reached to take the 'dish'. "Thank you."

He nodded, eyeing her speculatively. "Try to eat it," he said gently.

She felt her smile tighten. "Are you going to watch?"

He blinked at her, his skin darkening, and then chuckled uncomfortably. "No. I will go away and pretend I don't notice when you bury it in the sand."

Consternation filled her. "Is that what the others did?"

"Some."

It made her feel badly, and she wasn't even the one who'd behaved so rudely.

"We haven't eaten anything in a long time. That makes it hard to eat and ... hold it down."

"I've fetched more water," the 'waterboy'—Gerek she deduced since Khan had identified Adar for her—broke in. "Mayhap you could drink a little and then nibble and wash it down?"

Miranda studied his earnest face. "I think I lost the other one ... uh"

He grinned, rueful amusement dancing in his eyes. "You held onto it longer than I would have if I'd had Khan in behind me," he said with a chuckle.

Miranda couldn't help but grin, albeit wryly. "I didn't actually know it was Khan. I thought he was further away, and it was *him* that was right behind me." She nodded at Adar.

"Adar."

"I am Gerek."

"I'm"

"In need of having your ankle seen to," Teron broke in before she could finish.

She glanced at him, but as bad as her ankle was throbbing, she didn't particularly want to hike her ankle in the air when Adar and Gerek were already hovering in front of her and looked way too fascinated in her 'assets'. Taking the bottle from Gerek, she planted it solidly between her legs in the dirt and finally yielded to Teron's determination to lift her foot.

Gerek and Adar exchanged a look and politely got to their feet. Gerek sent her a wicked smile, however, his eyes gleaming with devilment.

"I'm Miranda," Miranda said, looking up at them, "but everyone calls me Randy."

Either it confused them or they were just having trouble trying to pronounce a name obviously strange to them. Nodding, they both turned and left. She watched them until they'd reached the water's edge and waded in.

"I will have to carry you to the water if you're to go in with the others. I think it would be good to soak the ankle, but not good to try to swim. In a few days, mayhap."

Miranda transferred her attention to Teron's face, studying what she could see of it as he focused on wrapping her ankle. There was a faint frown between his brows, but she thought it was from concentration.

"Is this too tight?" he asked after a moment, lifting his head.

Miranda looked down at her ankle, focusing on it. "I don't think so," she said finally.

He flicked his fingers lightly along the bottom of her foot. "Do ...?"

Caught completely off guard when he tickled her foot, Miranda uttered a choked laugh and tried to snatch her foot away from him.

He looked at her with a mixture of surprise, confusion, and amusement. "I suppose that answers that question. I will check it again in a while and make certain it isn't so tight as to cut off blood flow. For now you must bathe the cuts and scratches and then I will put ointment on those that seem to need it. I will carry you down to the water if you'll allow it."

Miranda stared at him unhappily. She didn't want to offend him, too, but the plain fact of the matter was that she was too acutely self-conscious about her nakedness now to feel comfortable with the idea. Maybe it seemed seriously belated—and maybe it

was—but she'd been in such a state when she'd arrived that there hadn't been a lot of room for worrying about that particular aspect of her situation. The pain hadn't worn off, but the shock had, at least mostly, sufficiently that she'd become increasingly aware of and uncomfortable about her nudity.

She supposed the episode with Khan had really brought it home. Right up until he'd caught her and they'd wallowed all over one another in the jungle, her focus had been on everything else—fear, pain, and survival. There hadn't been anything the least bit sexual about the wrestling match when she'd been trying to get away and he'd been determined to prevent it. She was sure neither one of them had thought beyond that.

And yet, from the moment he'd swung her up into his arms and against his hard chest, it seemed to put a whole new light on it. She'd not only been abruptly completely conscious of him as a virile, and extremely attractive male—alien or not—but the wrestling match, in retrospect, became almost ... like foreplay, as if it had primed her awareness. She suddenly remembered every touch even though she hadn't consciously been aware of it at the time.

Beyond that, it dawned on her forcefully that her attempted escape had brought her into the limelight, so to speak. Khan had carried her back. Gerek and Adar had been waiting with food and water to tempt her and Teron to treat her injuries. Maybe the other women wouldn't think anything about it. Maybe, if they'd thought about it at all, they would be sympathetic that she'd suddenly been surrounded by aliens, but she knew damned well if the four males hovering over her had been human men the rest of the women would be contemplating cutting her throat for being the center of attention.

Maybe they would be anyway since the harsh fact was that they were completely at the mercy of these Hirachi males and the other women would feel threatened in the sense that they'd see it as trying to make points with their new 'masters'?

It was unreasonable, she thought resentfully. She hadn't gotten any more attention than any of the others—just all at one time—but there was nothing really reasonable or fair about survival mode.

Before she could think of a polite way to decline, a shadow fell over the two of them. Even as she looked up, she was hit with an avalanche of fabric. She jerked instinctively, expecting pain until her mind identified what she'd been pelted with.

Khan's expression was as thunderous as it had been the last time she'd seen him. Having dumped the gowns he'd brought them on the dirt beside her—half on top of her—he pivoted and stalked toward the other side of the compound.

Teron twisted around to stare at his back.

Miranda watched him for several moments herself and finally pushed the gowns off of her that had fallen on top of her. "Uh ... my ankle's a little better now. I think with the wrapping I can hobble down to the water on my own steam. It would probably be better anyway ... to keep mobile, you know."

Teron leaned forward and scooped her up despite her protest. "It will be better if you stay off it as much as possible," he contradicted her, both his voice and his expression grim.

She slipped her arm around his shoulders, wiggling a little to try to put at least a little distance between herself and his bare chest. She heard him grinding his teeth and flicked a quick look at his face. He was studying her, she discovered, from beneath hooded lids, his golden eyes tumultuous. Chastened, she subsided, realizing abruptly that

not only had she not succeeded in putting any distance between them, but her wiggling was only making things worse since she was rubbing all over him.

Chapter Five

Teron strode quickly toward the water and plunked Miranda on the sandy soil near the lazily lapping waves with the air of discarding bad luggage. Straightening without a word, he stalked down the beach and into the water.

"My, it must be nice to be the prom queen," one of the women commented in a perfectly audible voice that she'd lowered just enough to give a pretense of not intending to be heard.

It brought Miranda's focus back instantly from her contemplation of the healer. It was hard to guess which one of the women had made the remark, though. It seemed a good half of them were giving her evil looks. The others were pointedly gazing off into space as if they were alone in the universe.

She'd expected it, and it still unnerved her and pissed her off at the same time. Deciding to ignore the remark, she shifted down the sand in a sort of crab walk to reach the water, wondering if she should try to bathe off without getting the bandage wet. There didn't actually seem to be any way she could accomplish both, however, so she decided to just disregard the binding and focus on bathing.

The water was salty, which seemed to rule out any possibility that it could be anything but an ocean. It occurred to her after a few minutes that she'd simply assumed it was water and only water, just like she was used to back on Earth, and that it could have any sort of chemicals in it that could be toxic to her—to humans. It didn't seem to bother the Hirachi, though, and although they were from an entirely different world, she thought—unless he'd been lying—that the insistence by the lizard-man that humans and Hirachi were closely related genetically must mean that what was alright for one was alright for the other.

That was probably dangerous thinking, but she didn't know much about science. Genetics, she understood, on the forensics end, at least. Beyond the narrow scope of science directly related to her job, though, she didn't know a hell of a lot, and didn't even remember much of what she'd learned in school. It had taken all she could do to memorize the elemental table, the names of the planets and moons in her own solar system—basic science—and she hadn't had any use for it since so she hadn't retained a hell of a lot.

The salt stung, which was what had brought about her sudden awareness of and anxiety about the water, but she was pretty sure it was just a typical salt-on-open-wound reaction. She hadn't realized how cut up she was from her little adventure until she began scrubbing salt water all over herself.

She hoped to god there wasn't anything toxic in the plants.

Deborah settled beside her after a few moments. "Do you think that was ... wise?"

Miranda glanced at her. She didn't have to think hard to figure out what the topic of conversation was. "Probably not."

Deborah seemed to wrestle with something for a moment. "They're pissed off

because they think you endangered them.”

Miranda turned to stare at her. “Exactly how did they arrive at that brilliant conclusion?”

Deborah’s lips tightened. “We don’t know anything about these monsters,” she said pointedly. “What’s to say they wouldn’t retaliate on the ones handy if one of us got away?”

Anger swelled in Miranda. It took her a moment to realize that not all of it was defensive. She was offended by Deborah’s reference to the Hirachi as monsters. She didn’t really want to examine that at the moment, though. “Look at it this way,” she said tightly. “I tested the waters. Now we know that we aren’t allowed to leave the compound, that they will come after us and bring us back. We know that, even if furious—and believe me Khan was—they won’t hurt us. They’ve given us food, water, tended our injuries, and Khan insisted on getting clothes for us and some way to test the food to make sure it won’t kill us. I don’t think they’re monsters.”

“I guess all of us should just appreciate you ‘testing’ the waters for us?”

Miranda glared at her. “I don’t think I give a fuck one way or the other, lady! In fact, I’m sure I don’t!”

Miranda’s furious comeback seemed to diffuse Deborah’s anger or, more likely, it set off an alarm, making her aware that she was dealing with an unknown quantity. She swallowed with an effort. “You’re a cop.”

“*Was* a cop,” Miranda said pointedly. “I’m way the hell out of my jurisdiction here, to say the least. On Earth, I was a cop. Before we were taken, I had a job. *Now*, I don’t have a job. I don’t have a duty to anybody here but myself.” She made the announcement loud enough that she was sure everyone could hear and swept them with a narrow eyed, challenging glare. “We’ll *all* be better off if we try to stick together and not get into backbiting, but we all need to try to accept that this is real life. It might seem like a nightmare, but we aren’t going to wake up from it. We’re going to have to deal with it.

“I’m not going to apologize to any damned one of you for trying to save myself, so if you’re waiting for it, don’t hold your breath! If you think snubbing me and giving me nasty looks is going to hold me back for one second, don’t hold your breath. This isn’t a popularity contest. It’s survival.”

Silence reigned for a while. Gradually, so subtly Miranda didn’t even notice at first, the women began to drift in her direction.

“What do you think we should do?”

Miranda, who’d been deep in her own thoughts, lifted her head at the question and discovered she’d been surrounded by the other women. It was Carol who’d spoken, however. Mildly alarmed at the realization that they were looking to her for answers when she didn’t have any, she scanned the faces around her. Frowning, she considered the question carefully. “I couldn’t begin to guess what their real motives might be. I don’t understand these people anymore than any of you do. Let’s suppose, though, that they’re people—not monsters—and that they’re at least somewhat like us in ways besides the physical similarity. If we can suppose that, then we can also suppose that they’re motivated by pretty much the same things we are—wants and needs.

“They bought us. There’s no point in arguing that we weren’t for sale. It happened, and there wasn’t a damned thing we could do to prevent it. Looking at it from

that viewpoint—and the suspicion that we cost a lot—they'd want to take care of their investment, right?"

"That damned lizard didn't seem to give a damned how well he took care of his investment," Joy Freemont pointed out.

Miranda thought about it and shrugged. "True, but he was a trader. One, they don't get attached to the things they trade—it's only valuable for the trade. I doubt he saw us any differently than he does anything else. He doesn't worry about how the things he trades *feel*, just about whether or not they're intact when they arrive at the trade place.

"Two, he isn't like us—or the Hirachi. He said we weren't physically compatible, so he didn't see us in the same light as he might have if we had been.

"To the Hirachi, we have a different kind of value. They didn't buy us for trade. They bought us for their own comfort."

A note of hysteria had entered the clamoring voices of the women as they responded to Miranda's comments, which had actually been as much an attempt on her part to try to reason through the puzzle as to inform—maybe *more* to get her own mind straight. She was used to it. Whenever she was working on a case, she, and whomever she was working with, usually just her partner, Calvin, bounced their thoughts back and forth while they worked out the mystery they were trying to solve.

The babble was hard to decipher, but she got the general idea.

She shook her head at them, but she didn't make any attempt to bring any kind of order to the discussion. She wasn't their leader. She didn't *want* to be their leader. She didn't want to be responsible for anyone but herself—not in this situation.

In her job, she'd been responsible for people just like them, but that had been matters of law. This was a whole new playing field—in every way. They didn't seem to grasp that none of their laws meant jack-shit here. The only reason they had back on Earth was because of the system, which each level, more or less, supported. Here, there was no system. She could spout law at the top of her lungs and nobody was going to back her up. She didn't *have* an army behind her—other cops, prosecutors, judges, or jails.

"You're saying you think we should just do whatever they want?" Deborah demanded finally when she didn't share any input in the discussion.

Miranda shook her head at them. With an effort, she managed to get to her feet. Planting her hands on her hips, she looked at them with absolute disgust. "There's no American embassy. There's no Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines. There's no cops, no lawyers, no judges, no jails, no weapons—*pretend* you're all alone on a desert island and you know that nobody—*nobody* is going to rescue you.

"*Pretend* those beings over there are natives and they can eat you, kill you, torture you—do anything they want and nobody's going to stop them.

"Because that's the reality here. Now ... you can be stupid, behave as if you're going to be rescued, the cavalry will arrive and beat the shit out of all those bad old aliens over there and take you home where you have rights. Or you can be smart and make yourself useful and be just as nice as you can possibly be in the hope that, if you're useful, and you're really nice, they'll let you live.

"I've got no intention of trying to tell any of you what to do or how to do it. I don't have time to baby-sit the stupid. I'm worried about my own ass. But that's the

way I see it and that's the way I plan to play it.

"Make up your mind whether you agree or disagree—I don't care. Just don't get in my fucking way. I'm not playing the 'let's be stupid together' game just so all of you can feel better because 'everybody's doing it'.

"Khan brought us some clothes. I'm going to claim mine—*not* because I think they can't contain their lust—they've been doing a damned good job of it so far—but because it's a lot more comfortable, and I'm not going to ignore any comfort offered."

It was a damned shame she couldn't just stalk off after that glorious speech, but she was handicapped by an ankle that was killing her, binding or no binding. She hobbled a while and hopped.

Deborah came up beside her after a few minutes. "Want help?"

Miranda glanced at her and finally smiled reluctantly. "I did say I wasn't going to turn down any offers of help, didn't I?"

Deborah looked at her assessingly a moment and finally smiled back. "You're a bitch. You know that, don't you?" she commented as she slipped an arm around Miranda's waist.

Grateful, Miranda put an arm across her shoulders. "Being one of a kind is so taxing," she said dryly.

Carol, who'd arrived in time to hear the remark, gave her a resentful look but finally shrugged, looping her arm around Miranda's waist from the other side. It was easier with one arm around each of them—awkward, but still easier. Holding her injured foot up, she swung between them. It still hurt every time she jarred the ankle, but not as much.

"You'll at least admit we've got reason," Carol said irritably.

"I'm not arguing the point. You can even call me Queen Bitch if you want to, but it isn't as if I'm the only woman here acting like one. I'm just as scared as anybody else here, and just as confused and worried."

It was a relief to reach the spot where Khan had dumped the gowns on top of her. Settling on the dirt, she grabbed one up as Carol and Deborah did, examined it with a mixture of disgust and nausea and finally pulled it over her head and shoved her arms through the holes.

"Lovely," Deborah commented.

"Yes, there's nothing like having such a wonderful reminder of our voyage out," Carol said sarcastically. "I feel like puking just looking at it."

"I don't suppose anything lizard-man had had would have good vibes attached to it," Miranda said.

"God I feel sexy! Why the hell couldn't the bastard have forked up the clothes we were wearing when he kidnapped us?" Carol said tightly.

Miranda shrugged. "I don't want to rain on your parade," she said dryly, "but we've been standing around here stark naked since we arrived. If that didn't give them a lift, I don't think anything we could put on would do it for them. And, I might add, as revolting as this fucking gown is, I can't picture my slinky little black dress faring well here. I'd be back to naked within a week at most."

"Panties would've been nice," Deborah said sourly. "I still feel naked without panties."

"You're really thinking about ... making up to them?" Carol asked tentatively.

Miranda thought that over. "You know, Carol, attitude has a lot to do with quality of life. You can look at a turd and say its shit and kick dirt over it or sweep it away in disgust—or you can drop it in a hole and plant something in it and grow it."

"Yuk. I guess I get the idea ... but yuk. Did anybody ever point out that you're really blunt?"

"Several times," Miranda said with amusement. "And shockingly crude at times. Sometimes it takes being blunt and crude to get through to people, though. You know they usually don't pay any attention when you stick to polite. Anyway, I can't help it. It's just the way I am—blunt. The crude I picked up from working around men all the time ... I'm not really good at kicking habits, either."

"So ... you're saying you would screw one?" Carol said in a 'let's get this straight' tone.

Miranda burst out laughing. The situation wasn't funny, but Carol's 'blindness' was. Maybe she shouldn't have thought so, but she did. "I don't know, Carol—Do you think anything short of a fucking Sherman tank would stop even *one* of them if they were bent on screwing you?"

Carol looked at her with fear, and Miranda felt a touch of guilt. What was the point in trying to pretend it wasn't so, though? How was that going to help her ... or any of them?

"I think we can rule out rape here," she added after a few moments. "Don't you think they would have already if they were like that? I mean, Khan was pretty blunt about us being seriously inferior to their own women. I don't think he was just trying to talk the trader down on the price. Maybe part of it, but let's face it—we're generally more drawn to people of our own race, aren't we? As strange as they look to us, we have to accept that we also look strange to them."

"Maybe," Deborah agreed a little doubtfully. "But I've known men that would fuck a goat if they could get it to stand still long enough."

Miranda snickered. "Maybe that's why we haven't seen any wildlife yet?"

Carol and Deborah both looked at her, horrified, and then started laughing, too.

Carol's two 'clubbing' buddies joined them while they were still giggling over it like kids. Smiling faintly, the two grabbed a gown and pulled it on. "What's so funny? I could use a laugh," Joy said finally, suspicion threading her voice that the three of them were laughing at everyone else, or them in particular.

Miranda caught that instantly. She didn't know if her insight into human nature was a good thing or a bad thing sometimes.

It seemed to go over Carol's head—lucky girl! She grinned at her friends and shared the joke.

It was really unfortunate that she was in the middle of it when Teron returned with the salves he'd promised.

Everyone fell silent instantly, staring at him wide eyed and trying to figure out if they'd been speaking English or his language. Miranda didn't know herself. Whatever the lizard-man had done to them it had made speaking and understanding the Hirachi tongue as natural to them as English—and as thoughtless.

Miranda couldn't tell from his expression. He seemed stiff and cool, but that could've been because the very fact that everybody had gone silent at one time implied that the discussion concerned him, or at least the Hirachi. It might also have been

because he'd seemed miffed with her after he'd carried her to the water, and she was pretty sure of what had brought that on—her apparent reluctance to have him touch her.

His coolness when he'd seemed almost friendly before unnerved everyone and Miranda was no exception. She had to strip again when he reached her since she'd been naked when she'd run through the jungle and she had more cuts and scratches from that than she'd had before she'd run. Bundling her ugly gown in her lap, she held her hair out of the way while he salved the broken skin along her back, trying to keep from shivering every time she felt the stroke of his finger.

It wasn't cold.

She was uncomfortably warm by the time he'd finished her back. It occurred to her that it might be better, for her, at least, if she tended her own boobos on her front. He seemed offended already, though. She didn't want to add to it. Khan had really taken it badly when she'd implied 'death before dishonor' was more to her taste.

Which she hadn't actually intended to imply.

Maybe he hadn't taken it that way either? Maybe he'd just been insulted that she'd questioned his motives for buying them at all?

She'd like to know—needed to, but she was afraid her understanding of human nature couldn't really be extended to them, whatever she'd told the other women to the contrary. From the exchanges she'd heard between them they certainly *seemed* very human-like in behavior, but how much could she trust her evaluation when she knew she was still trying to measure everything by the yardstick she knew?

She discovered she needn't have worried. He salved her scratches with the sort of impersonal professionalism she was used to with doctors and moved on to Carol.

When he'd finished with Carol and left and she thought he was out of hearing range, she glanced at Carol. "Do you think we were speaking English when he came up?"

Carol reddened. "I don't know."

* * * *

Khan was not pleased with the garments the trader handed him. The material they were made from seemed sturdy enough but when he held one up to study it and saw that the things were nothing more than squares with openings for head, arms, and legs—and ugly beyond that because it was virtually colorless—he turned and glared at the bastard. "You have nothing better than this?"

The trader looked taken aback and then indignant. "They are slaves!"

Khan ground his teeth, struggling with the urge to pound the sniveling worm into the dirt. "They are not slaves—now," he growled finally. "These things would not appeal to any female! They are ... graceless! They will not enhance their beauty. They do not even have the benefit of being practical! There is nothing to protect the arms or legs."

The trader's face hardened. "It is all that I have. If you like, I will see what I can find to trade that might be more to your liking and bring them when I am this way again."

"They were not naked when you took them!" Khan said. "Where are those garments?"

The trader's eyes slid away. "Damaged and discarded. I had to decontaminate them to be sure they were not carrying harmful microbes. It's standard procedure."

He was lying and Khan knew it. Short of taking the ship apart, however, he saw

no way around settling for the ugly things and it seemed unlikely the slime would have the garments with him, in any case. No doubt they were on the main ship, in his holds, to be traded the next time the gods damned bastard stopped.

As angry as he was about it, he dismissed it. The garments would be something to cover them with, at least, some protection from the elements.

It also occurred to him that it might be for the best all the way around. It was probably *not* a good idea to enhance their beauty—at all. It was going to be difficult enough to ignore them as it was. At least with the shapeless things it would not be as hard to overlook the shape beneath ... he hoped.

"I need the device to test the food."

Reluctance flickered across the trader's face, but he motioned for Khan to follow him and went inside, digging through his stores until he found a scanner. Khan watched him suspiciously while he 'programmed' it and then told him to give him a demonstration. Supposedly, the requirements of the females had been programmed in and also the elements detrimental to them. He had no way of being certain, of course, but once he'd been shown how to use it, he tested it on plants he'd become familiar with and saw that it noted plants he knew to be poisonous or edible to the Hirachi.

He would have to trust that the trader wanted to trade with them again badly enough that he wouldn't deliberately create a problem by killing the females.

Stacking his goods together, he headed back to the compound. When he reached it, he set his goods down and paused long enough to close the gates. He would barricade them when he'd found something heavy enough, he decided, but he thought the gates themselves were heavy enough the women probably wouldn't be able to open them—not without several of them pulling at them anyway.

Most of the women, he saw, had moved down to the beach.

The one with red hair and green eyes was surrounded by Hirachi.

His gut tightened. Anger surged through him even though he realized that Adar and Gerek were there to give her food and water, just as he'd told them to, and that Teron was trying to tend her wounds.

It was the *way* they were attending her, he finally decided, that spawned the resentment, the sense of possessiveness.

Or maybe it was the fact that she was smiling at them?

He didn't know, but he didn't particularly care for the gut churning anger that arose in him. Struggling with it, he picked up the goods he'd set down when he'd closed the gates and started toward the intimate little knot just as Adar and Gerek finally took themselves off.

It eased some of the sense of possessiveness, but he discovered he didn't really like the way Teron was looking at her either.

And he sure as hell didn't like the way she was looking at Teron.

Grinding his teeth, he stalked toward the pair, dumped the stack of gowns beside them and strode toward the beach, certain that the sooner he put distance between himself and that red headed female the better off he'd be.

Chapter Six

As much as it disturbed Miranda that they might've shaken what had seemed to be a budding understanding with at least one of the Hirachi it occurred to her almost as soon as he disappeared into the water that there wasn't a single Hirachi in sight. Certain she must be wrong, Miranda scanned the entire compound more carefully, searching for any previously unnoticed vantage point where they might have guards placed.

"They're gone," she said to no one in particular after she'd searched the area for several minutes.

The other women, who'd been engaged in low voiced conversations all around her quieted a few at the time as the comment made the rounds. They began to scan the compound as Miranda had, a few growing bold enough to get up and walk around a short distance from the group.

"They all went into the sea," Deborah said after a few minutes. "Did anyone see any come out again?"

No one had. Curious now, everybody who could got up and moved cautiously closer to the beach to stare out over the water. Miranda pushed herself to her feet and hobbled toward the gate. Dismay filled her when she saw it had been closed, and irritation. What had she been doing that she hadn't noticed, she wondered?

Khan had dropped the gowns practically on top of her, she remembered. She'd been surrounded by Gerek, Adar, and Teron before that. It must have been Khan who'd closed the gate. She hadn't noticed because she was too busy watching his angry departure and then Teron had carried her down the beach.

"Shit!" she muttered under her breath, wondering if it was even worth the effort to check it. Deciding it was, she paused to rest a few moments and, alternating between an awkward hobble, hopping, and resting, made her way down the wall until she'd nearly reached the gates.

They were thrust open just before she reached them. Halting abruptly, she stared at the panel, waiting to see who, or what, was entering.

Khan strode through, glanced almost casually in the direction where everyone had been sitting, and pinned her with his gaze. For a split second, there was surprise in his eyes but it took him less than five seconds after that to correctly assess why Miranda was standing within a few yards of the gate, one leg lifted like a stork, her hand braced on the wall, her eyes wide with the most innocent expression she could manage.

His face turned stony, his lips flattening into a hard line. Instead of approaching her, however, he turned and grasped something and lifted it. Every considerable muscle in his back and arms flexed and bulged with the strain. Miranda was so mesmerized by the display of power that it was several moments before she could drag her attention from his muscles to the thing he'd lifted.

A jolt went through her when she finally did.

The beast he half dragged half carried through the gates was damned near as big as he was—thankfully dead—and looked like something out of a nightmare. Its hide

looked plated. It had three horns on its head, three spiny horn-like protrusions on the tip of the tail that looked to be around six feet long, and a mouth full of very large teeth that looked big enough to bite her in half with one chomp.

She stared after Khan blankly as he hauled the thing down toward the water's edge and then glanced toward the gate again. Three more Hirachi followed him, each carrying a beast. Behind them were a half dozen Hirachi carrying logs that looked big enough to build a log cabin.

The last one in, set his log down, closed the gates and then picked his burden up again and headed down to the beach to join the others.

The women who'd gone to check on the Hirachi, having discovered at some point that the Hirachi were behind them, sailed back toward their side of the compound like a flock of startled chickens—complete with unnerved squawks and flapping arms.

Miranda glanced back at the gates again, studied them for a long moment, and finally turned to head back. She discovered when she did that Khan had dropped his burden and fixed her with a laser stare. Pretending she hadn't noticed, she hobbled back to join her own group.

She didn't know if the men had brought those horrible things in just to demonstrate what inhabited the jungle outside the gates, but whether it had been their intention or not, it was certainly effective. *She* was cowed. She'd completely lost interest in heading into the jungle again any time soon—maybe never.

The ritual that followed even turned Miranda's stomach, despite the fact that she'd thought she was pretty calloused to gruesome. Pulling knives from their boots that were roughly the size of machetes, they began butchering the things while the men who'd brought the logs set about building a bonfire to roast them on.

Miranda discovered if she could just focus her gaze away from what they were actually doing, it was sort of fascinating to watch them—because the beasts they were wrestling with were undoubtedly damned heavy and it took strength to gut them, take them apart and lift the carcasses onto the spits after they'd cleaned them for cooking.

The display of glistening muscles was enough to put her into a trance.

The smell of roasting meat had already begun to waft across the compound when the hunters finished their task and headed down the beach to pitch the entrails as far out into the water as they could.

Then they stripped to bathe.

Miranda hadn't actually expected quite the show she got, but she couldn't have torn her gaze away if the other end of the compound had suddenly exploded. Khan's buttocks and legs were as muscular as his arms and just as beautifully formed. She couldn't say that she was exactly surprised. She'd noticed the snug fit of his trousers. She just hadn't expected the view to be quite as lovely as it was.

The front view was a shock that wasn't quite as pleasant. In fact, although it was mesmerizing, it was downright unnerving. Her gaze was so riveted to the piece of meat swinging from his lower belly that she it was several moments after he'd frozen before it dawned on her that he'd stopped with one leg in his trousers and one out.

Her head snapped upwards, her gaze clashing with his for a shocked moment before she managed to look away.

Glancing uncomfortably toward the other women to see if they'd noticed her fascination with the anatomy of the Hirachi in general and Khan in particular, she

discovered that they were all staring toward the Hirachi men with glazed looks on their faces.

"Oh god! Please don't tell me I looked like that!" she muttered under her breath. She couldn't do anything about the others, but she reached over to her nearest neighbor, Deborah, and pinched her. Deborah's head snapped toward her guiltily. She stared at Miranda blankly for a moment, glanced back at the Hirachi, and then at the others and covered her face with her hands, uttering a snorting, hysterical giggle.

"Stop it!" Miranda hissed, giving her a hard nudge. "They'll hear you!"

Deborah gasped a couple of desperate breaths. "I can't," she muttered against her hands.

Grabbing her, Miranda dragged her into a tight embrace, pounding on her back. "There, there! Don't cry! You poor thing! It's alright," she said a little desperately.

Deborah burrowed her face against Miranda's neck, snorting.

It tickled. Miranda struggled with the nearly irresistible urge to laugh herself. "I swear to god, Deborah, if you make me start laughing I'm going to kill you if they don't kill us first," she whispered unsteadily. "Quit tickling my neck."

Deborah moved her face, dragged in an unsteady breath and lay limply against Miranda for a moment. "I think I'm alright now."

Easing her hold on the other woman, she looked at her a little doubtfully. Deborah stared back at her, flicked a glance at the puzzled, curious, and concerned faces of the other women and uttered another choked gasp. She was still heaving and snorting against Miranda's shoulder when Miranda cast an anxious glance toward the Hirachi to see if they'd noticed.

Khan and Teron were headed their way.

"Oh fuck! They're coming this way!"

Deborah uttered another snorting laugh, but the discovery that the Hirachi were approaching, thankfully, had a sobering effect. She'd managed to calm down by the time Teron and Khan stopped in front of them. There was concern in Teron's gaze as he crouched down to their level, thankfully no suspicion. "Has she taken ill?"

Deborah shook her head without lifting it from Miranda's shoulder or looking around. "No! I'm just ... It was just such a shock ...!"

Miranda pinched her surreptitiously. "Those ... uh ... beasts. They're ... uh ... there's a lot of them around?"

Khan crouched beside Teron. "Did you think I had no reason for not wanting any of you in the jungle?"

The comment killed the little urge Miranda had to feel any amusement at all about Deborah's predicament. She felt her face reddening. "Do you think I'm so stupid I didn't think there were any animals out there?" she snapped before she thought better of it.

Deborah pushed away from her abruptly and stared at her in horror for a moment, glanced uneasily at Khan and then extricated herself from Miranda and moved away with the air of 'I'm not with her. I don't know her'.

Miranda had regretted the impulse the instant she'd spoken, though. She didn't need that look from Deborah to tell her it would've been much better if she'd ignored the impulse to speak her mind. Biting her lip, she averted her gaze.

"Yet, you went out without a weapon."

Ok, so that *was* stupid, in retrospect. She risked a glance up at him after a moment and discovered he was still glaring at her. There was nothing she could think to say, however, that wouldn't provoke him, mostly because she felt defensive about the entire thing and she knew any excuse she tried to make for her actions was either going to sound completely lame, or insulting.

Uncomfortable under Khan's critical gaze, she glanced at Teron only to discover that he was watching both her and Khan. Impossible as it seemed, Khan's expression was even stonier when she looked at him again. He met her gaze for a long moment and finally rose to his full height, surveying the women staring at him owl eyed.

"You are no longer slaves. Consider yourselves guests of the Hirachi until you are ready to find your own way in this world." He glanced down at Miranda again. "For your own safety, I advise you against wandering far from the compound without weapons for defense—at any time, but most especially at night when the predators are out seeking prey." He half turned, gesturing toward the beasts roasting on the spits. "Those are grazing animals."

When he left again, Teron finally spoke—to Deborah. "I have a drought that will calm the spirit if you think you have need."

Deborah shook her head. "I'm alright ... really. I was just This place isn't at all like home," she finally said, her chin wobbling.

He nodded, lifting his head and scanning the tops of the trees above the walls of the compound. "It took us a great deal of time to grow accustomed to this world, as well. In some ways, it is much like our own. In others" He stopped, obviously caught up in his thoughts, and finally looked at Miranda. "We understand the need to be free. We also understand that you have no reason to trust, but you *are* far safer here than out there ... at least for now." He paused, frowning as if he was trying to decide whether to continue or not. "I am certain there are vast differences between your people and ours beyond what we can see. Khan feels responsible for your safety—we all do."

Miranda stared at his back as he strode away, wondering why she felt a sudden desire to cry.

"Do you think it's true?" Deborah asked a little shakily.

Miranda swallowed against the uncomfortable tightness in her throat and turned to look at the other woman. "I think I want to believe it—probably all of us do—badly."

"But you think it isn't safe to trust them?"

Miranda frowned. "I think it's ourselves we can't trust. Them ... I don't know." She stared down at her feet for several moments, uttering a gusty sigh. "I think we have to, though, and the worst of it is that we're going to have to try change their minds about keeping us ... even if we don't really trust them, or shouldn't. I don't know about you, but I can't think of anything worse than being 'free' on this planet with things like that roaming around."

Deborah shuddered. She was silent for several moments before she spoke again. "I don't know, Miranda Did you see those ... *things*? I mean, honest to god, it isn't enough that they're frigging giants! I didn't expect *that*!"

Miranda grimaced. "It's going to be a hell of a mountain to climb, I'll grant you, but they're huge all over. How realistic was it to expect them not to be hung like horses?"

"Yes, but They're talking about *breeding*. I don't know about you, but I'm

pretty sure that fucking bastard had my IUD pulled. We're not just talking screwing. There'd be ... consequences, at least according to lizard-man. Maybe I could get up my nerve to tackle Godzilla, but I don't know if I could handle having baby Godzilla."

It scared the hell out of Miranda if it came to that, but really small women had babies by big men all the time. Detective Williams wasn't a hell of a lot shorter than the Hirachi, and was probably heavier, or at least almost as heavy, and his petite wife had managed to deliver a whopping ten pound boy. It wasn't a prospect that thrilled her, but obviously it was doable. "We'd have Teron."

Deborah gulped. "Miranda! These people have got to be primitive. They act civilized—I'd even be willing to say they're *more* civilized than a lot of people I've seen on the streets of the city, but ... look at this place!"

Miranda sighed tiredly. "I don't have the answers, Deborah. I'm just as scared as you are. I'm not keen on the discovery that we've suddenly become hearth tenders and breeders—or at least *have* to be to make ourselves the least bit useful to them—when we're all used to being a hell of a lot more than that, but I just don't see any alternatives. If you do, I wish you'd share."

Carol, Lynn, and Joy moved a little closer to join the conversation. "He said we weren't slaves anymore," Carol pointed out.

Miranda sent her a searching look, wondering if Carol was just immature or a complete moron. It was hard to say. She was obviously over drinking age or she wouldn't have been plucked, but maybe she'd just been too sheltered?

"Exactly what was it you were doing at the club?"

Carol raised her brows. "We just went out to have a little fun."

"You weren't shopping for Mr. Right?"

Carol shrugged. "Maybe Mr. Right Now—not that I saw anything interesting or I wouldn't have been headed home by myself."

Miranda nodded. "Ok. Well this is how it is here at club paradise. Those handsome hunks over there are the only variety available—and they're going to *always* be the only game in town from now on. What you're going to have to do—what we're all going to have to do—is to convince them that we're worth having. Personally, I think they can't be rid of us quick enough.

"Pretend they're the guy you spent the night with last night and he's in a dead heat to get to the door and get out before you can give him your phone number or ask him if you're going to see him again—because I think that's their attitude toward us.

"So ... if you ran up against that, what would you do?"

Carol frowned. "Go out and meet somebody else."

"What if you couldn't?"

She gaped at Miranda indignantly. "Why couldn't I? There's lots more."

Miranda stared back at her for a long moment and finally glanced at Deborah a little hopelessly.

"What she's trying to get at," Deborah tried, "is what if you met this guy and you were just crazy about him and you wanted to keep him, how would you go about trying to do that?"

Carol glanced at Lynn and Joy for help.

"Buy something really sexy and flaunt myself in front of him and ignore him,"

Joy said helpfully. "It works every time. They never want you if you're too available ...

especially if nobody else wants you.”

“Oh god!” Miranda muttered.

Carol looked at Deborah and Miranda indignantly. “Are either of you married?”

“No,” they responded almost in unison.

“Well then—you’re not really experts, are you?” she said with a triumphant smirk.

Oh, the kid wanted to be smacked! “Has that little trick ever worked for you if the guy wasn’t interested to start with?” Miranda demanded testily. “Never mind! I don’t suppose it’s occurred to any of you that there not only isn’t any place to buy something sexy around here, but they found us all completely resistible when we were buck ass naked!”

Carol glanced at her friends and then smirked at Miranda and Deborah.

“Actually, I happened to notice that I’ve gotten plenty of interested glances. Teron flirted with me, and so did Gerek and Adar.”

Lynn and Joy both glared at her. “They flirted with us, too,” Lynn said indignantly.

Miranda and Deborah shared a speaking glance. Miranda gave Carol a brittle smile. “Well ... there you go! You three just keep smiling and flirting until you land one and he’ll take care of you. That’s the game we’re going to have to play here.”

Suspicion flickered in Carol’s eyes, but she apparently decided to dismiss it.

“Actually, once you get past the strange color, they’re kind of cute ... all of the ones I’ve seen close enough to tell, anyway.”

“And did you see the cock on Teron!” Lynn seconded with a giggle.

Actually, she hadn’t. She’d been too busy studying Khan, Miranda thought with a mixture of wry amusement and irritation.

After a few moments, the trio decided to get up and wander down to the water’s edge.

Miranda watched them go with a mixture of uneasiness, relief, and irritation. “I hope the three stooges don’t get us all in trouble,” she said finally.

Deborah was watching them, too. “Hmmm. You think they had fake IDs? I don’t think I was that dumb when I was their age.”

Shrugging, Miranda transferred her attention from the females stalking the Hirachi to the Hirachi themselves. They were too far away to tell anything about their expressions, but the girls definitely had their attention as they splashed and giggled and chased each other along the edges of the water. “I guess it’s just a male thing,” she said finally.

“What?”

“Nubile girls always get all the attention.”

“Maybe. You don’t think these Hirachi warriors would be more interested in a woman that could kill one of those things, skin it out, and have it hanging over the cook fire when they come back from a hard day’s labor in the ocean?”

“I sort of got the impression that was what they were used to,” she said wryly.

“Unfortunately, men on Earth dump competent, intelligent wives all the time for pretty, useless females.”

“There is that. I don’t think I could get the hang of what they’re doing, though. I’m pretty sure I never was any good at it.”

"No. I think I'm going to have to try the 'pack horse' rout. We've only got three bimbos with us. Some of the men are going to have to settle for useful ... wup! Spoke too soon!" Miranda added when she saw a half dozen more of their group trailing down toward the beach.

Deborah dragged her attention from the 'hunt' on the beach. "At least, now that they've gotten over their terror, they're adapting."

"It's easier the younger you are," Miranda said musingly. "I hope to hell the bimbos among us don't have the Hirachi trying to kill each other inside of a week, but I wouldn't place any bets on it."

She discovered when she glanced toward the Hirachi enclave again that Khan was staring in her direction. "Oh hell!" she muttered. "What would you want to bet he blames this on me, too!"

* * * *

Despite the fact that the huge fire and the roasting beast seemed to have all the earmarks of a celebration of sorts—a party at least—the Hirachi left the beach after a short while. Disappointed when they lost their audience, the women at the beach trudged back, but they hadn't rejoined the group long before more Hirachi emerged from the sea. After heading to the bins to empty the loads of *jasumi* they'd brought up from the ocean, some detoured toward the fire to tend it or turn the meat, settled to rest briefly, and then went back out. The procession continued until the sun set. In fact, the last of the Hirachi only emerged after full dark had settled over the compound and the only light came from the bonfire.

It made Miranda tired just watching them. She found it hard to believe the men weren't completely exhausted. One swim would've been enough to knock her out, particularly since she noticed they were usually gone several hours when they left.

How could they possibly swim for that long, she wondered?

Or was there some sort of platform on the other side of the wall beyond their view?

Obviously, the wall wasn't completely solid. Not only did the water at least seem to wash in and out, but Khan had gone into the sea when he'd left before the hunt and returned through the gates with his catch.

She supposed that accounted for the muscles. If they did the same thing day in and day out they probably didn't have an ounce of fat anywhere on their bodies. It seemed to her that swimmers tended to be leaner looking than the Hirachi, muscular but not so bulked up, but she couldn't think of anything that would account for that. She supposed, maybe, they were just genetically predisposed to carry around a lot of muscle.

She was so hungry from lack of food and smelling the meat roasting by the time the sun set that she'd lost any real interest in studying the Hirachi. Her entire focus was on the meat that had so thoroughly revolted her when she'd watched it butchered and cleaned.

"My god! Do you think they just put that there to torture us?" Deborah asked. "I feel like my stomach is about to cave in."

Miranda grunted an agreement. "If they don't offer us some pretty soon, I think I'm going to have to beg—as much as I hate to be reduced to begging."

Almost as if they'd heard the conversation, one of the Hirachi left the fire pit, glanced toward their group and finally made his way to them. She didn't think it was one

that she'd met yet, but then she couldn't tell that much about him. With the fire at his back, his identity was pretty much concealed by the shadows. He nodded in greeting. "You are welcome to come and share our kill with us."

A half dozen of the women hopped up immediately. Miranda couldn't identify them in the gloom either, but she suspected it was probably the 'youngest' members of their group, the barely legal ones. The others got up a little more cautiously.

She would've been among the bimbos herself if she hadn't been handicapped by her ankle. It just took her a little longer to get up—particularly since she was also stiff from sitting so long. Deborah offered to act as crutch to help her. She accepted but uncomfortably. "I could make it on my own, you know. It'll just take me a little longer."

Deborah flicked a searching look at her. "I think I can manage to stave off starvation a few more minutes."

"I suppose I'm going to have to brave the jungle tomorrow and see if I can find a stick that'll work as a crutch."

"We'll go together," Deborah said firmly. "I don't think any of us should go out there alone."

Miranda released a snort of amusement. "As much as I appreciate that—and I know you're right in a sense—I'm not sure groups of us going out would be that helpful."

Deborah shrugged. "Two could scream louder than one. I could help you run. And, if it looks like its going to get us, I could just leave you as bait and make my getaway."

Miranda sent her a startled look and burst out laughing. "That's one way of looking at it. Maybe we should take Carol as bait?"

Laughing, Deborah shook her head. "We need her. How else are we going to figure out how to entice ... uh" She broke off when she realized they were close enough to the Hirachi by that time to be overheard. "You know. We need our experts. Why don't you wait here and I'll go see if I can grab some grub for both of us?"

Miranda nodded a little reluctantly. "God I hate being crippled!"

"If you stay off that ankle you'll probably get better faster."

It was probably good advice but it didn't make it chafe any less. She wasn't used to having to depend on anybody else for anything. She hated it. She despised feeling helpless and she was uncomfortable feeling like she owed anyone anything. It wasn't that she minded helping anyone else. She just didn't like feeling indebted.

Like she was to the Hirachi even for breathing.

The worst of it was that she didn't think there was anyway she could pay her debt—certainly not any time soon.

Actually, the worst of it was that she didn't see anyway she could keep from accumulating debt in the foreseeable future.

Chapter Seven

It rained. It would've been bad enough if it was just a sprinkling. It did in fact start out that way, just a few drops splattering on her arm and cheek to rouse Miranda enough to make her wonder if somebody was standing over her spattering her with water drops to annoy her. She'd barely opened her eyes enough to peer around for the culprit when the sky lit blindingly with a bolt of lightning. The light show was followed almost instantly with an explosion of sound that brought everybody wide awake, screaming.

And then the sky opened and rain poured down on them in heavy, bone chilling sheets.

The first two nights had been pure hell. Sleeping under the stars wasn't something Miranda had ever aspired to, and evidently she wasn't alone in that lack of interest in getting closer to nature. Everyone else hated it far more vocally.

It wasn't just the constant, damp breeze blowing off the water at night that chilled their sunburned skin and made them shiver no matter how tightly they huddled together. There were biting insects that feasted off of them at night when the wind wasn't stiff enough to blow them away and the sounds of animals in the jungle outside the compound made them feel even more vulnerable and exposed.

The rain was the last straw.

The screams of fright turned to outraged squeals, but although most of them jumped up, there was no where to run, no shelter beyond the little bit provided by the vertical wall at their backs. After surveying the empty compound in hopes something would suddenly appear, most of them simply flopped on the ground again and wept with a mixture of hopelessness and anger.

Miranda drew her arms inside her gown and, when she discovered that it actually seemed to repel the water, pulled the neck of it over her head like a hood. There wasn't a sign of the Hirachi, she discovered when lightning lit the sky again. It puzzled her as much as it alarmed her to discover there was no one in the compound with them—no stalwart warriors to beat the beasts from the jungle off of them if one should happen to scale the wall that protected them.

Surely to god the men weren't *working*?

They had to rest *sometime*, didn't they?

She hadn't seen them either of the two previous nights since they'd arrived, but she'd just assumed they were all sleeping near the far wall and it was too dark to actually see them.

Unable to sleep with the rain pouring down on them anyway, she sat for a long while staring at the water where the men usually came and went, watched a good while after the rain stopped, but eventually she fell asleep again.

Sounds of activity woke her a few hours later. Considering she'd been awake most of the night and it was overcast for a change, she thought she might have slept a good while longer if not for the sounds of movement and the faint thuds as the men emptied their nets into the bins. She'd been listening for indications of the Hirachi,

though, she realized, even after she'd finally given up watching for them.

They'd been forced to designate the closest corner of the beach/water as their sandbox. As little as any of them had wanted to and as disgusting as they found it to be, they had needs that couldn't be ignored for very long. No one could quite get up the nerve to brave the forest to squat and there wasn't any place, besides the water, inside the compound that gave them even a modicum of privacy or dignity.

None of them were comfortable about making use of their latrine when the Hirachi were anywhere around, though.

Deciding to ignore that particular discomfort, Miranda got up a little stiffly when she saw Khan and began the arduous task of hobbling over to talk to him. She didn't particularly relish it, but somebody had to and it didn't look like anybody else was going to volunteer.

He noticed that she was headed his way, thankfully, and, after studying her for several moments, left the others and strode to meet her. His expression wasn't particularly welcoming. It made it that much harder to gather the nerve to ask and she struggled for a few minutes trying to think of a way to start.

Finally, with an inward shrug, she just plunged in. "I was wondering if we could borrow something to cut with?"

Something flickered in his eyes, suspicion, she thought. "What do you want to cut?"

Miranda frowned. Unfortunately, she didn't have a clue of how to go about making any kind of shelter and she doubted any of the others had any better idea than she did. She just knew she—they—couldn't stand much more of being so completely exposed to the elements. Her head was stuffy today from having to sit in the rain half the night—and it was obviously the height of summer. They were all going to die of pneumonia if they had no way to protect themselves by the time the weather began to cool—and she assumed it would.

"Small trees, I guess, and some kind of brush or maybe fronds if there's anything with big leaves. We need to make a shelter."

She couldn't quite decipher the thoughts that flickered across his face that time. "We have shelter we will give you until you can make your own. We were only waiting until you had recovered some of your strength to take you to our village."

Miranda stared at him blankly. "Your village?" she echoed. "You don't live here?"

He gave her a strange look. Lifting his head, he glanced around the empty compound. She could tell he was insulted when he looked at her again. His entire face was taut. "This is the prison where we were kept when the Sheloni took us," he said through clenched teeth that made it clear he despised being within the walls at all. "We bring the *jasumi* here that we trade with the Vernamin for goods. This is the rendezvous for pick up."

"Oh," Miranda said a little blankly, feeling her face redden with embarrassment and more than a little irritation. How the hell were they supposed to have known that when it was where they'd been brought and nobody had told them any differently? "Is the village far from here then?"

He turned at the waist and lifted an arm, pointing to some distant spot above the far corner of the seawall. Miranda followed the direction, but she couldn't see anything

but the tall wall and a little sky from where she stood. Confusion filled her. "I thought there was an ocean beyond the wall."

He nodded.

"It's on an island then?" she asked, her confusion deepening. "Or ... I guess maybe a peninsula?"

He gave her another strange look, seemed to consider it for a moment. "A shelf, not an island," he said finally. "About fifty feet above the floor."

"Floor?" Miranda repeated blankly, wondering if her mind was still as sluggish with sleep as it seemed to her. The bizarre sense washed over her that they were speaking at cross-purposes, but she couldn't figure out why that was. "How far would we need to walk?"

He looked taken aback and she could see he was as confused as she was. "Not walk. Swim."

Miranda's eyes widened. "We'd have to *swim*? How far?"

His gaze skimmed down her length and back to her face. "For us, it is about an hour."

Miranda looked him over as he had her. She hadn't actually studied any of them before, not up close—certainly from a distance, but they'd pretty much kept their distance and during her 'close encounters' with them right after she'd arrived she hadn't been in any state to notice a hell of a lot besides their size.

She *had* noticed the oddly loose skin along the backs of their arms that stretched from just above the elbow to just below it, she realized, and the odd little extra skin along the wrists. She'd noticed the hardened ridge that ran along their arms and across their shoulders and even a slight, nearly unnoticeable webbing of skin between their fingers. Everything about them was strange, though. She hadn't really considered the significance of any of those things.

Even noticing it more strongly now, she drew a blank.

She met his gaze again. "I don't think we could swim that," she said finally.

He nodded. "It would take more time for you. This is why we thought it best if you rested before you tried."

Miranda bit her lip. She was a pretty good swimmer—she didn't know about the others—but even she wouldn't willingly tackle a swim that would certainly take her a good bit more than an hour. "There isn't any way to reach the village without swimming?" she asked a little hopefully.

He stared at her blankly. She could see the thoughts churning in his mind. "It is thirty feet or more below the surface. Even if you could reach the area without swimming there would be the swim down."

Miranda's jaw slid to half-mast. "It's *under* the water?"

Khan stared at her blankly. "Of course."

Slowly, as she stared at him, it finally jelled in her mind. "You're ... the *Hirachi live* in the ocean?"

He seemed as stunned as she was. "You can not live in the water?"

They stared at one another as it slowly sank into both of them that they'd made assumptions that weren't true for either one of them, that they were far more different than any of them had realized. After studying Khan in stunned disbelief for some time, Miranda turned away from him, looked around blankly, and started hobbling back toward

the human enclave, still struggling to digest what she'd learned.

It wasn't until she'd reached her spot and dropped heavily on the sand that Miranda realized she'd completely forgotten that she'd gone to Khan in hopes of getting tools if she couldn't prompt him to offer to build a shelter for them by asking.

From out of nowhere, the urge to cry assailed her. She didn't understand where it had come from or why she felt it until she glanced up and saw that Khan hadn't moved, that he stood where she'd left him, staring at her.

Hopelessness, she realized. She hadn't even been aware that a seed of hope had been planted, that she'd not only accepted that she might actually survive but that she might have a future, a life.

Despite her best efforts, she felt the tears gather in her eyes and overflow.

They weren't the same. The lizard bastard had lied. They might surmount all of the other things—all of the vast differences between their cultures and beliefs and every misunderstanding that could arise out of it.

They might convince the Hirachi that they weren't worthless or useless just because they weren't the fine physical specimens *they* were used to.

How could they surmount being *that* different? How could there be any future for any of them if they were so different they couldn't even look forward to the possibility of having children?

Heaving a shaky breath, she wiped her cheeks and dropped her head to her knees.

It wasn't as if she'd been dying to have a baby. She hadn't even given it much thought—before she'd left Earth. She supposed it had floated in the back of her mind a good bit of the time, surfacing from time to time when she met someone she thought she clicked with—or saw someone she thought she might. It surfaced when she was trying to arrange her life around her career, when she would stop to think when she might squeeze a pregnancy in that might not interfere with a case, or the possibility of a promotion.

She'd always figured there'd be time for it later. She'd promised herself she wouldn't miss out on it. She wouldn't worry about whether or not she managed to find Mr. Right before it was too late for her. She would hope for the best but plan for the worst. Before it was too late for her, she'd have the baby—or maybe two—whether it worked out just right or not, whether or not she found a partner to share her life with.

It was the breeding thing, she realized abruptly. As horrified as she'd thought she was, the suggestion that the Hirachi were looking specifically for women to bear their children had planted that seed of hope. How often did a woman actually get the chance to get near a male who *wanted* her to bear his child?

If they'd been horrible, she doubted that seed would've sprouted, but they were a long way from horrible, however different they were. They were physically appealing and beyond that—whether actually true or not—she'd glimpsed the sort of qualities in them she hadn't even really believed men had anymore—strength and gentleness together, a strong sense of responsibility, honor and integrity, protectiveness, intelligence, and a willingness to work as hard as it took.

She supposed it had seemed just too good to be true and she should've realized if it did, then it was. The thing was, she'd thought it would turn out to be too good to be true that they were as god-like as they seemed to her, that she'd discover they had all kinds of flaws.

That was what usually happened when she thought she'd found the perfect man—

it turned out all of his *other* girlfriends thought so, too. Or she discovered he was a control freak, or a thief, or in to drugs—or drank too much and couldn't hold a job.

It hadn't occurred to her that it would transpire that it was too good to be true because it couldn't work.

"Hey!" Deborah said after a while, thankfully distracting her from her miserable thoughts. "You ok?"

Miranda lifted her head and looked at her. "Sure. I feel like hell, but I'm fine."

Deborah studied her face a little doubtfully. "You don't look fine."

Dragging in a calming breath, Miranda shook her head. "No, I really am fine except for feeling like hell after the night we had last night."

She heard murmurs of agreement from those around them close enough to hear. "I don't suppose anyone has a fucking clue of how we might go about putting together some kind of shelter?" she asked a little more loudly.

"Like a hut, you mean?" one of the women—Miranda thought her name was Julie—asked doubtfully.

"Like 'I don't care what' as long as it keeps at least a little of the fucking rain off!"

A dozen of the women gathered around.

"We'd have to go out in the jungle," Julie said uneasily.

Miranda nodded. "I didn't think we could build anything out of the dirt we have here."

"Actually," another woman volunteered, "Adobes are made out of clay, baked in the sun. I read that once."

Miranda studied the woman, thinking it over. "I think that only works if you're in a place where it hardly ever rains. Given what we got last night—and the jungle—I'd say there's probably a lot of rain here."

"A kiln ... never mind."

"And now that she brought that up, how are we going to get anything at all—even supposing we manage to find stuff we could use? We don't have any way to saw it down."

"I guess the first thing to do, then, is to see if we can find rocks sharp enough to hack at the plants," Miranda said despondently.

* * * *

Khan was too stunned to feel anything at first—beyond shock. Why, he wondered, when he could finally bring his disordered thoughts into a semblance of order, had he not noticed that they were *not* formed as his people were? Why hadn't he noticed that they had none of the fins they needed to glide swiftly and easily through the water?

Because he hadn't looked beyond what pleased his eyes, he thought with self-disgust.

When he closed his eyes and thought of Miranda, he thought of the beautiful red hair and green eyes, her pretty face, her beautiful, seductive, womanly body—and he hadn't been able to budge his mind past any of that. He'd spent a great deal of time, in point of fact, trying to get that much out of his head.

Anger slowly built inside of him.

He was going to kill that gods damned lizard bastard if he ever got the chance to get his hands on him! The lying serpent! It wasn't bad enough he'd brought females to

torment them with that were so blatantly unsuitable to mate with Hirachi males?—They could not even take care of themselves! How could they protect their young? How could they, when they were so weak and small, bear strong, healthy young?—Now he learned that they could not even swim? How were *they* supposed to protect their women and their young when they could not even take them to their stronghold? It wasn't bad enough they couldn't expect the women to fight by their sides to help protect their young? They couldn't even *hide* them to protect them?

He felt ill at his thoughts. It wasn't until Miranda lifted her head and looked at him, though, that he realized why he felt so ill about it all.

The lizard-man may or may not have lied to them, but he had certainly lied to himself. All the time he had been struggling to enumerate all the reasons why it wouldn't work between them, he'd been looking for some way that it might. He wanted Miranda, against all reason, he wanted her so badly he could scarcely think of anything else.

Maybe it was true that it was because he was so near the spawning time ... and maybe not.

It hit him abruptly as he stared at her woebegone face that he *could* have her. He didn't have to worry about the spawning. He needn't concern himself that she might be too small and weak to bear his child or that the child might be too small and weak to grow into a strong Hirachi warrior.

That thought made his gut twist miserably, though. He *needed* to spawn—they all did. No more than a handful of them had *ever* gotten the chance to spawn. *He* certainly hadn't. He'd resisted the urge, as most had, because they knew it would make them, their woman, and their child vulnerable to the attacks by the Sheloni. It took four long cycles for the infants to grow strong enough to risk the first excursion into the sea. The Sheloni often raided twice in a single cycle. At the very least they would have to deal with four possibilities that they'd be snatched from their young and the child left to die—or taken, as well, and brought up into slavery—very likely more than that. And the more chances the Sheloni had at them, the less likely that they could bring any child they begat into adulthood, or even to an age where they stood a chance of surviving without parents.

He'd missed a half dozen spawning cycles already and, with each one missed, the urge grew stronger and harder to ignore.

It wasn't enough merely to take a lover.

It was far better than nothing, though, he reminded himself. Something was better than nothing. He hadn't even *seen* a Hirachi maiden in so long he could hardly remember what they looked like anymore.

In some respects, he was fiercely glad the gods damned Sheloni had finally given up on the idea of breeding their slaves in captivity and ceased to focus on capturing the females, but it was hell not even having the option of a woman's body to assuage his needs. It was hell not hearing the sound of a woman's voice, her laughter, not feeling a woman's touch ... ever.

He turned away after a few moments, wondering if he should tell the others. Would they think as he did? That it was safe enough to try to woo them as lovers if there was no chance of breeding?

And was it truly safe?

They still had the spawning to deal with. It wasn't likely to weigh very heavily upon them that they had *reasoned* that the females were unsuitable for breeding once

they entered the cycle. Reason wasn't something any of them had a great deal of at that time.

And what if he was wrong and the trader hadn't lied? What if it actually *was* possible to spawn their young upon them? What might they breed, assuming the women survived it?

He would have to give it a great deal of thought before he said anything, he decided, *if* he said anything.

Beyond their own considerations, it also couldn't be avoided that the Earth females might not be willing to accept them even as lovers, let alone *choose* lovers among them. However assiduously they courted them, they could not change the way they looked or what they were and, as long as it had been since he'd had any opportunity for it, he thought wryly, he could certainly recall that the females that had chosen him before did not look at him as if they'd stumbled upon a wild *lytzh*.

It was too soon and they were too strange. Mayhap, after a time, the Earth females would grow accustomed to them and not be so fearful of them.

That was not likely to happen, though, if they were caught up in the spawning fever, he thought wryly. Unlike the Hirachi females, *these* females would not be able to discourage them if they weren't interested in spawning with them. They were going to have to make certain the females were locked safely away from them so that they could not get to them.

He didn't know how in the hell they were going to manage it, but they would have to think of something.

He was finally drawn from his abstraction by the discovery that the Earth females—the majority—led, of course by the red headed female that was driving him to distraction—were testing the gates.

If that female was *half* as ferocious as she thought she was, he thought irritably, he wouldn't have spent so much time agonizing over whether it was safe to touch her even if she *did* invite him!

Fortunately, before his temper got the better of him, he abruptly recalled she'd come to ask for tools to make a shelter when she'd thrown him for a loop by informing him that there was no way in hell he was getting her into his pod—with or without him.

He was still annoyed. They would not have their quota when the Vernamin arrived if they did not work at filling it. If he spared even one man to guard them and help them, they would probably still be short when they'd had to pay the trader so much to buy the females' freedom.

He certainly couldn't go. He'd already shouldered more of his share of the burden off on the others while he tended to their needs than he should have.

He considered the men on the beach, but he didn't particularly want to send Gerek or Teron or Adar. The bastards had already shown way too much interest in Miranda to suit him.

It fucking infuriated him that he wouldn't even know by what name she was called *now* if they had not gotten her to tell them!

He wasn't going to give them more opportunities to try to woo her, gods damn it! If she decided to take lovers among them, he meant to be first with her. He sure as hell had no intention of waiting at the back of the fucking line!

He didn't even have a gods damned clue of what sort of shelter they could make

with nothing more than brush. There were no stones available for such a project.

Shaking it off, he strode toward the women, deciding he could make up the trips to fill his own quota by working later and starting earlier.

It wasn't as if he'd had more than a few gods damned hours of sleep since they had come, he thought disgustedly.

Reaching the women, he threaded his way past them and opened the gates. Pulling his knife from his boot, he moved far enough outside to allow them to follow, tipping his head and studying the jungle carefully for any sign of beasts before he turned to Miranda.

"Tell me what you want me to cut and I will cut it."

Miranda stared at Khan with a mixture of surprise and reluctance and finally glanced at the other women questioningly. When nobody volunteered any suggestions, she turned and studied the jungle herself. "We just wanted to make something temporary for now. Later we can consider how we could make something more permanent and what to use," she murmured trying to conjure a picture in her mind of something tent-like. They'd need something to hold everything together.

It was a damned shame they didn't have duct tape. She'd seen guys put together some really strange things with the stuff—even seen furniture made with nothing but duct tape and plastic pipe.

No pipe—no plastic—and no tape. "Vines. We'll need some ... probably a lot, limber enough to weave it where it won't break."

"Hey! I took a basket weaving class!" Stacy volunteered. "Great idea!"

Thank god, Miranda thought! Somebody that at least knew how to construct *something*!

Feeling a little more confident, she followed the wall, searching the edge of the forest for likely looking vines and pointing them out. As Khan hacked them off, they pulled at them to disentangle them from the other plants they were twined around and began coiling them up like rope. They came finally upon an area where there were plants that reminded her of bamboo. Little more than stalks, some weren't much bigger in circumference than her thumb, others nearly as big around as her calf and most of them were at least eight to ten feet tall.

As Khan chopped them down, they each grabbed as many as they could carry at once and began dragging them back toward the compound. Sweat beaded Khan's flesh as he worked until his entire torso and arms were gleaming with it. Miranda wasn't sure which was more fascinating, the gleam of his flesh or the play of muscles.

Both, she thought wryly, struggling to keep her mind on the task and off of Khan's body. "I could do that a while and give you a rest," she said after a while.

He paused to look at her. After studying her a moment, he held the knife out to her. She took it, gripping it as he had and bent over to hack at the bottom of one of the plants.

"Teron says you bear the mark of a warrior," Khan said when she straightened to toss the plant toward the clearing.

She glanced at him in surprise, frowning while she tried to figure out why Teron would've said that and what he might be talking about. It dawned on her after a moment that Teron had noticed the scar from the knife wound on her upper arm, but ... warrior? "You mean the scar on my arm?"

Khan nodded.

She shrugged. She certainly hadn't seen it as any sort of badge. It was damned ugly and she hated the unsightly thing. On the other hand, it beat the hell out of the alternative and she knew how men were about their own 'battle' scars. "I was in vice then. My partner and I tried to arrest a drug dealer. He wasn't keen about going to jail. He pulled a knife when I tried to cuff him and went for my throat. I managed to leap back, but he caught my arm. That's all there was to it, really—except for the stitches," she added wryly.

She saw he was frowning in confusion when she'd cut another 'bamboo' and straightened to toss it.

Thinking it over, she realized probably half of what she'd said most likely didn't translate at all and wondered if she'd even spoken to him in his own language—or if it had been half and half. "Was I speaking my language or yours?"

His lips curled up at one corner. "Some in mine, some in yours."

She shook her head. "I don't know what the trader did to my head, but I can't even tell what language I'm speaking unless I stop and think about it." She frowned, trying to recall what she'd said and what probably hadn't translated. "I was ... a peace keeper. We worked in pairs—two peace keepers to help one another—and one night we caught a bad man. When I tried to ... tie his hands, he cut me with his knife."

"This ... partner, he was a lover?"

Miranda nearly made a miss-lick with the knife. She straightened abruptly and looked at him. Abruptly, she grinned as an image of her partner rose in her mind. Chuckling, she shook her head. "No—definitely no. He had a wife and a houseful of kids. Besides, he was an asshole, a pretty good cop, and dependable in a fight, but otherwise we didn't get along that well. He figured I should be home knitting, or something like that. Last I checked, knitting doesn't pay that well, so I wasn't interested."

She knew he couldn't have understood half of what she'd said, but he didn't seem to be that interested.

"You had many lovers, though?"

Chapter Eight

Miranda stopped and straightened, glancing around them to see how many of the others might have been close enough to hear the question. Vaguely relieved when she saw that there was no one close by at the moment, she focused on Khan.

Anger was her first reaction but fortunately in the time it had taken her to glance around it had occurred to her that she wasn't talking to anyone from her culture who knew anything about it. He was thinking in his own terms. He had to be.

There'd been no accusation and no judgment in the question.

Just as well since she had a hell of a knife in her hand.

She was still inclined to be insulted, but she tamped the anger and studied him curiously. "Why would you say that?"

"You are a beautiful woman. A warrior among your own kind—very desirable, yes?"

Miranda blinked at him in fascination. He'd suggested that their women were warriors and there was no doubt that the Hirachi thought anything less was ... less.

It was still hard to wrap her mind around the idea that he actually thought it was an asset. Mostly men—Earth men—didn't care for the possibility that the woman they were with might be able to kick their ass.

It was one of the hardest things about trying to date—for her, anyway.

Obviously, it wasn't something the Hirachi male spent a lot of time worrying about.

She couldn't imagine why!

"A few," she finally responded non-committally, wondering if he was offering. She wasn't comfortable enough to ask. "Do Hirachi women have a lot of lovers?"

He shrugged. "Some more than others. The more desirable could choose as many as they liked, of course."

That wasn't a lot different than the way of things on Earth, she thought wryly. "Define 'more desirable'," she said, pausing to look at him again.

He studied her a moment through narrowed eyes. A slow, wicked smile curled his lips that made her stomach do a shimmy. "A woman that a man has only to look upon to wish to crawl between her legs and bury himself in her body."

Miranda was pretty sure her face matched her damned hair by the time he'd finished, and it wasn't just the heat in her face making her uncomfortable. She felt hot and weak all over and her heart was racing so hard it was difficult to catch her breath. She supposed, later, that she should have been outraged, but since it didn't occur to her at the time to be there didn't seem much point in trying to summon it. Clearing her throat, she focused on hacking down poles for a while. "So ...," she said when she'd managed to recover her wits, "are all Hirachi women warriors? Or just some?"

He moved up beside her and took the knife. "All."

There was something about the way he said it that told her it was a subject he didn't really want to discuss. The detective in her wanted to push it, but she fought the

impulse. As badly as she would've liked to know in the hopes that she would understand him better and possibly all of the Hirachi, she realized their association was still too raw and new to withstand any sort of pressure. At the moment, the Hirachi seemed inclined to be helpful and generous, but anything could tip the scales against them and destroy the tentative rapport they seemed to be developing. After studying the tense set of his jaw for a moment, therefore, she turned away, grabbed some poles and dragged them back to the compound.

She noticed that they'd aroused the curiosity of the other Hirachi. Ignoring them, she planted her hands on her hips and studied the materials they'd gathered, trying to form some idea of how to put them together to form a shelter. Finally deciding there probably wasn't a lot they were going to be able to do in so far as shaping when they had so little to work with, to say nothing about how little any of them knew about constructing, she began laying the poles out side by side. When she'd finished, she saw that they'd gathered enough already to make two six foot walls. Figuring that, at the very most, they could space them maybe five feet apart and still get the tops together, that would be about enough room for six people stacked like sardines.

Inwardly, she shrugged. They pretty much slept that way now since it was the only way to share their warmth.

It wasn't going to be a 'quick' project, she thought wryly, even with all of them helping ... and all of them weren't. Turning to survey the handful of women sitting on their asses, she contemplated limping all the way across the compound on her throbbing ankle to reach them and finally merely put her fingers in her mouth and whistled.

Not surprisingly, they all jumped and whirled to look at her. She'd learned the trick when she was a kid and could emit a very loud, high pitched whistle when she wanted to. Planting her hands on her hips, she yelled at them, "Unless you ladies are planning on sleeping outside while the rest of us sleep in the hut, get your sorry asses over here and help!"

Even at a distance, she could see expressions of outrage, but they got up and stalked toward her.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are"

"I don't know who the hell you think you are!" Miranda snapped at the woman. "But I'm telling you like it is. You want to sleep in a shelter—you help build it. You want to eat, you help fucking catch it and cook it! Got that?"

The woman glared at her, but she kept her rage to herself.

Miranda surveyed the other women. "Find something to dig with. Set the poles in as straight a line as you can and make sure you bury one end deep enough it'll stay put when we need to bend them over to tie them together. One line here," she said pointing, "the other line here. They have to line up if we're going to pull them together."

"What are we supposed to dig with?" the bitch with the big mouth demanded.

Miranda stared at her a moment. "Go down to where they've been cooking the beasts and see if you can round up some of those plates that came off of them, or maybe some bones—try to find shells. We don't have a hardware store around here."

Stacy, the basket weaver, returned with a load of poles while she was watching the slackers wander around with their thumbs up their asses through narrowed eyes. She knew damned well what they were waiting for, the dumb shits! They thought if they wandered around long enough looking cute and helpless, some man would rush over to

do the job for them—and maybe they would—but it was a damned sight less likely to work here than it did on Earth with their men.

Tamping the urge to throttle the lot of them and get rid of what was shaping up to be a serious problem before it could get to be one, she turned to Stacy. When she'd explained what she'd told them to do, she told Stacy to stay with them and make sure she could work with their efforts and tie the poles off.

She didn't know what the Hirachi thought about her 'slave driver' tactics, but they seemed fascinated to say the least. Most of them were watching her, not the women wandering around on the beach.

Shrugging it off, she headed back out to help round up more poles and vines, reminding herself that she might as well stop worrying about being 'desirable'. She looked like hell and she felt worse, but the only way she was likely to at least feel a little better was if they managed put together some kind of shelter to get out of the weather.

It was a crying damned shame they couldn't go the 'village' Khan had spoken of, which was probably far better than anything they could come up with, but they couldn't so there was no point in whining about it.

She discovered when she got back that Khan had pretty well decimated the bamboo poles in the location they'd found. Trying not to feel disheartened about it, she struck off in search of another patch. He fell into step beside her.

After glancing at him a few times she felt compelled to offer him an out. "I know you have other things to do," she said tentatively.

"There is always something in need of doing," he agreed.

"I don't suppose you have another one of those knives? We could both work and get done faster. Or, you could go do whatever you need to and I could handle the cutting."

He studied her frowningly for a moment and finally shook his head. "I don't have another, and I would not leave you alone."

There didn't seem to be anything to say to that, but it didn't make her feel any better.

It couldn't be helped. Without something for cutting they'd be reduced to trying to chew the damned bamboo off. "I don't suppose these Vernamin you've mentioned would be interested in trading for anything besides the *jasumi*?"

He slid a speculative glance at her. "What would you be interested in trading for?"

Miranda shrugged. "I suppose that would depend on what they have. I'm pretty sure we could use just about everything," she said wryly and frowned thoughtfully. "I think we'd need a 'how to' book even to figure out what we'd need."

He sent her a quizzical look. "How to book?"

She shook her head. She wasn't about to admit that of the twenty something women they had in their group Stacy's basket weaving class was probably the most useful skill among them. It was just too pathetic, and he already thought they were useless. There didn't seem much point in elaborating on just how useless they were in their current situation.

She wasn't even sure a lot of them had been 'useful' citizens *before* they'd been pitched into the middle of the savage planet. If she'd had a gun her skill at shooting could be helpful, but she didn't.

She supposed what they needed to do was to sit down and conference on what skills they all had to see if any of them knew anything helpful. She'd already ascertained that there weren't any hunters among them, though, and none of them had the faintest idea of how to 'prepare' food off the hoof—nor a burning desire to learn. And feeding themselves ranked highest on the scale of 'need to know'.

It was staggering and dispiriting even to consider how ill-equipped they were to survive.

Just how great, she wondered, *was* a civilization when the people could only survive within the society they'd created, knew almost nothing beyond what they needed to know to do their jobs?

Maybe she just wasn't *trying* hard enough to summon useful information from her years of education, though? Or maybe some of the others could recall something they'd learned that would be helpful?

Her grandmother had known how to do things, she remembered, and yet, at that, she didn't take the raw materials and make things—even when she canned her own vegetables. She went to a store and bought jars and lids and whatever else went into home canning. She had kitchen appliances to help her prepare the food.

For that matter, her grandfather had had all sorts of things he could use to help him *grow* the vegetables.

And he went to the farm supply store for the seeds and fertilizer.

One thing at the time, she told herself when she began to feel so overwhelmed and hopeless she felt like screaming. They needed to focus on managing the bare minimum of basic needs and then they could aspire to better.

They didn't manage to complete the hut before it finally grew too dark to gather more materials. She thought they might've managed something significantly smaller, but they had to accommodate the entire group. The up side to that was that they were all so exhausted from their work that they, or at least Miranda, managed to sleep better than she had since she'd arrived.

Khan didn't return to help the following day, but since she knew he had his own work to do and he'd given them a half a day of his time, Miranda tried to take it philosophically.

She hoped that it was just that he had his own work to do, anyway.

A handful of them spent the day learning 'weaving' from Stacy and helping her tie the poles together. Unfortunately, they'd discovered it just didn't work to put the poles up and *then* try to tie them together. The few that had been set had to be taken down again. The women who'd spent so much time digging holes and putting them in the ground gave her the evil eye most of the day.

It was nice to know that she was making friends.

The following day a Hirachi by the name of Ren spent half a day with them chopping down bamboo poles and vines. They began sleeping inside the developing shell as soon as they'd managed a couple of sections of wall, but it was a solid week before they managed to complete even the frame of their 'hut', which was actually more of a long tunnel since it wasn't closed at either end.

It also didn't work that well in keeping the rain off of them, they discovered. The best that could be said for it was that it kept *some* of the rain off.

They spent their second week on the new planet making mud pies to try to fill the

cracks between the poles and trying out various types of foliage as 'shingles' for the 'roof'.

Near the end of the third week, the Vernamin they'd heard about arrived.

As exhausting as their labors had been, Miranda had spent a good deal of time considering how she might approach the Vernamin and try to set up some sort of trade with them. She knew well enough what she wanted in trade—she had a list about a mile long. The catch was whether or not they could find something equally desirable to the Vernamin.

She had a very bad feeling that was going to be a resounding no as soon as she spotted the triangular shaped ship drop from the sky and move closer and closer until it finally settled near the beach inside the compound.

The entire group huddled together when they spotted the ship, gaping at it, she didn't doubt, like cavewomen. They hadn't seen technology this advanced *before* they'd been taken, though, and they'd lived under the most primitive conditions for damned near a month—which was all it apparently took to revert them to babbling awe at the sight of an object that reflected real civilization.

Khan approached the ship the moment the gangplank came down.

A simpering group of the women sidled a bit closer, as well.

It was the shirkers, Miranda realized immediately—the, thankfully, small segment of the group that worked harder to *not* work than anybody else in their enclave.

It didn't take much imagination to figure out what they'd decided to offer in trade. She should've tumbled to it sooner, Miranda thought wryly, considering they'd been primping since they'd gotten up that morning.

Not that 'primping' was very effective when they had so little to work with. All they had were the ugly shifts Khan had gotten them and weeks of hard labor had begun to tell even though the material was surprisingly resilient. Beyond that, they didn't have so much as a comb and finger combing only went so far. Her hair, everybody's, was beginning to look like dreadlocks.

Anger surged through her. She knew damned well that group wasn't likely to barter anything to share with the whole, probably not even anything particularly useful.

She tamped her irritation. She still intended to approach them before they left to find out if there was anything on the godforsaken ball of dirt besides *jasumi* that they could interest the Vernamin in.

"We may have to consider leading that little pack off into the jungle and leaving them there," Deborah said tightly.

Miranda glanced at her. "Don't tempt me."

"The only way you could do that," Stacy, who'd come to stand on her other side commented, "is if you could convince them there was a boutique out there, and I don't think even that bunch is that stupid."

"The problem is," Jan Hutton retorted, "they aren't stupid enough. They're just self-centered, manipulative, and smart enough to be really dangerous."

They quieted as they saw legs appear on the ramp leading down to the dirt—about six. Frowning, they stared hard at the ramp as the legs moved slowly down the ramp until the body they belonged to appeared. Miranda was so stunned and appalled she couldn't even think for several moments.

"The stock market took a killing blow today when the tit/pussy index hit rock

bottom. In other news ... Nothing to trade with the Vernamin ...," Deborah announced, a note of grim satisfaction in her voice when the 'welcoming committee' let out a gasp, whirled, and beat a retreat back toward the main group.

Jan and Stacy both snickered.

Miranda expelled a gusty sigh. "Unfortunately, that's all too true."

Deborah sent her a sharp look. "Don't tell me you were thinking about offering pussy for goods?"

Miranda glanced at her. "At this point I'd be willing to offer just about anything to get a few things—shit! Even a fucking comb! I begin to understand why the 'natives' were so willing to trade for beads and blankets."

"God! What I wouldn't give for a blanket!" Stacy exclaimed.

Miranda turned to look at the others. "Well, ladies, we've hit bottom. After generations of owning the one commodity men would do almost anything to possess we now find ourselves in the position of owning the one thing no fucking body is interested in. Any suggestions?"

The three women looked at each other and shrugged. "I don't know what bug people, that already seem to have everything they could possibly want, might be interested in," Deborah said finally.

They watched while Khan and the Vernamin who'd come out of the ship settled to haggling. Realizing after a little while that it looked like it might be a lengthy discussion, Miranda sat down to wait. Her ankle, despite the demands she'd made on it, hardly bothered her anymore unless she walked too much or stood too long with her weight on it. It still wasn't healed, though, and she was too tired in general to stand.

Khan, it seemed to her, looked as if he was pretty worn down himself.

She strongly suspected that was their fault. From what she'd been able to see, all of the Hirachi worked from dawn to dusk. She'd noticed, though, that Khan, and any of the others that took time to help them, seemed to make up the time lost by working later and starting earlier.

She felt guilty about it. She hated that they were all so helpless that they were an added drain on the Hirachi, but she didn't see that they could do anything about it except try to learn how *not* to be a burden. She didn't think that was something they were going to be able to achieve anytime soon.

The hut, pathetic as it was, was their greatest achievement so far and although they were all proud to have it, it was so far from actually being comfortable that it hadn't made a big difference in the 'quality of life'. It was just as well, she thought wryly, that they had to work so hard just to survive. It didn't leave a lot of time to be miserable about anything else.

She was miserable on a personal level, though, whether she consciously acknowledged it or not. She had been since she'd learned that the Hirachi weren't 'land mammals' as they were, but primarily sea mammals. When she'd finally broken down and told everyone, they'd been as stunned as she had been, but she didn't think very many of them had actually carried through with their thinking on the discovery like she had.

Maybe because *they* hadn't been thinking, as she had, of trying to bridge the species gap and looking for a 'significant other' among the Hirachi.

A surprising number of their group had actually seemed delighted to discover the

Hirachi were 'mermen'. She supposed it had appealed to the romanticism in them.

It might have her, too, except that she was too practical not to see that it presented huge problems. She certainly wasn't disgusted by it. The discovery hadn't diminished their appeal to her by one iota.

Unfortunately, she had a bad feeling the same couldn't be said for the Hirachi, not when they were already appalled by the diminutive size and 'weakness' of the Earth women.

Deborah, whom she'd discovered with a great deal of delight, was a lab technician, or had been in her previous life, had pointed out that they were clearly mammals, regardless, and there were strong indications that they were closely enough related to the Hirachi that it was possible the trader hadn't lied to them.

Not that being a lab technician would be helpful to them per se, but it meant Deborah had a strong background in science that could be useful.

In some ways, she was almost sorry for it, for that matter. She didn't know if Deborah knew enough to be a reliable judge of the situation or if she was just as hopeful as everyone else seemed to be.

She supposed, though, that it didn't matter much. The Hirachi had been friendly and helpful ... and pretty much kept their distance otherwise. It wouldn't have been so bad if they'd *seemed* to be keeping their distance to avoid temptation, but she hadn't gotten that impression. It seemed a lot more like disinterest to her.

Except for the comment Khan had made the day he'd volunteered to help them gather the things for their hut. She'd spent a lot of time wondering since then if the comment had carried any personal connotations, if he'd been flirting with her even causally. He'd said that she was beautiful—not that she was or ever had been and she didn't have to have a mirror to know she looked like pure hell now—but he'd been so offhand about it it was hard to take it as a compliment or even interpret it to mean he thought so.

She'd thought he *might* be hinting, at the time, that he'd consider being her lover, but, except for the other comment when she'd asked him point blank what constituted a 'desirable' woman, he hadn't made any attempt that she could interpret as a come on. He was always polite and helpful—not especially friendly. Teron and Gerek and even Adar were a lot more friendly, and also polite and helpful.

Actually, Teron was almost as standoffish as Khan. He'd touched her—all of them—more than all of the Hirachi put together, and he still managed to make it so completely impersonal it was impossible to take it any other way. He might make her feel warm all over when he examined her ankle and then bandaged it again, or when he'd checked to make sure her cuts and scrapes were healing properly, but he didn't linger and there were no 'accidental' brushes or touches. He hadn't given her, or any of the others that she'd seen, an opening to try for something a little more interesting.

Gerek was downright playful, which actually surprised her considering she'd bashed him over the head with the water bottle at their first meeting. She was sure she hadn't really hurt him—the bottle wasn't that hard, but she certainly hadn't expected him to like her after she'd bowled him over right in front of the other males.

Unlike Khan and Teron, who's features were pleasing in a totally rugged, manly way, Gerek was just downright handsome and the charm of his easy smiles and the gleam of amusement and mischief generally to be seen in his eyes only emphasized, to her

anyway, that this was a male used to being appreciated by females. Don Juan had nothing on the guy.

Adar was 'cute', as ludicrous as it seemed to think about a six and half foot, probably three hundred pound man built like a tank being cute. She thought it was because he was a little bashful, though.

She would've been willing to screw any of them if she'd thought they were interested. She was pretty sure ninety nine percent of the other women viewed them in pretty much the same light, though, and also that she scored somewhere around mid-list in so far as actual 'assets' and even lower on the nubile scale since she was pretty sure she was the oldest damned female in the group. She thought Deborah was probably closest to her in age and still younger, but the vast majority seemed to be in the under twenty five age group.

It was hard to say for sure when nearly half of the women present had the maturity of teenagers.

Deborah nudged her after a while, distracting her from her unpleasant reverie, and she looked up to see that the Vernamin representative was heading back toward the ship. Her heart beating unpleasantly in her chest, she got to her feet, brushed the dirt from her butt, and resolutely struck off to intercept him—or her.

Chapter Nine

It occurred to Miranda forcefully as she strode toward the creature with as much confidence as she could manage that the trader had said it was the Vernamin who'd suggested he shop for human women to trade with the Hirachi.

It didn't make her feel terribly warm toward the bastard. It in fact, irked the hell out of her to be forced to act humble when she would've liked to kill the son-of-a-bitch for having a hand in putting them in this position to start with. Trying to put it to the back of her mind, she nodded politely when the creature halted, studied her for a long moment, and finally nodded almost regally in acknowledgement.

"We'd like to try to set up some sort of trade agreement for ourselves," Miranda began, gesturing vaguely toward the enclave of women.

The creature studied her in silence for several moments. "What do you have to trade?"

Miranda's lips tightened in annoyance. "Nothing at the moment. I've come to discover if there is anything on this world, aside from the *jasumi*, that the Vernamin might have an interest in."

The Vernamin sounded almost amused when it spoke again. "That would be difficult to say when we've not explored this world. There could be any number of things ... or nothing of any interest at all."

She'd thought pretty much the same thing, but that didn't prevent her from feeling frustrated. "Raw materials?" she persisted. "Vegetable, mineral, or ores?"

She thought she saw a flicker of interest in the Vernamin's eyes, but that was hard to tell considering how strange it's multifaceted eyes were, and there certainly wasn't a hell of a lot of expression to its face.

"The *jasumi* is actually all three ... which is why it is so desirable to us. It contains elements essential to us for propagation of our species. Also, it is a valuable energy source for us."

Miranda nodded, feeling a spurt of hopefulness, her mind instantly leaping to the device Khan had bartered the trader for. If they could 'borrow' it to take a reading of the *jasumi* and find out the elements and use it to search for those elements in other things "So ... if we found something with some of the same elements you'd be interested?"

"Quite possibly. Assuming you might find something of interest to us, what would be of interest to you?"

"Weapons and tools," Miranda said promptly.

The Vernamin looked slightly taken aback. "You are contemplating making war on the Hirachi? I must tell you I do not approve of that at all. They are a surprisingly honorable species, fierce in protecting themselves and their own, but primarily peaceful. They have far more admirable qualities than flaws."

Miranda stared at the thing blankly. "As it happens, I completely agree—we all do," she said firmly. "There are beasts here that make life extremely hazardous, however—really big, ferocious things. We can't search for trade goods—or much of

anything, actually—without some way to protect ourselves. I don't think sticks or rocks would discourage them much. And it'll be hard to get anything without some kind of tools."

The creature nodded, but it was hard to say if she'd convinced it to bring trade goods when it came again.

"What about a trip home?"

Miranda hadn't really realized that Stacy, Deborah, and Jan had followed her until Stacy spoke up.

She could see right off that the Vernamin wasn't happy about the suggestion even before it spoke. It spread two of its arms in a strangely human-like shrug. "We did not bring you here. We have no notion of where your home world might be."

"But you have the capability?"

Again the thing shrugged. "We have the capability of space flight, but unfortunately not the range the Sheloni are capable of. This is why we did not aid the Hirachi in returning to their home world."

Miranda studied the thing angrily for a long moment. "Of course it had nothing to do with the fact that they're so good at collecting the *jasumi*."

"We would not have been happy to return them regardless," the Vernamin admitted, "but the fact remains that it is not within our capabilities."

Miranda was obliged to admit that that was possibly true. Humans certainly didn't have a huge range of capabilities in space flight.

It was almost easier to accept it as truth than to consider the bug like aliens might be more technologically advanced than humans.

"But the trader might," Stacy persisted.

The alien focused on her. The prolonged silence was indication enough of thought without any sort of expression. "The Hirachi bartered for you, did they not?"

"They said we were free," Stacy said a little defensively.

"And you feel no obligation to repay their generosity?"

Miranda felt discomfort settle with a twist in her belly. "We don't have any way to repay it."

"The female of the species always has much to offer the male," the alien contradicted. "It is the nature of the female to reproduce young, to nurture, to give comfort ... to bring about structure, order, and culture because they have need of it to ensure the safety and survival of their off-spring."

"They're not interested in us," Deborah said flatly. "We aren't their species."

Miranda thought the bug-alien looked almost surprised and then amused. "They are vastly different than their brethren then. The Sheloni has sprinkled the solar system with the Hirachi they stole away from their home world. It was the Sheloni who introduced the Earth females to the Hirachi to begin with. And those who have been gifted with the Earth females seem completely content with them. They have off-spring, and thus the Earth females seem content, as well."

"I guess they are different," Miranda said glumly, not completely certain she believed the tale anyway.

The Vernamin shrugged. "That will change when their spawning season is upon them, you may be certain. They will have a great difficulty resisting the need ... now that the threat of having their young enslaved or being separated from them has been

removed. And once the deed is done they will be bound to the females who bear their young.

"They are a noble species—as I said, admirable. They have suffered much, surmounted great tragedy and hardship and still retained a noble spirit. They are strong. Strange, they may seem to you, but there is much they have to offer your off-spring."

Miranda smiled thinly. She was sold. She didn't know about the others, but she'd been sold before the Vernamin's praise. That wasn't the problem. The problem was trying to sell the Hirachi on the idea when *they* couldn't claim nobleness, or anything else the Hirachi would consider desirable qualities to pass on.

She hated to admit it, and wouldn't, but even *she* thought the Hirachi would be breeding down. Intellectually, she supposed they were on par—at least close. She didn't think they were superior, particularly in light of the fact that the Hirachi had obviously been plucked from their own civilization and pitched into the same stone age they had—and were thriving.

Physically, they were just plain inferior. She didn't think size was necessarily the be all and end all of physical superiority, but the human enclave barely had the strength and stamina to survive the hardships they'd encountered thus far—and that was with *help*. If not for the Hirachi, she didn't doubt they'd be well on their way into a downward spiral by now.

Accepting the Vernamin's comments to mean an end to the negotiations, she nodded. "We'll have something to trade when you return," she said firmly, with far more confidence than she felt. "We'll need tools and weapons. If we do well, we'd also be interested in a few things of comfort—clothing, or at least the materials to make clothing, grooming supplies like soap and combs, some sort of bedding."

They watched the Vernamin until it had disappeared into the ship again and finally moved away. They hadn't actually seen that the ship disturbed the ground much when it moved, but they preferred not to take any chance of being fried. The ship rose, moved slowly across the compound toward the bins. A beam of light not unlike the one that had snatched them up appeared below the ship. When it disappeared again, there was a large bin similar to those holding the *jasumi*. Moving again, the ship hovered over each of the bins, rather like a bee extracting the pollen from flowers, and the beam appeared once more, extracting their goods.

"It was a female," Deborah said emphatically.

Miranda, Jan, and Stacy all turned to stare at her. "What makes you think that?"

"A male would never give a female credit for civilization—because they're the ones who build it. But the truth is, they would've been completely content to live in caves and hunt when they were hungry and nothing else if they hadn't discovered women needed softer 'nests' to survive." She grinned suddenly. "Imagine! We can thank the need to guard the pussy supply for civilization as we know it ... knew it."

After staring at her blankly, they all burst out laughing. "I'm not sure everybody would agree with that," Miranda said ruefully. "That's taking things down the simplest denominator, isn't it?"

Deborah shrugged. "Everything always begins with the simplest denominator. As some brilliant man once said 'necessity is the mother of invention'."

* * * *

It took giving herself a good, hard pep talk to gather the nerve to approach Khan

about the device he'd gotten from the trader. They needed it, desperately, or she didn't think she could've gotten up the nerve at all.

She was only going to borrow it, though, she kept reminding herself. He'd gotten it, he said, to make sure the food they ate was safe. All she had to do was to point out that they could, and needed to, conduct their own search for edibles. As fecund as the jungle was, there was bound to be food they only had to gather—not kill. Beyond that, they needed more than protein to stay healthy.

She had plenty of time to talk herself in to it. Khan and several dozen others disappeared in to the jungle as soon as they'd finished their negotiations with the Vernamin. Miranda watched the remaining Hirachi as they emptied the bin and sorted the contents. She couldn't really tell what goods they'd gotten for their labors, but they seemed to be very carefully accounting and distributing it.

They were excited about it. Even if she hadn't assumed they would be, it was obvious in the way they behaved. Ordinarily very quiet and orderly, all of them seemed tense with a sort of suppressed excitement and far more talkative than usual. Occasionally, she even heard laughter.

It warmed her when she did, made her sad to realize she hadn't heard it before, but she supposed it was possible that they were just in general more sober minded than their human counterparts. Or maybe it was just frowned upon because they were supposed to be—were—fierce warriors?

They hadn't felt much like laughing, themselves, she thought wryly. Their future was so uncertain and they'd been so miserable it was hard to find anything to laugh about—to feel real amusement about. More than one of them had yielded to a fit of hysteria over the past several weeks, laughing mindlessly over things they would probably have wept about, or completely ignored, before.

If she hadn't been so afraid of offending the Hirachi that first time when she'd seen a display of Hirachi 'manhood' she thought she would've laughed as hysterically as Deborah had.

Not that she could ever have *ignored* that! But it certainly wasn't the sort of thing that inspired laughter in a woman—fear, maybe—but not humor.

She'd been trying to convince herself ever since that fear of the Hirachi had somehow distorted her perceptions, but that was a little difficult when she'd seen them a number of times since—they always went down to the water to bathe when they'd finished cleaning whatever they'd killed to feed the women with.

No, they just had to accept that the Hirachi were big all over.

Not that it looked like they were going to have to worry about handling that much man meat.

The hunting party was gone so long Miranda had begun to wonder if they'd had trouble before the first of the party began to straggle back into the compound. It was the men who'd gone to collect the wood for the fire and to build a spit, she saw, dividing her time after that between watching the men work at the fire pit and watching the gate a little anxiously.

When she saw the first of the hunters appear at the gate, she searched the faces of those returning until she saw Khan. Relieved when she'd scanned him for any sign of injury and didn't see one, she transferred her attention to the others. Gerek and Teron were among them, she discovered ... and Gerek was limping. Her chest tightened, her

heart fluttering uncomfortably with anxiety when she saw the gash along one thigh that had been bandaged with a piece torn from his breeches.

She didn't know whether to be glad that Teron was among the hunters or dismayed.

She was both—relieved that he'd been there to see to Gerek's wound and at the same time unsettled by the thought that he might have been injured himself—on two levels. He was the only one among them, as far as she knew, with any skills for tending the sick or injured. It was almost as disturbing to consider the horrible repercussions of losing the only 'healer' they had as it was to think of anything happening to Teron for his sake alone.

To think of something happening to any of them.

Had it not even occurred to her, before, that *any* time they went out to hunt they risked their lives? Or was it only that it hadn't actually mattered to her before?

She knew the last wasn't true. She would've been horrified even in the beginning, would've felt guilty to think they'd gotten hurt or worse, killed, trying to get food for them. She would've been just as distressed if anything happened to any of the Hirachi as she would've been if they'd been human. Life was life, and she didn't consider the loss, or threat of loss, lightly.

She didn't think she'd actually fully appreciated the danger before, though. It wasn't that she'd been completely unaware of the threat. The beasts were enough by themselves to drive that home, but her mind hadn't really 'acclimated' to the new reality that she was living. She wasn't used to thinking in terms of the threat to life and limb any time anyone left the safety of the compound.

She wasn't sure she could *get* used to it.

She'd come to care more than just a little about the Hirachi, though—some very much more than others, but even those she didn't know well weren't really strangers to her.

She wrestled with the urge to go to Gerek and see how badly he'd been hurt. She wasn't certain enough, though, that it would be acceptable, or welcome. Even after living among them nearly a month, she knew very little more about their customs than she had to start with. She did know, though, that people on Earth had some fairly strange customs and that it wasn't really a good idea to leap impulsively into behavior that might be insulting.

Some men were very touchy about their 'manliness' and although she hadn't noticed that the Hirachi seemed to be, they still considered themselves warriors. Weakness certainly wasn't something they admired and it seemed probable that they wouldn't want anyone to think, and certainly not point out, that they'd 'failed' to meet their high standards.

In any case, there seemed enough Earth females perfectly willing to ignore the possibility of flouting some of the Hirachi customs and inadvertently insulting them. Carol and her 'twins', Lynn and Joy, and two others whose names Miranda couldn't remember rushed over to fuss over him.

He looked more disconcerted and embarrassed than pleased by the attention, but then again what did she know?

As annoyed as Miranda was about Carol and her buddies wallowing all over Gerek, she wasn't really surprised. She'd realized herself that Gerek was a chick magnet.

The only real surprise was that they'd refrained from being quite that obvious before, but she supposed it had taken them a while to get over the fact that their first attempts to rivet the attention of the Hirachi hadn't gone over very well.

Taking their cue from the other bimbos, bimbo group number two flocked to the returning the hunters, as well, exclaiming over their prowess as hunters and examining them for injuries—Miranda supposed. She couldn't actually hear what was going on, but the body language of the women seemed to speak for itself.

She wasn't thrilled about the objects of their attention—Khan and Teron. In fact, she felt a very unpleasant wafting of unidentifiable emotions about the circumstance.

At least some of it was uneasiness about how the Hirachi might view their behavior. She'd tried to walk a tight-wire regarding the Hirachi and advised the others to have the same wariness. She'd thought it would be far better to err on the side of caution until they understood their ways better. She hadn't wanted to say anything that would make them fearful of the Hirachi, who at least seemed friendly and trustworthy, and she had thought it was a good idea to urge them in the direction of acceptance of their situation—but acceptance wasn't throwing themselves at the Hirachi!

God only knew how they'd take that! Even if it was 'favorably' they ran the risk of serious trouble because they were so outnumbered.

If the Hirachi were disgusted with their behavior, then they ran the risk of turning away their only hope of survival.

She'd known she hadn't gotten through to the majority and that at least some of it was purely from resentment of her advising them at all, but she hadn't expected such a blatant display.

Try though she might to avoid it, though, she realized the main reason she was not happy had nothing to do with 'reason' at all. Jealously, resentment, and envy were the main culprits. Khan, Teron, and Gerek just happened to top her list of interest, damn them! There were damned near a hundred Hirachi—all of them present! Couldn't they have set their sights on some of the others? Adar hadn't taken part in the hunt, but he was adorable! For that matter, she hadn't seen *any* Hirachi males that weren't at least attractive—virile was always attractive—and all of the Hirachi were so very powerfully male they practically wreaked of testosterone.

With an effort, she pushed it from her mind and tried to focus on her goal. She couldn't do anything to change the situation and there was no point in dwelling on it. If the blond bimbos wanted them they were probably as good as tagged and bagged already—whether the men knew it yet or not.

She couldn't afford to approach Khan about the device simmering with resentment and jealousy. She had a hard enough time with diplomacy at her best and it seemed probable she was going to have to do a little begging and cajoling. If he turned her down and she bit his head off, she wasn't likely to get her hands on it.

She was doing fairly well in regaining her equilibrium until the men finished and went down to the beach to bathe—and the bimbos flung off their gowns and joined them—except they were more focused on 'frolicking' in the water than bathing.

Miranda didn't know if she was more humiliated or angry. She felt like throttling the whole bunch, though. It was almost more embarrassing that the Hirachi didn't seem to know what to make of their behavior, couldn't decide whether to watch or politely turn their backs. Instead, they focused on finishing their baths, put their clothes back on and

joined the other Hirachi.

Miranda would've felt sorry for the women that had made such an exhibition of themselves if she hadn't wanted to kill them more. They looked almost as bewildered and embarrassed as the Hirachi had.

Fools! Miranda thought angrily. They hadn't succeeded in doing anything but making everyone uncomfortable. Couldn't they get it through their heads that they were dealing with a completely different race, if not species? From another world entirely?

It occurred to her as she watched the women play in the surf a while longer, just to save face, and finally climb out and head back, that it was the playing that the Hirachi didn't understand. They worked all the time, and they were young men from what she could see. However old they actually were in human years, they had the look of barely matured adults. She could be wrong, but not one of them looked even close to thirty. The biggest majority looked to be no more than early to mid twenties.

They didn't play and it seemed probable from the little she had heard about them that they hadn't played since they were small children—may not have even then. They'd been brought up as warriors—male and female—because their species was at war with the Sheloni.

Maybe they were actually a little intrigued by the playfulness of the flirts, but they didn't know how to respond to it and, because they didn't, it made them uncomfortable.

It made her feel bad for both of them—the Hirachi and the idiots—but she was still too angry about the exhibit to feel terribly sorry for the women. It was a pity that they were trying so hard to make themselves appealing and had no idea how to go about it, but they might've had a better idea if they'd just considered they weren't dealing with their own culture.

God! She could think of several cultures right on *Earth* that would've been deeply offended and disgusted by that kind of behavior!

It was just as well it didn't look like she'd have any opportunity to try to approach Khan anytime soon, she decided. She was too upset to handle it at all well. It would be better, she was sure, to wait a day or two and since she was still uncomfortable, she decided to go into the hut and try to rest for a little while. It would be hours before there was anything to eat and she was already hungry. She didn't think she could endure watching and smelling. If she could sleep for a little while it would put her closer to meal time when she woke.

Deborah, Jan, Mary Jane, and Stacy apparently had the same idea. They fell into step with her as she crossed to the hut.

"I don't know who I feel most embarrassed for—me, the Hirachi, or those idiots," Deborah commented, alerting Miranda to the fact that they didn't have resting in mind as she had.

Miranda smiled wryly, but shook her head. "It's a good thing for us the Hirachi seem very tolerant. If they weren't, there might have been stonings tonight instead of a cook out."

Stacy uttered an amused snort. "Speak for yourselves. I'm just glad they tried it before the thought occurred to me. Now I know not to try that."

Miranda couldn't help but chuckle. "Feeling desperate?"

"Hell, yeah!"

They'd settled on the bundles of dry grasses they'd gathered to try to make sleeping less miserable when the other women began to drift toward the hut. Before long, everyone was inside the hut except for the exhibitionists.

Contrary thing that she was, Miranda immediately began to feel sorry for them. The embarrassment should have been 'punishment' enough. Social censure on top of it seemed a little harsh. She supposed she couldn't blame the women who'd joined her in hiding in the hut, though. If they felt as she did, it wasn't an attempt to censure as much as it was a desire to separate herself and hide because she was embarrassed.

They'd get over it, she told herself. They were nothing if not resilient and too certain of their appeal to be trounced for long. No doubt they were out there now assuring themselves and each other that *they*, the women who'd decamped, were just jealous of *their* beauty and envious because all of the Hirachi had been so thoroughly entranced by them.

By nightfall they would've convinced themselves that they could now have their pick of the males they were most interested in.

And, who knew? They might be right.

Chapter Ten

Contrary to what Miranda had thought, the exodus to the hut wasn't entirely what it had seemed. The women who hadn't taken part in the attempt to work up a trade with the Vernamin wanted the details. Miranda let Stacy and Deborah do most of the talking. They'd been close enough to hear everything. Her input wasn't really needed, at least not until it came down to the question of what they might be able to get up to offer for trade.

She explained her plan, then.

Without surprise she discovered the women weren't exactly happy about it. Assuming she could borrow the device from Khan and she could use it to break down the elements of the *jasumi* they were still going to have to leave the compound and search for a supply source and, once found, they would have to gather it. She knew it wasn't a reluctance to work, that it was because they were afraid of what they might encounter beyond the compound. She was, if it came to that, but the only alternative was just to give up the idea altogether.

Everyone was even more unhappy about that. It was bad enough to have to do without things they'd always taken for granted, but to know there was a possibility of getting some of the things they wanted so badly if they were willing to risk their lives to get it was worse. It was like teasing someone dying of thirst with a bottle of water by holding it just out of reach.

They wanted to think about it.

Translation, they wanted to wait until they were *more* desperate.

At the rate things were going she didn't think that would take much more than a week. She didn't want to wait. There was no telling how long it might take to find something and then, if they were successful, they'd have to collect it and get it back to the compound. If they waited very long, they might end up with nothing to trade when the Vernamin came back.

On the other hand, she wasn't sure she was desperate enough to go for it yet herself.

They'd switched to a discussion of what they might do to improve their situation without so much risk when one of the Hirachi came to invite them to join them in celebrating a successful trade with the Vernamin. Everyone rose eagerly to file out of the hut, wondering aloud if it actually was a celebration—if the Hirachi had something special planned—or if it was merely an invitation to eat with them as usual and be more happy because of the trade.

By the time Miranda made it outside, the first of the women to leave had already reached the area near the roasting pit. Wishing she'd actually gotten the chance to primp a little so that it would have more of the feel of something special, and had something to primp with, Miranda scanned the compound where everyone was gathering and discovered there did seem to be something a little different planned.

Generally, they had the tendency to segregate themselves. Her group had been

too uneasy about mixing with the Hirachi when they'd arrived to make any attempt to mingle. The Hirachi had either sensed that they wanted it that way or hadn't wanted to mix themselves and tended to stay with their own group and they'd just sort of fallen into the habit of it. Beyond that, it was usually a sort of relay meal for the Hirachi. A group would come up on the beach and eat and then return to work as another group arrived so that there were rarely more than a third of the Hirachi in the compound at any one time.

Maybe part of that had been strategic, a wariness about all of them gathering in such an exposed position, but, for whatever reason, Miranda discovered for the first time that all of the Hirachi seemed to be present.

It was a little intimidating, actually. She'd had a fair idea of the number, but since she hadn't seen them all together before she hadn't felt quite so outnumbered.

By the time she reached the area where everyone was settling to eat, she discovered another change that was a little unnerving. The Hirachi hadn't separated themselves off. Some of them had already gotten their food and found a place to sit but the biggest majority of them had sort of encircled the Earth enclave.

Miranda glanced at Deborah to see if she'd noticed and what she thought about it. From her expression, Miranda saw she had noticed and that she looked as uneasy as she felt.

Khan moved up beside her as she stopped in the line to wait for her share of the food. She glanced up at him, a little surprised, but smiled when she met his gaze. "The trading went well?" she murmured questioningly, more because she couldn't think of anything else to say than because she had any doubt.

He smiled back at her easily. "Yes. Very well. We reached the quota and a bit more."

A flicker of discomfort went through her at the reminder of how hard they'd had to work to manage that after what they'd paid for her and the others' freedom. "I'm so glad!" she said, meaning it, and then added, "I'm sorry we couldn't help. Not that we would've been much help, I don't suppose, but it might have taken a little of the load off so that you didn't have to work so long and hard."

They hadn't actually offered, she thought uncomfortably. The first week they hadn't because they'd been half dead and half crazed with terror and too wrapped up in their own misery to consider that they should at least offer. After that, they'd been too focused on trying to build a shelter, but since she'd discovered by that time that the Hirachi were merfolk, for want of a better word, there hadn't seemed much point in offering since it wouldn't be more than lip service. The Hirachi were mining the ocean. There was no way the Earth women could help them.

"It would be too hazardous for any of you to try when you aren't as we are in that respect," Teron said as he joined them.

Miranda glanced at him in surprise just in time to see him exchange an indecipherable look above her head with Khan. She glanced at Khan, noted that she couldn't tell any more about his expression on the receiving end of that look than she'd been able to tell about Teron's thoughts, and finally dismissed it. "There are ... things in the ocean like these things?" she asked a little uneasily, realizing the moment she said it how empty-headed it made her sound. She blushed. "Never mind, of course there are. I just ... it's hard to get used to this planet."

She was almost relieved to discover they'd reached the front of the line. After

taking her plate and thanking the man serving, she turned to look for a place to sit. Khan, to her surprise, cupped a hand beneath her elbow and guided her to a spot somewhat to the rear of those already seated. She settled with a mixture of pleasure and uneasiness when she realized Khan meant to sit with her.

Teron settled on her other side.

Her belly tightened. After glancing from one to the other with a vague smile, she focused on the food until Gerek arrived, squeezing in between Khan and Teron. Beginning to feel a little strange about being surrounded by Hirachi, she divided a look between the three men and finally focused on Gerek. "How's your leg?" she asked sympathetically.

His face darkened. "Fine," he said a little shortly. "It was nothing."

Miranda bit her lip. It had looked like a good bit more than 'nothing' to her. Not that she'd seen the actual wound, but the bandage had been soaked with blood and, even though she'd only caught a brief glimpse, it looked as if the leg of his trousers had been pretty well shredded before the piece was torn off to make a bandage.

It seemed obvious from his response, though, that she'd been right and the Hirachi were inclined to see any such injury as a mistake on their part that reflected badly on them and thus weren't eager to discuss it.

"He will be more attentive when next we hunt, though, I'm fairly certain," Khan murmured coolly.

Gerek glared at him.

It sent another wave of uneasiness through Miranda, particularly since Gerek wasn't inclined to be sullen. He'd always seemed a happy-go-lucky sort who tended to allow gibes to roll off his back like water. She didn't doubt he'd been teased by the others about the water bottle 'battle' between them, but it hadn't bothered him that she could tell.

Before anyone could comment, however, Adar joined them. Khan, Teron, and Gerek all glared up at him a moment but finally shifted to make room.

A little taken aback to discover she seemed to be surrounded, wondering if she could manage to eat and still make polite conversation, Miranda smiled at the newcomer a little vaguely and looked around. She didn't know whether to be relieved or more unnerved when she discovered all of the women had been surrounded by Hirachi just as she had.

There didn't seem to be any particular order to it. Three Hirachi were seated facing Deborah, two with Stacy, a half dozen with Carol.

Frowning thoughtfully, she focused on her food for several moments, trying to think of some topic of conversation since she wasn't particularly comfortable with silence. "This reminds me a lot of beef," she finally said. "It isn't just the same, of course, but it's really similar."

"What sort beast is this beef?" Teron asked.

Miranda looked at him blankly for a moment. "Uh ... actually, they're called cows when they're alive. The meat's called beef." She thought it over. "They're probably about as big as these beasts—some maybe even bigger, but they have hooves, not toes and claws. They've got two horns—on their head. They aren't wild. They're raised on farms or ranches."

A look of surprise flickered across Gerek's features. "I remember Grandfather

speaking of something like this that was done when he was a boy,” he said, looking pleased that he’d remembered it. “In the time before, when they had cities on the land as well as in the sea and many spent more time living in the land cities than in the sea.”

Relief flickered through Miranda when the others took up the discussion, inputting their own memories and stories they’d heard. It seemed to relax the tension in them, too, besides relieving her of the responsibility of trying to find a subject for conversation that they could all participate in. Beyond that, it gave her the first real opportunity she’d had to learn something about them.

They were amazingly polite. Despite their interest in reminiscing, they made sure to pull her into the conversation with questions.

She was a little surprised, although she supposed she shouldn’t have been, to discover they seemed to have had a very advanced civilization at one point. Then the Sheloni had arrived, offering ‘friendship’, technology more advanced than anything they had. It had brought about conflict and then war and the Sheloni had descended upon them as order broke down and begun to raid their world for slaves to mine the *jasumi*, which they traded with the Vernamin.

This seemed to go on for several generations before something happened between the Vernamin and Sheloni. The Vernamin had championed the Hirachi, trounced the Sheloni, and begun to deal directly with the Hirachi. She would’ve liked to have known what, exactly, had happened, but the Hirachi didn’t seem to know themselves. The Sheloni had simply abandoned them and not returned. The Vernamin had come then and offered a peaceful trade agreement.

The Hirachi still vigilantly watched for their old enemies, however. That, apparently, was part of the reason they’d built their city beneath the sea. They had been doing so for several generations anyway, though, having completely abandoned the land cities on their home world of Ach after the wars between themselves.

As interested as she was in hearing their history and understanding them better, she realized after a little bit that the subject was, not surprisingly, a depressing one for them. After listening for a while, she waited for an opportunity to reminisce about something a little lighter—an incident from her days as a rookie—and then found herself trying to explain a social structure that was beyond their grasp because it was so different from anything known to them.

It gave her an opening to ask about the device, though. Miranda hesitated to bring it up, but decided it was as good a time as any. They’d finished eating. Soon, she knew, the Hirachi would leave for their own village and there was no telling when she might get another opportunity. Khan surprised her when she brought it up. He merely shrugged.

“I acquired it for you. It is yours. You do not need to ask to borrow it. Can you read Hirachi? Or only speak it?”

As surprised and pleased as she was about the discovery that she wasn’t going to have to wrangle with him for the use of it, the last question threw her for a loop. “I don’t know,” she replied slowly. “I don’t know what the trader did or how he did it. Would he have had access to the written word?”

Khan shrugged. “Obviously so. He set it up in the Hirachi language and the device does not speak. There is the screen.”

Miranda squirmed inwardly. She’d seen him use the damned thing. She didn’t

know what her problem was that she seemed so prone to dumb questions tonight. "Right. I forgot. I suppose I'll find out."

Khan untied a sort of bag that hung from the waistband of his trousers and loosened the top. Digging around inside the pouch, he pulled out something and held it out to her. Noticing the faint tremor in his hand first, Miranda frowned a little curiously, wondering at it, before she focused on what it was that lay in his palm. Realizing after a moment that he'd offered it to her to look at, she picked up the strange looking thing and examined it more closely. When she did, she discovered that it separated into two pieces.

It looked amazingly like hair combs—the sort used in arranging and pinning hair, not detangling it.

"I made it for you. It does not entirely match your eyes, but I could not find anything closer."

Miranda's head jerked upward automatically. She met his gaze as it slowly sank into her mind that he'd said he'd made the combs—for her—and she still had trouble accepting it. She looked down at the combs again, feeling a tide of warmth flow over her.

They were beautiful and so cunningly made, so fragile looking, it was hard to grasp that he'd fashioned them himself. Emotion clogged her throat as she looked up at him again and surprised a look of uneasiness in his eyes. She smiled at him suddenly, feeling the smile all over. "They're beautiful," she managed to say a little breathlessly, discovering that she abruptly felt tearful for no reason she could fathom. "The most beautiful things I've ever seen. Thank you! Thank you so much!"

She looked down at her treasure again, struggling with the urge to leap up and run before she embarrassed herself by bursting into tears. She felt an equal urge to throw her arms around him and hug him tightly, to kiss him. She wondered if she dared, wondered if she should or if it would transpire it was something the Hirachi would never do and therefore would be put off by it.

She could explain it, though, couldn't she? If he seemed to be disturbed by it, she could explain that it was an Earth custom—and it was ... sort of.

Setting the combs down carefully before she changed her mind, she got to her knees and moved close enough to him to grasp his shoulders for balance and then leaned closer still and pressed her lips to his.

Even as she began to pull back, she felt his hand settle on the back of her head. Holding her, he tilted his head at a slight angle to hers and opened his mouth over hers. Instantly disoriented, she tightened her grip on his shoulders instinctively, but her entire focus was on the feel of his mouth on hers. His tongue glided along the seam where her lips met, applying pressure, demanding entrance. She parted her lips readily, eager to feel more.

Her senses rioted the instant he melded his mouth with hers entirely. His heat, taste, scent, the texture of his tongue as he explored her mouth in one sweep created an explosion of her senses. The unique essence that was Khan was like nothing she'd ever known and more delightful to her senses than anything she'd ever experienced. A pleasurable fire roared to life the instant awareness completely filled her. She wanted to drown in the sensations, felt as if she was. Her mind reeled with the intoxicating fumes of need. Her body seemed to melt from heat.

She was almost too weak to lift her head when he broke the kiss—abruptly—as

the heated cocoon that enveloped them was pierced by a sudden, high pitched squeal. Struggling to focus her eyes, Miranda looked around for the source of distraction.

Carol, she saw a little blankly, was bouncing all over one of the males who'd sat with her during the meal, kissing his face with excessive enthusiasm. The discovery sent a shaft of resentment through Miranda to cool her own ardor.

Did the damn bitch absolutely *have* to have everybody's fucking attention for everything she did, Miranda thought angrily?

Moving away from Khan self-consciously, she looked around and gathered up her gift carefully before she sat down. It wasn't until she did that it dawned on her that, although she hadn't been as noisily demanding of everyone's attention as Carol, she'd still kissed Khan right in front of the other men gathered around her.

Actually, he'd kissed her. She didn't regret it, but she'd only intended to give him a sort of brotherly kiss for the gift.

Alright! She'd hoped for a little more. She'd gotten a lot more than she'd bargained for, though. Still feeling warm and weak, wavering between relief that Carol had interrupted and resentment for the same reason, Miranda flicked a vaguely apologetic look at the other men.

Teron caught her attention when she discovered that he was holding out an offering to her as Khan had. Feeling her discomfort deepen, she took the offering and unfolded it, discovering it was a pair of soft boots similar to those they wore. She could see they had been made from the skin of the beasts they'd been slaughtering for food.

They looked just her size, too. She glanced from the boots to Teron a little questioningly. "For me? You made these for me?"

He nodded, his expression carefully blank, though she could see a question in his eyes. A thrill went through her. Torn between the desire to examine them more carefully and the equal urge to fling herself at him and squeal like the 'idiot' had, she hesitated. She didn't want to offend Khan, but she was as thrilled with Teron's gift. She didn't want to make him feel less appreciated even though she didn't want to make Khan angry. Both anxiety and eagerness collided inside of her, but she set the boots and combs aside and moved to thank Teron as enthusiastically as she had Khan.

He 'received' without the slight hesitancy she'd sensed in Khan. Opening his arms to her as she moved toward him, he gathered her close and sought her mouth before she could decide whether to merely give him a friendly peck or something a little more intimate.

A touch of amusement flickered through her a split second before his mouth came down on hers and then her thoughts scattered like a flock of startled birds. The sheer hunger in his kiss tied everything inside of her in a knot. She sank beneath a tidal wave of sensations. It was hard to say whether she enjoyed his taste and touch more than she had Khan's, and in fact it didn't cross her befuddled mind even to compare them, but the effect on her was no less powerfully arousing.

She felt like a jellyfish by the time he sucked at her lips and parted from her with obvious reluctance, boneless, so shaky and disoriented it was only by sheer dint of will that she managed to stay upright. Thoroughly drunk and disoriented, struggling with the effort to appear 'normal', she returned to her place a little awkwardly. Before she could pick her boots up to examine them, both Khan and Gerek shoved more gifts toward her.

Bemused, wondering if it was a sort of game—like the old game of spin the bottle

with her being the bottle—Miranda glanced uncertainly from Gerek to Khan several times. Khan settled her dilemma by withdrawing his offering, but he glared at Gerek and that made her more than a little uneasy.

Gerek, she discovered, had made her a pair of trousers like those they wore. They were as soft as the leather Teron had used to make her boots. When in the world had they found the time to make these things, she wondered? While they'd been supposedly sleeping? They worked from daylight to dark.

Setting the latest gift on top of the others, Miranda offered him a kiss, as well. He accepted with an enthusiasm to rival Khan's and Teron's.

She felt downright tipsy by the time he let go of her, sweltering hot with the blood surging through her. Her world had narrowed to the circle she sat in. She had a vague awareness that similar 'games' were being played out around them, but no more than a nebulous sense that she wasn't the only one receiving gifts or expressing her gratitude in a similar manner.

In a way, it was somewhat comforting, though. Wryly, she realized it was the pack mentality she'd always deplored—as if shared guilt lessened individual guilt somehow. It didn't, she knew, and yet she couldn't really think straight. She was uneasy on one level, anxious that she might be creating trouble, either for herself or between them, by being so even handed with her affection. It didn't seem right, though, to behave so enthusiastically about one gift and then to merely smile and say thanks when someone else gave her a gift that they'd also worked hard on.

Adar gave her a comb fashioned similarly to the ones Khan had made, except it had clearly been designed to rake the tangles from her hair. He also gave her a kiss that rivaled the others for enthusiasm—and effect.

She felt as if she'd been drinking hard liquor by the time they began the second round of gift giving. This time they gave her things they'd obviously traded for; a knife from Khan similar to his but smaller; soap for bathing and washing her hair, from Teron; a blanket from Gerek; some sort of shift from Adar that seemed to be made out of real cloth rather than leather.

She thought, if she hadn't been downright punch drunk, she might've wept with pure joy. Even as discomfort began to settle inside of her with the realization that she didn't have anything at all to give in return, Khan grasped her hand and hauled her to her feet.

A little stunned, thoroughly mystified, Miranda stumbled along in his wake as he led her away from the group, away from the light of the fire. They passed several entwined couples along the way, and it had begun to sink in what he had in mind before Khan halted, turned and swept her against his length.

That was Hirachi courtship, Miranda thought a little blankly?

He took her smoothly to the ground when he discovered the difference in their height made an upright embrace both awkward and uncomfortable. She'd barely settled when he sought her mouth with his, though, banishing any ability to think, any room for doubts or uncertainty.

Her mind had indelibly imprinted the feel and taste of him. Welcome rose inside of her in a heated tide. The kisses they'd shared before—the kisses she'd shared with the others—already had her coiled tightly inside with need. She thought, in fact, that she might come before Khan ended the kiss and dropped his mouth to explore her throat.

"You are as generous hearted as you are beautiful," he murmured feverishly.
"You will not regret choosing me as one of your lovers."

She'd chosen, she thought a little blankly?

Lover?

One of her lovers?

He distracted her by grabbing the hem of her ugly gown and nearly ripping it off of her. Briefly alarmed, to say nothing of the burning discomfort, she didn't manage more than a sharp intake of breath at the disrobing before he dove for one breast and latched onto her nipple with an enthusiasm that punched the air out of her lungs. Fire poured through her, following a direct path from the sensitive nipple he'd closed his mouth around to her belly as if the two were connected with a pipeline designed to carry molten desire to her womb. She gasped as tremors rippled along her channel, certain for a handful of seconds that she'd just come.

He lifted his head when she began gasping a little hoarsely, staring at her. Sensing his intense gaze, she managed to pry her eyelids open enough to peer at him. Shadows cloaked him so far from the fire, but his eyes glowed. They were tumultuous with his needs and notched hers a little higher.

He uttered a ragged breath. "I am clumsy with need," he murmured apologetically, swallowing audibly before he dipped his head to explore her throat. "Gods! I have wanted you, Miranda. Tell me how to give you pleasure. I don't know what will please you."

Shivering, Miranda lifted a hand blindly, found his head and stroked it, heaving a shaky breath. "You were doing just fine a moment ago," she said a little teasingly, breathless, dizzy, anxious for him to get back to doing what he'd been doing. "Just kiss me, touch me. Everything you do pleases me—or skip all that and come inside of me."

His head jerked upward at that, but he didn't need to be invited twice. Pushing her legs apart, he settled his hips between them.

Contrary to her hopes, however, he didn't attempt to enter her. He fitted his mouth to hers and kissed her as he had before, scattering her wits, carrying her down into the heated abyss of pleasure where she'd swum before. Waves of pleasure rolled through her with each caress of his tongue along hers. She stroked her tongue along his, absorbing the feel of his mouth and tongue, his taste, with a sense of rising desperation. She felt the instant rise of pleasurable tension again, felt the muscles along her sex quake with need, felt the hot excretion of moisture filling her channel in hopefulness for his intimate caress.

The shaking need she felt in his hands as he explored her body, the raggedness of his breath as he followed the touch of his hands with his lips, suckled at her flesh, drove her to distraction. She gasped for breath, moaned her appreciation for each touch. She arched her back to offer her breasts to him when he'd wove a path along her chest that was driving her crazy, groaning his name when he accepted the offering and tugged at the tight buds that ached for his attention with the heated suction of his mouth.

Her heart felt as if it would beat her to death with excited anticipation when he finally surged upward and she felt the knob of flesh she'd been aching for connect with her body. She gripped his waist frantically with fingers curled into claws as he pressed deeper, driving her along the sand twice as far as the meager ground he conquered inside of her.

Desisting when it apparently dawned on him, he panted for breath. “Am I hurting you?” he gasped hoarsely.

“You’re killing me, damn it! Give it to me!” Miranda ground out mindlessly.

Chapter Eleven

He seemed confused by her demand. Grabbing him tighter, Miranda curled her legs around his hips and tried to mount him.

She heard him grinding his teeth. Slipping one arm around her hips and the other around her shoulders, he tightened them bruisingly and pumped his hips jerkily.

Miranda groaned as if she was dying as she felt him gain a little headway, felt the pressure mount to the edge of pain as his thick member slid slowly deeper. She ignored the threat of pain. The mindless need hammering inside of her left no room for concern about anything beyond feeling the rub of his thick flesh along the achy segment of her channel. She nearly came with the first brush when he'd finally managed to drive deeply enough to touch it.

She felt like she was going to pass out. She couldn't tell, though, if it was from the pleasurable rush that went through her with his first pass, or if she was dying from oxygen deprivation, or if she was coming apart at the seams from the mass of hard flesh that had begun to feel as if it might rupture something. She didn't care either. Only one goal held place in her mind, assuaging the maddening itch.

Her natural lubrication finally rescued her from the distraction of growing pain and the possibility of internal injury, coating his flesh with a generosity that allowed him to slide home and hit bottom hard enough she ground her teeth.

He withdrew almost at once, gliding more smoothly outward and then returning with a force that nearly buckled her spine—might have hurt if she'd been in any condition to notice. She wasn't. Three strokes—two in, one in retreat—were enough to send her over the edge. She shuddered and jerked against him as her body exploded with rapturous, glorious waves of release.

Khan uttered a choked grunt as her climax rattled through him, shook his desperate hold on his control loose and his body convulsed in nearly agonizing pleasure. He couldn't decide whether to keep pumping or stop, but it didn't seem to be a matter of conscious decision. He shook and jerked with the force of the paroxysms as his body expelled the fluids that would carry his seed when he entered his cycle. It seemed to take his strength with it. By the time the seizures had finally stopped it was all he could do to hold himself off of Miranda to keep from crushing her.

He didn't want to. He wanted to plaster himself against her and feel every inch of her body against his, to gather her close and enjoy holding her. He wanted to stay just as he was, feeling her hot flesh wrapped around his cock.

Straining against the increasing sense of weakness, he reluctantly pulled his flesh from hers and settled beside her, gathering her as closely to him as he could. Gods! He'd wanted her so bad he'd nearly disgraced himself. Thank the gods she'd been as needy as he had. If she hadn't come so quickly he wasn't certain he could've held out to please her.

He wanted nothing so much as to lie holding her until he'd recovered enough to explore her again, but he knew the others were waiting. She hadn't chosen him alone.

He hadn't actually expected that she would, but he was vastly disappointed, nevertheless.

It was worse that he was so near his cycle. He could already feel it in the need pounding through him to take her again immediately, the insane urge to meld his body with hers and simply stay.

He stroked her back, abruptly needing assurance that he'd given her pleasure, that he hadn't just imagined it—needing to know he hadn't hurt her. He murmured the questions against her hair, listening keenly for her answer above the blood pounding in his ears with a combination of rising desire and anxiety. Relief flooded him when he heard her assurances and beyond that, heard in her voice that she hadn't merely said it to make him feel better when it wasn't true.

He swallowed with an effort when he sensed that Teron was growing impatient. "The spawning is upon me ... but if you will still have me as your lover afterward, I'll learn all the ways to please you and give you the time you deserve, not rush as I did this time. I was ... too needy for you."

Miranda stared at him blankly when he kissed her lightly on the lips and rolled away from her, sensing he'd gotten up and moved away even though she couldn't see that well in the darkness, hadn't been able to see his face well enough to gauge his expression. She was still trying to gather her wits and figure out what he'd meant by his remarks when Teron dropped his knees beside her and gathered her against his length.

She didn't even realize, at first, that it *was* Teron.

She thought she would've known instantly when he kissed her, though, even if he hadn't murmured her name hoarsely a moment before and she'd recognized his voice. Dragging her astride his thighs without breaking the kiss, he lifted her hips high enough to align his body with hers and pressed her down until she'd engulfed his flesh. She shuddered, feeling the muscles along her channel clenching madly around his engorged member. He broke from her lips to sample her throat as he lifted her slowly upward and slowly settled her again, holding her there for a long moment.

The long, leisurely strokes, the sporadic cadence, threw her off kilter and kept her there. It didn't prevent a fresh rise of tension. It teased her to distraction until she was begging him to cease tormenting her and give her what she needed. Releasing a ragged, pent up breath, he did, began to move rhythmically until she reached a point where she felt as if she was dangling over the edge of a precipice and then, when she'd almost begun to weep for it, he gave her release.

Gerek practically snatched her from Teron's lap, dragging her to him and mounting her almost in the same motion.

Two wild rides and three climaxes later, she lay plastered against the dirt feeling as if she was going to melt into it as she listened vaguely to Adar's retreating steps, wondering bewilderedly what had just happened. Discovering she wasn't in any condition to figure it out, she gave up the effort to hold onto consciousness and dropped into oblivion.

The morning light woke her to the discovery that she was lying spread eagle on the dirt like a carcass. Dew and the airborne sea spray coated her liberally. It took a strenuous effort even to lift her head and look around. She discovered when she had that she wasn't alone. Littering the compound were the rest of the women, some sitting up and looking around dazedly, some lying as she'd been, like the dead, others having just come around sufficiently to lift their heads weakly and glance around as she was.

The place looked like a war zone—as if a bomb gone off in the middle of the compound and blown their clothes off and scattered them haphazardly across the yard.

Pushing herself upright, Miranda scanned the area again, not certain what she was looking for until she didn't find it and realized she was looking for the Hirachi—more specifically Khan, Teron, Gerek, or Adar. They weren't there, of course. There wasn't a single Hirachi in sight.

Beginning to feel a sense of hurt worming its way through the wall of confusion, Miranda got to her feet with an effort and headed down the beach toward the water, more because everyone else seemed to be headed that way than because she was really conscious of a decision to do so. When she'd waded in up to the waist, she splashed water over her face to try to drive the fog from her mind. Along about the time she began scrubbing water over herself with her hands, she remembered her gifts from the night before, specifically the soap.

Anxiety instantly assailed her. She'd left the pile when Khan had dragged her away, she realized in dismay. Slogging out of the water instantly, she headed up the beach, trying to ignore the twinges of discomfort every step caused her.

Relief flooded her when she saw her pile as she'd left it. Rushing to it, she dropped to her knees and checked everything, just to be sure, and finally sat down.

"That was a hell of a party," Deborah muttered wryly, drawing her attention.

Miranda turned to stare at her, still trying to gather her wits. "What happened?"

Deborah blinked at her. "Aside from getting fucked six ways from Sunday, you mean? Not sure," she responded when Miranda nodded.

Discovering she was still too exhausted to figure it out, Miranda got up after a few minutes, gathered her gifts, went to retrieve her ugly gown, and then headed to the hut. She'd already collapsed on her grass pallet and was drifting toward sleep when the other women began to stagger in and fall out on theirs.

Hunger and thirst roused her some time later. Groaning, she rolled over and struggled to sit up. She hadn't had one sip of anything stronger than water and she still felt as if she had the worst hangover she'd ever had in her life. Her head was pounding and ... actually her sex seemed more abused than her head.

It didn't take a lot of searching to find the answer to that. The moment she began the search heated remembrance washed through her. She'd had sex—with Khan, Teron, Gerek, and Adar.

No wonder she felt like she'd been run over by a tank. She'd been run over by four tanks!

She glanced a little self-consciously around at the other women. They looked as bad as she felt, though, and between that and the vague memory that she'd passed at least two couples engaged in amorous adventure on the way to her own rendezvous she realized pointing fingers and snickers wasn't something she had to worry about. She didn't entirely understand why the 'gang' had fucked her silly and left, but she had a bad feeling it was circling in the back of her mind just waiting to pounce.

Deciding to focus on her physical discomfort before she allowed anything unpleasant in the doors, she turned to study her spoils from the night before.

It was really unfortunate that that particular word popped into her mind because it was followed by some of the thoughts she'd been trying to keep at bay.

Like the fact that she'd paid for her 'gifts'.

That explained at least part of the vague sense of hurt that had been teasing her since she'd woke the first time. Determinedly pushing it from her mind, she took everything except the knife and the shift and headed toward the water's edge. When she'd taken care of nature she gathered her belongings and went to the opposite end to bathe.

They were going to have to do something about a more permanent, less repellent sandbox, she thought as she trudged along the beach. She wasn't comfortable about polluting the water they had to use for bathing—or that the Hirachi used. Then again, they were going to pollute *something*. There was no avoiding it. They didn't have the nice sewage system they'd had back in civilization to carry everything away tidily so that they didn't have to think about where it ended up.

Building an outhouse wasn't a lot more appealing, in fact would probably be worse in very short order.

Unless they put it outside the walls of the compound? Then again, getting eaten while they were trying to take care of nature just wasn't the way she wanted to go.

Dismissing it from her mind for the moment, she used the soap to bathe everything, including her teeth—uck!—and then spread her ugly gown on the ground and settled on it to dry while she very carefully worked her comb through her hair. She was dry by the time she was satisfied she'd gotten all the knots out. Her eyes were burning from the sting, and her arms felt as if they might fall off.

Slumping, she rested for a few minutes before she tackled gathering her hair up with the combs Khan had made for her. After several failed attempts, she finally stood up and bent at the waist, using gravity to help her gather it at the crown of her head and secure it.

The trousers fit surprisingly well. They were a little loose, but not enough to be a problem.

Which meant Gerek had a surprisingly good eye for measurements.

Teron did, too. The boots he'd made for her fit her as nearly perfectly as any shoe she'd ever bought and felt worlds better, at that. Sitting down once more on the gown she'd spread out, she studied the pants and boots.

They were made from leather so soft it felt almost more like cloth than leather and there was nothing sloppy or defective about the craftsmanship that had gone into cutting them or putting them together. She had a vague idea that making animal hide into leather wasn't something that was quick or easy, so they'd either been working on the gifts for her for weeks, or they'd already had the leather and they'd still worked on fashioning them into something for her to wear for weeks.

For her specifically, she wondered? Did they fit her well enough she could assume they had been intended for her from the beginning?

Picking up the comb Adar had fashioned for her from some sort of shell, she supposed, she studied it carefully. It hadn't snagged her hair. Each tooth was as smooth as a comb manufactured by a machine that poured liquid plastic into molds. In fact, it was a lot better made.

How much time had it taken to make something like this, she wondered? Hours upon hours, surely?

Just like the combs that held her hair off her shoulders and out of her eyes.

She couldn't seem to reconcile the hours of dedication that had gone into each

gift—even the gifts that they'd bartered for represented hours and hours spent collecting *jasumi*—and what she'd woken up to.

Desertion. That was why she felt that tease of unhappiness at the fringes of her mind, the fact that she hadn't wanted to face.

The gifts said one thing. Their behavior the night before, their *discarding* of her, said something else entirely.

Getting up abruptly, she picked the gown up that she'd been sitting on, shook the dirt from it and pulled it over her head. She hated to top off her beautiful boots and pants with anything so ugly, but she didn't have anything else to cover herself.

Anyway, she thought, it would protect the nice things from catching too much dirt and stains.

Carefully gathering her dried cake of soap and her comb, she headed back to the hut to put them with her gown and knife, wishing she had some place 'safe' to hide them just in case anybody decided to covet them. After a little thought, she tucked the small bundle beneath the grass of her pallet and shoved the knife into the side of her boot as she'd seen the Hirachi do.

The knife, she discovered, fit as comfortably as the pants and the boot, the length and width of the blade as well as the handle seeming as if they'd been custom made to fit her hand and balanced for her size and strength.

She discovered when she left the hut again that some of the women had already fed the coals from the fire the night before and begun reheating the remains of the meat. She'd given up worrying about dying of food poisoning. They didn't have any way to refrigerate, or in fact any way to preserve anything. All they could do was heat the meat again and hope for the best.

They sure as hell couldn't afford to just throw away whatever they didn't eat—not unless it reached a point of being completely inedible—which hadn't happened yet. Generally, with the number of people they were feeding, they were lucky if one hunt brought in enough to feed everybody one meal and occasionally two. Moving to the spit when she saw one of the women struggling to turn the carcass by herself, she helped.

It was burned on one side from being left unattended while the fire was still hot enough to cook.

Everyone had been otherwise occupied the night before, however.

She had a knife now, though. She could always hack off the burned part.

There was still no sign of the Hirachi. Wondering if they'd returned to the beach while she and the other women were still sleeping off their wild night, she headed toward the bins to check to see if they'd brought in a load of the *jasumi*.

The bins were still empty.

They'd left the night before and they hadn't come back.

The sense of having been abandoned welled up once more, washing over her more forcefully. Glancing around to find a place to steep in her misery, Miranda saw a large pile of the roots they'd discovered in the forest that were edible.

Pretty disgusting, but not toxic and they contained some essential nutrients.

They'd found that if they soaked them in sea water for a while before they cooked them, the tubers absorbed some of the sea salt and weren't quite as disgusting to eat. Using her gown to form a pocket, she counted out one for each of the women and headed down to the water.

The meat would have to cook a while to lessen the possibility of food poisoning anyway. When she'd washed the roots and piled them so that the lapping waves could wash over them, she squatted down just out of range and stared at the water.

Khan had said the spawning was upon them, she recalled abruptly.

Frowning, she struggled to remember what he'd said to her. She'd been too wrapped up in the desire pounding through her at the time to pay a lot of attention, but she remembered pretty readily that he'd said something about her choosing him as one of her lovers.

How the hell had that happened when she couldn't fucking remember doing any such thing, she thought, suddenly angry?

Not that she hadn't lusted over all of them, she reminded herself judiciously. She had felt a very definite interest in all four and she'd hoped she had a chance with at least one of them, but she couldn't remember anything she'd said or done since her arrival that could've been construed as having chosen—not by them. She'd thought she'd done a fair job of keeping her interest in them to herself, especially when she could see the more aggressive females among them had earmarked all of four of them. She'd figured they had a far better chance at interesting the men than she did—which was why she'd not only tried to keep her interest to herself, she'd tried hard to keep that interest from growing into anything that might end up hurting her.

Almost certainly would since watching any of the four with any of the other women would have made her unhappy at the very least.

But she'd chosen—all four of them?

And they'd just accepted that?

Obviously, they'd accepted that, she thought irritably. There was no way any of them could've failed to know. Not only had they had a compound wide orgy going on, but there was no real privacy for anybody.

And besides that, they'd fucking been waiting in line!

Gerek had dragged her off of Teron, for gods sake!

It took her a while to recall what Khan had said afterward, because she'd still been reeling in the aftermath and in no condition to think.

He'd asked her—no, told her that if she'd take him as a lover *after* the spawning that he would make it good for her. She'd pretty much dismissed what little she'd even absorbed at the time because she'd thought he was still worried that he'd hurt her. She'd also suspected he was worried because he knew she wasn't a Hirachi woman and he'd thought, *known*, he didn't know how to please her, undoubtedly suspected that she was so different that the things that pleased the Hirachi women wouldn't feel good to her.

All of that put together had some really, really unpleasant connotations.

As young as she'd thought he was, as long as he'd undoubtedly been stranded on this world without a woman, Khan was damned experienced as a lover. Granted, she'd been lusting after him long enough it wouldn't have taken much to light her up, but there hadn't been any awkward groping. He'd played her like a master—they all had.

It wasn't that she'd expected them to be virginal—or even wanted that, if she was honest.

But she realized she *had* thought they were the next thing to it.

They had a village! She hadn't seen it, of course. Considering the time it had taken *them* to build the pathetic hut they were sleeping in, the existence of a village and

the permanency that implied, suggested they'd been here a very long time—particularly since it seemed they spent so much of their time gathering the *jasumi* for trade with the Vernamin.

Moreover, they'd been slaves of the Sheloni before that.

Everything pointed to them having been on this planet several years, which meant they would've been barely grown when they were taken.

Unless they were actually older than they looked.

It was possible, she supposed, but how likely?

She realized after a little more thought that she didn't really care. It wasn't that part that was really nagging at her.

It was the fact that Khan had plain out said he had no intention of coming near her once he entered his spawning cycle.

She didn't completely understand that business, but it seemed obvious, even to her, that they had a period of fertility and the rest of the time they weren't. *They* had been brought to the Hirachi specifically because they were nearing that cycle where they would be able to spawn young—would feel a huge drive to do so.

Except the Hirachi considered them inferior stock and they had no intention of breeding with them.

That was the part that hurt.

It was like feeling around a wound until you located the splinter, the real source of pain.

They didn't mind sharing her because she really didn't matter that much to them.

"I think they've soaked long enough," Stacy said, breaking in to her unhappy thoughts.

It was actually a welcome distraction. After staring at her blankly for a moment, Miranda gathered the roots up and took them back to the fire, carefully dropping them into the coals. When she'd shoved them far enough in to cook, she helped Stacy give the meat another turn.

"I see you lucked out at the Christmas party last night," Stacy murmured.

Miranda looked at the other woman curiously for a moment before she caught the correlation. It had *felt* like Christmas the night before. In the ugly light day

She smiled wanly. "I was so thrilled."

"I think we all got soap," Stacy muttered. "Not that I didn't need it, but it isn't quite like getting bath products back home, is it? It felt a little like a statement."

"I was trying not to think about that. Anyway, damn it, we've been washing several times a day. We couldn't stink even if we didn't have any damned soap!"

Stacy shrugged, glanced around for a place to sit and finally moved far enough away from the fire so that the heat radiating from it wasn't so uncomfortable. Miranda joined her, staring glumly at the juices dripping from the meat and wondering how she could be so hungry when she was also miserable.

Deborah and Jan joined the two of them after a while. "Guess we won't be seeing the guys again until after the spawning," Deborah observed morosely. "Talk about wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am!"

Miranda glanced at her. "You got the old 'damn you're fine girl, but I can't waste my seed on you' too, huh?"

Jan snorted disgustedly. "You don't see any of them around, do you?"

"I think I've figured out the choosing thing," Deborah said medatively. "That is, assuming everybody else did what I did."

"The kissing?" Miranda guessed.

"Yeah. You think that was it?"

"I sure as hell can't think of anything else it could've been. That's a hell of a note! Like we had a fucking clue!" Miranda said angrily.

Deborah shrugged. "You're the one that kept reminding everybody that they probably had some customs we'd find strange."

"Yes, but" Miranda stopped to think it over. "I can't think of anything else. That must have been it. It makes me wonder what would've happened if we hadn't all decided it wouldn't be polite to kiss one and then ignore the others."

Jan shuddered. "I'm not sure I want to know." She was silent for a few moments. "I've never been gang banged before. I'm not sure I know how I feel about it. Not that it wasn't nice! I must say the guys I was with were really good."

"I haven't gotten the impression that any of them were really bad," Miranda said dryly. "You think they're older than they look?"

"They could be a hundred years old—or more," Deborah said. "We still don't know a damned thing about them."

"Oh god!" Stacy exclaimed. "Don't talk like that! It would be so grossly unfair!"

"As *if* it's going to make any difference to us!" Jan said. "Did you miss the part where they made it clear they weren't interested in the house and white picket fence?"

"How often do you think they spawn?" Stacy wondered aloud.

Miranda thought it over. "Since it seemed to me that the Vernamin appeared to have a good bit concern about it disrupting the supply of *jasumi*, that would also seem to indicate they had some idea because they'd seen it. I don't know. Once a year, maybe? Don't most large mammals mate once a year?"

"Most that are around our size," Deborah said after a little thought. "But that's usually spring and this doesn't feel like spring—I hope to *god* this isn't spring on this planet! Larger mammals—a lot longer because they have really long gestation periods. I think the elephant takes something like four years."

Jan, Miranda, and Stacy stared at her in horror. "That can't be right!" Stacy said finally. "Those poor things are pregnant for *years*?"

"I said I *thought*," Deborah said testily. "I'm not sure except that it's a lot longer than the human gestation period."

"Well—the Hirachi are big, but I don't see how that could possibly apply to the Hirachi. The trader *and* the Vernamin said we were compatible. How could we be compatible if there was that much difference in the gestation period?"

"We can't even assume that it would be once a year, regardless of the length of gestation," Miranda said pointedly. "They aren't just not human. They aren't from Earth at all. None of the rules we know necessarily apply to them."

"The whole discussion is pointless, anyway. To hell with them! Maybe we're not as tall and strong and beautiful as their damned women to them, but I'm not going to let them make me feel inferior any damned more! If they can't appreciate us, they can all kiss my ass!"

"It isn't bad enough we have to put up with this kind shit on Earth? We get shipped all the way across the universe only to find out the natives here like tall and

buxom, while the men back there want girls instead of women? We're too strong and independent to appeal to the men on Earth and not strong enough for the Hirachi men?

"I think we should just focus on trying to find a source of trade goods, gather up anything and everything that we know would be valuable back on Earth and when that bastard trader comes back, we negotiate a deal with him to take us home.

"And when I get back, I'm going to track down the son-of-a-bitch behind selling us off to start with and kill him!"

She was almost surprised to discover that her companions weren't taken aback by her angry tirade. Instead, they looked as angry as she felt.

"Here! Here!" Deborah agreed. "I like all of it but the last part. Not that I don't want to, mind you, but I know my limitations. Getting shot trying to gun down some political figure just isn't my idea of revenge. Now, if you want to go to the news people and do a tell all, I'll go along with that."

Miranda sent her a look of disbelief. "They'd just lock us up in a loony bin if we started babbling about alien slavers and alien planets. I doubt we could even convince news people that the government was involved if we tried to say it was a white slave/prostitution ring."

"Of course we couldn't!" Jan agreed. "They wouldn't have a motive for anything like that and we weren't, so we wouldn't be able to dig up any evidence."

Miranda shook it off. "There's no point in worrying about that now anyway. Until and unless we find a way back, there certainly isn't anything we could do about it. I think we should just focus on trade goods."

"We can't even do that until we get the device from Khan," Deborah said.

"Which brings us back to the spawning. It's obvious we won't see them again until they've passed the cycle."

Chapter Twelve

Khan had a bad feeling even as the fire began inside of him that he wasn't far enough, the barricade they had built outside the gates of the compound was not stout enough, and the reinforcements they had built along the sea wall were not strong enough to keep him away from Miranda.

They should've built the containment lodges.

They hadn't seen the need for them when they'd built the village, though. Even if it was true and they could trust that the Sheloni were no longer a threat, they had had no women and it seemed unlikely they would. What need did they have for containment lodges to protect non-existent women from men maddened with the need to breed them during the spawning cycle?—and there had been no time for it after the trader had brought the flower women, as Adar had dubbed them and they had all begun to think of them.

It had seemed appropriate if not particularly flattering to the tiny, spindly creatures with their strange white/pink skin, curiously colorful pale hair, and even more exotically colored eyes.

And they didn't just *appear* to be as fragile and easily crushed as the petals of a flower, either. The hot sun wilted and burned them. The wind and sea chafed their delicate skin and, as willingly as many of them labored, they had neither the strength nor the stamina nor any sort of skills that he'd been able to determine to survive the harsh environment of this world.

He'd spent a good deal of time trying to imagine the world they must have come from, but it defeated his imagination. Mayhap, like the Sheloni, their race had advanced to such a weakened state? Mayhap they had reached a point where they relied so heavily upon the technology they had devised that they'd no longer seen the need for physical strength and stamina?

Or mayhap they had bred weakness into their race without awareness of it because of their technology?

And, mayhap, the Hirachi were more fortunate than they had realized, he thought wryly?

When the Sheloni had helped bring about the destruction of the great civilization they had built for themselves and pitched them backward to a place where they had little or no technology to rely upon, mayhap it had saved them from a similar fate? When they were forced to use their wits, their physical and personal strengths to survive. When nature once again determined their individual suitability for survival and technology could not be relied upon any longer to nurture the weak and unsuitable, it had been harsh. In many ways, it had been nearly unbearable, and yet the physically and mentally inferior had not lived to breed and pass on their weaknesses. The defective did not survive long enough to burden their society or pass on their weaknesses to a new generation, no matter how strenuously those who cared for them struggled to preserve their lives.

And they had never been able to bring themselves to cease to try even when their

civilization had crumbled and survival had become a struggle even for the strongest among them.

Inevitably, it was the weak and sick, the injured or defective, old, young, and in between, that was their failing, that resulted most often in their capture and enslavement, those unable to retreat to the sea for protection from Sheloni raids. They couldn't take them and they couldn't bring themselves to abandon them, and they couldn't fight the Sheloni—other tribes of Hirachi bent on raiding them for the things they needed to survive, yes, but not the Sheloni. There was no fighting their technology. A dozen powerful warriors couldn't bring down one of their machines, and they couldn't fight at all when the Sheloni simply gassed them and rendered them unconscious and caged them like animals.

Despite all that painfully earned knowledge, he had found himself growing more and more determined to coddle and protect the flower women. What warrior worthy of the title could simply turn his back on the weak, even if they weren't his people? What was the point of building the strength and learning the skills to fight if not to protect those unable to do so?

That was their purpose before their capture, to stand and fight so that those who couldn't could flee to safety, aided by the fledging warriors who'd not yet grown into their full strength or learned all the skills they needed.

It didn't bear thinking on what had become of them—the elders and young children, the sick and injured—when the warriors among them had been snatched away, but it wasn't something he liked to dwell on. It was useless to do so when he could do nothing about it.

He *could* do something about the current situation, though, or had thought he could. Now, he was no longer certain. As hard as they had tried thus far, it seemed to him that the flower women were only growing weaker as time went on. They were not people of the sea and couldn't be brought to the village in the sea where they wouldn't have to deal with such harsh conditions.

The only way they could care for them as they needed would be to build a village on the land—which would be more vulnerable to attack by any who were hostile toward them—and he wasn't certain they would survive long enough for the Hirachi to build one. The strange structure they'd built for themselves hadn't seemed to help them a great deal—primarily because there was little of comfort or protection to it. But it would take far longer to build anything that *would* offer what they needed.

Scrubbing his hands over his face to try to push away the thoughts, he stood and began to pace his bed chamber as if by doing so he could outstrip them.

It didn't help as much as he'd hoped. Miranda had become the constant companion of his mind almost from the very first and his weakness in yielding to his urges had certainly not helped.

He had known it wouldn't, but like everything else, he had convinced himself that it would ease the strain, make it more bearable, give him breathing room to act with reason and not upon instinct and desire.

He could not *fathom* why she appealed to him so strongly that he hadn't been able to think of much else from the time he'd set eyes upon her. Even when his mind had been hammering at him that she was strange, a complete contradiction to everything he'd always thought he considered beautiful and most appealing in a female, the blood had

been pounding through him in direct conflict of what his mind had been telling him.

Actually, not a complete contradiction to what he thought of as feminine beauty, he reminded himself wryly. No woman he had ever bedded had had a more beautifully womanly form. It was almost *more* appealing that she was a miniature woman and looked so fragile, though he was damned if he could figure out why when that only meant that she was totally unsuitable for a man of his size. He had only to look at her to see that he was liable to break the tiny thing if he yielded to his impulses.

He sure as hell couldn't convince himself she was big enough to accommodate his cock—and that had been *before* it had occurred to him what his seed was liable to do to her, growing in such a little thing.

Actually, trying to imagine driving his cock into such a tiny body had led inevitably to imagining his seed growing in her belly, which hadn't been nearly as pleasurable a thought as the first. He could see without touching her that he could span her tiny belly with his hand. No infant of his breeding was going to be comfortably housed there. It was, in point of fact, almost as horrifying an image as trying to imagine her *birthing* any child of his.

The cock—there was some possibility of. As tiny as she was, the woman's body was certainly designed for expansion, and hers seemed particularly so when she looked so soft and pliant. Even if she couldn't take all without injury, he could fit well enough to find pleasure.

A babe, though—unless her own genes prevailed, or her body wouldn't allow for more growth than she could safely handle—she would die horribly.

He had been against that notion on principle in the beginning. The more he came to know her the less his principles mattered and the more she did. He would not have felt right before. Now it wasn't just a matter of not being 'right'. He wasn't at all certain that he could bear it. In fact, the prospect of it terrified him.

Not that she was unique in that particular respect. It seemed to be a universal trait with her species. None of the women were much sturdier looking than Miranda and quite a few were even tinier.

Not that he had any interest in any of the others beyond the fact that it was against everything they had ever been taught and that he personally believed to injure, or cause to be harmed, or fail to protect the innocent.

Realizing after a few moments that his mind had returned to the very subject he most wanted to avoid thinking about, he stopped pacing his bed chamber and headed into the main living area. Dropping into the pool, he swam out the entrance tunnel and left his pod. The water cooled his heated body somewhat, but it wasn't nearly cool enough to bring his blood from a slow simmer to comfortable temperatures.

There were others out similarly occupied in trying to cool their heated blood—most in point of fact. It did not make him easy in his mind that fully a quarter of the men were fully erect already and having problems taming the beast. That didn't augur well for their resolution to stay clear of the women that so many were in trouble and already having problems with control. He stayed until the need for air was burning his lungs and finally returned through the entrance tunnel and propped his folded arms on the edge of the pool, allowing himself a few minutes to recover, breathing deeply until he'd fully oxygenated again.

When he emerged the second time, he saw that those having control issues

seemed to be doing better with the water to cool them, but he still wasn't completely easy in his mind. After a little thought, he went in search of Gerek, his second, and signaled for him to follow when he returned to his own pod again.

Gerek's expression was grim and his countenance already showing strain when they emerged. Heaving themselves from the pool, they merely sat on the edge, waiting for the water to drain from their skin.

"I think we need to gather everyone in the nursery," Khan said. They had always called the gathering room that even though they, themselves, had never had cause to use it as such, or any likelihood that they would, simply because it was an integral part of the construction and that was the only term ever applied to the area. It said a lot for the focus on his own thoughts that the term, used regularly without any thought given to what its ultimate purpose was, caught in his throat. For a few moments, he considered whether it was a wise choice or not, but it couldn't be avoided that it was the only area that was really large enough for the entire group to gather.

In a typical city, on land or sea, the lowest level was the safest, and because of the venting and the large pool, also the most constant in temperature—which was why it had always been the nursery—although it also insured that the remainder of the city was kept at a fairly constant, and comfortable, temperature. Once the young were old enough to handle the swim to the cities in the sea, they spent most of their time there. The large pool made it easier to train the young in their breathing and swimming so that they could gradually learn to take in enough air to stay beneath the water for longer and longer periods of time. Having them all together also made it easier to teach them the knowledge they needed to acquire and to protect them from any attacks—so long as the city itself wasn't compromised.

Pushing thoughts of nurseries from his mind, he gathered his wits again. "Some of the men are already having problems and we're a gods damned long way from the peak. It'll be easier for the strong to monitor the weak if we're all together and hopefully prevent a full scale raid on the ... compound."

Gerek's lips tightened, but he merely nodded. "At least they're more likely to still be reasonable. I'll enlist Adar and Kurt and Teron if I see them to help round everyone up."

"Adar was one of those I spotted who was already having trouble," Khan said dryly.

Gerek scowled. "In that case, I'll find Adar first and send him to the nursery and then tag the others as I come upon them. It will still be done faster if I had several men to help."

Khan agreed. "Circle north from this side. I'll go around the other way, just in case some of them have already strayed a little further than they should." Waiting until Gerek had disappeared, he dropped into the pool and took the alternate route around the city that he'd agreed to. He wasn't really surprised nor particularly pleased to find that he'd been right. At least a dozen men had wandered in that direction already and were trying hard to pretend they were interested in nothing more than swimming off their excess energy.

Two bowed up at him, however, when he ordered them back. They backed down fairly quickly, but it didn't bode well that they were already becoming belligerent.

It had been a mistake, he realized grimly, to think they could take lovers so close

to their time without repercussions. He'd thought at the time that it would help to ease the strain, but it seemed to have had the opposite effect.

He wasn't sure that *not* allowing it would've helped matters. The men had been antsy to court the women from the moment they discovered that they were unlikely to endanger them by breeding on them—because it had begun to seem impossible that they could. Unfortunately, they'd had nothing to court with and had had to work longer hours besides making up their quota—and a little more for such gifts as they had no skills to make. He was fairly certain if sheer desperation hadn't been driving them they would never have managed to fashion gifts for courting at all in the length of time they'd had.

Fortunately, he thought wryly, he hadn't been able to get a great deal of sleep—and he supposed the others hadn't either.

And they had *still* been skating the fine edge when they'd finally been ready to court and try to tempt the women's interests by displaying their skills and thoughtfulness in the gifts they chose and fashioned.

It could've been worse, he supposed. The lot of them had been so anxious by that time disappointment wouldn't even have begun to describe their feelings if the women had rejected both them and their love tokens. At least now they'd had some appeasement and they knew that the women would accept them as lovers. As soon as they were through the spawning period, and knew they could safely indulge their pleasure, they had something to look forward to.

He wasn't sure, now, that that would be enough, but there was never any certainty, with any of them, without containment.

It took him so long to round up the stragglers, his skull was pounding from the need for air by the time he emerged in the nursery pool. Gasping for breath, he treaded water until the dizziness passed and then surveyed the assemblage. When he finally accepted the impossibility of a head count from where he was, he climbed out of the pool.

He met up with Gerek on the far side. "Someone is missing," he ground out.

"Adar and Teron," Gerek responded tightly.

"Gods damn it!" Khan snarled, instantly certain where they were headed. "I would've thought Teron, at least, would have a cooler head."

Gerek shrugged. "I think he went after Adar. I'll go after them."

Khan's eyes narrowed. "I don't think so."

"I suppose you mean to?" Gerek growled, instantly displaying aggression.

Khan considered it and dismissed it. "No. I'll send one of the others—someone not sniffing at Miranda. Adar and Teron are more likely to see reason if they aren't confronted by a rival."

Looking somewhat appeased, Gerek surveyed the possibilities. "Malek?"

Khan frowned. "Mayhap—his woman, Carol, spurned him. I do not think he has recovered enough from that yet to feel the rise." Striding toward Malek, he pulled him aside and explained the situation. Nodding grimly, Malek strode to the pool and leapt in, disappearing. He wasn't gone long before he reappeared with both Teron and Adar.

Adar looked a little the worse for his excursion.

Teron was livid.

"You sent Malek after me?" he snarled the moment he met up with Khan.

Khan contained his anger with an effort. "You and Adar were both gone."

"Because I went after Adar!"

"Which put both of you far closer to ... the compound than you should be right now!" Khan snapped.

Teron seemed to wrestle with his temper. "I have myself in hand," he said finally.

He hadn't needed to say it. If he hadn't Malek would've been gone longer and both Adar *and* Teron would've been showing signs of having been in a fight when they returned, not just Adar.

It was just as well their fighting skills went down when their blood rose and reason went out the window, Khan thought wryly. A cooler head could still prevail simply because they could outwit their opponent, a very good thing since rage tended to increase their strength even though they were less able to draw upon their skills.

Khan let it go, instead drawing Gerek and Teron into a discussion about building a land village. It wasn't a completely safe subject since it still directed their thoughts toward Miranda, but he wasn't currently in any condition himself to come up with a subject that didn't involve Miranda in some way.

* * * *

"There's something blocking the gates," Miranda said, desisting finally from shoving at them.

Deborah and Mary Jane stopped pushing, as well. Deborah frowned. "We haven't had a storm lately. What could be blocking it?"

Miranda couldn't think of a thing. Anger surged through her, though. They hadn't seen a sign of any of the Hirachi in two days. As far as she could tell, they had maybe two more days worth of meat, but they would be out of the roots with their next meal ... and they weren't sure the meat wouldn't spoil, for that matter. She still didn't like going beyond the compound, but she'd decided it would be a good idea to find what they could to eat, now, instead waiting to hunt something when they'd run completely out and were hungry.

Stepping back from the gates, she surveyed the walls speculatively. They were rough, but not rough enough to offer hand or toe holds and they must be nearly twelve feet high. There was no way they were going over them without something to help them manage it. "We need a ladder."

"Let me just see if I can pull one out of my ass," Mary Jane said sourly.

Miranda batted her eyelashes at her. "Could you, sweetie?" she asked sarcastically.

Surprised, Mary Jane blinked at her, but finally grinned. "I could try, oh great leader, but I'm not sure the results would be anything helpful."

Shaking her head, Miranda turned to survey the compound. Aside from their pathetic hut, there wasn't anything except the fire pit and the bins. If the bins were closer to the wall they might be able to climb up on one and then climb from the top of the bin to the top of the wall, she thought. The question was, could they move one of the bins?

Doubtful, she decided, but she crossed the yard to study it anyway, testing it by pushing against it.

"I don't think all of us together could move that thing, and I doubt we could convince 'all' even to try. Besides, even from the top it looks like another seven or eight feet."

“Which would mean balancing on the lip of the bin while somebody climbed somebody’s shoulders,” Miranda finished.

After studying the problem several more minutes, she turned to look at the hut again. “We could use a couple of those left over poles to make a ladder.”

Deborah and Mary Jane followed her as she crossed the yard yet again and stopped to study the poles. Picking out the two longest, she dragged them over to the wall and leaned them up to check the length. They were shy of the top by several feet, but she thought she could climb from the top onto the wall. Getting down on the other side might be a problem. She could jump, but then if she couldn’t move whatever it was blocking the gate, she wouldn’t have any way to get back in and she didn’t care for that possibility.

The walls were several feet thick at the bottom, though. Even if they narrowed at the top, she thought she could walk it and have a look at the blockage.

Pulling the poles down again, she studied the project thoughtfully. “I could cut some of the others up with the knife to make rungs, but I’m not sure how we’d put it together. There wasn’t much vine left and it’s pretty stiff now. And I don’t think there are enough poles to make as many rungs as we’d need.”

Deborah turned to study the hut. “I suppose we could sacrifice a couple of poles from the door, but that thing is so ‘holely’ now I’d really hate to. I mean, once we cut them up we wouldn’t be able to use them again.”

Miranda had to agree. “Why don’t we just see if we can tie maybe three of the poles together and make sort of a plank to walk up?”

Deborah and Mary Jane both looked doubtful, but they went with her and helped to gather up what was left of the poles and vines. They quickly discovered the rounded poles couldn’t be tied together and kept flat without some kind of brace. Miranda took one and hacked it into four pieces and the three of them set about trying to twist the vines to hold their ‘plank’ together.

They hadn’t even managed to get the second one secure when they noticed it was getting dark really quickly. Glancing skyward uneasily, they saw a storm was blowing up from the sea—fast.

“It’s going to rain ... again.”

“Shit!”

“Let’s try to get this done before it does,” Miranda suggested.

Neither Deborah nor Mary Jane looked very happy about it, but they focused on helping her until they felt the first fat drops of rain. The two of them instantly abandoned the project and headed back to the hut, joining the other women already pouring inside.

Miranda ignored the sprinkling until it abruptly dawned on her that she was wearing leather and that the rain wasn’t going to be good for either her boots or her pants. She’d already shot to her feet and headed toward shelter when the hissing sizzle of the fire heating their main meal of the day caught her attention. Skidding a halt, she turned to look at the fire pit in dismay.

“The rain will put the fire out!” she yelled, panic stricken at the thought.

It wasn’t just that they’d been waiting for the meat to heat enough they could eat it. They didn’t have any way to make fire. The Hirachi had always built the fires. All they could do was to get it going from the coals if there were still live ones.

If the rain put the fire out completely they were in deep, deep trouble.

Most everyone seemed to grasp that at once. The dozen or so women nearest the opening or who hadn't yet charged inside, skidded to a halt as she had, gaped at the fire pit in dismay and then turned to look at Miranda.

"What do we do? We can't *carry* the coals inside!"

Miranda dashed over to the open door of the hut. "Dig a pit to hold the coals close to the middle of the hut! Hurry! Somebody find something we could use to scoop up some of the coals! Anything!"

The orders got pretty much everybody moving, but for the most part they ran around in useless, panicked circles.

"The plates!" Miranda bellowed as it finally occurred to her that they had a stack of 'plates' from the animal's hide that they'd been using to eat from. Dashing toward the fire pit even as the sprinkling of rain began to come down a little harder, Miranda grabbed one of the plates stacked near the fire and tried to get close enough to the fire to scoop up a burning coal. It took her several moments of dodging, burning her fingers, and braving the fire before she managed to roll one out. Discovering it was too big for one plate, she grabbed a second, juggled the burning piece of wood for a moment and finally managed to clamp a hold with the two plates. She dropped it before she was half way back to the hut and had to stop and wrestle it again. The fire had done out by the time she reached the hut with it. She tossed it in the pit that the others had dug anyway, grabbed a handful of the bedding closest to it and tossed it over the bit of wood, blowing on it hopefully. The moment the dry grass started smoking, she dashed out to try to get another. She met a handful of other women struggling to get several pieces of burning coal to the hut in a sort of relay effort.

The rain began to come down in earnest before she reached the pit again, but she made one more desperate attempt to get a live coal, uncertain if the one she'd already gotten had caught ... or any of the others. She managed to rake a glowing coal out because the rain had already pretty much killed the fire that had been burning before. Trying to shield it with her body, she doubled over and ran with it.

The hut was full of smoke by the time she reached it. She managed to suck in a mouthful the moment she met the wall of smoke. Coughing and choking, her eyes tearing so badly from the smoke that she could barely see, she struggled toward the fire pit. Somebody jostled her and she dropped it when she'd barely gotten inside with it.

"Watch it! Hot coal!" she cried in warning, but it was too late. Someone stepped on it and screamed. Someone else kicked it back toward the door and another woman stepped on it as the entire group bailed out of the hut in a mindless stampede to evade the smoke.

Giving up on finding the coal after a few moments, Miranda followed them outside to stand in the downpour, still coughing up the smoke she'd managed to inhale.

When she finally got her coughing under control and her eyes had stopped tearing from the smoke, she moved toward the hut and peered inside, trying to decide if they still had a fire or nothing but smoke. She couldn't tell. She could hear an occasional hiss as water made its way through the thatching on their roof, but she couldn't see actual fire through the pall of smoke.

Shivering, she moved away from the hut again, looked around a little forlornly, and finally followed the rest of the women, who'd plastered themselves against the wall of the compound in hope of sheltering from at least some of the water pouring out of the

sky.

The rain stopped almost as abruptly as it had started.

It was hard to feel grateful about it. They were thoroughly drenched by that time and not one of them had a dry change of clothes or anything to dry off with. Nearly a third of the women simply flopped down in the mud and squalled. Miranda felt like joining them. She decided to hold off on yielding to hysterics until she'd seen whether or not they still had a fire.

Pushing away from the wall, she slogged her way to the hut, feeling a stronger urge to weep with each squish of water from her beautiful new boots. They were ruined. She knew it and she was going to be barefooted again!

Smoke was still boiling out of the hut when she reached it, which didn't actually help her feelings. Abruptly worried that the entire fucking hut was on fire, she sucked in a couple of breaths, dropped to her knees and began crawling toward the pit the other women had dug to contain the fire.

She could see a couple of tiny flickers of light when she finally reached the coals. Relief flooded her. Sniffing at the tears that stung her nose, she carefully pulled another handful of dry grass from the pallet nearest the fire and dropped it around the tiny fire.

Quickly checking the perimeter to make sure nothing was close enough to lead the fire from the pit to the grass pallets that burned so well, she scrambled out of the hut again and sat down, coughing at the smoke until her throat and chest felt raw.

"Did we manage to save the fire?" Deborah asked tiredly.

Miranda looked up at her through burning eyes and just nodded. "For now," she managed after a moment in a croaking voice.

They couldn't go back into the hut. The burning grasses kept it going but put out toxic fumes, or just smoke—they weren't sure which. Either way there was too much smoke collecting inside the hut for them to use it.

After a while, when they saw the storm clouds were bringing on a premature dusk, they filed down to the fire pit and tore off enough meat to appease their hunger. It wasn't particularly hot anymore, which made it easier to get the meat, but it wasn't particularly appetizing either.

They spent the night outside taking turns to brave the smoke and feed the fire to keep it going. It turned out it wasn't hard staying alert enough to watch the fire. It rained again and nobody got much sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

"We aren't going to make it without the Hirachi," Deborah said, making an obvious effort to keep any inflection out of her voice.

Miranda turned to stare at her dully, but she couldn't summon enough strength of will even to convince herself that Deborah was wrong and nobody else disputed it.

"I'm open to suggestion," she finally managed to say with great difficulty because her throat was still raw from all of the smoke she'd inhaled. She'd burned herself in several places juggling the hot coals, but the rain had pretty much cooled the burning.

"They said they'd come back after the spawning," Deborah reminded her. "I know it wounds your pride that they don't seem to think we're good enough for anything like a relationship, but, really, how different is that?"

"Not much," Miranda admitted, "but, *before*, I had a life. It was a lot easier to ignore the fact that I didn't have a relationship."

Deborah shrugged. "I don't think we're going to have to worry about having plenty to do," she said dryly.

"That's true," Stacy agreed. "You know it wouldn't be half bad ... really. They're sweet. They're really good lovers. They don't mind helping out and we really do need them."

True, but how long was that going to last if they didn't actually care anything about them, Miranda countered in her mind.

Of course, it wasn't as if they had a lot competition.

Unless the damned trader decided to come back and brought more women.

Especially if he decided to aim for tall women. The Hirachi were bound to see them as a lot closer to what they were used to.

She decided not to point out that dismal prospect. It might happen and it might not. If it took the son-of-a-bitch a while to collect more and come, though, they had a little time to learn to fend for themselves a little better.

At the moment, their only shelter had been designated as the fire room. At least they could be grateful that it had been tight enough to keep the rain from putting it out, but they'd successfully stopped up most of the cracks and crevices and the result was that there weren't a lot of places for the smoke to get out. The ground was saturated, too, and all the wood the Hirachi had gathered to keep the fire going. It wasn't going to burn until it dried out, which meant they couldn't even attempt to carry the coals back to the original pit until then ... which meant they were going to have to sleep outside, in the mud.

"We still need to try to come up with trade goods to get some of the things we need," she said after a bit. "I don't think it's realistic to believe we have a snowball's chance in hell of getting up enough to buy our way home, but we still need a lot of things even to *make* things we need. We can't rely completely on the Hirachi, particularly when we aren't 'keepers' to their way of thinking. What if they just decide to move on? What if someone shows up with Hirachi women?"

"I don't know about the rest of you, but to me, this entire situation totally sucks! If this is what we have to look forward to any time the Hirachi disappear for a few days, I just can't see just waiting around for them to do something. I'd like to know, the next damned time they go into fucking spawning phase, that I'm not going to starve, or end up having to spend the night in the fucking rain!"

For once, nobody disagreed. She was actually a little surprised that the bimbo faction hadn't immediately objected, but she supposed they either hadn't heard or they'd decided it really didn't have anything to do with them. They weren't in the habit of doing any more than they absolutely had to at any time anyway. No doubt they were certain none of the others would have the nerve to suggest that they risk their necks by going outside.

Or, more likely, they were confident they'd so captivated the men they'd screwed that they figured they really had nothing to worry about in the foreseeable future.

Getting up decisively, Miranda surveyed her clothing and debated whether it was worth the effort to bathe off before she set out. Deciding she was just too miserably uncomfortable caked in mud, she took off her beautiful new pants and boots and carefully spread both along the roof of the hut to dry, hoping that they weren't completely ruined, and then headed down to the water. Seeing her intent, the rest of the women got up and followed her down to bathe.

"Are we still going to try to go over the wall to see if we can find some food?" Stacy asked.

"That's the plan—especially after last night's rain. The meat's turning because it didn't cook long enough."

"We should probably try to get more water while we're at it," Deborah put in. "I think some of the bimbos have been sneaking fresh water for their damned hair."

Anger surged through Miranda. "You're not serious? Even they can't be that stupid."

"Au contraire!" Mary Jane contradicted her. "They can and they are. I'm surprised they remember to breathe."

"I'm going to beat the fatal shit out of the whole bunch of them if I catch them at it!" Miranda growled, but then tamped her anger with an effort. "Alright, we'll check the bottles before we go, pour everything together and take the empties with us. Mary Jane, I want you to find a couple of women to help you watch the water while we're gone—*guard* the water. We should be able to find something after the rain, but you never know."

Miranda hadn't bothered to remove her gown before she went in. It was muddier than she was. When she'd slogged out of the water, she took it off and wrung as much water out as she could, then put the gown on again. She supposed she should've tried to wash the mud out of her new clothes, but she'd been afraid the salt water might be even worse for them. They were completely ruined, she was sure, but there wasn't anything she could do about it.

Weeping hadn't helped, surprise, surprise!

When Deborah and Stacy had followed suit, the three of them set out toward the plank they'd been working on the evening before and squatted down to finish tying it off.

They had to have help lifting it to the wall and bracing it. The angle was steeper than Miranda had wanted, but they couldn't find a gentle slope that would put them close

enough to the top and, moreover, the plank wouldn't stay up. Leaving a couple of women to brace the bottom to keep it from slipping, Miranda started up.

Her wet, muddy feet were slick and so were the poles. After a couple of attempts to scale the plank, though, she'd smeared most of the mud off and finally managed to get some traction. The cross pieces they'd used for bracing helped with the climb but they were too far apart to be as much help as they might've been otherwise and she resolved to cut a few more and add to it the first chance she got.

It also didn't help that she'd burned her fingers and it was hard to ignore the pain and grip the slick wood tightly enough to climb. Eventually, huffing for breath, she made it to the top. Fearful the damned plank would drop from under her, she didn't wait to catch her breath. Instead, she straightened and grabbed at the top edge of the wall and began trying to heave her lard ass upward enough to throw a leg over and finish the climb.

Damn it! She hadn't realized just how heavy her bottom end was until she tried to drag it up the wall with her arms! Either her arms were weaker than the last time she'd tried pull-ups, though, or her ass and thunder thighs were gaining ground.

Fortunately, she discovered the top of the wall was as wide as the bottom, nearly four feet. That made it impossible to reach across for a grip on the opposite side to help with the climb, but at least she had a flat surface to collapse on when she finally made it.

She lay huffing for breath, trying to ignore her sore throat and lungs from the smoke inhalation the night before. Finally, she pushed herself up onto her hands and knees and looked down toward the gates. "It's ... been barricaded!" she called down to the women down on the ground looking up at her.

"A tree fell on it or something?" Deborah called back, obviously confused.

"They barricaded it!" Miranda said angrily. "This isn't something that got blown down against the gates! It's a huge pile of stones!"

"I'm coming up for a look!"

Miranda shrugged. She didn't see how Deborah's assessment was going to change anything. There was no way that they could move the stones, she knew. They were just too big.

Damn Khan's hide! She knew he had to be behind it even if he hadn't done it himself. He was their leader. They didn't argue with him when he told them they needed to do something. They just did it!

After glancing down to gauge Deborah's progress several times, she finally nerved herself to stand up. The wall was wide, but it was impossible to stand without getting vertigo since there wasn't anything solid on either side of her. When she'd stood and braced her feet wide for balance, she scanned the forest, discovering she could actually see over a good bit of the growth from the vantage point of the wall. There were tall trees, but they were a good bit taller than the wall and most of them didn't actually have branches except at the very top, that formed an umbrella like canopy. The brushy growth beneath them didn't grow nearly as tall as the wall, however. The trees grew thickly and the trunks impeded a good bit of the view, but she could still see a fair distance.

She could see the clearing where the trader's ship had landed when it brought them down. Some of the underbrush had recovered from the landing, but she saw the glint of sunlight on water—a puddle, maybe?

The Hirachi, she realized, had done quite a bit of clearing themselves near the compound. Something prevented the plants from encroaching within six to ten feet of the walls anyway—she supposed. She hadn't seen that the Hirachi cleared it and it was bare to the dirt. They'd cut down, with Khan's help, most of the bamboo like plants close to the enclosure, which had cleared a fairly wide area, and the Hirachi excursions to collect wood to burn had thinned the jungle growth a good bit, too.

At least she could see well enough from where she stood to see that there weren't any animals close by—at the moment.

Deborah reached the wall. "I'm not sure I can make it up," she said, huffing for breath.

Settling on her belly since she didn't want to take the chance that Deborah would pull her off, Miranda grabbed both of her hands and tried to pull her high enough that Deborah could get one leg over the edge of the wall. She slipped a couple of times trying to 'walk' up the wall, but finally managed to get one leg over. Releasing one of her hands, Miranda grabbed her leg and pulled until she was on the wall.

Closing her eyes, Deborah lay huffing for breath as she had.

"Ready?" Stacy called up to them.

"Not yet!" Deborah said gustily. "Give me a minute."

She finally managed to get to her hands and knees but after one attempt to stand up, she simply crawled over to the edge near the gate and looked down. "Well shit! We can't move that. What now?"

Miranda glanced a little doubtfully at their plank. "I suppose, if we can pull it up we can use it to get down and then up again when we get back. We could jump down, but then we wouldn't have a way back in."

"No way in hell am I jumping!" Deborah said emphatically. "I know it isn't really that far, but it *looks* a long way from here and I can't do it!"

Miranda shrugged. "So we get Stacy up here and see if the three of us can pull the plank up."

Stacy managed it with seeming ease, earning her a resentful glare from both Miranda and Deborah. Getting to her feet, she looked around with interest. "What's next? Water bottles? Or the plank?"

"Let's get the plank up. That'll probably take all three of us."

It actually took the three of them up top and four of the women below. When Miranda and Stacy had managed to lean down and get a grip of the top edge, the women below grabbed it and walked toward the wall, then shoved it up as high as they could reach. It still took all Miranda, Stacy, and Deborah could do to hoist it the remainder of the way up using the top end to help lever part of the weight.

They dropped it when they tried to carefully slide it over the other side.

The three women stood staring down at their plank in consternation for several moments. "I'll jump," Miranda finally volunteered, "and then push it against the wall for you two."

"I can jump it," Stacy assured her. "We'll both do it. It'll probably take both of us to lift it."

Miranda wasn't going to argue. Nodding, she turned and looked down at the women on the other side. "Throw the bottles up."

It might have comical if it hadn't been so pathetic and frustrating. Not only could

nobody throw, nobody could catch when the women on the ground finally did manage to pitch the bottles high enough. Neither Deborah nor Stacy could decide whether to try to catch the bottles that did make it up to them or dodge them. Within a few minutes it began to sound like a baseball game. The majority of the women came close enough to play spectators and cheerleaders, screaming encouragement and directions. Several volunteered to have a try at pitching the bottles to the women on the wall. Miranda narrowly missed being clocked by one in the head—which she didn't catch.

She'd finally managed to gather four in the pocket she'd formed with the tail her gown when there was a rumble in the distance loud enough to catch everyone's attention.

Everyone froze, scanning the sky for any sign of thunder. They didn't see anything, but they heard the rumble again—felt it.

Frowning, everyone looked at each other.

"What was that?" several women called up in unison. "Do you see anything?"

Deborah, Miranda, and Stacy began looking around, searching the landscape as far as they could see for any sign of anything that might account for the noise. When Miranda heard it the third time, though, she realized it seemed to be coming from beyond the sea wall. Her heart thumping with uneasiness, she headed in that direction to look out to sea.

The Hirachi village, Khan had told her, was out there ... somewhere, and Miranda's first thought was of them. Hurrying as quickly as she dared, she walked until she was beyond the water's edge, craning upward to see if she could see anything. She wasn't reassured when she didn't. She hesitated, but she needed to know that whatever they'd heard wasn't an explosion, or maybe a quake beneath the sea—or a volcanic eruption.

The last two thoughts made her heart race even faster. Clutching her gown close to keep from dropping the bottles, she increased her pace until she was almost running. She stopped abruptly when she reached the corner where the wall turned, scanning the horizon and then the surface of the water between the wall and the horizon.

The water, she saw, was churning.

Abruptly, she *felt* the rumble beneath her feet.

Before she could whirl and race back, something broke the surface of the water and shot upward in a flying arch. She'd already sucked her breath in to scream when it clicked in her mind that it was one of the Hirachi, though he was too far away for her to recognize him. He hit the water nearly on top of a second Hirachi.

Feeling perfectly blank, Miranda stared at that point in the water until the two surfaced again and she realized they weren't trying to get away from whatever it was that had made the wall shake. They were fighting!

The moment she realized that, she discovered that she could see dozens of others fighting just beneath the surface. That was what had the water churning, the battle in progress between the Hirachi.

She still felt blank. She couldn't make any sense of it.

A rival tribe?

Were there other Hirachi on the planet?

Dimly, in the distance, she could hear the women calling questions. She glanced back toward the beach. Deborah and Stacy had both started down the wall toward her. It shook again. Her heart leapt into her throat. She braced herself, trying to keep her

balance. "Go back! It's the wall!" she screamed. "Quake!"

Deborah and Stacy both halted, their eyes rounding, their lips parting in dawning horror. Miranda glanced behind her, wondering whether it would do any good to try to warn the Hirachi.

She discovered she'd already captured the attention of several of them.

They were swimming *toward* her, though, not away from the threat!

"No! No! Go back! It's going to fall!"

Khan's head appeared above the surface, close enough she recognized him. After staring at her for a split second, he dove. Vaguely relieved, certain that meant he'd heard her warning, she turned and began to jog back toward safety herself, afraid to run very fast for fear the thing would shake again and she'd lose her balance.

A wet splat behind her caught her attention and she halted, turning to look.

Khan had landed on the top of the wall where she'd been standing moments before.

She stared at him blankly, her mind scrambling to figure out how he'd managed to get from the surface of the water to the top of the wall that quickly. Even as she stared, however, another man shot up from the sea and landed almost on his heels.

Teron.

Uttering a snarl of rage, Khan slammed his elbow backwards into Teron. Teron's arms pin-wheeled in an effort to regain his balance and then he disappeared over the side again.

Miranda's jaw dropped.

Khan met her gaze, his own piercing. His expression, even at the distance that separated them, unnerved her. He smiled abruptly.

Actually, it was a lot closer to a feral grin.

Screaming, Miranda whirled and ran, throwing bottles in every direction, nearly tripping over one in her haste to make it back to the compound. She could hear the solid thuds as his feet hit the wall behind her. It spurred her to a reckless speed.

Deborah and Stacy gaped at her for a split second, screamed, and leapt from the wall to the compound. A roar of sound surrounded her. The wall began to shake again, far harder than before, nearly pitching Miranda off. Behind her, she heard a huge splash.

She didn't dare look back, though. It was all she could do to stay on the wall. She'd managed to cover about fifteen more feet when she heard the splat behind her again and realized Khan had either regained the wall, or one of the others.

She didn't know and she didn't care at the moment. She couldn't think past reaching the beach and leaping from the wall herself.

The women began screaming again.

At first Miranda thought it was either a warning to her, encouragement to run faster, or a reaction to whatever was happening behind her.

It sounded as if the wall was crashing into the sea, but the wall beneath her feet was wobbling too much for her to spare a glance back—or ahead. She was focused on her feet and the wall and the water below. The moment she saw the glint of sand and realized she was near the shore, she raced forward several feet more and leapt.

A hand caught at her flying gown as she jumped.

She screamed at the jerk against her, but he hadn't managed to grab a firm hold.

She wasn't as close to the beach, she discovered, as she'd thought. Her feet hit

the water and she kept going. When her feet did hit solid ground, her knees buckled. Shoving upward again the moment she stopped moving downward, she broke the surface and, coughing and choking, her hair blinding her, began to struggle toward the beach.

Even as she slung her wet hair out of her eyes, she was grabbed from behind. She caught a brief tableau of the chaos on the beach—women running in every direction, screaming their heads off and Hirachi chasing them—and then she was whirled dizzily.

When her eyes finally focused, she discovered that it was Khan who'd grabbed her. His face was taut, his golden eyes tumultuous. "Mine," he growled. Using the tether of her hair to drag her head back, his head descended and he captured her mouth beneath his in a kiss filled with such raw need Miranda wasn't certain for several moments whether to try to fight him off or yield.

As confused as she was, though, there was no escaping the onslaught against her senses as he moved his mouth hungrily over hers, sucking at her lips, raking his tongue possessively along hers. She caught the madness. Fire coursed through her, seemed to consume her in a wall of heat. Weakness followed, dizziness. The light faded as she descended into darkness. Every sound save the pounding of her blood in her ears and their desperate breaths diminished. She lost awareness of the water surging around them and knew nothing but the hardness she was clutched tightly against.

She was barely aware of movement until she found herself pressed down against the ground, sandwiched between the damp sand of the beach at her back and Khan, who'd pressed tightly against her side, wedging one knee between her thighs. Supporting the bulk of his weight on his side, he explored her body with the same feverish possessiveness as he did her mouth and then her throat, tugging at her gown, pushing demandingly at her legs to urge her to open them for him. He'd pinned one leg with his weight, but she readily lifted the other and, when he freed that by shifting his weight to the knee between her thighs, dragged that leg upward, as well, and twinned it around him.

He shook all over in eagerness as reached between them to tear at the opening of his pants and guided his engorged flesh to her opening. Shifting upward the instant he found her channel with the rounded knob of the head, he surged into her with trembling desperation, his breath rasping hoarsely from his chest.

He came so fast, she was stunned, began to jerk with the hard spasms almost before he'd claimed her fully. It touched off a minor quake within her in response, but she was still left with a bewildered sense of incompleteness when he withdrew, still swimming in a heated whirlpool of need.

"Mine," he growled as he moved off of her. "She accepted me!"

Dazed, Miranda pried her eyelids up with an effort and discovered Teron, Gerek, and Adar standing over the two of them. A shockwave went through her at their presence even before the rage on their faces sank in. The three glanced at each other, but to her surprise and relief, they merely turned and strode quickly away. More deeply confused, though vaguely relieved that it didn't seem the four men would begin to brawl as she'd more than half feared, she glanced up at Khan. He was scanning the compound through narrowed eyes.

As if he'd come to a decision, he brought his focus back to her face. "I will take you to my pod. How long can you hold your breath?"

Miranda gaped at him blankly. "A few minutes ... maybe three."

He got up, pulling her with him before she had time to fully grasp his intention or question it or argue. Carrying her out into the water until it was breast high to him, he lowered her. "Hold on to my back. When you need to breathe, pinch me to signal me."

He dove almost before she'd situated herself. She sucked in a quick breath as she saw the water coming at her, squeezing her eyes closed as it covered her. He shot through the water like a torpedo, his body undulating as he raced through the water until she felt as if she'd caught a ride on a missile ... or a dolphin. Just as she was beginning to feel the burning need for air, he shot to the surface, arched just above the water and dove again. If she hadn't gasped instinctively the moment she cleared the water, she wasn't certain she would've had time to catch a lungful of air.

The speed he traveled was dizzying in itself. When, added to that, she was forced to hyperventilate, hold her breath until she felt herself skating the edge of panic, and then suck air again, she was so beleaguered, so lightheaded, she didn't have room for any thought beyond the focus of clinging to him and grabbing air when she could. She'd just begun to think she was getting the hang of it when he stopped, dragged her around to face him, and caught her chin. "I will breathe for you. Take deep breaths."

She was already panting for breath until darkness encroached. At his command, though, she sucked in several long, deep breaths. The moment she clamped her lips together, he dove, propelling the two of them through the water so fast she felt like she was strapped to a rocket. She clung to him frantically, her heart pounding with fear but even as panic for the lack of air began to grip her, he fastened his mouth tightly over hers and forced a gust of breath into her lungs. The panic receded but the darkness seemed to wind more tightly around her. Trying to focus on something to keep the fear at bay, she counted the breaths he fed her. With the tenth, he abruptly disentangled her, shoving her away. Opening her eyes fearfully, she discovered he'd thrust her toward a rounded opening.

It looked too small for the two of them to pass through together. Confused as she was, there was no arguing and no doubt in her mind he expected her to swim through it. She pushed herself inside of it after a brief hesitation, and when she saw light just ahead, swam toward it with the eagerness of a sudden certainty of finding air. She sucked in a harsh breath as her head broke the surface, choking on the water she inhaled in the process. Khan broke the water beside her. Catching her waist, he tugged her with him and finally caught her waist with both hands and lifted her straight up. Her buttocks landed on a solid ledge. Releasing her, he moved beside her, caught hold of the ledge and heaved himself from the water.

Chapter Fourteen

Shaky from her ordeal, Miranda swiped the water from her face with one hand and looked around curiously, feeling her confusion deepen rather than lift. The room she found herself in was cave like. There were no windows. The walls curved from the flattened surface beneath her to form a dome above her head. Light filtered in through a hole in the ceiling, however, creating a spotlight effect on the floor directly beneath and then diffused to brighten the remainder of the room, more similar to recessed lighting than anything else she could think of.

It was furnished after a fashion, though it looked as if the seats and tables that scattered the room in groupings had been hewn from the same stone as the floor and walls. Here and there, were what looked like colorful cushions, but the dim lighting, or maybe the lightheadedness that still plagued her, made it difficult to see well.

Getting to his feet, Khan drew her up and pulled her soaked gown off, dropping it in a soggy heap where she'd been sitting. Still dazed by everything that had happened, unable to completely grasp it, she shivered, staring at him while he focused on peeling off his boots and then his trousers. When he'd dropped them by her wet clothing, he scooped her into his arms and strode across the room and through an open doorway.

She had a dim impression that it was a bedroom a moment before Khan lowered to a soft, yielding surface and followed her down. His scent enveloped her, wafting from the bedding as well as him as he curled around her.

"A more fitting nest for my mate," he murmured against her throat as he burrowed against it, nipping at the sensitive skin and sending cascades of goosebumps all over her. Her nipples, already perked from the coolness, tightened more in response to his touch.

The heat radiating from his body chased the chill from the lingering dampness from her skin. The brush of his lips over her flesh, the touch of his hands, generated a fire in her belly.

A strange sense almost of being outside himself and looking on gripped Khan as he absorbed the feel of Miranda's smooth skin against his hands and lips, drank in her taste and scent so that it became a part of him. There was almost a dream-like quality about touching her—as if it *was* one of the dreams that had plagued him for weeks, imagining her in his bed, receptive to his touch, goading him with soft sighs of pleasure to take his own pleasure, waiting eagerly for his seed to fill her with new life.

Dread flickered at the fringes of his mind, as if threatening to turn the dream into a nightmare, but he refused to acknowledge it, allowed the drunken sense of victory and the heated need pulsing through him to take precedence. It wasn't difficult to submerge himself in the glorious feel of her. It was easier than trying to probe that vague sense of uneasiness, of wrongness.

Twice he'd merged his body with hers and both times too frantically to relish. She was his, now. His. A fresh wave of triumph engulfed him as memories of their mating ritual flooded his mind. The acknowledgement when she'd met his gaze, the

token chase, her instant yielding when he'd captured her.

He'd half feared she would reject him—more than half feared it—and choose one of the others bearing down on them. She'd yielded, though, with no more than a token resistance—just enough to leave room for a niggling of doubt, to bring a dizzying sense of triumph when she gave herself.

His heart thundered almost painfully in his chest with the memory. For a handful of moments the sense of painful desperation to join with her instantly, again, threatened to overwhelm his determination to savor his victory. He fought it down, joining his mouth with hers in intimate play that assuaged some of the need to penetrate her body with his, to feel her heat wrapped around him.

He had to *give* pleasure for her body to more readily accept his offering, he reminded himself, breaking from her lips finally and scooting downward to search for all those little places where her body was most sensitive. He mapped them all, lingering to hear her gasps and moans for the sheer pleasure it gave him, not merely to learn the way of touching her that pleased her the most.

The taut little buds at the center of her breasts drew hoarse cries from her when he sucked them, made her clutch at him frantically and arch her back for more. He lingered over them until she was thrashing feverishly beneath his touch and searched further a field, examining the soft depression between her ribs that created a gentle valley leading to her belly. He charted the soft belly that housed her womb where his child would grow, wavering between a vague, incomprehensible sense of fear and heady delight as he nestled his face against it.

The urge to explore her sex pushed everything else from his mind as he caught her woman's fragrance, a mingling of her desire and the scent of her skin. Pushing her thighs wide, he examined the delicate pink petals of flesh with his gaze briefly and then with his mouth and tongue. Discovering a hard bud at the apex, he plucked at it with his lips. When she bucked against him, sucking in a harsh gasp, he caught it more firmly and sucked at it, flicking his tongue back and forth across it until she was groaning incessantly. She stiffened abruptly, her entire body arching upward, and then began to convulse with rapture.

A red haze filled his mind as the certainty that she'd come did. He sucked and teased the bud until she was crying out hoarsely, began to beg him to stop. He lifted his head with a mixture of uncertainty and reluctance, but when she wilted with relief instead of tipping her head to glare at him, he decided she'd finished coming.

Crawling over her, he caught his cock and guided it to the mouth of sex, pressing against her until her dainty little mouth opened to swallow the head of his cock. He nearly blacked out when it did. Shaking his head to push back the wall of darkness, he caught his weight on his elbows on either side of her and struggled to sink deeper inside of her.

He found himself on the brink of losing his seed long before he'd penetrated her deeply enough to feel her womb, too far. Gritting his teeth, he eased the pressure for a moment, sawed shallowly in and out until he felt her moisture coating him and then tried again. Her body closed so tightly around his flesh, despite the moisture, it was almost as much agony as pleasure to force himself into her tight sheathe.

He fought the acid burn in his balls to release his seed. Struggling to ignore it, he felt sweat from the strain pop from his pores as he cupped his hips over and over to delve

a little deeper and a little deeper still. When he'd almost despaired of sheathing himself entirely, he felt the tight grip of her muscles on his cock ease slightly, felt her lubrication allowing him to glide into her fully at last. He nearly lost his seed the instant he felt his cock head butt her womb.

Sucking in a harsh breath that was a mixture of relief and desperation, he began to move in a cadence he hoped would bring her to crisis once more. She surprised him. He'd barely attained a smooth rhythm when she stiffened, arched against him and began to utter the cries he knew meant she was coming. The realization alone was enough to snatch his precarious hold on his control from him. The milking motion of her channel around him completed his descent into madness.

His body jerked and seized, forcing his seed into her spasming womb, the force of the convulsions punching the breath from him in hard grunts. Relieved when it finally stopped, he slumped heavily against her, trying to catch his breath.

* * * *

Sated, completely, utterly, gloriously limp from the magnitude of her climax—the second in quick succession—Miranda made no attempt to move. She wasn't sure she could, but she was sure she didn't want to. The bed beneath her *felt* like a bed—a real bed—and she wasn't entirely sure that wasn't almost more wonderful than the feel of the hard man inside of her and on top of her, pressing her deeply into its softness.

Actually, she was sure. The hard man was far more pleasurable.

But the mattress felt divine, too.

He began to move again after a few moments, slowly sawing along her channel until she felt his flesh grow hard inside of her again. A flicker of doubt went through her, but the transition from uncertainty to welcome was so swift she hardly noticed. Warmth surged inside of her, the warmth of gladness not passion, but still a warm reception to Khan.

The certainty filled her that she didn't care whether or not she came again. The deep connection of their bodies was pleasure enough in itself, comforting, infinitely desirable for that alone. The pleasure she sensed he derived from stroking his flesh intimately against hers was as captivating.

She dragged her feet up the bed, planting her soles firmly against the surface and lifting to meet his languid thrusts. Instantly, ripples of desirous pleasure took priority. Her focus shifted as the warmth grew more pronounced. The recognizable tension toward release began to grow a little more prominent with each thrust and retreat as he changed the tempo, became more focused himself on the pursuit of ultimate pleasure.

The shockwaves that rippled through her grew more and more marked, closer and closer together. She lifted her eyelids with an effort, studying the bunching, flexing muscles of his chest and arms above her, lifting her arms to stroke them over his flesh with a profound sense of wonder and joy she couldn't quite put a name to. Her touch lifted goosebumps on his flesh, made him quiver. Her throat closed with a mixture of unidentifiable emotions.

Gliding her hands down his chest and belly, she settled them finally on his taut buttocks, gripping them, urging him to drive his thick flesh deeper inside of her, faster. He uttered her name on a long, drawn out groan that made her flesh prickle, her heart hammer faster, sent a hard wave of pleasure through her. It pitched her over the edge. She sucked in a quick breath as she felt her body begin to quake, groaning in pleasurable

agony as she released it. The sound, or the tightening of her body in spasms of release, triggered his own. He surged deeply, burrowed his face against the bedding and slipped his hands beneath her, clenching his fingers tightly into her buttocks as he shook and jerked with his own climax.

He slumped so heavily against her when the convulsions ceased that she felt the air slowly squeezed from her lungs.

Either he heard the grunt or he felt her body collapsing beneath his weight. He jerked upward instantly, pitched over onto his side, and dragged her with him. Shivering slightly as the heat left her body, she snuggled tightly against him. He coiled around her, sharing his warmth, and she drifted lazily toward unconscious, lulled by his warmth and the beat of his heart beneath her cheek.

She knew she slept for a while just as surely as she knew it wasn't nearly enough when he roused her with feverish need, stroking and kissing her with a hunger that denied the appeasement she'd given him only hours before. She responded readily, not with any great need of her own but with a fervent wish to give pleasure.

Her willingness didn't seem to be enough. He teased her until he brought her to the fever again, driving into her until her body answered his call and exploded with pleasure before he allowed her to sink into oblivion for a brief time and called to her again, and then again until she lost count of the times he expended himself on her and wrung pleasure from her.

* * * *

Khan woke to a sense of well-being unlike anything he could summon to his memory. For some time he lay reveling in it, enjoying the rare sense of complete relaxation. As his mind sought the source of the total absence of tension, however, apprehension descended on him with a vengeance. Opening his eyes, Khan stared blearily at Miranda's sleeping face completely without comprehension for a handful of seconds.

The lack of tension, he realized as his mind filled with carnal images, was from the absence of the spawning urge.

A cold sweat swept over him. Bile rose in his throat and he swallowed sickly against it.

The last clear thought he could remember was charging after the men when they'd broken ranks, fought off the men trying to reason with them, and charged toward the compound. From the moment the two groups collided and began battling it out it had ceased, he realized now, to be an effort to protect the women and become a battle for supremacy to mate.

Miranda had called to him, distracting him. He remembered that. He had no idea what she'd called out. All that remained clear in his mind was the realization that she was in danger because the men were pounding against the wall with combined sonic blasts that were crumbling the foundation, and the abrupt certainty that she was summoning him.

Doubts had still swarmed in his mind until she'd met his purposeful gaze unflinchingly, held it for so long he knew it was promise and then turned to allow him to give chase, to conquer.

He didn't *know* that, though, he thought a little sickly. He'd just thought he knew it because his mind had been burning with the fever and he'd accepted behavior he was

familiar with, believed that it meant the same thing—take me. I'm yours.

The only thing about the Earth women he *was* certain about was that their mating customs weren't at all the same as that of the Hirachi!

Because *they* weren't the same!

He'd promised himself that he would protect her—from everyone, including himself, but there was no doubt in his mind that the spawning fever was gone because he'd thoroughly expended it.

He could smell their intermingled scents, the musky fragrance of spent passion.

He'd pumped his seed into her body relentlessly until he couldn't summon more.

Conflicting desires struck, the urge to cover her body again and join his flesh with hers and an equal desperation to get as far from her as he could because he couldn't bear to look at her, knowing what he'd done.

She might *die* because he hadn't been able to control himself.

It was nothing short of a blessing of the gods that he hadn't killed her in his mindless pursuit to impregnate her!

The insane, guilty urge flooded his mind for several moments to try to find some way to retrieve his seed, to remove it before it was too late, but he knew it was already too late.

Sneaking from the bed as quietly as he could to keep from waking her and facing what he'd done before he absolutely had to, he left his chamber for the facilities, hovering over the waste bowl for a little while and struggling with the urge to puke. His stomach merely tormented him, however, and, giving up, he stepped into the bathing cubicle, trying to scrub the stale scent of sex off.

He didn't feel any better when he'd finished. After pacing for a short while, he finally pulled his breeches on and dropped into the pool. The losers in the battle to mate were congregated in the nursery as he'd known they would be. Miranda's lovers met him with the hostility he'd expected, but he felt none of the triumph he should have, would ordinarily have felt.

"You are finally done?" Teron growled.

Khan settled heavily in the midst of the men, trying to figure out how he felt beyond terrified of the consequences of his actions. "Yes," he said finally, tiredly.

Gerek looked for several moments as if he'd lose his grip on his temper. "You broke off the gods damned contest!" he snarled finally. "We had settled nothing!"

Khan's lips tightened. "She accepted me!" he growled back, his own anger surging to the forefront. "You know it doesn't make a gods damned difference who comes out the victor! The maiden chooses, gods damn it! It was *her* right to decide who she wanted to father her child!"

Adar, Gerek, and Teron glared at him for a while, but finally seemed to tamp their anger.

"She is mine next spawning!" Teron muttered after several minutes of uncomfortable silence. "I am the eldest and I have not spawned, gods damn it!"

Khan, Gerek, and Adar all glared at him furiously.

"I do not see how you think that means that your need is greater than anyone else's!" Adar said indignantly. "*None* of us have spawned!"

"That means you are *least* likely to find favor!" Gerek said tightly. "Not more likely. You are not likely to spawn anything but females ... now! She will want sons!"

"How do you know what she will want?" Teron growled. "She is not a Hirachi woman! Mayhap *they* prefer females! She will want a daughter to help her, to carry on her line. Sons are for their fathers!"

Khan studied him a little hopefully. "You think she will weather the birthing without much trouble?" he asked a little hoarsely.

Teron turned to look at him, staring at him blankly for many moments before the color slowly leached from his face. He swallowed convulsively a few times. "I will have to help her birth it. There are no women." Shooting to his feet abruptly, he charged toward the pool, dropped to his knees, and threw up the contents of his stomach.

Khan felt a wave of dizziness wash over him, felt his belly clench. Springing up, he raced to the pool, and puked, as well.

It seemed to be contagious. Within a short time fully half the men in the nursery were prostrate around the pool, or on their hands and knees, emptying their stomachs. Khan collapsed weakly onto his side when he finally stopped gagging. Rolling to his back a few moments later, he stared up at the ceiling, struggling to ignore the sounds and smell of retching and tame his roiling stomach. "It will take an hour for enough water to recycle to freshen the fucking pool again," he muttered to no one in particular.

Teron pushed himself to feet and stood over Khan, wavering a little weakly, but glaring at him furiously. "I do not know why you are sick to your stomach! *I* am the healer. It is *I* who will have to attend *twenty* flower women trying to disgorge babes fully half their size, gods damn it! It is *I* who will have to deal with it!"

"We will *all* have to deal with it!" Khan snapped furiously, dropping his arm across his eyes as he struggled with the urge to weep like a child. "I have impregnated our little Miranda!"

"And I am sorely tempted to unman you for it and choke you with it!" Teron snarled.

* * * *

Every muscle on Miranda's body protested when she stretched, but it was a pleasant soreness. Smiling as she felt around blindly for Khan, she opened her eyes when she didn't find him and glanced around the room.

It was almost as delightful to find herself inside a *real*, honest to god room, as to realize why she felt so thoroughly satisfied ... and so rested, she mentally added with amusement. Feeling anticipation thread her veins, she got out of the bed and padded to the door to peer out. A little disconcerted when she didn't see any sign of Khan, she finally shrugged off the niggling of doubt that surfaced and began to explore, moving first to the cushions she'd noticed when she'd arrived. A faint rustle emerged from them as she squeezed the first she came to, but she discovered, although it was firm, it was still the softest thing she'd felt since she left Earth—except his bed, which felt pretty much the same and must be filled with whatever filled the pillow.

The casing felt a little strange—almost slick like plastic, but when she lifted it to study it, she saw it was woven. Shaking her head when she still couldn't figure out what it was made from, she set the pillow down again and looked around. There was another door, she saw, on the same wall that fronted his bedroom, but this one was more narrow than the opening to his bedroom. Moving toward it, she peered inside and studied the room a little blankly, trying to figure out its function. There were counters, even a small table and chair, rather like a kitchen, but she didn't see anything that looked like the

appliances familiar to her. The counters appeared to be a solid block, she saw when she'd stepped inside for a better look. She discovered, though, when she'd looked closely that there were recessed notches here and there that fit her grip and when she'd pulled on them, she saw they opened.

There was little inside, but she saw a few food stores—fish and what appeared to be sea plants in one that was cool enough she didn't doubt it refrigerated the food—a few rough looking 'plates' like they'd been using to eat from and several vessels that looked as if they'd been fashioned from some kind of shells.

There was a boxy looking thing on top of one counter that was roughly the size and shape as a large microwave—minus a viewing glass in the door. She didn't see any sign of heating elements, fans, or even coals, though, and finally decided maybe it wasn't for cooking. Unable to figure out the function of it, she left the kitchen when she'd finished exploring it and went back into Khan's bedroom—where she made the most delightful discovery *ever*.

He had a bathroom! With a sense of awe, she explored the cunning design of it, realizing that it actually functioned! Water spewed from the overhead spout of the shower, and the spout in the lavatory. The toilet *flushed*! Feeling like she'd woken in heaven, she used everything.

It would've been well worth the nightmare trip to get here just for the bathroom, she thought with amusement when she emerged again.

Khan was sprawled on the hard shelf he evidently used for a couch when she went into the living area again, one arm propped on one of the cushions. A look of surprise flickered in his eyes when she smiled at him. He studied her as if he couldn't decide whether to smile back or not, but some of the tension seemed to ease from him. "Are you hungry?" he asked, his voice sounding a little strange.

Disconcerted, suddenly feeling a little awkward, Miranda finally nodded.

He got up and strode into the kitchen. Miranda retrieved her gown, discovering with little surprise that it was barely damp even though it hadn't been hung to dry. Whatever it was made from seemed to repel water. When she'd dragged it over her head, she felt a little better and followed him into the kitchen.

He was standing over the box thing she hadn't been able to figure out.

He seemed to be *blowing* into a sort of tube attached to it.

Miranda tilted her head curiously.

He flicked a glance at her and stopped. "Does the sound bother you?"

Feeling completely blank, Miranda merely stared at him. "The sound?" she echoed.

He looked a little disconcerted. After studying her curiously, he opened the door of the box and examined the contents. Steam wafted from the opening. Flipping what looked like some sort of fish-like creature, he closed the door again, picked up the tube and—did whatever it was he was doing.

"Sonic heat," he said a little sharply when he'd flicked a glance at her and saw the puzzlement in her expression. "Unlike the water, the air diffuses the waves too much. We have to use this to concentrate them enough to cook the food."

Miranda blinked rapidly as her mind tried to process that information. It wasn't that she hadn't heard that sound waves could be used for all sorts of things, but people couldn't make them.

Of course she'd heard of people—or at least women—who could hit a high enough note to break glass.

And Khan wasn't 'people'. He was a Hirachi.

"You can't do this," he said flatly.

Miranda felt a sudden upsurge of anger—hurt, too, though she was determined to ignore it. "No. I can't. I'm not Hirachi. So sue me!"

Whirling on her heel, she stalked toward the door with no clear idea of where she was going. He caught up to her, caging her with the circle of his arms. She grabbed his wrists, intent on flinging them away from her. He tightened his arms, dragging her back against his length. "I did not mean that the way you took it," he said gruffly.

Miranda swallowed convulsively a couple of times. "How did you mean it?"

He was silent so long she decided he couldn't think of anything to say that would have a grain of truth to it and still reduce the sting. "I am always ... disconcerted when I realize that I'm different from you," he said finally. "Does it bother you that I am?"

The urge to weep became more pronounced. He was worried that it bothered her that he was different? She turned in his embrace, sliding her arms around his waist and rubbing her cheek against his hard chest. "Will you think I'm lying if I say I'm glad you're different?" she murmured, meeting his gaze when he pushed a little away from her and tipped her face up with one forefinger beneath her chin.

His gaze flickered over her face before settling on hers. A faint smile curled his lips. "You like this Hirachi warrior?"

She smiled back at him with an effort. Like seemed a little mild for what she felt. "I think I do."

He chuckled. "You must consider it and tell me again when you have sampled my cooking. Everyone says I am the worst."

Tugging her back into the kitchen, he gave her a push toward the table and the single chair. "Where will you sit?"

"I will stand," he said firmly, focused on pulling the dish from the 'cook box'.

She should've grown accustomed to everything seeming surreal to her in this length of time, but it still felt strange.

The fish-thing looked pretty horrible actually, although it smelled appetizing. Wryly, she thought it might have been more appealing to look at if he'd taken the head off. She wasn't used to having her food stare at her. She didn't care if some chefs thought it was a nice touch or not!

When he'd placed the plate on the table, he crouched to pull several other food-type items from what she'd guessed was a refrigeration unit of some kind and moved to the basin with it, pulling a small knife from a slot in the 'counter' top and cutting it into pieces.

There was no sign of electricity that could see—even the light she'd noticed seemed to be filtering through a long pipe from above the surface of the water—and yet the temperature of the rooms felt as comfortable as an air-conditioned house. He had a means of refrigeration, of cooking, bathroom fixtures that worked

It was almost like returning to civilization, however strange everything seemed.

When he'd cooked the 'veggies' to go with the meal, he used the small knife to cut everything into bite sized pieces, propped his rump against the counter behind him and tried to pretend he was focused on his own food. Miranda felt his gaze, though,

knew he was waiting to see what she thought about his efforts.

Trying to ignore the beast head on the table in front of her, she picked up a piece of the flesh and popped it in her mouth, wishing he'd given her something to wash it down with just in case of need. Surprise flickered through her when she discovered it actually had a taste and texture very similar to fish she'd eaten. It didn't taste just like any kind of fish that came to mind, but it was close enough to calm her gag reflex. She smiled without looking at him, knowing he was watching her.

"Not too gods damn awful?"

"Pretty good, actually."

Setting his plate down he pulled out two of the drinking vessels she'd seen earlier and filled them with water from the spout over the basin. She was astonished all over again when she tasted the water carefully and discovered it was fresh water, not salt water as she's suspected, and surprisingly cold. "It's cold!"

He nodded as he picked up his plate again. "Evaporation. It takes the taste from the water, but it chills it, so it is a good trade off, I think."

Miranda flicked a glance at him, wondering if she should point out that she couldn't drink salt water without getting sick, but discarded the idea. There didn't seem any reason to tell him when there was fresh water available.

That thought brought her mind rather abruptly to the women. "Did the others bring the other women to the village?" she asked a little hesitantly.

A look of discomfort flickered across his features. He frowned at his plate. "Yes," he said.

Miranda couldn't quite decipher his reaction to the question, but she decided not to probe. It was enough to know the others hadn't been abandoned to get along, or not, the best they could. "Good."

He sent her an indecipherable look, but returned his attention to his food so quickly she almost wondered if she'd imagined the flicker of guilt she thought she'd seen in his eyes.

Maybe he felt guilty that they hadn't brought them before?

She didn't see any reason why he should. She would certainly have liked to have been here instead of enduring the misery of the compound, but then she hadn't encouraged him to think so when she'd discovered where the village was. She hadn't even tried to persuade him. The prospect had completely dismayed her, in point of fact.

She wondered abruptly if it was just a 'visit' and they'd be deposited on the beach again in a few days—or maybe sooner.

The thought did nothing for her appetite but, try as she might, she couldn't see that he looked as desperate for sex as he had when he'd pounced on her on the beach and it occurred to her that the marathon bedroom gymnastics they'd just enjoyed might be the extent of spawning season.

That thought, naturally enough, made her mind leap to the possibility of his success. She couldn't decide whether she was pleased at the prospect or not, but she didn't feel any dismay.

Not until it dawned on her that the Hirachi males were apparently laboring under the illusion that *they* would be at peak fertility at the same time the Hirachi hit it.

That realization actually sent a wave of nausea through her.

It took all she could do to choke down the rest of her meal. She got up quickly

when she'd finished and carried her plate and cup to the basin. "I should do clean up since you cooked," she said nervously.

Chapter Fifteen

Khan made an uncomfortable sound in his throat. "You should not stand."

Miranda turned to look at him in total confusion. "Why not?"

His face darkened, his gaze flickering to her stomach. It took Miranda several moments to figure out the significance of his glance. When she finally did, she still wasn't certain, but she felt her own discomfort level shoot upwards. "I'm fine," she muttered, pretending she hadn't understood him. "I felt a little weak right after the long dive, and the bedroom gymnastics, but I took a nap. Anyway, there isn't much that needs cleaning."

Khan retreated. She heard him pacing in the living room while she cleaned up the dishes. As soon as she shut the water off and started toward the living area, he ceased pacing and met her at the door. "I must work. We have not worked in ... uh ... I am not certain. Many days. We will not fill the quota."

Miranda didn't know whether to smile at his uneasiness or not. It dawned on her, though, that he might be trying to figure out some way to boot her out of his domain. "Sure. I understand." She hesitated, but as badly as she wanted to stay where she was far more comfortable, it didn't feel right to impose on Khan's good nature. "Did you want to take me back to the compound now?"

He looked startled and then disturbed. "You can not go back there now!" he said a little hoarsely. "You are breeding!"

Miranda blinked at him, absorbing that with more confusion than understanding. She didn't particularly want to bring up the possibility that she *wasn't* breeding, though, however dishonest it felt to willfully deceive him. "I'll be staying here with you, now, then?"

He looked uncomfortable again, seemed to ponder it, which didn't make Miranda feel particularly good about the situation, and then finally shrugged. "I do not know. This is not something that has ever come up. Usually, the woman has her own pod—but you do not so ... Do you not suppose it would be better ...?" He broke off. "I'm sure it would not be good for you to try to go to their pod. You can not hold your breath long enough and you are not used to swimming. You may welcome your other lovers here and then, mayhap we will think of something else that will be more comfortable for all. We must. You can not stay here until the birthing, and ... uh"

He sent her a strange look. "We will talk of it later when I have had time to think what we could do."

Miranda stared at him in disbelief as he dropped into the pool and then vanished before she could gather her wits to think of anything to say. She wasn't certain how long she stood gaping at the rippling water of the pool, but finally she moved to the bench and dropped down on it.

It was a sign of just how distracted she was that she flopped hard enough to bite her tongue, expecting to land on a cushioned surface with springs. Wincing, she sucked at her tongue until the sting dissipated and finally looked around for the cushions.

Grabbing both, she parked one on the ledge for her butt and shoved the other behind her back. For a moment, she allowed herself to relish the simple pleasure of comfort after having done without it so long, but her mind turned almost immediately from that to trying to unravel what Khan had said from what she'd *thought* he'd said.

He was only the stand-in for the spawning, she wondered a little wildly?

She *must* have misunderstood that, she decided. She was willing to admit that there could be a vast difference between their cultures, and probably was, but ... *what the fuck?* What the hell happened to 'mine'?

He was done now so she was dismissed?

But she had to stay here because his fucking semen were swimming around in her belly and might, or might not, have found a little mate of their own?

Given the fact that she'd decided almost from the first that there were some things about the Hirachi that were just down right bizarre, she supposed she shouldn't feel so ... swept up in some strange reality that was completely backwards, but she did. And what made it even *more* bizarre was that Khan was acting strange even for Khan.

It was like ... he had multiple personality disorder, or something! Before he'd decided she'd chosen him for a lover, he'd been downright cold most of the time, and barely civil the rest. Then they'd screwed and he'd disappeared—almost like her last 'boyfriend', except he'd come back like a caveman, dragged her to his lair and screwed her brains out and now

She didn't understand *now*, damn it!

He was just acting strange and she didn't get it!

She was pretty sure he'd just told her he was ok with her dragging Teron, Gerek, and Adar into *his* pod and using *his* bed to screw them, though.

A lump the size of her fist formed in her throat.

So much for thinking he'd decided he just couldn't live with out her and charged in like her white knight and rescued her from the horrible wilderness! She sniffed a few times, trying to decide if she'd feel better if she squalled for a while or worse. Crying her heart out sounded pretty tempting, but she decided she'd rather find Deborah and the others, see if they'd been similarly abused and, if so, enjoy a bitch fest.

She wasn't confessing anything, though, until she found out if they'd been dumped on.

As badly as she wanted somebody to use as a sounding board, it still took a while to get up the nerve to enter the pool. Even when she had, she clung to the edge for a while, reminding herself that it was a very short tunnel. All she had to do was duck outside, take a quick look around and then return if she needed air. It was stupid to panic just because it wasn't a swimming pool. The same rules applied—hold breath, swim under the water, and then come when she needed air.

Sucking in a few deep breaths, she shot through the tunnel and out the other side, took a quick look around and ducked back in. The 'village' looked like a ... sandcastle, she decided, more than anything else. She hadn't stayed outside long enough to really take in a lot of details, and it was gloomy so deep in the sea, but that was the overall impression, towers and spires. The spires, she realized must be the chimney sort of things they used to bring light down into the rooms/apartments, probably circulating air, too. Khan had called it a pod, but that was what it looked like—an apartment building designed like a sandcastle. She'd noticed holes sprinkled here and there and since she

didn't think they had windows, she thought those must be entrances to other 'pods'.

They didn't seem that far apart. Surely she could swim from one to the next, duck in and grab a breath of air if she needed to?

Of course, the occupant might not be too happy about an unexpected guest, but since Khan had left to work, surely the others had, too?

She could try it, she decided. If she met up with anyone that got nasty about her popping into their place, she'd just apologize and leave ... and try to remember to avoid that pod the next time. Taking several deep breaths once she'd made up her mind, she ducked through the tunnel, swam toward the next one as fast as she could and went in.

It seemed to be empty. She treaded water for a few minutes until she'd steadied her pulse and caught her breath and then ducked out again, glancing back toward Khan's entrance and trying to find a point of reference so that she could find her way back. It seemed to be on the end—unless there were others around the corner that she couldn't see—and fourth down from the top. Ducking back inside for a few more breaths, she checked it again for any other identifying features and finally moved to the next opening.

She'd checked nearly a half dozen and was considering giving up and going back when she broke the surface of a pool and heard a feminine gasp. Swiping the water from her eyes, she apologized a little breathlessly. "Sorry ... uh ... I was looking for Deborah or Stacy," she said when she saw a woman curled up on the 'couch'.

She couldn't remember her name.

She sniffed. "I don't know where anybody is," she said a little tearfully. "Tin *said* he had to go to work—lit out of here like his pants were on fire."

Miranda studied the woman's face sympathetically and finally remembered her name was Beth. "Khan, too. I guess they figured they'd rested enough."

"I guess," she mumbled, then brightened a little. "You want company?"

Not particularly. She really wanted to talk to Deborah, but she could see Beth was in just as much need as she was. "It's kind of scary," she said warningly. "The entrances are pretty close together, but you have to hold your breath until you get to one and get inside."

Some of the tension eased from her. "I'm a pretty good swimmer. I won't panic."

"Good," Miranda said flatly. "Because I'm not that good and if you get into trouble I can't rescue you."

Beth looked a little uneasy, but finally nodded, getting up and heading to the pool.

"I've already checked six or seven places. Give me a head start and then follow."

She paused before she ducked under the water. "It's hard to tell one from another—inside or out. You should be sure to look it over carefully when you leave if you want to find your way back."

By the time they'd checked six more, Miranda had picked up two more followers and she was too tired to go on without resting for a while. Fortunately, the pod they ducked in to was empty. Feeling like a burglar, Miranda climbed out of the water with an effort and simply sprawled on the floor, struggling for breath. "My *god* I'm out of shape!"

Carol, Beth, and Mary Jane climbed out and sprawled on the floor to rest, as well. "I guess one thing that's really nice about living down here is no dust—and no tracking in dirt," Mary Jane muttered.

"It give me the creeps," Carol said plaintively. "I don't know why they'd want to build their village down here anyway. If they'd built it in the compound it would've been much better."

Miranda had decided she really didn't like Carol, but she figured that was alright since it seemed to be mutual. "Because they're sea people, for one thing. For another, they were imprisoned there and it's just plain bad memories, I imagine."

"If I said black was black you'd disagree," Carol said testily. "I think I'm going back to my place to wait for Merc."

Mary Jane snickered when she'd disappeared. "You think the idiot can find her way back?"

Miranda shook her head. "She won't care where she lands. She doesn't give a damn about Merc—or any of the others."

"Do you?"

Miranda swallowed with an effort. "I do—quite a lot, actually."

Beth burst into tears. "They don't really care about us, though. At least ... I don't think Tin really likes me. He was talking about my 'other' lovers and he didn't seem the least bit jealous. In fact, he couldn't seem to get out fast enough."

Miranda sat up, glanced at Mary Jane, and then studied Beth. "Khan did the same thing ... pretty much."

Beth sniffed and looked at her in surprise. "Really? I thought he was just crazy about you! He could hardly take his eyes off of you if you were anywhere around. He almost fell over a log one day when you bent over at the beach," she added, giggling at the memory. "It was all I could do not to laugh."

Something fluttered in Miranda's belly, but she quelled it. "I guess it was ... screwing he had on his mind. Maybe that's all it was with any of them. And, you know, that doesn't make them any different than the men we're used to—or make them all bad."

"Let's face it, they haven't been laid in a while. It's only natural, I suppose, that they wouldn't be able to think about anything else."

"You think that's why they're that way about the 'other lovers'?" Mary Jane asked.

Miranda shrugged. She'd actually been thinking *exactly* that, but it made her feel like shit. "You mean like they don't feel right to hoard the only available pussy when their buddies aren't getting any?"

"Something like that."

She frowned. "If it was a bunch of our guys, they wouldn't be sharing."

"Yes, they would. Back in high school, they did it all the time. They'd just pass the girls around that were willing to sleep with them," Beth said.

"They're not immature little twerps looking for notches for their bedposts!" Miranda said angrily. "They've taken care of us."

"Yes, but ... they were expecting to take it out in trade."

"Maybe," Miranda said thoughtfully. "Why wait so long, though? Why act like they weren't interested at all and then suddenly make a complete turn around?"

"Well, I don't understand that either!" Mary Jane said testily. "I had a hard enough time trying to figure out men back home. Sometimes, I think they're just like them and sometimes I don't think they're anything at all like them."

Miranda sighed. "Maybe we should just accept that it's a strange little quirk of

theirs? It *seems* to be a custom. I mean, it doesn't make sense that they'd all have the same attitude if it wasn't, does it? As many as there are, wouldn't *some* of them refuse to play the game if it wasn't something they'd been brought up to think was 'right'? When Khan claimed me on the beach, Gerek, Teron, and Adar were right there. They looked like they wanted to beat the shit out of him and I thought for several really scary minutes that that was exactly what they were going to do. But Khan said I was his and I'd accepted him. And the others just backed off. They were still angry. I could see that. It wasn't like they were afraid of Khan. They just accepted his claim. And the night we had the orgy—He said he was glad I'd chosen him as *one* of my lovers, that I was generous hearted."

"So ... you're suggesting the women chose and the men accept that?"

"That's what it sounds like to me—not that I actually did—that I was aware of, but I guess that was the way they interpreted the kiss," Miranda said.

Mary Jane frowned thoughtfully. "You know this sort of reminds me of something I read one time about Indians—uh—American Indians—I mean Native Americans, or whatever we're supposed to call them now—anyway, some of the tribes had matriarchal societies. And I think, in some, they were pretty free with the sex and it wasn't looked down on. Of course, in others, it was really looked down and they did horrible things if anybody cheated. It isn't cheating, though, if everybody knows and they agree with it. It's cheating if you have a agreement not to see anybody else and break it—and I don't care what anybody says, men are worse about it."

"What's a matriarchal?" Beth asked.

"The women. They traced their lines through the women and the women were the property owners—the tepee or whatever belonged to them, because of the children. The men just owned their horses and hunted."

"Well ... that's all very well and good, and maybe we're right and it is their custom, and maybe not, but it isn't *our* custom and I'm not really very comfortable with it. Don't get me wrong, I like the guys that decided I'd picked them. They're cute, and really nice—except for Tin—he's a little bit of a prick—that boy's got a corn cob up his ass!—I really don't much care for Cel's sense of humor, either—but I like them well enough. It's just ... I really, really like Dirk and I don't want him to not like me because of this lover thing they have going on. I don't see how he could get to like me if he knows I sleep around."

"You don't think we're *all* worried about that?" Miranda asked irritably. "The question is, is there any chance anyway? Or are they just going to pass us around regardless? Or would they not like us if we didn't put out? Maybe they just aren't used to having families and that's why they're like that? And if they aren't, then they just don't think that way. How did you end up with Tin, anyway, if you like Dirk the best?"

Beth gave her a look. "Honest to god, Miranda! Did you *miss* the 'raid'? The wall fell—just collapsed right into the sea, which scared the hell out of everybody and then this *wave* of yellow skinned devils came boiling over it! We didn't know if it was our Hirachi or some others—but I thought others because they'd just been so ... *civilized* right up until then. And everybody started screaming and running in every direction, because there wasn't any damned place to run to. I was just trying not to get caught, at all. And then Tin caught me and I was so relieved to see it was him, I didn't think of objecting. I thought he'd rescued me! And I didn't know it was 'the spawning' thing I'd

heard about anyway. The next thing I knew he was screwing my brains out right there in front of God and everybody and snarling at Dirk and Cel that I was his. I'd *chosen* him."

Miranda stared at her, but she didn't actually have any trouble visualizing the 'raid' as Beth called it. She'd caught a glimpse of the mayhem herself. "They must have some sort of ritualistic signals," she said after a moment. "I mean—Khan said pretty much the same thing—and he did the night of the celebration, too. It's not like I haven't had guys get mixed signals from me when I didn't even know they were alive, but these guys seem pretty ... disciplined, really orderly about everything they do. The kiss ... I hate to say it, because it sounds kind of stupid, but I kissed Khan because I really wanted to and then, when the others gave me gifts, it didn't seem right to behave any less enthusiastically. I like them. I didn't want them to feel slighted when I could see they'd worked just as hard to give me something nice.

"The gifts must be part of a ritual for them—they give gifts to the woman they desire. If she spurns it, she spurns them. Seems pretty simple—kind of mean, but that must be it."

"So ... if we hadn't run around the compound, screaming like sirens, they wouldn't have gotten the idea we were ripe for them?"

Miranda uttered a snort of laughter. "Actually, that might really be part of it. I mean, think about it—the Hirachi women are warriors. Do you think they'd react the way we did?"

"So you're saying the next time they go into the spawning cycle we're just supposed to stand there and ignore the one we don't want to catch us?"

"I guess we could ask," Miranda said a little doubtfully, "but then that would be to risk hurting their feelings."

"Oh! We wouldn't want to do that," Mary Jane said dryly. "It's such *fun* just to guess what the hell's going on!"

Miranda shrugged. "I wouldn't want to hurt Khan's feelings," she mumbled. "I suppose if you don't like the guy you're with, it wouldn't matter."

Mary Jane looked uncomfortable. "I don't like hurting people's feelings. I've had mine hurt too many times to willingly hurt anybody else." She uttered a deep sigh. "I think I might have a problem."

"Besides the ones we already discussed?" Miranda asked.

Mary Jane chewed her lip. "I'm not at all sure I'm at the peak of my cycle. What do you think is going to happen when ... if it turns out we're not pregnant?"

Miranda dropped her chin on her hand glumly. "They'll either think it just won't work with us and be disappointed—which I don't think is good—or they'll be glad it didn't work—which I think is worse—or we'll find out that it'll only work if some of us manage to hit the peak at the same fucking time they do, which is such a long shot I don't want to think about it at all."

Beth studied her unhappily. "You really think they're only fertile at the spawning time?"

"*They* think so. There must be a reason why they think so," Miranda said irritably.

"Yes, but ... what if it's like us? What if that's just the Hirachi women's cycle and *that's* why they think they're only fertile then?" Beth said.

"I suppose we'll find out ... eventually. I'm betting they aren't going to be really

thrilled, though, if they find out they're fertile all the time and we're fertile once a month. I'm guessing it's sort of a natural birth control for them and maybe one of the reasons they don't have a problem with the women having as many lovers as she wants."

"But if it's once a year anyway—we couldn't have one much sooner than that. So it'd pretty much work out the same, right?"

"I overheard one of them say that their spawning is seven years," Mary Jane said after a prolonged pause. "I think, maybe, *that's* why they don't mind if the women have lovers."

"Seven years!" Miranda and Beth both exclaimed at the same time.

"That can't be right!" Miranda added.

"Actually, they said cycles, but it translated to years."

"Maybe they meant months?"

Mary Jane shrugged. "I guess that'll be on the list of 'we'll find out eventually'."

Beth frowned. "Maybe you could ask Teron? He's the doctor. It could be like a fertility thing. He probably wouldn't think anything about it."

"I'm not asking Teron!" Miranda said flatly. "He's supposed to be one of my lovers. It *won't* sound like a doctor/patient thing. Anyway, I think he's a friend of Khan's and even if he isn't, Khan's their leader. You think he won't go right straight to Khan and tell him I'm probably not knocked up?"

Beth looked horrified. "I hadn't thought about that. But ... they're liable to figure it out eventually anyway, you know? Probably will unless they've got super semen that lasts a really long time—or everybody just *happened* to be at the right place at the right time."

"I'd rather it was later, thank you very much!" Miranda snapped. "I know I'm being a coward about it, but I'd like to enjoy it a little bit ... before."

Mary Jane and Beth both nodded.

After a moment's thought, Mary Jane shook her head. "I suppose you know nine tenths of the women now hate your guts?"

Miranda gaped at her in stunned surprise. "Why?"

Mary Jane shrugged. "Because most of them had their eye on Khan, or Teron, or Gerek and you got all three."

Miranda studied her, wondering if she was joking—not that she had any trouble believing the women had been lusting after any or all of the three—she had, and she thought she had good taste. She'd said it sort of jokingly, though. "You aren't serious?"

"Half serious," Mary Jane admitted finally. "I'm pretty sure they all had their eye on at least one, or possibly all three, but not everybody hates you for it—mostly Carol, Lynn, and Joy—and the other 'bimbos'. They aren't really stupid, not all of them total morons, anyway. They just act dumb because they think it's cute and also because that's how they get out of having to do anything. Everybody figures they're too stupid to do it. Khan, Teron, and Gerek are sort of the cream, though—the most eligible bachelors—and they figure they should've gotten them."

"Poor Adar," Miranda said after a moment. "He's so cute. I can't believe he's been slighted!"

Mary Jane laughed. "I hate you for Adar! I think he's cute, too, but he isn't 'the doctor', or 'the leader', or 'the second in command'. I'm just saying ... watch your back. Carol's a real backstabber. She's got six on a string and she's preening over that, but she

still feels like no one deserves the best but her.”

“Well if six Hirachi males can’t keep that girl busy, honest to god it just can’t be done!” Miranda said testily. “It’s not like Khan’s the governor or anything!”

Mary Jane gave her a look. “No, Khan’s like the president. In case you haven’t noticed, the Hirachi ‘nation’ seems to be the only folks here and he’s their leader.”

She supposed she could see Mary Jane’s point—and Carol’s—position of power and all that. She’d been pretty damned impressed, herself, if it came to that, but she’d been more impressed with *him*. The only thing his position as their leader said to her was that he must be a damned fine specimen of manhood to be a leader of a group like the Hirachi.

A splash in the pool redirected her attention and she looked down to discover a Hirachi male she didn’t know staring at her and the other two women. Before she could say anything, he disappeared again.

Miranda glanced a little uneasily at Beth and Mary Jane. “Uh oh,” she murmured.

She was just about to climb back into the pool and head ‘home’ when Khan surfaced.

He looked really angry.

Chapter Sixteen

"I have been searching for you!" Khan growled.

The accusing note in his voice instantly set her back up even though she felt a little guilty about him looking for her.

Well, and lounging around in some strange Hirachi guy's pod.

"I didn't know I wasn't allowed out," she said tightly. "I was looking for my friends and stopped to rest."

His lips tightened. He glanced at Beth and Mary Jane. "We were searching for bodies."

That knocked the wind right out of her sails. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make trouble. I just wanted to visit with my friends. I didn't know you'd be back so soon."

Khan caught her waist and dragged her into the pool with him. "I will take you back now."

She didn't particularly care for his highhandedness, but she could relate. He'd been worried, and he was angry because he was worried. She sent Beth and Mary Jane an apologetic look and moved to the exit, sucking in several breaths before she ducked beneath the water and swam out.

There was search party just outside. That didn't make her feel a hell of a lot better. In fact, she felt like a truant caught skipping school. Without pausing to examine the men outside too closely, she swam toward the nearest pod. Khan caught her before she could duck inside and a moment of panic hit her. Fortunately, before she managed to get too worked up about it, he snatched her close and gave her air.

He had to stop twice more to give her air before they made it through the entrance to his pod. She was so weak and shaky she had to have help getting out.

"How did you go so far when you can not hold your breath for more than a moment?" Khan demanded when he'd climbed out.

Miranda looked at him a little resentfully, but the discovery that Teron, Gerek, and Adar had followed them inside leavened her temper ... a little. "I'll have you know that I can hold my breath at *least* a couple of damned minutes!"

The three men climbed from the pool and settled around the edges, glaring at her.

Talk about being ganged up on!

She released a huff of breath. "I stopped at every pod and went in for a breath of air. I was looking for the others anyway."

The four men exchanged looks. "You can only hold your breath that long and you still went out?" Khan demanded.

Miranda's resentment peaked. "Yes," she said tightly, since there wasn't actually anything else she could say. She'd begun to feel a good bit more like a kid being berated for taking stupid chances, mostly, she realized, because that was what it had been even though it hadn't seemed that risky at the time.

Actually, it had been scary as hell and seemed really risky. She'd just decided to do it anyway because she'd felt a burning need for 'girl talk' and there wasn't anybody

handy. She folded her arms over her chest, struggled with her temper for several moments and then admitted she was wrong. "I'm sorry. I honestly didn't intend to upset anyone or cause any trouble. You're always gone all day when you work. I didn't think you'd be back to miss me."

"The light is gone and it is worse that you took the risk *knowing* that no one would miss you," Teron said angrily. "If you had had trouble, there would've been no one to help you."

"I can only say I'm sorry so many times! I won't do it again!"

"You will give your word of honor?" Gereke demanded.

"Cross my heart and hope to die!" Miranda said promptly.

That didn't go over well. All four men looked at her as if she'd announced that she was about to commit suicide.

"You hoped to die?" Khan demanded, his voice hard now with anger.

"No, I didn't. I wasn't trying to kill myself. It's just a saying, for god sake! It means I swear I won't."

They didn't seem convinced and it made her angrier. She got to her feet and planted her hands on her hips. "I'm human! I'm *not* Hirachi! I can't stay in here all day of every day completely alone, with nothing to do and no one to talk to. I'll go out of my mind!"

"Regardless of what you seem to think, I'm used to being useful, not useless. Maybe it'll be alright for some of the women. I don't know and I certainly can't say when I don't know them that well. I just know what works for me.

"So either give me something to do or at least take me to stay with one of my friends while you're gone."

She stalked from the room and into the bedroom since there was no other place to go but the kitchen, and she certainly couldn't do anything in there! *Not* that she was a great cook, or even particularly liked cooking! But she would've welcomed it as something to make her feel like she was at least carrying her weight.

Since she couldn't scream at the food and make it cook, though, that seemed like a definite bust.

She couldn't do laundry. They didn't have hardly any clothes to start with and they spent more than half their time in the water anyway. How could they get dirty? Especially now that they weren't working in the compound.

There wasn't any cleaning to do, at all. Khan, obviously, was a very tidy person, not that he had a lot of belongings to strew around.

Something somewhere between working herself to death and getting nowhere, and sitting on her hands, staring at the walls, would be nice.

Something for entertainment if she had nothing useful to do would be nice—TV, radio, newspapers, books—hell, puzzles!

She sat down on the edge of the bed when she reached it, trying to decide whether to lay down and fume, or sit up and sulk. It was dark. She didn't know how it was that she'd failed to notice the light was getting dimmer and that that must mean it was getting close to nightfall when she'd already figured out they 'piped' sunlight into their pods.

They'd been pretty wrapped up in their discussion, though.

She could hear the men talking in the other room, but despite the fact that there wasn't a door in the place, she couldn't make out what they were saying. After a few

minutes, she heard them get up and move into the kitchen.

Her stomach growled.

Sulk until they came to fetch her to eat and then pretend she wasn't actually interested—just to drive home her unhappiness about them being angry with her?

It wasn't actually that tempting. On the other hand, the kitchen was pretty small. She couldn't imagine anyone would be able to move if everyone piled in. She was still trying to decide whether to join the group or not when Teron appeared in the door holding a light—probably something Khan had traded for since it looked like advanced technology they didn't have.

"I thought you might not like to sit in the dark. Are you hungry?"

She was always hungry—now. Before, she didn't think she ever got hungry. She usually ate when she had time and whatever was handy, or quick and easy.

God what she wouldn't give for quick and easy! She'd never particularly felt like she was spoiled, or that she had a cushy life and yet, in retrospect, nothing she'd thought of as a hardship even *began* to compare to this place.

Well, not Khan's place. It was pretty comfortable, but the planet was another matter.

Getting up, she followed Teron into Khan's living room. Adar was seated on the couch—Gerek in the kitchen with Khan. Adar offered her the spot she'd made for herself with both of Khan's pillows.

She debated the matter, but she'd been sitting on a hard floor for hours. She didn't think her butt could take any more hard surfaces at the moment, not when soft was available. She settled on the pillows and divided a look between Adar and Teron. "So, what did you two do today?"

Adar and Teron exchanged a look.

"We worked."

"That's good. Anything interesting happen?"

Amusement flickered in Teron's eyes. "There is not much about harvesting *jasumi* that is a challenge to the mind. We go down to find the *jasumi*, hack it away, put it in our nets, and then we go up to breathe and down to search again."

Miranda looked down at her hands. Jobs did tend to be repetitious, most of them. The only thing that made one more bearable than another was whether it was something you didn't mind doing over and over again and/or there was some challenge to the one thing you did over and over that you liked.

It still made her feel badly for them. What a dull, hard life! It would've been bad enough any time, but when it didn't seem they had anything to look forward to when they weren't working it seemed even worse. "You go up to breathe?" she asked after a moment. "You don't get air from the water?"

Teron looked as if he wasn't certain whether to be insulted or amused. "We are not fish. We breathe air the same as you do."

Miranda reddened slightly, feeling rebuked, but how was she to know without asking? Wait and observe until she figured it out?

Actually, she thought, studying the Hirachi was a pretty fascinating subject. "I hadn't had much chance to observe or to examine," she said, smiling faintly. "When I was a detective, that was a good part of what I did—observe—and then try to unravel the mystery and find the truth. How long can you hold your breath?"

He considered it. "It differs from one to another. On average, around an hour."

Miranda was more than a little stunned even though, logically, she realized that they would've had to develop the ability to hold their breath for long periods of time to be able to accomplish anything underwater. She wondered if that had had anything to do with the fact that they had such massive chests. It seemed likely even though she'd thought before that it was just very well developed muscles.

She supposed not being able to do something that came naturally to the Hirachi must make them seem pretty contemptible and worthless.

She didn't feel inferior—she supposed she was too arrogant to—but she could see where they might think she was.

"I've heard we came from the sea ... long, long ago but if we did, when we left it, we just left it."

Teron and Adar both looked surprised, even a little pleased. She couldn't figure out why until it dawned on her that they saw it as a kinship—and maybe it was, however minor. She didn't see that she needed to point out that that theory had them climbing out of the sea before they'd even become human.

"The world you come from—there are no great seas?" Adar asked curiously.

Miranda looked at him in surprise and then realized he'd leapt to that assumption because she said they'd left the sea. Truthfully, she couldn't remember, but it seemed to her that there was a good bit more ocean than land. "No, there are. Some mammals chose to stay in the sea and some chose to leave. Humans left. It was so long ago nobody knows why."

"What is your home world like?" Teron asked gently.

Miranda felt a tightening in her chest. It was why she hadn't asked them about their home world, because she knew it was bound to be painful to think about, and talk about, the world and people they'd left. "Blue skies," she managed after a moment. "Beautiful blue skies. It's weird but I can't even really remember noticing it that much. I don't think I ever looked up unless it was to check for storm clouds."

"Like the eyes of the other women," Adar said.

Miranda thought about it. "Something like that, but brighter."

Teron frowned thoughtfully. "Why are you different from them? Yours are green—and your hair red." He paused, studying her as if he'd just noticed something. "But it doesn't seem as dark now as before and your skin ... it is darker. What are the spots?"

Miranda hadn't actually thought of herself as being different. They were fair. She was, too, but the Hirachi didn't seem to have as wide a variation in coloring. She caught a strand of her hair and examined it. "The sun's lightened it a little—and darkened my skin. The spots are called freckles. Only very lucky people have freckles," she said with a wry chuckle.

"It is mark of beauty, then?"

Miranda glanced at Adar, wrestling with the urge to laugh. "I was joking. It's just a trait some people have and some people don't—like the hair color and the eyes. There are plenty of people that have green eyes like I do, just not here, and it isn't as common as gray ... or brown."

Teron looked thoughtful. "The sun has made it change? Is this why the hair of many of the others has begun to grow very dark like ours?"

Miranda stared at him in fascination, struggling with her amusement again. He was a doctor, a scientist of sorts. It didn't seem right to lie to the man, but she also didn't feel like it was her business to point out that more than half the 'blonds' among them weren't actually blond. She cleared her throat. "A lot of things can make the hair color change. Sometimes a person has blond hair when they're a child and later it grows dark."

It was true and didn't make her feel as if she was lying outright. She felt pretty pleased with herself about avoiding the issue without lying.

"And yours? It was different when you were a child and now is this color?" Teron pursued.

Miranda shrugged. "Not really. It was pretty much always red." Unfortunately. She didn't like it. She didn't know many people that really did. A lot of people *said* they did, but if red hair was actually as popular as that implied, the hair dye shelves wouldn't be full of blond and shades of brown.

Khan and Gerek arrived with plates of food. Handing them out, they headed back for the rest of the plates and the beverages. They all settled on the floor to eat picnic style and Miranda found herself entertaining them by answering their questions about 'her world'. Either they were less interested in her personally, or they felt that it would be painful for her to talk about her own life. They focused on general information. She didn't know how good a job she did in explaining what her civilization was like. So much of it didn't translate, which she figured meant that the concept probably didn't either, not just the words.

She didn't know how entertaining they found it for that matter. They were probably bored, or appalled, or maybe both. They didn't actually seem to be bored, but she noticed they exchanged looks several times that hinted at disapproval at the very least.

The problem was, she was never really sure what it was that she'd said that they found shocking.

Overall, though, she was glad for the opportunity. As sad as it made her, it was actually a pleasure to 'visit' in her memories. She also felt, right or wrong, that it was a step toward beginning to understand one another better because they did give her a little insight into what their world was like, too.

She felt both relaxed and comfortable with them right up until she realized that it was getting late enough that the guests would be leaving and it occurred to her to wonder if she was going to be passed off for the night. It didn't help that she liked all of them and couldn't really make up her own mind which of them she liked best. She thought Khan, but then when she was around Teron, she was very drawn to him—and Gerek, and Adar, all in a different way—because *they* were different. They made her feel different, but never in a negative way, and the plain fact was that, sexually, she also couldn't make up her mind.

Adar, she thought a little wryly, almost made her feel motherly in a sense. His bashfulness certainly brought out a strong desire to 'baby' him and tease him, despite his massive, fully six and half foot frame of pure brawn. He made her *want* to initiate, brought out the seducer in her.

Gerek brought out the reckless. He had the sort of 'bad boy' attitude they made a woman feel like they were playing with fire and the charm that made them want to, even when they knew in the back of their mind they were going to get burned.

Teron and Khan both made her feel all woman, supremely desirable, completely and utterly feminine. Khan brought out the submissive side of her nature, though, made her feel like a woman in need of a strong man to lean on, made her feel like she could safely do that, could yield completely to him and never suffer a moment's anxiety that he would break her trust ... as if she *should*, because it was the way things were meant to be.

Teron made her feel like that, too, and yet she felt more of an equal with him, like she could safely yield to the primitive urge to be weak and let him be the strong one, but he didn't seem as unyielding as Khan or as demanding that she fulfill the role she was born to. She felt like he expected her to be as strong and independent as she could be and that he'd be there anytime she fell down.

She was relieved and a little sorry, too, when the visitors left and she was alone with Khan. She was both glad and unnerved to be alone with Khan and she also felt guilty about the others. However it had come about, and whatever the parameters of this business about them all being her lovers, she felt the obligation of a lover to give them attention, as well. It made her feel guilty that the relationship, such as it was, seemed too one sided. She was receiving a lot more, it seemed to her, than they were.

There was also the little matter of her heart to consider. With no assurance that they were engaged further than the bedroom, she was reluctant to open herself to feeling things for them that would hurt when and if they decided to change partners. It was a risk people always took when they tried to build a relationship. She'd been through it a few times already herself, but it didn't seem to her that the situation even offered the possibility that it could be more.

She completely understood how Beth felt, as if she'd been placed in a position where she couldn't even hope to build a relationship—not with any of them. But how could she give herself, feeling like she already did about them, and still guard herself from being hurt?

She couldn't. That was the main reason it was so unnerving to be alone with Khan. One on one, forced by circumstances and her needs to give herself to him even if she hadn't wanted to—which she did—she was more vulnerable.

Of course, there was always the chance that being too much in his company, or any of the others, would have the opposite effect. She'd discover things about them that pushed her away or at least dampened her enthusiasm for them.

She didn't really think that was likely, though. She didn't think they were going out of their way to entice her, trying to make a good impression by concealing their less desirable traits and habits. They just did because of who they were.

She wasn't really needy either—actually not at all. Khan had thoroughly satisfied her. She was pretty sure she was good to go for a while in that department. Men in general seemed to have a stronger sex drive, though, or at least want sex more often whether they felt a great need or not. She wasn't against the idea, she decided. If he wanted to, she was willing to accommodate.

He didn't seem to want to. In point of fact, he didn't even join her in the bed until she'd fallen asleep. He roused her after a while when he climbed carefully in the bed and stretched out, but he didn't make any attempt to initiate sex or even to cuddle. A flicker of uneasiness went through her despite the fact that she was more than half asleep, but she ignored it and the warning in her head and scooted closer to snuggle against him despite the lack of invitation. He stiffened, but seemed to force himself to relax. Curling

around her carefully, he nuzzled his face against her hair and then dropped to sleep in that really annoying way men had where they seemed capable of simply 'switching off'.

He woke her when he got up. "I will take you to the nursery where you can visit with your friends."

The words 'friends' and 'nursery' triggered a response she might not have managed otherwise. Instead of swatting at him and telling him to leave her alone so she could go back to sleep, she got up. It didn't take much to get ready and she wasn't a lot more alert.

She actually thought that was probably a good thing. The trek from his pod to the 'nursery' wasn't particularly pleasant. She was getting used to him breathing for her, she thought, but it was a long way from comfortable. When they emerged in the large pool, Khan's hands loosened on her. She didn't let him go, however. Instead, she glanced around, discovering that many of the women were already there and others just arriving as she had.

"I need to go," Khan said, although he didn't make any attempt to peel her loose.

She returned her attention to him, discovering that they were breast to breast, and nose to nose. They had been, of course, since they'd left his pod, but that was necessity and she was too distressed to feel anything else. She didn't know why he'd been reluctant to cuddle her the night before—if it was because he just wasn't used to it or thought it might make him want to have sex when he didn't—but she felt an impulse to try to bridge whatever gap there was between them.

Or maybe just to stake her claim?

She moved closer instead of away, pressing her lips to his. He hesitated, but only fractionally, covering her mouth and kissing her with a heat that made everything inside of her melt and her eyes roll around in her head. She smiled at him a little drunkenly when he lifted his head. "I'll see you to night."

He looked a little quizzical, but he merely nodded and dove.

Miranda discovered she had to recover a little before she could hoist herself out of the pool. She still felt pretty weak kneed, though, when she stood up and looked around for Deborah.

It was almost as boring to spend the day with twenty women who had nothing to do but talk as it was to spend the day alone, Miranda discovered—not so much the first day, but a little the second and a good bit more the third since they'd pretty much run dry of fresh material to discuss and couldn't think of much to do but complain.

Khan collected her at the end of each day, took her to his pod and fixed food for both of them and then left her to the bed alone until she dropped to sleep. He cuddled her willingly enough when she demanded it, but not with any particular enthusiasm.

Miranda wasn't particularly needy in a sexual sense, but she found that she was becoming more and more needy for reassurance. The third night, she lay in wait for him, *pretending* to go asleep. As soon as he settled beside her, she rolled toward him as she'd been in the habit of doing, but she didn't stop there. She thought it was possible that he was just too exhausted to feel any urge for sex. Her first few caresses were tentative because of that, but the moment she felt his cock rise against her, she became more pointed.

He didn't resist. When she pushed at him to get him to roll onto his back, he turned. Eyeing her a little warily as she promptly climbed on top of him, he settled his

big hands on her hips, but more as if to keep her balanced there than in any way that she could think of as sexual.

Refusing to give in to the nagging doubts, she leaned down to explore his face with her lips, his pointy ears, and then his throat and chest. He'd begun to shift restlessly beneath her by the time she'd traced the tattoos on his chest with her lips and tongue and teased the rings piercing his male nipples.

She hesitated, trying to decide whether to move back up for a kiss or lower. She didn't want to yield up control, though. Scooting back until she was seated on his thighs, she continued her exploration downward over the hard, rolling muscles of his abdomen, undulating her body as she did so, so that she was pressing her sex intimately against him.

She heard him swallow when she reached his belly. His hands came up to grip her upper arms, tightened. She nuzzled lower until she found the root of his cock and then traced it with the flat of her tongue until she reached the tip. He sucked in a harsh breath and held it. A shudder rippled through him as she focused on the head of his cock, stroking it with her tongue and finally opening her mouth over it and sucking.

His hands tightened bruisingly on her arms for a moment and then he released his hold. Grasping the mattress in his fists, he uttered a choked sound and sucked in another harsh breath as she traced the ridge of the head with her tongue and sucked his cockhead into her mouth again.

Encouraged, feeling her own body quicken in response to the rising tide of desire she felt in him, she settled more comfortably and began to stroke and suck at him rhythmically. He shifted beneath her, his hips rising as she took his thick flesh as deeply into her mouth as she could. Tremors began to wrack him, became harder. It drove her own heat index upward, increased the excitement pumping through her until she felt dizzy with it.

He released his frantic grip on the mattress and grasped her head, seemed undecided as to whether to make her stop or show her the rhythm he wanted. He yielded to the second impulse, guiding her for several moments until she'd mastered the pace and then releasing her to dig his fingers into the mattress again.

"Miranda," he growled abruptly as if it had been torn from his throat. A desperate warning, or plea, she wasn't sure which, but she thought it was a warning. Her heart thundered with excitement. Sucking in a deep breath, she moaned her own pleasure around his shaft, increasing her pace. The moan or the pace broke his hold on his control. He grabbed her head again as if he meant to push her away. She clamped down more tightly on him, sucking his flesh for all she was worth.

His cock bucked in her mouth and then his semen flooded it. A dizzying rush of triumph swamped her. Swallowing, she pulled at him more greedily until he ceased to come and his cock softened in her mouth.

Tired, but still buzzing with excitement, she finally released him and lifted her head to look up at him. His eyes were closed, his breath still ragged. She climbed up him until she was staring down at his face.

He opened his eyes finally to stare up at her, his eyes still glazed. Smiling faintly, she dipped her head to nip at his hard chin. He lifted his arms abruptly, curling the fingers of one hand tightly in the hair at the nape of her neck, coiling his other arm around her.

Dragging her down to him, he melded his mouth to hers and kissed her deeply, with appreciation, with burgeoning hunger. He rolled after a few moments, pressing her down into the mattress and fitting his body to hers almost in one motion. Curling his back, he watched her face as he merged his body with hers. She closed her eyes to hold the pleasure inside, clutching at his arms as pleasurable tension coiled more tightly inside of her with each delightful stroke of his flesh along her channel.

He paced himself to her gasps and moans of pleasure, reading her needs, meeting them almost before she recognized them herself until he brought her to completion. The moment she began to seize in rapturous convulsions, he began to plunge faster, racing to catch her and then uttered a deep, hoarse groan in concert to her higher pitched cries of bliss, jerking as his body expelled his hot fluids into her channel.

Sighing blissfully in the aftermath, she snuggled against him when he turned to position the two of them on their sides and allowed herself to drift into slumber, supremely pleased with herself that she seemed to have broken through the wall he was trying to build between them.

Seemed, Miranda thought, dismayed, being the operative word. Teron came to collect her the following evening. Gerek about a week after that and then Adar.

The 'nursery' began to feel a lot more like a harem, to Miranda, at least.

Chapter Seventeen

It was impossible to refrain from looking around for Khan when she'd gotten used to being with him every night, had begun to feel less strange about being in his home and more as if it was becoming hers, too. She supposed she shouldn't have grown that accustomed to it in such a short length of time, and there was still some awkwardness to it, but she'd grown used to it enough that she'd seen that she could very easily fall into the habit.

She saw the understanding in Teron's eyes when she finally met his gaze, saw a flicker of something else that made a blush of guilt and an undeniable surge of desire rise in her.

There wasn't much more than a hair's worth of difference between Teron's pod and Khan's. The layout was almost identical, certainly. His 'couch' was lined with pillows, though, four across the seat and one along the back, as if it was a work in progress.

She felt the awkwardness and the mixture of anticipation and nerves familiar to her from previous attempts to launch a new relationship. She could tell Teron felt it, too, but he headed straight into the kitchen to prepare food, which gave him something to do.

She followed him after a brief hesitation, offering to help prepare whatever he'd planned to cook. He looked a little surprised, but described what he needed from the refrigeration unit. When she'd lined it all up on the counter near the basin, he took the knife and showed her how to do what he wanted. Folding his arms over his chest, he settled a hip against the counter and watched her.

She glanced up at him a little questioningly after a moment. "Am I doing it right? Or getting on your nerves?"

A faint smile curled his lips. "A little of both."

She chuckled, ignoring the twinge of irritation she felt at the comment. "I'm working blind here. I've got no idea what any of this is or what you mean to do with it."

"We're pretty basic," Teron said wryly. "Food and plenty of it. The quantity is far more important than the taste."

Miranda doubted that. She lifted a brow at him.

He shrugged, grinning. "In our society, warriors do not—or did not cook. We had to ... acquire the knack to survive, but since none of us paid a great deal of attention to the preparations—generally weren't even present, it's been mostly guess work. Then, too, although many things are similar here, some that seem to be actually aren't and even when it's close, it's just close. Not the same."

Miranda nodded. "Those things ya'll killed before tasted a lot like beef. The texture of the meat was even similar, but they sure didn't look anything like a cow. I wouldn't have guessed just to look at them that the meat would be so much like beef. The roots *looked* like potatoes, but they tasted like ... chalk," she said instead of 'shit', which was what she thought about it.

"But you have the skills of one familiar with cooking."

Miranda smiled wryly. "Oh, I was a regular little Suzy Homemaker when I was a little girl. I had visions of being a Mommy and that was pretty much my only aspirations. I was going to have a huge fairytale wedding, live in a big house, and produce a houseful of children."

She could tell Teron hadn't grasped half of what she'd said and it wasn't entirely because of the language. The concept was probably completely alien to him.

He seemed to catch the breeding part pretty well, though.

She was actually sorry she'd brought it up. She could see the questions in his eyes. Shrugging inwardly, she finished the tale. It seemed unlikely he'd grasp much more of it than he had the other. "Reality actually sucks, though. I outgrew it when I got old enough to notice I wasn't living a fairytale life myself and couldn't expect it. My father drank, and it got worse the older I got. When it reached the point where he beat the shit out of my mother and put her in the hospital, she divorced him, and then it was just the four of us—my mom and my brother and sister—and pretty rough since she didn't really make enough to support the family in comfort. My brother went off to war and came back in a box. My sister married a bastard just like my father. My mother remarried ... and did just as badly the second time around, and I decided to be a cop."

He hooked a finger beneath her chin and turned her head toward him, tipping her face up to examine it. "To protect others?" he guessed.

Miranda frowned. "Maybe," she said honestly. "I think it had more to do with a stupid romantic idea I had that it was an exciting career, rather noble, and that I'd be respected. The reality was that a lot of it was boring and tedious, scary and life threatening—I had to deal with the dregs of society, and believe me when you crawl around in shit you don't feel the least bit noble—and most people hate cops unless they need them. The minute any guy found out I was a cop, they lost interest in dating me."

"What is this word 'dating'?" he asked curiously.

Miranda couldn't prevent a wry smile. He might not catch much, but he caught the key words. She searched her mind and realized the closest word in his language that seemed to correlate was courting. She had her doubts that their concept of courting was quite the same.

He looked surprised and then confused. "I don't understand why being a cop would make you undesirable to your males. They don't admire the skills of a warrior?"

"Not much," Miranda said dryly. They didn't admire anything that smacked, in any way, of 'manliness'.

In all honesty, it didn't particularly make her feel better to think that that skewed perspective they'd gotten of her as some kind of 'warrior woman' might be why 'her' men found her desirable. She wanted to be wanted for what she was. She wasn't a warrior woman, not by any stretch of the imagination. She was just 'a' woman, who wanted to be desired, and loved, and have someone that she could love.

They ate fish. She was getting pretty tired of fish, particularly since she'd never been terribly fond of it to start with, but she supposed it was far easier to get fish where they were currently staying, and she doubted it was as hazardous.

She didn't want to be on a steady diet of roast 'beast' for that matter.

Inwardly, she sighed. Variety—that was just one more thing she missed.

Teron had two chairs at his table so they were able to sit down together and share the meal. Teron pushed back from the table when he'd finished, but he didn't attempt to

rise. "This 'fairytale' life you spoke about before, that you wanted when you were a child, this was because this is expected in your society?"

Miranda studied him with surprise. She'd never actually wondered where she'd gotten the idea from. She supposed she must have picked it up somewhere. Or maybe it was just the child's eye view of the way things were supposed to be like when she grew up? She had some good memories from before her father had begun to drink so heavily, though. Maybe it hadn't entirely been skewed by her childish mind?

"It was once upon a time," she said finally. "I think the government is more responsible for the crumbling than any other one thing, even individuals—not that I think they're blameless. But how stupid is it to gather up the best—the smartest and bravest men, and send them off to war to die? And the government has, over and over. You have to wonder how that effected the gene pool—It certainly couldn't be good for it.

"Their economics policies mostly demolished it—sending jobs to foreign countries so our men couldn't support their families, and raising taxes all the time. When a man couldn't support his family anymore, the women had to get out and help support the family, which left the children to be raised by strangers who didn't love them and to whom tending them was just a job.

"That's what happened to my family, anyway, and a hell of a lot others. I'm not excusing my father. He was weak to turn to drinking whatever the provocation and it sure as hell didn't help matters. But it was frustration that pushed him that way, and a sense of failure."

Teron nodded. "Leaders making bad decisions. This is what brought about the destruction of our own civilization." He fell silent, thoughtful. "Ideally, how would you want things to be?"

Miranda looked at him questioningly.

"For you. The big house and many children?"

"I think I could safely say the majority of women, me included, would like to see fathers doing what they once did—taking care of the family so a woman could nurture her children. I think most women would find it rewarding enough to make their 'nests' and tend their children, that that's what they really want—and to be respected and appreciated for the importance of that job.

"I mean, really, what could possibly be more important than making certain the future generation is taught the things they should be? I can tell you from first hand experience what happens when that doesn't—people reach adulthood with no respect for the rights of others, and they're not civilized. They look like it, but they're really just animals that look like human beings, and they prey on the weak. That's all my job was, really, rounding up the animals and caging them so that they couldn't hurt the civilized humans, and it seemed to me that there were more animals and fewer civilized all the time."

She smiled at him wryly. "If I could fix the world"

His own smile was wry. "We have a new world. It needs a lot of fixing."

Miranda made a derisive sound of amusement. It was better than crying. "A lot!"

They got up and did the kitchen cleanup together. It felt companionable and Miranda liked it.

She was still tense when they'd finished. Anticipation was certainly a large part of it, but there was doubt. She supposed there was always doubt until there was

familiarity.

She didn't hesitate, though. When he took her hand and led her into his room, she followed without reluctance, the anticipation shimmying inside of her. He turned to face her when they reached his bed. Lifting his hands to remove the combs that held her hair, he turned to set them on a small table beside his bed and then reached to smooth her hair with his palms and fingers.

"I have never seen hair of this color," he murmured, studying the glint of her hair as he sifted it through his fingers. He met her gaze. "Or eyes the color of growing things." He touched her cheek, lightly traced the sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

Miranda smiled faintly. "Or freckles."

He shifted closer, grasping her waist and drawing her up onto her toes to meet him as he bent to brush his lips along hers. "Or anything half as beautiful as you are, Miranda," he murmured against her lips, nibbling at them, lightly sucking at first her top lip and then her lower, fuller lip before he sealed his mouth to hers.

With no more than that, no touch beyond his hands on her waist and his lips on hers, he awoke every nerve ending, made her breathless with expectation even before she felt the touch she'd been waiting for, needing. Heady longing swept through her mind as he stroked his tongue along hers and her taste buds exploded with the taste of him. Heat shimmied along her nerve endings and warmed her blood as she drew his scent into her, breathed him, entwined her own essence with his.

Enthralled, Miranda lifted her hands to brace them against Teron's hard pecs, to steady herself as dizziness swept through her, tumult erupting inside of her.

He lifted a hand from her waist to cup her head as he deepened the kiss, sucking at her tongue, entwining his with hers, sweeping the tip along the silky inner surface of her mouth. Giddy with the drug of rising passion his caresses evoked, weak and heavy, and yet with a sense that she was becoming as insubstantial as the heat wafting off her in waves, she slipped her hands up his chest to grip his shoulders.

She was too dizzy to stand on her own when Teron's lips parted from hers and he lifted his head to study her face. Guiding her to his bed, he climbed onto the mattress with her, catching the hem of her gown and drawing it off over her head. She settled back against the mattress, staring up at him a little dazedly as he climbed from the bed again, pushed his boots off and peeled his trousers down. His broad shoulders and long black hair briefly hid the rest of him from her view, but when he straightened again, she allowed her gaze to wander down his narrow hips and muscular thighs before returning to examine his sex. Turgid, it stood up aggressively, the soft sack beneath drawn up, as well.

He climbed onto the bed with her then, settling on his side and explored her with the feather light touch of his long fingers and his gaze, teasing the red thatch of down at the apex of her thighs before he met gaze. Her throat tightened at the fire in his eyes. Her entire body went taut, her heart pounding erratically.

Holding her gaze, he glided his hand upward after a moment, cupping one breast and massaging it gently before he transferred his gaze to the globe he held in his hand. A faint frown appeared between his brows as he studied her breast. Lifting his hand, he tracked the faint blue tracery of veins in her breast. His voice was rough when he spoke.

"Fragile, as soft as the petal of a flower," he murmured when he reached her

nipple and traced the areola, watching in apparent fascination as it tightened, making her nipple swell even more.

Settling closer, he toyed with the tip of first one breast and then the other, plucking at them lightly until they were throbbing almost painfully with the blood engorging them and it was all Miranda could do to drag air into her lungs for the escalating anticipation coursing through her. She stilled when he leaned toward her at last, watching his face as paused a breath away from a touch and finally plucked at the tip he'd decided to endow with his attention with his lips, flicking his tongue lightly back and forth over the tip and driving her insane with the need for more.

She released a moan of pleasurable agony when he finally settled his mouth fully over her nipple and began to suckle it, feeling for several moments as if she'd black out from the intensity of sensations pelting her. Her womb contracted at the first hard drag of his mouth. Heated moisture coated the walls of her sex, which fluttered, needful of his possession.

She lay still for a time, cupping his head to her, basking in the currents sizzling through her until it built to a point where she couldn't be still anymore, where she began to feel fevered and desperate. A mixture of despair and intense longing fluttered through her mind when he transferred his attention to her other nipple, teasing it with the same leisurely torment as the first.

"Teron!" she gasped a little desperately when he released it and began to explore the soft mounds with light brushes of his lips. "Please?"

She felt his lips curl against her skin.

"Please what?" he asked huskily, charting a trail with his lips to her throat. "Kiss you here?"

She made a humming noise of pleasure when he did, tilting her head back to give him better access so he could explore her entire throat and neck.

"And here?" he asked when he reached her ear, tugging at the lobe with his lips. "Should I kiss this pretty little shell?"

She was too feverish with need to fully gasp anything he said, but goosebumps erupted all over her as he traced the swirls of her ear with the tip of his tongue, his heated breath teasing her almost more. "Yes," she whispered a little hoarsely.

"Every where?"

Her throat dry from her panting breaths, Miranda swallowed with an effort, torn between the lure of more pleasure and the rising desperation to feel him inside of her. She shook her head.

"Is that a yea? Or a nay?" he murmured, winding his way back along her neck to her breasts.

She gripped his shoulders, digging her fingers into his flesh. "Don't tease me anymore. I want you inside of me," she whispered.

He leaned away, stroking his hand down the length of her body until he reached her mound. She parted her legs as he pushed his hand between them, lightly skimming his fingers along the lips of her sex. "Here?" he asked huskily, when he parted the lips and stroked his finger along her cleft.

"Teron!"

He chuckled, pushing her legs wider and shifting his hips between them. She gasped, arching her back when she felt the head of his cock butt the mouth of her sex,

press into her.

Straightening his arms to lift his upper body away from hers, he tipped his head down to watch as their bodies slowly began to meld, curling his hips to press forward and then allowing the muscles along her channel to expel him as they tried frantically to grip his turgid length. Watching him through her lashes, she finally tipped her head up to see what he was studying with such rapt fascination. Her belly clenched as she stared at their connection, watched his cock disappear inside of her body.

He lifted his head, met her gaze for a long moment, and dropped to his elbows. Shifting his arms beneath her shoulders, he watched her face as he curled his hips and drove deeply. She sucked in a sharp breath at the glorious mixture of pain and pleasure as he impaled her on his thick flesh, squeezing her eyes tightly.

“Miranda?”

She opened her eyes to look up at him. “It feels so good.”

His face went taut. He released a pent up breath raggedly. Tightening his arms around her, he began to thrust and retreat in a cadence that drove her swiftly upward to her peak, shattered her with the magnitude of the eruption. She moaned as it seized her, arched against him, shuddered with the quakes, gasped his name in praise. He groaned as he followed her into glory, shaking with the force of his own climax and finally stilling, gasping for breath.

He dipped his head to kiss her forehead when he'd caught his breath and finally shifted downward to seek her lips, kissing her with gusty appreciation. He moved off of her then. Settling on his side, he dragged her close and curled his arms around her to hold her against his length.

“Still among the living?” he murmured near her ear.

Miranda chuckled. “Barely.”

* * * *

Teron dragged a frame-looking thing from an alcove and a basket of colorful fibers when he'd taken her to his pod the following day. Settling on the floor with the frame braced between his knees, he carefully separated the fibers and began to attach them one by one at the top and the bottom, forming vertical lines. After watching him for a few moments from the couch, Miranda joined him, studying what he was doing more closely as it dawned on her that this was how he'd made the pillows on his couch.

He flicked a glance at her after a few moments. “Would you like to try it?”

It looked simple enough. She discovered it wasn't quite as simple as it looked. Holding the frame just right took some getting used to and the fibers, which were like thin ribbons, had to be kept flat when they seemed to determined to twist. Leaving her to it when he saw she had the knack for it, he went to prepare a meal.

He had it ready long before she'd managed to attach fibers all the way across. Almost reluctantly, she set it aside and joined him. The dinner discussion was about the weaving. Happily, she'd already gotten a little experience with it in building the hut. It was a fairly simple process. It just took practice to turn out a piece tightly woven enough without bunching the fibers or twisting them and making the piece rough.

They returned to the living room after the meal and Teron finished attaching the vertical ‘threads’, which she discovered were from a plant that grew in marshy areas near the sea, and showed her how to weave the horizontal pieces through the verticals. She'd woven almost an entire inch before he took the frame from her, set it aside, and drew her

into his bed.

The following day, after he'd taken her to the nursery and left her, he returned a little later with the simple loom and more than enough fibers to keep her occupied. She was dismayed until she discovered the fibers weren't compromised by the water in any way. It didn't penetrate. She had only to set the frame up for a few minutes to allow the water to run off. The fibers he'd brought to add to the weave had to be hung up to drip dry, but she simply spread them across the top of the frame.

Miranda doubted, under any other circumstances, that her project would've drawn more than a vaguely curious gaze or two. Between their boredom and the lack of anything even vaguely civilized, though, a good percentage of the women were downright giddy with excitement, so eager to learn the craft themselves that it was hard to gather in a tight enough group to instruct them.

By the end of the week, every woman had a loom and the majority were at least making an effort to produce a piece. The malingers, of course, barely paid lip service to the effort and managed to screw theirs up every time anyone helped them restart their project. When they finally discovered they couldn't convince any of the women to take over for them and make their pieces, they settled sullenly to the task, but it was easy to see their men were going to be doing any real weaving that got done.

It was tedious and repetitive. Hunching over the thing made joints ache and complain. Weaving the thin pieces of fiber could be nerve wracking and frustrating and the fibers were thin enough it could slice the fingers if one wasn't careful, but it was also rewarding. They could talk while they worked and still actually make progress toward making something and after doing a few pieces they were accomplished enough to start figuring out ways to work simple designs into the pieces by carefully sorting the varying colors.

Miranda had just begun to feel settled despite the strangeness of being passed to a new man once a week, when she discovered the men intended to return them to the compound. She'd spent the week with Adar and had expected that she would be 'rotated' to Khan the following day. Instead, Teron arrived and led her into Adar's bedroom to examine her.

Miranda didn't even realize that was his intent at first. She was disconcerted at the thought that he meant to make love to her in Adar's bed, even though Adar didn't seem disturbed by it. When she'd lain down, though, and Teron picked up her hand and examined, it dawned on her that he'd come as 'the healer'.

Uneasiness instantly swept through her. She hadn't given a thought to the possibility, the likelihood, that she wasn't pregnant and that the men thought she was since the first week she'd spent in the village. It crashed over her with an unpleasant shock, though, when Teron, after examining her hands and feet, began to carefully press her abdomen.

He pulled her gown down again and offered his hand to help her sit up. "We will need to return you and the others to the compound," he said without preliminary.

The shock that went through Miranda that time left her cold. "Why?"

He frowned, lifting a hand to lightly stroke her cheek. "You are not ... fashioned for this environment, Miranda. Even limiting the time that you spend in the water, your skin is damaged and you do not have the ability to pull air into your body and hold it for long periods of time as we do. You aren't designed in that way. It places a strain upon

you that you should not have when you are breeding—even so early as this.”

She wanted to argue the matter, but she didn't dare suggest that she might not be pregnant at all. “It's still better here,” she said after a moment. “The sun damages my skin in the compound and ... I don't have to go to the nursery every day. I could stay in the pod and go once in a while and it wouldn't be as bad.”

“The Vernamin have delivered the temporary shelters we traded for. The compound will be better for you.”

Miranda clamped her lips against arguing any further. It seemed obvious, since they'd gotten temporary shelters, that they'd never intended to keep her with them any of the time. Arguing was patently useless when they clearly hadn't changed their mind about it since then. It would only add strain to a relationship that was evidently tenuous at best.

She looked away, trying to gather her pride around her like a shield, trying to hide the hurt tightening in her chest until she could barely breathe. “When will I be taken back?”

“Tomorrow.”

Chapter Eighteen

It was just as well, Miranda thought wryly, that the return trip to the compound was such a traumatic and exhausting experience for all of them. She was pretty sure emotion would've overruled common sense otherwise and there would've been some very ugly scenes on the beach. A good half of the women still managed to show their asses, though in most of those cases it was a matter of stalking off sullenly or weeping. Only a handful were able to really work at burning their bridges, and of course Carol was the leader of the pack as usual.

Trying to ignore her screaming tirade, Miranda managed to gather her wits enough, and hold tightly enough to her conflicting emotions to kiss Khan and tell him she hoped she'd see him again soon.

She waited until all of the men had left the beach and disappeared before she confronted Carol and her group of harpies, releasing her own pent up emotions. "You total, *stupid*, fucking moron!" she snarled, struggling with the urge to knock the woman off her feet. "We need them a hell of a lot more than they need us! And you can be damned sure if you've succeeded in running them off for good that I won't lift a hand to feed your stupid, sorry ass! If you can't be anything besides fucking useless, at least learn to keep your damned mouth shut or, honest to god, I'm going to beat you unconscious until I teach you better!"

It was fortunate, for Carol, that she was so shocked that she didn't come back with some of the mouthy comments she generally did. Miranda wasn't certain she could've contained her urge toward violence if Carol had added to her stupidity by provoking her.

When she saw that she'd cowed the group, she turned on her heel and stalked toward the hut, ignoring the domed habitats that had been lined up along the far back wall of the compound. Dropping onto the crackling and now brittle grasses of what had been her pallet, she covered her face with her hands and wept until she was exhausted.

She didn't realize she'd been followed until Deborah sat down next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Mopping her wet face with her hands, she wiped her hands on her gown and finally glanced at Deborah. Stacy, Mary Jane, Jan, and Beth, she discovered, had followed her into the hut. They were red eyed, as well, their eyes puffy enough she thought they'd probably spent the night before indulging their own emotions.

"You think they'll come back?" Deborah finally asked, her voice a little hoarse with the mixture of fear and grief threading it.

Miranda sniffed. "I don't think they've abandoned us—not completely, anyway—unless those *bitches* managed to give them all a complete disgust of us. They're not just too stupid to live. They're dangerous. You'd think anyone, short of a purely retarded person, would have enough sense not to run the Hirachi off completely!"

The other women looked at each other uncomfortably. "You think we should have a meeting?" Stacy asked finally. "There's four habitats. We're going to have to

decide who sleeps where if nothing else.”

Miranda didn't particularly feel like conducting a meeting, not if they expected her to do the talking, but she realized there was no point in putting it off any longer. They had a faction of women among them that were a burden in too many ways to count. It couldn't be ignored or tolerated anymore. For better or worse, they were stuck with one another. She supposed, all things considered, that they could've been much worse off. At least the majority of the women realized their lives depended upon their willingness to work and to tackle tasks they'd never been called upon to do before.

Nodding tiredly, she told the others that she'd meet up with them after she'd washed her face. She left the hut, moving down to the water. The women didn't have to be gathered. They'd already headed to the habitats to check them out, but once she'd checked them out herself, the group gathered outside.

Her anger had surfaced again by the time she faced them because Carol and her cronies had already looked the habitats over and picked the choice spots for themselves. Not that there was a huge difference from one to the other—in fact none—but the habitats contained stacked bunks and the prima donnas had all perched their little asses on the lower bunks.

They didn't bother to join the rest of the group who gathered to hear what was going on. After waiting a few minutes to give them time to present themselves, Miranda marched to the women seated. “You, you, you, and you,” she said tightly, tapping each on the shoulder. “Bring Carol's ass out here.” Without waiting to see if they'd do it, she tapped four more women and sent them after Lynn and so on.

She hadn't reckoned on just how resentful the women had become. By the time the ‘culprits’ had been dragged out kicking and screaming, everyone was showing signs of a fight and struggling to subdue the urge to wreak more havoc on the women they'd been ‘deputized’ to retrieve.

The offenders were dumped unceremoniously at the front of the group. Miranda made sure that she made eye contact with each one. “I'm going to say this one more time for the mentally impaired among us—*this* is survival. It isn't a game and it isn't a popularity contest where you *might* be elected queen of the day. None of us care how fucking adorable you are in the old world. Here, you're just another mouth to feed and you've been nothing but a burden since you arrived. Not only that, but you've done the best you could to create trouble among us, and between us and the Hirachi—who we depend on for survival. From now on, you *will* work just like everybody else, or you don't eat. Sit on your ass, pretend you're too stupid and/or weak to do the work assigned, and you can starve to death for all we care. If I find out you're playing the Hirachi men against each other to stroke your fucking ego, if I see you throw another fit in front of those men, I *will* form a lynching party, we *will* march the offender off into the jungle and we *will* leave you there!

“You are not *worth* my life! You are not worth risking the lives of *any* of the other women here. Is that perfectly clear? Because I can break it down into baby talk if you still haven't grasped your situation.”

“You wouldn't dare,” Carol the truly stupid snarled.

Miranda crouched in front of her. “You don't want to test that. You obviously haven't grasped that most of the women here, including me, would just as soon take your ass off right now and be rid of you. This is your last chance.”

"My men would be furious!"

"Assuming you haven't completely cured them of any interest in you already, we can play stupid just as well as you can. We can tell them anything we want to explain your absence, my dear.

"And then we could divide your men up among us and treat them like they deserve. What they *don't* deserve when they've broken their backs to take care of all of us is to be treated like shit."

Carol began to look worried for the first time. "You think my friends won't tell them?"

Miranda looked her 'friends' over before focusing on Carol again. "I *think* taking you off and dumping you might be the incentive they need to behave themselves. I *think* they aren't your friends. I *think* they wouldn't risk a broken fingernail, anymore than you would, to help anybody but themselves ... because they're just like you, Carol."

Leaving her message to sink in, she stood again and faced the other women. "We're going to hope the Hirachi haven't abandoned us. Teron said they'd brought us back because they knew the sea wasn't our natural environment and it wasn't good for us. I don't think he was just saying that—although I'm sure it wasn't easy sharing their personal space when they clearly aren't used to it, particularly with people that aren't even of their culture.

"They've shown more thoughtfulness and care than we probably deserve since we haven't really been able to be that useful to them and I think we should try to focus on that and not hurt feelings. We'll divide the undesirables between the habitats because they'll have to be watched, but, within reason, I don't see why we can't split up according to preferences for roommates. It should make living together a lot easier and then, once we've done that, the groups need to draw straws or something to settle who gets the bottom bunk—unless some of you don't mind the top anyway.

"One thing—personal belongings belong to the person who's managed to accumulate them. Nobody 'borrows' unless they've been given permission. Otherwise it's going to be considered stealing and we'll have to vote on punishment.

"Stealing will not be tolerated!"

"If anybody has 'borrowed' something that doesn't belong to them, now is the time to return it with apologies to the injured party. Once everybody has been settled in to their new area, rest a little, and then we'll meet up again and decide what needs to be done, prioritize, and split up if we have to to get it done."

Deborah eyed her with a mixture of amusement and respect when she joined the women she'd come to think of as friends. "I don't know if I want to live with you or not," she murmured. "Ohh, you're scary when you're pissed!"

Miranda gave her a look. "You should talk! I saw you punch Carol in the mouth! I didn't punch anybody."

Deborah shrugged, looked away guiltily. "It felt better than it should have. I didn't know I had it in me, but to be honest I wanted to hit her a few more times once I got started." She was silent for a moment. "Did you really mean that about getting rid of Carol and the others?"

Miranda shook her head. "I hope it won't come to that."

"But if it did?"

Miranda studied Stacy for a moment. "I'm not willing to die for her stupidity. I

meant that. If she and the others continue to behave in such a way that they are a threat to the survival of the majority, we won't have any choice—but it'll be their decision, not ours."

They discovered when they went to claim a habitat that they'd been stuck with Carol and Joy. Miranda instantly regretted the decision to divide up the troublesome pack, but she knew it was for the best, even though she hated having to put up with Carol and Joy. Everybody else had at least two women in their midst that they would've rather not been around.

Having settled the question of the bunks, she left the habitat, returning to the hut to collect her gifts. She felt like crying when she discovered Khan—or someone—had returned to collect her pants and boots for her as she'd asked, cleaned them and neatly folded them, and then placed them with her other things. They hadn't said anything about it and she hadn't wanted to pester them. She'd given up hope that she would ever see the pants and boots again, though, or figured even if she did she'd find out they were completely ruined.

Deborah, Mary Jane, and Stacy joined her in the hut. Mary Jane sniffed her things and wrinkled her nose. "Smoked. I suppose they'll smell like smoke forever more. It's a shame we didn't think to drag some of the meat in and smoke it while we were at it."

Miranda looked at her with a surge of excitement. "You know how to smoke meat? Doesn't that make it keep longer without going bad?"

Mary Jane shrugged. "Not really, I don't guess. Dad had a smoker and used to smoke turkeys for Christmas. I don't know if it would, like, make it keep a lot longer, but all he did was build a fire in the smoker and leave the turkey to slowly cook. It took hours and hours. I remember that."

Vaguely disappointed, Miranda considered what she'd said and finally shrugged. "I guess we get to experiment, but there's always meat that goes to waste. Assuming, of course, that the Hirachi come back and bring us more meat," she added, feeling her spirits plummet again.

Mary Jane looked the hut over. "I think we need something a lot smaller than this even to try it. Like I said, he had to keep the fire going overnight. He'd get it started on Christmas Eve, sometime in the afternoon and keep it going until just before we had Christmas dinner. It would take a lot of fire to heat this place up enough. He used an old refrigerator."

They discovered they'd worried needlessly. The Hirachi men returned as had been their habit before the removal to the underwater village. They looked uncertain of their welcome and many of them downright angry.

They had every reason to be. They'd been publicly humiliated.

She regretted not beating the shit out of Carol and her cohorts herself.

That group was sulking and barely spared a glance at the men. The other women, thankfully, stopped what they were doing and followed the men, offering to help. They were dismissed, which didn't surprise Miranda, but since Gereck was among the men, she made a point of going to him and demanding a kiss. He looked surprised and doubtful but he readily obliged. The kiss was purely carnal—not the affectionate peck she'd intended, but she responded with the heat that welled readily within her. She smiled up at him a little dopily when he set on her feet once more. "Well ... hello to you, too," she

said teasingly. "I won't ask if you missed me."

He chuckled, she thought more from her tone than because he entirely understood. "My little man did," he murmured, shifting a pointed look downward.

"Maybe I should've kissed your little man, then, if he's the only one that missed me!" Miranda said a little tartly.

Grinning, he caught her wrist when she turned away, dragging her back for another kiss. "This man missed you, too," he said huskily when he pulled away. "But the little man won't mind if you kiss him."

Miranda sent him a look of promise. "I'll think about it," she murmured teasingly, feeling very pleased with herself when she turned and headed back to what she'd been doing.

Either the other women had decided to take their cues from her or they'd been as anxious as she was to make certain the men knew they were welcome for more than the food they'd risked their necks to get. Even Carol and her bunch had decided to unbend enough to greet their men, although, Miranda thought sourly, she doubted their motives had anything to do with making the men feel better. More likely, they'd either been afraid they might have defectors, or they'd just decided to 'show everybody' that their men found their behavior acceptable—probably both.

She didn't care either as long as they patched things up.

She noticed the men watched them working on taking the hut apart curiously, but, like they generally did, once they had the fire going and the meat cooking, they took to the sea again, reappearing now and then to turn the meat on the spit and study the work in progress.

Miranda had decided they could use part of the old hut to build a smoke house and part to build a 'bath house' near the water's edge. She didn't actually think there was any way to get water piped inside to make even a crude shower, but they needed toilets. It had been miserable enough to have to use what was available before, but after a month in relative civilization nobody wanted to do without something that at least approximated a bathroom.

The bamboo they'd used for construction had dried out and most of the pulpy center fell out when they took hut apart. Deciding they'd work for pipes, some of the women settled with the straight pieces that had been used to form the ends of the hut and began stabbing at what was left with thinner pieces of bamboo to finish the job of hollowing them out. While they were occupied with pipe making, the other women began dragging materials toward the beach and began assembling their 'bath house' just above the high tide line.

Miranda hoped they could put something together that would carry the waste far enough out that the current would handle the rest of the problem. They managed to get the smoke house erected and their new bath house mostly put together before the men returned near dusk to eat with them.

As tired as she was, Miranda felt something hard and fearful inside of her break free the moment she recognized Khan, Teron, and Adar among the men. She hadn't wanted to admit, even to herself, that she believed they'd simply dumped her, but she'd been afraid they had. She was so giddy with relief she had to work hard to tamp her enthusiasm and try to hide the fact that she'd doubted them, but she had a feeling she wasn't entirely successful.

Disappointment filled her when the men *all* got up to leave. She'd hoped that Khan would stay the night with her, at least. Instead, all four of them kissed her silly and then left her feeling thrown away—ripe for sex and no one to party with!

Trying to dismiss it, she headed for the carcass and worked at carving off some turkey sized chunks of meat to put in the smoke house.

They discovered when they got up the following morning that the men had come back and completed their bathhouse—totally completed it. Four 'shower' spouts had been added to one long wall and were connected to a barrel-like container they'd put up on 'legs' so that gravity would feed the water once the barrel was filled. There was also a row of 'toilets', a bench with cutouts and trap to collect waste and funnel it away with the 'pipes' they'd made.

Everyone was so delighted they were practically dancing with excitement.

Except Carol and the obnoxious bunch, naturally, who sneered at it, complained about the fact that the water had to be lugged up to fill the barrel before the showers would work, but deigned to make use of it.

"They'd complain if they were hanged with a new rope," Mary Jane said irritably.

Miranda and Deborah stared at her a moment and started laughing at her graveyard humor.

When the first women got sick, everyone was convinced they had food poisoning. They decided they hadn't cured the meat long enough, or maybe hadn't built the fire hot enough, and produced smoked, *dried* meat the next time around, and the first to puke were still exhibiting nausea and occasional vomiting. When it finally occurred to them that none of the food poison-like symptoms had been accompanied by diarrhea it also dawned on them that some of them, at least, were pregnant. By the end of the month, they decided they could make that unanimous. It was a relief on several levels. On others, not so much.

Miranda couldn't decide whether she was more thrilled or scared to death at the prospect of having a baby—her first—without a hospital and lots of drugs close at hand. She was pretty sure the others shared her sentiments—except for those who hadn't wanted to be pregnant at all. They were just plain scared shitless and didn't even have anything to be happy about to counter it.

Beyond that, nobody knew who the father of their baby actually was since it seemed very unlikely that they'd all been at peak fertility when the designated impregnator had done his job. And they had the added worry of a showdown some eight months down the road when the babies arrived and might or might not look like the Hirachi who thought he'd fathered it.

"I wonder if we should mention, now, that we don't have cycles like the Hirachi women apparently do," Deborah said uneasily.

"I don't think they'll be very happy if we mention it now when we didn't before," Miranda said.

"Yes, but I think Tin's going to be really angry if I have a baby and it looks like—Cel or Dirk," Beth said unhappily.

"Puhlease!" Carol put in. "They all look alike and babies all look alike. You don't honestly think they'll be able to tell the difference?"

Everyone but Joy turned to glare at her angrily and even Joy didn't look terribly pleased with her. "They don't *all* look alike!" Deborah snapped. "They don't look

anything alike! If you ever paid any attention to anybody but yourself you would've noticed that."

Carol glared at her but finally shrugged. "I was just trying to make her feel better," she said coolly.

"Right," Mary Jane retorted dryly.

Miranda massaged her temples. "I suppose we can all act like wonder brain over there and pretend we're completely stunned when the babies get here," she murmured with a touch of humor she didn't particularly feel.

"I heard that!" Carol snapped.

"Good!" Miranda snarled at her. "At least now I know you aren't deaf *and* stupid! I'll remember that the next time you decide to play deaf!"

"Oh this is going to be fun!" Deborah said dryly. "Twenty pregnant women all stuffed in these four little pods together! We'll be lucky if we all make it to term alive."

"You know," Beth said thoughtfully, "I read once that anytime women were stuck together really close, their cycles began to shift toward the alpha female until they were all on the exact same cycle."

Everybody stared at her with a mixture of hope and doubt. "You're sure that's what the article said?" Mary Jane asked.

"Actually," Deborah put in, "I've heard that, too. Maybe we were all cycling together?"

Miranda frowned. "You think we were together long enough for that to happen?" she asked doubtfully.

Deborah shrugged. "God only knows *how* long we were together on that damned ship."

"Yes, but ... would it work, though, since we were all 'asleep', in hibernation or something like that?"

"Maybe the trader gave us some kind of drugs? He said he'd taken our birth control to make sure we were ready to breed. He knew about the Hirachi and seemed to know about us, too."

"Maybe. I think I'm going to vote we all just keep our mouths shut and worry about the issue if it comes up ... and not before that. We've got enough to worry about now," Miranda pointed out.

She should've known, Carol being the troublemaker she was, that she'd take the first fucking opportunity to make the announcement just to make trouble for everybody else!

* * * *

Miranda had a split second to feel surprise and delight when Khan suggested she walk with him to her habitat. A flicker of uneasiness washed both away when she discovered that Teron, Gerek, and Adar apparently meant to join them, though.

Somehow, she couldn't quite convince herself that they had something kinky and exciting in mind.

She was even more unnerved when she discovered that Teron intended to examine her. Aside from feeling some vague discomfort at being exposed to all of them at one time, though, she didn't think much about it. Teron hadn't examined her since he had just before they'd all been brought back to the compound. She thought she was probably around three months along in her pregnancy and she figured he probably *should*

check her.

She was actually a little pleased about it, even though she still had a lot of reservations about the *labor* she was facing at the end. She'd gotten just far enough along that she had to leave her pants undone at the waist, and she'd developed just a little bit of a pooch—so that it had finally begun to seem real to her.

She was a little embarrassed and uncomfortable when he slipped two fingers inside of her but since he then pressed down on her abdomen she decided he was just trying to get an idea of how much her womb had grown. The discomfort vanished. She studied his face anxiously, trying to decide if he thought it felt right or not.

She couldn't read his expression, unfortunately.

When he settled back and pulled her gown down, she waited expectantly a moment, but when he didn't offer anything, she asked, "It's alright?"

"I can not find any reason to feel concern at this time."

Relieved, she looked at the others.

There was something about their expressions that set off warning bells.

"Taj has told us that his woman informed him that the child she carries might not be his," Teron said.

Chapter Twenty

Miranda stared at Teron, searching her mind a little frantically to try to identify who Taj was. She came up empty. She had a hard time even remembering all of the women's names. The faces were all very familiar by now, but the names—there were just too many to remember them all.

It didn't matter. She knew what he was asking.

She still felt a cowardly urge to try to elude being pinned down about it. "Who's Taj's woman?"

"The one called Carol."

Anger surged through her. She should've known right off, or at least suspected that it had to be Carol or one of *those* women, the obnoxious half dozen. She struggled with her temper a moment. "Oh? What do you think?" she managed finally.

Teron's face hardened. "I think I ... we would like to know about your natural cycles."

Miranda immediately felt defensive. "It's not my fault that you just *assumed* we were on the same sort of cycle as the Hirachi women!"

"But you knew we did," Khan put in tightly. "And you didn't say anything."

Miranda felt her face redden guiltily. She was still more than a little resentful, though. "You made it pretty damned clear that you didn't want to breed with any of us any damned way because you thought we were inferior! You didn't think it would work. *We* didn't think it would work! And when it came right down to it, you were too busy to ask and I was too busy to think about it!

"*I* thought you'd just decided to screw! I didn't know it was the spawning! We don't do that. There was no reason for it to even occur to me."

Something flickered in his eyes. She didn't know exactly what it was, but then she realized that she'd opened her damned big mouth and stuck her foot in it—done exactly what she'd wanted to avoid. She'd told Khan she didn't choose him.

She discovered she couldn't hold his gaze once it occurred to her that she'd hurt him. She looked down at her hands miserably, twisting them together, wishing she had Carol's neck between her fingers so she could twist her head off.

The fucking cunt! She'd decided to be spiteful to hurt Taj and put them *all* in the position of seeming like deceiving, manipulative bitches!

"What is your cycle?" Teron asked after a few minutes.

"Twenty eight days ... more or less. Earth days. It would be roughly once a month—there. I don't even know how long the days are here. I haven't had a period since I got here, but trauma can interrupt the cycle and throw it off. And I don't know what the trader did to us."

Teron looked completely stunned, she discovered when she glanced at him. They *all* looked stunned—disbelieving.

Not that she could blame them. She'd been pretty damned stunned and disbelieving when she'd heard about their cycle.

"So ... we won't know until it is borne," Teron said finally, a strange note in his voice.

Miranda wasn't convinced they would know then, but she decided not to point out that the baby could take after her, completely, and look nothing like any of them. She nodded, unable to speak for the knot of misery clogging her throat, resisting the urge to say that it was most likely Khan's given the timing. She'd already thought about that, though, which was one of the reasons she'd thought it would be alright not to say anything.

It seemed like a really bad idea to suggest she thought it was Khan's under the circumstances. She could be wrong and it would only make him angrier, she realized, to let him believe it was his and then to, possibly, find out differently.

"What is the gestation period?" Teron asked a little hoarsely.

Miranda's heart performed a fearful little eruption of rapid beats. She felt the blood drain from her face as she looked up at him. "About nine months—Earth time."

Frustration flickered across Teron's face, although she could see he was struggling to hide his own anxiety, that it had dawned on him abruptly that she might not even have the same gestation period—which could mean disaster for the baby.

Surely not, she told herself, trying to beat back the fear that already had a toehold in the back of her mind. It was a natural thing. The body *knew* when the baby was ready.

Except that wasn't always the case even among themselves, she knew. Her sister had had a miscarriage five months into her pregnancy.

Of course, she'd suspected the bastard her sister was married to might have had something to do with it. She just hadn't been able to prove it, and Amanda had sworn up and down that she'd fallen and she'd been alone.

She must have looked as scared and miserable as she felt. Signaling for the other men to leave with a slight nod of his head, Teron drew her to him after a moment, cuddling her almost protectively against his chest. She struggled with the urge to weep at the unexpected tenderness and finally mastered it, although her chest felt painfully tight. "It will be alright, dear heart."

She was almost as glad for the fact that he'd given her shelter in his arms so that she didn't have to face the others as she was appreciative of his efforts to reassure her.

She wasn't particularly reassured when she knew he didn't know anything about her—any of them—regardless of how knowledgeable he might be about his own kind. "I haven't had a baby before—none of us have," she muttered, confessing the one thing that scared them all more than anything. If there'd even been one among them that had, there would've been someone to tell them what to expect.

She had her sister, but they weren't close, hardly ever saw each other at all since she hated her sister's husband. Amanda hadn't successfully carried a baby to term, anyway, which made it worse, really, because she was afraid it might be something hereditary. The most information they'd been able to gather was from the women who'd been close to somebody who'd had a baby and close just wasn't the same. They only had bits and pieces of information and they didn't know how much they could even rely on that.

"There's no reason to believe the differences between us are vast enough to cause any sort of complications," he murmured after a moment.

And no reason to think they wouldn't, either, Miranda thought, but she didn't

want to push him into trying to reassure her because she didn't think he'd have the answers and she didn't want to *know* he didn't.

She was looking more for a distraction than anything else when she decided to try to initiate sex, but there was no getting around the fact that she was horny as hell. Feast or famine, she thought irritably. They'd been at the compound weeks before the men decided to fuck her brains out—all four of them—then they'd taken off for nearly a week, then she'd had them in relay and not one of them had offered to touch her since.

She got plenty of kisses—when she demanded them—but otherwise they were elusive.

Teron kissed her back with enough heat she thought she would've figured out that he was as needy as she was even if not for the rise of the hard ridge beneath her buttocks. He firmly clamped her into an embrace when he broke the kiss, though.

"Dear heart?" he asked a little hoarsely.

"What?" Miranda asked a little dreamily, still feeling a warm buzz from the kiss.

"You said that you could get pregnant once each twenty eight day cycle ...?"

"Yes?" Miranda said in a puzzled voice.

"Is this ... would this be all the time?"

Miranda pulled away to look at him curiously. "From the time we start having periods until we can't have children anymore." She could see he was a little pale.

"But ... when you are pregnant, is this also true?"

Miranda gaped at him. "Of course not! We stop having cycles once we get pregnant."

He looked vastly relieved, but she discovered he'd lost his erection.

Well fuck!

He set her off his lap.

Miranda looked up at him with a mixture of hurt, disbelief, frustration, and confusion, struggling with the urge to beg. She needed reassurance almost as much as she need relief, though. "We have the habitat all to ourselves," she said tentatively.

He studied her uncomfortably for a moment and then glanced around as if seeking help when he was the one, she knew, who'd sent the others out. "Sexual relations probably isn't wise ... now ... when you're breeding."

Miranda gaped at him in disbelief. "But ... I'm hardly even pregnant!"

"And it is not my turn, in any case."

He left before she could even react to that. It wasn't his *turn*? They had to screw in a certain order, she thought in disbelief?

Alright, so she could see how that might prevent problems, but did they have to be so damned ... civilized about it? Didn't they do anything on impulse, damn it?

It occurred to her after a moment that they didn't. She didn't know if that was discipline *born* into them or taught to them because they'd been born into a world at war with another.

She didn't suppose it mattered a lot, either, when, apparently, the only time they behaved completely impulsively was when they were at the mercy of their spawning cycle and their hormones were driving them crazy.

It dawned on her abruptly that they must know that there was at least some chance that they were fertile at other times or they still wouldn't have questioned whether or not the baby was Khan's.

Unless, she thought, their actual spawning cycle was longer than she'd thought? She hadn't considered what happened to the males *not* chosen to spawn.

Maybe they continued to be fertile for weeks after the first heat?

Not that that mattered *now*, except that it meant any one of the four might have gotten her pregnant. She was already pregnant, though. They couldn't get her pregnant again—not until after she'd had the baby she was carrying.

Maybe they didn't believe that, though, she thought uncomfortably. Maybe, since they'd already caught her in a lie of omission, they just didn't trust anything she said now?

In all honestly, she had to admit it would've shaken her faith if the shoe had been on the other foot.

She still couldn't *believe* she had four lovers and she couldn't get *one* of them to give her any, damn it! She didn't even look pregnant yet! If she couldn't convince them before she looked like a cow, she doubted she'd be getting any after she developed a waddle!

The men had all vanished by the time Miranda gave up waiting hopefully for Khan to make an appearance. The women were all gathered near the beach and there was enough screaming and cussing going on that it was obvious a fight was in progress.

Good god! They were degenerating into savages!

Stalking across the compound, she pushed her way through the spectators until she reached the 'arena'. Joy was sitting astride Carol's chest, Carol's hair gripped in her fists as she used it to pound Carol's head into the dirt.

Resisting the urge to join the other women encouraging Joy to 'beat the shit out of her', Miranda stalked over to the pair, planted her foot on Joy's shoulder and shoved her off of Carol. "Enough!"

Joy scrambled to her feet, still furious enough to take on all challengers. "That fucking *cunt* told Taj we weren't in cycle when they were! She just did it for spite because she was mad at him! And now Barak hates me and it's all her fault!"

Miranda sympathized with her, but in all fairness, it just wasn't true. "I doubt Barak hates you ... and even if he does, it isn't her fault, as bad as I hate to side with her. We should've told them, but then we don't understand them any more than they understand us. They'll realize that." She hoped.

Nobody believed her. She didn't believe it either, actually. The men had wanted babies, badly enough they hadn't been able to ignore the urge, and they had to be tremendously disappointed to discover they'd been duped into thinking they had a baby on the way and now didn't know whether they did or not.

It wasn't as if they could explain that they'd been afraid the men would abandon them if they told them—which they had been. *That* wasn't going to make them feel any better about it.

"We'll just have to try to muddle through it and mend our bridges. Chances are, they would've found out eventually and they might've been even angrier if they'd spent nine months expecting a baby that turned out to be somebody else's. She did us a favor, even though we all know she certainly didn't intend to and didn't care how things turned out for the rest of us. Now they know so we don't have to worry about it anymore, and they certainly *also* know that they got us pregnant—twenty of them are going to be fathers."

As pep talks went, it didn't help anyone's feelings that much. Everyone struggled to be polite when the Hirachi returned the following day, as dependable in that sense, at least, as sunrise, but there was no pretending there wasn't a rift between the Hirachi and the Earth women that hadn't been there before.

Politeness seemed to be the best any of them could manage, on either side. Miranda had no idea if it made everyone miserable or not, but it certainly made her unhappy. She'd *enjoyed* greeting the men with hugs and kisses and bidding them good night the same way. Even if there hadn't seemed any chance of more than that. The stiltedness from their misunderstanding prevented her from feeling comfortable enough of her welcome to offer even that much, though.

That was bad enough on an emotional level, but she wasn't just emotionally needy. She didn't know if it was a hormonal thing, or the fact that she'd had a taste of heaven and wanted more, but, either way, she was pretty damned miserable with the abstinence she had to endure because of the chasm that had opened between them.

It wasn't until the Vernamin returned that Miranda even thought about her attempt to start a trade with them. Since they had nothing to offer, though, she didn't try to approach them.

It still reminded her that they had far more reason to work on a trade now than they'd had before. They would have babies to take care of before many more months. They needed to do whatever they could to get ready for it.

They also needed to try to eat as nutritiously as possible to ensure healthy babies. Shifting her focus from just trying to get enough for everyone to eat to searching for food that would help round out their diets, Miranda took the device Khan had given her and led a party out the following day. She'd done a reading on the *jasumi*, just in case they happened to find something of use in trade while they were searching, but she didn't really have much hope or expectation of it.

None of them really dared to venture into the jungle. Whenever they went out, they stayed within view of the gates and kept to the areas where the Hirachi had done enough cutting that they could spot any animals that wandered close. They hadn't seen many in their excursions. She thought that was probably because the wildlife wasn't assured of plants to hide them, or maybe it was because there wasn't enough to eat in the cleared areas to tempt them.

Either way, the animals they did see seemed as frightened of them as vice versa and generally ran the other way. If it didn't, they backed slowly and carefully away themselves until they were close enough to the gates to dash inside and slam them closed.

As had become her habit, Miranda carried her knife in her right hand and the device in the left as they left the compound. The other women, who hadn't been fortunate enough to get a knife as a gift, had made crude spears for themselves. Glancing at the group as they paused just beyond the walls to decide which direction to take, she felt a flicker of amusement.

They all looked like wild women, she didn't doubt.

"You look a bit perkier today," Deborah observed sourly. "Share the joke."

Miranda shrugged. "I was just wondering what people who used to know us would think if they could see us now."

"Ok! We look like shit! Don't rub it in."

Miranda glanced at the women and then studied them a little harder. "Actually,

you don't like shit—any of you. You look pretty damned good. Can it be that camp savage has actually been good for us? Here we are all toned and tanned, looking like a tribe of Amazon women with our ratty dresses and spears.”

The women looked surprised, and then doubtful, but they looked around at each other. “I think it's the high protein diet and working our asses off,” Deborah said after a moment. “Not nearly enough body fat—not for pregnant ladies. If we were shooting for gymnasts, we're in great shape, though.”

Miranda shrugged. “I don't think it's a bad thing to lose a little extra fat and put on some muscle. I'm pretty sure my caboose is still there.”

Deborah slapped her on the ass. “And a damned fine one it is,” she said leering. “At the rate we're going it's starting to look a lot better to me than it should.”

Miranda laughed. “Don't even go there. I'm strictly a sausage girl. If I can't have pig, I don't want anything.”

The retort had everyone chuckling. “So which way today?”

Miranda frowned. “I think we're going to have to go a little further. I think we've pretty well cleaned out everything really close. We might as well start here, though, checking with the scanner and work our way out since we haven't tried the scanner before.”

Crossing the clearing near the gate, she stopped at the first plant she came to and did a scan on the leaves and branches and then knelt down to see if she could pick up anything on the roots. “This one would be good if anybody's constipated,” she announced. “Guaranteed to clean you out from both ends.”

Everyone studied the poison plant thoroughly to make sure they could identify it the next time and they moved on. Reaching a patch of plants bearing berries that she'd studied several times, Miranda scanned them a little hopefully. “*Definitely* poison,” she said, dismissing the plant since the fruit was highly toxic.

“The leaves or roots might be edible,” Stacy pointed out.

Shrugging, Miranda stepped back and checked them. “Nope. They've got even higher concentrations of digitalis. We can name this one the heart attack bush.”

“What about the other one?”

“Poison oak.”

They stumbled upon some ‘potato vines’ they'd missed and stopped to dig up the roots before moving on. Miranda paused after about thirty minutes, checking their location in relation to the gate. Deciding she didn't want to go any further away from the compound, she began moving horizontal to the walls. She remembered having seen a patch of lower growing shrubs that had berries and wanted to check them.

Fruit was something completely absent from their diet. Of course thoughts of berries made her think of muffins and pies and there was no flour for anything like that. Still—berries would be a nice change, especially if they were naturally sweet. She hadn't tasted anything even vaguely sweet in forever.

Her distraction cost them. She was so focused on locating the patch of berries that she wasn't focused on looking for possible threats. The entire group had waded into the shrubs filled with berries before any of them noticed the animal that had already beat them to the patch.

They all froze as the thing lifted its head and stared straight at them. On all fours, it was easily as big as a very large dog. When it abruptly stood on its hind legs, it was

taller than a Hirachi. It issued a challenging growl.

"Don't move," Miranda said in a low voice.

That was when they discovered the beast wasn't alone. A second, as big or maybe bigger than the first rose up to their left—between them and the gates. Miranda flicked her gaze to the right and left, trying to decide how far they were from the gates without turning her head.

She didn't dare try any movement, fearful the beast or both of them, would take it as a challenge and charge. At the very least she didn't want to *not* be looking directly at it when and if it charged. She hadn't seen one before. She didn't know how fast they could move.

They had a lot of fucking teeth, though—sharp teeth. They might like the berries, but they were *also* meat eaters. A cold sweat washed over her. She could feel a rivulet trickle between her breasts.

The moment she saw the beasts begin to drop to all fours, she let out the loud, high pitched whistle she used to signal the women in the compound to get ready to slam the gates.

She hoped they heard her. She couldn't use either hand and she couldn't whistle nearly as loudly without her fingers.

The whistle was also the signal to the others to run like hell. The instant they did, the animals charged. Screaming, the women pitched their spears at the two charging animals. Miranda wasn't about to pitch either her knife or the scanner. She screamed, though, swiping the knife through the air threateningly even as she backed away. The animal skidded to a halt, obviously confused that she not only hadn't run, but was waving something at it.

Miranda didn't dare take her eyes off the thing, but she tried to see where the other beast was out of her peripheral sight. There was no sign of it, but she couldn't decide whether it had chased the other women or if it had circled around behind her.

She didn't know if the others had managed to get to safety or the damned thing was mauling them.

She didn't know, even if she could reach the gates, if she would be able to get in.

Feinting with her blade, she cast a quick look for the other beast as the one facing her jumped back. Relief surged through her when she caught a flash of golden skin. They were coming to help her. All she had to do was keep the thing at bay until they could reach her. Screaming at the thing again when it jumped at her, she slashed the air several times in quick succession.

Abruptly, it stood up, bellowing another challenge. She took a step back, swiping at the huge paw it aimed at her head. The blade connected with the paw, nearly paralyzing her arm. She almost dropped the knife, but it had slipped in her grip and when she tightened her hand again, she felt the blade bite into her palm.

Someone grabbed her from behind, snatching her off her feet and slinging her away from the beast. Khan, she realized in the split second that she glimpsed him before she fell back against a wall of flesh and felt two hands clamp on her. Lifting her off her feet, the second man swung her around behind him.

Dizzy and disoriented, she staggered slightly, but managed to keep her feet under her.

Khan had his knife in his hand. Uttering a bellow that made her ears ring, he

slashed at the paw she'd already cut, cleaving it off. The beast howled. Lurching away, it shook its head.

Khan and the other man bellowed almost in unison that time. Her ears rattled.

Blood spurted from the beast's ears, nose, mouth, and eyes.

Miranda stared at the thing as it wobbled and went to its knees.

The moment it dropped, both men moved in and stabbed it with their knives until it stopped moving. Their chests heaving at the exertion, both men finally turned to look at her. She stared at Khan and Teron blankly, trying to wrap her mind around the fact that they'd just killed the thing ... with their voices.

Sound waves, she realized. Khan had said that, out of the water, they needed the tubes to focus the sound waves they could emit to make them powerful enough to cook food. Obviously, even without the tubes to focus the waves, even without water to carry them, they could still emit a pitch strong enough to debilitate if not kill outright.

They seemed as frozen as she was. Abruptly, Khan surged toward her, grabbed her shoulders and jerked her up against him hard enough it rattled her brain in her skull when she slammed into his unyielding chest. His arms tightened around her nearly crushingly.

He didn't seem to realize it.

It dawned on her as the shock began to wear off that he was shaking.

"You'll hurt her, Khan," Teron said gruffly.

Heaving a shaky breath, he eased his hold on her, finally released her altogether.

"Gods damn it to hell, Miranda!" he roared at her. "What did you think you were doing?"

Miranda's chin wobbled. "Picking berries," she said weakly.

Chapter Twenty One

Teron surged toward her, sweeping her up into his arms and turning to glare at Khan. "Quit bellowing at her!" he snarled. "She's been through enough."

Looping her arms around Teron's neck, she peered at Khan over his shoulder, shuddered at the look of contemplated mayhem in his expression and burrowed her face against Teron's neck. "I dropped my knife," she muttered shakily. "And the scanner."

"Khan can get them," Teron tossed over his shoulder with barely a pause.

Khan uttered a bellow of frustrated rage.

Miranda peered at him again, saw he was still glaring at Teron's back and tightened her hold on Teron. After a moment, however, she lifted her head to look around for the others.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or unnerved when she didn't see anybody else. "Where are the others?"

"Inside ... where you should've been," Teron said tightly.

Ok. He was pissed off, too. He just hadn't *seemed* pissed off like Khan had. She wanted to get down, but she didn't think there was much chance of putting a more comfortable distance between herself and Teron.

He didn't set her on her feet, even when they'd entered the compound. Instead, he headed for her habitat. She discovered her partners in crime were already there waiting, wide eyed and still shaking with shock—or maybe because of the enraged Hirachi males standing over them.

Teron routed the other males as soon as he'd settled her on her bunk. Wordlessly, he checked her for injury. He didn't meet her gaze until he'd opened her palm and studied the cut.

"The knife slipped when I hit the thing," Miranda explained when she saw the accusing look in his eyes.

He examined it again. "It doesn't seem too deep. I think a bandage will do." He examined her wrist and then her elbow and shoulder.

Miranda ground her teeth, trying not to wince.

He noticed.

He checked each joint more carefully. Apparently satisfied, he grasped her shoulders and pushed her flat on the bunk, grabbed the hem of her gown and tossed it up and examined her exposed belly. Miranda glared at him, but looked away when she saw him begin to lift his head.

Obviously, he was satisfied with that, as well. He got up and moved to Deborah, examining her just as carefully. Her palms were abraded, as if she'd had her spear ripped from her hands. She had a nasty scratch running almost the length of her thigh, as well.

When Teron had moved from her to Stacy, Miranda lifted her brows questioningly, but Deborah merely shook her head, sliding a glance at Teron. When he'd made the rounds, he stopped at the door and swept a taut look at the entire group. "I don't have my medicines with me. Stay put until I get back."

"What happened?" Miranda whispered the minute Teron disappeared.

"That thing, the second one, was cutting off our retreat. I stabbed at it with my spear, trying to shoo it off, but the thing had lurched toward me. It sort of fell on the spear and then when it reared back, tore the spear out of my hands. I don't know how I got the scratch. I was in such hurry to outrun the thing I guess I fell over a bush or something"

She stopped speaking when she noticed movement at the door.

Miranda glanced in that direction sharply, her mind leaping to the fury on Khan's face the last time she'd seen him. It unnerved her to discover it *was* Khan.

It didn't make her feel a lot better to see that his expression was now carefully guarded. The question she saw in his eyes, though, caught her attention, held it while it slowly sank in that he'd come to make peace but wasn't certain of his welcome. Sitting up on her bunk, she patted the mattress beside her in invitation and looked at him questioningly.

His gaze flickered from her face to her hand and back again. He pushed away from the door and crossed the floor. Crouching by her bunk, he took her hand, studied the cut on it, and met her gaze. She couldn't read his expression any better than before, but she saw his eyes were tumultuous. Lifting her free hand she touched his cheek lightly. "Don't be angry with me. I know I wasn't as careful as I should've been."

His throat worked. She heard him swallow. He looked down at her hand a moment more and finally surged toward her. Climbing onto her bunk, he wedged himself between her and the wall, arranging her against his length with such care that she realized he thought he'd hurt her before, maybe frightened her.

She supposed she *might* have given him that impression when she'd peered at him over Teron's shoulder. She realized she hadn't been afraid of him, though. Unnerved, yes, mostly surprised and confused, though, and part of that was because she was still reeling from shock at her brush with death.

She shuddered at the thought, pressing herself more tightly against him, comforted when she felt his arms coil tighter to hold her as closely as she seemed to need.

She hadn't even registered imminent death at the time. Everything had happened too fast and the fear that had surged up inside of her had slowed her wits, leaving little room for thought and reaction. She thought she might be dead now, though, if Khan and Teron and the others hadn't arrived when they had.

Deborah might be dead—all of them.

She didn't know what had happened behind her, but the image that rose in her mind was that Deborah had ended up diverting the second beast to allow the other women to reach safety.

If she hadn't

Pulling a little away, she tipped her head back to look at Khan, wondering how he and the others had managed to arrive so fortuitously. She wasn't certain it was a good idea even to bring it up. All things considered, it might be one of those situations that was better ignored, simply tucked into a hole and covered. She asked anyway. "How did you know we were in trouble?"

He eased a ragged breath from his chest and lifted a hand to stroke her cheek, settling his palm there and curling his fingers along the side of her head. "The sound you

can make that you use to tell the others to close the gate.” He swallowed with an effort. “We were hunting when we heard it.”

She hadn't realized they'd been around enough to understand what the whistle signified. It made her feel better, though, to realize that they'd been close by, hunting in the woods while she and the women had been gathering whatever food they could find in the 'cleared' areas. They would've felt safer at the time if they'd known it, she thought a little wryly.

He tilted his head, moving closer to match his lips to hers. Gladness rolled through her in a heated wave. It seemed like forever since he'd kissed her. She surged toward him to meet his advance, her lips parting with sudden breathlessness as she felt the infinitely welcome pressure of his hard mouth on hers. A tremor traveled through him as he sucked lightly at her lips. An answering echo went through her. Everything inside of her seemed to hesitate and then to melt into a heated pool as he settled his mouth more firmly against hers and she felt the first, light caress of his tongue along hers.

It *was* a caress. As intimate as their joining was, his touch was soothing, gently appreciative, non-demanding. She still felt heat and want rise inside her. She felt the strength flow from her. She felt intoxicated as she absorbed his essence into her being, felt him almost as a part of herself, as if his spirit had moved inside of her and entwined with hers.

He ended the kiss as he'd begun it, a slow withdrawal, lingering to test the softness of her lips by plucking at them with his, as if he was as reluctant to break the contact as she was. He tucked her head against his shoulder when he had, settling his cheek on the top of her head.

His hands moved almost restlessly over her, stroking her, but lightly as he'd kissed her, the intent of his touch to soothe, not to incite desire. It did anyway. She couldn't be so close to him and not feel it, especially when it had been so long, but it also achieved the aim to soothe. She was still surprised that she dozed off.

She woke when she felt a hand close gently around hers, lifting her eyelids with an effort and staring in groggy confusion at the face that swam into her view. Teron's dark brows were drawn together as he carefully stroked salve along her cut and then wound a bandage around her hand. He studied her hand for a moment when he'd finished and finally lifted it to his lips, holding it there for a long moment before he settled it again where it had lain before ... along Khan's side.

She discovered when she lifted her gaze to his face that he was watching her. He pulled her close for a brief kiss as if he'd only been waiting for her to acknowledge him and then carefully disentangled himself from her and climbed from the bunk. She rolled to the warm hollow he'd left on the mattress beside her, dragged in a deep lungful of his scent and, listening vaguely to the stir of movement around her, comforted with the knowledge that Teron was attending the injuries of the others, she allowed herself to drift away again.

She felt strangely disembodied when she woke again, disturbed by the increase in activity around her. Realizing with a sense of surprise that they'd all napped and it during the day, Miranda wondered briefly if Teron had given them something to make them sleep. Wryly, she admitted to herself when she realized she couldn't remember him doing so that she spent a good part of every day fighting the urge to climb into her bunk and sleep. She supposed it must be the pregnancy that made her feel as if she never had

enough sleep.

It was hard to say when exhaustion had become as integral to her life as fear and hunger.

Not that they didn't get plenty to eat when they did eat, but on the 'good' days they had two meals and the rest of the time only one. That made for a lot more time anticipating getting fed than time spent with appeased hunger.

She wasn't sure if it was the smell of food that had aroused everybody or the heightened level of sound indicating that the Hirachi had arrived. Sluggish, she moved to the edge of her bunk and rubbed her eyes.

When she dropped her hands, she discovered Deborah was watching her, a half smile curling her lips. She lifted her brows questioningly. "What?"

Deborah chuckled. "Crazy woman! I couldn't believe you were trying to fight that thing with a knife—a big, big knife, granted, but still a knife!"

Miranda shook her head. "You should talk! A spear?"

"I didn't have time to decide whether to run or not. The damned thing was too close to run. I didn't want to face it, but I didn't want to give it my back even worse."

"Exactly," Miranda said dryly. "I sure as hell wouldn't have pitted myself against that thing with a knife if I'd thought I could outrun it."

Deborah was a silent a moment. "You scared them," she said finally. "I don't think it looked the same way to them ... or maybe it wouldn't have mattered either way."

"I figured that was why they were so angry with me, but it was still almost more unnerving than that thing."

Deborah's gaze flickered over her. "It shouldn't have been. They love you. I don't know about Gerek and Adar, but I suspect they do, too, from the way they hovered at the door so anxiously."

Miranda felt her face redden, but her pulse sped up. "You think?" she said a little hopefully.

Deborah winced. "It was almost ... *excruciating* watching them hover over you as if they were afraid to breathe hard for fear you'd crumble to dust. I don't think. I know. I squirmed, but I couldn't seem to look away. I *know* I've never seen any man act that ... worshipful over any woman. I was eat up with envy, I don't mind telling you. But then Blain came in and cuddled me and he was adoring enough to appease my latent hostility toward you for having Khan and Teron worshipping at your dainty little feet."

Miranda snorted. "These mud slashers? Dainty?"

"Beside their boats—dainty," Deborah retorted with a snicker.

Miranda couldn't help but grin. "An *Amazon* would be dainty next to these guys," she murmured ruefully. "I must say, though, as intimidating as it is sometimes, and sometimes downright awkward, it's nice being around guys that make you feel dainty and feminine."

"And squishy and soft," Deborah agreed wryly, getting up.

Miranda followed her out, trying to decide if Deborah really thought Khan and Teron cared about her or if she'd just been teasing, and if she'd thought so, was she right? She'd certainly found their gentle attention comforting and soothing, and she was sure they'd done that because they'd realized the incident had scared her half to death even though she'd been in too much shock to fully take it in. It was hard to decide, though, if it had been merely sympathy that had inspired it.

There was no getting around the fact that the Hirachi, in general, seemed to have a tremendous capacity for gentleness, despite their size and fierce appearance. They'd been infinitely patient and careful of all of the women from the very beginning when they'd certainly had no reason to care one way or the other what happened to them.

She thought a lot of it was because of their own experience. It had helped them to empathize when they might not have otherwise. She thought it was also because, despite their superior size and the mixture of curiosity and contempt they'd seemed to feel for the 'little people', they'd felt compelled to protect them *because* they'd thought they were too small and weak to take care of themselves.

And, of course, they hadn't been able to prove them wrong—not because they were too small and weak to handle their situation but because they were just poorly equipped. They were too 'civilized' to be able to rely on their natural instincts for survival and too pampered by the civilization they'd been snatched from to be able to cope with an environment where nothing was familiar. When all the tools and accoutrements of the combined minds of mankind had been snatched away, they'd been left with nothing to work with but their brain and their two hands—no survival skills or knowledge.

If Khan and Teron—or even Gerek and Adar—cared about her the way she wanted them to, the way she felt about them, though, wouldn't they have wanted intimacy? How could they love her and not also want that?

Actually, she knew how. Unless they were a hell of a lot more different than human men than she thought, their needs should have overruled any reservations they had. Any man that didn't try for sex at least occasionally just didn't want it.

She would've liked to think it was only something different about them, but it was clear from the selection of lovers that they enjoyed recreational sex just like their human counterparts. They didn't *just* have sex for procreation. They got serious once it came time for the spawning, apparently competed aggressively for the opportunity to reproduce. The rest of the time they seemed perfectly willing to be very civilized about it—satisfied as long as they could look forward to having sex with their lover on occasion—but they *still* wanted sex or it wouldn't be a common practice among them to select lovers.

She couldn't tell that *anybody* was getting any, but it didn't make her feel any better. She might've felt worse if she was the only one being ignored, but it certainly didn't help her feelings that she was in the company of the majority.

Maybe they just found it a turn off that the women were small enough it made sex a little awkward trying to match up? Maybe they were put off by the fact that they had to be careful not to crush them or break anything?

Maybe they'd never really wanted the women available and, having indulged their needs after a long drought, they didn't really need because they didn't actually want and never had?

Maybe they loved her—them—like a cute pet or a friend, not like a woman? Maybe they just couldn't really see the strange little aliens as women at all?

Gerek greeted her with an enthusiasm when she reached the gathering place that seemed to belie her disturbing thoughts, grabbing her up in a nearly crushing embrace and kissing her until her eyes crossed. "Wild woman," he murmured with a mixture of teasing amusement and censure when he leaned away and captured her face with one

hand, adding firmly, "No more trying to battle beasts twice as big as you are."

"You'll have to tell them not to be fighting me for berries," she retorted dryly. "Believe me, I would've run if I'd had the option."

He studied her face lingeringly. "I'll do that."

There was a seriousness about his mobile face that she rarely saw. He released her after a moment, though, handing her off to Adar. Adar squeezed her tightly and kissed her a little wildly. She thought it might have turned into something more interesting if Khan hadn't thumped him on the back, distracting him.

He glared at Khan a moment and then seemed to collect himself when he saw Khan was holding a plate of food. Grinning at her a little sheepishly, he released her and tugged her down to sit with them and eat. Neither her earlier harrowing experience nor her carnal interests dulled her appetite. She thought maybe it was her lingering self-consciousness, though, that made her notice the surreptitious glances the men cast toward her burgeoning belly.

She wasn't altogether certain they were even aware of it. They seemed to be trying hard to ignore it, in point of fact.

It said a lot for her own focus on sex, she thought wryly, that she thought, at first, that their interest was focused a little lower. It was the uneasiness she saw flicker in their eyes that finally penetrated her preoccupation with sex and made her realize it was her stomach that held their rapt attention.

She felt *more* uncomfortable when that dawned on her. Trying to be casual and not alert them to the fact that she'd noticed, she glanced down at her belly herself, wondering if she'd dropped food in her lap. She didn't see any globs or drips, though. She didn't even see that her belly was particularly noticeable. There was a definite bulge there but it seemed to her that she was getting wider faster than she was ballooning outward. The small waist she'd once been so proud of had virtually disappeared.

She definitely looked pregnant, but she couldn't see that the change was enough to warrant the alarm she caught in the glances they exchanged with one another.

It unnerved her, made her wonder if Teron had found something he was worried about and had told everyone but her.

Shouldn't she *feel* something if there was anything wrong, though?

Almost as if her thoughts had somehow been transmitted to the tiny being growing inside of her, she felt a faint flutter. She paused with her hand halfway to her mouth, held her breath, searching inwardly and trying to decide if what she'd felt was nothing more than her own body. Dropping her food back on her plate, she settled her hand firmly over the place where she'd felt the almost imperceptible movement. The slight pressure made the flutter feel more pronounced when it came again.

"You feel something?"

Miranda's head jerked upward at the question, but it took a moment for her focus to shift from her inner search to her gaze. She discovered that all four men were staring at her hand even though it was Teron who'd asked. Abruptly, joy surged through her. "I think ... I'm pretty sure I did."

She discovered they didn't look nearly as joyous as she felt. In fact, they looked downright faint, maybe a little sick.

"I think I felt it move," she clarified.

Teron swallowed convulsively a couple of times. "No pain?"

She glanced around at them, chuckling a little uncomfortably. "Of course not! It was just ... like a little flutter. I suppose it might not have been the baby," she added, vaguely disappointed that it might not have been. "But it didn't feel like me."

It seemed to spoil their appetite, which she found somewhat insulting. Trying to ignore the tension that seemed to have gripped them, she finished her own food and then got up and gathered their plates and took them to rake the scraps into the pit they referred to as the compost pile and went to wash the plates.

Gerek joined her, crouching beside her and washing half.

"I think I can handle washing five plates," Miranda said a little testily.

Gerek slid a speculative look at her. "No one meant to insult you, dear heart," he murmured.

Miranda looked at him a little questioningly as she restacked the plates. She sighed. "I wasn't insulted. I just ... don't understand."

His gaze flickered over her face. Reaching for her, he dragged her into his lap. The move overbalanced him and they both sat down with a splash in the surf. Miranda couldn't help but laugh. He cupped her face in his hand, grinning back at her. "I've never understood less in my life ... or enjoyed more," he said quietly. "It's almost as terrifying to know you, dear heart, as it is joyful, confusing, intriguing and downright unsettling." He shook his head, the amusement fading from his expression. "I can't decide if I'm more glad that I wasn't there to see what happened or more frustrated and frightened at the thought of what might have happened if the hunters hadn't been near enough Particularly considering how much you frightened Khan and Teron. I'm not sure either one of them have completely gathered their wits, yet. Actually, I'm not certain either one of them will ever be the same again."

Miranda eyed him quizzically, uncertain of whether he was teasing or not.

He lowered his forehead to touch it to hers. "No man likes to feel powerless, to have to face the fact that there might be one foe they can not defeat who can snatch the one thing dearest in the world away while he can do nothing about it."

Miranda swallowed with an effort, realizing abruptly that she hadn't just endangered herself. She'd threatened the tiny bud of life that had thrilled her so much only a few minutes earlier. She sucked in a shuttering breath. "No *one* wants to face that," she corrected him.

How could she tell him she was sorry she'd risked their child? She was. She cared about it and yet there were other risks. It's life was just as threatened if it's health was. She didn't think it was *wrong* that she'd gone searching for food that would ensure good health and strong growth. She couldn't assure them that she wouldn't try again, only that she'd try to be more alert and more careful. The jungle was the only place that offered things she might need, that the baby might need.

And she couldn't very well ask the others to take risks she wasn't willing to take herself. Her baby was more important to her than theirs were, but she didn't doubt they felt the same way.

He kissed her. "Next time, let someone else hold the beast off while you run," he said almost as if he'd read her thoughts.

Helping her to her feet, he scooped the plates up.

Miranda glanced at him in amusement as they waded out of the water. "I hadn't exactly planned to take a bath while I washed dishes," she said teasingly.

He chuckled. "That's one of the things I think I love most about you, dear heart. Nothing ever quite turns out the way one expects it to."

She smiled at his teasing, but wondered if he was referring to the 'breeding'. She doubted there'd been anything else quite that unexpected.

She didn't think the baby was Gerek's, which caused her a pang of regret even though her greatest hope was that it was Khan's. Gerek had wanted a baby, though—so had Teron and Adar. If anything made her feel inadequate it was the realization that she couldn't make them all happy and that it mattered to her that she couldn't.

She could try. She was willing to try. She just didn't have a lot of confidence that she could succeed.

* * * *

It was barely daylight when the party of Hirachi arrived, rousing everybody from their habitats. Still bleary eyed, Miranda stumbled out of her habitat first to see what the noise was about. Gerek met her almost in the doorway. Chuckling, he snatched the knife from her hand, pitched it toward the dirt so that it stuck straight up with a twang, and swept Miranda into an exuberant dancing gig of an embrace.

"It's a very good thing I wasn't an enemy, warrior woman," he said teasingly.

Miranda eyed him crossly. "It's barely daylight."

He nuzzled her neck. "We wanted to get an early start."

"Last night wasn't early enough?" she asked tartly. "At least I wasn't *trying* to sleep then."

He leaned away to study her face. "You're as prickly as a *keltzit* first waking," he murmured.

Miranda didn't know what a *keltzit* was and she was pretty sure she didn't want to know. It didn't sound like a compliment even if he was grinning at her when he said it. "You aren't that chipper yourself," she reminded him. "*You've* obviously been awake more than five seconds."

He kissed her and swatted her buttocks playfully. "Go shower and wake up. We'll have something to eat shortly and then we'll leave."

Yawning, Miranda retrieved her knife and trudged toward the bathhouse. She'd gotten over feeling downright nauseas first thing in the morning, but she certainly wasn't awake enough to have an appetite, yet. She still wasn't alert enough after her brief shower to be very interested in eating or even able to figure out what was going on, but she tried to work on figuring it out while she ate.

It looked like fully half the Hirachi were on the beach—a very rare circumstance so early in the day.

And they were going for a walk?

Everyone else looked as sleepy and bewildered as she felt.

When they'd finished eating, though, they all got up and allowed the Hirachi to herd them out of the gate. They turned north, which surprised her, following the wall of the compound and then turning at the corner and following the north wall down to the far end.

There was a path cut through the jungle, she discovered when they reached the other end. The smell of fresh cut vegetation seemed to indicate that it was a fairly new path, too, although she couldn't be certain. She'd never been this way herself—not any of the women. They confined their excursions to the side of the compound the gates

faced.

The land sloped upward. It wasn't immediately noticeable because the jungle encroached closely on either side, but she began to notice it as they walked in the pull along her calves and the back of her thighs.

She also noticed that the Hirachi marched on either side of them, dividing their attention between the path in front of them and the woods. Adar walked on her left side and Gerek on her right.

They weren't just walking three abreast. When she looked up the line ahead of them, she realized every single woman was guarded by two warriors.

She wasn't certain whether she should be alarmed by that or not.

She supposed she was, she just wasn't certain what to be alarmed about.

Was it more dangerous here for some reason? Did they expect something to happen? Or was there an ominous reason why the women were caged in?

She didn't believe that, but it was impossible to completely dismiss it once the thought occurred to her. Regardless of how familiar the Hirachi had become to all of them, she didn't feel a hell of a lot closer to understanding them than she had in the beginning.

She didn't *think* they presented any kind of threat, but the circumstances had thrown her off kilter.

Her anxiety eased after a while, not because she was any closer to figuring out what was going on, but because she became too hot, tired, and plain out miserable to really care. She'd reached a point where she felt like she was going to have to demand to stop and rest—and relieve her aching bladder—when they began to slow. She couldn't see for the people in front of her, but they seemed to be spreading out, as if they'd reached a clearing.

She discovered it was when she finally reached the spot herself, not a natural clearing and not a *small* clearing. She was no great hand at visually calculating the size of things, but the area looked fully as large as a city block—minus buildings and plus enough huge trees to shade a good bit of it.

It was the raw ground at the back of the clearing, though, that riveted her attention—and the men working there—and the enormous building rising from the pit they'd dug.

Chapter Twenty Two

Miranda had no idea how long she simply stood stock still, gaping at the structure that seemed so incongruous for such a setting and yet also seemed to blend with its surroundings in both the color of the stone it was being erected from and the free flowing, natural looking shape of it.

It certainly wasn't boxy like buildings she was used to seeing.

It reminded her of the 'sandcastle' the Hirachi had built beneath the sea.

Dragging her gaze from it finally, Miranda glanced at first Gerek and then Adar questioningly. She saw there was a question in their own eyes.

Unable to decipher it, she moved away from them after a moment, studying the building and the men working there as she moved nearer. Gerek and Adar joined her after a moment, like shadows, catching her elbow to right her when she stumbled over the debris that littered the ground.

"It will take many months more before we can complete the village," Gerek said finally, a grimness in his voice that was rarely there. "With the best will in the world it's just not possible to finish before But the nursery is complete. It won't be particularly comfortable with so much construction going on and no privacy, but still"

Miranda looked at him a little blankly. "You're building a village ...?"

Gerek and Adar glanced at one another. "For our families," Adar said, his gaze flickering over her face almost anxiously.

Miranda was still having trouble absorbing it. She saw when she glanced toward the structure again, though, that Khan and Teron had broken off and were striding toward her. Their expressions were searching.

"Would you like to look at the nursery?" Khan asked, holding out his hand.

Miranda took it automatically, still a little too bemused to trust the idea that had been slowly germinating in her mind. She divided her attention between the building and Khan's face as he led her toward it, pointing out various features and explaining what they were doing. She recognized the construction of the nursery as soon as they'd descended into it, by way of a wide stair instead of the entrance tunnel of the one in the sea. Beyond that, it didn't differ a great deal. The entire thing, walls, floors, and ceiling, seemed to be all stone—something like concrete, she supposed because it wasn't built from stones that had been joined with mortar. The ceiling was supported by arches and columns, just as the other one was.

Actually, the ceiling itself was arched, rather like a halved barrel, which curved downward to the supporting columns that lined either side of the central pool and then curved up again and met the outer walls. It was bigger, noticeably bigger, maybe twice the size of their nursery in the sea.

Miranda studied it—gawked at it, more like—until she was distracted by the voices of the other men and women who'd filed down to look at it. She glanced at the men, discovered they were watching her expectantly. "It's ... well, it's beautiful, really."

Touching her elbow, Khan led her to a corner alcove. "For now, this will be our

area.” He grimaced as he studied it. “Not much space for comfort, but you seemed to like to gather with the other women in the nursery before so, mayhap, it will not be so bad until we can complete the family pods on the upper layers of the village. The environment will also not be as controlled until the remainder of the structure is done—the spires for cross ventilation, evaporation, and lighting—but it will be more comfortable than the habitats since this is below the ground here and the soil will insulate from the intense heat ... and the cold once the season changes.”

Miranda looked around the small space. Four beds had been wedged into the small area with barely room to squeeze between them and the pillows they’d each had in their private pods had been piled on the beds.

It was definitely tight, but a thrill still went through her as it slowly sank in that they meant to share the space—all of them—she thought. Teron moved up behind her, settling an arm around her shoulders and his chin on top of her head. “This is what you wanted, dear heart?” he murmured. “The fathers to provide so that you could devote your attention to your babes?”

Miranda didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Momentarily confused, she finally recalled the conversation, but she’d been speaking in a general way, and she’d been thinking about her own culture—A father and mother to divide the tasks and rear their family. She was vaguely distressed that Teron had misunderstood, unnerved, and happy about it all at the same time.

This was far better than what she’d thought of—taking the current situation into consideration. With only twenty women to so many men, it could only have caused resentment if some had been left completely out. They seemed to prefer the idea of sharing a woman to doing without, and she certainly couldn’t blame them. “Yes,” she managed to say finally. “This is perfect.”

* * * *

The situation was perfectly awful, Miranda decided after her first few weeks in the ‘new village’. She got to sleep with her men, *sleeping* being the damned operative word. It wasn’t as if she would’ve been completely comfortable having sex with one while the others were close enough to touch—and the rest of the village population certainly close enough to hear. It was worse, though, that she lay in their arms night after night, feeling achy and needy and unable to do a damned thing about it.

She’d just *thought* she was miserable before. She hadn’t had good night kisses to get her thoroughly aroused, though, and then had to curl up in bed with them. She could cool off when she climbed into an empty bed. She couldn’t cool off with an erect cock nestled between the cheeks of her ass every night, or against her thigh and belly.

She might not know anything about being pregnant, but she didn’t believe for one moment that either humans *or* Hirachi just stopped having sex altogether once a woman was pregnant. She thought it probably wouldn’t be a good idea in the last month even it she actually felt like it, and she doubted she’d be able to for a while afterward, but that was still months away. As close as she could calculate it, she wasn’t even halfway there, yet.

At least she knew they weren’t screwing around, she thought wryly, which helped her feelings but didn’t do anything for her rampant hormones.

Maybe they thought she didn’t want to?

Well, there was no doubt she didn’t feel particularly sexy but that didn’t deter her

from wanting sex, particularly when it was dark enough at night inside the nursery to eliminate any possibility that they could actually *see* her.

She was tempted to come right out and demand to know why they didn't want to, but she couldn't dismiss the uneasy feeling that they might give her a reason she didn't especially want to know. Finally, she simply decided to take the initiative and force the issue—sneak attack. She'd already tried a more or less direct approach without success. It didn't matter how enthusiastically she returned their kisses, however. Good night, was good night and that was the end of it.

Of course, she knew they had to be exhausted. They split their time between working to finish the land village, as they called it, mining the *jasumi*, and providing food for everyone. They'd made the last a little simpler. Using the bamboo and vine method of construction, they'd build a wall around the clearing and then chased a small herd of the beasts into it and corralled them.

They were without a doubt the ugliest damned 'cows' any of them had ever seen, but it worked. They had cow-like and fish-like. All they needed now was pig-like and chicken-like and they were set, Deborah had commented wryly.

They still worked very hard, much harder Miranda was sure than they'd worked before when they hadn't been concerned about providing for anyone but themselves. True, they'd built the village in the sea and that was a hell of an accomplishment, but it had been modest beside what they were building now.

It made her feel guilty—a little guilty—about demanding more, but she didn't figure it was *that* much more. It wasn't as if she wanted, or expected, them to entertain her all night. She could be satisfied with once—once in a while.

She decided to focus on Adar. He seemed the most defenseless where she was concerned, poor baby, which also made her feel guilty, but not enough to make her change her mind. The hell of it was, she fell asleep herself the first time she decided to put her plan in motion.

She couldn't even claim justifiable exhaustion. Since the Hirachi had moved them all to the new village, all of the women spent most of their day in the nursery weaving or preparing the food for the meals. They couldn't *cook* it themselves, but they could certainly prepare it for cooking. They went out to 'gather' early in the day before the height of the heat, and late in the afternoon, but they didn't have anything too strenuous to do anymore.

She supposed it was just the pregnancy. She'd felt more tired and inclined to want to sleep more ever since she'd gotten pregnant, but it irritated her when she realized she'd fallen asleep before Adar did and she'd have to wait until the next 'rotation' to have another chance at seducing him.

She was prepared the next time. She'd taken a nap during the day, which she rarely did, and woken refreshed and determined. The men actually seemed to prefer to spoon, but since that made it impossible for her to get her hands on 'the meat', she simply ignored Adar's attempt to get her to roll over and put her back to him.

Disconcerted, he rolled and presented her with his back.

Bad move, she thought wickedly. She could still reach around him to play. Predictably, he dropped to sleep almost as soon as he'd settled comfortably. She waited until he'd had time to drop more deeply asleep and then very casually brushed her hand along the ridge in his trousers that had just begun to soften. He stirred, but she didn't feel

any tension that suggested she'd woken him. After a brief debate of whether to slip her hand beneath his waistband or unfasten his trousers, she decided to risk opening them. If his pants were still fastened when he woke up, he would be wearing armor against her.

She hadn't counted on how fucking *loud* it would sound when she opened the damned closure of his pants. Wincing at the noise, she froze briefly, held her breath. Adar seemed to be breathing a little more rapidly, but she wasn't certain. Her own breath was short from the mixture of anticipation and excitement that had begun to thrum through her. After that brief hesitation, she slipped her hand inside his pants and began to stroke him.

He'd been semi-erect before she'd even touched him. His cock was as hard as a piece of iron by the time she'd stroked her hand from the root to the tip. She shifted closer, curling her fingers around it, nibbling lightly at his bare shoulder since she couldn't reach any higher and still maintain her grip on his cock—and she wasn't letting go of that unless he pried her loose.

He began to move restlessly after a few moments, his breath catching in his throat in soft grunts of pleasure. Miranda felt her own heat index rise in direct proportion to his. Her sex quaked with anticipation, grew moist and achy—more achy. She'd gone from a mild interest, to a definite interest, to a sense of desperation over the weeks since she'd had any relief at all.

She felt him tense when he roused from sleep. As he shifted over onto his back to look at her, she climbed on top of him, straddling his waist. He caught her waist, but she knew it wasn't to mount her on his staff, knew, regardless of the desire she'd aroused in him that he wasn't going to take it any further.

She sprawled on top of him before he could lift her away, pushing back against him until the head of his cock was wedged in her cleft—about an inch north of where she needed it. Nuzzling her face across his broad chest, she found his nipple and clamped down on both the nipple and the ring through it.

He stilled instantly. She didn't know if it was because he thought she might bite the sensitive nub or if it had sent a hard enough shaft of arousal through him to paralyze him, but she didn't wait to find out. She sucked at it, teased it with her tongue, all the while wiggling her hips and trying to get his cock shifted into a lock and load position.

He sucked in a deep breath, lifting her upward, and expelled it on a harsh groan, lowering her again.

Taking that as a sign of defeat, she released her grip on his nipple and reached between them, grasping his cock and aligning it. He caught her hips again just as she managed to connect. Ignoring his light hold, she rocked back, engulfing more of his flesh.

He seemed to wrestle with himself for a moment and finally surrendered, squeezing her flesh as she rocked back and forth on him but making no attempt to either help or hinder. A vague sense of disappointment flitted through her, but the rising tide of passion banished it as she finally managed to engulf him completely, felt the wondrous friction of his flesh brushing along her channel.

She pushed herself upright, moving on him until she found the rhythm she needed. It didn't take much. She'd begun to feel so deprived she was ready almost before she managed to get him fully inside.

And Adar *still* nearly beat her to culmination. She was hovering on the brink,

focused on reaching her goal when he stiffened beneath her, his hands tightening almost painfully. She ignored the warning to be still, grinding herself on him when his grip prevented her from moving until she felt the first quakes. She lowered herself to his chest then, trying to muffle her pleasurable gasps against his flesh as she came shatteringly.

The rippling of the muscles along her channel in climax, pushed him over the edge, as well. He jerked beneath her, jarring her with the force of his own release and finally expelled a long, drawn out breath of relief. For several moments, he didn't even attempt to move. Finally, wrapping his arms around her, he twisted beneath her, tumbling her onto the mattress beside him.

He sought her mouth, kissing her with what almost seemed a mixture of apology and appreciation. "You are alright?" he asked in a low voice made husky by expended desire.

Or maybe anxiety?

"Mmmhmm," Miranda murmured dreamily, more than half asleep already.

"Better than alright."

Adar was gone when she woke the next morning, but Miranda felt too glorious to be deeply disturbed by it. As often as not they woke before her and left without even arousing her since she'd grown accustomed to having a bed partner. She saw with little surprise when she finally rolled over that all of them gone. Yawning and stretching, she finally got up and made her way to the community facilities just off the main room of the nursery.

She didn't know how they'd managed running water for showers and working toilets and she didn't care as long as they worked. It was civilization at its finest. Actually, finest would be when they had their own private facilities, but this was close enough to heaven, in her opinion for the moment.

When she'd dressed, she gathered up her basket, shoved her knife in her boot and went to see who else was stirring. Deborah and Stacy were just heading to the facilities, so she waited for them.

Both women gave her knowing looks when they came out again. "I wonder why she looks so well laid this morning?" Deborah teased wryly.

Miranda felt her face redden at the discovery that her attempt to keep quiet hadn't been terribly successful, but she grinned unrepentantly. "Because I am?"

They were still chuckling about it when they reached the surface and left the building. Miranda's amusement died when she saw that the bulk of the Hirachi were gathered in a tight knot at the far end of the grounds.

She should've known something was up, she thought fearfully, when she didn't hear any sounds of work. After glancing anxiously at Deborah and Stacy, she hurried toward the gathering, imagining all sorts of horrible possibilities—except what was actually in progress.

The men gathered as spectators moved very reluctantly when the three of them began trying to push their way to the front to see what was going on, but Miranda realized just from the sounds that there was a fight in progress even before she could see who was involved.

Teron and Gerek, their arms folded over their chests, were watching while Khan beat the shit out of Adar.

"What's going on?" Miranda demanded before she thought better of it.

Khan paused, his fist poised in the air, and turned to look at her, then flicked a significant glance at Teron and Gerek. Unfolding their arms, Teron and Gerek strode quickly toward her.

"Nothing you need be concerned about," Teron said tightly as he stopped directly in front of her, blocking her view of the other two men. "Go back to the nursery."

Miranda stared up at him and then looked at Gerek's taut face. "Not until you tell me what this is about!" she said stubbornly.

"The dispute is between the four of us. We will settle it," Teron said evenly.

If he'd slapped her she couldn't been more stunned—or hurt, if it came to that. To be so abruptly relegated to nothing but an interfering outsider when she'd begun to feel like they were a family was shattering. She swallowed with an effort, searching her mind to try to understand what kind of dispute they could possibly have with Adar.

The only thing that leapt to mind was the fact that they'd had sex the night before, but she couldn't believe it was that. It wasn't as if she hadn't before, with their full knowledge. It wasn't as if they didn't know and accept that he was one of her lovers. She hadn't refused any of them in favor of him.

As little as that made any sense at all to her, she couldn't think of anything else Adar might have done. She didn't believe he would've refused any order Khan might have given him.

"Tell me it has nothing to do with me at all and I'll go," she said finally.

Teron studied her for a long moment and finally flicked a dismissing glance at the Hirachi men still standing behind her. When Miranda glanced significantly at Deborah and Stacy, they turned rather reluctantly and followed the Hirachi away.

"He ignored a direct order given to him by Khan ... and me."

Miranda blinked at him in disbelief. "He wouldn't do that," she said emphatically.

Teron's expression became stony. "He *did* do just that," he ground out.

He was talking about what had happened between her and Adar the night before. She suddenly knew it with absolute certainty. "If you're talking about what happened last night," she said angrily, "I did that. It wasn't Adar. And what I'd like to know is why he was ordered not to, damn it! If you and Khan aren't interested, that's your own decision, but don't be making that kind of decision for me ... or for Adar. And you've got no right to use him for a damned punching bag, anyway, when he didn't do anything but ... lay there!"

"Self control," Khan ground out, suddenly joining them, "is part of a warrior's training. Anyone who can't control himself, whatever the situation, under orders, deserves to be disciplined ... for the good of all. Adar is as aware of that as the rest of us."

Miranda felt stinging tears flood her eyes and emotion clog her throat until she could hardly swallow for it. Guilt swamped her, but it was more than guilt. As wonderful as she'd felt at the time she'd made love to Adar and even when she awakened, in an instant it had turned into something—ugly. She felt tainted, disgusting, as if she'd raped Adar, and now *he* was paying for it.

She still didn't completely understand what was going on, but it suddenly didn't matter. She'd tried her best to convince herself that there must be some reason, other

than the unpleasant one she couldn't shake, that the men had lost interest in her as woman. She'd known all along she wasn't just to their taste, wasn't what they really wanted, but, like an idiot, she'd thought when they'd become lovers that had all magically changed.

It hadn't and she realized the reason none of them had touched her since was because she just didn't appeal to them enough for their needs to overcome their disinterest—maybe even revulsion. She felt like her heart was breaking. She couldn't go on with the farce anymore, she realized, couldn't pretend there was something there when there wasn't. Whatever their reasons for 'adopting' her to take care of her—she supposed because of the baby she was carrying—she couldn't just coast along and keep lying to herself. She had to struggle for breath even to speak. "I don't want any of you anymore. Just leave me alone."

Turning away from them, she started back across the clearing, brushing at the tears that were blinding her until she could barely see where she was going. Khan caught up to her before she'd gone far, grasping her shoulders to stop her and turning her to face him. "Why?"

She shook her head, refusing to look at him.

"Tell me why," he said harshly.

She sucked in a shaky breath, trying to master the urge to simply let go of her emotions and sob. She didn't trust herself to speak, though. What could she say, anyway? I can't stand being with you and caring so much when you don't? I want to get further away so, maybe, I won't be tempted? So I have some chance of healing a wound that's never going to heal if it stays open?

It was humiliating enough that they didn't want her when she wanted them so much, *cared* so much about them.

"You break my heart and you will not even say why."

The words drew her gaze upward. She stared at the taut planes of his face, trying to swallow past the painful tightness in her throat, struggling with hope and doubt. "How can you care about me when you won't even touch me anymore?" she asked on a choked sob.

His face twisted with pain. "We are only trying to protect you, dear heart. It is not a question of want. Teron feared it might ... hurt you. I could not bring myself to risk that. None of us could."

Miranda gave up the effort to hold her emotions in check, weeping as loudly and without restraint as a child. She wasn't certain herself if it was from relief or hurt, but she didn't make any attempt to push away from Khan when he wrapped her in his arms and held her against his chest. She wept all over him until his chest was as wet as her face and she was completely exhausted from crying and reduced to hiccoughing breaths.

She finally dragged her gown up and mopped the wetness from his chest and then her face.

"I am not worried about a little wetness," he murmured harshly, cupping her face in his hands and forcing her to look at him. "Say you did not mean it when you divorced me. I love you. I do not think I can bear if you will have none of me."

Miranda's breath caught in her chest. Her mind erupted into chaos and for several moments she couldn't get beyond the fact that, as simply as saying she didn't want them in a fit of pique, she'd completely thrust them from her life. Her face

crumpled at the realization. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I really didn't. I love you."

He swallowed audibly, searching her face for the truth of her statement. The tension left him. Drawing her closer, he bent to meet her, his kiss a balm to her wounded soul that she didn't want to end.

She discovered when he finally lifted his head, though, that Teron, Gerek, and Adar had followed her, as well. She swallowed hard when she met each man's gaze in turn, realizing she'd hurt them in her pain when it was something she'd never wanted to do. "If I say I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, will you forgive me?"

"Readily, dear heart," Teron said, pulling her close for a kiss.

She chuckled a little unsteadily when Gerek dragged her away from Teron and kissed her ruthlessly. She looked up at Adar apologetically when Gerek had released her, lifting her hands to lightly brush his bruised face. "I'm so sorry, baby," she murmured, lifting up on her toes to kiss his bruised mouth carefully.

He smiled at her a little crookedly when she settled on her feet again. "I am not altogether sorry," he murmured, flicking an uncomfortable look at the other men, and then added hastily. "If you are not hurt."

"It hurt me a lot worse to think none of you wanted me anymore," she mumbled and then turned to look at Teron worriedly. "Do you really think it would hurt me to have sex?"

He glanced at Adar with more than a little irritation. "Our women do not—certainly not in the beginning when they feel there is the chance that it could cause them to lose the child—nor at the end when it might cause premature labor. I suppose, if it had, we would know by now," he said tightly.

She smiled at him a little hopefully. "So ... since it didn't ...?"

He studied her for a moment and finally looked at the others. "She is mid-term now. I think she is past the worst risk of miscarriage. I suppose, so long as we are careful, and it causes you no discomfort, it will not hurt to indulge on occasion—until late in your pregnancy."

Miranda smiled at him, suddenly feeling as light hearted as she had when she'd first woken. "I absolutely adore you! And you! And you! And you!" She gave Khan a saucy smile as she turned to leave, brazenly stroking her hand over his crotch. "Later!"

He was grinning at her when she flicked a glance back at him.

Chapter Twenty Two

Khan seemed to be laboring under the illusion that he could pleasure her and forego actual penetration. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for her figure out that he'd decided *she* needed the relief. Briefly, she wondered if he'd just lied to her and told her what she wanted to hear, but she could see he was as needy as she was, and she wasn't having it. She *was* horny. It seemed to her that her pregnancy had hyped up her needs, but nothing short of full penetration was going to satisfy her and beyond that, she was completely against leaving them to suffer through pleasing her without getting relief themselves.

There was a little problem with that determination. As aroused as they obviously were, they were also so unnerved about having sex with her due to their certainty that they would knock the baby loose apparently, that they had trouble maintaining an erection when she demanded penetration. It was so deeply distressing all the way around that she was almost more relieved than sorry when Teron finally forbid any more sexual relations.

She thought they were relieved, too, which didn't help her feelings.

She didn't really understand it. They *acted* like they wanted her. It certainly didn't take much effort on her part to get a rise out of any of them, or maintaining it up until the moment of truth, but the minute any of the four slid their cock inside of her, it began to deflate.

Either it felt different to them—not a happy thought—or they really and truly were scared to death that they were going to hurt her and nothing could convince them otherwise. She wasn't sure she believed that, but it became impossible to dismiss it after a while. The bigger her belly got the harder they tried *not* to look at it, and when they did, they couldn't seem to tear their gazes from it.

They *were* afraid and either their fear finally communicated itself to her or it was just that she reached a point where she realized labor day was looming and couldn't be avoided. She thought it was a little of both, uncertainty and anxiety generated in her from their uncertainty and anxiety, and a completely natural fear of the pain she'd heard associated with child birth.

The fear stayed with her right up until she entered her last month, although it had already begun to wane in the face of misery. The last month was so completely miserable, though, that she graduated very quickly from dreading 'the end' to wanting desperately to get it over with.

The last of her doubts about their anxiety vanished when she actually went into labor. It was patently clear from the absolute panic that went through all four men when she announced that she was pretty sure she was in labor that they were terrified.

It didn't help her feelings that Teron seemed to be in as bad a shape as the others.

She discovered he had organized and prepared, however, and when three of the other women also decided to go into labor within hours of her first pains, the direness of the situation seemed to steady him.

She passed from 'pretty sure' she was in labor to absolutely certain within a couple of hours, descended into such a nightmare of pain that she pretty well lost touch with everything around her. She noticed when Gerek and Adar ceased to pace up and down just beyond the alcove where she lay and disappeared, because they'd been getting on her nerves and it was relief. She noticed when Khan flopped weak kneed on the edge of the bed beside her because it jostled her when he landed. When Teron bellowed at him to get his ass off the bed, he jumped up for a moment and then sank to the floor beside the bed, squeezing her hand so hard it went numb.

She noticed increased activity all over the nursery from the other women who'd gone into labor and their 'attendants' and the mixture of excitement and dismay of the women expecting to go into labor most anytime.

Everything was incidental to the unremitting pain, though. That dominated her world. Finally, when Teron had checked her for maybe the twelfth time he had her sit up and removed her gown as he had her pants and boots earlier.

She didn't argue. She didn't care. All she wanted was for the pain to stop.

She balked when she discovered they expected her to deliver *in* the pool, but she was in too much pain to manage more than a whimpered objection. When Khan had climbed down into the water, though, and lifted her carefully from the edge, she discovered they had warmed the water in the pool until it was almost the same temperature as her body. It was surprisingly soothing, seemed to ease her pain. She wasn't certain if that was because it relaxed her or if the buoyancy of the water helped, but she could feel that her contractions were as hard as they had been—and getting steadily harder and closer together.

Positioning her with her back braced against his chest, Khan caught her legs beneath her knees and drew them upward so that Teron could check her progress. He stroked her cheek soothingly when he had. "Soon, baby. Just a little longer."

His gentle touch as well as his words soothed her, but it distressed her when he crossed the pool to check another of the women. She knew he had to take care of everyone, than he couldn't just stand over her and comfort her with his nearness.

She didn't want him to. She wanted him to stay with her.

As if sensing her distress, Khan murmured soothingly to her, rubbing her stomach, calming her once more.

Two more women went into labor before any of the first four women had delivered. Already showing signs of stress, Teron climbed out of the pool and went to check their progress. By the time he returned Miranda had begun to feel so much pressure in her lower belly that she knew her baby had to be coming.

Teron swallowed a little convulsively when he checked her again, flicking an uneasy look at Khan. "It's crowned."

Miranda dragged in a shaky breath. "It's coming?" she asked dizzily, hope lacing her voice.

"Yes, baby. When you feel the next contraction, I want you to push."

As relieved as she was that he'd told her it was almost over, it still seemed to take forever. Every time she felt a contraction, which seemed continuous by that time, she gritted her teeth and tried to push the baby from her body, over and over again until she was so tired and dizzy it had begun to take almost as much effort to *try* to push as the pushing itself.

"I can't," she said a little breathlessly, suddenly fighting the urge to weep from sheer exhaustion. "I can't do it."

"You can!" Teron said sharply. "Don't give up on me now, Miranda. It's almost here."

The suspicion arose in her that he was lying. "Is it?"

"Yes, one more push, I think. Next time—push really hard, baby."

She panted for breath, trying to gather her strength. The moment the next contraction started, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, sucked in a deep breath, and began bearing down as hard as she could, growling with the effort. Teron settled his hands on her belly, pressing down to help her. Abruptly, she felt a sense of release, felt the baby slip from her. Opening her eyes, she looked down between her legs and saw a cloud of blood in the water, watched with a mixture of joy and disbelief as her baby swam upward through the water until its face emerged.

Teron grabbed it as it let out a wail of indignation.

Miranda uttered a sound that was half sob half chuckle, staring at the baby anxiously as Teron checked it, trying to inventory his parts when her eyes were so blurry she couldn't focus clearly. She could see, though, that he had a shaggy cap of black hair. His skin seemed lighter, more like hers. She couldn't see his face, or count fingers and toes, but he looked fat and healthy.

Teron settled the baby back into the water after a moment, and handed it to her, instructing her to keep it's body submerged beneath the water to keep it warm.

Even with the buoyancy of the water, the baby felt heavy in her arms and she knew it hadn't just been imagination that he'd seemed big. He *was* big ... and he was definitely a he. She was a little disconcerted when she got a glimpse of the plumbing.

Curling her arms around him carefully, she pulled him closer to her chest, glancing at Khan when she felt his face close to hers as he looked over her shoulder at the baby. He was too close for her to see his expression, but she eased the baby from her chest so that he could look at his face. "He has his daddy's hair," she murmured, feeling a strange little catch in her throat as the anxiety suddenly arose that it wasn't his daddy looking at him, that it might not have been his father who'd helped her deliver him.

It was almost as bad to think the baby might not be Khan's, to think of his disappointment if it wasn't, as it was to think her son's father might have missed his birth.

Pushing that distressing thought aside for the moment, she focused on admiring her baby, checking his little fingers and toes. He had the 'growths', she discovered, the thin membranes that the Hirachi had that helped them navigate swiftly beneath the water. Except for the paleness of his skin, which was somewhere between her own skin tones and Khan's, she couldn't see anything of herself in him.

She wondered why that made her feel so joyful.

When Teron had delivered the afterbirth, he moved around to her side, took the knife he'd prepared for the purpose and cut the umbilical, tying it tightly against the baby's belly. Pausing long enough to lean over to kiss her, Teron moved away then to check the other laboring mothers.

Miranda twisted her head around in search of Khan. He hadn't said a word since the baby's birth. She saw that his expression was strained, his complexion pale.

"It is a very large baby," he said finally.

Miranda looked at him a little quizzically. "Which probably explains why I had so much trouble birthing him," she said with a wry chuckle. "But his daddy's a pretty strapping fellow."

There was uncertainty in his gaze when it met hers. Miranda swallowed against a sudden wedge of emotion in her throat and looked away.

Teron returned after a few minutes and took the baby from her so that Khan could help her from the pool. When he'd dried her off, he carried her to his bed and covered her with the coverlet she'd woven herself and the blanket they'd traded with the Vernamin for. He took the baby blanket she'd woven then and returned to the pool for the baby. He had it swaddled and cuddled with its head in the crook of his shoulder and neck when he returned. Crouching beside the bed, he settled the baby in her arms and stroked a shaking hand over her head.

"He is mine," he said a little hoarsely, sounding dazed.

Miranda studied his face, but she wasn't about to argue with him. She smiled at him tremulously, relieved beyond measure, still a little doubtful and worried that he might decide the baby wasn't his after all, but willing to dismiss it for the moment. "He's beautiful. He looks just like you."

"Perfect," Khan agreed, his voice still rough, although she could see he wasn't sure it was a compliment to liken the wizened little face of his son to him.

Rising after a moment, he stripped off his wet trousers, dried himself with the cloth he'd used to dry her, and climbed carefully onto the bed with her. Settling on his side between her and the wall, he gathered her and the baby both very gently into his arms. He settled his cheek against her head after a few moments. "I was so afraid he would be too big for you," he muttered, relief evident in his voice. "I have never feared anything so much ... except when I thought that beast would take you away from me. It was almost worse to think that I would lose you because I had lost control than because I had failed to protect you from the beast."

Miranda digested that in silence as everything slowly fell into place and she finally, completely, understood why Khan and the others had behaved so strangely. She'd thought it was just a typical male thing that her pregnancy made them uneasy. She supposed she should have realized that their perception of her as such a 'tiny, frail little being' would translate in their minds to a death sentence for her if they got her pregnant. As absurd as it seemed to her, it really wasn't—They were so much bigger, they had every reason to believe their baby would be too big for her to handle, and in point of fact, though thankfully that wasn't something that had really occurred to her, she *had* had trouble. It could easily have been far worse, though, she realized. She might not have been able to deliver him if her hips had been narrow—like a few of the women—and she didn't know if Teron had the knowledge or the skill to perform a Caesarian if needed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He shook his head. "I did not want to make you afraid, too. It could not help you to be as anxious as we were."

Miranda bit her lip, but she couldn't help but smile. "I really hate to tell you this, baby, but none of you did a very good job of hiding the fact that you were worried. If I'd known *why* you were so worried, I wouldn't have been so anxious myself. It's not exactly common for men on my world to be as big as the Hirachi are, but there *are* men as tall—some even taller—and their women still manage to deliver their babies."

Of course, sometimes they had to have help, but she didn't see any point in telling him that. She'd managed. That was all that mattered.

He lifted his head to look at her a little doubtfully. "This is true?"

She touched his cheek lovingly. "It is true." She glanced down at Caleb—their son—feeling the wonderful sense of loving and being loved envelop her as she studied him. "He's a big fellow, but he's actually not that much above average among my people."

Khan didn't look particularly pleased about that. "He is not?" he asked a little doubtfully, apparently forgetting for a moment that it was *his* son. "He is a little smaller than I am used to seeing ... but not much."

Miranda didn't know whether to laugh or swat him. She decided to ignore the comment. She was a lot more interested in being assured it actually *was* his baby if he knew, and he seemed firmly convinced. "Tell me how you knew he was yours."

He looked surprised. "He has my scent."

She stared at him blankly a moment until that set in. Shaking her head, she returned her attention to the baby, who had discovered her breast and was searching with grim dedication for the nipple he seemed to know instinctively was waiting for him if he could only find it. Smiling at him lovingly, she guided him to it. "You never cease to amaze me, Khan," she murmured.

* * * *

The sonic boom that rent the air like a crack of thunder on a clear day startled everyone working in and around the fields. Miranda, who'd been busy shelling beans, was so startled by the sudden noise, she jumped, throwing her hands up, and scattered beans all over the blanket she'd spread on the ground for her family to sit on. Khan, who'd been blowing raspberries on Caleb's fat belly until he was giggling almost hysterically, lowered the toddler and narrowed his eyes in the direction of the compound. Maya, who'd been cooing at her daddy, Teron, and trying to pull his nose off, jumped, scrunched her face up, and started wailing.

The men working in the field stopped, lifting their heads to watch the progress of the ship Miranda couldn't see, even though she realized that must have been what she'd heard. The women lounging in the semi shady areas cast by the trees near the edges of the field clutched their babies, or set their tasks aside and slowly rose to watch, as well.

"What is it?" Miranda asked, her hand pressed to her pounding heart.

"A ship," Khan replied grimly.

Miranda frowned, setting her bowl to one side so that she could get up and look, too, but the ship had already passed from view, either blocked from sight by the towering walls of the village behind them or the trees in the distance. "The Vernamin's ships don't do that," she said uneasily.

Khan met her gaze. Standing abruptly, he whistled as Miranda had taught him, the high pitched sound having been adopted as their alert. The men in the fields immediately abandoned their plows and hoes and strode quickly to their women and children, gathering them up and herding everyone toward the nursery.

The men would be going to meet whoever had landed, Miranda knew. She didn't like it, but she had Caleb and Maya to worry about. She couldn't go with the men, as certain as she was that she could somehow protect them as long as she was with them.

She looked up anxiously at Khan and Teron when they'd helped her get the

babies to safety and settled them to playing in the alcove that had been theirs until they'd completed their family pod. "Be careful," she told them. They pulled her close for a quick kiss and left to join the other men waiting for them. Watching them, wishing she'd been able to find Gerek and Adar and caution them to be careful, as well, Miranda lowered her hand to her belly. It hadn't even begun to swell with Gerek's baby. She hadn't told him. She'd wanted to wait to be sure.

She dismissed the fear behind the thoughts the best she could and focused on trying to keep her children occupied. Caleb was determined to get into the pool. He loved the water and it took patience and determination to keep him out of it. She knew she needn't have any particular anxieties about him getting in. He could swim like a ... Hirachi and he'd already shown that he'd taken after his father in most ways. At two and half, he was only just learning the breathing techniques that would allow him to breathe in enough air to sustain him under water, though. He couldn't hold his breath much more than ten minutes.

And she couldn't watch Maya, who at six months was just beginning to crawl, if she had to keep diving in and dragging him out.

As accustomed as the children were to spending a great deal of time in the nursery, it almost seemed as if they could sense the tension of their mothers. They tried everybody's patience, not that that was much of a feat for so many toddlers and infants. Twenty of the babies present—the first crop—had been born within weeks of one another, nearly running poor Teron ragged with deliveries, and of course this had resulted in twenty toddlers reaching their terrible twos all at the same time. There were another fourteen infants ranging from new born to twelve months to deal with besides the very active and difficult toddlers. Miranda had decided a two year gap between hers would be best for both her and the children, keeping them close enough in age to be playmates, but giving her body time to recover and *her* time to get one out of diapers before the arrival of the next. It wouldn't work out quite like that if she actually *was* pregnant with Gerek's baby, and she was almost certain she was. The second and third would be a little closer, but she knew she'd passed the most ideal child bearing years. She wanted to at least give Gerek and Adar one child of their own as she Khan and Teron and she didn't think she actually afford to spread her pregnancies out quiet as far as she'd originally intended without risks she'd rather not take.

It seemed to her that the men had been gone far too long just to check out the arrival before she finally heard the all clear signal. Everyone else was just as anxious as she was, though, and she had to wait her turn to reach the stairs and climb them. Gerek met her on the stairs, taking Maya from her. She looked a question at him, but instead of answering, he guided her up the second flight to their level and down the long corridor that connected the private pods. Their's was the next to last on that end. She discovered that Teron and Adar were waiting for them in the spacious living area.

"It's the trader," Teron responded to the question in her eyes. "Khan sent us to fetch you."

Miranda stared at him blankly. "The trader?" she echoed.

Teron's expression, grim already, hardened. "The one who brought you to us, dear heart."

Miranda glanced from one to the other, wrestling with the uneasiness that instantly coiled in her stomach. "What about Caleb and Maya?"

"I'll stay with them," Adar said. "Khan didn't want you to come without at least two to guard you."

Still more than a little bemused and uneasy, Miranda nodded, kissed Adar and the babies and left with Teron and Gerek. They seemed focused on watching the woods for any sign of threat. Although the Hirachi had managed to pretty well chase the worst predators from the area, or killed them, they never took chances, but she had the feeling they were also anxious to avoid a discussion. "He's brought more women?" Miranda finally guessed.

"He has," Teron said tightly.

Miranda's uneasiness deepened instead dissipating, but there didn't seem much point in questioning Teron and Gerek. Either Khan hadn't told them why he'd sent for her or they just had no intention of telling her.

She saw the women as soon as she entered the gates. An unpleasant sense of *deja`vu* swept over her when she saw that they were naked—and chained together at the ankles. She wondered if she'd looked as terrified and thoroughly confused as they did, but she was pretty sure she had. Empathy stirred in her.

They were tall women, reminding her the trader had promised to try to bring women closer to the Hirachi ideal of beauty. Even though they had curled in upon themselves, their knees drawn to their chests and their arms wrapped tightly around their legs, she could see that their arms and legs were long. Five of the ten were black women, ranging in skin tones from very dark to one who's skin was so light her heritage was harder to place. Two clearly had Asian blood. The other three were white, or pink as the Hirachi called them, all brunettes.

They looked startled when they saw her. She smiled at them reassuringly, ignoring the prickle of territorialism that swept through her, and looked around for Khan.

He'd been standing with the trader at the far end of the line of women, but when he looked up and spied her, he broke off and strode toward her purposefully. His expression was grim when he stopped. "He wants to trade for them," he said flatly.

The mixture of pity and territorial resentment warring inside her rose a little higher. Miranda studied his face. "And?" she said questioningly.

Annoyance flickered across his face. "And we have our women," he said, lowering his voice. "But they are your people."

Understanding dawned. Smiling at him lovingly, Miranda went up on her tiptoes and kissed his hard cheek. "And you can't stand the thought of what might happen to them if he takes them away and you can't abide slavery. Pay the man, Khan."

He nodded, but she could see something was still bothering him. "It's liable to cause trouble in our midst," he said finally.

Miranda was pretty sure it would. She thought she was as confident in the love her men felt for her as any of the women, and even she hadn't liked the women looking at her men. They had to consider everyone, though, and beyond that, even if they'd had total peace and everything was absolutely perfect, it didn't change the fact that they couldn't allow the trader to take the women away again. "Mary Jane and Carla's men have no one since ... since they died. They're lonely and they have babies that need mothers. And then, too, Carol, Lynn, and Julia have divorced so many of their men, and they're miserable. They at least deserve a chance to find a woman who'll appreciate them. It isn't as if there aren't single men here that might want them."

She could see Khan agreed with her—to a point. “If they are only more troublemakers like Carol and her group, though”

“There is that chance,” Miranda admitted, “but there’s also the chance that, among them, are very warm hearted, caring women.”

Khan’s gaze flickered over her face and the tension left him. “One even half as sweet as you would make it worth whatever trouble the others bring,” he murmured, lifting a hand to squeeze her shoulder affectionately and then patting her cheek. Before he could return to speak to the trader, however, she grabbed his wrist and stopped him.

“I’ll talk to him.”

He looked surprised, but he allowed her to precede him. Miranda didn’t make any attempt to tamp her anger as she strode purposefully to where the lizard-man was waiting, eyeing her and Khan curiously. Reaching him, she halted to face the trader, studying him through narrowed eyes. “We’ve decided to buy them and give them their freedom,” she said tightly. “But if you pick up one more woman from my home world, you slimy son-of-a-bitch, don’t come back here. I’ll cut your damned throat myself! Are we clear on that?”

The trader looked taken aback. He stared at her in disbelief for a moment before he glanced at Khan. Khan bared his teeth at him. “She will. Count on it.”

“If you want to trade with the Hirachi,” Miranda continued more mildly, “we don’t trade in people. Bring us actual trade goods—seeds, either flowers or vegetables, though the food will be most welcome, domesticated animals for farming, household goods, staples like flour or potatoes, yard-goods, needles, thread, or yarn—anything we can’t get at all, or easily, here or make ourselves will be welcome.”

When the trader had taken his shackles and his blood money and left, Miranda told the women firmly, but kindly, that they were to go with the men to the village where they could be sheltered.

Khan dropped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close for a kiss. “Did I tell you today how much I love you?”

Miranda smiled, thinking it over. “I’m not sure,” she said teasingly.

Amusement gleamed in his eyes. “You are more precious to me than ten loads of *jasumi*,” he murmured back provocatively. “I can barely believe my good fortune in buying you for less than half a load.”

Miranda elbowed him in the belly. “Only ten?”

He chuckled, but sobered almost at once. “You know you are my entire world, dear heart. This world could not contain enough to equal what you do to me.”

Gerek snatched her away before he could kiss her, twirling her into his own embrace. He grinned at the look of indignation on Khan’s face before burrowing his own face against Miranda’s neck. “I’m not as good with sweet words as Khan. I think I’ll just show you how much I love you tonight.”

Teron disentangled her from Gerek. “Nice try,” he said coolly. “She comes to my bed tonight. If anybody is going to be worshipping her tonight, it’ll be me.”

“Tonight is your night to tend babies,” Khan reminded him.

Gerek scowled at both of the others, but shrugged and grinned at the look Miranda sent him. “Adar’s better with Maya. You know she gives me hell. I’m far better with our little man than babies.”

Miranda smiled at him. “Then you should get lots of practice in while you can.”

He looked at her curiously for a moment and then let out a whoop, snatched her from Teron and spun her around in a circle. "Mine?" he asked when he'd set her on her feet and ran his hand experimentally over her belly.

"Yours," she confirmed.

He matched his forehead to hers, his eyes gleaming as he met her gaze. "I love you, woman. You know I adore you, don't you?"

She touched his cheek. "I know I adore you."

He kissed her thoroughly before he finally yielded her up to Khan and Teron who fell in on either side of her to walk her back to the village.

"Poor Adar," Gerek said after a few moments, chuckling. "He's going to be pissed when he finds out he missed again."

"The next one's his," Miranda said firmly, throwing a glance back at Gerek. "And then I'm out of the breeding business. Four is enough."

Teron and Khan both looked down at her with bemused smiles. "A good thing, too," Khan said. "If you'd picked any more lovers I would've had to object. It's bad enough sharing you with those three."

The End