

A movie poster for 'Alien Breeders II: Deep Penetration'. The background is a dark, stormy sky with a cityscape visible in the distance. In the foreground, a man with long dark hair and a woman with long blonde hair, both wearing ornate, patterned tunics and dark trousers, stand on either side of a woman with long red hair who is seen from the back. The man on the left is looking down at the red-haired woman, while the woman on the right is looking towards the center. The overall tone is dramatic and mysterious.

KAITLYN
O'CONNOR

ALIEN BREEDERS II:

DEEP
PENETRATION

Deep Penetration

Copertina del libro

None

Alien Breeders II:

Deep Penetration

By

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Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

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Chapter One

There was something in the darkness, something terrifying. Emerald could feel its presence and her heart began to pound with the fear that grew in her along with the certainty that if she didn't find a way to escape it, the evil thing would catch her. She glanced away, searching for some place to run to, some place to hide, but there was a thick fog rolling around her that obscured her surroundings.

It didn't matter, she told herself. She just needed to get away, to put some distance between herself and the threat and then she would find a place to hide. Not even the fear seemed to lend her the strength she needed to flee, though. Every muscle in her body strained with effort and she still found she could barely move. Her heart thundered faster the harder she

struggled until she hardly breathe for fear tightening her chest.

It was coming. She could feel it coming. Her fear sharpened when she felt it directly behind her. She struggled to scream and came awake with a jolt that echoed throughout her body as if she'd fallen and landed hard.

Sucking in a sharp breath, trying to calm her racing heart, she lay for several moments with her eyes closed, reassuring herself that it had been nothing but a dream and at the same time struggling to recapture the nightmare and figure out what had scared her so much. The little she remembered began to fade almost immediately, though, far faster than the effects it had had on her. Realizing after a few moments that sleep had escaped her and that she really didn't want to go back to sleep for fear the dream would resume, she opened her eyes.

She almost thought when she had that she was still asleep and dreaming. The wall she found herself staring at didn't look the least bit familiar. Frowning, struggling now to recall her last memories before she'd fallen asleep, she scanned everything within view and finally turned her head to search further.

Her heart, which had barely begun to regain its natural rhythm, leapt with alarm when she saw the two men-the two beings-standing between her and the door. She would've leapt from the bed except she discovered she was bound to it.

The taller of the two moved a little closer. "Don't be alarmed. You're safe."

He spoke English? It threw her. For several moments she wondered if something was wrong with her eyes or her mind, or if it was purely an illusion of light and shadows, but even though she blinked rapidly, the being still looked alien-almost human, but different enough there was no doubt in her mind that he wasn't.

She stared at him hard, trying to will the strangeness to vanish, searching his features. The sharp angles and planes that made up his face might have been human. His nose was long and narrow, the nostrils slanted upward in a sharp angle that almost bordered a sneer and yet there was nothing else about his expression to suggest contempt. It was merely the natural slant, she was certain, and it gave him an almost regal, superior appearance. His mouth was little more than a slash, the lips hard and thin. The deep set eyes above the prominent cheekbones were the least human-looking feature. Surrounded by long, heavy lashes, they were slanted far more than human eyes, large and heavy lidded. A thick pelt of pale hair, cut in layers and groomed in a style that was almost familiar framed his face and brushed his shoulders.

His skin and hair tones were almost the most human-like features he possessed.

Overall, the impression was almost that of a predatory bird-the angular face and beak of a nose almost hawk-like-attractive enough in a strangely exotic way, and still unhuman-like enough to make her belly stir with uneasiness.

She scanned down his length, her gaze flickering over his

hands, his long legs and torso, clothed in some strange metallic-looking material in a style that seemed as exotic as his physical appearance and yet oddly familiar, and finally returning to his face. He was the height of a tall human male, his build almost as angular as his face, but still very human-like in his proportions and shape, his hips and waist narrow and V'ing upward to form a wide chest and broad shoulders, not merely humanoid.

"Where am I?" she asked finally, alarmed to discover speech was a great effort, her voice hoarse as if with disuse.

Something flickered in his eyes. "Earth."

Emerald felt her heart begin to pound again, although she couldn't decide why that would frighten her. Maybe because she didn't believe him? "You're not ... human. What are you?"

The other being moved up beside him. He was taller than the first by several inches, and far broader, less angular. Oddly enough, the 'predatory bird' impression persisted with him, however, for his face was also hard and angular, despite the fact that he clearly had more muscle mass. His hair was longer and almost black. "I'm sure you have many questions. Rest. We'll talk later."

Anger flickered through Emerald despite her lingering alarm at her discovery that she'd woken among aliens. "Rest? Tied down?" she asked tightly.

The two men exchanged a long look. The first man spoke

again. "The restraints were only for your safety, to keep you falling while you were unconscious. I can remove them now that you're awake."

Emerald was suddenly uncertain of whether she wanted him that close to her. On the other hand, being tied down was certainly no comfort. She swallowed a little convulsively, struggling to dredge up an attempt to be cordial when she felt more threatened as time progressed. "Please."

He seemed to hesitate, as if trying to decide whether she was mentally stable enough to make her request reasonable and finally moved closer. The other man remained where he was, which was some relief until it occurred to her that it might be more a matter of precaution rather than for her comfort. He was closer to the door and positioned in a way that would make escape unlikely even if the first man was distracted enough for her to elude him.

The man who'd approached went to a small console beside the narrow bed where she lay and touched several buttons. The restraints across her chest and hips released and retracted. Her attention caught by the movement, her gaze followed instinctively, and she saw she wasn't lying on a bed at all, but rather inside some sort of coffin-like capsule. The part she was lying on had the look of a narrow bunk or hospital bed, but above her was a clear, lozenge shaped top that she knew, somehow, had enclosed her until very recently. Alarm fluttered through her again. Struggling with it, she scanned the contraption, trying to decide what it was and what its purpose

might be.

"Do you feel strong enough to walk? If so, we'll escort you to ... a more comfortable room."

Emerald jerked a quick glance toward the one who'd spoken—the dark one—searching her mind for some reason she might not be strong enough to walk. Nothing came to her. In fact, her mind was strangely bereft of memories and that alarmed her even more. "Why wouldn't I be?"

His dark brows rose questioningly, but she could see something flicker in his eyes and the suspicion arose that he not only knew exactly what she was asking, he knew why she might be weak. She dismissed the question for the moment since it seemed clear that neither of them meant to tell her anything and a sense of self-preservation made her reluctant to let them know she couldn't remember anything.

In any case, panic began to claw at her the moment she realized just how empty her mind was of memories. It wasn't just that she still couldn't remember what had happened just before she fell asleep. She couldn't summon any sort of memories from before she'd fallen asleep. The effort to capture something—anything—made sharp pains stab at her brain. The suspicion instantly arose that they might not only know why, but might be responsible for the memory loss. More importantly at the moment, though, she knew her survival might well depend on keeping her wits about her. She couldn't afford to yield to the hysteria trying to gain a hold on her.

Her body, she discovered, responded sluggishly to the internal command to rise. She sat up with an effort, a conscious command of her muscles rather than the automatic response it should have been. Dizziness instantly assailed her. She closed her eyes, struggling against it and felt hands settle on her shoulders. When her eyes popped open in response, she discovered the fair haired alien had caught her.

Her heart sped up, palpitating in a jerky way that further unnerved her as she found herself staring into his eyes, felt her senses expand instantly to encompass him. Despite the fact that his appearance was lean, she discovered that it was misleading. It was his height that made him seem slender. The hands gripping her shoulders were large and powerful, his chest far broader than she'd realized. Unconsciously, she sucked in a deep breath, inhaling his scent.

It was oddly reassuring when he didn't look human to discover that his scent was comfortingly familiar-even appealing to her senses-not alien. "I'm alright," she said a little stiltedly.

He seemed reluctant to release her, but she became certain that it wasn't merely concern for her dizziness. For a moment longer, he held her, staring at her face, and then he seemed to come to himself. He released his hold and allowed his arms to drop to his sides.

Emerald made a new, unpleasant discovery, when she tossed aside the sheet that had covered her.

She was naked.

Her gaze flew upward with a mixture of alarm and accusation from her bare breasts and groin to the man standing over her. She saw anger flicker in his eyes briefly. Instead of saying anything, however, he picked up the sheet that had dropped from her and held it up in offering. Emerald snatched it from him and struggled to wrap it around herself, sliding her legs over the side of the platform she'd been lying on and inching her buttocks toward the edge. The floor was further than she'd expected. Her bare feet met icy metal when she slipped from the bed to the floor, landing with an impact that sent stinging sensation through the soles of her feet. Her ankles and knees jolted and nearly gave out. He curled his hand around one arm, steadied her, and released her.

Emerald felt as heavy as if she'd just climbed out of a pool of water after being buoyed by it for hours. Striving to ignore the heaviness and at the same time pretend it wasn't so lest they perceive her weakness, she focused on adjusting the length of fabric to allow herself a few moments to gather defenses.

The room they were in, she discovered from her new perspective, was empty except for the contraption she'd climbed out of. It shouldn't have been a surprise considering how small the room was, and yet it seemed to speak somehow more of a lab setting than a medical treatment room. She wasn't certain why unless it was the thing that had contained her itself-which didn't rule out the possibility that it was, in fact, a medical facility. She might've been confined in it for any number of medical reasons. Unfortunately, no firm

sense of 'why' occurred to her.

The dark one studied her with patent interest as she moved toward him. He waited until she'd halted in front of him questioningly-several moments past that, in point of fact-before he turned and led the way to the door. It slid open silently, disappearing into the wall beside it and Emerald saw a corridor outside. Rather than directional light, the walls, ceiling, and floor seemed to glow, although the light wasn't phosphorescent but white. Emerald looked around curiously as they left the room, but there was not only nothing to see, there was nothing the least bit familiar about it to jog memories.

The two men fell into step alongside her. She glanced up at them and discovered they were taller than she'd thought, closer to seven feet than the average six of a human, for she wasn't a short woman even though she wasn't particularly tall for her own species. She felt short beside them-dainty, in fact. She couldn't decide whether she liked the feeling or not, but she was inclined to think not. If they'd been attractive human males-maybe-but she wasn't sure she would've liked it even then. In her current situation, it only seemed to emphasize her disadvantage.

Thankfully, the trek wasn't a long one. She'd felt weak and heavy and awkward from the moment she'd gotten up. She was tired to the point of dizziness by the time they halted at another door. When it opened, she saw a room almost as stark as the one they'd left. It contained a real bunk, however,

and a table and two easy chairs. Ignoring the bed, she headed to the closest chair and plopped into it weakly.

"Do you remember your name?"

Emerald sent a sharp look at the dark haired alien. "Why wouldn't I?" she asked tautly.

He frowned and sent a wry look at the other man. "I'm Tariq."

"My name is Koryn."

Emerald glanced from Tariq, the dark one, to Koryn, the fair 'slender' male, wondering at her reluctance even to tell them her name. What was the sense of 'wrong' nagging at her, as if she was supposed to keep everything about herself 'secret'? Shaking it after a moment because it seemed more imperative to convince them that she had her memories, she responded, "Emerald."

Both of them looked surprised. "This is the name of stone considered precious, correct?"

Emerald felt her face heat. "It's still my name," she said stiffly.

"For the color of your eyes?" Koryn asked.

Emerald glanced at him, searching her mind. It was dismaying that she didn't know. She hadn't even known her eyes were green. She glanced down at the question, though, and stared at the lock of hair across her shoulder. It was red, a dark wine

red. How could she know that, know what wine was and the color red, when she couldn't seem to remember anything at all? "I'm Irish," she said, the words tumbling from some deep recess of her mind without any attempt to draw them forth. "Of Irish descent, anyway. It's a trait of my Irish heritage-the green eyes and the red hair."

Tariq tilted his head curiously. "What else do you remember?"

Nothing! Instead of yielding to the panic, she took the offensive position. "I don't remember how I got here and I don't know why I'm here! Am I a ... prisoner?"

The men exchanged a look she found hard to decipher. "No," Koryn said tightly after a prolonged moment.

"Then I can leave?"

"Where would you go?"

Emerald threw a frightened look at Tariq at the question. His expression tightened but she had the sense that he was more annoyed with himself than her.

"You've been ... asleep for a long time. We're just trying to discover what you remember," Koryn said soothingly.

Emerald swallowed a little convulsively, her mind taking flight at that and scrambling madly again for memories that weren't there. The suggestion, it seemed to her, was that she'd been in a coma and that suggested something awful had happened

to her. She looked down at her lap, trying to remember if she'd noticed any scars when she'd seen she was naked. Nothing jumped out at her, but then she'd been too unnerved by her nakedness to really search for healing scars. Still, she didn't feel anything that suggested healing wounds or even the tightness of a scar, or muscle that didn't work quite right. She lifted a hand to her face.

"There are no scars," Tariq said, his voice almost harsh.

She flicked a glance at him, relieved, but still dumbfounded. "I don't understand. Why was I asleep so long?" She frowned, thinking. "Was I in stasis for some reason? Traveling in space? Is that how I got here? This is a ship, isn't it?"

"We're on Earth. We found you here."

Why couldn't she remember being found then? "You? You mean you and Koryn?"

He seemed to hesitate. "The ... androids."

He'd meant to say something else. She stared at him, trying to figure out what he'd almost said, but she came up empty.

"Why are you here ... on Earth?" If that was actually where they were and she found that they'd been elusive enough in their answers that she didn't trust either one. She didn't feel as threatened as she had at first. They didn't seem to mean her any harm, but that didn't necessarily mean they didn't.

The men exchanged a look she found impossible to interpret.

"There are some things that it will be better for you to take your time and remember on your own. We've no desire to influence you, when the end result, perhaps, would be the development of false memories due to suggestion," Koryn answered finally.

It disturbed her that they knew she had amnesia, but what he'd said seemed to suggest they weren't responsible. Could she trust that, though? "So you're saying you can't, or won't, tell me why you're here?"

"You don't mean to rest until you have some answers, do you?" Tariq asked wryly, glancing at Koryn. It wasn't actually the sort of look that asked permission, but it was something like that, as if he was consulting Koryn.

It occurred to her abruptly, that Koryn must be something like a medic. Tariq seemed to defer to him primarily when the answer to a question might upset her. What would that make Tariq, then?

"She should have food, anyway," Koryn said decisively moving to a panel on one wall. When he'd depressed the button, he spoke into it in a language that was so clearly not Earthly in origins that it shot a fresh jolt of adrenaline through Emerald's system.

"We are of the Anunnaki," Tariq said. "Does that mean anything to you?"

Emerald stared at him, blinking while she tried to access a memory that seemed to tickle her mind, just out of reach. She

frowned, straining harder to grasp it and finally gave up. "It almost seems ... familiar somehow. Why is that? Are our people ... allies?"

Tariq frowned. After a moment, he crossed the small room and settled on the bunk Emerald had decided to ignore. "It's curious that you used that particular word. It suggests a military alliance. Are you a politician? Or a soldier?"

Emerald felt the color leave her face and return with a vengeance. She bit her lower lip in frustration. There really didn't seem much point in trying to support the pretense that she had memories, though, when they clearly knew she didn't. "I don't know."

Koryn settled in the other chair. "It's alright," he said soothingly. "I think you'll find it easier if you don't work too hard to remember."

"I had a head injury," Emerald said abruptly.

"Did you?"

There was enough curiosity in the question that it undermined Emerald's certainty that that was what had happened to her. Wouldn't they know if they'd treated her? "What else would explain the fact that I can't remember things?" she asked, an edge to her voice that was more fear than anger. What weren't they telling her?

Koryn sent a tightlipped look in Tariq's direction. Tariq

shuffled, but she wasn't certain if it was a dismissal of Koryn's concern or her question. His next statement seemed to imply the latter. "There are other things that might account for the lack."

"Like what?"

He smiled abruptly. Emerald felt her belly quiver, but she didn't have to search for the reason behind it. His smile was as beautiful as he was, making it instantly, abundantly clear why they seemed alien when they looked so human. They were flawlessly perfect-both of them-and it wasn't just the perfectly white, perfectly straight teeth he displayed. His mouth curled in a perfectly uniform smile and displayed two perfectly shaped and identical dimples, one in either cheek-in the exact same spot.

In nature, at least human nature, there was no such thing as perfect symmetry. "You aren't ... at all like I expected you would be."

Emerald frowned slightly. It actually sounded like it was intended as a compliment, but it made her wonder how he'd expected her to be-and why he'd had any expectations at all.

Because he'd been studying her when she was unconscious and vulnerable.

She had mixed feelings about that that she couldn't unravel or understand beyond the fact that she was flattered and dismayed at the same time.

"Illness ... other trauma," Koryn answered her question instead of Tariq.

She performed an internal inventory, but although she felt weak, that suggestion to account for her lack of memories didn't seem closer than an accident. Maybe they'd zapped her with something that had caused the amnesia?

"But you think I'll remember?"

"We have great hope that you will remember at least some things."

"Why?"

Tariq lifted his brows but something flickered in his eyes.

"I know why I want to remember. I'm just curious that it seems important to you."

"It's important to your peace of mind," Tariq responded smoothly. "That's sufficient, surely?"

It was and it wasn't. She needed it, but she had the sense that they needed or wanted her memories as much as she did and maybe that explained why they weren't willing to give her 'suggestions' that might produce those 'false memories' Koryn had mentioned? She might have pursued that except that the door opened and a third man entered. He was clearly of the same race even though he looked a good bit shorter-at least a half a head shorter, although still tall compared to a human

male-and, unlike them, his hair was close cropped to his head. Military, her mind supplied, although she had no idea where the thought had come from.

He brought a tray in, set it on the small table between the chairs, bowed and departed.

Emerald stared at him until the door closed. "He doesn't speak English?" she guessed.

"He wasn't programmed to, no."

Emerald glanced at Tariq sharply, considering that. "You're saying ...?"

"He's an android. They are both biological-externally, anyway-and mechanical. They serve us."

Emerald frowned doubtfully, going over what she'd seen in her mind, but she couldn't think of anything that suggested he was a machine. "He didn't look like a machine ... or act like one."

Tariq shrugged. "Nevertheless, he was 'born' in a lab."

"Do they have names?" she asked curiously.

"That was my assistant-Roth," Koryn responded.

Assistant? Did that imply they worked in a lab? It didn't seem like the sort of term one would use in a medical sense. He would've said nurse, wouldn't he? "He's not a soldier, then?"

What does he assist you with?"

This time it was Koryn who smiled and made her belly shimmy. He spread his hands wide in a gesture. "In whatever way I require assistance."

"What made you think he might be a soldier?" Tariq asked curiously.

Emerald frowned. "The hair. It looks like a military cut."

Koryn removed the cover over the tray and set it on the floor. "Eat ... while it's hot."

Emerald's stomach growled as soon as the aroma hit her, but she wasn't particularly thrilled to see it looked like nothing but broth of some kind. Chicken, maybe?

How could she know so many things and not remember anything about herself beyond her name, she wondered with sudden frustration? What sort of brain damage could she have that would allow her to talk and think, to identify what most everything around her was-even to know about things she had no reason to know about?

Trusting the thoughts aside after a moment, she ignored the spoon and picked the small cup-like bowl up, taking a careful sip. She knew as soon as the hot liquid cascaded over her tongue and down her throat that it was chicken soup as she'd thought, or at least something very like it. "When can I have real food?"

Koryn chuckled as if pleased. "We'll get there."

Emerald nodded a little distractedly, trying to figure out how she'd known that she had to start with clear liquids and work toward solid food. How would she know that? Did it mean she had a medical background herself? Or was it because she'd been hurt badly enough before to discover it?

"You never told me why you're here," she said after a moment, realizing they'd actually told her very little at all. It seemed they had a question for every question she asked.

Tariq studied her for a long moment and stood up, clearly intending to leave. "In a very real sense, we are ... allies of your race. We've been to Earth many times in the past-though it's been a quite a while since we last visited."

* * * *

"What do you think?"

They'd left Emerald to rest and retired to Tariq's quarters to discuss her condition where they could speak openly since Tariq insured his privacy with a daily sweep for any sort recording devices. Tariq, who'd sprawled in a chair and stretched his long legs out before him to study his boots frowning, glanced up at Koryn's question. He thought she was breathtaking. He thought they'd made a serious error in judgment when they'd decided to seek perfection. Nature had made Emerald beautiful despite the many tiny imperfections

his own people had obsessed over.

Of course, no one was disputing that they'd made far too many mistakes-not anymore.

Somehow, he didn't think that Koryn's thoughts were running in the same direction as his own, however. He shrugged. "I'm not the scientist."

Koryn frowned. "This isn't my area of expertise," he pointed out tightly.

"This isn't anyone's area of expertise," Tariq said angrily, shoving to his feet and crossing his cabin to his beverage dispenser. "I'm having nizsum? You?"

Koryn's brows rose. Tariq rarely indulged in fermented drinks, particularly not anything as strong as nizsum. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"She'll sleep a while. You've time for the effects to wear off."

"A small one, then."

Tariq took the two drinking vessels the dispenser produced, which were roughly the size and length of his index finger and crossed to hand one to him. When he'd settled in his chair again, he merely studied the dark liquid in the transparent vessel, however. "I think she's the strongest one we've found ... and I'm still not certain I want to risk it. In fact, I damned well know I don't. She's too" He broke off, his mind straying to

her again as he struggled to find the word he was looking for.

"Precious," Koryn finished when Tariq didn't, lifting his vessel and downing the contents. "There is not another like her in the universe and never will be again if we aren't damned careful with her."

"No two are ever entirely the same," Tariq said dryly. "But you're right. I don't want to risk losing her. Even the mission isn't worth that. We'll keep digging."

"So ... you're saying we should implant memories to guard her sanity?"

Tariq stared at him for a long moment, struggling with the angry denunciation that instantly rose to mind. "I don't know," he growled finally and downed his own draught of nizsum.

Koryn tilted his head, frowning at Tariq curiously. It wasn't like Tariq at all to be so indecisive. "We only have two options," he reminded him. "We can wait and see if she remembers anything of use to us, or we can manipulate her memories."

The memories would change her, though, Tariq thought angrily, and he didn't want anything about her altered-not by so much as a hair. She would be someone else, because she would have some else's memories. Unfortunately, his orders were clear cut and not open to interpretation. "Prepare the implant," he said tightly. "That way it'll be ready if we see it's necessary. In the mean time, we'll keep her under close observation."

"What do you suggest?" Koryn asked slowly.

Tariq glanced at him sharply, feeling his belly tighten with reluctance. He swallowed with an effort against the knot that rose in his throat, a mixture of frustration and disgust and anger. "What the hell happened here?" he growled.

It was a rhetorical question Koryn made no attempt to answer. None of them knew what had happened, had so much as an inkling. They'd been trying to find answers to their questions since they'd arrived weeks earlier to find a garden of Eden bereft of the children left in her care.

"Study her personality and try to work up something as close as you can," Tariq said tiredly. "I think there's a good chance that she had a military background and, if that's true, she's the first we've recovered that might have some of the answers we're looking for."

* * * *

Emerald was so sleepy when she finished drinking the soup that she immediately suspected they'd laced it with something to knock her out. She discarded the thought after a few moments' reflection. She hadn't noticed anything 'strange' about the taste and she felt sure she would have if there'd been any sort of drug added.

For a while, she resisted the pull, too unnerved by her situation to feel safe to sleep, but it was a losing battle. Finally, she got up, climbed into the bunk and yielded. She had no idea how

long she slept, but she woke feeling far more alert than before and not nearly as weak. Deciding the soup and the nap had been beneficial, she got up and explored her cabin. There wasn't much to explore, unfortunately, but she did discover that there was a private facility that included a shower attached to the small cabin.

The long, hot shower sapped a good bit of the energy she'd woken up with, unfortunately, even while it seemed to ease some of the soreness from her muscles and invigorate her. Wrapping up in the sheet again when she'd dried off, she returned to the main room and settled in a chair to think.

She'd had another nightmare. Unfortunately, from the moment she woke it was just as elusive as the one before except that it left her with the sense, right or wrong, that it wasn't just a 'generic' nightmare. She struggled with her memory for a little while and finally gave up. She couldn't be certain the nightmare had any basis in reality at all. It might, as she suspected, be the result of something she'd experienced, but she had no way of determining that even if she could remember the details of the dream.

She didn't know what to think about her situation. It just seemed too pat that aliens had come to visit the Earth and run across her and decided to rescue her even if not for the fact that she could tell they were withholding a great deal from her. It was possible, she supposed, that the Anunnaki were a benevolent race and such things were commonplace to them-assisting others-and yet she couldn't imagine that they would

travel so far merely to 'visit'. They would almost certainly have an agenda. She just couldn't figure out what that might be.

She knew, though, that they'd traveled a tremendous distance. Even if not for the fact that that 'felt' true, they'd implied it themselves.

So, they were here for a reason. Did she have anything to do with that reason, she wondered? Or had they come across her purely by accident?

It seemed to her that she could safely discard the suspicion that they were enemies of the people of Earth. What would be the point in taking care of her if they were? They'd said she wasn't a prisoner-or Koryn had, although there'd been something about Tariq's manner that made her question it. They certainly hadn't treated her like one.

She was naked, though, and Tariq's question had unnerved her when she'd asked if she was free to leave. 'Where would she go?' Somehow, she thought it wasn't a reference to the fact that she couldn't remember where she belonged. It had seemed ... ominous somehow.

Shaking the thought and the sick feeling that began to churn in her belly, she got up decisively to test whether or not she was a prisoner. The door opened the moment she approached it. Gathering the sheet more tightly around herself, she stepped into the corridor and looked around. Since she hadn't seen anything the way they'd come when they'd left the treatment room-or whatever it was-she headed off in the opposite

direction.

The corridor seemed endless. It was a while before she noticed that there were doors leading off of the corridor. Closed, they formed a nearly invisible seam against the surrounding walls. She hesitated when she reached the next, but since it occurred to her that it was quite possibly someone's private quarters, she decided not to test the theory.

She'd been moving along the corridor for perhaps twenty to thirty minutes when it abruptly dawned on her that she had no idea how to get back to the room where they'd taken her. Dismayed, she stopped, turning to look back in the direction she'd come from. A very little consideration convinced her that she was committed to her quest. She really had no choice at this point but to continue to look if for no other reason than she was lost.

She reached a branch in the corridor a few minutes later and debated whether to stay with the corridor she'd been following or try the one that branched off at a tangent. She saw what appeared to be a row of windows further along the branch, however, and that decided the matter.

Moving a little more quickly, she hurried along the corridor until she reached the first and discovered it was just as she'd suspected, a view port. A wave of shock and horror swept over her when she saw the view, however.

She was too shocked for many minutes to actually assimilate

what she was looking at and too distressed even when she had to throw off her shock. The first indication she had that she was no longer alone was when a hand settled on her shoulder. Jumping, she whirled instinctively, clamping a hand on the wrist attached to the hand on her shoulder and whipping his arm behind his back. She didn't get the chance to finish executing the maneuver that should have put him on the floor. He followed, flowing easily with her movements and using her grip on his wrist to jerk her against his length and bind her in an unbreakable hold.

"So ... you are military."

Emerald twisted her head around to look up and back at her captor. There was no relief in discovering it was Tariq. "Let me go," she said through teeth clenched to hide just how shaken she was.

His brows rose at the demand, but his grip slackened. Emerald whirled away from him immediately, bending to snatch up the sheet she'd dropped and whipping it around herself shakily before she confronted him. "That isn't Earth!" she said angrily, pointing a shaking finger toward the window. "We aren't on Earth! I don't know where the hell we are, but that isn't Earth!"

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Chapter Two

Tariq eyed her assessingly. "It isn't the Earth you once knew, but it is Earth," he said finally.

It wasn't! He was lying, damn him! She knew he had to be. Without another word, she whipped around, intent on racing down the corridor in search of a route of escape. He caught up to her before she'd even managed to accelerate to an all out run, snagging her around the waist. She whirled on him, her survival instincts at the fore, intent upon fighting her way to freedom if necessary.

Unfortunately, she'd already given away her hand in the previous encounter. He was ready for her and he was not only far bigger and stronger, he was amazingly fast for a being that was big enough he should have been slow and clumsy. He caught her wrists and when she tried to break free and run again, he merely twirled her in a tight circle and used her own arms to bind her against him. "Calm down! Now!" he growled through his teeth.

"You said I wasn't a prisoner! That was a lie, too!"

"We didn't go through the effort of regenerating you just to

allow you to destroy yourself," he said tightly.

His comment took the fight completely out of her. She twisted her head to look up at him in disbelief. "Regenerated?" she gasped, so horrified at the implication that her mind had gone completely chaotic.

Several emotions flickered across his face in quick succession-anger and self-disgust among them. Finally, a look of resignation and purposefulness settled on his hard features. "Come with me and I'll explain what I can," he said decisively.

Emerald was in no mental state to either agree or object. He took her silence as acquiescence and eased his hold on her. Settling an arm around her shoulders, he led her back in the direction she'd come. When they reached the connecting corridor, he turned left and hurried her along it, stopping after only a few moments before a door. It opened, revealing an apartment far more elegant than the one she'd been taken to before and at least three times as big.

It was still much the same layout, she saw, an apartment in the sense that it was divided between a lounging area, a work area, and a rest area, but not spartanly appointed.

He led her to a chair and gently pushed her down on the seat. She stared at his back blankly as he moved away. In a few moments, he returned, crouched in front of her and held out a tiny vessel that looked more like a test tube than anything else. Emerald stared blankly at it and then looked at him.

"Drink it."

She took it like a sleepwalker, put the edge against her lips, and tipped it up. The liquid that spilled into her mouth burned like fire all the way down. She coughed, struggling to catch her breath, but she felt the effects almost instantly. The liquid hit her belly and started a blaze that swept through her and wiped out her equilibrium even as it spread warmth through her to chase the chill of fear.

She discovered he was smiling faintly when she managed to open her eyes and blink the tears from them enough to bring his face into focus.

"Better?"

She blinked at him a little owlshly, dismayed to realize she was tipsy with no more than a sip of the stuff. "I don't know."

He studied her face for a long moment, seemed to wrestle with himself and abruptly caught her chin. She had no clue he meant to kiss her until her eyes lost focus as he zoomed in. She tensed as his mouth settled over hers, but it was as far from unpleasant as it was possible to be. More heat poured through her as they connected and she felt his heat and his taste invade her. He lifted his lips from hers after little more than a brief connection, seemed to hesitate in debate as to whether to pull away or sample more and then slipped his hand to the base of her skull and pulled her close again, sealing his mouth more firmly over hers and breaching the

barrier of her lips with his tongue in almost the same motion. The effects of the liquor she'd gulped didn't hold a candle to the affect he had on her.

She felt for several moments as if she would either float away or melt into a puddle. It took a tremendous effort to lift her eyelids when he broke the kiss and withdrew. She saw when she had that he hadn't withdrawn far. He was studying her face with an intensity that made everything inside her go liquid with want.

"Not wise," he said distractedly, his voice husky in a way that sent a shiver through her. "Not when I want you naked in my bed badly enough I can taste it ... and you're already naked."

It flickered through her mind to wonder why he would even struggle with the desire. It wasn't as if she had a hope in hell of stopping him. She wasn't even certain at that moment that she would want to put up a fight with the lure of promised pleasure was still pounding through her.

He straightened abruptly, placing her eye to eye with as impressive an erection as she'd ever seen. Before she could study it as thoroughly as she wanted to, he turned away, surreptitiously adjusted himself, and disappeared into another room off the main room. When he returned, he held out a folded garment.

"It won't fit," he muttered when she took it, "but at least it won't fall off if I breathe on it."

Emerald discovered the moment she'd unfolded it that it wasn't his. It was far too small, she was sure, for him to get in to.

Smaller than Koryn.

Small enough the certainty settled inside her that it belonged to a woman.

She didn't want to examine the unpleasant feeling that tightened her belly at the realization. Instead, she focused on trying to figure out how to get it on. He took it from her after a moment and showed her that the front simply parted when he ran his hand down it. Curiosity flickered through her, but she dismissed it, unwilling to emphasize her ignorance. Discarding the sheet she'd been clinging to, she stood up and stepped into it, pulling it up over her shoulders. He was right. It was far too big.

Tariq turned her to face him when she'd struggled with the front for a moment, sealing the edges, and then rolled the sleeves up until her hands were free. He left again when she sat down to roll a cuff along the bottom of the suit legs, returning a moment later with a pair of boots.

The sick feeling tightened in Emerald's belly again, but she took the boots wordlessly and slipped one on each foot, wondering even as she did if she'd be able to walk in them without falling on her face. Especially since she was still feeling the effects of the drink he'd given her ... and still weak from his kiss.

"Where are we going?" she asked when he'd led her out of his quarters and into the corridor again.

"Out," he said curtly.

Emerald's belly immediately clenched with reluctance. She didn't know why he'd suddenly become determined to take her outside, but if he meant to set her 'free' in that ... jungle She didn't know what she'd do. Scream? Beg? Cling?

She didn't want to go out at all! Not after what she'd seen. She felt her throat close with emotion, struggled with the urge to beg him to take her back to her quarters as some unnamed terror clawed at the back of her mind. She was so distressed, she didn't realize they'd gone in an entirely different direction than before until Tariq halted in front of what she could see was a wide cargo door. He paused as he reached for the control, studying her. "I'll be with you, Emerald. I'll keep you safe."

She searched his face and felt a modicum of calm settle over her. Nodding a little jerkily, she turned her head as the door began to open, staring at the view that was slowly revealed. The door halted when it was barely high enough for her to walk beneath it and she saw a gang plank extend toward the ground.

Settling a hand along her waist, Tariq urged her through the opening, bending to duck beneath it, and then pausing to close it behind them before he walked her down. The sights

and sounds of a primitive world had pelted Emerald even as the doors had opened. Smells joined the riot to her senses, the musky smell of earth, and crushed and rotting vegetation. A wide swath had been cut from the jungle at the foot of the gangplank.

Emerald knew immediately that it led to the crumbling ruins she'd seen from the port and the fear she'd refused to acknowledge pumped her heart a little faster as Tariq guided her along the rough path. It disturbed Emerald no end to discover that much of the vegetation seemed familiar to her, eliminating any comfort she might have felt that there was almost as much that wasn't.

None of it should have familiar-and yet it was and she realized that could only mean that she'd seen it before.

She struggled to search for another explanation. Was it some sort of trick to make her feel as if she was as mad as a hatter?

It seemed far too elaborate for that-unless they'd found a world very similar to Earth?

It looked like Earth and at the same time it didn't seem familiar at all. What had he meant by saying they'd regenerated her? What had he meant when he'd told her it wasn't the Earth she'd known?

She was very afraid she was beginning to understand and yet she refused to allow the thoughts to take hold of her, pushing

them to the back of her mind.

She was developing blisters from the slipping boots before the first crumbling wall came into view. She halted abruptly, staring at the fading colors she could see where climbing vines had been ripped away to reveal parts of what had once been a building of some sort. Tariq stopped and turned to look at her questioningly.

Swallowing a little convulsively when she recognized the symbols on the wall, she looked at Tariq a little beseechingly. "I don't want to see this."

His gaze moved over her face. "You wanted to know."

She swallowed with an effort around the knot in her throat. "I don't think I want to anymore."

He returned to her, settling his hands lightly on her shoulders. "You're strong, Emerald. You can do this."

She looked up at him mournfully. "Do what?"

"Face what you must to learn the truth."

"I'm ... afraid," she admitted.

He pulled her closer, settling his arms lightly around her. "I know, child, but I also know that you are brave and strong. If I didn't believe you had the strength to face it, I wouldn't have brought you."

Emerald settled her cheek against his chest, feeling like the child he'd called her, and yet comforted by his embrace. The sense of security vanished almost as soon as he pulled away and doubts rose again, but she allowed him to lead her deeper into what had once been a great city.

Emerald felt her flesh creep as they walked, felt as if the gaping holes in the crumbling walls were eyes staring down at her, almost as if they were accusing her. After a few moments, they reached an intersection and she discovered the source of some of the noises she'd been hearing growing steadily louder.

Approximately a block from the intersection, she saw people laboring. She glanced at Tariq questioningly, but he was focused on the activity ahead of them.

"What are they doing?" she asked curiously.

"Excavating," Tariq responded shortly.

She could see that. She just didn't understand what they were looking for. "For what?"

His gaze flickered over her briefly before he looked away again. "Answers." He halted when they reached the dig, looked around, and finally walked her to a low stone wall and told her to sit. Abandoning her there, he strode purposefully toward the hole in the ground and halted at the edge, his legs slightly apart, his hands on his hips. In a few moments, Emerald saw a figure she thought she recognized. As he

neared Tariq, she became certain it was Koryn.

"We found two more!" he said, excitement threading his voice. The look of pleasure vanished and an expression of shock washed across his features as he glanced in her direction and spied her. "What is she doing here?"

Tariq turned to look at her. "She decided to explore on her own and find her answers."

"So you brought her here?" Koryn asked, his voice tight with angry disbelief.

Tariq's expression tightened. He didn't say anything. His expression was sufficient to silence any further objection Koryn might have made.

Koryn nodded stiffly, wrestled with himself, and plunged onward. "You said she was too ... important to our mission to risk. Her mind is too fragile right now."

"I underestimated her determination and her ingenuity," Tariq responded coolly. "She found her way to the observation deck-undeterred by the fact that she had no clothing. So much for your certainty that she wasn't likely to attempt anything when she felt vulnerable and exposed! She'd already seen the dig site by the time I located her."

"She wasn't under guard?"

Tariq studied Koryn in stony silence for a long moment. "You

presume too much on our friendship, Koryn," he said coldly instead of reminding Koryn that the majority of the ship's personnel was at the dig.

Koryn reddened. "My apologies, my lord! But the mission"

"If we fail, it's my ass, not yours."

Koryn wrestled with himself. "It isn't just the mission, Tariq! You know we've found damned little to go on at all and half of that is useless! I thought we'd agreed that she was far too ... special to take unnecessary risks with her!"

"I do agree," Tariq responded grimly. "Completely. I would've prevented the situation if I could have, but she was asleep the last I checked on her-She should've slept a full cycle. She didn't and she decided to test her boundaries. Beyond that, as ... keen as my interest in her is, I have responsibilities that take precedence over my personal desires. If she hadn't forced my hand, I would've put this off as long as possible, but she did. Now we have to deal with it."

Koryn swallowed his anger with an effort and nodded. "How is she doing?"

"Surprisingly well, frightened, but that's to be expected."

Koryn relaxed fractionally. "How much have you told her?"

Tariq shrugged. "Enough for her to begin to understand."

"I'd like to assess her mental state myself."

Tariq nodded. "I thought you would. Where did you locate the remains? I'm assuming from the way you announced it that you feel like there's a good chance of extracting sufficient DNA for our needs?"

Koryn shifted uncomfortably. "I won't know until I get them back to the lab. I think so, though. They're remarkably well preserved."

"Male or female?"

"One of each," Koryn said, grinning abruptly.

"Two females and three males," Tariq said dryly. "We make progress."

Koryn sobered. "This couldn't have happened more than a hundred years ago ... if that much."

"If you managed to narrow the time line, we have made progress. Any idea of the race?"

Koryn shook his head. "I won't be able to determine that without tests. There wasn't enough. Any word from the others?"

"Nothing and more nothing." Tariq frowned, narrowing his eyes against the sunlight as he surveyed the dig. "Humans-and their forbearers-survived several extinctions that we know

of. Considering the condition of the planet, it seems damned unlikely this was the results of any kind of natural disaster."

"We don't know, for certain, that there aren't any survivors," Koryn pointed out. "The search parties have barely scratched the surface."

Tariq grunted noncommittally. "This area seems fertile enough to support them. There's plenty of everything else."

"We don't know what it was like then, however."

"True." He turned to study Emerald. "Maybe she'll remember something."

Koryn turned his head to study her, as well. "Maybe."

* * * *

Strain though she might, Emerald was only able to catch a few snatches of the conversation between Koryn and Tariq. It was enough to fire her curiosity, but not enough to appease it, particularly when they switched to their own language shortly after they'd begun talking.

The only thing that she had managed to grasp-she thought-was that they were arguing about her. Koryn was angry that Tariq had brought her and Tariq was both defensive about his actions and angry because he felt defensive and resented Koryn questioning his decision.

It seemed to indicate that she was of some importance to them, but that was as unnerving as it was comforting. If she could've counted on her importance as protection, she wouldn't have felt uneasy at all, but she wasn't convinced that she could when she didn't understand how she was important to them.

After a few minutes, Tariq left Koryn, following the path Koryn had traced to reach him, and Koryn approached her. She looked up at him questioningly when he settled on the wall beside her and looked her over piercingly. "We'll have to get some clothes made for you that fit better," he commented after a long moment.

It was the last thing Emerald had expected and she looked down at herself self-consciously. "I thought I was naked because I was being treated. I didn't have clothes when you found me?"

Koryn cleared his throat uncomfortably. "No."

Emerald frowned. "Why would I be naked?" she wondered out loud.

"Nothing comes to mind?" Koryn prompted. "You haven't remembered anything?"

He knew something he wasn't telling her. Emerald was certain of it. "Not really, no," she responded after a moment, turning to study the work in progress. "This can't be Earth."

"Why do you say that?"

Emerald glanced at him in disbelief. "This ... place shouldn't be here!"

"So you do remember something?"

Emerald looked down at her hands, trying to figure out how to explain something she didn't understand herself. "It isn't really memories. It's ... the feeling that this is wrong, out of place. It's like writing something and then looking at the word you've written and knowing it isn't right, that you've spelled it wrong, even though you don't know how it should be spelled or even how you know that the pattern doesn't look right."

Koryn nodded. "And yet things like this don't remain the same. Time changes them. The man-made structures deteriorate with age and vegetation begins to grow over everything when there's no one to cut it back."

Emerald nodded and turned to look at the city again. "What happened here?"

"We don't know. That's what we're trying to discover."

Emerald wrestled with her thoughts. In a way, she was afraid to ask the questions burning to be asked, afraid of the answers, and yet the need to know warred with that fear and doubt nibbled at her certainties. "Tariq also suggested that a lot of time had passed since I saw Earth and that was why this doesn't look familiar. Have I ...? Was I in stasis for some

reason?"

A frown of reluctance drew Koryn's brows together. "Not that we've determined."

"But you're saying this is Earth and a lot of time passed and that's why it doesn't look familiar? Was I in a coma?" She lifted her head to study the ruins again, trying to decide how much time it would take to change a thriving city into a crumbling ruin that looked like some ancient relic of the distant past. They hadn't built like the ancients, though. Ancient cities had survived because the people who built them had meant for them to last. In her time, no one had wanted or expected anything to last long. They'd wanted to recycle and rebuild because it provided work and promoted a healthy economy.

Koryn startled her out of her thoughts by taking her hand. She glanced searchingly at his face and then down at her hand in his. Her belly fluttered. The contrast was far more startling than she'd realized. It wasn't that his hand looked alien next to her own. It looked just as human as hers did-except that it engulfed her hand.

He seemed as fascinated with her hand as she was with his, studying it intently as he explored the width and length of her palm and each digit. "What feels like the truth to you, child?"

Emerald sent him a startled look, distracted by the fact that he'd called her 'child' just as Tariq had. In a way, it almost sounded like affection the way they'd used it, and yet it carried some unnerving connotations. "Why would you call me a

child?"

He sent her a startled look, seemed to debate a moment, and finally gave her a penetrating look. "Because you are in every sense of the word beyond the fact that you have the body of a fully matured adult. You are an infant."

Emerald searched his face for some clue of his age. Beyond the fact that he appeared to be a fully mature adult male, however, she discovered no foundation to base a guess of his actual age. "You're ... older than me?"

He grinned abruptly, making her belly shimmy in that strange way that was both unnerving and exciting. "Vastly, child ... in every sense of the word."

Emerald looked away, mulling over everything they'd said, had hinted at without actually telling her anything specific. A horrific thought emerged, grew to be a certainty despite every effort to discount it. "I was dead," she said finally, turning to search Koryn's face again. "You pulled me out of this pit. That's what Tariq meant."

He didn't have to answer. She saw the truth in his eyes. Despite the fact that she'd put the idea together herself from the things they'd hinted at, though, acceptance didn't come. She felt the 'sense' that it was the truth and still couldn't make herself believe. "That's why I don't remember anything. There aren't any memories. I'm not ... real. I'm a clone."

Koryn's hand tightened on hers when she would've snatched it

away. His expression was hard when she glanced at him angrily and she felt her own anger fade in the face of his. "You are as real as I am-as any natural born thing in this universe! The method of your birth and development didn't change who and what you are. I merely took the seeds of life and planted them in fertile soil to grow-accelerated, of course-we needed mature adults, but the memories are yours-and they will return to you. They're just as much a part of your DNA as the color of your eyes and hair!"

He looked away. "That's a part of the mystery here. You should remember. You should all remember and no one does."

Emerald's heart leapt jerkily. "There are others?" she gasped, setting aside his other strange comment for the moment.

He shrugged. "You are the first woman. I regenerated two males before you. They also had no memories to speak of-only the most basic, just as you have-and their instincts, of course."

"But ... they're alive? And they're ... humans from my time?"

He studied her face. "As far as we can determine-yes."

"But ... they might remember me! If I'm familiar to them, I might trigger memories or they might trigger mine!"

His gaze slid away. "Not likely."

"Why? You said I should have my memories! I don't

understand. I thought all memory was stored in the brain, but if that's true then maybe I only need to see someone familiar to begin to remember."

His lips tightened. "It's entirely possible that in your time scientists didn't know how to turn on that part of the DNA strand or even that it existed or what it was, but much if not all of the memory is 'backed up' in the DNA, very like a secondary recording device. This isn't ordinary memory loss, Emerald. If it was, then familiar things might trigger the return, but we found you here and you've remembered nothing."

"That's not true! It looks familiar! It's just ... changed beyond true recognition. If I knew the men, though"

"I had to implant false memories in their minds," he confessed explosively. "The ... void was too disturbing for them. They began exhibiting signs of onset psychosis. It was either that or keep them sedated and possibly do more damage. The chances are slim, now, that they'll recall anything about their past lives."

Emerald stared at him in dismay. "You ... put false memories in their minds?" she gasped, horrified. "But ... you changed who they were!"

"There was no other option! If I hadn't, they would've been completely useless to us!"

Emerald felt her jaw go slack. Fear chased the shock in rapid succession. "Useless? What use to you have for us?" she

asked faintly.

He sent her a look she found hard to decipher and looked away. An expression of relief flickered over his features. Following the direction of his gaze, Emerald saw that Tariq was striding briskly toward them. Koryn stood up abruptly. "I have to get back."

Tariq's gaze flickered over her face and then he glanced at Koryn's retreating back. When he met Emerald's gaze again, there was wariness and speculation in his eyes.

"He suggested we might be useless to the Anunnaki," Emerald said, her voice quavering with unnamed fears. "What did he mean?"

Tariq rolled his eyes. "Imbecile," he muttered.

Emerald jolted to her feet. "What did he mean?"

His lips tightened, but after a moment he seemed to force the anger back. "We mean you no harm, child. Surely you have had time to understand that much?"

Emerald swallowed a little convulsively, feeling her alarm waver. How much could she believe of what she'd been told, though? "What did he mean, then? And why do both of you call me a child when I'm not?"

Tariq smiled faintly, lifting his hands and settling one on each of her shoulders. "You find that insulting? It isn't meant to be, I

assure you. It's a term of endearment."

Warmth fluttered through her, but doubt, too. Why would they feel any affection for her? Because she was their prize experiment?

"You are human-a child of the Anunnaki."

Emerald blinked at him. "A child ...? You're saying we're the same?"

Tariq glanced around and then led her to a place to settle that was out of the direct sunlight. "I promised to explain what I could," he said when they'd settled. "My people found this world long ago. The humanoids that inhabited it then were barely more than animals. In the beginning, they were merely considered handy for experiments." He shrugged at her expression. "I promised the truth. I can paint a prettier picture if you like. I'm not particularly proud of my ancestors in that sense, but then again, I wasn't their keeper. I had nothing to do with what they did."

"I'd rather have the truth," Emerald said stiffly.

He nodded. "We were just exploring genetics then. They were close enough to our own species to make them ideal for the experiments-and simple enough to make them malleable. We re-engineered them in our own image, altered their DNA until it matched our own-more or less. This wasn't a swift process. It took generations of humans to perfect the strain." He paused again, seemed to wrestle with something, and finally

struggled. "Part of the reason was that, in the beginning, it didn't occur to them to try. They were far more interested in seeing what the limitations were and beginning to understand genetics better. There were ... other medical experiments, as well. Transplantations, hybridizations of two or more species. This world was little more than an enormous lab to build our own understanding of the sciences.

"Eventually, however, we managed to produce a pure species identical to our own from the native population and, once we had, we realized the true value of them. They were our insurance of the continuance of our own species. They-you-became our baseline when we began to manipulate our own DNA in our quest for perfection. For many years, we were guardians of this world and then, as our children 'grew up' we came less and less often, checking from time to time to make certain we still had our insurance in case of need, testing to make certain the strain was still pure enough to use as a baseline, but leaving the Earth primarily in the hands of our children.

"The reason I thought the name might be familiar to you is that the ancients of this world considered our people gods-because we told them we were. It made it ... easier to gain their trust and their cooperation. And because they believed we were gods and worshipped us, we became part of the history they recorded for future generations.

"It wouldn't have been necessary except that we needed to test their learning capabilities and behavioral modifications as

part of the process. The alternative, however-to cage them or enslave them with our superior strength and technology-wasn't considered ... conducive to our experiments. We needed to keep them in a more or less natural setting to get accurate data."

When he ceased to speak, Emerald mulled over what he'd told her, trying to consider it objectively. It wasn't easy to ignore the churning sense of betrayal and yet it was that very thing that made it feel like the truth. "That's what Koryn meant about us being of use to the Anunnaki?"

Anger transformed Tariq's face into a frightening mask. She was relieved when she discovered that anger wasn't, apparently, directed at her.

"Yes," he growled. "We came to take our children home ... only to discover that something had befallen our nursery and apparently destroyed what we'd come to consider our insurance of the continuance of our species."

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Chapter Three

A wave of nausea rolled through Emerald. Despite the fact that she'd been skeptical about just how important she was to them and the seemingly affectionate nature of their attitude toward her, she realized nothing even close to the truth had occurred to her.

The Anunnaki had returned to collect their guinea pigs and discovered some predator had apparently gotten into the 'cage' and wiped them out. So they were very busily digging for remains to try to resurrect the species because they'd finally reached a point where they had need of them.

And she still didn't know what purpose they were supposed to serve.

The Anunnaki were neither allies nor enemies of the human race. They didn't consider them significant enough to see them in either light.

"I think I'd like to go back to the ship now, if it's alright?"

Tariq sent her a keen look, but he merely nodded and rose to escort her.

The truth was, she didn't want to go back to the ship at all. She wanted to escape, but as Tariq had pointed out-to where? This place might truly be Earth, and yet it was as alien to her

as if it was another world. It might as well be one. Beyond that, both of them had told her there weren't any humans left to run to.

She wasn't sure she believed that-or much that they'd told her, for that matter, but she had eyes in her head. This city had been abandoned long ago and if it had, it seemed to her that, regardless of how far or how fast she ran, she would only find more of the same. It wasn't reasonable to think otherwise.

Her head was throbbing with the endless round of conflicting thoughts and emotions by the time they reached the ship again. She was also limping, although she did her best to hide it-from pride, she supposed. Her feet had begun to feel sticky, though, and she was fairly certain the boots had rubbed blisters and then rubbed the skin off.

Koryn, she discovered, had beaten them back to the ship. As they approached, he and several other men were directing some sort of robotic cart up the gangplank. Her stomach lurched. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what it was beneath the tarp that was so valuable to them.

She stopped abruptly, unwilling to move any closer. Tariq sent her a curious look, but returned his speculative gaze to the cart almost at once. When they'd entered the ship, he took her arm and walked her up the gangplank.

He was frowning when they reached the corridor, scanning her speculatively. "You're limping."

"The boots are too big," Emerald said evenly. "It's hard to walk in them."

"Take them off. You don't need them now."

Reluctance flickered through her. Too big or not, the boots were some protection for her feet and if she gave them up she wouldn't have anything if she decided to take her chances and flee the tender mercies of the Anunnaki. "I'm used to them now," she lied.

His lips tightened. "Remove them."

Rebellion flickered through her, but she bent down and pulled them off, returning her borrowed boots ungraciously by throwing them down. "I suppose you want the suit, too?" she asked tightly.

"Don't pretend to misunderstand me," he growled. "Why the fuck didn't you say anything? Your feet are raw and this is not the sort of place you want to pick up an infection! The micro organisms have had generations to outstrip any immunities you might have!"

Snatching her off her feet, he swept her up into his arms as if she was no more than the child he referred to her as. Emerald would've tried to thwart him if he hadn't pounced on her too fast for her to grasp his intentions. "Put me down! I can walk!"

"You aren't going to, though," he growled, striding so swiftly down the corridor that the stir of air whipped her hair around

her face.

As little as she liked to admit it, even to herself, the man was intimidating beyond his size, as if that wasn't intimidation enough! She felt as if she was being hauled away by a giant and the really unnerving part was that that wasn't all that far from the truth. She had only to look at his face at such close range, the 'wall' of his chest, and the size of the arms and hands coiled around her to feel like a pigmy. She was far enough from the floor in his arms for her belly to quiver with a fear of heights she hadn't even realized she had.

It went way beyond being made to feel 'dainty and feminine', maybe mostly because there was nothing at all lover-like about his hold or his manner. His attitude was more like an angry parent furious with childish stupidity that had resulted in an injury.

It cowed her, wilted the brief flare of rebellion. Even that analogy wasn't accurate, she realized with dismay, because parent and child implied affection and concern and his only concern was that she'd damaged one of the guinea pigs they'd worked so hard to resurrect. She wasn't at all surprised when they arrived at his destination and she discovered it was a med-center. He spoke to the man who seemed to be in charge and then plunked her down on a gurney unceremoniously.

The man, who was clearly a doctor, lifted her feet one by one and examined the raw spots with an expression tight with disgust. Feeling chastised when he flicked a glance at her

face and moved away, Emerald didn't attempt to object when he returned with a small basin to catch the fluids he pored over her feet. Whatever it was stung like fire on the raw, bleeding patches, though, and it took all she could do to maintain a façade of stoicism. The pain brought tears to her eyes and a knot to her throat. When he'd finished torturing her with the fluid fire, he dabbed some sort of pasty goop on the spots and then wrapped her feet with something similar to gauze. She braced herself when he left and returned with something that looked a lot like a syringe, but discovered that, at least, wasn't painful. It felt more like a puff of air when he pressed it to her arm than a shot.

Tariq listened in grim silence as the doctor spoke to him in their language and then scooped her up again. She had to suppose his anger had worn itself out since he didn't seem to be in nearly as much of a hurry to return her to her cabin as he'd been before, and she simply didn't believe he'd been in a such a rush to get her to a medic over nothing more 'life threatening' than blisters, raw or not. Anger had set the pace.

She would've almost preferred it as they left again. She wanted to be alone and the sooner the better. She was tired and she felt battered and emotional from the things she'd learned, Tariq's anger, and the doctor's complete disregard for whatever pain he might be inflicting. It seemed to emphasize her status as an experimental animal rather than a person and that thought plunged her spirits to lowest ebb.

To her dismay, he didn't return her to the cabin where they'd

first put her. Instead, he carried her to his own. She held out some hope for a few moments that he'd only done so to appropriate the clothing he'd loaned her, but he disabused her of that notion as soon as she'd stripped and handed it back.

"Consider yourself a prisoner of the Anunnaki," he said tightly. "You'll stay here. If I'm not here, there'll be a guard outside."

"Where would I go even if I wanted to escape?" she demanded plaintively.

His gaze flickered over her face. "You are too hardheaded for your own good. I admire your spirit, but I've no intention of allowing it to overcome your good sense ... or my admiration mine."

Emerald swallowed convulsively. "You could imprison me in the other cabin just as easily and I wouldn't be around to bother you!"

He moved closer, capturing her face in one hand and tilting her head back so that she had to look at him. "It won't bother me, Emerald. I can assure you of that."

The implication in the way he looked at her if not what he'd said should have frightened her. Instead, it only suffocated her spirits further. She didn't feel up to the challenge of trying to protect herself. She felt as weak, and lost, and afraid as the child they called her. Tears welled in her eyes in spite of all she could do. "Why didn't you just leave me in peace?"

Some of the ruthless aggression left his face. For a moment, she almost thought he would kiss her again and her belly fluttered with anticipation. Instead, his face hardened again. "If I had, you wouldn't be of any use to me," he said coldly.

She wanted to fling herself down on his bunk and cry her heart out when he'd left her. Instead, she pulled the coverlet from the bed, wrapped it around herself, and curled up in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the room. Her chest ached with the tightness of unshed tears she refused to give in to. Her thoughts were no comfort and did nothing to ease the ache.

Everyone couldn't be gone! She couldn't accept that. She thought she had to accept that she was, in truth, on Earth and that the Anunnaki had resurrected her from a speck of DNA left behind. And if she accepted that, then she had to accept that a great deal of time had passed since whatever it was that had happened, but she couldn't believe the human race was extinct! Somewhere out there, there were survivors. There had to be! They'd existed for thousands of years, fought everything Mother Nature could throw at them, and survived—despite the odds against them. Whatever had happened, there would've been some with the cunning, determination, and luck to make it and, in the time that had passed, they would've multiplied.

Even supposing she could escape, though, how would she ever find them?

Or were they only hiding from the aliens? The Anunnaki?

She should've trusted her instincts, she thought with a sudden flicker of reviving anger! They weren't benevolent! They had their own agenda and she was simply a pawn they meant to keep!

* * * *

It was Koryn that woke Emerald several hours later when he entered the room carrying a tray like the one she'd been brought the night before. She roused enough to study him before he spied her, long enough to see the consternation on his face when he discovered she wasn't in the bed where he'd apparently expected to find her. Relief flickered in his eyes when he saw her, but his face tightened with irritation.

No doubt it had given him a nasty turn to think she might have escaped!

"I brought you something to eat," he said after settling the tray he'd brought on the table near the chair.

"Thank you," Emerald said neutrally, wondering why he'd brought it instead of sending an android with it.

Grabbing another chair, he dragged it up in front of hers. "I wanted to have a look at those abrasions."

Emerald eyed him with irritation. "It's just a couple of blisters."

"I'd still like to look."

Sighing, Emerald uncurled and extended a leg. He cupped a hand beneath her leg just above the ankle to support her foot and slowly removed the bandaging. Emerald studied his face while he studied her foot with frowning intensity, wondering what their world was like and why humans had suddenly become of so much importance to them when they'd apparently grown weary of 'playing' with them and pretty much ignored their existence for years.

"What happened to the Anunnaki?"

He flicked a quick look at her and returned his attention to her foot, but his expression had hardened. "This seems to be responding well. I think we can dismiss any anxiety about infection."

He wrapped the bandage again and held out his hand imperiously. Anger flickered through Emerald that time and the urge to kick him rather than merely meekly extending her foot for him to examine. She quashed the impulse and held out her other foot. When he'd examined that foot to his satisfaction and wrapped it again, she tucked her foot beneath her once more.

"Why can't I have something to wear? You aren't worried I'll thwart you and catch my death from exposure?"

A mixture of amusement and anger flickered in his eyes. "You'll have to talk to Tariq about that."

Which, apparently, was a waste of time! "Why?"

"Because he's claimed you," he said tightly.

Emerald's heart skipped a beat. She frowned at him. "What does that mean?"

"It means he has the power to do so and he's exerted it."

"I still don't understand," she managed to say after a moment. "I thought ... I understood that I'd been resurrected for experiments."

He looked startled and then irritated. "What the hell made you think that?"

"It's what Tariq said-that the Anunnaki had experimented on humans since they'd first discovered them."

He glanced toward the untouched tray and reached over to remove the lid. Picking up a bowl much like the one the night before, he handed it to her. She saw without a lot of enthusiasm that she'd graduated to thicker broth. Taking it from him obediently, she sipped at it, discovering it tasted like cream of mushroom soup. She frowned. "Why is it that everything you've given me is so familiar?"

"Because most of the foods in your diet originated on our world. We didn't just experiment on the humans," he said dryly.

"But ... you aren't going to use me for experiments now?"

He looked at her, his gaze flickering over her face. "You

belong to Lord Tariq now. He'll tell you what he wants you to know."

She looked down at the cup in her hand to keep from giving her thoughts away as resentment swelled inside of her. Just like that? He decided and it was so?

Why was she surprised when she'd already deduced that she was either a prisoner or a lab rat or both? And maybe she still was? He hadn't explained what it meant that Tariq had claimed her.

Except she had her suspicions that he had plans that included having her naked in his bed. He'd said as much, after all. She didn't see any reason to doubt it, but she discovered acknowledging it unnerved the hell out of her. "Lord Tariq?" she asked in a suffocated voice. "If he's so important, why was he sent here to collect the lab animals?"

"He wasn't sent."

Emerald sent a startled look toward the door where his voice had emanated and discovered Tariq was standing in the portal. She felt her face heat.

Koryn pushed his chair back abruptly and rose. "I had a look at the abrasions. They're responding satisfactorily to the medications."

Tariq met his gaze for a long moment and then glanced at Emerald. He sauntered into the room, allowing the door to

close behind him. "Just so that there are no misunderstandings," he murmured, "she's off-limits until I've bred her."

Shock rolled over Emerald. She gaped at him, wondering a little wildly if she'd misheard him.

"Gods damn it, Tariq! She's barely two days out of the pod! You know damned well she's still too fragile and weak for breeding! You'll end up killing her and your babe with her!" Koryn growled, switching abruptly to their own language.

Tariq's face hardened. "Have I ever given you reason to believe I'm deficient in understanding?"

Koryn blushed. "I'm not questioning your intelligence or your judgment-in any other matter! Don't talk to me as if I'm mentally deficient! Do you think I didn't notice you could barely contain yourself until she was fully developed and ready to be released from the growth pod?"

Tariq flushed. "How the fuck did you manage to notice anything when you've been hovering over her pod yourself?"

"I was doing my job!" Koryn responded tightly.

"Tell that to someone who doesn't know you as well as I do!" Tariq said derisively.

Koryn stared at him angrily for several moments. "I won't deny I desire her."

"Good! Because you'd be wasting your fucking breath!" Tariq snarled, striding to the beverage dispenser. He hesitated over selecting nizsum and finally settled on a mild wine, annoyed that he'd even considered the nizsum. Then again, Koryn was right. From the moment he'd first seen Emerald, he'd thought of little else besides possessing her. Abstinence was hellish enough without having a desirable woman close enough to smell her scent and not being able to do anything about it.

"She isn't ready, Tariq."

Tariq turned to study him for a long moment before he focused on Emerald. "I know that," he said almost mildly. "I just wanted to make sure that you understood our friendship won't save you if you touch her before I've bred her." He met Koryn's gaze for a long moment.

"And after you've bred her? Will you give her to me?"

Tariq's face hardened. He looked away, struggling to get his temper under control. Reminding himself that a pretense of indifference was the only way he was likely to pull off what he wanted didn't help. He didn't feel fucking indifferent! He wanted to choke the life out of Koryn for touching her at all. "I'll let you fuck her."

"You mean to keep her? She's human. You know, regardless of the circumstances-or your position-the council would never allow you to take her as a concubine."

Tariq sent him a startled look since it hadn't occurred to him

even to consider taking her as a concubine and then glanced at Emerald. She might be a pureblood and a desirable woman, but she was human, not Anunnaki. Granted, some of the old ones had, but that was long, long ago and the main reason it was frowned upon now. They were simple creatures, however desirable, and hadn't acclimated well to their world or their customs and beyond that, their own women had been outraged and made such a fuss that the council had reversed their stance on taking Earth women as concubines. They hadn't outlawed it, but they'd made it damned difficult on those who had, and no one had even tried it for years.

The only possible explanation for Koryn's assumption as far as he could see was that it had occurred to him, which didn't improve his mood and deepened his suspicion that Koryn's guilty start when he'd come in arose from what he'd been thinking about doing, even if he hadn't acted on it. "That and the fact that you're my best friend is the only reason I'll allow you to fuck her at all," Tariq growled.

"When you tire of her, then?"

Tariq flicked a hard glance at him and finally shrugged. "I've no heirs," he said dryly, studying the wine in his glass. "I'll want to breed more than one on her."

"So what you're saying is that you intend to use our friendship to keep her?" Koryn said tightly.

Tariq sent him a look of surprise. "You object?"

Anger flashed through Koryn. He wasn't in a position to object and they both knew it. His bloodlines and family name were almost the equal of Tariq's and yet 'almost' wasn't good enough now. He had neither the power nor the position to demand a breeder of his own-not in their current circumstances. If they hadn't found their nursery devastated, their purebloods vanished into thin air or dead

He still wouldn't have been in a position to demand Emerald if Tariq had wanted her, he thought angrily. He could choose one if they'd found enough to go around and as long as no one of higher class or power wanted her, she was his.

Even Tariq stood to lose her if someone of a higher position decided to claim her.

That was why he refused to wait, Koryn realized abruptly. It wasn't just his eagerness. It was the fear that she'd be snatched from his grasp.

His anger waned as that settled in his mind. It wasn't a bad plan, he decided once he'd gotten past his anger and could think straight. If she was breeding, Tariq could keep her in seclusion and if it was known that he was sharing her she wouldn't attract undue notice.

It did little to cool his resentment that he couldn't claim her for himself. He wasn't certain he could've brought himself to share her with Tariq if their roles had been reversed, but then he knew Tariq well enough to know it was eating at him that he had to regardless of his efforts to behave as if it didn't matter.

"No," he responded finally, his own voice tight with reluctance. "There'll be no way to keep the other men from talking, you know. Too many have seen her already. She might not have attracted so much notice if not for the hair."

Tariq snorted. "You think they noticed anything above her breasts?"

"You and I did."

Tariq downed his wine. "That's why I intend to keep her confined in my quarters. I suggest you double your efforts. I wouldn't propose it if things were different, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to make duplicates if you can get enough genetic material to do so."

"Not that I don't see your point, but I've been damned lucky to get what I have!" Koryn retorted angrily.

Tariq turned to look at him. "What about the woman you found today?"

Koryn frowned. "I don't know," he said doubtfully. "Possibly. I think it's more likely I could get enough from the male to make two."

"I don't give a fuck whether the women have breeders or not!" Tariq growled.

"They do," Koryn retorted dryly, "and there are some powerful women behind this enterprise."

"They'll be happy to learn that we've found nearly three times as many men than we have women, then," Tariq said sourly. "I hope to fuck it isn't a trend, but it's beginning to look that way."

"It's a little early to arrive at that conclusion, although I'll agree it is certainly looking that way, but I'm not sure it will count in our favor with the women when we haven't managed to clone even half the men we've found."

The comment effectively distracted Tariq. "It would suggest a war as the cause of this mess-either among themselves or with invaders. The council-everyone-is going to want to know what happened and we're going to need the right answers."

"We haven't found anything to support that," Koryn said sharply.

"Except the ratio of men to women, you mean?"

"Except that," Koryn agreed. He glanced at Emerald, saw that her jaw was set and her eyes sparkling with anger and repressed a smile. "Emerald doesn't look especially gratified by your claim."

Tariq flushed uncomfortably. "I hadn't realized I said that in her language," he said ruefully.

Koryn stared at him a moment and chuckled. "I hadn't thought I'd live to see the day a woman rattled you that much."

"You haven't seen it now," Tariq said tartly. "I was pissed off to

find you hovering over her. It had nothing to do with being rattled."

Koryn grinned. "If you say so. As much as I'd enjoy staying to watch, I think I'll just take my leave now and let you handle this. The lab calls."

"Coward," Tariq murmured with amusement.

Koryn flicked a rude gesture at him as he headed out, but he didn't turn around.

Tariq studied Emerald ruefully when Koryn had departed. She glared at him and finally turned a disdainful shoulder in his direction and settled her head against the back of the chair.

"You aren't sleeping in that chair," he said grimly.

Emerald stiffened, but she didn't otherwise acknowledge his comment.

Shaking his head, he returned to the dispenser for another glass of wine for himself and one for her. She stared at him when he settled in the chair beside her and offered her the glass. "It's wine," he said dryly.

"I had soup."

"And now you'll have wine."

Her jaw tightened but after a long moment, she took the glass. "Somehow I doubt this is part of my diet," she muttered under

her breath. "Maybe it'll kill me."

She discovered Tariq was staring at her stony faced when she glanced at him again, his eyes blazing with anger. "I hadn't taken you for a coward," he said evenly.

The dart struck home. "I'm not," she said tightly, "but there are some battles you can't win and the only option is ... a strategic retreat."

"It's never wise to announce your battle plans to the enemy," Tariq said coolly. Setting his half empty glass down, he took hers from her hand and set it down on the table, as well. She resisted when he caught her hand and drew her toward him-for all the good it did. An all out battle wouldn't have stopped him, although it might have saved face.

She decided an appearance of compliance was a better battle strategy at the moment, however, since she had nothing to gain by trying anything else and a lot to lose. She yielded to his determination, getting up and moving to him. He pulled her down on his lap, adjusting her more to suit himself than for her comfort. For many moments after he'd cradled her against his chest, he merely stared at her.

She wondered what was going through his mind. He didn't seem angry that she'd defied him, even briefly, or complacent that she'd yielded. He didn't even seem particularly aroused, although she could feel the evidence of sexual interest against her hip. She flinched instinctively when he lifted his free hand toward her face. He hesitated fractionally and then completed

the move, stroking a hand lightly along the hair at her temple and then downward to grasp the lock hanging across her breast. Lifting it, he rubbed his fingers back and forth over the strands and finally brought the lock to his nose and sniffed it.

Emerald stared at him curiously, wondering what he'd expected her hair smell like. Different in some way than his own she supposed, but she'd used the soap they supplied her with and had to suppose it was what they all used. She emerged from her introspection when he leaned closer. His hair tickled her face as he brushed the tip of his nose and then his lips along her throat, dragging in a deep breath.

It aroused him-her scent. She felt his cock grow thicker and harder against her hip. Her belly clenched in reaction. Her skin pebbled as he expelled the breath he'd inhaled and it wafted along her skin, making her nipples tighten in reaction. By the time he'd brushed his face along her cheek to her temple, a deep quivering had begun inside of her and her skin felt flushed all over. He lifted his head to meet her gaze as he reached for the sheet she had clasped tightly to her breasts.

Briefly, she resisted his tug and then yielded as she had when he'd issued the wordless command to come to him. He lowered his gaze to her breasts as he dragged the sheet to her waist. She looked down at his hand as he cupped one breast, lightly massaging it.

It was disconcerting enough to discover her breast looked like an apple on a turkey platter next to his hand that she glanced at his face. Sensing the movement, he lifted his head and met

her gaze again. There was no amusement or distain that her breast looked so woefully small compared to the size of his hand. On the contrary, his face had grown taut, his eyes dark and glittering with the need his erection gave ample testimony to.

He lifted his hand from her breast to cup the side of her face, tightening the arm he had around her shoulders at the same time to draw her closer even as he tilted his head toward her and matched his lips to hers. He sucked lightly at her lips, with a slow relish that belied his display of ruthless aggression before even while it set her heart to pounding like a trip-hammer.

He didn't deepen the kiss. Instead, after teasing her with his lips until she'd begun to feel a sense of desperation for more, he lifted his lips from hers and traced the bridge of her nose to her forehead. His hands tightened on her almost convulsively for a moment. She heard him swallow and then his grip on her eased. "Go to bed, Emerald," he murmured against her hair.

She lifted her head and stared at him dizzily, uncomprehendingly.

"Now!" he growled. "Before I do something I'll regret."

She bounded up from his lap and retreated to the bed, almost tripping on the sheet she was dragging in her rush. Embarrassment and anger had joined her confusion and the fear that set her into flight by the time she clambered onto the bed. She settled on the bed as close to the far wall as she

could get, but the desire to curl in upon herself was stronger than the prompting of wounded pride to display her resentment by showing him her back and her indifference.

The problem was that she wasn't indifferent. She drew her knees up to her chest, curling into a tight ball, and tried to convince herself that it didn't bother her that he'd apparently decided he didn't want her after all. It wasn't as if she'd wanted him to paw her! She certainly hadn't volunteered for breeding-as if she was a fucking barnyard animal!

There was nothing wrong with her damned breasts, either! Could she help it if she had perfectly average breasts and his hands were like-pie plates? No! They'd have to be the size of fucking bowling balls, or her head, to fill a hand that size! And who wanted that kind of aggravation?

Her throat closed with emotion.

She told herself that she was angry and fearful.

The last part wasn't a lie. As resentful as she'd been over the plans he had for her, she couldn't help but wonder-now that it seemed she didn't have to worry about that-what she did have to worry about. Would they use her for experiments after all?

He'd suggest that he would let Koryn have her when he was done with her, she recalled, pushing aside the resentment that had caused her at the time. Would he offer her to Koryn now? And what if Koryn didn't want her? What if none of them did?

Did she have any palatable options?

She hadn't realized that it had almost made her feel safe to think that Tariq wanted her, despite her anger and resentment that they treated her as if she was chattel, property to be used and disposed of at will. She knew it was stupid to feel any sense of security about it all, and yet she had nothing else to cling to. She didn't even have that small source of comfort now.

What was she going to do?

What could she do?

She'd told herself that yielding was the only sensible thing to do and yet she couldn't even convince herself that she'd merely tolerated his touch and hidden the revulsion she should have felt.

She had a bad feeling he knew just how much his touch had affected her, too, and that shamed her more than anything else.

She'd almost worn herself out and dropped to sleep by the time he joined her on the bed and yet the moment she felt the mattress dip, she jolted completely awake and tensed all over-fearing/hoping he would reach for her. He did. He took the cover she'd wrapped around her and spread it over the two of them. Even as she curled into a tight ball again, however, he planted a hand on her belly and dragged her back until she could feel the heat of his body and the tickle of

his chest and groin hair along her back. Tucking her head on one rock hard bicep, he curled his other arm around her and then a leg and settled his face against the back of her head.

She was still lying stiff and tense against him when she heard his breathing slow and grow deeper and knew he'd fallen asleep. She couldn't have been less comfortable if she'd been strapped to a rock and yet, somehow, she managed to fall asleep.

The nightmare woke her. Even though she couldn't recall more than a little of it when it jerked her awake, she knew it was the same dream. Tariq's hand glided slowly up her belly and settled between her breasts as she lay panting with residual fear. She thought at first he was merely moving in his sleep, but then he tipped his head downward and she felt his lips along her shoulder.

Her heart calmed its frantic rhythm. Shifting closer until she could feel his heat against her back again, she drifted, comforted by the wall of flesh surrounding her. It flickered through her mind to wonder if he meant to do more and then she dropped into nothingness.

?

Chapter Four

Tariq didn't regret his decision although he was willing to acknowledge that Koryn was right in a sense. He was borderline obsessed with Emerald, but he had been on a purely scientific level and as a potential breeder for the heir he wanted so badly since she'd begun to develop so he didn't see his interest, as keen as it was, as anything to be particularly concerned about. It wasn't obsession in the sense of a pathological need. It was a rational, controllable interest and for equally logical reasons.

His bloodlines were not only important to him, they were important to the Anunnaki or he wouldn't enjoy the position he did among them. Emerald was as close to perfection on a genetic level as he thought he was likely to find among the purebloods, especially considering what they had found, so his decision to breed her was just plain good sense. On a less exalted level, his sexual urges were also completely normal and understandable given his situation. They'd expected to be transporting a large number of the purebloods back to Nibiru and had limited shipboard personnel accordingly. It was his vessel and he was the commander and he was fully aware that he could've brought a woman along to provide for his sexual needs. He'd chosen not to for the simple reason that it would set a bad example for the lower ranks, which was

always a matter of prime consideration for him, and also because he'd fully intended to choose one of the purebloods for his bed as soon as one was available.

He hadn't expected to endure abstinence quite as long as he had and his superior bloodlines didn't protect him from his natural urges any more than it did anyone else. There wasn't a man onboard that wasn't suffering from blue balls as badly as he was except for those who'd found respite in a fellow crewmember.

And he hadn't taken a female crewmember into his bed for the same reason he hadn't brought a woman along to start with-bad example to the others. He firmly believed in leading by example. If he set the highest standards for himself-and he did-his men struggled to give him their best.

He'd been tempted to discard his lofty principles and take care of his needs, more than once, but he hadn't, which made it completely understandable as far as he was concerned that he was now approaching the point of feverish desperation to get his hands on Emerald.

It wasn't obsession. It was need!

Any warm female body would do. He just didn't see any sense in having plain bread when he could sink into a delicious piece of cake only by waiting just a little longer. It was as much a matter of proving to himself that he had the discipline to wait as it was the desire to anticipate rather than capitulate and settle for less than what he wanted.

He wasn't in the habit of settling for less than precisely what he wanted.

If he wasn't entirely happy with the decision, he had no one to blame but himself-and possibly fate-that capricious bitch that supposedly controlled random odds and yet always seemed to stack the deck against everyone, especially when they were at their lowest ebb.

He didn't believe his reasoning was faulty in any way or adversely influenced by his interest in Emerald. He'd made it a point to remove himself as far from that distraction as possible and consider every angle carefully.

He fully intended to load his ship down with purebloods before he returned to Nibiru for the simple reason that failure wasn't an option as far as he was concerned-and returning without them would not only be a failure for him personally. It would be a disaster for the Anunnaki. They needed the purebloods. As badly as everyone hated to admit it, they all knew they were doomed without them. It didn't matter that it was their own poor decisions that had brought about the disaster. They had to deal with it, and the purebloods were their only option of doing so.

He had to consider the possibility, though, that his ship might make the return trip to Nibiru without the numbers he'd anticipated and fewer purebloods meant severely limited supply to demand. Those with power and position would get first choice, as was their right. Those directly beneath them

would get their castoffs and so on until supplies trickled down to the lowest levels. Except supplies wouldn't be trickling far down the scale if they were as limited as what he'd discovered so far and there were too many in the ranks above him, as it stood, for him to get more than a whiff of a pureblood.

He'd decided to take what he wanted while he had the chance-right of conquest plus most superior rank present-and handle any consequences later. He was sure there would be consequences, possibly very unpleasant ones, but that was immaterial as long as he ensured his own lines. Assuming he was successful enough to appease those of higher ranks than he was, he'd also decided to include Koryn for the simple reason that he didn't want anyone of superior rank to his to look too closely at his prize and run the risk being usurped.

And they would exercise their rights if he made it too obvious that he considered Emerald a prize. The only way he could avoid that pitfall was to make it clear that he wasn't obsessed with her or even particularly possessive-in short to make it clear that she was of no particular importance to him at all beyond her breeding capabilities and the only way to do that was to make her available to others-or at least one other.

It was a logical conclusion. He knew it was. Unfortunately, it was also the only thing about his decision that had caused him any revulsion.

He didn't want to share his prize. The sense of possessiveness that twisted sickly in his gut at the mere

thought of sharing did disturb him, but it also strengthened his resolve. He had to share to protect his own interests and that being the case, who better than Koryn, who was almost more like a brother to him than a friend?

He could trust Koryn not to try to stab him in the back by trying to win Emerald's affections.

He thought.

Except he didn't trust the fucking bastard! He just trusted him more than anyone else he could think of.

He didn't need her affection, he assured himself, trying to shake the sick feeling that twisted in his gut every time the thought crossed his mind. He'd claimed her and he was absolutely determined no one's seed would prosper in her belly but his until he was satisfied he'd adequately ensured his bloodlines. He would also enjoy fucking her any time the notion struck him, and his claim took precedence. There was no reason to be particularly disturbed about it even if Koryn did capture her affection. Her first obligation was to him and always would be-unless someone of higher rank usurped him and Koryn was the only hope he had of preventing that unless they found more purebloods-and quickly!

Emerald might well be the key to that-which was yet another completely logical reason for him to consider her of value. When and if her memories returned, she might be able to tell them what had happened to the others or at least give them some idea where to search.

A shout on the other side of the excavation caught his attention. Tariq studied the knot of activity for a moment and finally made his way quickly to the site to see what they'd found. When he was close enough to see that the workers had broken through a wall that appeared to connect to a vast cavern or perhaps a tunnel system, he felt his stomach go weightless with anticipation and excitement.

"Let's get some light down there and see if we can find a way down."

Even as he voiced the order, someone hurried forward with several flares, activated them, and tossed them into the darkness beyond the hole. The glow of the artificial lights illuminated an eerie subterranean cavern that bore all the marks of having been manmade or at least utilized by them for some sort of underground transportation. A pair of rails made of what appeared to be some sort of metal formed a parallel ribbon into the darkness beyond the reach of the light. Tariq could just make out a hulking shadow at the far end that appeared to be a machine of some kind. Closer, a platform had been built several feet above the rails.

"Stairs!" one of the men peering into the cavern announced excitedly.

Tariq surveyed the area until he spotted them. "Get a scanner and let's get a reading on that location."

Impatience flickered through him when they'd determined the

distance and coordinates and found the location on the surface. There was a pile of rubble over it that looked to be at least thirty feet deep. He surveyed it with disgust, considering options. "Let's setup a winch and pulley at the hole we've punched through and lower a couple of men to check it out. If they find anything worth the effort, we can put a group together to clear away the rubble."

They had to send men back to the ship to gather up the tools they needed. Nearly two hours passed before they had men on the ground inside the manmade cavern. Tariq stared at the moving lights impatiently for a moment and finally glanced at the winch operator. "Haul the seat up. I'm going down."

The man looked startled, but he hastened to obey. A few moments later, Tariq stepped through the opening and began his descent. He hadn't reached bottom when he heard a shout from one of the men who'd gone down before him. The voice echoed around the giant chamber, making it difficult to pinpoint the direction, but Tariq saw several other men that seemed to be converging on the same point. Leaping off the crude transport they'd put together the moment it was low enough, he strode quickly toward the other men.

His stomach clenched the moment he drew close enough to see what they'd found.

There was a tangle of six to ten bodies. It looked as if they'd huddled together in a tight knot near one of the back walls. At least half of them appeared to be children.

Thrusting aside his revulsion, he crouched down and studied the group, looking for anything that might tell him their story. He discovered it didn't actually take a lot of imagination or a very long search. "They suffocated." Straightening, he took the portable light he'd brought from his pocket and scanned the walls nearest the bodies. There appeared to be a good bit of soot on the upper parts of the walls but he couldn't be certain it was enough to indicate a fire had killed them. If they'd been sheltering in the area for a while, they would've needed some means of cooking. He couldn't even say for certain that they were huddled together because they'd known what was coming and were terrified. They could've been crowded together for warmth or even comfort from misery.

By the time they'd found the fifth group, Tariq decided, grimly, that he was fairly certain he could dismiss any possibility beyond the first. They'd died cowering in the darkness from something they knew was coming after them. His anger threatened to boil over into rage. Had they turned on each other and fought a war to end all wars? Or had outsiders invaded with the determination to wipe them out? And if that was the case, what would've provoked them? Or had they not needed provocation beyond a desire to destroy?

He realized when he'd finally tamped his anger that they still had nothing to say, positively, that a war had caused the apparent extinction. The Earth had had time to recover from any number of things-including various natural disasters and if something as cataclysmic as an asteroid was responsible, that would also explain why they'd taken shelter below ground

and cowered in terror.

The area they'd discovered was virtually undisturbed. This might be their best chance to track down what had happened.

He returned to the surface and organized the workers into three groups. The group remaining topside would focus on clearing enough rubble to give them easier access to remove the remains. The two going below would divide into a recovery group and an investigative group.

He looked around for Koryn when he'd outlined the plan and discovered Koryn wasn't among the workers. Trying to convince himself that Koryn was working on extracting the DNA from the pair they'd found the day before, he headed back to the ship, but he discovered it was hard to contain the rage seething just below the surface.

* * * *

Koryn relaxed fractionally when he'd gone over the latest scanner results on the developing clones. Everything was testing normal as far as he could see. It was early days in the development, of course, but he didn't see any reason for the alarm that had first smote him when the female's cells had begun to divide and then separated. Clearly, she was genetically predisposed toward that particular trait. Once the cells had split to form two, they'd begun to generate more cells very rapidly that had clustered.

Tariq would be pleased, he thought wryly. It was a shame he

couldn't take credit for it!

Turning his attention to the readings on the male, he studied those with equal care and was satisfied with the development of the two clones he'd managed to coax with the DNA he'd harvested from the male.

He had no idea how desirable the end result was going to be, but the males seemed to be mongoloid, at least, which meant they'd managed to harvest representatives of two races- assuming the cells continued to develop.

The more varied the genes they collected, the more pleased everyone on Nibiru was likely to be since genetic diversity was the objective in collecting the purebloods to start with. With any luck, the clones would be ready to transplant into the larger pods within twenty four hours, Earth time.

Not that luck had been particularly forthcoming in this endeavor!

He hoped to hell they found more soon. At the rate they were going, they were going to have the council breathing down their neck any day, demanding to know what the hell was going on. They should already have made a shipment back to Nibiru.

He didn't envy Tariq!

That thought produced an image of Emerald in his mind, unfortunately, and he abruptly felt a sickening wave of the

emotion he'd just denied. He hadn't realized the proprietary interest he felt toward Emerald went beyond either pride in his achievement, scientific curiosity, or even the general sense of ownership they all felt toward the purebloods who were, after all, theirs, since they had developed them.

Without the interference of the Anunnaki, it seemed likely they would still be little more than the barely intelligent beasts they'd found when they'd first discovered Earth. They hadn't gained much more than a toehold on intelligence in thousands of years of evolution, after all, and still looked, and behaved, more like beasts than human. Even with their knowledge, it had taken them generations to produce something acceptable-not that they'd expected any different. They'd barely scratched the surface on genetic research in those days. Apart from the fact that the indigenous humanoids were amazing similar to them on a genetic level as far as they could tell and perfect for research and development, what they didn't know had far exceeded what they did. They certainly hadn't cracked the codes to accelerate cell regeneration. They hadn't had the ability, then, to speed things up. They'd had to plod along at a virtual snail's pace, waiting for the humanoids to reproduce naturally so that they could study the results of each attempt at manipulating the genetics.

He didn't know how the old ones had had the patience! The advances they'd made since that time made it possible to accelerate cell division at a rate that could take them from first division to a fully matured adult in a matter of weeks and then simply 'turn off' the hyper growth cycle when the clone reached

the target 'age'. And he'd still been in a near fever of impatience for Emerald to reach that point long before she had. Then, off course, they'd had to wait another full week for the cells to stabilize and fully mature before they dared remove her from the pod and awaken her.

Right up until he'd finally managed to drag his attention from Emerald long enough to notice the look in Tariq's eyes, he'd thought he was merely giddy with triumph at having successfully regenerated her from virtually nothing! True, it had crossed his mind, several times, that he finally understood why the old ones were almost obsessive about the purebloods-on a sexual level. He'd thought it strange that they would discuss their defects, their backwardness, and talk about them being the children of the Anunnaki one moment, and then reminisce with such yearning about the lovers they'd taken among them. Because, of course, their life cycles were woefully short and, speaking purely from a scientific perspective, it hadn't been desirable to lengthen their life spans. It was enough of a headache to complete their research as it was and there'd actually been some debate over shortening their life spans so that they could get results faster.

Their imperfections should have made them repulsive, or undesirable at the very least, but he'd realized as soon as Emerald became recognizable as a being that the imperfections were not only minute, they were what made the purebloods so fascinating-at least part of what made them so fascinating. He hadn't enjoyed studying the most beautiful Anunnaki woman he'd ever seen nearly as much. Physical

perfection, he'd realized, could be downright boring, whereas he'd never tired of studying Emerald because every time he did, he noticed something different-had begun to realize he never would-just about the time he realized that his sense of possessiveness went well beyond a scientist's love of and territorialism for his pet project.

He would've been better off if he'd never reached that understanding, he thought with disgust, because it changed nothing beyond making him furious and miserable.

Actually, more accurately, he would have been better off if he could've remained objective about Emerald. He'd had as much to gain by taking part in the expedition as everyone else, but he couldn't say that he'd been particularly keen about the necessity. He had, in point of fact, been furious that they'd been so arrogant as to allow themselves to get to such a pass-as pissed off with himself as anyone else since it hadn't occurred to him what they'd done, either, until they'd had their noses rubbed in it!

It still disgusted him that they'd been so blinded by their pursuit of perfection and longevity that it hadn't occurred to any of them that they were cutting their own throats. Generation by generation they'd winnowed out 'the ugly and undesirable' until they'd reached the point where they'd so bottlenecked their gene pool that everything they'd worked for had collapsed like a house of cards!

Of course, as far as he was concerned the entire fucking mess was the fault of the old ones-the cloners! Five hundred

years or so should be enough fucking 'lifetime' for any damned body! But, no, they'd decided they needed more. They were too important, themselves, to pass down their knowledge and power. They were needed.

Unfortunately, the council had agreed with them. They'd gone a step beyond that, though, requiring that anyone with such skills and scientific knowledge be resurrected for the good of the Anunnaki.

And look where that had gotten them all! An entire generation of young that was so hideously defective they'd had to abort the whole crop! It had thrown everyone into a blind panic-including him!

So while he'd agreed it was absolutely necessary to collect enough fresh contributors for their gene pool among the 'children', he hadn't been terribly enthusiastic about it when he knew from the data on them that they were considered purebloods only because they were the baseline for the Anunnaki-without improvement.

He had no trouble, under the circumstances, understanding why it rankled so much that he might not end up with one at all, let alone a prime choice. He had his own lines to think of, after all. But Emerald ... He realized he hadn't thought about his bloodlines at all once he'd become so enthralled with her. Nothing had really crossed his mind but the fact that she was his ... until Tariq had brought him back to reality with a jolt!

From the moment she'd left the pod she'd ceased to be 'his'

and become the property of the Anunnaki-which meant, as it always had-that she would have to go through the selection process until the higher ranks had made their choices before he would even have a chance at making a selection himself.

And he couldn't honestly see that happening. Maybe he was obsessed with Emerald and no one else would want her, would think she was the most beautiful, desirable creature ever conceived, but he didn't believe that, hadn't believed it from the moment he realized Tariq was as fascinated with her as he was.

What he didn't understand was why he felt like beating Tariq to a pulp every time he thought about the fact that Tariq had claimed first rights. Tariq was well within his rights considering his position. It had never particularly bothered him before and, besides that, Tariq had offered to share her. Even if Tariq wanted to breed several children on her, eventually, he would get the chance, and he didn't even have to wait that long to slake his desire for her. Tariq had said that he could fuck her as soon as he was certain she was breeding.

It wasn't as if the two of them hadn't shared lovers in the past!

There was no getting around the fact that he didn't want to share her at all, however, or that he resented the fact that she would belong to Tariq and he must make do with seconds.

Short of killing Tariq, though, which he was unnerved to admit even to himself had crossed his mind, there was no changing the situation.

Unless the female he was currently developing appealed to Tariq more, he thought abruptly.

Or they found another that appealed to him.

He sure as fuck couldn't have more than one when they were in such short supply!

It would be a week before he even had any idea what this female would look like, though! All he did know was that she was Caucasian like Emerald, and had the genetics that would make her tall and slender, blue eyed and blond haired.

Another with red hair might have come closer to appealing to Tariq, he thought.

Dismissing his thoughts with an effort, he checked the time and realized why his stomach felt as if it was gnawing a hole in itself. He'd missed breakfast when he headed to the lab and it was past the noon meal time.

Emerald should be able to tolerate something a little more substantial without adverse reaction. With that thought, he left the lab and went to the ship's galley to chose something he thought might tempt her appetite and grab something for himself, as well. He could dine with her and use the opportunity to see how her mind was developing. Maybe she had remembered something of value by now?

He was still uneasy about her lack of memory. He'd put it down

to the length of time that had passed since her death. Ordinarily, they resurrected, if they were going to, with fresh samples and, naturally enough, the fresher the better. And, of course, he hadn't been able to retrieve even as much genetic material from her remains as they liked to have. It had been a full strand, though, as far as he'd been able to determine. There shouldn't have been such a gap in her memory. He could understand a delay in retrieving the memories from the DNA, but nothing like they'd seen so far-with Emerald and the others.

It was almost as if someone had deliberately tampered with their memories-but that didn't make sense. Granted, the purebloods had come a long way, technologically speaking, since the last reports on their progress, but even if they'd begun playing with genetics themselves, why would they deliberately damage the memory strands?

He discovered when he arrived at Tariq's quarters that Emerald was asleep. He wasn't surprised. She'd only been out of the pod a few days. She was bound to sleep a very great deal at first.

After a brief debate with himself, he decided to allow her to sleep a few more minutes before he woke her and carried the trays to the table to deposit them. He didn't think he would've noticed she was in distress if he had simply settled to wait, but he hadn't been able to resist moving back to the bed to watch her as he had while she was in the pod. Almost the moment he settled on the edge of the mattress, he saw that her face

was twisted with some strong emotion she shouldn't have been experiencing in deep sleep.

He frowned. He'd noticed the other two they'd resurrected had seemed to suffer a similar phenomena-nightmares. Was it memories her mind was trying to repress for some reason, he wondered?

The internal debate was shorter that time. If it was memories, he needed to try to bring them out. Speaking in a quiet monotone, he tried to reach her subconscious without waking her. "Relax ..." Slowly, she relaxed yielding to his hypotonic suggestion. "What do you see, Emerald?"

"They're coming," she whispered.

Koryn felt his heart leap, but it was hard decide whether it was the suggestion that he'd been right about the dream or a reaction to the fear in her voice. "Who?"

"They'll overrun us."

That seemed, indisputably, a reference to a military operation. He was just about to suggest she go back further when he heard a sound behind him. He glanced around sharply and discovered Tariq had come in and had obviously leapt to the wrong conclusion. The absolute fury on his face, however, rather than unnerve him, shot adrenaline through his system and a responsive anger. He surged to his feet just as Tariq reached him. Tariq grabbed him around the throat before he could speak, squeezing tightly and cutting off any attempt he

might've made to explain the situation at that point.

Not that he felt like attempting it. Rage enveloped him in a red haze. He gripped Tariq's wrists, trying to wrench hands loose and when that didn't work, balled his hands into fists and pummeled them into his stomach. He managed to catch Tariq on the solar plexus, which knocked the breath from him and loosened his grip fractionally, but he was at a disadvantage. He was a scientist, not a trained fighter. He tried to free himself from Tariq's grip again and when that failed, caught Tariq's throat in a similar hold.

Dizziness had already begun to envelop his mind, however, and although he squeezed with all the fury and grim determination he could muster, he doubted he could've broken the deadlock if Tariq hadn't abruptly released his hold and drove a fist toward his face. It broke his own hold on Tariq and he stumbled back.

"I told you not to touch her," Tariq said through gritted teeth.

The effort to suck in a reviving breath of air past his crushed throat set Koryn to coughing. "She's asleep," he managed to say finally.

"If you think that makes me less inclined to kill you where you stand . . .," Tariq growled.

"Hypnotized. She remembered something," Koryn snarled.

That gave Tariq pause. He glanced toward Emerald, studied

her for a long moment and then looked at Koryn again.
"Explain."

Koryn glared at him angrily. "I brought her something to eat and saw she was asleep. I thought I'd let her rest a few more minutes before I woke her, but then I noticed she seemed to be dreaming something that distressed her. I decided to see if I could coax it out ... if it was a memory."

Tariq's rage subsided but he made no attempt to hide the fact that he was still both angry and suspicious. "Maybe you could explain to me why you brought her food instead of sending a droid with it?"

Koryn studied him uncomfortably, feeling a good bit of his own anger subside as the question prompted the realization that Tariq wasn't paranoid. He'd come specifically because he'd wanted to spend the time with Emerald and knew Tariq was on the dig site. He hadn't consciously considered trying to seduce her, but it occurred to him that he'd hoped for an opportunity. "She's still my charge," he gritted out instead of admitting he'd only come because he wanted to see her.

And because he'd intended more if the chance presented itself.

"There's some reason it's better to check on her when I'm not here?"

Koryn's lips tightened. "I wasn't aware that you'd forbidden it," he growled.

Tariq narrowed his eyes. "Was I wrong to trust you, Koryn?"

Discomfort wafted through him. "In Emerald's case ... possibly," he admitted reluctantly.

Tariq looked for several moments as if he might explode again. He wrestled with it and finally paced away. "We have been friends a very long time, Koryn."

Koryn shook his head. "Regardless of what you obviously think, I had no intention of trespassing," he said finally.

"Unless the opportunity arose?" Tariq prompted with keen insight that made Koryn uncomfortable all over again.

He shrugged, but reluctant amusement flickered through him. "I couldn't honestly say." He raked a hand through his disheveled hair, making it more of a mess. "Not consciously," he added after a moment. He scrubbed his hands over his face as if he could wipe away the last several minutes that had put a severe strain on a longstanding friendship. "I wasn't thinking straight, I guess, but, whatever it looked like, the only reason you found me as you did was because of the dream."

Tariq moved back to the bed to stand over it, staring down at Emerald. He glanced at Koryn after a moment. "So ... finish what you started."

Koryn moved back to the bed and settled on it as he had before. "Emerald ... tell me where you are now."

She didn't answer for several moments. "In position." She hesitated. "I don't have much ammunition."

"There's a war?"

"Yes." Some emotion flickered across her face. "The stupid bastards!"

Koryn lifted his brows and flicked a look at Tariq. Tariq, he saw, had moved closer to hear. "What started the war?"

Emerald frowned and moved restlessly. "They attacked them. We'll pay. We'll all pay."

Koryn looked at Tariq. "Who are you talking about, Emerald?"

"The government ordered it. It was ours. They didn't know Stupid, arrogant bastards!"

"This was a territorial dispute?"

"The new world. The colony. Then the cowards ran and left us to die. We're all going to die. They're coming! Oh god! There are so many of them!"

"It's alright, Emerald. They aren't here. They can't hurt you." He calmed her down and then lifted the hypnotic trance he'd placed on her.

He met Tariq's gaze for a long moment and the two of them crossed the room. "I'm guessing Emerald took part in their

last stand here," Tariq said when Koryn joined him. "We found a tunnel system in the city. There are bodies everywhere-all civilians as far we've seen."

"They left," Koryn said, feeling curiously blank. "They must have developed far more superior technology than anyone on Nibiru guessed if they colonized another world."

"They had to have. There's nothing in this system suitable for colonization-nothing close to the Earth as far as habitability." He glanced toward Emerald when his attention was caught by movement. "Do you think she'll recall anything?"

Koryn frowned. "I don't know in all honesty. It's almost like someone deliberately erased their memories."

"I might have disagreed with you on that before," Tariq said slowly. "Now We have to consider they had the technology to do so and I'm guessing they had a strong motivation. I don't think they were simply abandoned here when the others left. I think they were given the task of holding the enemy so that the others had a chance to escape. If they had the capability to do so, it would've made sense to make certain the enemy couldn't find out where the others went. It seems pretty clear from what we've found so far that they made a dangerous enemy, or their leaders did, and underestimated their strength. They came to wipe them out, not merely to retaliate."

"Gods! How the hell are we going to figure out how to find them?"

Tariq shook his head. "I don't know, but unless this war of theirs set them back technologically, I don't think we're going to find the children of the Anunnaki. We might well find another war."

?

Chapter Five

It took Emerald several moments to catch her breath and calm her runaway heart. There was nothing unusual about that. Every time she'd woken from the nightmare she could never remember once awake, she'd felt as if she'd been running from something or fighting or both. For the first time since the nightmares had begun plaguing her sleep, however, they lingered over her like a weighty mantel and slowly but surely, it settled inside her that the nightmare was real-a memory, not merely some imaginary thing that frightened her.

Fragmented images filled her mind chaotically as she lay

staring at the ceiling, trying to sort them and make sense of them. The emotions came through with far more clarity, though, than what had actually happened. She felt those with such an intensity that they peaked once more and she had to struggle to calm herself down again before she could even try to piece together what had happened-the details.

She knew what had happened. She'd died and everyone around her had fallen beneath the heel of their enemy.

She sat up abruptly on that thought. "The people in the subway!" she gasped, struggling to get up from the bed and discovering she was tangled in the covers.

She didn't even see Tariq until he was nearly upon her-a huge dark, unrecognizable form that made her heart nearly lurch out of her chest when he swooped down on her and gathered her into his arms. For several moments, panic gripped her and she fought to free herself, convinced that one of the aliens had caught her.

"Stop it! You're safe."

Recognition pierced her panic and she ceased her efforts to break free and gripped him frantically instead. "They're coming! We have to go!"

"They're gone, Emerald," he said soothingly. "They left a long time ago."

That caught her attention. She pushed away from him far

enough to search his face for the truth and then reality lurched awkwardly into focus, fitting itself over the residual memories. She didn't struggle when he pulled her against his chest again and began to stroke her soothingly. A shudder went through her, but she didn't feel trapped or overwhelmed. She felt ... safe, felt as if she was more sheltered by his bulk than she would've been by a bunker. His warmth filtered into her, dissipating the cold that had seemed to go bone deep. "There are ... were people in the subway and the sewers. We sent them there to protect them."

Tariq lifted her and carried her across the room. Settling in the chair with her where he'd sat the night before, teasing her and then sending her away, he arranged her comfortably across his lap, just as he had then, curling an arm around her as he tucked her into the crook of one arm. The memory flickered through her mind, but she was too needy for the comfort he offered to give any precedence to her wounded pride from that incident. She snuggled closer, burrowing her face against his chest, trying to block out the memories she'd been trying so hard to bring to light.

"What started it, child?" he murmured after several moments.

The sudden urge to weep like a child made her chest tight. She fought that urge just as she had the fear and the sense of hopelessness that had threatened to engulf her, struggling to focus on the question and trying to remember. "It was the new colony," she said finally. "I don't really know. We heard that the colonists met with hostiles shortly after they arrived. We heard

they were trying to negotiate a treaty and then the next thing we heard was that the aliens had attacked, that there was a terrible battle and most of the colonists and the military escort that had accompanied them had been killed. It was shortly after that that we discovered the aliens had tracked them back to Earth and were coming."

She felt silent, trying to remember more. "We'd heard they were backwards primitives," she said after a moment. "Everyone was shocked when they heard the primitives had wiped out the entire colony. Nobody believed it. And then, when we heard they were coming after us, we realized it must have been the colonists that had provoked it-or maybe the military-but nobody believed the military would've acted without orders. Everyone blamed the government, believed they'd been the aggressors, but we only knew what we'd been told, what was on the news.

"We knew when we heard they had attacked the outer solar bases that we were going to be overrun. They managed to get a report back before ... before we lost communications. There weren't enough ships to evacuate everyone-hardly anyone, actually. We-the military-was ordered to stay behind and fight, to make sure the ships got away and to try to protect the civilians who had no way to escape. Our prime directive, though, was to throw everything we had at them and engage them so aggressively that they would have to focus on us so that the evacuees had a chance to escape."

Tariq's hand paused when she stopped. "You were part of the

military force?"

Emerald frowned, considering that, and felt a sudden wave of loss envelop her. It might've completely undermined her efforts to control her emotions except that a sense of relief and hope was part of it. "I volunteered to stay," she said with an effort. "There wasn't room on the ships for everyone. Part of the forces were to go with the ships to try to protect them, but if you volunteered to take part in the Earth defenses, you could get a ticket. I stayed so I could send my daughter, Cara, to safety. And because I couldn't send anyone else and I wanted to be part of the forces that stayed to try to protect them."

A knot of emotion formed in her throat, making it difficult to swallow. "I saved her," she murmured, trying to convince herself. "We held them long enough the ships got away."

Tariq gave her a few moments to compose herself. "Where did they go, Emerald?"

Emerald's heart skipped several beats as awareness abruptly descended over her that the man she was cuddled so trustingly against was an alien—just as those who'd attacked them had been. Not the same alien race. Those who'd attacked were horrible creatures that barely looked humanoid—but still an enemy of humans! She didn't give a damn whether they called her child or not, called humans the children of the Anunnaki! They considered the humans belonged to them! She hadn't died to protect her daughter just to tell them where to find her!

She pushed away from him abruptly and sat up. She would've leapt to her feet and put more distance between them if she hadn't known it would only result in a useless struggle. "I couldn't tell you if I wanted to. I volunteered to stay and that meant volunteering for a memory erase to keep the enemy from finding out where they'd gone."

Tariq studied her speculatively. "And you wouldn't tell me if you could," he said flatly.

Emerald searched his face. "No, I wouldn't."

"Don't you want to know that your daughter's safe?"

Emerald sent a sharp glance toward Koryn. She hadn't even realized he was there until he'd asked the question. "Not badly enough to let your people enslave her," she retorted coldly. At any rate, she knew her daughter was safe! There was more she still didn't remember than she did, but the one thing she was completely convinced of was that they'd halted the invasion at Earth's doorstep. They'd thrown everything they had at them and destroyed most of the invading fleet, damaged them so badly they'd focused on a ground war. The enemy might have defeated them in the end. She didn't know. She'd fallen here-at the city-but she knew they hadn't succeeded in wiping out mankind, even though it was abundantly clear that was their intention.

God only knew what they'd done to provoke it, but she had a very bad feeling that they had provoked it. They'd felt their own needs superseded all other considerations, that they were the

most important species, when they'd set out to colonize and, to an extent, she'd agreed with the general consensus.

She still thought that they'd allowed their arrogance to overcome good sense in their dealings with the aliens that had attacked them, but she didn't know that for certain. They might have made an earnest attempt to negotiate. It might well have been impossible. The aliens who'd attacked had certainly proven they were vicious, vindictive bastards and maybe they'd been that way from the start-impossible to deal with without a fight to the death? To her, they'd seemed like monsters-scarier than any nightmare. Maybe humans had looked that way to them and all they'd been able to focus on was eradicating the nightmare creatures so that they couldn't be a threat to them?

She could see she'd angered both of Tariq and Koryn, but that was just too damned bad! Maybe everything they'd told her was true and they would've still been living in caves and chucking spears if not for the Anunnaki. She didn't know, and it didn't matter. They weren't children anymore to be awed by the 'god-like' aliens! They certainly didn't owe the Anunnaki anything for choosing them as guinea pigs!

Tariq's eyes narrowed but after a moment he merely set her on her feet and got up. "Koryn was thoughtful enough to bring your midday meal. Unfortunately, although he'd thought to join you, I'm afraid I'll have to deprive you of company. We have business to attend to."

Disconcerted, Emerald frowned uneasily at the two men as

they strode from Tariq's quarters.

Not that they'd mistreated her since she'd awoken, but she would've expected a more violent reaction than that from most anyone.

Guilt flickered through her at that thought. Despite everything, they'd been unfailingly considerate of her, kind and gentle in spite of their arrogant superiority complex-which, she supposed, they at least had reason to feel. As annoying as that was, it would have been far more irritating if she hadn't seen them as superior beings herself in most every way.

It occurred to her that they must think they had some other way of obtaining the information since they hadn't pressured her for it and it was clear that they were determined to discover whatever remained of the human race.

Or maybe they were just trying to use psychology on her, trying to make her think they had another way to get the information so that she would let her guard down?

A cold wave washed over her abruptly as another memory surfaced. They were excavating for the remains of the people who'd died here and her platoon had been stationed to defend the entrance to the subway where those who hadn't had the chance to flee the city had been sent for safety. She'd told them when she woke from her nightmare! For several moments, wild ideas of somehow diverting them chased back and forth across her mind. Just about the time she acknowledged the futility of trying anything, however, it

dawned on her that no one in the subway was likely to have the information they were seeking. Everyone knew they had established colonies on several different planets. She didn't doubt that they knew the names that had been given to the planets. She realized it was highly unlikely that the Anunnaki would find anyone who knew the star systems where those planets were, though, or would be able to give them any kind of description that might help them narrow down the possibilities.

Those who'd remained on Earth after the exodus had little interest in the other colonies. They'd considered themselves 'caretakers' of the home world and it was entirely possible that was the real reason many of them had stayed, to guard human interest in the home world until it's climate stabilized again and made it more welcoming. For the most part, though, those who'd remained hadn't actually stayed by choice. They simply hadn't had the option of going to one of the new worlds either because they had no skills that made them desirable colonists or they couldn't afford to make the trip and often both.

She'd joined the military because she'd known it was her only hope of getting off planet and settling with her daughter on one of the colony worlds. She hadn't wanted to leave earth at first. Sure they had problems due to the climate change, which had caused global economic instability, but it was home and the colonies had their own problems. Besides that she hadn't wanted to leave her family behind when there was a strong possibility that she'd never see them again.

She'd lost her reasons for staying over the years, though, lost those closest to her, and as Cara grew older, she'd come to see that there were far better opportunities for her daughter on the colony worlds.

She'd expected to get the chance to go with her, though, hoped she might at least have the chance to join her later even though she'd known that was doubtful.

Grief swelled in her chest at the thought, making it hard to breathe, but she struggled to tamp it as she had since she'd sent Cara away. Her daughter was safe and that was far more important than anything else. She not only had the chance for life. She had the chance of a good life, far more opportunities than she would've had on Earth even if not for the war.

She was just sorry for herself that she couldn't be there to watch her life unfold.

She didn't presently see any possibility of it, at any rate. She wouldn't even be alive now if not for the Anunnaki and she wasn't convinced, yet, that they'd done her a favor. She had a bad feeling she never would be convinced of that.

Thrusting her depressing thoughts aside after a moment, she focused on eating what she could of the food Koryn had brought, reminding herself that she had to get stronger to even look for opportunities. She felt stronger already than she had a few days before and she'd recovered enough of her memories to have both a past and some hope for a future.

Beyond having a goal, she didn't allow herself to dwell too much on Cara. She hadn't since she'd sent her away to protect her and now wasn't the time to allow herself to get bogged down in useless emotions. She had to survive first before she had possibilities.

* * * *

Koryn was so consumed by jealousy that it wasn't until they reached the dig that he emerged sufficiently to feel any curiosity at all about what Tariq had found. It had bothered him just knowing that Tariq had her in his quarters. He'd convinced himself, though, that Tariq wasn't fool enough to risk Emerald just to appease his needs and, unfortunately, he'd assumed that meant that Tariq would keep his distance.

Clearly the bastard saw no reason not to gentle her to hand while he waited, though. She not only hadn't put up any resistance when he'd carried her to the chair and cuddled her, she'd clung to him. The sight had been enough to make him so sick with rage that he'd wavered for a time between the urge to throw up and the urge to drag Emerald out of his lap and resume what they'd started earlier.

Emerald's distress was the only thing that had kept him firmly planted where he was. The memories he'd helped to surface were clearly far more traumatic even than he'd expected and he'd been worried enough about her dealing with them emotionally that he'd managed to retain a slender thread of sanity. Not much more than that, but at least a little self-control.

The underhanded bastard was using her emotional frailty, her need for comfort to accustom her to his touch!

Not that he could see that Tariq had succeeded all that well, he thought with some satisfaction. She didn't trust him, despite his efforts.

Of course, she didn't trust him either!

That rankled almost more than the fact that she'd at least trusted Tariq enough to calm her when he thought she ought to have been more inclined to turn to him. He was the one who'd revived her, after all. She'd responded to his hypnosis with trust!

And yet he'd gotten the distinct impression that she wasn't even aware he was in the room until he'd spoken-which was proof positive his mind was just so much mush! What in the hell had possessed him to pose such a question, he wondered, thoroughly disgusted with himself? He should have known better! Tariq might still be laboring under the impression that the humans were vastly inferior intellectually to the Anunnaki, but he'd studied their genome thoroughly. He knew they were the equal of the Anunnaki in that respect-maybe not technologically but even that was debatable now, when they'd discovered the humans had mastered space travel to an extent that had allowed them to colonize other worlds.

If he'd been thinking straight, he would've known that that would instantly set off alarms and inspire distrust!

The truth was, he thought disgustedly, that he'd been too focused on trying to gain her attention and her trust to think before he spoke.

Not that he thought the fault was entirely his! Tariq had completely underestimated the humans in general and her in particular. Granted, it was hard to shake the preconceptions they'd had when they'd been sent to collect the 'children'. Everyone back on Nibiru still thought of the humans as the simple, easily manipulated and awed beings they'd dealt with in the beginning.

Tariq's 'slip' in front of her-because of his ungovernable temper where she was concerned!-had done more damage than either of them had realized at the time. He thought she would've been inclined to trust them if she hadn't learned their plans before they'd had time to build any real trust, but Tariq had fucked up any possibility of that! Her reaction to his attempt to persuade her to open up was proof of that!

"Don't tell me you're still sulking over the woman," Tariq said dryly, jerking Koryn from his thoughts.

He felt his face heat with a mixture of anger and discomfort. "I suppose you wouldn't be 'sulking' as you call it if the shoe was on the other foot?" he growled.

Tariq sent him a speculative look, considered it, and finally shrugged, smiling thinly. "Point taken. You'll get your chance with her. I gave my word-as little as I like the necessity."

Koryn's lips tightened. "I think you're underestimating Emerald and I think you might come to regret it. You need to try to wrap your mind around the fact that she isn't a 'child' in any sense of the word."

"The humans are very child-like," Tariq said with amusement.

"So we were told," Koryn snapped, "and I have no doubt that was true-once upon a time."

"They progressed. It was only to be expected. We gave them the tools they needed, after all, to build a civilization and helped them to evolve far more rapidly than they would have without our interference."

Koryn was about to argue further when it dawned on him abruptly that Tariq's attitude was his advantage-quite possibly the only one he might have. If he was too hardheaded and narrow minded to see that treating Emerald like a simpleminded child was only going to push her further away, then all the better for him. "If you say so," he murmured, struggling to keep his voice neutral.

Tariq sent a suspicious glance in his direction, but he kept his gaze firmly fixed on the city as they approached it. The frenzied activity at the dig distracted both of them from their focus on Emerald and the disharmony that had arisen between the two of them because of their mutual interest in her.

Koryn found that he was both relieved and eager to shift his focus to his vocation. He wasn't accustomed to dealing with jealousy at all, let alone anything as stomach churningly intense as he'd experienced lately and he was almost as perturbed over the cracks that had developed in his friendship with Tariq. This was familiar ground and soothing because it was. Beyond that, the discovery of so many boosted his flagging spirits in regards to the success of their mission. He grinned at Tariq when he'd examined the remains of the bodies that had been recovered thus far. "These are far better preserved. I think we can count on extracting useable materials."

Tariq's expression was grim despite the satisfaction that flickered in his eyes. "I would like to find the bastards that did this and wipe them out," he said tightly. "They were defenseless. They couldn't have posed any threat to the bastards."

Koryn felt his belly clench. With his mind redirected toward the tragedy itself rather than the scientific aspects of the situation, he turned to study the scene through new eyes and felt the same emotions he'd sensed in Tariq-fury at the mercilessness of those who'd killed so many. "Do you think there's any chance of discovering who was responsible? I don't imagine you would get much of an argument against launching a retaliation if we could find out. I think most everyone on Niribu will be livid over this when they were our wards."

"Maybe," Tariq said, his expression taut. "Most of them are far

more interested in breeders than anything else. They'll be appeased enough if we can produce them in sufficient numbers, but I'm sure the old ones, at least, would support a campaign." He seemed to force himself to relax after a moment, rubbing at the tension in his neck. "Unfortunately, I'm not sure we have any chance of discovering who's responsible. I'd put the chances somewhere around zero if we can accept what Emerald told us. These people were the castoffs of their own society or they wouldn't have been left here to die. If they'd been important to the humans, they would've been evacuated."

"Not necessarily," Koryn countered. "It doesn't look to me as if they had much time to prepare for the attack. Undoubtedly, the most powerful and important would've had the first seats, but we don't know what they had available to facilitate an evacuation. Room might have been severely limited-must have been or everyone would've been evacuated."

"I guess we'll see what we see," Tariq said coolly. "How much time are we looking at here?"

Koryn frowned thoughtfully, relieved to turn his focus to the task at hand. "We hadn't expected to have to deal with anything like this. Our cloning facilities are extremely limited. If we contacted Niribu, we could get what we needed to process them in mass. If we're to be limited to what's available ... I can grow a dozen at the time and have a dozen more ready for the pods when those are developed enough to take them out. Even allowing the first a few weeks to fully mature, we could

go ahead and send two dozen. The second batch would be matured enough by the time they reach Niribu."

"So we're looking at months," Tariq said with obvious disgust. "Do what you can for now. I'd rather hold off on contacting the council about the situation. We might still find survivors and that would appease the council members somewhat." He was silent for several moments. "Process everything as it comes in and select the best for quickest processing. There's no point in wasting time on the less than desirable-unless that's all we find."

"I see your point, but Emerald and the others were excellent specimens. I'm optimistic quality, at least, isn't going to be an issue for us."

Tariq wasn't as convinced as he would've liked to be. He thought Emerald's bloodlines were inarguably excellent, but he was inclined to consider her a rare gem. It remained to be seen whether he was right or Koryn.

He was rooting for Koryn.

Dismissing the headache for the time being, he made his way back to the ship. Emerald had defied him and he wasn't as confident that he knew how to deal with her rebelliousness as he would've liked to be. He had no doubt that he could break her to his will, if that had been desirable, but it didn't take much of a search to realize it wasn't. A part of what had drawn him to Emerald, aside from her physical appearance, was her quiet strength. He didn't want to break her spirit any more than

he'd wanted to implant false memories that might subtly, or significantly, alter her personality.

Truthfully, the rebelliousness had come as a surprise-and not a particularly pleasant one. He'd been certain he was well on his way to taming her to hand and hadn't anticipated any real difficulties in training her to please him in bed. Her withdrawal and distrust had shaken that conviction and he wasn't pleased about that, either.

He would've been far more than displeased if they hadn't discovered so many humans in the underground that it seemed to make her cooperation in giving them information a moot point. If not for that, he would've had no choice but to force her to give up the information they needed, whatever the consequences to her.

It still pissed him off that she'd refused.

And he couldn't allow her to be openly defiant even if he did admire her spirit. It would be completely unacceptable once he got her back to Nibiru. He had to make her understand that his patience and indulgence of her would only go so far and no further.

By the time he reached the ship again, he realized exactly what he wanted to do to teach her the error of defying him.

* * * *

It startled Emerald when the door opened and the Android that

had been set to guard her entered and approached her where she sat in one of the large chairs in the lounging area of Tariq's quarters. He knelt in front of her and indicated that she was to extend her foot. Reluctance instantly slithered through her but riding it was the unwelcome certainty that wrestling for possession of her foot wouldn't go well for her. That certainty increased to uneasiness when he lifted his head and met her gaze when she failed to comply immediately.

Regardless of what they'd told her, there was intelligence in his eyes and determination, not the dead look of a thing that had no life of its own beyond the mechanics that powered it.

Swallowing against the sudden dryness in her mouth, she shifted her weight from her legs and held out the foot he'd tapped with his hand.

His gaze skimmed the length of her leg and focused for a handful of seconds at the juncture of her thighs, just long enough to increase the sense that he was far more than a machine but not long enough to solidly confirm that suspicion. Her heart fluttered, but she couldn't decide if it was from anxiety, a flare of hope, or a combination of both and a purely physical reaction to his interest-or what appeared to be interest.

"You aren't Koryn's assistant, Roth," she murmured when he settled her heel on his hard knee and began to unwind the bandaging on her foot. "What's your name?"

As closely as she watched him she couldn't see that he'd

heard her let alone understood, and yet she still felt like he had.

With calm deliberation, he completely removed the bandage, dropped it to the floor and examined her foot with his gaze.

"They said you weren't ... real, that you were a machine and that you hadn't been programmed to understand my language," she said tentatively when he lifted her foot to study the bright pink new skin where here blisters had been. "Your hands feel real to me."

He flicked a brief look at her face at that. His dark, tawny brows drew together over the bridge of his nose as he returned his gaze to her foot. He hesitated. After a long moment, he stroked the new skin lightly with the ball of his thumb, as if he was testing it, though it almost seemed more like he was trying to soothe the angry color.

There was nothing detached or unfeeling about his touch. Emerald refused to believe that she could react the way she had if it was. "It isn't as if they talk to me or would listen to me, you know. We're lower life forms as far they're concerned."

He curled his fingers around her ankle and lifted her foot. Instead of settling it on the chair, however, he moved her leg to one side before he released it. She might have thought there was no motive behind it except that his gaze once more traveled her thigh to the lips of her sex-which he'd exposed very deliberately to his view by that move-lingering a second longer than before. Again, she felt an uncomfortable flutter, this

time in both her chest and her lower belly.

He flicked a look upward at her face. "I am Aeon," he said, his voice sounding rusty, almost harsh. "Tariq's man. You will not fare well among the Anunnaki if you cannot learn to accept your place."

Anger flickered through her as he took her other foot and guided it to rest on his knee. "You didn't have to, though, did you? They created you as a ... machine, so you have no feelings."

His face hardened, but he focused on unwrapping the bandages on her foot.

"It's curious to me, though If you're nothing but a machine and have no feelings I can't help but wonder why you have any interest in studying my pussy."

Dark color tinged his cheeks, but there was grim amusement in his eyes when he flicked a look at her. "I have an interest in keeping my dick. I have no need for one to serve Tariq."?

Emerald eyed Tariq warily when he entered the room some time later. She couldn't see any sign of the anger from earlier, but his expression and his manner were purposeful enough that she felt a flicker of uneasiness as he crossed the cabin and disappeared inside the small compartment beside the facilities where he'd gotten the clothing he'd allowed her to wear before. When he reappeared, he was carrying a strap-like object that looked like a belt and Emerald felt her uneasiness deepen even though he hadn't once glanced in her direction since he'd returned. Maybe because he seemed intent on behaving as if she was invisible?

He sat down on the edge of his bunk. "Come here, Emerald."

Emerald sent him a startled look. He was focused on removing his boots, though, and she almost managed to convince herself she hadn't heard him summon her.

She knew when he looked up and met her gaze with a look of hard determination that she hadn't misheard him. He hadn't 'forgotten' her refusal to answer his questions earlier or decided to overlook it.

Her eyes widened as he stood up. Contrary to her expectations, however, he didn't stride across the room to fetch her. He turned his attention to removing his clothing.

Realizing his intent instantly, Emerald's heart slammed

against her chest wall so hard it knocked the breath from her. She threw a glance toward the door, wondering if she could reach it and escape before he could catch her. When she dragged her gaze from the door, however, she discovered that Tariq had seen her glance at the door.

"You wouldn't like the consequences if you tried that," he murmured pleasantly. "I might, but I'm convinced you wouldn't."

A shiver skated down her spine.

"I'm fairly certain you also won't like it if I'm forced to repeat myself."

Emerald swallowed with an effort, so panicked by that time it took her a moment to realize what he was referring to and several moments more to convince herself to respond to the summons rather than try to flee. She chastised herself for the impulse, which she knew would be futile and would almost certainly result in discovering what he'd meant by his veiled promise. She was a soldier, she reminded herself. Any woman knew rape was almost inevitable if she was captured by the enemy. She'd been trained to deal with it.

All she had to do was to make like a dead fish, focus her mind away from whatever he did to her, and endure with a pretense of indifference. If it didn't completely wreck his 'mood' it would certainly spare her a great deal of pain and humiliation.

It still took all she could do to get up from the chair and cross the room obediently. She didn't think she could've managed it

then except that he sent her an impatient look that she was afraid was her last warning.

Naked now, he sat down on the edge of the bed as she approached with lagging feet and picked up the strap he'd dropped on the bed when he undressed. She stopped when she was just beyond his reach. She knew it was mistake, but she didn't think she could take another step without her knees buckling.

He was far more magnificent than she'd dreamed possible, too beautifully perfect even for his nakedness to seem obscene-and he seemed twice as big as he had before, which was saying something when she almost felt as if she was in the presence of giants any time she was close to either him or Koryn.

He lifted his free hand and summoned her closer with the crook of a finger, pointing to floor between his splayed legs. Trying not to notice the mammoth cock that went with the mammoth everything else, Emerald locked her knees, lifted her chin with as much defiance as she could muster, and obeyed.

His eyes narrowed, his expression growing harder. "Drop the sheet."

Emerald had to command her fingers to obey. The urge to clutch the sheet tighter was so strong she almost thought he would have to peel her fingers loose if he wanted to strip the sheet from her.

"I'm not a very patient man," he said grimly.

Swallowing against a knot in her throat that felt like her fist, Emerald released her hold on the sheet, allowing it to drop to the floor. When it fell, he reached for her. She might have fled in spite of her efforts to cling to her training if she could've commanded her legs to move. She couldn't and she stumbled slightly when he grasped her hips and drew her closer, flinching when he released the catch on the belt and it fell open. To her surprise, rather than striking her with it, he looped it around her and fastened it snugly at her waist. She stared at the belt and then met his gaze with utter confusion. "What is it?" she asked, her voice emerging as a hoarse croak.

"It's to prevent you from achieving orgasm."

Emerald stared at him blankly, trying to ignore the muscles low in her belly that clenched in response.

He brought his knees together, caught her waist and lifted her, settling her astride his knees. She grabbed instinctively for his shoulders to keep from falling when he spread his knees again, parting her thighs with the movement. She almost lost her balance again when he lifted his hands to her breasts, releasing her grip on his shoulders to cover them with her hands.

His hands curled around her wrists. She fought the tug of his hands until they tightened around her wrists hard enough to make her flinch. To her surprise, the moment she did, he

released her wrists.

"Move your hands ... now."

She might have defied him if not for the tone of his voice. It was so eloquent of repressed violence that she knew she'd pushed him as far as he was willing to be pushed. Reminding herself that she was supposed to pretend indifference, not resist, she forced her hands down and settled them on her thighs. With the best will in the world, she discovered she absolutely couldn't keep her hands down when he cupped her breasts.

He stared at her hands as they gripped his wrists and then lifted his head to look at her speculatively for a long moment. Uttering an irritated breath, he dropped his hands to her waist, turned and dropped her onto the bed. Before she could react, he followed her down. Catching both wrists and lifting her arms above her head, he crossed her wrists and manacled them with one hand and then pinned the lower part of her body by planting one leg across her hips.

She looked up at him, wide eyed with fear despite her best effort to calm herself, in spite of the chant 'Dead fish! Dead fish!' reverberating through her mind.

Satisfied that she couldn't resist any longer if she wanted to, he used his free hand to explore her breasts. Emerald squeezed her eyes closed, trying to ignore the feel of his hand on her breasts. No amount of chanting to herself seemed to help. Her awareness of the sheer size of the man was so

acute she almost felt as if she was drowning in sensation. Her mind swam with the explosion of synapses firing in her brain. Every hair follicle on her body had leapt to attention and she could feel the faintest of movements, even air currents stirred by his breaths.

His hand engulfed one breast and then the other, squeezing lightly. He stroked his long fingers over them and then downward across her ribs and then her belly. Her belly quivered at his touch, the muscles in her sex spasming frantically. When he returned his attention to her breasts, he ran a finger lightly over each nipple until it stood erect and then plucked at them over and over until she could feel them tighten to hard knots and then the blood begin to pulse in them with jarring hardness. Her eyelids flew open when she sensed him leaning closer, felt the heat of his breath against her breasts.

Mesmerized, she watched his lips part as he neared one tight peak, watched as he closed his lips around it. Heated sensation flooded her on the instant, making her belly quiver again, thawing the coldness that had invaded her with the fear. He sucked the tight nub with a leisure that began to send a steady stream of warmth through her, flicking at it with the tip of his tongue. He lifted his head after a few moments, just enough to allow him to trace the circumference of her nipple with the point of his tongue and then sucked it into his mouth again, pulling on it with the suction of his mouth.

Slowly, insidiously, her fear melted away, replaced with utter confusion and leaving her defenseless. The heat began to

climb inside her far more rapidly the moment her defenses began to crumble. The belated reminder to herself that she should focus her mind on something else was useless to her by that time. Her body had responded to his touch and no effort to ignore it helped in the least. Pleasure had already given way to a lethargic delirium by the time he decided to move to her other breast and tease that nipple as he had the first.

The jolt that went through her the moment he closed his mouth around it and sucked seared a path straight to her womb. It clenched in a hard spasm but even the brief pain barely slowed the tide of heat building inside of her to an inferno.

She had no idea of when she'd ceased to strain against his hold or when he'd released his grip on her wrists. The first she even realized he had was when she felt his fingers tangle in her hair and the tug as he tilted her head back. Lifting away from her breast, he sucked at her throat, massaging one breast with his free hand and then gliding it lightly across her ribs to her belly. Her heart thundered frantically in her ears as he cupped her mound and then parted the outer lips and stroked a finger along her cleft.

Releasing his grip on her hair abruptly, he levered himself upward, supported by one elbow and reached down to grasp one of her legs, pushing it aside and studying the play of his fingers as he parted the tender petals of her sex and lightly stroked her clit. He shifted again after a few moments. Pushing himself toward the foot of the bed, he caught hold of

her legs, bent her knees, and pushed them upward. She tried to sit up when he moved between her legs.

He sent her a narrow eyed look. She stared at him for a long moment and fell back, closing her eyes again tightly as she felt him arranging her legs, touching her sex lightly. She opened her eyes again when she felt him grip her wrists and move her arms down to her belly. "Spread your lips for me and hold them," he murmured, his voice sounding so raw it sent a shiver through her.

She hesitated, but the will to resist had melted away with her fear and the rise of the fever he'd built. She pulled the lips of her sex apart, watching him as he lowered his head, trying to brace herself for his touch. It didn't help. The moment she felt the heat of his mouth close around her clit a hard jolt went through her. She gasped, fighting the urge to lift her hips with each tug of his mouth.

The heat grew until she felt as if she was burning up. She tried to use her mind to cool herself, tried to ignore the sensations pelting her, but it was useless. She felt her body climbing toward release. It reached a point where she felt herself quivering on the verge of climax and stayed there.

It began to feel almost more like torture than pleasure. She struggled to reach her release until she thought she couldn't stand anymore and grabbed frantically at his hair, trying to pull him away. He caught her wrists, squeezed them until she released his hair and then looped his arms around her legs and pinned her with her legs splayed so wide she felt the burn

of the muscles along her inner thighs.

She gasped, strained against his hold as he continued to alternately tease her clit with his tongue and suck it. She fought to reach her climax for a while and fought to escape it for a while and didn't win either battle. She couldn't find release and she couldn't close her mind to the pleasure that had become sheer torment.

She panted for breath until her mouth and throat were as dry as dust and she began to feel like she might pass out. She began to pray for it after a time, but she discovered to her dismay that even when she did finally faint it was no more than a brief respite.

She bit her lip when she discovered that she was whimpering, trying to contain the shameful sound, but with indifferent success. She was so fevered she barely heard the odd little chirping noise that penetrated her torture chamber until Tariq abruptly ceased tormenting her and lifted his head as if to listen. The second time the sound intruded, he pushed himself up and climbed from the bed.

Emerald closed her legs the moment he released her, curling into a tight ball, shivering as the heat began to cool with the blessed cessation of stimulus.

Tariq snatched up his communicator and dropped to the edge of the bed shakily. "What is it?" he growled irritably.

"We've just gotten a report back from one of the search

teams. They found a group of survivors."

Tariq's heart was already pounding with his own runaway desire. At that, it clenched in his chest almost painfully. He struggled to wrap his mind around the message for several moments when it was still focused firmly on Emerald.

"Sir?"

Tariq dragged in a deep breath and let it out slowly, thinking. "Get the coordinates for me if you haven't already and prep a skimmer for me." He stood up. "And tell them I'm on my way."

Breaking the link, he turned to look at Emerald, far cooler headed than he had been a few moments before but still struggling to get his raging desires under control. It was as well they'd interrupted him, he thought wryly, when he'd managed to regain some semblance of control. It wouldn't have taken a great deal more of 'punishing' Emerald before he'd completely lost focus and done something he would've regretted.

Raking a shaking hand through his hair, he stared at his uniform for a moment and finally picked it up and began pulling it on.

It occurred to him as he was pulling his boots on that his lesson hadn't gone entirely as he'd planned even if he had been interrupted before he'd yielded to the urge to drive his painfully throbbing cock into her until he spilled his seed. She'd fought him every step of the way. He debated briefly

and then opened the link again. Koryn answered on the third chime.

"Meet me in my quarters," he said grimly and broke the link.

He got up to pace while he waited, struggling with his decision. He was still waging battle when Koryn arrived a few minutes later, but one glance at Emerald as Koryn entered his quarters hardened his resolve. She'd sat up on his bunk and grabbed the blanket, covering herself, and was staring sullenly at the floor.

His expression hardened as he glanced at Koryn. "Emerald is being disciplined. I'd barely begun the session but something has come up and I have something else that needs my attention. I'll need you to take over until I get back."

Surprise flickered in Koryn's eyes but after staring at him a moment, he merely nodded. "I'll take care of it."

Tariq flicked a glance at Emerald, having deliberately switched to her language to make certain she understood. "Good. Lay down, Emerald. Koryn will be handling your discipline until I can get back."

She gaped at him in disbelief but the moment he tensed as if he meant to return to the bed, she lay down. Tariq sent Koryn a wry look. "As you can see it's likely to take quite a few lessons before she learns to accept the situation."

He strode toward the door as Koryn crossed the room to the

bed where Emerald lay and sat down to remove his boots.

Koryn discovered when he straightened to remove his uniform that Emerald was watching him warily but without a trace of the submission Tariq would expect to see when he returned.

This was going to be hellish, he thought! He already felt like his balls were going to explode. Well, he thought philosophically, if he couldn't hold his seed, he couldn't. As long as he didn't plant it in Emerald he might live to see another day.

She tensed the moment he settled a knee on the edge of the bed. He shook his head at her. "You don't want to try that."

He saw something flicker in her eyes, but although she subsided instead of leaping out of the bed as he'd fully expected, she scooted toward the wall when he settled. "Lie down," he said evenly.

He barely managed to deflect her leg when she abruptly kicked out at him. Catching her ankle, he gave her leg a jerk that dragged her flat of her back. Before she could roll away, he shifted his weight upward and pinned her to the bed, catching her wrists. "I can bind you," he said through gritted teeth, "but I can guarantee you this is going to be a lot more uncomfortable for you if I have to do that and take a lot longer."

She fought him despite the warning. Sighing irritably, he finally gave up trying to pin her down and got off the bed, dragging her with him. She struggled every step of the way as he

stalked to Tariq's supply room to retrieve bindings and then returned to the main cabin with her. After studying the bed speculatively for several moments, he realized it was going to be damned uncomfortable for him to spend hours disciplining her if he had to tie her to the bed and he turned to consider the chairs. Realizing with relief that one was a play chair, he hauled her over to it and pushed her down in it. Fortunately, she clearly didn't realize what it was. She hesitated in surprise just long enough for him to grasp her wrists and clamp them in the wrist manacles he'd activated. She tried to kick him again when he grabbed her ankles, but it took little effort to guide first one and then the other into the ankle manacles.

When he clamped the last one, he activated the positioning device, watching carefully as it moved her into position since the play chair had been designed for the Anunnaki and their women were a good bit taller. The knee position wasn't just right and it spread her legs a little further than it should've for that matter, but she'd brought it on herself. Taking the binding he'd collected, he moved around to the back and squatted down to thread it through the loop on the back of her belt and secure it, binding her tightly to the table the chair had become. Satisfied, he rotated it until it was upright and then lifted it until the height was comfortable for him.

She sucked in a sharp breath and cursed him when he lifted his hands and lightly stroked them down her length, but he was too riveted on his task the moment he felt her silken skin against his palms and the pads of his fingers to feel the anger it might have otherwise stirred. Ignoring her efforts to struggle,

he continued stroking her lightly until she ceased to struggle, either because she'd tired herself or because she'd calmed down.

Flicking a glance at her face, he decided, wryly, that it was the former. Her eyes were still glittering defiance. He moved closer, cupping a breast in each hand and gently squeezing it, massaging the round globes until they flushed with the blood rushing to them and her nipples hardened. He focused on her nipples then, plucking at them until they were so tight and engorged with blood that they felt like little pebbles.

She flinched when he leaned in to take one into his mouth. "Don't!"

He paused, flicked a chiding look at her face and caught it with the edge of his teeth instead of his lips, bearing down just hard enough to warn her to behave. She sucked in a sharp breath, bucking against the bindings. He bit down harder until she stilled, panting, and then sucked at the tiny morsel to sooth the sting.

He hadn't meant to do more than tease her slowly to awaken her to sensation but almost the moment he felt her nipple in his mouth, his control slipped. He sucked and pulled at her hungrily, trying to ignore his painfully swollen cock and the urge to thrust inside of the pink little lips parted so invitingly for him by her position. Unable to resist the urge to explore it at the very least, he ran a shaking hand down her belly and found her cleft and then her opening, pushing an index finger inside of her.

Her muscles closed around his finger and he could feel the velvety soft walls. It sent a dizzying wave through him. The image instantly leapt into his mind of those muscles clamped around his cock and he felt his balls draw up to his belly, felt as if they'd drawn up into his throat. She was so wet, so tight, he thought a little wildly. His throat closed with want and it took all he could do to refrain from replacing his finger with his cock on that instant.

Some tiny spark of sanity remained, however, enough to prevent him from doing anything suicidal-like fucking Emerald when Tariq had claimed her. Instead, he struggled to appease his own hunger by feeding on her soft flesh more frenziedly. He paused when she began make tiny whimpering sounds that finally penetrated the red fog of his mind.

He was supposed to be disciplining her, he reminded himself with an effort. She had to understand that defiance wouldn't be tolerated from a slave. If she was to end up in anyone else's hands, she might not survive the lesson for disobedience.

She moaned when he withdrew his finger and lightly stroked the delicate petals of flesh along her cleft instead and then sucked in a sharp breath when he released the nipple he'd been teasing and switched to the other. She fought it, forcing him to warn her again with a nip of pain. When she subsided, he swirled his tongue around the little bud to sooth the sting and then sucked it.

For a time, he managed to content himself with merely

suckling her breasts, knowing that as uncomfortable as that made her it was a nothing compared to the misery she would endure if he took her to the edge of a climax and held her there. He hadn't been in any state to properly discipline her when he'd started though and the longer he teased her the harder it was to control himself.

He began to think he was in far more torment than she was and decided he had to withdraw at least long enough to calm his heart before it exploded. The moment he flicked a glance at her face, however, and saw her glazed eyes and passion twisted features, it very nearly unhinged his mind.

He stared at her for a long, long moment and finally moved around behind her to remove the binding at her waist. When he'd freed her, he slipped an arm around her, depressed the retractor on the manacles and lifted her away from the play chair, carrying her to the bed. She looked up at him dazedly when he'd settled her.

He fought another round with the urge to mount her on his shaft and finally settled at the end of the bed, pushing her thighs wide and leaning down to cover her clit with his mouth. His cock bucked in his hand as he curled his fingers around it. The counter pressure of his hand produced pleasure that was so intense, he thought for a moment he would black out. Sucking in a harsh breath, he pulled at her clit hungry, stroking his cock. He'd nearly achieved orgasm when a sound behind him jerked him abruptly from his focus. Halting abruptly, he lifted his head jerkily and looked around.

Tariq, he discovered, had returned. He stared at him with fevered eyes, trying to summon some sense of self-preservation, but his mind couldn't get past the fact that he was nearly there.

"I see you've worked diligently at teaching her the error of her ways," Tariq said dryly. "I believe he deserves a reward, don't you, Emerald? By my estimate, he's given you a good two hours of pleasure."

Koryn glanced at her when Tariq spoke to her, discovering with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Get up."

Koryn glanced jerkily at him and discovered he was staring at Emerald. She struggled upright at the command and stared at him without comprehension.

"Give him what he needs. Take his cock into that pretty little mouth of yours and give him release."

Nodding, Emerald slipped off the bed and moved between his legs. Koryn stared down at her and swallowed convulsively, but he couldn't bring himself to refuse the offer. He felt like he was going to die if he didn't find release. Swallowing with an effort, he thrust his cock at her. He almost passed out when he felt the heat of her mouth close over his cock.

Then she bit him.

He winced at the pain that cut through him, grabbing her head, but the heat and pressure of her mouth far exceeded the pain. His balls erupted like a volcano. He tightened his fingers in her hair, thrusting mindlessly. She struggled for a moment and then began gulping and sucking frantically as his seed spewed into her mouth. He collapsed weakly, panting for breath when the convulsions finally ceased, feeling as if he might sink into a coma.

He heard Tariq's footsteps as he headed to his refreshment bar and the sound of liquid pouring into a glass tumbler. By the time he managed to catch his breath and recover enough to push himself upright, Tariq had paced back to the bed. His expression was grim as he stared at Emerald. "You bit him, didn't you?"

Emerald sent him a wide eyed look, glanced at Koryn and then at Tariq again. Her chin wobbled. "It was an accident," she gasped shakily.

He shook his head at her. "Get in the bed and rest while you can."

Emerald bit her lip, but dropped her gaze to the floor, nodded, and climbed into the bed shakily. Koryn sat forward warily, more than half expecting her to try to kick him. He was vastly relieved when she didn't and not merely for his own sake. It took an effort to push himself to his feet. When he'd finally managed it, he looked around a little dazedly for his uniform and moved toward it when he spotted it. Deciding he wasn't

currently in any shape to put it back on, he collected the suit and his boots and moved to a chair, collapsing weakly into the seat. Tariq followed him, eyed the play chair for a moment and finally pressed the button to make it reconfigure into an easy chair once more.

"I take it she continued rebellious?" Tariq asked pensively.

Koryn struggled with his conscience, but he thought the play chair spoke volumes and Tariq wasn't likely to believe any lie he told him. Beyond that, he was alarmed at the sheer strength of will Emerald had displayed. Granted, Tariq had every intention of keeping her if he possibly could, but they had no guarantees that he could. And if she continued to fight she would discover just how gently he and Tariq had handled her. "She fought like a tigress. There was no talking reason to her," he said finally. "I didn't think you were serious when you said she needed discipline." He lifted his head and stared at her longingly. "I know you thought she was a soldier from the start, but she seemed so ... gentle and biddable."

"Well, thank the gods she isn't big enough to do much damage," Tariq said dryly.

Koryn rubbed his cock absently. When he glanced at Tariq again, he saw amusement in his eyes. Anger flickered through him briefly, but then a reluctant smile dawned. "I should've known better than to stick it in her mouth when she'd fought me every step of the way," he said ruefully. "Next time, warn me. I'll jack off before I try disciplining her."

Tariq was about to inform him that there wouldn't be a next time, but it occurred to him forcefully that he wasn't weathering Emerald's punishment that well himself. If she continued rebellious "Tomorrow, then. I'll handle it tonight when she's had time to cool down enough for another effective session."

Koryn sent him a startled look but it took very little reflection to realize Tariq was right. If she'd still been rebellious enough to bite him when Tariq had already disciplined her and he'd given her a lengthy session, then she wasn't going to back down easily. Nodding, he slipped his feet into his uniform and stood up to shrug his shoulders into it. "I'll be better prepared tomorrow." He glanced at Tariq when he'd pulled his boots on. "Did you find anything?"

Tariq snorted with disgust. "They're a sorry lot. Too much inbreeding, if ask me, but the medics are running tests on them. Regular savages, too. A show of force cowed them quickly enough, fortunately. I would've been thoroughly pissed off if I'd gotten there and discovered the team had put them down.

"They weren't faring well. I suppose we'll know when get the test results, but it could be malnutrition and not inbreeding. Gods! I hope to hell that's all it is! We rounded up fifty. If they check out, we could send them on, fatten them up on the trip to Niribu and pacify the screaming masses ... at least temporarily."

Koryn felt his spirits lift considerably. "Breeding age?"

Tariq shrugged. "There didn't seem to be any much above full maturity. Either the conditions they've been subjected to haven't been conducive to longevity or they're a roving band of young scavengers. We couldn't get much out of them."

Koryn nodded. "Well ... I'll leave you to your wine and your woman. I have work to do in the lab."

Tariq lifted his nearly untouched glass when Koryn had left, wondering if 'his' woman was going to drive him to drinking. He shook the thought after a moment. His only problem was having to discipline her and abstain while doing it. If she hadn't been 'untouchable' at the moment, he didn't think he would've felt any need for something to tranquilize. She'd been out of the pod almost a week, though, and she was on a regular diet and gaining enough strength to fight both him and Koryn. He thought he could give her another week and take care of his real problem.

Jacking off, as Koryn had suggested, wasn't helping do more than take the edge off and not much of the fucking edge at that. He was tempted, briefly, to find a willing partner among the crewmembers. He dismissed the thought. He wanted Emerald and, that being the case, fucking anyone else wasn't going to help a lot more than jacking off-in which case, why go to the effort?

It occurred to him that eschewing the company of other women in his bed might not send Emerald the right message, but he dismissed it. He could handle that when and if it came to that. At the moment, he was fairly sure she wasn't feeling

the least bit possessive about him.

?

Chapter Seven

Emerald lay in absolute misery for hours, feeling as if every nerve ending in her body was fried from the 'disciplinary' sessions Tariq and Koryn had treated her to. She almost thought violent rape would've been better. She might've felt battered afterward, but she could've hated both of them with an intensity that left no room for anything else. What infuriated her most about the ordeal was that they'd left her wanting them to fuck her senseless. She felt as if she hated both of them and yet the moment Koryn had left all she could think about was the hours he'd tormented her without giving her any relief.

She almost thought she could've climaxed getting him off except she couldn't. She skated the edge until she thought it

would drive her crazy, but she couldn't find the release she needed so badly.

If she hadn't been so angry and miserable, she might've begged Tariq to give her the relief she needed. She wanted to, so badly she could taste it, and yet her pride kept her tongue firmly between her teeth-that and the certainty that he wouldn't give her what she needed.

Instead, she clamped her eyes tightly shut and tried to ignore the sense that he was watching her, waiting and hoping that he would leave so that she could rip off the damned belt he'd fastened on her that prevented her from orgasm.

She hadn't thought he was serious when he'd told her that! Who in their right mind would invent such a device?

The Anunnaki-to 'discipline' their sex slaves.

It was hard to wrap her mind around that even though Tariq had come right out and said that he was keeping her for breeding!

What was his objective any way, she wondered? To wear her down until she told him what she knew?

If that was it, she was in for pure hell. She couldn't tell him anything if she'd wanted to and she had a bad feeling it wouldn't take much more of what she'd already endured to tell him anything he wanted to know-if she could have.

It finally occurred to her when her mind had ceased to be so fevered with the endless hours of erotic stimulus with no relief that he'd said they were disciplining her-not interrogating. It was her flat refusal to tell him that had angered him.

It had been nothing short of stupid to fling that at him when she knew he couldn't get information from her that she no longer possessed! And then she'd compounded that by balking at his orders. She was a soldier! She was used to following orders without question. Why she'd decided to ... challenge Tariq's authority was a complete mystery to her.

She couldn't even honestly say she'd refused because she'd known the order was sexual in nature. She'd known, just from the way he looked at her, that he wanted her before he'd ever touched her the first time. If she was honest with herself, she'd been hurt and angry when she thought he'd decided he didn't want her after all, not relieved. He unnerved her and yet she'd wanted him. She just hadn't liked the way he'd demanded it.

She'd wanted to be treated as an equal, not a ... slave, but she was whatever he wanted her to be. There were no choices for her.

Even if there was some chance of escaping, she didn't stand a chance in hell of surviving the world she'd seen outside the ship, and she knew it. And she couldn't even escape Tariq's quarters, let alone the ship. She'd tried everything she could think of to get the door open and couldn't.

He didn't even need Aeon standing guard outside the door.

Despite her misery and the thoughts tumbling around in her mind, she dozed after a while, exhausted from the hours of torment she'd endured. She woke with a start some time later to discover that Tariq had left.

It took her several moments to figure out why it was important that Tariq had left. When she finally remembered the belt, she sat up and began pulling at it. It felt as if it was made of something soft and yielding, but it not only didn't stretch, no amount of wrestling with it broke the catch. Expelling an angry huff, she looked down at it and began twisting it around and around her waist, trying to find the catch.

Unfortunately, she was still working at it when Tariq returned. His gaze immediately pinned her when he stepped through the door and although she jerked her hands away from the belt guiltily, she knew he'd seen what she was doing-trying to do. That seemed to be enough. His face hardened. Without a word, he strode across the room and settled the tray he was carrying. "I brought you something to eat. Come."

She sent him a resentful glare which she tried to erase from her face when he glanced at her. Staring at him warily, she got off the bed and gathered the sheet around her.

"Leave it."

She stared at his back in dismay. "But"

He turned and leveled a look at her. Dropping the sheet, she

stalked over to the chair and sat down. She discovered he'd brought food for both of them.

"When we reach Niribu, you'll be expected to serve me ... if I decide to dine with you," he said coolly.

And who knew? Maybe she could find some poison to lace his food with, she thought angrily? "When are you going to Niribu?" she asked after a moment.

When he didn't answer, she looked up at him questioningly. His expression was stony. "We will be leaving when I've finished my task here."

"Collecting bodies and cloning them just so that they can be slaves?" she asked tightly. "Maybe they'd rather stay dead."

He tilted his head almost curiously. "Your people once perceived us as gods. It's an honor to serve the Anunnaki."

Emerald lifted her brows. "You mean back when we were living in caves and scratching ourselves? Yeah, I can see that. We aren't nearly as easily awed these days."

"Or as cautious," he murmured. "I don't need your tongue to breed you."

Emerald swallowed the morsel of food she'd put her mouth with an effort at his tone and the not too subtle threat. He was actually pretty fucking scary with almost no effort at all, she thought uneasily. It was pretty difficult after that to even pretend

she had an appetite, but she made an effort out of pure determination to convince him he hadn't scared her.

"Go and bathe and then wait in the bed," he said when they'd finished. "I have a report to make."

She wasn't particularly tired, but she decided that she'd pushed him as far as she dared. Getting up, she headed into the bathing facilities. She didn't ask him to remove the belt and he didn't offer. She soaked thoroughly, hoping against hope that it would short out. It had to be some sort of electronics even if wasn't anything familiar to her, she reasoned. Impulses travelled to and from the brain electronically. If it was blocking the nerve signals that controlled orgasm, it would have be doing it with some sort of wave.

Tariq was sitting at his desk on the far side of the room when she returned, speaking to a holographic image hovering just above the desktop. Unfortunately, he wasn't speaking English, but she supposed she could guess what the conversation was about-collecting humans for transport back to Niribu. Climbing into the bed, she lay back, staring at the ceiling, wondering if she pretended to be asleep if he would let her sleep.

Somehow, she doubted it and when he finally ended his communication and approached the bed, she knew with dismay that she was right. He sat down to pull off his boots and then stood again to strip. Flipping the covers off of her, he settled beside her, propped on one arm and studied her. "Put your arms over your head."

Emerald gulped, struggled with the urge to continue trying to pretend she was asleep and finally lifted her arms. When she peered at him, she saw his expression was stony. "Draw your knees up."

Clamping her thighs together, she drew legs up without hesitation that time, hoping the fact that she'd instantly obeyed might weigh in her favor.

"I think you know that isn't what I meant," he said dryly. "Spread them."

He was going to torture her like he had before! She knew it and it was more reluctance to endure it again than rebelliousness that made her hesitate. Biting her lip, she fanned her thighs open. He used his free hand to push them wider and shifted her feet until he was satisfied. She flinched all over when he stroked a finger along her damp nether lips, carefully separating the folds of flesh. She felt heated moisture collect in her channel as he explored her there. With an effort, she stared hard at a point on the ceiling and tried to focus on it so completely as to block his touch from her mind. She succeeded to a degree and yet when he found the mouth of her sex and slowly pushed a thick finger inside of her it brought her mind right back to focus on his touch.

She swallowed with an effort, trying to calm her heart as it accelerated to match the cadence of his finger as he slowly pushed it deeply inside of her and just as slowly withdrew it, pulling completely out each time and convincing her that he

meant to stop and then, after a brief pause, pushing inside of her again until she felt the heat within begin to rise in spite of every effort to prevent it.

She reached a point very quickly where she had to fight the urge to try to evade his finger, to close her legs tightly. The inner muscles of her thighs quivered both from that tension and the strain of holding her legs wide for him to torment her. She squeezed her eyes tightly, hopeful of escaping in that way, but that only seemed to intensify the sensations.

When she opened eyes again, she saw that he was studying her face, his own taut. His expression made her heart trip over itself and begin to race a little faster. The muscles along her channel quivered, sending out the first tremors of a climax and then simply continued to spasm faintly-just enough to tighten her chest and make it difficult to breathe without panting.

She was almost relieved when he finally removed his finger and skated his hand up her belly ... until he began massaging her breasts and plucking at her nipples. They tightened in response, filling with the blood that would intensify their sensitivity. He continued to pluck at them until they began to ache and then hurt with the pressure.

Dread filled her when he finally stopped and leaned down to cover the closest with his mouth. She tensed all over, trying to brace for the jolt she expected and it still knocked the breath from her. She almost thought it might not have been so excruciating if she hadn't, but she was too mindless within moments to have another clear thought. He thrust his finger

into her channel again as he pulled at her sensitive nipple. This time, he drove into her hard and fast, however, pulling at her nipple in the same rhythm until she reached fever pitch and began to moan and thrash.

He released her nipple. "Be still," he said harshly.

She stilled, tensing every muscle as he shifted over her to capture her other nipple. She nearly passed out when he sucked it into his mouth, dipped toward darkness but not oblivion. The darkness that invaded her mind only seemed to increase the sensations until her entire body was quivering.

She dragged in a shaky breath when he finally lifted his head and withdrew his finger. He studied her for a long moment when he'd stopped. "Take my cock in your mouth and give me release," he said hoarsely, "and I'll allow you to rest."

She was on fire, her mind almost too fevered to comprehend. She pushed herself up, however, and crawled down the bed to grasp his cock and guide it into her mouth. It was huge. She felt her jaws pop as she struggled to fit the head into her mouth. In the end, she couldn't manage to cover much more than the head, but she sucked at it feverishly and stroked her hands up and down his cock. He caught her legs, turning her and then burrowing his face between her legs. Her heart slammed against her ribcage as he covered her clit and began to pull at it with a fervor that made the muscles along her channel quake harder. She sucked at the head of his cock and stroked her hands along the length with more enthusiasm,

lured by the promise of a climax until he cock abruptly jerked in her hands and mouth and hot semen hit the back of her throat. Still caught up in the belief that she was about to come, as well, she pulled at him enthusiastically until he finally ceased to come and pushed her away.

She settled back and stared at him, too stunned for several moments to grasp what had happened. She felt like crying when her sluggish mind had finally sorted it and she realized the belt had prevented her from achieving orgasm. It hadn't shorted out as she'd hoped it would.

She dropped weakly down on the bed after a moment, struggling with her emotions, with the heat still churning inside of her. The quivering inside of her had only just begun to subside when Tariq caught her hand and tugged at her. "Come here."

She sat up, eyeing him distrustfully, but she didn't dare hesitate, despite the dread that instantly seized her.

She discovered it was warranted. He'd allowed her a few moments respite and then he began all over again. She lay awake for hours after he'd dropped to sleep, struggling to summon any emotion at all besides self pity but discovered she ached too badly to rouse anything else.

* * * *

Koryn caught Emerald completely by surprise. She'd woken to find Tariq gone with a mixture of relief, anger, and an aching

need that still lingered strongly enough to make her miserable. Getting up, she'd headed into the bathroom and bathed in hot water until it eased the ache of her tense muscles and then turned the water to as cool a temperature as she could stand in the hope that it would cool the heat inside of her. It worked to an extent. She was still far from comfortable, but neither her breasts nor her sex felt nearly as swollen and achy.

Koryn appeared several hours later, while she was staring at nothing and wishing herself miles away. She eyed him warily when he came in, but relaxed when she saw he'd brought food. He strode to the table and set the tray down, pulled up the other chair and attacked the food he'd brought himself with enthusiasm. Discovering she was starving herself since she'd barely touched her food the night before, she joined him at the table and focused on appeasing her own appetite.

When Koryn finished eating, he pushed away from the table and relaxed in the chair, watching her until she'd finished. He smiled when she pushed her plate away. "Finished?"

She nodded.

"Good. Get in the bed."

Emerald gaped at him in dismay, feeling her stomach knot around the food she'd just consumed and creating a wave of nausea. He tilted his head, lifting his dark blond brows questioningly.

Emerald got to her feet jerkily and headed toward the bed,

struggling with the dread knotting her stomach, deeply regretful that she'd eaten at all.

"You won't need the sheet. Leave it," Koryn said cheerfully enough she felt the urge to throw something at him.

Instead, she flung the sheet off, climbed on the bed and lay down, staring angrily at the ceiling and resolutely ignoring Koryn as he pulled his boots off, shrugged out of his uniform and strode purposefully toward the bed. The anger didn't sustain her nearly long enough. The instant she heard his swift stride toward her, it abandoned her and dread washed over her in an all consuming tide. Settling one hip on the edge of the bed, he studied her for a moment and then grasped her wrists, lifting her arms behind her head. She clenched her teeth tightly and stared hard at the ceiling as he lightly stroked her breasts with his long fingers and then began to knead them.

She knew it was useless to try to block it from her mind, but she couldn't think of any other way to try to defend herself from the torment she knew was coming and the certain knowledge of it made it harder than it had been the first few times. When he'd brought a rush of blood to her breasts to fully sensitize them, he transferred his attention to stroking her torso and belly and finally got up.

Hope instantly sprang to life that he'd decided not to torment her because she'd done what he told her to do. It died an unhappy death when he climbed onto the mattress on his knees and pushed her legs upward and out. He sat down his

heels, studying her sex and finally reached to stroke the lips, parting them, plucking at her clit until it swelled with blood as her nipples had.

She grunted as the air left her lungs when he traced a path from her clit to the mouth of her sex and shoved his index finger deeply inside of her. Tensing all over, she clapped her legs together instinctively and was instantly sorry. He sent her a look that filled her with dread. She opened her legs again, spreading them wide for him, but the damage, she knew, had already been done. Narrowing his eyes, he withdrew his finger slowly and then slipped backwards and settled on his belly. Using his fingers to spread the lips of her sex, he flicked the tip of his tongue over her clit several times.

"Put your hands here and hold the lips wide for me."

Emerald bit her lip, but reached down to comply. "Good girl," he murmured, grasping her hips and dragging her to his mouth. Holding her with his gaze, he opened his mouth over her clit and began to suck at it. Fire coursed through her with each tug of his mouth, centering in her belly, growing swiftly into a conflagration.

Dragging her gaze from his with an effort, Emerald struggled to catch her breath, fought the rise of heat to no avail. He shifted after a moment, pushing his finger in and out of her slowly for several moments and then increasing the tempo until he was driving into her in hard thrusts. Catching her clit with his mouth, he began sucking it hard as he continued the

forceful thrust of his finger until he drove her to the edge of her peak where she hovered in endless torment until she couldn't stand anymore and tried to push herself away from him to escape.

He caught her, dragging her around on the bed until her head and shoulders were against the wall. It almost seemed impossible that he could be more punishing, but he succeeded, driving her almost immediately to her peak again despite the brief respite and holding her there until she began to weep in spite of all she could do. He ignored her tears until she began to beg him to stop.

Finally, he stopped. Coming up on his knees, he stared at her angrily. "Don't ever push me away again," he said tightly.

Emerald sniffed and shook her head, but even she wasn't certain whether she was refusing or agreeing that she wouldn't. He seemed to suspect the latter.

"Turn around and be still for me."

Reluctantly, she obeyed, lifting her arms over her head as he told her and holding her breath as he settled to tease her breasts until she thought she would lose her mind. She didn't dare move, though, when he slipped a hand down her belly and pushed his finger inside of her again. It took every ounce of will power she possessed to lay perfectly still while he pulled at her nipples with his mouth and finger fucked her until she peaked again and then continued until she was nearly mindless.

She was shaking all over by the time he finally stopped, a quivering mass of jelly.

"Suck my cock."

She struggled up, tried to find her bearings and finally grasped his cock, opening her mouth over it. To her dismay, he caught her legs and repositioned her so that he could suck her clit while she brought him off. She fell to the bed tiredly when he'd finished coming, struggling to catch her breath.

Koryn sat up after a few moments, grasped her and dragged her around, arranging her against his side. She shivered when he skated a hand along her back.

"You can stop this, baby. You understand that, don't you?" he murmured after a moment.

Emerald tensed against him, trying to understand what he was saying and finally gave up, shaking her head.

He released a pent up breath. "Yes, you do." He shifted her to her back, surging up to hover over her, and gasped her face with one hand. "You don't have the right to refuse to do what you're told to do, or to glare sullenly and perform reluctantly. You don't have the right to speak to any Anunnaki as an equal. Accept that and Tariq will cease to punish you for your willfulness and he won't send me."

Emerald swallowed with an effort. He was right. She did know.

She realized abruptly that she wanted them to punish her and that was why she continued to push even when she knew what the results would be. She didn't know why. It was sheer torture to be made to feel the things they made her feel and not be allowed surcease.

Maybe she'd begun to crave it? Maybe even though they left her each time feeling as if she wanted to claw her skin off to keep from feeling the sensations, she still wanted it?

Or maybe she wanted them to keep punishing her until she could finally hate them?

And maybe it wasn't either of those things but instead a deep hatred for herself because she was alive when she shouldn't be, feeling things when her entire world had collapsed around her?

"Why didn't you leave me as you found me?" she wailed abruptly.

Koryn swallowed audibly. "Because we have orders just like you did," he said finally. "Because our people have needs just like yours did."

"I still don't understand."

He released an irritated breath. "Shut up, baby," he growled, covering her mouth with his and kissing her deeply.

Against all reason, it sent a surge of heat through her. She

struggled for a moment to deny it, to deny him and then abruptly yielded, kissing him back. She was dizzy with longing when he broke the kiss. He studied her a moment and pressed his forehead to hers. "Don't be good, baby. I won't have an excuse to touch you."

She stared at him in confusion when he pulled away, but he got up and crossed the room without another word and dressed. He paused to study her when he'd started toward the door. For a moment, it seemed he might say something else, but he turned away resolutely and left.

* * * *

As badly as he hated to admit it even to himself Tariq had begun to wonder if he had the stamina to hold out long enough to break Emerald to hand or even the strength of purpose. He'd been angry enough about her defiance, at first, and convinced that it was the only way to ensure her protection that he hadn't considered that she might be far more difficult to train than he could handle. A week of nightly sessions was beginning to wear on his nerves, however, and he couldn't see that she was any less defiant than she had been to begin with.

She hid it better. After the first few sessions, he'd almost been convinced that he and Koryn between them had made her understand and accept her situation even if they hadn't actually broken her willfulness and he'd been inclined to leave it at that because he hadn't wanted, any of the time, to completely break her spirit. He'd been determined that she would respect and obey him and equally resolved upon

protecting her from the possible consequences of her willfulness if she remained rebellious once he took her back to Niribu.

He had no intention of allowing anyone to take her if he could prevent it, but that was the sticking point. He had to admit to himself, at least, that there was a possibility that he wouldn't be able to prevent it. And he knew of at least two men of superior rank to him that would glory in breaking her spirit completely. She was just the sort of challenge that could bring out the worst in them.

And Emerald wasn't convinced enough for self-preservation. She hadn't openly defied him or challenged him beyond the first few days, but she didn't guard her expression nearly well enough and she was just slow enough every time he told her to do something to make it clear that she was considering whether to obey or not. And she still pretended deafness from time to time or that she was asleep and hadn't heard his command.

Wryly, he admitted that he probably wouldn't have been able to keep his hands to himself anyway, even if it hadn't been necessary to discipline her. He wanted her too badly to have managed to simply wait without sampling. Under other circumstances, however, there would've been no need to punish her by not allowing her to orgasm. It would've given him far more pleasure to hear her cries of completion, to see her sated and satisfied, to see welcome in her eyes because he gave her so much pleasure than to see wariness and dread in

her eyes because she knew he would withhold what she needed. Even demanding that she satisfy him at least often enough to keep him sane didn't truly satisfy him. It probably wouldn't have anyhow when what he really wanted was to burrow his cock deeply inside of her and come, but it was even less satisfactory when he knew he'd left her fevered with need, that she was so sensitive she could hardly endure his touch.

Worse, she dominated his thoughts even when he was nowhere near her because the last session was on his mind or the next one. It was almost as much 'punishment' to him to discipline her as it was to her. He couldn't touch her without being equally effected and even when he allowed himself some relief, it was as woefully brief as it was unsatisfactory. He burned because she burned.

It was almost laughable that Koryn was in as bad or worse state than he was and almost gratifying if it came to that, despite his reservations about including Koryn in her training. He had partly because he knew she needed to get used to the fact that the decision of who she would spread her legs for was as much his decision as when-or the decision of whoever ended up with her.

And also because he saw no reason why Koryn shouldn't be just as miserable as he was and that was the gratifying aspect of the situation. Koryn was at least as miserable if not more.

He'd fucked up at least three specimens that he knew of- because he'd confessed about those. Fortunately, there were

sufficient samples from the latest finds that that hadn't been the disaster it would've been if he'd fucked up Emerald's or any of the others that they'd barely been able to scrape together one sample for. It was telling, however. Koryn was one their best geneticists. If he'd been in the habit of such sloppy work he would never have gained the stature he had in his field.

Another week, he told himself. Only one more, and then he could safely breed her, he was sure, and once he had bred her, surely to the gods, even if she stubbornly refused to accept until then, she would have to once she was carrying his babe in belly-surely!

He wished he was more confident of that than he actually was, but it had crossed his mind to wonder if it was even safe to take her back Niribu given her grim determination to refuse to accept her status as a slave breeder of the Anunnaki in general or him in particular. It was for damned sure she wasn't flattered or honored to serve the Anunnaki!

She should be, he thought with sudden anger! He had some of the best bloodlines of all the Anunnaki and the Anunnaki was the most superior race ever conceived! They were her parent race and far superior to her own race in every way! She should be gratified to bear his child-not fighting him tooth and nail the entire way!

"My lord?" Merrick asked, breaking Tariq's train of thought abruptly.

"What?" Tariq growled ungraciously.

Merrick looked taken aback. "We've found a survivor willing to talk. As I said, he wants to barter the information for his freedom."

"And you explained that we don't barter?"

"I did."

Tariq curled his lips. "Any man willing to barter his fellow man for his own gain isn't much of a man-even for a human! My Em" He broke off abruptly, feeling a wave of cold wash over him. That was what came of having her always on his mind! He'd damned near admitted that she'd simply refused to talk! Merrick would be wondering why he hadn't immediately turned her over for interrogation!

Not that it was any of the bastard's business what decisions he made! But there was always the chance that he might talk and that would never do!

"I'll speak to him. I doubt he has anything useful, but it's worth a try." He hesitated. "Has he been cleaned up and deloused?"

"Of course! We took care of that right away. We didn't want the ship infested," Merrick said stiffly, clearly outraged at the suggestion that they wouldn't have.

Tariq ignored his pique. "Take him to the interrogation room. I'll let him cool his heels in there a while and then question

him."

Merrick nodded and left and Tariq allowed his thoughts to drift back to Emerald. It was nearly noon. Koryn would be going to her for a session shortly. There was little point in returning to his quarters to check on her even if that hadn't been the case. She hadn't figured out how to bypass the door security and the android, Aeon, was there to guard her even if she did.

And his session with her the night before had severely tested him.

His cock rose at the thought, reminding him that he hadn't allowed himself a release for three days. He didn't want her to get the impression that he was as affected as she was, though, even if he was.

Still, it had been three days and he was about ready to kill something. Maybe it would be better to go to her and find some relief before he questioned the human?

There was no reason he couldn't sit in on Koryn's session any way. It wouldn't be the first time they'd done a three way and it probably wouldn't be the last.

In any case, he had to wonder if it wasn't Koryn's technique that was somehow lacking and had failed to have the desired result. For all he knew something Koryn was doing was countering the effectiveness of his own sessions!

He might have to kill him if he discovered that to be the case,

he thought grimly. He'd endured just about all he could take. He was going to throttle the bastard if he discovered Koryn had been undermining his efforts!

?

Chapter Eight

Emerald looked surprised to see him. That shouldn't have instantly aroused his suspicion when he'd made it a habit to steer clear of her during the day, but it did. Tariq narrowed his eyes at her speculatively which was when he noticed at least one reason for her guilty start when she'd discovered it was him that had entered his quarters rather than Koryn.

She'd fashioned herself a robe from the missing sheet!

She knew gods damned well that he would've provided her with clothing if he'd wanted to see her clothed! He could see it in her eyes.

That also supported at least part of his suspicion that Koryn

was undermining his efforts! He hadn't reported the fact that she'd made clothing for herself-as crude as it was-which meant that he allowed it.

His lips tightened. Realizing he was too angry to confront her about it at the moment, he strode to his beverage dispenser after that brief pause and searched the list of available beverages for something that might sooth his frazzled nerves, and therefore his temper, at least a little without compromising his resolve not to allow drinking to become a habit. It was a little early even to consider wine-and certainly for beer. He settled for a watered wine-which tasted like hell and did little for his temper.

Emerald, he saw when he headed toward his chair, had bundled herself in the remains of the sheet to hide her crude toga.

Admission of guilt, he thought angrily, settling in his chair and taking a sip of the disgusting concoction he'd gotten for himself before he fixed her with a hard look. "Stand up," he said evenly.

She hesitated a fraction too long and finally stood, carrying the sheet with her.

His lips tightened. "Drop the sheet."

Koryn arrived at that moment, fortunately for him since it allowed Tariq the opportunity to discover that Koryn was as ignorant of the toga as he had been. The blank look on his

face was testament to that even if not for the comment that followed. "What the hell is that?"

Tariq returned his attention to Emerald. "Apparently it escaped the child's understanding that she wasn't given clothing because she wasn't allowed them."

Emerald's face paled and then reddened. "I wasn't?" she echoed with just enough surprise that it was almost convincing.

Almost.

Koryn advanced toward them after a brief hesitation and set the tray he was carrying on the table. "I didn't expect you. I only brought enough for two."

Tariq waved that off and responded in English. "I'm not hungry ... for food. Come here, Em and sit in my lap."

She eyed him warily, but moved toward him.

"I think you're forgetting something," he said, stopping her when she would've settled on his lap.

She studied him for a moment and reached to untie the knot at her shoulder, allowing the toga to drop to the floor. He held out his hands, grasping her waist when she moved to him and settling her on his lap with her back against his chest. She'd twisted at the waist, placing both legs together on one side of his. He slipped a hand beneath her left leg and moved it over

his, pushing her legs apart by splaying his own. She tensed and then forced herself to relax.

Koryn took the chair Emerald had vacated and scooted it closer to the table, removing the cover from the tray and sorting the food. "You decided to sit in on our session?" he asked in a conversational tone that didn't entirely mask his anger.

"I thought I would," Tariq agreed. "Emerald hasn't been responding as I'd hoped. I thought we might ... intensify the training a bit and see if that was beneficial."

"Good point," Koryn agreed, focusing on his food. "How are we going to work this?"

Noticing that Emerald hadn't made any attempt to eat her own meal, Tariq studied it a moment and finally chose something for her, holding it to her lips until she took it into her mouth. When she took it, he stroked a hand down her belly and parted the lips of her sex with his fingers, carefully separating the folds and examining each by touch. "I haven't entirely decided yet," he murmured, lifting his other hand to massage one breast. "Suggestions?"

Koryn's eyes gleamed as he narrowed them on Emerald's face. "Well, she's not much more than a morsel. Still, I think with a little effort we could come up with a position that would allow us both to discipline her at the same time. Or, we could take turns-either or both, really. Do you want to extend the session? I generally limit it to two hours, sometimes less-

depending, of course on how she behaves."

Tariq left off pinching her nipples to pick up another bite of food and offer it to her. "Hmm. I usually go for two myself. So, you're thinking four since there's the two of us?"

"I think we could easily manage that if we rotate."

"There's the dilemma. Would it be more effective to discipline her severely for two or less intensely for four?"

Koryn shrugged. "When she's particularly rebellious, I try to achieve maximum intensity as soon as possible and keep it there for most of the session. It doesn't seem very effective to merely stimulate her. She doesn't really feel it until she's reached orgasmic level and unable to achieve it. It's wearing. I think, given her lack of response and the toga thing, we should consider a four hour intense session since we're both here."

Emerald choked and began coughing. Tariq waited until she'd caught her breath and offered her a drink. "I didn't know," she said shakily when she handed the glass back. "I just thought there wasn't anything available for me to wear."

Tariq studied her for a long moment and exchanged a look with Koryn. Koryn shrugged. "Four it is."

Emerald turned her face away when he offered her another bite. It hardly seemed to matter whether she refused or not given the discussion and her stomach had knotted the moment they began it until it had taken an effort to swallow

what she had.

"Finished already?" Tariq asked pleasantly. "Just as well. I have business to take care of. The sooner we get started the better." He glanced at Koryn when he'd set Emerald off his lap. "You should cover it. She might be hungry later. Run along to the bed, child, and wait for us."

Koryn settled back in his chair. "Why did you really come?"

Tariq considered for a moment but they'd been friends a long time. "For the reasons I already outlined and also because I'm in need of a little relief," he said dryly. "I didn't want to give her the impression that it bothered me as much as it does her so I haven't required her to give me release-and I've reached my limit. I can't keep my fucking mind on what I need to do."

"You're having that problem, too?" Koryn asked with a mixture of amusement and disgust. "You aren't seriously considering four hours?"

Tariq grimaced. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure I could handle four. I'm completely serious that we need to try something a little harsher. It almost seems as if she's becoming more rebellious rather than less."

"You noticed that, too?" Koryn was silent for several moments. "I'll admit this is wearing the shit out of me. I propose we have her bring both of us off early on so we aren't as distracted and can focus better. Then we keep it intense until she begs for mercy."

"That hasn't seemed to have much effect," Tariq said dryly. "I never stop anymore until she does."

"So maybe that's the problem?" Koryn said thoughtfully. "She realizes that we'll stop as soon as she does?"

"You may be right," Tariq agreed after a few moments thought. "If we're going to try that, though, I think we should hold off as long as we can. Otherwise we're liable to be too anxious ourselves to keep going long enough to convince her."

Koryn blew out a harsh breath. "Alright," he said a little doubtfully, "but I don't know how long I'll manage to hold out. I pretty much feel the same way you do and I haven't gotten off in days. Do we work together or rotate?"

"We may have to mix it up to manage this," Tariq said dryly. "Let's start together and see if we can achieve our goal a little more quickly that way."

Koryn nodded and bent over to remove his boots.

Tariq removed his own. He discovered when he straightened that Emerald was watching the two of them with wide, frightened eyes and he felt his belly clench with reluctance. He thrust it away, disgusted with himself. If she was half as frightened as she pretended to be she wouldn't continue to provoke them. He discovered he wasn't unaffected despite the determination to ignore it, however. As much as his balls ached for release, he was only semi-erect when he reached

the bed and stared down her, trying to focus on positioning rather than the look in her eyes.

He glanced at Koryn ruefully. "What did we decide?"

Koryn's lips twitched. "Intense When she begs for mercy, we make her bring us off and then begin again."

Tariq frowned. He didn't recall that they'd decided just that way, but it took little reflection to realize that was most likely to work. "You get between her and the wall. I'll take this side."

Koryn climbed over her and settled. Propping himself up on one arm, he dragged her closer to give Tariq more room and lifted the leg nearest to him, draping it across his thighs. After considering it a moment, he pulled it higher. Tariq looked her over and then picked up a pillow. When he'd settled, mirroring Koryn's position, he shoved the pillow beneath Emerald's hips to lift them higher and draped her other leg over his hips.

Emerald was staring at the ceiling when he glanced at her face. It hardened his resolve. He knew what she was doing-trying to block them out. It wouldn't do her any good but it annoyed him that she tried to ignore him just the same. Focusing on the breast closest to him, he began stroking her to bring the blood rushing to her most sensitive areas.

"There's one thing that concerns me," Koryn murmured quietly after a few moments.

Tariq sent him a questioning look.

"In her mind she may have known many men and she admitted that she'd born a child, but this body has never known any man."

"It did occur to me," Tariq said.

"Did it also occur to you that we aren't human? I'm not familiar enough with the breed to know if she's tiny for a human or just tiny to me because I'm used to our women, but she has a tight passage to accommodate anyone our size."

Tariq's cock tightened at the thought. "And?"

"If you expect to wedge that thing of yours in her in the near future-and I know you do-it might not be a bad idea to go ahead and break the hymen and help her get accustomed to something a little bigger than my finger," he retorted dryly.

Reluctance flickered through Tariq. Taking her for the first time was one of the things he'd looked forward to, but he realized almost immediately that Koryn was right. There was no telling what kind of damage, physically and/or psychologically, that he might do trying that. He realized he didn't want to risk that despite his disappointment in considering it. "You're right. It would be better for her to help her muscles grow accustomed to accommodating something a good deal bigger than she's used to.

"Two fingers then. When she's wet enough, we'll push it with four."

"I'll break her hymen when I decide the time is right for it. It won't hurt her as much if she's thoroughly aroused."

Koryn nodded absently, studying the nipple he'd been teasing and trying to decide if it was sensitive enough to begin. He'd been distracted enough by the discussion to be uncertain, however, and he decided to pluck at it a little longer just to be sure.

When Tariq ceased to pinch her nipple and slipped a hand down her belly to part the petals of her sex and stroke her cleft, he reached lower, as well, and began to pluck at her clit, leaning down at the same time to take her nipple into his mouth.

Tariq followed him and they each caught a nipple almost in the same moment. He felt a jolt go through her and satisfaction flickered through him. She was well primed, he discovered the moment he pushed his finger inside of her, already wet and the walls of her sex fluttered around his finger as he pushed deeply and slowly withdrew. She was nearing her peak already. He quickened his pace to carry her to the top and then shoved a second finger inside of her and began a pounding thrust. She shuddered and jerked beneath them as if an electric current was running through her. He slowed his plunging thrusts when he felt Koryn's knuckles brush his and then stopped, waiting for Koryn to work his two fingers into her and then beginning again, slowly at first and then more quickly as they caught each other's rhythm.

He released Emerald's nipple and lifted his head to study her

face after a moment. She was gasping for breath, her fingers fisted tightly in the pillow beneath her head. Satisfied, he lowered his head to catch her nipple in his mouth again and began pulling on it with more vigor, partly to push her to the edge of endurance and partly because he couldn't help himself. He was rapidly nearing the limits of his own endurance.

He was so focused on trying to ignore his own needs and the burn in his arm from driving into her that it was a while before it penetrated his mind that Emerald was whimpering. When it finally did, he increased his efforts, driving harder and faster and pulling on her nipple more fiercely until she began to beg them to stop. Instead of stopping as he usually did when she reached that point, he began driving into her at a pounding pace and kept going until she was sobbing.

Gasping hoarsely for breath, he finally stopped. Koryn was slow to react, but he withdrew only moments behind him. Settling back and rubbing a shaking hand over his face.

Tariq scooted up the bed eagerly. "Take me into your mouth," he said hoarsely, helping her to turn over when she began struggling.

She hovered over the head of his cock for a moment, dragged in a deep, shaky breath and opened her mouth over him. Bliss so intense flooded through Tariq that he thought he would pass out. He caught her head between his palms, guiding her, wishing her mouth was bigger. It was almost as frustrating as

it was thrilling to feel her tiny mouth and tongue curled around the head of his cock-frustrating because he could get little more than that in the small cavern of her mouth and yet it created sensations so intense he couldn't have held back if he'd wanted to. She'd barely stroked his cock and sucked at him a handful of moments when he came so explosively he damned near did pass out. Tightening his hands against her scalp, he struggled to suppress the pained grunts forced from his lungs each time his testicles contracted to eject more seed. The suction of her mouth was almost more torment than pleasure when she'd sucked him until he was dry and yet it took all he could do to release her and push her away.

He sank toward blissful oblivion when he'd finally stopped convulsing, only vaguely aware that Koryn had demanded the same service. With an effort, he gathered himself when she'd finished and flopped weakly on the bed beside him.

She shuddered and tried to roll away from him when he settled beside her to begin again. "Don't move," he said through gritted teeth.

She stilled, opening her eyes to look at him with feverish eyes filled with both pain and reluctance that evidenced the fact that she wasn't cowed by a long shot. He flicked a look at Koryn, meeting his gaze. Koryn struggled to resume his position on her other side and began plucking at her nipple. She was so sensitized from their earlier efforts, it didn't take more than a few moments to bring her to her peak. Tariq wasn't certain whether she held out longer that time before she began to beg

for mercy or if it just felt like because he was as weak as water. It felt like it was longer and because it did, he ignored her longer.

When he finally decided she'd had enough, he glanced at Koryn. "Remove your fingers and hold her," he said grimly, pushing himself upright to get better leverage and deeper penetration, he cupped fingers together to make his hand as small as he could since he couldn't reach her hymen with his finger and pushed it into the mouth of her sex. She bucked, trying to escape Koryn's hold, and he shoved her thigh beneath his hip, using his weight to hold her still as he pressed slowly deeper until he felt her hymen. Withdrawing slowly and pushing in again several times, he waited until she seemed to catch her breath and broke through in one, swift motion. She cried out, bucking against him. He stilled until she'd ceased struggling and then slowly withdrew.

She went limp when he'd withdrawn.

He glanced at her pale face worriedly, feeling the blood drain from own face as the fear abruptly smote him that he'd badly miscalculated.

"She fainted," Koryn announced grimly when he'd checked her.

Tariq stared at the blood on his fingers a little sickly and felt a sudden surge of rage, which he directed at Koryn. "It's a damned good thing you thought to make easier on her!" he growled angrily.

"You think your cock would've been better?" Koryn growled back. "It's as big as your hand!"

Tariq cupped his fingers together as he had and compared the two. It was close, granted, but his cock was the smaller of the two. "My cock doesn't have fucking bones in it!" he growled, flinging himself from the bed and stalking into the bathroom to wash his hand, wondering as he did why the fuck Koryn's suggestion had sounded the least bit rational.

Because neither of them was where Emerald was concerned?

"She was as ready as she was ever going to be," Koryn growled, having followed Tariq.

Tariq whirled on him angrily. "You wanted me to hurt so that she'd hate me!" he snarled. "And I was stupid enough to fall for it!"

"You were fucking determined to be her first! You think she would've been less inclined if you'd punctured her with that fucking pole of yours? It's done. It had to be done, one way or another, before you could breed her."

Tariq ran a shaking hand over his face, struggling with the urge to choke the life out of Koryn. The comment gave him pause, however, a moment to consider that he was far angrier with himself than he was Koryn. He couldn't kick his own ass, though! "I should've sent her to Merrick and had him do it with

some sort of medical instrument," he muttered.

"So she'd hate him instead?"

"I don't give a fuck if she hates him!" Tariq snarled.

"She's a slave, Tariq! Why the fuck do you care if she hates you?"

Tariq punched him, slugging him so hard Koryn staggered out of the door and slammed into the wall.

Uttering a snarl of rage, Koryn righted himself and surged forward, catching Tariq on the jaw with his fist before he could duck. They'd just grabbed one another by the throat when a sound from the other room distracted both of them. They tensed, hesitated, and then released each other abruptly and moved to the door to look toward the bed.

Emerald had curled into a tight ball and Tariq had the uneasy feeling that she was crying. The urge to leave instantly smote him. Even as Koryn shoved past him and strode purposefully to retrieve his uniform, however, it occurred to him that beating a retreat, now, might deprive him of whatever chance he might have to mend things. Swallowing a little convulsively, he approached the bed, braced himself and settled on it, dragging Emerald onto his lap. To his relief, she slipped an arm around his waist and curled against him. Feeling his chest tighten with some unnamed emotion that was dimly related to relief, he enfolded her in his arms, holding her tightly.

She sniffed. "I think there's something wrong with me," she muttered.

Tariq felt his heart sink. A wave of both dizziness and nausea swept through him. "Wrong?" he echoed hoarsely, trying to remember if he'd noticed a lot of blood. There hadn't been much on his fingers, but he'd withdrawn his hand. Maybe he'd punctured something besides the hymen, he thought in sudden horror?

Emerald sniffed again. "I think I came," she wailed, "and it hurt so much worse than the first time!"

It took Tariq a few moments to actually assimilate that statement. Mixed emotions pelted him from nearly every direction even when he did decide he'd heard her correctly. An avalanche of relief mixed with a dash of amusement, irritation, remorse and then more anger. She'd scared the living hell out of him and she'd fainted because she'd come?

How had she come, he wondered blankly, realizing abruptly that she was still wearing the belt?

He struggled for several moments to decide how to respond. One thing stood out in his mind, though, as paramount in importance. He struggled with it, knowing that what he wanted to say would be completely unacceptable to anyone he knew and would probably shock them to the core. "I didn't mean to hurt you," he managed to say stiffly.

She lifted her head and stared at him. "You used your hand

and you didn't mean to hurt me?"

He felt his face heat. "It had to go," he growled. "I thought my hand was smaller." He studied her face. "I couldn't reach it with my gods damned fingers!"

Emerald bit her lip and burrowed her face against his chest, struggling with the wild urge to laugh at his expression-a mixture of remorse, resentment because he felt it, no doubt, and wariness. Beyond that, it was such a man thing to think of! If anything didn't fit that they thought should, they would get a sledge hammer and drive it in!

It had hurt like hell, though. She sighed, realizing that she couldn't recall that it had hurt any less at all the first time she'd lost her virginity-in her other life. In fact, it seemed to her it had actually hurt worse the first time, now that she thought about it. She'd been bone dry from nerves and he'd either thought it would be less painful to tear it slowly or he'd had to work harder to punch through it. Either way, it hadn't been a jolting stab of pain. It had burned on and on until she'd begun clawing at him to get him off of her.

She was almost more disturbed that she'd come, or thought she had. Aside from the inhibitor she was wearing that should've prevented it, it had almost seemed like the pain had set it off and that was what really worried her. Maybe it was only that it hadn't prevented her from coming, though?

He cupped her face with one hand after a moment, using his thumb to nudge her chin upward. After studying her

expression, he lowered his head slowly and brushed his lips along hers. She licked her lips automatically, tasting him on them and feeling a warming tide roll through her. She lifted her lips for more. He released a ragged breath and covered her mouth, sucking at her lips hungrily and then spearing his tongue into her mouth and raking it along hers.

His arms tightened around her, lifting her higher when she stroked her own tongue against his in return. He coaxed her tongue into his mouth, sucking on it greedily and then followed its retreat. When she sucked on his tongue in return, a shudder raked through him. He kissed her more feverishly, shifting his hold on her to run a shaking hand over her, squeezing her buttocks and at the same time pressing her more tightly against him.

He seemed reluctant to stop once he'd started, but finally, with one last brush of his lips, he lifted his head. He held her gaze for a long moment. She saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

He looked away. "I have to go," he said, his voice sounding strange.

Emerald looked at him curiously when he abruptly set her aside, but when he got up, she merely curled on the bed again, dragging the covers over her.

She'd thought Koryn had already left, but she heard Tariq say something to him as he dressed and then the two of them left together.

She didn't want to think about it-or anything. She'd been through days and days of pure hell and now, finally, she felt relief. She didn't know if she actually had achieved orgasm in spite of the inhibitor or if her body had simply reached maximum overload and shut down briefly. She didn't care either. She was exhausted and, for the first time in a while, she didn't feel as if her humming body was going to drive her up the wall.

* * * *

The male Merrick had told him about was crouched in one corner of the room, gnawing on his fingernails when Tariq entered. He looked at Tariq as if he was a monster, turned pale, his eyes widening to the size of saucers, and surged to his feet.

"You had something to say?" Tariq asked, sprawling in the chair that had been set in the room for him and studying the male with thinly disguised revulsion.

"You're ... you're the lord?"

"I am."

The male swallowed convulsively several times. "I'm Pete, Lord. I know stuff. I don't want to go no other world."

Tariq's lips curled, but he felt little amusement. "Lord Tariq. They did tell you that I don't barter, yes?"

Pete went back to gnawing his fingernails. "But I got somethin' for you."

"That remains to be seen," Tariq said dryly. "In any case, staying here isn't an option for you. You should count yourself lucky that we found you. You look half starved. Food is something you won't have to worry about anymore-in fact anything. You'll be a breeder for the Anunnaki women. All you have to do is fuck ... productively."

Pete gaped at him. "What's that mean? Productive?"

"It means you'll be expected to impreg ... get the women pregnant. If you can't do that, then you may have problems, but our tests indicate that you should be a good breeder."

The man gaped at him for several moments and then puffed out his chest, grinning broadly. "Hate to brag, but I am good. I can look at a woman hard and get her knocked up."

Tariq resisted the urge to roll his eyes, smiling tightly instead. "Now ... the information ...?"

The man frowned. "Who am I gonna be fuckin'?"

Tariq heaved an irritated breath. "The Anunnaki women."

The man looked him up and down. "How come you cain't do it? Shootin' blanks?"

Tariq's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid the answer to that is too

complicated for your minuscule brain to process," he said tightly. "We need new contributors to the gene pool-new blood."

"These women-they big like you?"

Tariq blinked at him. "Hardly," he said tightly.

"But they must still be big. All you fellas I seen was."

"Tall," he agreed coldly. "Yes."

"They ain't gonna have a problem with me bein' short next to them?"

"They want the dick and the seed."

"What if I git stuck with an ugly one?"

"Luck of the draw. Close your eyes. You're no beauty yourself."

"But I cain't git no hard on if I think she's ugly."

Tariq grinned evilly. "Oh, I can guarantee you'll be able to get it up, whatever she looks like. You may not be able to get the son-of-a-bitch to go down, but you'll get it up."

Pete looked uneasy-as well, he might. "Maybe you could help me git with a purty one if I help you out?"

Tariq studied him through narrowed eyes for a long moment and it abruptly occurred to him that he happened to know a

woman who would be deeply appreciative to get her hands on a good breeder-and as wormy as the little bastard was, he was potent-not ill equipped to please an Anunnaki woman, if it came to that from what he'd heard. Even Merrick, their medic, had been impressed with it. Of course, she was no great beauty, but she was a powerful, influential woman. A slow smile curled his lips. "Lady Seana."

The man blinked. "Lady," he repeated, clearly pleased with the idea. "She purty?"

"She's rich and powerful," Tariq responded.

Pete's brows rose. He frowned, considering, and finally nodded. "We found one of them alien ships."

Tariq's heart skipped several beats. He struggled to keep his thoughts to himself and his expression merely politely interested. "Those who attacked?"

The man nodded vigorously. "It got shot down when the war started, I guess. It looked all banged up, like it crashed, but it was still mostly in one piece."

Tariq narrowed his eyes. "What makes you think I'd be interested in that? We're looking for survivors."

"Thing is, the way I heard it, they got bunches of them."

Tariq stared at him. "They took prisoners?"

The man nodded vigorously.

Tariq's expression hardened. "Tell me how to find it and I'll make a gift of you to Lady Seana."

Pete frowned uneasily. "Don't know if I can tell you how," he said slowly, "but I can take you to it."

Doubt flickered through Tariq and the instant suspicion that the little bastard thought that the offer might give him the chance to escape. He got up to leave. "I'll consider it. You may be certain, however, that if you're lying to me you will deeply regret it."

?

Chapter Nine

Emerald wasn't as convinced that she'd achieved orgasm when she woke up a little later as she had been when she fell asleep. The familiar discomfort was back. Although it seemed to lack the intensity of before, she felt warm and achy, as if she

was coming down with something. The question was, was it just ... residual arousal because she'd been teased so long without being allowed release? Was it possible that they'd somehow trained her body from so many 'sessions' to always be on edge or maybe simply because she wasn't allowed anything to wear and that kept her focus on the sensitive areas of her body?

Maybe she hadn't actually achieved orgasm as she'd thought and it was simply that her body had reached such an unbearable peak without the ability to release the tension that it had simply shut down as she'd suspected before?

It was a dismaying thought in some ways, but she didn't suppose it posed any real threat of harm or they wouldn't do it. In another way, it was almost a comfort. At least, if it was true, she knew there was some escape, some relief.

It didn't seem to her that she could look forward to anything else in the near future. She was trying to learn how to behave as they expected. She might've subconsciously been pushing them before Koryn had spoken to her. She knew she'd very consciously pushed them at times, but even then she didn't think it was because she wanted them to punish her. Because it was punishment, almost more than she could bear most of the time.

The problem was that she still didn't fully understand the finer points of being their sex slave slash breeder.

She considered that and amended it. She thought she did.

She was supposed to be-like a robot, she supposed, with no thoughts or wishes of her own, always prepared to do just what they wanted. The problem was trying to grow accustomed to at least behaving as if she was an empty vessel. That was what she was trying to do and yet she'd discovered it was a lot harder than it seemed on the surface because she had to fight a constant battle with her instincts and her personality. Even though she'd been trained, as a soldier, to follow orders without question, their orders were so personal, so unlike what she was used to, it always sent just enough of a jolt of surprise through her that she couldn't prevent an emotional response. Beyond that, their method of training was almost as demoralizing as real torture.

She supposed she should count her blessings that she was important enough to them that they preferred the 'gentle' discipline they'd thought up-actually she was grateful. The pleasure might be nearly unbearable a lot of the time, and was, but it could have been so much worse it didn't even bear thinking about.

She didn't know why they hadn't simply made her that way if that was what they wanted. Surely it wasn't beyond their capabilities if they could grow a fully functional adult from a few cells in a very short time-days or weeks? From the things she'd heard, they hadn't actually been on Earth long and she doubted they'd found her right away.

She didn't understand that part, but maybe they couldn't do that without creating something so mentally deficient that it

was repulsive?

Or maybe they just weren't willing to go that far? Maybe it was against their principles?

She would've thought it would be against their principles to enslave another race, but she didn't suppose any race ever completely advanced beyond their basic nature. And it seemed to be in the nature of most to use anyone weak enough for them to use if the mood struck them.

Sexual slavery had been an ongoing problem for humans, for that matter, for centuries. It hadn't been eradicated because there was still profit in it, still plenty of men willing to pay for a woman they could use as they pleased.

The breeding thing was a new twist, though. That didn't make any sense to her. They seemed capable of reproducing so why did they need to enslave another race to reproduce? She'd heard them mention males, so it wasn't just women they were after. They wanted, or needed, both.

Koryn was a geneticist, she thought abruptly. She'd assumed his presence was purely for the purpose of reviving humans since she knew he was responsible for her own resurrection, but they hadn't known about the war. They hadn't known what had happened on Earth. They'd expected to merely come to Earth, select what they wanted, and leave again.

Something was wrong with their genes?

What could possibly be wrong if introducing their 'children' as they called them would eliminate the problem?

It hit her abruptly-limitation. At any time the gene pool became extremely limited, problems began to appear in the offspring-defects. So did that mean something had happened to the Anunnaki to reduce their gene pool so drastically that they had to have fresh contributors?

It seemed to her that that was the only answer.

War? Disease? Natural disaster? She realized it could be any of those things or even none of them. Maybe they were practicing population control and simply underestimated the numbers they needed and limited their off-spring too drastically? Or maybe, since they seemed fond of 'playing' with genetics, they'd done something to themselves?

Did it matter beyond the fact that they'd decided to collect what they considered belonged to them, the human race, and that included her?

She realized it did. It didn't change the fact that they were unbelievably arrogant and too single minded to consider that their 'children' also had rights, but a true need to take breeders to insure the survival of their race put an entirely different complexion on the matter-at least insofar as her perspective on Tariq and Koryn.

She still didn't like the fact that they considered her their possession, but, despite their arrogance, she believed they

had made every effort to be gentle with her and she could at least concede that they weren't careless of their possessions.

Maybe they thought of her as a pet they were particularly fond of, but it almost seemed as if they were more inclined to treat her like a lover than an object for their lust and to breed for them.

Tariq had seemed genuinely concerned after he'd broken her hymen that he might've done far more damage than he'd expected or intended-remorseful, not just upset that he might have broken his toy. Maybe she'd misinterpreted it, but it seemed to her that his discomfort afterwards arose from the realization that he'd given more away than he'd intended. She hadn't thought about that at the time, but in retrospect it was hard to interpret his abrupt reversal any other way. He'd picked her up so carefully and cuddled her with such ... tenderness, and then abruptly plunked her down again and scrambled out of the room as if his coattails were on fire. What else would explain that?

He'd suddenly remembered he had something far more important to take care of?

He'd said as much, but he hadn't behaved as if he had anything more pressing when he'd come in than spending the afternoon disciplining her and he hadn't gotten any calls.

Then again, maybe she just wanted to put a positive spin on her situation because the future unfolding before her looked pretty grim otherwise?

* * * *

Reluctant for once to rise and leave his bed the moment he woke, Tariq lay in his bunk with Emerald, going back over everything Pete had told him and the ramifications of it. He wasn't in the habit of yielding to impulse. He was decisive and tended to make quick assessments of any given situation and act, but he never acted until he'd considered every conceivable angle. It was his uneasiness that too much of his focus was on Emerald and that his judgment, therefore, was impaired that made him consider Pete's proposition far longer than he ordinarily would have.

That plus the fact that he'd wanted to act immediately and he never trusted impulses.

Even his rage at what had been done to their children was firmly wrapped up in Emerald now. He was certain he would've felt much the same regardless. Like everyone else, he was accustomed to thinking of the humans as theirs, which by extension, meant that an attack on their children was an attack on the Anunnaki. It had become even more personal, though, when he'd chosen Emerald as the mother of his children.

It wasn't as if it hadn't occurred to him that he would never have had the opportunity of choosing Emerald if things had transpired differently. Even if the humans had increased their life-spans because of their own growing knowledge of genetics and she had lived a normal lifespan and still been

alive when he arrived, it was highly unlikely she would've been capable of bearing children-not impossible, but not likely. Nevertheless, it infuriated him every time he thought about the attack, because he couldn't help but see it as an attack on Emerald.

He wanted to retaliate. It had frustrated him no end that it seemed unlikely they would be able to discover who the bastards were that had decimated their nest of purebloods and the possibility Pete had dangled under his nose made him all the more anxious.

He dismissed any plot Pete might have hatched fairly swiftly, didn't even dedicate any time to considering possibilities. He would be on guard. Whatever the man had thought of would be impossible to execute when he would be expecting treachery.

It had occurred to him fairly quickly that this was no private war. As angry as he was about it, as distracted as he was by Emerald, he knew he wasn't alone. There had been brooding menace among the entire ship's personnel since they'd realized the devastation they'd found was premeditated. To their minds, they had been attacked.

Everyone on Niribu would feel the same way, he realized. Once he reported what had happened, there would be an uproar and they would be calling for blood.

That might just complicate his personal agenda.

It wasn't that he was any less angry or less inclined to retaliate, but he didn't feel that much urgency-not enough to delay his plans for Emerald. In point of fact, going off to war was more of an incentive to make certain he bred her before he left. He certainly didn't expect or plan to be a casualty, but then again no one ever did.

The question was, was it reasonable to wait until he had all of his facts before he made the report? It seemed both reasonable and imperative. But would the high council see it that way? Or would he find himself in hot water for delaying at all?

If he was ordered to immediately launch a counter attack, what would he do with Emerald? He sure as hell didn't want to risk taking her into battle with him. He didn't give a fuck if she had been a soldier. She wasn't now. She was his breeder and he wasn't going to risk her.

Was it safe to send her to Niribu to wait for his return, though?

He couldn't leave her on Earth. Aside from the fact that there was no place that they'd discovered so far that would be protected enough to suit him, he had a bad feeling he might spend years searching for her when he came back to collect her. She wasn't inclined to accept her circumstances, regardless of her efforts to pretend that she was. She wouldn't be waiting for him in he left her.

Could he afford to spare the time with what he knew now, though, to breed her before he had to leave her?

As far as he knew, no one knew what Pete had told him, but Merrick knew he was trying to negotiate better conditions. Once it came out, Merrick would also know when and how the information had been passed.

He could always bribe Merrick but short of seeing to it that he had an 'accident' that was no guarantee that it wouldn't come out and cold blooded murder for his own ends wasn't something he was willing to contemplate. He had no problem killing if it was a matter of survival or protecting his own from harm, but he couldn't justify killing Merrick simply because he was in his way.

He had finally decided he would have to simply play it by ear, regardless of the possible outcome. He had a duty to his people that superseded his personal considerations. He didn't know that Pete had anything at all to offer and, even if he was right and there was a craft, he wouldn't know until they examined it whether it would yield up the information they needed or not.

He'd arranged to check out Pete's claims the following day. After a little consideration, he decided not to include anyone but Koryn, whose interests were also at stake.

He hadn't touched Emerald the night before. He'd explained to her that he was allowing her time to heal since the rawness would negate the effectiveness of her discipline. He didn't want her to get the entirely wrong impression after what had transpired earlier and begin to believe he was so soft where

she was concerned that she could manipulate him. He informed her that he fully intended to resume their sessions as soon as it was effective once more and she needn't think otherwise.

He supposed it might have been equally effective to leave her wondering. He'd considered that worrying about it might be beneficial. He was uncomfortably aware that he'd been so ... unsettled at the results of his poorly thought out and executed attempt to prepare her for breeding, however, that she could get the wrong impression. He supposed that might also have been beneficial in a way, keeping her off guard, but he hadn't wanted to risk the possibility of her getting that idea into her head at all.

He suspected Koryn thought he was soft where Emerald was concerned, but the bastard was wrong if he did. The only reason he gave a fuck whether she hated him or not was for his own pleasure. If she hated him, she wouldn't respond to him, which would decrease his own pleasure-once he fucking got to that point!

Just a little longer, he told himself as he studied her sleeping form in his arms. By Koryn's calculations, she should be reaching the peak of her fertility cycle just about the time she was strong enough for that sort of activity. Of course, he knew he would still have to be very careful with her for a while-especially if he succeeded in impregnating her right away-which he hoped to do.

Under other circumstances, he would've been perfectly happy

to work at it for a while, but it seemed imperative to insure his claim to her. The others might rant over it, but they would have to concede the importance of his own bloodlines and that would give him time. Very likely, by the time she produced his first heir, the hoopla would've died a natural death and everyone would have settled on someone else. If not Well, he could work on it. It still might sort itself out in the meantime.

He realized as he studied Emerald that he was still unsettled about what had happened the day before-not especially about the rough handling, although that still bothered the hell out of him. He'd managed to, mostly, dismiss that, though, when he realized she didn't seem to be traumatized by it either emotionally or physically as he'd feared.

It was the deep fear he'd felt, he realized, that was really bothering him. He wasn't used to feeling fear about anything, dismay on occasion, but not cold sweat fear and certainly not for anything in the nature of a possession. Anger wouldn't have surprised him or particularly bothered him. He didn't like to lose.

It made his chest feel uncomfortably tight all over again, just remembering it. It made him reluctant to leave the bed and go about his business even though he knew it was important-far more important than laying abed cuddling his pretty little trinket.

Shaking the thought and the urge to hold her a little longer for the pleasure it would give him to feel her warmth, he

disentangled himself and got up to prepare for his excursion. Koryn was waiting impatiently when he arrived at the docking bay with his prisoner in tow.

"I stowed my gear in the skimmer already," Koryn announced.

Tariq scanned him. "You need to get a weapon. We don't know what to expect or what we might encounter."

Koryn sent him a startled look, saw that Tariq was wearing a holster and armed with a pair of pistols and then looked at Pete speculatively. He merely nodded, however. "There should be plenty in the locker on the skimmer."

Pete was almost too terrified when they first took off to speak at all or to think. He stammered so badly every time Tariq asked for directions that Tariq finally set the skimmer down. Grabbing the man by the front of his shirt, he lifted him bodily from his chair. "Do you or do you not know how to find the fucking ship you told me about?" he growled through gritted teeth.

The man gaped at him in horror. "It's west of where we was caught," he stammered finally.

"Due west?"

Pete's jaw sagged. "Toward the sun," he answered finally.

Tariq dropped him and returned to the controls. The skimmer was fast enough it shouldn't have taken them more than an

hour to reach the crash site instead of the nearly three it did. Pete was too frightened or too confused to be of much help, however, until Tariq finally realized that it was the height frightening and confusing him more than anything else. Once he'd taken the skimmer down so that it was traveling no more than a few feet above the treetops, Pete seemed to gather his wits. He pointed out, repeatedly, that that unnerved him, often enough Koryn began to seriously consider throttling the bastard himself. However, he also began to point out landmarks he recalled as they headed in a westerly direction from the capture site and Koryn managed to control the irritation that arose from the man's incessant babbling.

The ship he'd told them about had crashed on the outskirts of another city, they discovered. Tariq hovered over it for a few minutes, studying the ship itself and then the area around it. After a few moments, he took the skimmer up again and surveyed a wider area, using the shipboard scanner to look for heat signatures that might indicate human habitation that could present a threat.

When he was satisfied, he landed the skimmer. Pete hopped up and tried to beat them to the door. Tariq picked him up, hauled him back to the seat he'd occupied, and strapped him in. "You'll wait here," he said grimly.

"But ...!"

Ignoring his complaints, Tariq joined Koryn at the hatch again and they lowered the gangplank. The city was eerily quiet. Apparently, the skimmer had scattered even the wildlife or

sent it into hiding.

They spent nearly an hour removing enough rubble to find a way in, but by the time they'd cleared away enough of the rubble to find the hatch, they'd recognized the design of the craft.

"Dinjin," Tariq spat angrily.

"We had a gods damned treaty with the bastards!" Koryn snarled. "I don't know what pisses me off more! The fact that we made a treaty with them at all or the fact that they knew what they'd done when they approached the council for a treaty!"

"No doubt this was the reason for their interest in making a treaty," Tariq said tightly.

Koryn frowned. "I'm not sure I follow that."

Tariq was focused on finding a way in. After trying the hatch control, he looked around for something to use as a pry bar and wandered off.

Koryn watched him with irritation. When Tariq showed no inclination to explain his reasoning when he returned, Koryn posed the question again.

"The humans were focused on holding them here to allow the others to escape. They must have put up more of a fight than the Dinjin anticipated. If they hadn't done a lot of damage,

there would've been no incentive for the Dinjin to consider a treaty. They wouldn't have been worried about making one with us if they'd thought they had the resources to take us on, as well."

Koryn digested that while Tariq worked on the door. "We don't know that they attacked," he pointed out after a moment. "We haven't seen any others. There are other explanations for the presence of the ship. They might have been intent on nothing more than a survey of the planet."

"No ... but we will," Tariq agreed as he tossed the piece of metal aside, grasped the edge he'd lifted and began heaving at the door.

It took him several minutes to break it open. Breathing heavily from the exertion, he sent Koryn a sour look. "Thanks for helping."

Koryn grinned. "You seemed to be doing just fine without my help."

Grunting a response, Tariq stepped inside and looked around. They had to shift more debris out of the way before they could make their way to the control room. They formed a brigade. Tariq, in the lead, lifted the debris and passed it to Koryn. Koryn looked it over briefly to see if it was anything of any importance and then tossed it out.

There were two dead Dinjin in the seats in front of the ship's controls-which explained the less than pleasant odor, Koryn

thought grimly. If the ship hadn't been so well sealed, however, the bodies wouldn't have been in any condition to recognize them.

He dismissed that thought even as it occurred to him. Their elongated skulls were uncommon enough traits that it wouldn't have been that difficult-assuming the skulls had remained-which they might not have if the ship hadn't been sealed.

"No power," Tariq announced. "Either it's been longer since the attack than we thought, or this ship wasn't involved in it"

"Or the power source was damaged and that was what made them crash to start with."

"Or that," Tariq agreed. "We won't be getting anything off the computer here, though."

"I'm going to collect some samples," Koryn said, turning away abruptly.

Tariq glanced at him. "It's Dinjin. I think we'll get more from their computer with less effort than we would from them even if we revived them."

"Not necessarily. The DNA has a natural tendency to record memories anyway-at least ours does-and if they developed technology similar to ours they may have enhanced that. We might not get anything at all, but it's worth a shot."

"Good point. Watch yourself around Pete. I suspect he thought

this little excursion might give him the chance to escape and if that was the plan, I doubt tying him to his chair has dissuaded him."

Nodding, Koryn left.

"And keep an eye out for an attack!" Tariq called after him.

"If you thought there was a chance of that why the hell didn't you bring a couple of guards to stand watch?" Koryn demanded irritably.

"I don't want anybody to know what we've found until I've had time to examine the evidence myself."

Koryn peered out of the ship cautiously before he moved to the door and surveyed the surrounding area. Satisfied when he didn't see any movement, he headed to the skimmer to collect his instruments. It was just as well Tariq had thought to warn him to watch Pete, he thought dryly. The little bastard had managed to free himself and clobbered him with something he'd found to use as a club the moment he opened the door. He dropped his pistol at the blow but managed to retrieve it before Pete could get his hands on it.

The battle was brief. Pete was no match for him in either stature, weight, or speed. Unfortunately, it pissed him off that the bastard had hit him and he retaliated a lot harder than he'd meant to. Looking down at the fallen man with disgust, he finally crouched down to check his vitals and was relieved to discover he hadn't killed the stupid son-of-a-bitch.

Shaking his head, he picked the unconscious man up and carried him into the bathroom and locked him in-just in case he came around again and thought he was up to another battle.

"I hope you didn't have any plans for Pete," he muttered when he returned and saw that Tariq was focused on taking the console apart to get to the memory banks.

Tariq paused, whipping a look at him. "You killed him?" he asked sharply.

Koryn's lips tightened. "He tried to brain me with something. He's alive. I just won't know what, if any, permanent damage I did until we get him back where we can get a scan."

"Well, fuck!" Tariq said irritably. "I was going to give him to Lady Seana."

Koryn glanced at him in surprise. "Really? What for?"

Tariq released a disgusted huff. "Gods, Koryn! I know you have your nose in your work all day, but it seems to me you would've picked up a little understanding of the way the world works. She's on the high council and one of the most powerful at that-and she doesn't have any heirs. It never hurts to do someone a good turn-especially if you think you might need a favor yourself," he said dryly.

Uneasiness flickered through Koryn. "You think there might be

a problem keeping Emerald," he said flatly.

Tariq's expression hardened. "The problem is I don't know and I don't like to leave anything to chance. Maybe, maybe not, but she's a friend, beyond that and, according to Merrick, he should be a prime breeder. In any case, I offered to arrange it for Pete if he helped and I'm not in the habit of going back on my word."

Koryn didn't especially like the fact that Tariq seemed to be in some doubt about the outcome even though he'd worried about it himself. It unnerved him when Tariq was generally completely confident that he could do whatever he set out to do—mostly because he usually could do whatever he set out to do.

It occurred to him after a few moments that it might not be doubt as much as it was anxiety because of the way he felt about Emerald. He'd been at pains to convince himself, and him for that matter, that his possessiveness toward Emerald was purely a matter of having selected the female he wanted. She appealed to him sexually and she had excellent bloodlines. His interest was nothing but a combination of personal taste and reason.

Naturally they all wanted the best breeder they could get, but they hadn't actually managed to find that many—yet—and it wasn't impossible that they might find one that was even more desirable than Emerald—in both respects. If Tariq hadn't been so fixated on Emerald, he would have considered that possibility and at least waited a while before he made his

selection.

He hadn't even asked about their latest finds, however, either the survivors that had been found or the people they'd found in the tunnels that he was currently reviving. In point of fact, Merrick had reported that not only were more than half the survivors they'd found female, but they were all reasonably healthy and all of an age to be breedable.

Tariq would've been given that report long before the 'gossip' trickled down to him. And yet, also according to the gossip, Tariq hadn't even inspected them after they'd been brought back and cleaned up.

Tariq was a decisive man, but he was also intelligent. He wasn't in the habit of ignoring new developments and clinging to his decision only because he'd already made it. If anything new surfaced that affected the original decision, he reviewed it and adjusted accordingly as necessary.

Granted, having looked all the possibilities over himself, he'd concluded that Emerald was still preferable to any of the others, but he'd at least looked. The fact that Tariq hadn't was telling, he thought.

Apparently Tariq didn't realize that, though.

After considering it for a while, he finally decided that he needed point it out, whether Tariq would particularly welcome it or not. He waited until they'd collected everything they thought might be useful from the Dinjins' craft and loaded up

for the return trip.

"I heard they had found thirty or so breedable women among the survivors they found."

Tariq slid a glance at him as he powered up the skimmer.
"Thirty three."

"I didn't know the exact count, but I did go down to the hold to check them out."

"Did you find anything of interest?"

Koryn's lips tightened, anger flickering through him at Tariq's tone. "If you're asking me if I'd rather have one of them than Emerald, the answer is no."

Tariq shrugged. "I'm at a loss as to why you brought it up, then."

"Because there's already talk," Koryn said tightly. "You were clear enough that the only reason you were willing to allow me to get near Emerald was to prevent that kind of talk. They're going to speculate if you don't even have enough interest to look at them."

Tariq looked like he might explode for several moments, but after he'd wrestled with his temper for a moment, he relaxed fractionally. "Point taken. I'll take the time to look them over when we get back."

"Fuck one or two while you're at it."

Tariq's jaw tightened. "If I see one that appeals to me, naturally I will," he said through gritted teeth.

"Do it if you don't find one that particularly appeals to you! You haven't touched a woman since you fixated on Emerald and it's been noticed. If they knew you were fucking her, it wouldn't be so bad, but they know she isn't strong enough for that yet."

"How the fuck would they know that?" Tariq growled.

"They know how long these things take," Koryn said dryly. "It isn't as if we're doing anything radically different here than all of them are completely familiar with. Gods! Half of them have been cloned themselves at least once!"

"She's taking care of my needs, regardless," Tariq said stiffly, "aside from the fact that I've been focused on training her."

"That's exactly my point!" Koryn snapped. "We also don't want it common knowledge that we've had to discipline her!"

Tariq was too pissed off to think straight for a time. It occurred to him as the ship came into view, however, exactly why he didn't want to fuck any of the others-aside from his dislike of being told what to do. He wanted Emerald with an intensity that made it impossible to consider an alternative. Beyond that, he realized that he was deeply concerned that Emerald might learn of it and either be hurt or angry about it.

It made him so furious when he realized that that he immediately decided Koryn was right. There was every reason for everyone to believe he was fixated on Emerald because he was!

He was still so angry by the time he'd deposited Pete with Merrick to patch the stupid bastard up and stalked to the hold that he was radiating fury and all of the humans flew to the back of their cells and cowered there. He was dead set on putting the rumors to rest, however, by that time. After scanning the women, he picked one at random and hauled her off to one of the interrogation rooms. She screamed and fought him all the way and then promptly fell into a dead faint the moment he dragged his cock out of his uniform.

"Well fuck!" he growled, wondering whether to wait until she came around or head back to collect another possibility.

Grimly determined to finish what he'd started, he hauled her back and tossed her into her cell on her ass. She came around then, which made him suspect she hadn't actually fainted to start with, but he decided to ignore her and pick another one. The second was worse than the first. It wasn't until later that he realized it was a combination of his anger and the condition of his first 'victim' when he returned her that prompted her hysteria and he was certainly in no mood to see the humor in the situation even then. The second female screamed all the way to the room and kept on screaming while he stripped. He wasn't sure if it was the screaming that did it, or she just didn't have that much appeal, but he

discovered that time that he couldn't get his cock hard enough to do anything.

Thoroughly disgusted, he didn't even bother to dress before he hauled her back and thrust her into her cell. She was still screaming when he left her-he thought. Most of them were screaming hysterically by that time, however, and it was hard to tell one from another.

"Satisfied?" he growled at Koryn when Koryn joined him in the interrogation room.

"Infinitely," Koryn retorted dryly. "It'll be all over the ship inside of five minutes that you raped half of them and left broken women in your wake."

"I didn't rape either one of them," Tariq said disgustedly. "The first one passed out the minute I dragged my cock out and the other one was screaming so deafeningly I couldn't focus enough to get it up."

Koryn's lips twitched, but he was wise enough not to smile. "It doesn't matter what happened. It matters what they think happened."

It was going to matter to Emerald, too, Tariq thought angrily, but she might as well get used to it! He owned her not the other way around, regardless of what she seemed to think!

It wasn't until he climbed into bed with her later that it occurred to him that he had absolutely no reason to suspect that

Emerald was the least bit possessive about him. He should've been relieved about it, but he discovered he wasn't.

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Chapter Ten

Tariq was torn between absolute delight at the discovery that Emerald was indeed possessive of him and anger for the same reason. He was almost equally torn by the fact that it was Koryn who told her.

They'd met in his quarters to discuss what they'd discovered in the Dinjin ship over lunch three days later. He'd summoned Emerald to sit on his lap. It had started as a test of her obedience, but he'd discovered he enjoyed it even if it wasn't particularly comfortable for either of them on several levels.

"The memory cards were in pretty bad shape," he said with disgust, "but I got enough to confirm that the ship we found was part of an attack force. According to the propaganda issued to the fighters, the humans provoked it by attacking

one of their colonies and the objective was to eradicate the threat to their interests."

"There's no saying that was true," Koryn pointed out. "They would want to inspire the fighters to do their worst."

"It doesn't matter one way or the other," Tariq said grimly. "The fact remains that they brought the fight here when the dispute was with the colonists. I'm not sure that would even weigh with the council if it is true. They knew exactly who it was they were attacking. I've confirmed that and the objective wasn't merely retaliation. They fully intended to erase their existence. They'd planned to wipe out the people here and move on to the other colonies-which they knew about.

"That suggests that they'd already targeted the humans before there was any dispute. According to what Emerald told us, they'd taken great pains to prevent the Dinjin from learning about the other colonies. That could only mean that they'd been watching them before the humans knew they existed, let alone were a threat. I don't see any other possible explanation."

Koryn nodded agreement. "It's good you managed to get that. I haven't had much luck on my end. Not that I'm ready to concede defeat, mind you! There might still be some useful information if I can decode it."

"Such as the locations of the colonies? I didn't find that, unfortunately, and there's a lot of space out there. Without at least a clue of where to look"

"The chances are that we'll never find them-or know if the Dinjin succeeded or not."

"No. I don't believe they did, though. The defenders hit them so hard they took out almost half the battle fleet in the first few minutes of the battle. Unfortunately, the ship we found was one of them and that was where the recording stopped. We do know that there was a ground battle, though, and from what we've learned it was a fairly prolonged campaign."

"I guess that rules out any mention of taking prisoners?"

"The two we found were dead when they hit the ground. There was nothing in the orders I found to suggest that was part of the plan, but the ground battle probably changed all the rules."

Koryn frowned. "Don't you think the treaty rules out the possibility?"

Tariq snorted. "With those arrogant bastards? No, I don't. It might even have been part of the reason they proposed a treaty to start with-smug satisfaction that they'd wiped out our nest and taken the survivors as slaves."

"So ... what do we do with the information?"

"I'll have to report. I don't see an alternative and I think it might be a fatal mistake, for us-meaning you and me-to delay now that we have the information. The time we've spent gathering the Intel is understandable. Not turning it over now that we

have it could be seen as treasonous. I'll have to work on the report and contact the high councilor tonight."

"What about Emerald? That isn't going to give you much time to breed her."

"No, but the council will meet and discuss it. They could drag it out for weeks or months. I doubt they will, but it's a possibility. Even so, I'll have a small window of opportunity to breed her and I'll have to hope for the best. I'm certainly not taking her into battle. I'll have to send her to Niribu if and when we're ordered into battle. You won't be needed. I could send her with you."

Koryn studied Emerald speculatively. "At least your trip to the hold to examine the breeders seems to have had the desired effect. You know how gossip is. They're saying now that you've already sampled half of them."

It took Tariq a moment to realize Koryn had very deliberately switched to English. He'd already opened his mouth to remind Koryn, angrily, that he hadn't fucked any of them when he realized Emerald had grown rigidly tense in his hold. That gave him pause. He didn't know if Koryn had done it to stir up trouble for him, as a malicious prank, or simply to test Emerald, but he discovered that as much as it angered him that Koryn had told her something he hadn't wanted her to know, he did want to know how she felt about it.

Wondering if he was simply imagining her reaction, he shifted her so that he could see her face and pretended his only

interest was in playing with her. He discovered when he'd pushed his hand between her legs and pressed a finger into her sex, though, that she was bone dry-so dry it took an effort to push his finger in at all.

She was tense alright and she tensed more at his touch. He wasn't completely satisfied that he was certain of the reason for it, however.

"Still tender?" he asked coolly.

Emerald flicked a look at his face and then looked away. "A little."

Maybe, Tariq thought, but she was definitely angry.

Pleasure wafted through him for a moment before it occurred to him that, not only was he not done what she thought he had, but she had no right to be angry even if he had! "A pity. You're more delicate than I thought. I suppose I'll have to find another prospect in the hold."

Koryn settled back in his seat, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "A man with your appetites should consider having at least three anyway. Then, too, that would be the best way to see which is the better breeder. You could keep the first one that becomes pregnant as your prime breeder and the other two or three strictly for fucking."

"Good point," Tariq murmured, lifting his hands to massage Emerald's breasts. She jerked when he cupped them and

then stilled, staring stonily at the table. "What did you think of the tall one with the pale hair?"

Koryn frowned as if mentally reviewing them. "I didn't try that one myself. Was she any good?"

Tariq almost chuckled when Emerald turned to glare at him. He managed to kill the urge and return her look with a cool one of his own. He lifted his brows at her. "I do believe you've forgotten your manners," he said evenly. "Three days and you're under the impression that you can give me a look like that and there won't be consequences? Go get in the bed."

Her lips tightened, but she got up and stalked across the room.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" Tariq demanded irritably.

Koryn's expression tightened. "To see if anything we'd done had had any effect whatsoever. As you can see, it hasn't. I think it would be mistake to send her Niribu. I could pack her in a trunk and whisk her off to your place and keep her hidden until you get back-maybe, but that's a big maybe."

Tariq frowned. "What do you suggest, then?"

"I don't have any fucking suggestions," Koryn responded irritably. His frown deepened to one of worry. "I almost think it would be better to use the cerebrum-wash on her. I don't want to change her any more than you do, but you know what the reaction is going to be if anyone sees just how rebellious she

is. They aren't just going to be shocked that we tolerate it. They'll be deeply concerned that it'll affect the others and they won't tolerate that. They'll order it done or they'll confiscate her and do it themselves and I sure as fuck don't want them to get their hands on her. She might not be much more than a slobbering idiot when they're through with her and I'd rather put her down than see that."

Tariq felt a wave of nausea wash through him. "Don't even think about it," he said, his voice deadly cold.

Koryn looked taken aback for a moment. He shook his head. "You miss my point! She'd be better off dead than turned into some-mindless doll! Don't you see that?"

Tariq shoved his chair back and stood abruptly. "It won't come to that," he said. "We set her up for that and you know it."

"I do know it and I got just the reaction I expected," Koryn retorted.

"The discipline is working," Tariq reminded him. "I agree, she should've known better than to look at me like she wanted to kill me, but she kept that tongue of hers between her teeth. She's learning. It was my mistake to give her a few days to mend. We should've continued without let up until we broke her determination and she accepted. We'll start again. She's stronger now. I don't think we need to worry that it'll be too much for her. We can focus on breaking that will of hers down. And there's still the possibility that breeding will settle her. She'd have the baby to consider then."

Koryn looked unconvinced, but he merely bent down to remove his boots. "We need to try to think of alternate plans just the same," he said when he got up to remove his uniform. "We have to consider doing something radical."

"Not if you're suggesting doing something radical to Emerald," Tariq said tightly.

"With her or to her," Koryn said. "The alternative is a lot uglier. She doesn't have to have a mind to breed."

As angry as he was already, it was more provoking than it might have been otherwise to discover that Emerald was still angry enough to flatly refuse to cooperate. In point of fact, it took him completely aback to reach the bed and discover she'd bundled up in the covers. Gritting his teeth, he snatched them off of her and tossed them onto the floor. She promptly covered her breasts with her hands, staring stonily at the ceiling.

Koryn sent him an 'I told you so' look.

Tariq glared at him. "I think the position we used last time will be good."

Shrugging, Koryn climbed over her and settled by the wall.

"Move your hands over your head," Tariq said tightly.

She didn't move her hands at all.

He stared at her for a long moment and looked at Koryn. "Change of plans. Restrain her."

Koryn's brows rose, but he sat up and grasped Emerald's wrists, prying them from her breasts, and then drew her arms behind her back. Tariq watched the silent battle and turned, striding toward his storage compartment. When he returned, he was carrying a set of manacles. He secured them to Emerald's wrists. "Now you can hold her legs."

Apparently, Emerald had had enough time to reconsider whether it was a good idea to try to fight or not. She stiffened when Koryn settled behind her and slipped his arms beneath her knees, but she didn't try to fight him when he pulled them up tightly against her shoulders, spreading them so wide the tendons on either side stood out.

Tariq settled on the bed on his belly. Using the fingers of one hand to press the lips of her sex back, he opened his mouth over her clit and began to tease it with his tongue to bring the blood to it. She bucked at the first touch of his tongue, discovered she could only move closer and went still, panting for breath. As angry and resistant as she was, she couldn't prevent her body's reaction to the stimulus. After a few moments, her clit was swollen with the rush of blood. Tariq sucked it into his mouth and pulled on it until he felt tremors begin to run through her. Satisfaction filled him when he'd pushed a finger into her sex and discovered she was wet. He thrust slowly at first, pulling at her clit a little harder until the muscles inside of her began to quake and clutch at his finger

with each pass. Inserting a second finger, he began to thrust into her a little faster, gaining momentum as he felt the convulsions of her inner muscles increase. By the time it reached a point where they locked around his fingers he was pounding into her. He kept the rhythm steady until she uttered a choked groan and then began to whimper almost incessantly, continued resolutely until his arm was burning from the strain.

She went limp when he finally stopped and lifted his head to study her.

"Take the manacles off."

She didn't attempt to lift her arms when Koryn removed the binding. He nodded at Koryn to settle her on the bed and then climbed up beside her. Lifting the leg nearest him, he draped it over his hip and reached to massage the nearest breast. Koryn mirrored his movements, pulling her other leg over his hips and massaging her other breast, plucking at her nipples until they were hard with the blood engorging them. Tariq slipped a hand down her belly, parted the lips of her sex and pushed a finger inside of her as he leaned down to capture a nipple.

They alternated. When Tariq's arm tired and he withdrew his fingers, Koryn inserted his and then each of them inserted two fingers and drove into her together until she was shuddering all over. Tariq refused to allow her a moment's respite until he was tired enough to need it himself and only then for a few moments while he changed positions with Koryn. When she

stopped whimpering and began to cry, he told her to hold her nether lips for him and returned to the foot of the bed to suck her clit and thrust into her.

She held still for several moments and then tried escape.

Koryn caught her and held her. When she finally stopped straining against Koryn's hold, they changed positions and he held her while Koryn sucked her clit and rammed his fingers into her punishingly until she began to scream. Tariq muffled her shrill cries with his hand until she abruptly went limp.

Koryn lifted his head. "She's fainted."

Tariq drew in a shaky breath. "We might as well rest then."

Koryn frowned. "I think she's had enough."

"She tried to kick me in the face not five minutes ago," Tariq said pointedly.

"You have a point. We've been at it for hours, though."

Tariq frowned. "We'll give her a little time to recover. She'll be desensitized anyway if we keep going too long."

"Ice would numb her. Once the sensation returns it will have normalized."

Tariq heaved a shaky breath. "I need to cool down myself," he said tightly, climbing off the bed and heading to the shower.

Him also-or better than that, release, but he wasn't sticking his cock anywhere near Emerald's mouth after the way she'd fought both of them. Getting up, he went to the refreshment bar and got a cold drink and a glass of ice.

She came around with a sharp intake of breath the moment he touched a piece of ice to one of her nipples, slapping at his hand. Koryn fixed her with a hard look. "Unless you want to be tied to this bed I suggest you control yourself. Put your hands over your head and keep them there and spread your legs. I will do this either way," he said through gritted teeth.

She stared at him for a long moment and finally lifted her arms above her head and pushed her legs apart. She flinched when he applied the ice to her once more, lifting her arms and then resolutely dropping them to the bed again. "I hate you."

Koryn flicked a look at her face, but despite his determination not to show it, the comment sent a hard pang through him. He swallowed with an effort. "I'll live with it," he growled.

He ran the ice around her nipple until it was rosy from the cold and finally moved to the other. She flinched all over again but she didn't try to lift her arms. "Why?"

He didn't look at her that time. He wrestled with the urge to answer, too angry to yield to it. When he decided he'd cooled both nipples sufficiently, he moved to the opposite end of the bed. Taking her ankles, he pushed her legs up and settled them wide enough on either side of her to give him easy access. Taking another piece of ice, he parted the lips of her

sex with one hand and began to rub the ice slowly around and around her swollen clit. She jerked the moment he touched her, clamping her legs around his hand.

"Put your legs down. Now."

"At least tell me why," she said plaintively.

"Because I don't want you dead ... or worse," he ground out.

She swallowed convulsively several times. "What could be worse than dead?"

"Alive and ... vegetative."

She was silent for a while. "I ... won't fight anymore."

"Yes, you will. If we could trust that you wouldn't we wouldn't have to do this. And if you behave like you have and anyone else sees it there is nothing we can do to protect you." He flicked a hard look at her face. "Understand that, Em. Accept it. Keeping your mind depends upon it. At the very least, they will use a cerebrum-wash-which may or not reduce you to a vegetative state-and then shove tubes into you if it does and use you for a breeder anyway."

"I didn't mean it," she said after a long moment.

He flicked a questioning look at her.

"I don't hate you."

His lips tightened. "Yes, you do. But I don't hate you, Em. I care" He stopped, glancing away. "I care more than you realize and I'm terrified for you. Regardless of what it seems like to you, I'm trying to protect you."

He checked her nipples again when the ice he was using melted. They were still erect. He took another piece of ice and applied it to her clit and then moved back to her breasts.

Tariq glanced at him questioningly when he came out of the bath.

"I've cooled her down. She should be ready and receptive to another session when I've showered."

"Let her relieve herself first." He glanced at Emerald. "Now."

She got up and moved stiffly into the bathroom. When she returned, she looked at him questioningly. "On the bed. We'll wait for Koryn."

He moved to the refreshment bar without waiting to see if she complied, getting a drink for himself and one for her. She didn't look at him when he handed the glass of water to her. She took it and gulped it down thirstily. He took the glass and tipped her chin up to look into her eyes and then got up and left.

Emerald chewed her lip. She'd done her best to keep her expression neutral, but she had a bad feeling that that wasn't nearly enough to satisfy either of them. Tariq wandered out of

the room and into his storage compartment after a few minutes. She listened uneasily to his search. When he returned, she saw that her anxiety hadn't been misplaced. He was carrying what looked like an enormous dildo-except that it had some sort of machine attached to it.

She was still staring at it in horror when Koryn emerged from the bathroom.

Koryn's brows rose when he saw it. "What are you going to do with that?"

Tariq studied it doubtfully. "She needs discipline and I have to work up a report," he said dryly, then added ruefully. "Besides, as much as I hate to admit it, my arm's tired and the shower didn't fucking help that much. My balls feel like they're going to explode."

Koryn repressed a grin. "Reinforcements. Where the fuck did you get it?"

"My lover left it when I told her to get the fuck out."

"You didn't like the competition?" Koryn asked with amusement, eyeing the size of the dildo.

Tariq snorted. "My cock's bigger than that! I got tired of her constant demands-for other things," he added irritably when Koryn grinned. "I think she set out to make me a pauper."

Koryn sent him a disgusted look. "Ten women couldn't spend

enough to make a miser like you a pauper."

Tariq glared at him indignantly. "I'm not a fucking miser! I was generous with her. Some women are just never satisfied. The very minute she got through 'decorating' my gods damned mansion she decided she didn't like it after all and wanted to start all over again. I got sick of falling over workmen every time I came in."

"Maybe she was fucking the workmen?"

Tariq shrugged indifferently. "Maybe. She didn't seem too keen on giving it to me unless I bought her something first ... or I promised to buy her something else after."

"That's what you get for taking a lover of your own class. They're used the finer things and not afraid to demand them. You should've taken a woman from a lower class. Then she would've been grateful for anything you gave her and she'd be too afraid of being tossed out to demand anything. What is it doing on the ship, anyhow?"

Tariq gave him a look. "She went with me on my last mission," he reminded him. "The bitch bought it to annoy the fuck out of me-said she was tired of being ignored." He grinned abruptly. "She never got around to using it." Dismissing Koryn's ribbing, he turned to study Emerald. "One more session and then I'll put her on this for a while."

"You're going to need to adjust the depth," Koryn pointed out.

"Probably."

"Definitely," Koryn countered.

Tariq studied it worriedly. "You think?"

"Unless it's self-adjusting."

"Like I said, she never used it. It probably is, though. It's top of the line. She wouldn't buy anything less than the best. I can guarantee you, Celia wouldn't have had it if it didn't do everything."

Koryn frowned. "You really think that's necessary ... or even desirable?"

Tariq's expression hardened. "I think it's necessary and desirable. I wouldn't consider it if I didn't. We're running out of time. Trying to explain it to her isn't going to work. She's intelligent, but she isn't used to anything like she'll be facing there. She has to be submissive, not pretend to be. Otherwise, she'll give herself away-and possibly at the worst possible moment. "

Koryn released a pent up breath. "I know," he said ruefully. "I tried that, too. She told me she'd be good and then turned right around and refused me. If it isn't second nature to her, she'll be in trouble. And I'm still not sure about that thing. We at least get tired and give her a break. Maybe you should just try breeding her and see if that settles her? It ought to be safe enough by now."

"And if that doesn't work?" Tariq asked tightly. "If we try to discipline her after I've impregnated her, we run the risk of making her abort it-and she might not survive a miscarriage."

"I still don't like it."

"I don't fucking like it either," Tariq growled. "You think I do?"

"I wasn't suggesting that. I know better. Never mind. Let's just do it."

Emerald stared at the thing warily and shifted to the other side of the bed when Tariq approached her with it.

Tariq sent Koryn a speaking glance.

Koryn's lips tightened. "I guess you're right."

"Put your arms above your head and pull your legs up and spread them," Tariq said tightly.

She stared at him for a long moment and abruptly leapt off the bed and raced toward the bathroom. Koryn caught her before she reached it and carried her back to the bed. "I think she's just scared," he said neutrally.

"I agree," Tariq responded grimly, "but you and I both know that's still unacceptable. One outburst like that on Niribu could cost her her life. We'll have to bind her."

"You want to use the play chair? It'll make it easier."

Tariq considered it and finally nodded. He had to set the robotic dildo down and help Koryn get her strapped into the chair. When they had her positioned, they knelt on either side and began milking her breasts to bring the blood to them, alternately teasing her clit until her skin was flushed all over and both her nipples and her clit swollen. Tariq tested to make sure her channel was moist, positioned the dildo and then spread the lips of her sex wide and activated it, watching in fascination as the bio-cock moved to the entrance of her body and pressed against the mouth of her sex. For several moments it seemed to stop. Then he noticed that the skin around her sex began to grow more and more taut. Just about the time he'd decided it had stopped, however, Emerald began to pant and squirm and the head was slowly enveloped by the taut skin. She struggled, jerking as she tried to buck her hips and free herself of it. Despite her efforts, the dildo sank slowly deeper and deeper and then stopped. Tariq frowned at the part of the shaft still showing, wondering if the damned thing was defective. Abruptly, it began to move again, this time outward almost as slowly as it had entered her.

"Did it go all the way in?"

Tariq didn't even glance up. He was riveted to the thing as it slowly emerged again, coated in her moisture. "I don't think so," he said hoarsely.

The thing stopped when only the head was inside of her and began to press into her again. This time it seemed to go deeper. After moving slowly in and out several times, it began

to move faster.

"It's adjusted the depth," Koryn commented. "Can you adjust the speed?"

Tariq studied the small screen on the robotic device for a moment and finally began tapping the keys until the machine was driving in and out of her at a rapid pace that satisfied him.

"Does it shut off automatically or keep going till it's turned off?"

"I guess we'll find out," Tariq responded grimly, moving to take his place beside the chair again and testing the nipple closest to him. Discovering it was rock hard, he covered it with his mouth and began to pull at it with a vigor that matched the machine's pounding thrusts. Emerald groaned and continued struggling against her restraints for a while and finally ceased and began to shudder.

Tariq switched from her nipple to her clit after a while and then went back to her breast. Koryn moved to her clit when he abandoned it and teased it a while and then returned to her nipple.

When she began to weep and beg them to stop, Tariq got up and headed into his storage room again. He was carrying a gag when he returned. He pried her jaws open and inserted the soft ball in her mouth and then secured it in place with the straps. He could stand just so much of her weeping and begging and no more. He knew if he had to listen he wasn't

going to have the spine to do what he knew had to be done.

Koryn got up, as well. After standing between her legs and watching the machine pumping steadily into her for several minutes, he looked around a little vaguely for his clothing. "I think I'll go jack off before my balls explode," he muttered.

Tariq was tempted to do the same. Instead, he pulled his uniform and boots on and moved to his desk, trying to focus on the report he had to compose. He found it next to impossible and finally got up again. He discovered Emerald had fainted when he checked on her progress. He hesitated and then turned the dildo off, adjusting it so that the head was still inserted and then sat down to wait. When he saw her eyelids flutter, he got up and reset the dildo, adjusting the speed. He watched until he was sure she'd reached her peak and then returned to his desk and checked the time. He managed to focus on his report that time. When he thought to check the time again, he discovered an hour had passed. Deciding to give her a short rest, he crossed the room and turned the machine off again. He didn't think of it again until he'd finally finished composing his report.

She was staring at the ceiling when he returned. He studied her for a long moment, debating with himself. She'd been disciplined for almost three hours. He was inclined to think she'd had more than enough for one day. Then again, he reminded himself, she'd fought both of them far more than she'd ever dared before-and that was after two hours that had worn both him and Koryn out and left them in as miserable a

condition as she was in.

Dismissing his qualms, he set the machine again. He was careful to watch the time that time. One hour on, one off. He reached his limit during the fourth session and went to take a shower and jack off.

She was so exhausted by the time he decided to feed her that she had no interest in eating and she quivered all over at his lightest touch. He felt sick to his stomach, but he ignored it, forcing her to eat a little and drink. He felt far worse when he told her to go relieve herself and discovered her legs were so weak she couldn't walk.

"Hardheaded little idiot!" he growled. He carried her to the bathroom and stood over her until she'd relieved herself.

Wondering if he was a fool himself, he carried her to the bed when they emerged and lay down with her, cuddling her against his chest and stroking her back soothingly until she stopped shivering and fell asleep. He lay for hours staring into the darkness afterwards, wondering if Koryn was right and he should let him try to selectively remove her rebellious tendencies. That made him sicker than what he'd done, though.

He couldn't simply set her free, although he knew that was what she wanted. Even if he could bring himself to do it, she'd either die, torn to pieces by some of the roving wild animals, or be picked up again.

He began to understand why Koryn had said he'd rather put her down.

He couldn't do that. He couldn't bear the thought of seeing the light die in her eyes.

It would be as bad, or worse, to see eyes vacant of the spirit he was so fond of-even while it drove him up the wall.

He shook the thoughts, pulling her more tightly against his length. He would try to discipline her a few more days and if that didn't work, he would have to think of something else.

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Chapter Eleven

Tariq had expected the high councilor to be furious when he made his report and the man's rage still took him aback. It wasn't until later that it occurred to him why Mylor was so furious. He'd been the one who'd talked the high council into signing the treaty with the Dinjin.

He demanded a fully copy of the report and copies of all the data Tariq had managed to extract from the Dinjin ship and told him he would be contacting him again after the high council had made their decision.

Breaking the link with a sense of relief, Tariq turned to look at Emerald. He'd settled her with her tray on the bed so that she wouldn't be visible to the high councilor and told her not to make a sound.

She'd obeyed ... for a wonder, but as much as he wanted to believe that meant he could forego any further discipline, he knew better. She'd been quiet because she was worried about the councilor, not because he told her to. Seeing she'd finished, he told her to bring him the tray and then go take care of her needs. He was standing by the chair waiting for her when she came out again.

"Come here."

She glanced from him to the chair and slowly approached him. Her chin was wobbling and there were tears in her eyes. "Please don't."

A knot rose in his throat. He clamped his jaw tightly. "Get in the chair."

She bit her lip, but she sat down. She was tense when he lifted her arms and manacled her wrists and more tense when he locked her ankles into place. He adjusted the chair so that

it bent her knees upward and spread her thighs wide and then tilted it upward and went to the back to secure the inhibitor to the chair to prevent her from evading the dildo.

She was so tense it took him a good ten minutes to get her relaxed enough to produce any moisture. He ignored it, persevering until her body responded in spite of her will. She whimpered piteously when he spread the lips of her sex to allow the dildo to penetrate her and then began to pant as it stretched her flesh and finally breached the opening. He saw when the dildo retracted that there was little moisture on it and moved to her breasts to tease them until she ceased to strain against her bonds. He saw when he checked the dildo again that there was enough moisture to prevent damage and increased the pace until she began to groan incessantly.

It reminded him that he'd forgotten the gag. He put it in place and left her. Settling at his desk, he checked the time and pulled up the data he hadn't managed to decode and began working on it. He was careful to keep track of the time, however, stopping it after an hour, allowing her to rest an hour and then beginning again.

Her teeth were chattering when he released her after the fourth session and walked her to the bathroom. When she'd relieved herself, he sat down at the table with her and made her eat and drink as much as she would. When he told her to get back in the chair, she began shaking, but she got up and moved to it and remained completely docile while he strapped her in and began another session.

Feeling heartened by her progress, he returned to his work. When he checked her after the third afternoon session and discovered she'd fainted again, he was alarmed enough he dismissed his concern about her behavioral problems and removed her from the chair. She came around when he settled her on the bed. "Rest. We'll begin again later."

She fell asleep weeping.

Tariq was just about ready to tear his hair out when she finally stopped. Struggling to focus when she'd finally quieted, he gritted his teeth and continued trying to decipher the damaged memory chip. He'd just managed to pick out a handful of letters that appeared to be a name and a partial spacial coordinate when Koryn arrived carrying a tray.

He glanced distractedly at the time and then at Emerald. She was still sleeping and he summoned Koryn with a wave of his hand. "I think I might have found a piece of the coordinates to one of the colonies!"

Koryn immediately tensed. "You think?"

"These are English letters-not the Dinjin language-and these letters don't match up with any of the names of the planets in this system. I thought at first it might be one of the outposts, but it can't be. They would've used the human's name for it if they were going to record it in English."

"You think you can get the rest of it?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything to do except to keep trying."

Koryn straightened after a few minutes and glanced at Emerald. "She looks worn out, poor baby." He turned to look at Tariq again after a moment and saw that Tariq was studying her, his face drawn as and haggard as if he'd been enduring the discipline himself. Uncomfortable, he looked away again. "How's she doing?"

"Better," Tariq said, smiling crookedly. "She balked this morning when we started but after I'd let her rest and eat and told her to get back in the chair, she was completely docile."

"Maybe this will work," Koryn said neutrally. "I wasn't convinced yesterday."

"I'm not convinced today," Tariq said tiredly. "I just said it looked promising. Ask me again tomorrow."

"Do you want to let her sleep a little longer?"

"If she doesn't wake up by the time I finish eating, I'll wake her."

They hadn't reached the table when the alert on Tariq's communicator sounded. His expression hardened with tension as he strode quickly to the console. He activated it even as he sat down. His belly clenched when the high councilor's image appeared.

"We've declared war on the Dinjin," he announced immediately. "It was a unanimous vote. We're readying the fleet now."

"Should we join the force at Niribu or rendezvous elsewhere?"

"I want you to stay where you are and continue collecting whatever survivors you can. How many did you say you'd managed to round up?"

"I didn't. Right off the top of my head, I couldn't give you a precise count. Around fifty. There's a higher ratio of females to males-around thirty females and twenty males." He glanced at Koryn. "What's the status of your first group?"

Koryn approached him and bowed to the High Councilor. "I have a dozen that should be ready to turn out of the pods in two days. Six of each. And a dozen more ready to go in when I remove the first. Another six of each."

Mylor looked surprised and not particularly happy. "That's better than I expected. Ship the ones that are ready. Everyone's anxious to bring our children home to Niribu. We'd thought they were safe where they were," he finished angrily.

Tariq nodded. "I'll see to it."

Mylor stared at him hard for a moment. "All of them that are ready."

Tariq's jaw tightened. "Yes, my lord."

"He knows about Emerald," Koryn said tightly when he'd broken the link.

Tariq glanced at Emerald, discovering she was awake. "Go freshen up, baby, and come sit with me. Koryn brought food."

They moved to the table and settled. When Tariq heard the sound of water emanating from the facilities, he met Koryn's gaze. "I'll have to find out who's reported to the councilor," he said grimly. "He may have just been fishing. He hates my guts anyway. He knows I usually oppose him in the lower council."

"Fucking hell! You didn't think to mention that before?"

Tariq's lips tightened. "It's fairly common knowledge. If you paid any fucking attention to politics, you would've known it!"

"Yes, but ... Gods! The high councilor? Don't give me any gods damned lectures about politics! At least I haven't made an enemy of the most powerful lord on the gods damned council!"

"I have far more friends on the high council than enemies!"

Tariq snapped, stabbing angrily at the food on his plate and eating it without any appearance whatsoever of enjoying it. "At any rate, he won't be in power much longer. He has a lot of enemies and he was the one that pushed the treaty with the Dinjin. He'll be ousted next election, mark my words."

"As if that's going to do us, or Emerald, any good!"

"I don't suppose there are any females in the new batch that have red hair?"

Koryn looked startled for a moment. "One of the females has reddish blond hair," he said slowly.

"Good," Tariq said briskly. "We'll de-pod her and put her in with the shipment."

"Did you miss the part where I said they wouldn't be ready for two days?"

Tariq shrugged. "You always add a little to be on the safe side. We'll delay the shipment until you take her out."

"The count will be off."

"Not if she's the only one you take out tomorrow. You'll have time to make an extra before we make another shipment. Put two in the same fucking pod if you have to! They're small enough."

"She'll be weak!"

Tariq's jaw tightened. "I intend to carry her onboard myself and put her in a special holding cell-alone. She'll be strong enough by the time they arrive-especially if I give the order to take special care of her. That'll make it more convincing anyway."

"She doesn't look like Emerald."

Tariq sent him a hard look. "No one has seen Emerald but the

medic-and he was focused on her feet-me, you, and your assistant. Adjust his memory chip." Realizing he didn't hear the shower anymore, Tariq glanced in that direction and saw that Emerald had emerged. He lifted a hand. She crossed the room and paused in front of him and he pulled her onto his lap, relishing the fresh washed scent of her hair and the smoothness of her skin. Koryn was right, he thought absently. She was as sweet and soft as an infant. Baby suited her as a pet name. It rankled that Koryn had thought of it first, but he dismissed it.

He was relieved that she displayed a far better appetite than she had earlier. She relaxed in his arms, taking whatever he offered.

Koryn studied her through narrowed eyes for several moments. "Did you want me to stay and help with her sessions tonight? Or are you just going to use the robotic dildo?"

Tariq stroked her cheek lightly with the backs of his fingers when she remained completely relaxed. "I don't know if I'm up to watching that tireless bastard fuck her after watching it all day," he muttered. "I'm horny enough to crack myself."

"All the more reason to make use of it. She seems to be responding well to the sessions. A few more days of intense indiscipline might do the trick."

Tariq frowned and finally released a pent up breath. "You handle it. I need fresh air." He switched to English. "Go get in

the chair, baby."

"You should at least stay until she's ready."

Tariq flicked a glance at him, but he nodded. Getting to his feet, he followed Emerald to the chair and fastened her in, adjusting it. Koryn joined him a few moments later and immediately began massaging her breast. Tariq worked with him until she was wet and he could insert the dildo. When he'd inserted it, however, he turned and strode to the door. He didn't look back.

Koryn stood watching the pumping machine for several moments and finally flicked a look at Emerald's face. Her head was thrown back, her face a mask of agonized pleasure. Seeing that Tariq had forgotten the gag, he looked around until he found it and put it in place.

After glancing at the door, he crossed the room to Tariq's desk and pulled up the data he'd been working on. He discovered it was next to impossible to focus on trying to unravel the code when he could hear the steady hum of the machine pumping into her and hear her moans above that.

No fucking wonder Tariq needed to escape! If he'd spent the day listening to that and watching it he would be fucking lunatic!

Struggling to close his mind to it, he noted the time and returned his attention to the codes. When he glanced at the clock again, he discovered more than an hour had passed.

Leaping up from the chair, he strode quickly to the chair and shut the machine off. Emerald had either fainted or she was faking it. He checked her pulse and then her eyes. Relieved that she'd merely fainted, he left her to rest and returned to the desk.

He managed to break another piece of the code by the time Emerald finished her second session. He helped her from the chair and sent her to the bathroom to relieve herself and then headed to the bed and stripped. When she came out, he summoned her to suck him off, gritting his teeth as she opened her mouth obediently. Relief flickered through him when she didn't bite him. He settled back to enjoy it, claspng her head to guide her until she had the rhythm he needed.

"Rest," he said when she'd sucked him dry, leaving him as weak as water. He hadn't realized just how weak until he came to and discovered that Emerald had grasped his cock and was stroking it. He stared at her from beneath heavy eyelids as she leaned down to cover the head of his cock, tensing briefly and then relaxing when she didn't try to damage him as he'd more half suspected was her intention. Tariq returned just as she brought him off the second time. He was peripherally aware of it, but too focused on the pleasurable suction of her mouth and the hard contractions of his climax to do more than note it.

"How many sessions has she had?"

Koryn managed to lift one eyelid. "Two."

"That's enough for tonight. She needs to rest."

Koryn nodded with an effort and struggled to his feet. Discovering he really didn't feel like pulling his boots on, he tucked them under his arm once he'd pulled his uniform on and left barefoot.

Tariq undressed and climbed into the bed when he'd left, pulling Emerald against his length.

"Would you like for me to suck you off?"

Tariq swallowed with an effort. He wanted her to so bad he could taste it. He'd almost come just from watching her bring Koryn off. "You're tired. Rest."

She slipped a hand down his belly and cupped his cock.

Tariq ground his teeth. "Do it," he growled.

She shifted down the bed and took him into her mouth. He struggled to keep from groaning out loud the moment he felt the heat of her mouth close around his flesh. He felt like he was going to explode the moment she touched him, but he fought it, wanting to relish the feel of her hands and mouth a little longer. With the best will in the world, he couldn't hold his seed more than a few moments, however. He uttered a choked grunt as the first contraction hit him, groaned and then grunted as the second wave struck, knocking the breath from him again.

He was barely conscious when she finally stopped sucking at him, too weak even to push her away. She righted herself when she couldn't suck anymore from him. He roused enough to curl around her and drag her close and then passed out.

He summoned Koryn to bring breakfast for the three of them when he rose the next morning, leaving Emerald asleep while he performed his morning tasks. He felt downright cheerful right up until Emerald woke and he saw the dark circles beneath her eyes. He felt even worse when he sent her to take care of her needs and watched her limp into the bathroom as if every step brought pain.

He didn't have much appetite for the food when Koryn arrived with it. "I need to take care of arrangements for the shipment," he said as soon as they'd settled at the table. "I'm going to leave you in charge of Emerald's sessions until I get back. She'll need four between now and lunch. On an hour, off an hour. If I'm not back by then, give her an hour to rest before you start the afternoon sessions."

Koryn flicked a look at Emerald and then sent Tariq a sardonic look. "Coward."

"Fuck you!" Tariq growled. "Like I said, I have to make arrangements."

"Which you could make from here."

"Except I'm not fucking going to."

"Fine! I'll listen to fucking music. The sound of that gods damned machine drives me up the wall."

"I endured it all day yesterday, gods damn it! You can handle it today."

"It was your fucking idea to start with!"

"You're the one that pointed out that she was in danger as long as she refused to comply and that she wasn't docile!"

"As if you hadn't noticed!"

Tariq's lips tightened. He got up abruptly and dumped Emerald in the chair he'd vacated. "Be a good girl for Koryn, baby, and I might not give you any sessions tonight."

"You aren't at least going to stay and get it started?"

"No. My balls feel better than they have in days. I'd like to keep it that way for a few fucking hours."

Koryn glared at the door for several moments after it closed behind Tariq and then looked at Emerald. "Come here, baby."

She got up and rounded the table and he pulled her onto his lap. Cradling her with one arm, he began stroking her. He spent twenty minutes fondling her breasts and her clit and was as hard as if she hadn't brought him off twice the night before. Abandoning the idea of handling the session himself, he told her to get up and get in the chair. He was relieved when she

obeyed without hesitation, but like Tariq, he wasn't convinced.

All the same, he thought when he'd bound her and positioned her, she was at least maintaining a façade of docility. If she could manage that when he knew without a doubt that the mechanical wonder Tariq had dug up had to be pure torture for her, there was some hope she might survive. She was dry again when he checked her, tense despite her outward appearance of calm. He worked her heat up again until she was wet and parted her nether lips for the machine as he'd seen Tariq do. He hadn't actually watched the penetration before. By the time the thing had stretched the mouth of sex wide enough to breach it and began to penetrate her he felt like he had a knot in his throat the size of his fist-and that it was his balls.

He swallowed convulsively several times while he watched the thing slowly enter her and withdraw. When he decided there was enough moisture, he adjusted the speed and beat a retreat to Tariq's desk. He'd no sooner settled than the volume of Emerald's tortured gasps and groans reminded him that he'd forgotten the gag.

Leaping to his feet again, he gagged her and then moved to the entertainment console and selected music, setting the volume high enough he couldn't hear the robotic bio-cock or Emerald's muffled groans. He returned to Tariq's desk then and settled to picking apart the code.

Emerald had three long sessions rather than four one hour sessions due to the fact that the music and his attempts to

crack the code distracted him enough that he had difficulty also watching the time. He had a third string by the time he realized it was noon.

He had to carry Emerald to the bathroom to relieve herself. Mentally kicking himself, he carried her to the bed afterwards, told her to rest and ordered a tray sent to Tariq's quarters. He roused her when he decided she'd slept at least an hour and fed her. Tariq still hadn't returned so he sent her to the chair again and began the afternoon sessions.

He'd managed part of a fourth string of numbers and Emerald was part of the way through her fourth afternoon session when Tariq returned. Tariq strode immediately to Emerald, studied her a moment and shut the machine off. From there he strode to the entertainment console and shut that off, as well.

"What are you doing?" he asked tightly.

Koryn glanced around at him in surprise. "I've got two more strings and part of another."

Tariq's brows rose. He strode the desk and looked at the image over Koryn's shoulder.

"Does it still look like spacial coordinates?"

"It does. Move and let me pull up some maps."

Koryn got up and stretched.

"Why was Emerald in session when I came in? Did she give you any trouble?"

Koryn glanced at him in confusion. "Didn't you say she was to have four in the afternoon?"

"It isn't afternoon," Tariq said tightly.

Startled, Koryn glanced at the clock. "Gods!"

Tariq faced tightened. "How fucking long did you leave her on that gods damned thing?"

Koryn felt his face heat. "Almost an hour and half-this last time. I made sure she rested a full hour between each session, though."

"You're sure she only had four?"

Uneasiness slithered through Koryn. "Yes," he responded a little doubtfully.

"You aren't certain?"

Koryn frowned and finally relaxed. "I'm certain."

"Help her out of the chair while I look for maps-and order us a tray. I skipped the noon meal. I'm starving."

Koryn was less convinced when he'd unbound Emerald. She was unconscious and she didn't rouse when he we'd removed her restraints. Alarm flickered through him but, to his relief, her

pulse was even and strong-a little rapid considering she was unconscious, but possibly the cause of it. When he'd carried her to the bed, he checked her pulse again. It had slowed and after a few moments her eyelids fluttered.

Angry with himself for allowing himself to get so caught up in what he was doing on the computer that he'd lost track of time, he debated brief and finally settled beside her on the bed, holding her close and stroking her soothingly. She flinched at each touch. When she finally seemed to relax completely, he left her and ordered the tray of food.

"How is she?"

"Resting."

Tariq closed the holo-image on his desk when Koryn's assistant arrived with their food. Striding to the bed, he shook Emerald awake and then scooped her up and carried her to the table when she seemed more inclined to sleep than to get up. She was also more inclined to sleep than eat, Tariq discovered after trying to tempt her several times. Giving up after a few minutes, he caught her face in his hand and turned it to study it and then sent Koryn a deadly glare. "She's exhausted," he said tightly.

"You thought she wouldn't be?" Koryn retorted. "This is her second day. I thought that was the plan-to wear her down until she wasn't able to fight."

Tariq's lips tightened, but he got up and took her back to the

bed without another word, tucking her beneath the sheets and lingering for a few moments to stroke her hair before he returned to the table. "I found a leak in one of the hydraulic lines," he said evenly when he'd settled again. "It took most of the day to fix it, but the ship will be ready to leave tomorrow."

Koryn met his gaze for a long moment and finally nodded. "Emerald should be ready enough to leave tomorrow."

Tariq frowned, thinking. "I think it would be best if you had your assistant bring me the trunk I left in the hold tomorrow-early. I'm sure Celia left something in it Emerald could wear."

"I should give her a sedative to keep her calm. How long do you want her to sleep?"

"At least three hours ... if possible."

"I'll have to give her a time release capsule to manage that. Any luck with the maps?"

Tariq focused on his food. "It looks like it's pointing to a system in this galaxy. I'll have a better idea when I've run some figures."

Koryn focused on his own meal until he'd finished. Pushing his plate away, he studied Tariq for several moments. "When are you going to forward the information?"

Tariq met his gaze. "We don't actually have it yet, do we?"

Koryn relaxed fractionally. "No, we don't. All efforts will be focused on the war right now anyway. I doubt they'd even be able to consider an expedition until they've settled our dispute with the Dinjin."

"True. I don't see any need to rush, especially since we aren't sure yet. It would be better to be sure. There's no point in getting everyone excited for nothing."

"I've been going over that word in my head all day. Some of the survivors we picked up mentioned a colony named Centaurian. The order of the letters seems to match."

"We only have four letters. Still, it could be a match."

Koryn nodded and then got up and stretched. "Well, I'm for bed. I have work to do in the morning."

When he'd left, Tariq stared at his desk for several moments and finally got up and returned to it. It took him nearly an hour to find the system even with most of the coordinates and a fair idea of where to look. It was a binary system with ten planets. The sixth lay in the perfect orbit to support human life-not too hot, not too cold.

He sat back in his chair, studying it for a while and finally sat forward. His fingers hovered over the keys for a moment and then he began to type in the command. 'Dump data.' A question popped up on the holographic screen. 'Are you certain you want to erase the data?' He didn't hesitate that time. He typed in 'yes' and hit enter.

Rising, he stretched and moved toward the bed. When he'd undressed, he settled beside Emerald and drew her into his arms. She was shivering, he discovered. He tightened his hold on her and began to stroke her back slowly until she stopped shivering.

"Don't send me away. I'll be good."

Tariq was more than half asleep when he heard the whispered plea. Wondering if he was dreaming, he squeezed her gently, nuzzling his face in her hair. "You're my baby. I don't think I could bear it if I sent you away."

* * * *

Emerald had long since reached a state where she floated most of the time on a pleasurable, tortuous cloud where she had little awareness beyond the battle raging in her body. There were brief periods where she wasn't at that zenith of euphoria drugged state, but even then it seemed that she was climbing toward it or drifting toward complete unawareness. There were no truly lucid moments, no time of complete awareness, and she'd begun to have difficulty sorting what was real and what wasn't.

Dread lingered in her mind at all times, often flickering to the forefront her mind, sometimes a distant uneasiness, but it always seemed to be there. Koryn or Tariq had only to tell her to get into the chair for it to zoom to the forefront. She would feel it building while they bound her and the chair moved,

bending her knees and then spreading her legs so wide that she could feel air whisper over her sex and dry the moist inner lips until they ceased to cling and parted. It would climb higher when she felt their hands at her breasts or her sex, tweaking the flesh until blood rushed to those areas and warmth turned into fire and pleasure turned into pain from the pressure that built there because she knew that was what would happen the moment she felt their touch and she knew what would come next-that strange thing she remembered, the thing that looked exactly like a cock-except that it was bigger than any cock she'd ever seen until she'd seen Tariq's cock and then Koryn's.

The dread intensified when she felt the rounded tip press against her and then felt the pressure build and build until the skin was burning from it before her flesh finally yielded to a superior force and engulfed it. She would pant from a combination of fear that it would tear her instead of entering her and distress from the burning pain and the unrelenting pressure. She lost track of the dread then, too focused on the building pressure inside of her as she felt the slow, unrelenting progress of the thing prying at her flesh all the way, forcing it to yield. It would stop when it brushed her womb and retreat and come back again and, just about the time she would begin to relax, Tariq or Koryn or both together would jolt her attention from that thing, pulling at her nipples and her clit with such vigor that the jolts of heat running through her quickly converged into a constant roll of fire through her and the thing driving into her would begin to move faster and faster until the muscles in her sex began to quake as her body reached its

maximum peak and prepared to release in climax. The orgasm never reached fruition, though. She would hover at the brink, quake until she was exhausted from the tremors and dizzy from gasping for breath-endlessly waiting for the release that never came. And it would stop and that was almost worse. She could feel herself slowly cooling, could feel the promise of a climax moving further and further away until there was no hope of reaching it and yet her body continued to complain because she hadn't reached it.

And just about the time she almost reached that plain where it didn't matter anymore, where she didn't cry, or feel like crying, because she couldn't have it, they would begin again. It was worse when it was both of them because then she would fly upward to that trembling peak at the top faster and they would make her stay longer, sobbing for relief that was always denied.

Because she'd been bad.

She could have hours upon hours of pleasure so intense she wanted to scream and cry because she'd been bad, but she couldn't have the prize because she'd been bad. And 'bad' was anger over being denied and reluctance to feel pleasure and deprivation at the same time. 'Bad' was feeling that she had a choice when she didn't and showing them that she thought she had a choice. 'Bad' was any time she grew angry and let them know it by a look, and if she refused to yield that was even more 'bad' and resulted in more 'sessions' of tortuous, endless pleasure-without release.

That dread dominated her mind, but there was another dread, the threat that it could be much worse if she continued to be bad, if she couldn't make herself ignore the dread and the anger and yield, whatever they asked, immediately, without question, without hesitation. If her world hadn't felt turned upside down, she thought that dread would have dominated, because it was fear of death or completely losing her 'self', losing the ability to think at all or to make choices. One of them-or maybe both?-had told her that that was what would happen if she didn't learn not to be bad. There had been the hint that she would be given to someone else and that someone else might do far worse when she was 'bad'-the other things that made her dread.

She wasn't sure if she most feared those unnamed other things or simply being given to someone else. She knew she was terribly afraid that she would be given to someone else, but it didn't seem that it was because of what they might do if she was bad. It seemed most of her fear was wrapped up in being afraid it wouldn't be Tariq or Koryn and that she wouldn't get the petting she so looked forward to when they were pleased with her, the tender touches when they held her and caressed her instead of teasing her, when they kissed her. She wouldn't feel like any time she would be rewarded with orgasm if she could just be good long enough to deserve it.

It relieved her a little while when she'd finally nerved herself to beg Tariq not to send her away, promised to be good if he wouldn't, and he'd tightened his hold on her and murmured something to her in his own tongue. She hadn't understood

what he'd said, but it had felt like reassurance.

As she lay drifting in the heated haze later, though, enduring the wracking pleasure she'd come to expect, something different pierced the fog, some sound of movement that wasn't familiar. Lifting her heavy eyelids with an effort, she struggled to focus her vision and see what had intruded enough to pierce her awareness. She finally managed to bring the movements into focus even though there was only a tiny part within her field of vision. Koryn and Tariq were kneeling on the floor beside some sort of container, staring at whatever was inside of it. As she watched, Tariq bent down. When he straightened again, she caught a flash of long, reddish hair and then he moved completely into view as he moved away from the container carrying whatever it was. She caught a brief flash of the 'something' before he moved beyond her field of vision. It was a woman, naked and unconscious.

Fear rose inside her instantly, powerful enough that it pierced the state of euphoria. Did that mean they meant to send her away after all? Or had they, as Koryn suggested, brought in another woman to appease their needs because she'd been bad so long they'd given up thinking that they could use her for that?

The last thought almost calmed her. The fear lingered that they would be more interested in the new woman, but it was still better than being sent to someone else. If she could've just convinced herself that that was all it was, she would've felt better. She couldn't dismiss the fear that the other woman's

presence meant that she was going to be sent away, though, especially when she remembered bits and pieces of the conversation. Or was that the same conversation? She couldn't be sure, but it upset her so much she began to cry. She remembered they'd been talking about her. She'd heard her name mentioned several times and they'd been angry and arguing as they so often did when they talked about her. That was what it was about, sending her away and getting another woman to take her place.

She sobbed so hard over that that it caught their attention. Koryn's face swam into view when she blinked the tears out of her eyes. His expression was taut with disgust.

"How long has she been in this thing?"

Tariq jerked an alarmed glance at the clock. Relief flooded him. "Only thirty minutes on this session. It's her second today, though."

Koryn frowned. "You're certain? She's crying."

Tariq's expression tightened. "I'm certain. She often cries, or haven't you fucking noticed? Why do you think I got the gag? I can't fucking stand it when she cries. It ties me in knots."

Emerald heard Tariq leave and cried harder. She was startled when she felt Koryn's fingers brush lightly along her cheek. "Shhh, baby. You're half way there. Just a little longer and I'll let you rest."

She didn't understand what he'd said, but both his touch and his tone reassured her. She calmed enough to drop once more into the grip of the euphoric haze.

* * * *

Tariq garnered many a second glance and far more interest than he liked as he carried the unconscious woman through the ship to the docking bay where the shuttle was waiting to carry their first batch of breeders to Niribu. It made him uneasy even though he'd taken care to cradle her face against his chest and cover the exposed profile with a lock of her hair-just in case anyone had sneaked into Koryn's lab and gotten a good enough look at Emerald to realize the woman he was carrying wasn't her. He thought the possibility was slim. As Koryn had pointed out, he'd hovered over her pod from the time she'd developed to a stage where he could see her maturing face, the face that had haunted his dreams until he couldn't seem to make himself stay away. And although Koryn had refused to admit it, he'd hovered over her, as well. That hadn't left a lot of time for anyone else to obsess over her.

He still didn't want to take a chance. The ship had been virtually empty the day Emerald had decided to take a stroll and he was fairly certain she couldn't have run in to anyone at all or the alarm would've been sounded, but there was still a chance someone had glimpsed her and he was afraid Emerald's face was too memorable to be easily forgotten.

He was relieved when he finally reached the ship and strode up the gangplank. The crew was primarily androids and he

didn't see any of the other crewmembers as he made his way to the cabin he'd set aside for 'Emerald'. He settled her on the bunk when he entered and carefully secured the safety harness for takeoff. When he straightened, he studied the woman. She was pretty enough, he decided. Her figure was actually a little more voluptuous than Emerald's-not as appealing to his mind, but still enough to arouse a great deal of interest and competition for possession.

Relieved to see that she was desirable enough that it seemed unlikely anyone would question that she was the woman they'd decided he was obsessed with, he turned and left. He met up with his android, Aeon, on the way out. "Aeon, Emerald is sleeping. I confess I fucked her nearly to death when I realized I was going to have to give her up. She'll need a good deal of care if she's to recover before you reach Niribu. The crewmembers are not to have access to her. Understood?"

Something flickered in his eyes, but Aeon merely nodded. "Yes, Lord Tariq. I will take excellent care of her."

"Good. When you get to Niribu, you're to go directly to Lord Cindar and tell him that I've sent along a delicate beauty who'll require tender care and gentle training. If he's interested, make certain he sees her before anyone else."

Again the Aeon nodded. "Yes, lord."

"I also have a special male breeder. We put Pete in the cabin next to this one. He's recovering from an injury and needs special care, as well." He drew a credit from his pocket and

placed it in the android's hand. "This is for you if you see to it that he'd delivered discreetly to Lady Seana as a gift from me. Tell her that we assessed him as an excellent breeder and he has a cock that should make him equally entertaining as a love slave with a little training. If you're successful, I'll give you another just like this when you return. It's enough to pay for a woman's services for at least a month-each."

The android curled his fingers around the credit, his face devoid of expression. "Yes, lord. I'll see it done."

Tariq grinned abruptly. "Don't bother trying to convince me that isn't an incentive. I know you androids have needs just like us."

Something flickered in the android's eyes, but he merely bowed.

Feeling as if a great weight had dropped from his shoulders, Tariq left the shuttle and returned to his quarters to relieve Koryn. He could work from his quarters. Koryn couldn't and he was going to have to scramble to replace the empty pod in his lab. Someone on the crew was in Mylor's pocket. He was certain of it.

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Chapter Twelve

Neither Tariq nor Koryn could decide whether to be unnerved or gratified by Emerald's progress. Granted, Tariq had hoped that the intense disciplinary sessions he'd decided on would finally have the desired effect, but he realized he hadn't really expected that it would and yet, after only three days Emerald seemed completely docile.

He was deeply suspicious at first when he realized that Emerald hadn't hesitated to do whatever he or Koryn demanded the moment they demanded it. Even exhausted and weak, she struggled to comply instantly.

He pointed it out to Koryn over breakfast on the fourth day, when he finally noticed, wondering if Koryn had. "When is the last time that you noticed that Emerald resisted an order?" he asked curiously.

Koryn's brows rose and then he frowned thoughtfully. "Not yesterday," he said finally. "It seems to me that I recall some resistance the day before, but I'm convinced there was nothing yesterday."

"I was thinking the same thing, but of course, I didn't know if you'd encountered anything during your sessions. I begin to think this might actually work."

Koryn grimaced. "And we only needed to bring in the fucking robot to accomplish it," he said ruefully.

Irritation flickered through Tariq. "It doesn't get tired or too horny to think straight," he said tightly. "It's the same principle, regardless, and I doubt she can tell that much difference. It's cybernetic after all, real flesh and muscle."

"Except that it's a hell of a lot bigger than our fingers even when we did four at the time and we couldn't come close to matching it in stamina-not at that speed, or depth of penetration with our fingers for that matter."

"That might explain it. It keeps her at fever pitch longer, which is bound to be more effective in wearing her down."

"Maybe it's time to test it? Put her through her paces and see how she does?" Koryn said thoughtfully. "I can spare the time from the lab. I'll have to be in and out, checking up on the progress of the new seedlings, but that still leaves me plenty of time today."

Tariq considered his own situation. "I've made it clear I'm working from my quarters. Of course, they were convinced, the bastards, that it was a determination to stay with Emerald, but it might not be a bad idea to continue that pattern. It might help to convince them that they were mistaken."

"It might also make them suspicious she's still here. We can't openly order enough food for three anymore."

"She doesn't eat much. It isn't going to be a hardship," Tariq responded. "I think I can safely dedicate today to the project either way. Maybe I'll break pattern and spend most of the day at the dig site tomorrow."

"I won't be able to spend all day here attending her sessions if you do. That'll look equally suspicious-besides I have the lab work."

"If she does well enough today when we take her through her paces, I think we could safely reduce the number of sessions."

"You don't intend to simply stop when you think she's ready?" Koryn asked in surprise.

"You do recall what happened the last time I was soft enough to do that, right? She was worse after a few days than she had been before."

"Good point. She might reach a point where it isn't necessary at all or very often, but it would be safer not to try that for a while in case she begins slipping. I don't think I could handle having to start over from scratch."

"You'll have to if we have to-but I'd rather not chance it myself. That's why I said if she does well, I think it would be alright to reduce her sessions, maybe even drastically, but I don't think it would be a good idea to stop altogether-not anytime soon, anyway."

Koryn pushed his plate away and settled back in his chair.

"So, what's the game plan for the day?"

"I've been giving that some thought. I think it's possible you're right about the robotic fucker ... at least in a sense. It maintains that critical high, but it's also drugging. You can see she dreads it and at the same time craves it. I think the ups and downs of handling it ourselves, or mostly ourselves, would put just the strain on her that we need to test her. She'll be more alert and able to anticipate what's about to happen, which I think is the trigger for her resistance."

"Will we rotate? Or go together?"

"Rotation will give us both more recovery time, and I need it whether you do or not," Tariq said dryly.

Koryn uttered a snort that lacked true amusement. "Don't feel inadequate on my account! I need it as much or more than you do. Which brings me to the question of how much punishment am I going to have to take. If I need it, is it going to be a problem to get her to mouth fuck me?"

"It isn't a problem as far as I'm concerned-as long as most of the focus is on her. I won't be doing it, but that's because I plan to begin breeding her and I want my sperm count as high as I can get it."

"Speaking both scientifically and as a fellow horny layman, I doubt that's going to be an issue. You're a virile man to start with and you've been doing a hell of a lot of 'saving up' in the past couple of weeks," Koryn retorted dryly.

"Maybe, but it's too important to successfully breed her quickly for me to want to take any chances. If I miss this fertile period, I might not get the chance at another. I wouldn't worry about it if it wasn't for the situation, but"

"We do have a situation," Koryn finished for him. "I'm sure as fuck not going to quibble-wouldn't even if not for the dangers since I can't get my hands on her until you do. You do still hold to that? As soon as you've bred her I can fuck her?"

Tariq's expression tightened. "I gave my word. When have you known me not to keep my word?"

"But you don't like it," Koryn observed.

"I never did. I like it less now, but I also see that you're entitled by more than the word I gave when you've invested just as much effort, and risk, in her protection as I have.

Koryn was surprised and it showed, briefly. His relief was more profound. He knew Tariq had grown extremely attached to Emerald-at least as attached as he was-and that made it more difficult to consider sharing her. He supposed it was just as well they'd had to share the responsibility of training her. He didn't think either of them would have become quite so attached if they hadn't had to invest so much time in disciplining her, but he also thought it would've made it far more difficult, for both of them, to accept sharing her. "Shall I take the lead? Or do you want me to wait?"

Tariq hesitated. "You take lead today. She's given you far more trouble than she has me and she's very alert right now. I think we should challenge that."

It irritated the fuck out of Koryn for him to point that out. Unfortunately, he knew it was true-probably because he wasn't the authority figure that Tariq was.

Tariq cupped Emerald's face in his hand and tilted her head so that he could see her expression. "Go get in the bed, baby. Koryn is going to handle your first session this morning."

Something flickered in her eyes. Her hands tightened on him, but as soon as he released her she scooted off his lap and moved to the bed. When she lay down, she lifted her arms above her head and drew her knees up, planting her feet wide.

Ignoring the urge to leap to his feet and rush to the bed, Koryn simply studied her for several moments. It was as important that she have time to feel anticipation as the actual stimulation was. Without that, she wouldn't have the chance to consider what might be done and begin to feel dread. He leaned down after a moment and pulled his boots off. "Anything in particular you'd like to suggest I try this morning?"

Tariq pretended to consider it. "Actually, there is. It seemed to me that the ice was very effective in cooling her down and helping her to feel more. I want you to see how many times you can take her to the top, maintain it briefly, and then cool her down and start over."

Oh hell, Koryn thought, swallowing convulsively! He merely nodded, however, and got up to strip. When he'd discarded his uniform, he strode to the refreshment center and got a glass of ice.

To his surprise, Tariq had carried a chair across the room and settled in it beside the bed. "Don't mind me. I'm merely observing."

A little disconcerted, wondering if Tariq still thought he was undermining his efforts, Koryn looked around for a place to set the glass. Tariq took it. Shrugging inwardly, he studied Emerald, trying to decide where to start and what would test her most. He needed to thoroughly stimulate her to get her to the top to start with, but take it slow? Or push it? He decided he wasn't up to slow and began to alternately massage her breasts and her clit with purpose as soon as he climbed into the bed. He began to lightly pinch her nipples and her clit as soon as they began to swell with the blood flow, waiting for them to reach maximum sensitivity before he brought his mouth and tongue into play. He decided she was ready when tremors began to run through her with her efforts to remain still and her breathing had increased to short pants. Running a finger along her cleft, he found her entrance and pushed inside, slowly thrusting in and out a couple of times to see how wet she was and how close to peaking. The muscles along her channel were already quivering and tightening and relaxing against his finger.

Leaning down, he took her closest nipple into his mouth and

sucked hard. A hard shudder went through her in response and the convulsing muscles in her passage grew stronger and more rapid. He slipped a second finger inside of her and increased the pumping motion while he pulled hungrily at the nipple he'd trapped. Instead of moving to the second when he released it, he changed positions on the bed and settled between her thighs, capturing her clit. She hit her peak almost instantly. He kept pulling at her clit with his mouth and driving his fingers into her frenziedly for several minutes and then abruptly stopped and sat up.

Reaching for the ice, he took a piece when Tariq held the glass out and applied it to her clit. She tensed all over, gasping hoarsely as he stroked the ice around and around her clit and over it until it melted. Reaching for another piece, he repeated the process with each nipple and then pulled away to study the effect. Deciding she hadn't cooled completely, he continued until her teeth began to chatter.

He could feel the jolt that went through her when he started massaging her again, but other than a whimper that escaped her, she held herself rigidly still. He took her to her peak four times, held her there briefly and then cooled her with the ice before he started again. She was quivering all over by the time Tariq called the time.

Koryn wasn't in a hell of a lot better state.

They left her to 'rest' for an hour and then Tariq took Koryn's place on the bed. "Get me a glass of ice. I think I've grasped the process."

Emerald's chin wobbled, but she clamped her jaws tightly. Despite the ice, Tariq managed to get her to her peak faster. Even holding her there a little longer than Koryn had, he succeeded in carrying her up and down six times before Koryn called the time.

Koryn got up and stretched. "I need to go the lab for a bit."

"If you aren't back in hour, I'll put her in the chair for the next session," Tariq responded and then focused on Emerald. She was still in position he saw with satisfaction. "You may rest."

She curled up into a tight ball, shivering. He hesitated and finally pulled the covers over her in case she was actually cold and not merely shivering in reaction. He was mildly irritated but not really surprised when Koryn failed to show at the correct time. He succumbed readily to his scientific interests and was prone to lose track of time. Deciding it wasn't a bad thing since it would keep Emerald off kilter, he turned in his chair. "Go get in the chair, Em."

She pushed the covers back and slipped off the bed readily enough, but he saw that she was in no hurry to reach the chair. Still, she didn't make her reluctance obvious enough that he felt compelled to call her on it. He got up and followed her. She didn't simply 'assume the position' as she had when he'd sent her to the bed, but she didn't resist when he moved her arms and legs into position and manacled them or squirm when he moved around to secure her belt to the chair. He might've forgotten the gag except that when he flicked a glance at her

face her eyes were already swimming with tears. Bracing himself, he put the gag on her and positioned the chair. It took him nearly ten minutes to stimulate her enough to produce the moisture he thought necessary to insert the dildo. Once he got it going, however, he managed to peak her out in only a few moments. Deciding she'd offered enough resistance to warrant it, he set her start time when he reached his chair again rather than allowing the time it had taken to get her going as part of the session as he usually did.

Koryn made it back about halfway through the session and moved to stand at the foot of the chair, watching the dildo pound into her. Tariq joined him after a few minutes. "It occurs to me that we're damned predictable," Koryn murmured. "We always set the same speed."

Tariq shrugged. "It's a machine. I suppose it could be set to vary the depth and speed and angle just like we do, but I'm not that familiar with it. In any case, it maintains her at her peak and I think that's the important thing."

"Unless it could take her to a higher peak," Koryn said. "It would be more of a test if it did. Familiarity breeds contempt. We need to consider it a possibility that that's why she stopped resisting-not because she's cowed but because she's grown accustomed to it."

Tariq considered it and finally stepped forward, adjusting the speed until it was driving into her so hard and fast it was jolting her entire body. The incessant moans against the gag became keen cries almost instantly. They could see she was

convulsing harder than before. "I guess you were right. She seems to have reached a higher peak."

Tariq left to check the time after a few minutes. When he came back, he watched the pumping bio-cock for a few moments and then moved around to check on Emerald's progress. Tears were streaming from her eyes and her cries had grown hoarser, but he thought she was alright.

"What's the count?" Koryn asked.

"She had another fifteen minutes when I checked. I didn't start the count, though, until I finally got her to peak. She didn't offer any overt resistance, but I had a hell of a time getting her up there to start with."

"Maybe we can cut that if we stimulate her together the next time."

"Maybe. She might be more resistant after this." He left to check the time again. "You can shut it down. It's been fifteen."

Koryn shut it down. "Did it come with instructions?"

"In the storage room," Tariq responded absently. "Unless the cleaning droid got it."

Koryn disappeared into the storage room and returned a few minutes later. Settling in the chair at the table, he read the instructions. "This says that the nerve bundle that controls orgasm is located at the front of her channel and that adjusting

the angle can help achieve climax faster."

"I knew that," Tariq said dryly.

"Yes, but I think I can adjust the angle to make it easier to get her there-whether she resists or not."

"As big as that thing is, it can't miss much whatever the angle of penetration."

"We can try it, though. What's the time?"

Tariq paused and glanced at the clock. "It's time. It doesn't seem like an hour." He discovered when he reached the chair that Koryn was already there, fiddling with the chair's position. When he'd angled it to curl Emerald's hips upward at a slight angle, he studied her thoughtfully. "We should do the ice. She's still hot and we aren't going to keep her off kilter like that."

Tariq shrugged and Koryn left, returning a few minutes later with the ice. She jerked all over when he applied it but she tensed instead of struggling against her bonds. Tariq was skeptical. It seemed to him that Koryn had only insured that it was going to take longer, regardless of whether there were two of them stimulating her or not. As soon as he tested and found a little moisture, however, he started the dildo. She shuddered all over when it had fully penetrated. Another shudder went through her as it slowly retreated.

A little surprised, Tariq focused on stimulating her breasts and

clit as the dildo detected enough moisture to increase its pace. She peaked within moments. He stepped back, watching and then adjusted the speed to the number of reps per minute that he usually set it. Koryn headed for the door when he moved to his desk to note the time. "I'm going by my lab. I'll bring food when I come back."

Nodding absently, Tariq returned and reset the speed, increasing it until it was pounding into her as it had before. He left it at that speed for thirty minutes, reduced it to the 'norm' for fifteen and then increased it again. When she'd been in session precisely an hour, he crossed the room and turned the machine off. Adjusting the chair into the rest position, he unfastened her manacles. "Go lie down and rest."

Her legs promptly gave out when she stood up. Consternation filled him but he bent down, scooped her up, and carried her to the bed. She'd been sleeping nearly an hour by the time Koryn made it back again. Irritated since he was hungry, he got up and went to the table, carefully separating the portions to divide it between him and Emerald. Since she was still asleep, he decided to let her rest a few more minutes and eat. He got up as soon as he finished and went to the bed to shake her awake. "Come sit with me and eat, baby."

Her eyes were glazed and unfocused.

"Maybe you should go to the bathroom and relieve yourself and freshen up first."

She staggered off the bed and stumbled toward the

bathroom.

"Wobbly," Koryn commented.

"Yes, well we did set the speed higher," Tariq said dryly. "It took a lot more out of her than she's used to."

"I thought the idea was to keep off kilter today so that we could see how well she behaved."

"I didn't say it wasn't. I agreed that it was good idea to test her. I'm just saying it's been harder on her."

"Which means the next time we send her to the chair we'll discover just how docile she is."

"I think so. We'll give her a break for a couple of sessions and then send her back."

"One or three. Two makes a familiar rhythm."

"Alright one. I'll start since you did last time and then I'll send to the chair. One session there, back to the bed and then back to the chair."

She was more alert and stable when she returned from the bathroom but clearly not particularly hungry. Tariq kept insisting until he decided she'd had enough and then sent her to the bed. As before, she assumed the position without having to be told. Tariq decided not to allow her as much time to stew over it as they had before and got up to get a glass of

ice.

She swallowed audibly when she saw it, but she lay perfectly still-or as still as she could manage throughout his session. She looked so upset when he told her to go to the chair after her brief rest that he fully expected resistance. She surprised him again, staring tearfully at the ceiling but otherwise completely compliant.

She looked dazed and confused when they released her from the chair and Tariq had to help her to the bed, but she behaved beautifully. She didn't try to bite Koryn when he told her to bring him off with her mouth and she lay still while he teased her mercilessly. She burst into tears and sobbed like a child when Tariq sent her to the chair again, but she didn't try to struggle.

Tariq thought he was nearly as rung out from her testing as she was-not as miserable or as exhausted, but on edge from her weeping. When she'd eaten, he sent her to bed and left his quarters to try to calm his frayed nerves.

"That was hellish," Koryn commented, joining him. "I figured you would be out here."

Tariq swallowed with an effort. "So what's your assessment?"

"I think she's as ready as she'll ever be."

Tariq hesitated. "You don't think we've ... broken her?"

Koryn considered it. "No. I think we've pushed her to her lowest ebb, but I don't think we've broken her. I think she could spring back a lot faster than you realize. It wouldn't hurt to reward her. She needs to know that she'll be rewarded for behaving just as much as she needs to know there'll be punishment when she doesn't."

"If I breed her and she 'springs back' we're going to have trouble."

"Not necessarily. We'll just have to be a lot more careful in punishing her when she needs it."

Tariq nodded a little jerkily. "I'm going to breed her tonight."

Koryn felt his chest tighten with a mixture of pain and anger and even anticipation as it flickered through his mind that he could have her, too.

He just couldn't breed her.

"I think it's time," he managed to say finally.

Despite his own distress over it, Koryn almost felt sorry for Tariq when he caught a glimpse of his face in the moonlight. He'd never seen that look on Tariq's face before and it took him a few moments to figure out what it was. He was ... afraid. "You won't hurt her," he said after a moment.

Tariq flicked an uncertain look at him.

"She isn't the first human to be bred by an Anunnaki man. I know it's almost as ... unnerving that they're so small compared to us ... and what we're used to as it is fascinating, but they're sturdy stock. Besides, the bio-cock has accustomed her to something at least close to your size."

"A lot of them died," he muttered.

Koryn felt a twinge of some of same fear he didn't doubt Tariq was feeling. "They died when their own impregnated them, too. They didn't have the resistance to disease they have now, or the nutrition, or the understanding of medicine we have. There's no data suggesting there would be any problems using them as breeders or we wouldn't have been sent to get them."

He looked unconvinced, but he turned and reentered the ship, striding briskly away. "Be careful with her," Koryn muttered. "I'd hate to get my ass kicked trying to kick yours."

* * * *

When Tariq reached his quarters and crossed to the bed, he saw that Emerald appeared to be sleeping. The doubts that had been circling his mind instantly rose to the forefront again and he considered whether he even wanted to wake her or not. Ruefully, he realized as soon as he sat down that his cock was in no doubt. It had been fully erect or semi-erect from the moment he'd begun considering breeding her. He discovered when he'd removed his boots and stood to shrug out of his uniform, that she'd awakened or she hadn't actually been

asleep at all. She watched him as he undressed.

He couldn't tell what might be running through her mind, but it was enough that she watched him to make his heart speed up and his breath ragged. He settled carefully beside her and pushed the covers back so that he could study the form he found so breathtakingly beautiful. The moment he cupped her breast, however, she tried to assume the position.

"No," he said, his voice more harsh than he'd intended. "Not tonight. I want you to touch me while I touch you."

She looked bewildered, but she didn't resist when he lifted her hands and placed them on his chest. For several moments, she didn't move either. She began to stroke her hands lightly over his chest as he massaged her breasts, however, her touch tentative. It still set him on fire to feel her exploring him, to watch her face become flushed as stroked her breasts, to see her eyes glaze with pleasure. He brought her face close to his after a moment, cupping the back of her head and guiding her until he could breach the distance that separated them and brush his lips along hers. They parted as he nipped at them with his lips, sucking lightly at first one and then the other and then both when he'd settled his mouth more firmly against hers. He captured her breath and then her taste and then he explored the soft inner surfaces of her mouth with the certain knowledge that he would feel her nether mouth surrounding his cock, cupping it as her mouth cupped his tongue, sucking at it as the muscles worked around it.

The knowledge sent a headier rush through him, made him

impatient when he'd wanted to savor it.

He'd waited too long to have the patience for it, touched her too many times without benefit of relief. He moved from her lips to her throat and back to her face again to trace his lips over her cheeks. Returning to her lips, he briefly delved that orifice with a hunger that was rapidly growing beyond his control, but it was too reminiscent of the hot, moist, clinging muscles of her channel and not enough to pacify his ravaging need at the same time.

He explored her throat and lips again and then moved down to explore her breasts, pulling hungrily at each nipple and then scooting lower to explore her narrow ribcage and her belly. He hesitated there, feeling the urge grip him to suck her clit into his mouth. His throat closed with need and he yielded to it abruptly, pushing her legs apart and searching briefly for the little bud. It was swollen with her arousal and that was enough to make him near mindless. He pulled at it feverishly for several moments until he felt the tremors running through her. Sinking a finger into her, he discovered she was wet, the muscles along her channel already quaking.

He surged over her abruptly, pressing his cock to her cleft, struggling with the urge to find her opening with his cock. A flicker of sanity pierced his fevered mind, though, as he felt her slight frame beneath his. He paused, staring down at her, struggling to make his mind function and finally moved off of her, sprawling on his back beside her.

"Mount me and take me inside of you," he gasped hoarsely.

She looked confused, but she struggled upright. He caught her hips to steady her as she lifted one knee to move it to the other side of his hips. It wasn't until he felt the belt beneath his hands that he realized he hadn't removed it. He searched it for the clasp and unfastened it as she settled on his belly.

She glanced at him sharply when it fell away. When he'd dropped it on the floor beside the bed, he caught her hips again and urged her up. Her hands shook when she clasped his cock. It flickered through his mind that it could as easily be fear as desire, but he lost all ability to think the moment she guided his cock to the mouth of her sex and he felt her flesh pressing against him. He felt as if the breath had been punched from his lungs when he felt her body close around the head of his cock. His hands tightened on her hips as she slowly pressed down, engulfing more and more of his shaft until he thought he would black out from the intensity of the pleasure. Her slow descent was maddening. It took every ounce of control he had to prevent himself from grabbing her and driving her down over himself. He gritted his teeth when she lifted upward again without engulfing much more than the head and then she began to descend again.

He was going to blow his seed and he hadn't even achieved full penetration, he thought suddenly. Releasing his grip on her hips, he reached down to curl his fingers around the root of his cock, tightly pinching the tube that channeled his sperm from his balls through his dick to prevent ejaculation. It was more

torture than he'd anticipated. He thought for several moments that his seed would blow a hole in his testicles instead.

She distracted him from his torment when he felt the lips of her sex kiss the top of his fist. It was all the incentive he needed to let go. He grabbed her hips, driving deeper. She gasped, began convulsing. Uttering a pained grunt as the first convulsion hit him, he gripped her tightly, jackknifing upright the moment the spasm eased, and coiled his arms around her, lifting her and pressing her down again until the paroxysms tearing at his guts finally ceased.

Gasping for breath, shuddering, he was so wrapped up in the glorious aftermath of release that he didn't realize she'd fainted until he fell back against the pillow and she landed limply on top of him. Alarm flickered through him but when he checked her pulse he could feel it.

Maybe he'd squeezed her too hard?

A mental search finally produced the memory of her own convulsions and, more importantly, the sounds of pleasure. Not death throes then, release.

Relieved, he cuddled her, stroking her back, and went back to enjoying his release. He'd just recovered enough to begin considering whether he was up to another round so soon when he felt something hot and wet hit his chest. It confused him until he realized Emerald was shaking. He shifted to his side immediately, dumping her onto the bed and catching her face to tilt it up for confirmation. His throat closed. "I hurt you?"

he asked gruffly.

She shook her head.

He frowned. "It's alright to tell me."

She sniffed. "You didn't."

Relieved but not convinced, he brought her against his chest. "If I didn't hurt you why are you crying?"

He heard her swallow. "It felt so good."

His mind went blank for a handful of seconds. A mixture of amusement, pleasure that she had, and irritation that she'd scared the shit out of him only because it had felt good, filled him. It occurred to him abruptly, though, that he'd deprived her of fulfillment just as he'd felt deprived. It had felt so good, he'd thought he would pass out. Instead of either chuckling or dismissing it, though, he tightened his arms around her briefly and then leaned away to find her lips. She clung to him when he kissed her. He brushed his lips against her forehead when he'd broke from her lips. "You were good today, baby."

She shuddered, but she nuzzled closer.

Sighing, Tariq gave up on the idea of getting more of the same. He couldn't bring himself to put the gods damned belt on her again and the 'reward' thing sure as fuck wasn't going to work if he rewarded her all night like he wanted to.

He discovered it wasn't the hardship he'd feared. He was wiped out from the climax he'd already had.

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Chapter Thirteen

Tariq sent Koryn a deadly look when he arrived the following morning with breakfast and a scanner. Koryn missed it since he was completely focused on the scanner. The minute he set the tray down, he charged across the cabin and rolled Emerald over to scan her belly.

He looked disappointed when he returned to the table. "No results yet?" Tariq asked dryly.

"It didn't pick up anything," Koryn said with obvious disgust.

"Well, gods damn it, Koryn! I just fucked her last night! It takes the sperm a few hours to make the gods damned trip!"

"It's been hours!" Koryn said pointedly. "And they didn't have

much of a trip to take. You cock's long enough to deposit the fucking things in her womb!"

"Well it didn't," Tariq said tightly. "I might've bumped against it a couple of times but if you ask me the chances are a hell of a lot higher that it shot past her womb considering the load I had. It might take them twice as long to find their way back down."

Koryn stared at him for a long moment and turned to look at Emerald. "Get up Emerald and come stand by the table."

"Go to the bathroom and freshen up and relieve yourself," Tariq countered.

She looked from one to the other and finally stumbled toward the bathroom.

"Don't wash the come off."

"Gods! Clean up, Emerald. Ignore Koryn. He's being a dick this morning. If it falls out it sure as fuck isn't going to climb back in again."

"Countermanding orders is setting a bad precedent," Koryn said tightly.

Tariq narrowed his eyes at him. "So don't give her stupid orders," he snarled.

Fuming, Koryn focused on his food. "Do you still plan to spend

the day at the dig?"

Tariq studied him speculatively. "I do-most of it anyway."

"What about Emerald's sessions?" he asked when Emerald reached the table.

Tariq dragged her onto his lap, rubbing his fingers caressingly along her cheek. "She's been a good girl. I'm not going to punish her when she is."

Koryn nodded. "I'm heading to my lab, then. I've got a lot of work backed up. Do you want me to check on her at lunch?"

"You'll have to if she gets fed."

He got up to leave. "I'll just leave the scanner here. I don't want it found in my lab. I stole it from the med center."

Tariq considered telling him to put it back where he'd found the damned thing, but he was as anxious to know if his breeding 'took' as Koryn was. Well, not quite as anxious, he thought dryly, but he decided it might arouse less curiosity if the scanner reappeared when they didn't need it any more than for it to appear and disappear every day-or several times a day.

He wasn't needed at the dig, but he didn't think he could keep his hands to himself if he stayed in his quarters. He spent most of the day exploring the city and most of his time either reliving the night before or conjuring images of what he meant

to do that night. When he finally returned to the ship to eat, the urge to go straight to his quarters was so strong it made him uneasy.

He'd comforted himself while he was disciplining Emerald with the thought that he was enduring her punishment right along beside her. Arousing her aroused him just as much and although he'd allowed himself some relief, when he hadn't her, he hadn't allowed himself even close to what he'd wanted or felt he needed. And women didn't suffer nearly as much from 'drought' as men did-at least in general. He knew that for a fact-either that or he just had a fucking knack for picking out women who couldn't have cared less most of the time whether they had sex or not.

It occurred to him, though, to wonder just who'd trained who in his little endeavor when he was just as anxious to get hold of her again as he had been before he had.

He dismissed it. Wanting was a painful fact of life for most men-even those who had their own women and could easily appease their needs-and he hadn't spent any more time suffering than he could help. There was no reason to be uneasy about the fact that Emerald had been on his mind all day or concerned that he was eager to get back to her. He'd spent weeks waiting for the time when he could enjoy her and he'd been thoroughly satisfied by the experience. He'd wanted more the night before. It only stood to reason that he'd be anxious to get back when he'd bowed to reason instead of doing exactly what he wanted to.

When he finished his meal, he headed to the hold to check out the newest batch of survivors that they'd rounded up. The group was a good bit smaller than the first-less than thirty, in fact, and there were more men than women. He examined the women for quite some time, trying to decide if any of them appealed to him, and finally decided there was a dark haired woman that he wouldn't mind fucking.

Relieved, he left again. He wasn't about to waste his seed on the woman-on any of them-when he was trying to breed Em, but it was a relief that he'd managed to get an erection from considering one of them as a bedmate.

Well, a semi-erection.

Of course, it had been like that most of the day, when it wasn't as hard as a fucking rock and killing him, but he was convinced enough that it was interest in the woman to feel a little less uneasy. Discovering it was still early afternoon when he'd finished looking, he decided to check in on Koryn's progress with the clones.

It annoyed him when he discovered Koryn wasn't in the lab, but he went in to inspect the clones anyway. He didn't spend a lot time inspecting the males, actually. The females, he discovered, were at that awkward stage between puberty and adult. He studied them anyway, particularly the faces, trying to decide if any of them showed any potential for beauty. Deciding they didn't, he lost interest.

He met Koryn in the hallway on the way out and turned toward

the lab again.

"Checking out the new batch?"

"I looked. They aren't much to look at just yet."

Koryn shrugged. "They aren't going to be much to look at when they're 'done' either. Not a one of them actually pretty, although I don't think they'll be ugly either-and a good figure and a sweet disposition go a long way. I don't think there'll be any problem placing them."

"Where have you been?"

"I went to check on Emerald. She was resting so I scanned her again. Still nothing."

Tariq resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I guess I'll have to keep working at it," he said, smiling faintly.

Koryn sent him an irritated look, but he forbore comment.

"Why didn't you get her to get you off as long as you were there anyway?" Tariq asked testily.

Koryn looked a little uncomfortable. "I did. She woke up while I was scanning her. I figured I might as well check her behavior while I was there."

"And get a load off. How did she do?"

"Well."

He sounded both surprised and a little disappointed. Tariq glanced at the clock, saw to his relief that it was only a few hours until sunset and excused himself. "I'll be in my quarters. Are you going to bring dinner?"

"Not unless I get to play with Emerald a little," he muttered irritably.

"She isn't bred yet and you said she was behaving acceptably," Tariq said tightly, swiveling to glare at him from the door.

"I could warm her up for you."

"I can fucking warm her up myself!"

Koryn's face tightened. "I'll bring dinner around seven."

Tariq relaxed fractionally, studying Koryn with more empathy that he really felt like he deserved when he'd just gotten back from getting mouth fucked. On the other hand, he hadn't found that that satisfied him long. "Stay and watch if you want to. Just don't make a fucking mess."

Emerald was standing near his desk when Tariq entered. He checked, feeling uneasiness flicker through him, but dismissed it when she smiled at him tentatively. He smiled back her, feeling almost giddy that she'd smiled at him and then embarrassed that he had. "No greeting?"

She looked surprised at the question but moved quickly toward him. He gathered her into his arms, squeezing her tightly, and then leaned away to study her face. "How was my baby today? Have you been a good girl for me?"

Something flickered in her eyes than made a knot of uneasiness form in his belly. "Koryn told me to take him in my mouth and suck him off. I wasn't sure if I should, but I was afraid you'd both be angry if I didn't."

He stroked his fingers along her cheek. "It's alright. He told me. I told him he could use you, but you aren't to fuck him. Understand? Not until I've bred you. After that ... you can unless I say not to."

She looked confused and uneasy. "How am I supposed to know?"

"I'll tell you when and if I tell him. It's not likely to happen. I'm just saying if it did come to that. What else did he tell you to do?"

"He told me to sit on his lap when he brought lunch like you do and then he told me to get in the bed and he ... kissed me all over."

"Did he put the inhibitor on you?"

She paled. "No."

He cupped her face with his hand and kissed her on the lips. "It's alright, baby. I told him not to punish you. I just wanted to

make sure he didn't. I didn't tell him he couldn't reward you. Did he make you come?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"But not with his dick?"

"He used his mouth and his fingers."

He patted her cheek. "I need a bath. I've been at the dig most of the day and I'm sticky with sweat." He studied her for a moment. "Come with me."

He bathed her, enjoying the feel of her water slick skin beneath his fingers. He enjoyed feeling her hands on him when she washed him even more. She knelt down to stroke his cock while he was rinsing off. He allowed it, enjoyed feeling her mouth on him until he thought he was going to come. He stopped her then, pulled her to her feet, and then lifted her from the floor and kissed her. She curled her arms and legs around him when he lifted her from the floor.

He met her gaze when he felt the moist lips of her sex cling to his damp belly. "Gods! I want to fuck you till I can't move or breathe," he muttered, tilting his head and covering her lips again, this time for a far more heated kiss.

He put her down reluctantly when he broke the kiss and turned off the water, moving with her to the drying unit. Too impatient to wait until they were completely dry, he scooped her up about halfway through the cycle and left the bathroom with her.

He paused when he reached the main room. The bed beckoned but he didn't think he could trust himself to be careful enough with her if he took her there. Instead, he carried her to the chair they usually occupied when they ate and sat down with her. Turning her so that she was sitting astride his lap facing him, he drew her up onto her knees and kissed her again. Alternating between her breasts and her mouth and everything in between, he kissed her until he was so desperate he couldn't wait anymore.

"Take me inside of you, baby," he murmured hoarsely.

He gripped the arms of the chair with white knuckled fists while she struggled to engulf his flesh. He felt lightheaded from the effort by the time she finally sheathed him-most of his cock, enough that he wasn't inclined to complain. He coiled his arms around her tightly, holding her still while he fought the urge to come immediately. When he finally decided he could control the urge, he released his tight hold on her and slipped his hands to her buttocks, helping her lift and settle over his cock, watching her face contort with pleasure and the bounce and sway of her breasts. He'd begun to think he was going to lose it before she came when she abruptly stilled and began shudder. The tightening of her muscles around his shaft was enough to rip the control he had away. He moved his hands from her hips to coil them around her again, pulling her against his chest as he pumped his seed into her. She settled limply against him when she finally stopped shuddering.

The last thing he remembered was stroking her back. The

next awareness he had was when he heard the door open and jerked awake as Koryn came in. Koryn checked for a moment and then strode to the table.

Tariq blinked and glanced down at Emerald. Seeing she was asleep, he tipped her chin up and brushed his lips lightly across hers. "Wake up, baby. We need to get cleaned up."

She opened her eyes and stared at him drowsily for a moment and finally sat up. Tariq lifted her off his cock and set her on her feet, following her to the bathroom to clean up. When he'd finished, he went in his storage compartment for clean clothes, summoning Emerald.

He'd stuffed the clothes from the chest onto one of the shelves. He pointed them out to Emerald. "See if any those fit."

Her face was carefully expressionless when he finished dressing and turned see what progress she'd made. She didn't lift her head. She kept sorting the clothing, holding each one up to check it against her and folding it and putting it back.

Discomfort wafted through Tariq. He cleared his throat. "I'll get you some of your own clothing when I can. Celia left those when I kicked her out."

The color fluctuated in her face, but he couldn't see her expression. By the time she settled on a one piece jumpsuit similar to the one he'd given her before, her expression was

Carefully neutral.

Irritation flickered through Tariq, but he decided to ignore both the urge to explain himself and his anger that he felt it at all.

Koryn had divided the food by the time they returned and was halfway through consuming his own. He glanced up at Tariq and froze for a moment before he flicked an assessing look at Emerald. "You don't think the clothes are a case of too many privileges too soon?" he asked when Tariq settled in his chair.

Tariq ignored the question, watching Emerald's face keenly as he summoned her. She seemed to have recovered from her pique, but he wasn't certain he trusted that. "I don't think she feels particularly privileged to get something to wear," he said coolly. "What do you think Koryn?"

Koryn studied Emerald's face. "I'd have to agree. She looks a little sullen. Maybe she has some idea in her head that a slave has the right to question her master about his lovers?"

Tariq could see when he tipped her chin up that she was struggling to pretend contrition. He released a huff of annoyance. "Go take it off and put it up. And bring the inhibitor belt when you come back."

She paled but she got up immediately and headed toward the facilities.

"That didn't fucking last long," Tariq growled, trying to ignore the sick feeling twisting in his gut.

"Shit!" Koryn agreed. "Don't feel bad. She had me fooled, too. The question is, what the fuck to do about it?"

"I don't know," Tariq worriedly.

"Have you heard anything more from the High Councilor?"

"The shipment won't have arrived yet. I don't expect to hear anything further from him and I don't have anything to report at the moment to fish for news."

Koryn frowned. "There isn't anyone else you could contact?"

Tariq studied him for a long moment. "Military protocol is clear on that one. The high council declared war-no unnecessary 'chatter'. Even it wasn't for that, we could be a target. We aren't exempt from being attacked just because we weren't called to take part in the first assault."

Koryn looked unnerved by that. "What are the chances we might get attacked?"

"I don't know. It would depend on where the Dinjin are. They will have been informed and they'll do either of two things- amass a counter force by calling in everyone or they'll try to divert our main force from a concentrated assault on them by attacking our most vulnerable positions."

"Which means us."

Tariq nodded. "Among others."

"You think that's the reason the bastard said we were to stay here-so we'd be sitting ducks?"

"Mylor's a politician not a military man. I wouldn't put it past him, but I doubt it would've occurred to him. He has military advisors. I'm sure they told him we needed to stay here to guard whatever interests we have left." He glanced toward his storage compartment, wondering what was keeping Emerald and saw her come out again. She was carrying the belt and he decided it must have been the search for it that had delayed her. Unfortunately, he'd been distracted by the conversation and he couldn't be certain undressing and then finding the belt could account for the time.

He studied her face as he fastened the belt in place, going back over the things that hadn't quite set right that he'd dismissed and realized the chances were high that she not only hadn't learned anything at all from her discipline, but that she was searching for either a means of retaliation or escape. He felt sick to his stomach at the thought, but as fond as he was of her and as inclined as he was to dismiss it, he couldn't.

He settled her on his lap and picked up his fork to eat. "You didn't happen to catch Em anywhere near my desk when you checked on her?"

Koryn sent him a horrified look. "She was wandering around the apartment, but I thought she was just bored or needed to stretch her legs. I didn't see her near anything that set off alarms."

"I think we may have a problem," Tariq said grimly and then amended that. "I know we have a problem. I'm just not sure of how big a problem we have."

Koryn nodded, pushing his plate away. "So how do you intend to play it? Set a trap for her? Try to catch her in the act? Or simply make it impossible for her to do whatever it is that she has in mind?"

Tariq was inclined to think he just didn't want to know, but if his suspicions were right, Em was up to something sexual discipline sure as fuck didn't begin to cover as punishment. Rebellious or disrespectful behavior were so insignificant beside treachery as to seem laughable, and those could get her killed if she ended up in the hands of the wrong master. "I don't know. I could be making something out of nothing."

"But you don't think so?"

Tariq released a pent up breath of anger. "Like I said, I don't know. I don't want to leap to the wrong conclusion either way and not only can I not entirely trust my judgment with Em, I also have the problem of spending way too much time in political circles where you can't even trust your 'friends' not to stab you in the back if they see any benefit in it. She's been cooped up in here for weeks. It might not be anything more than boredom-like you suggested."

"This is true to an extent. She didn't exactly have a lot of time on her hands to be bored when she had sessions all day,

though."

"No, but she's intelligent. Idiots aren't easily bored."

"So maybe we just need to keep her busier? Damned if I have any suggestions for occupying her time, though." He paused.

"Well, I think you know how I'd like to occupy her time, but I meant besides that."

Seeing that Emerald had finished eating, he told her to go get in the bed. "Taking her out-even briefly-isn't an option," he said, watching her. "Not when she isn't supposed to be here at all anymore. It wasn't something I was particularly comfortable about before."

"No. I don't think we can afford to risk that. You have an entertainment center. Why not show her how to use it? Maybe that would keep her occupied at least part of the time?"

"She doesn't know our language," Tariq pointed out dryly.

Koryn perked up immediately. "I hadn't thought of that! I could teach her."

"I'm not sure that's a great idea either, not when there's even a slim possibility that she's considering treachery. Giving her the tools to escape strikes me as being particularly ... stupid."

Koryn glared at him indignantly.

Tariq's lips curled in a reluctant grin. "I didn't mean that the way

it came out."

"I don't think I'm going to ask you to explain what you did mean," Koryn said stiffly. "Unlike you, I'm not used to thinking in terms of treachery."

"I know that," Tariq said solemnly. "That's the reason I consider you my best friend and trust you more than anyone I know."

Koryn looked mollified and then a little uncomfortable. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, then, when I point out that we need to consider an ... alternate for Em. For what it's worth, I think she's bored, not considering anything treacherous. But it occurred to you and it could easily be another threat to her-beyond the fact that nothing we've tried seems to have really gotten through to her. The only way to really protect her might be to free her."

Tariq felt his gut tighten instantly with a mixture of reluctance and a sense of loss that was so powerful it sent a wave of nausea through him. "She wouldn't survive here. Beyond that, the Earth could be a target for Dinjin again."

"We located one of the colonies."

"We think we located one," Tariq countered angrily, "and we got the information from a Dinjin computer. They know where the humans are! We don't! You do recall that I said attacking our most vulnerable positions was a good possibility?"

Koryn's lips tightened. "In that respect Niribu wouldn't be any

safer than any other place-in fact far less since it's our home world and one of the most likely targets if they break through our forces."

Tariq scrubbed his hands over his face. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it." He met Koryn's gaze. "I'll consider it as an option. But I'll tell you now it's low on my wish list."

"I know you don't want to give her up. Maybe what you need to consider is whether she's more important to you as a possession or if her life is more important?"

"I don't plan on letting it come to that."

"I know you don't, but it might come to that regardless. I'll agree it's the least desirable solution, but I'd be willing to take her."

Tariq studied him. "And stay?"

Koryn seemed to struggle with himself. "If she'd have me. Once she's free, she's free to make her own choices."

Tariq frowned, studying him with a mixture of disbelief, curiosity, and anger. "You'd give up everything you left on Niribu?"

Koryn uttered an amused snort. "There is nothing in my life that's more important to me than Emerald. In any case, I know enough sciences to find work. Genetics may be my specialty, but I haven't confined my studies to that to the exclusion of

other useful sciences. I'm not saying I want to give up everything and follow her. I'm just saying I'd be willing to if it's the only way to save her. I might have some chance of pulling it off-and returning if she refuses me. You wouldn't. You'd be facing charges of treason when and if you came back."

"You would be, too, if they knew what you'd done."

"I know, but the odds are in my favor. Not yours. I'm not a military man."

Tariq shook his head. "Like I said, I'll think about it. I don't like it-especially not when there's a damned good chance she's carrying my child."

"I'd think that would be more of an incentive to protect her."

"It is," Tariq said tightly, "which is why I've got no intention of leaping until I've thought it through."

They felt silent. "Under the circumstances, are you sure you want to continue trying to breed her?"

"I'm sure," Tariq said tightly.

Koryn got up. "I'll leave you to it, then."

Tariq studied him thoughtfully. "I thought you planned to stay?"

Koryn grimaced. "I was more in the mood to party when I still believed we'd succeeded and she would be safe without us having to go to extreme lengths to see to it."

"Like carting her off to a world we aren't sure we've pinned down?"

"Like that," Koryn agreed.

"Stay," Tariq said abruptly. "She has to be disciplined. Whether it seems to be working or not, I don't see an alternative at the moment to continuing to treat her as she'll have to expect to be treated."

Koryn flicked a glance at her. "I don't mind saying I'd rather not."

"But you will."

"I will."

"Look at this way, you can scan her tomorrow and if she's pregnant, you can fuck her all day. I don't see any reason why we should suffer because she's determined to be disciplined."

Koryn grinned reluctantly. "And if she isn't?"

Tariq hesitated. "She will be bred ... or she won't. After tonight, she'll be infertile until her next cycle."

Koryn sat down again and pulled his boots off. It didn't escape either of them that Emerald hadn't assumed the position when she'd climbed in the bed.

Tariq's expression hardened. "Assume the position."

She sent him a startled look, but she lifted her arms above her head and positioned her legs.

Koryn climbed into the bed on the side near the wall, propped himself on one elbow and began to massage the beast nearest him. Tariq took the other side and they stimulated her until she began shift restlessly with the heat they'd generated. When Tariq tested her channel and found her wet, he moved over her, aligned his cock with the mouth of her sex and pressed steadily against her. Without the bindings of the chair to anchor her, he quickly discovered, she was more inclined to yield by being pushed up the bed. He came up on his knees and dragged her back. "Hold her until I'm seated," he growled.

Koryn sent him a look, but he moved around behind her and lifted her shoulders, pushing her in counter to Tariq's thrust. When he paused, Koryn climbed off of the bed and propped against the wall to watch. There wasn't a lot to see, he discovered. By the time Tariq had settled over her, curling his arms around her tightly to hold her while he attempted penetration, Emerald was invisible except for her legs.

He crossed the room for a chair and settled in it, stretching his legs out and crossing them at the ankles.

Tariq hadn't realized just how much effort Emerald had put into engulfing his flesh until he positioned himself to penetrate her instead. The anticipation as she slowly sheathed him inch by inch before been torture and still nothing compared to the agony of his current efforts. He didn't know if she was going to

buckle first or his cock, but he couldn't fucking brace both at the same time and it felt like she was peeling the flesh off his cock. He eased off and pushed again with teeth gritted determination, hammering at her resistant flesh with hard thrusts of his hips until he managed to get deep enough inside that he thought he could manage a short stroke without falling out again.

It was a very short stroke and it still sent such a wave of pleasure through him that he almost came. He paused, panting, and went back to trying to wedge his cock into her. She let out a yelp to let him know when he hit bottom. He felt his cock to see if it felt like there was as much hanging out as it seemed like to him and discovered it wasn't just his imagination. He knew damned well he'd gotten deeper before, but he decided he couldn't hold back anymore. There was no point in it beyond the pleasure it gave him when he'd put her inhibitor back on.

Except to punish her and he was too focused on finishing to worry about that for the moment.

Sucking in a reviving breath, he began to move his hips, thrusting into her in short jabs to keep from pulling out far enough to injure himself. Emerald was still gasping and shaking all over when he finished pumping his seed into her. Bracing his weight on his arms, he rested, trying to catch his breath. The continuous quaking of the muscles along her channel might have pushed him out if he hadn't endured weeks of deprivation. Instead, he felt his cock growing hard

again. He had the presence of mind to cup his hips and sink as deeply as he could before he was fully erect again and discovered he had a far more satisfying connection when he was fully erect. It was almost more satisfying in regards to his staying power. It took him far longer to reach crisis, allowing him to thoroughly enjoy the deep massage of his cock until exhaustion began to war with the pleasure and he began to think he wouldn't be able to come at all.

He shifted positions, tipping Emerald's hips up as Koryn had for the machine and wedging a pillow under her. Almost the moment he resumed his pounding cadence, he had the gratification of Emerald's screams in his ears. It was touch and go for a little while as to whether her cries of ecstatic agony most excited him or distracted him, but he finally reached his peak and felt the semen begin to jet through his cock. It was an orgasm well worth the effort, he discovered, even if he also had to work harder to empty his balls because he already had once. He drove as deeply as he could after the first few convulsions, holding himself there while his body forced the last of his semen into her.

He was almost too weak in the aftermath to support himself at all. It felt like his bones had melted, not just his muscles. Sucking in a couple of breaths, he rolled off of her and onto the bed, gasping for breath, halfway to coma from two of the best climaxes he'd ever had before he even hit the bed. He drifted toward sleep with the sound of Emerald's sniffles in his ears.

She didn't have to give him any reproachful looks the following morning for punishing her by seeking his own pleasure and depriving her of hers. There were dark circles under her eyes from the little sleep she'd gotten, and her eyes, nose, and lips were puffy from weeping.

Tariq settled at the table when he'd sent her into the bathroom, wondering if he should begin her disciplinary sessions again or if there was any point to it. He wasn't as convinced as he had been before that she was too delicate to handle the sessions even if she was pregnant. Of course, being as willful as she was wasn't necessarily an indication of physical strength, and he knew it, but he wasn't sure he could've handled the punishment she had without cracking.

Koryn arrived with a breakfast tray just a few moments before Emerald emerged from the bathroom and went to stand and wait for her as soon as he'd set the tray down. Ignoring him, Tariq lifted the lid on the tray, helped himself to a portion of the food, and ate.

He was still trying to decide whether to begin Emerald's sessions again or not when she finally emerged and Koryn sent her back to the bed so that he could do a scan. Tariq watched the proceedings absently at first, but something about Koryn's attitude finally caught his attention.

"Still no results?"

Koryn glanced at him, his expression an odd mixture of emotions Tariq had difficulty interpreting. "Congratulations,"

he managed finally. "You've impregnated her."

Tariq abruptly felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. A wave of heat and then cold washed over him while he struggled to catch his breath. "You're certain?" he asked hoarsely.

Koryn got up. "You can go to Tariq now."

He proceeded her to the table and set the scanner down. "I'm positive. I ran the scan twice."

Tariq stared at Emerald's belly for several moments when she stopped in front of him. Finally, he reached for her and pulled her onto his lap, but he felt like every movement was mechanical, as if his mind had become detached from his body. He discovered when the cloud had lifted from his mind enough for awareness of his surroundings to seep in again, that he was still staring at Emerald's belly. He settled his palm over her perfectly flat belly, trying to imagine-to accept-that there was a baby inside-his baby.

He couldn't imagine it. Nothing felt real, not the baby, not the conversation. It was almost more like a dream. He met Koryn's gaze again. "You're sure?"

Koryn grinned abruptly and then chuckled. "I'm sure. You've fathered a child. It wasn't an indecisive reading. It was positive."

Tariq met Emerald's gaze for the first time, wondering what

she thought about it. She looked as stunned as he felt. Twin urges hit him at the same time-to throw up the breakfast he'd just wolfed down and to escape the sense of suffocation that descended over him.

He got up abruptly and planted Emerald in the chair he'd just vacated, striding briskly toward the bathroom. He stood at the lavatory for several minutes, splashing cool water on his face and trying to decide if he really did need to throw up or not. Finally deciding he didn't, he dried his face and hands and left the bathroom. "I'm going out," he said harshly.

"What do you want me to do about Emerald?" Koryn called after him before he could get to the door and escape. "Should I resume the sessions?"

Tariq paused at the door and turned to stare at him a little blankly and then glanced at Emerald. "She's been bred," he said stiltedly when he met Koryn's gaze again. "Do what you like ... just don't remove the inhibitor."

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Chapter Fourteen

Tariq had no idea what his destination was until he reached the docking bay. There was very little activity. Men were prepping a shuttle for another trip to Niribu with more of the slaves, but they were in no particular hurry since he'd ordered them to wait until Koryn's second batch of clones were ready for shipment. At that, it was hardly enough to make the trip worthwhile-unless they managed to find more survivors.

The thought gave him a purpose and he ordered a skimmer prepped.

"How many men are you taking?"

Tariq looked at the man. "None. I'll be taking it out alone."

The man gaped at him. "Begging your pardon, lord, but ... we're at war. Shouldn't you at least take a couple of guards?"

"If I thought so, I would've told you to send to men," Tariq said coldly. "Just get the ship prepped."

The man paled, saluted, and left the operations room to take care of it himself. Tariq was pacing the operations room impatiently when he returned thirty minutes later to inform him the skimmer was ready. Without a word, he strode from the room and crossed the hanger to the skimmer.

He opened the com-link when he'd powered the engines up and turned the skimmer toward the bay door. "Send me the most current coordinates of the search parties."

"Yes, sir! What time should we expect you back, my lord?"

"When I get back!" Tariq snarled, breaking the link.

* * * *

"If you're done, go get in the bed," Koryn said.

Emerald glanced up at him, feeling reluctance pierce the cocoon of shock, but she got up and moved to the bed. By the time she reached it, she discovered she was struggling with tears, again, and for the same reason.

Tariq was angry with her. He wasn't even pleased that she'd conceived for him.

Because she'd been upset about the woman and she hadn't been able to hide it.

She'd thought she was doing really well, that she'd gotten the hang of pretending she didn't feel anything at all.

Tariq had been so pleased with her, too! He'd been so sweet. She hadn't realized just how much she craved the tenderness he showered on her until he'd withdrawn again and she realized she'd screwed up-again! She hadn't realized just how badly, though, until now. She'd been more upset the night

before that he was too angry with her to make love to her as he had the first time than she was about not being allowed the pleasure of a release herself. That had left her miserable and achy, but she was almost used to that. Not in the sense that it bothered her any less, but in the sense that she'd come to expect it-more pleasure than she'd imagined anyone could feel and no culmination, no sense of completion, just more pleasure until it became as much torture as pleasure.

He knew she'd been trying to figure out how to get in to his computer. She'd seen the suspicion that had instantly transformed his features when he'd seen her standing by the desk. Koryn had probably told him she'd been snooping earlier, too!

The worst of it was that she hadn't found anything at all. All she'd wanted to do was to try to discover something about their world. She didn't know anything except what they'd told her and that was limited to 'training'. She hadn't really thought they were lying to her about the danger. She had thought they might be exaggerating for the sheer joy of tormenting her, but she hadn't found out anything and even the effort had cost her more than she'd expected.

It wouldn't do any good to try to explain why she was snooping or that she hadn't actually found anything. She knew it was enough that she'd tried. And, considering she was punished for hour upon hour for days on end for nothing more serious than looking at them the wrong way, or allowing her anger to show, or not instantly leaping to every command, she couldn't

imagine what sort of punishment that was going to get her!

Except she could-now. He was going to discard her, send her away. She thought she'd rather be dead than have anyone else touch her. She needed Tariq and Koryn.

She was so upset, she didn't realize that she'd forgotten to assume the position for punishment until she discovered that Koryn was standing by the bed. It made the urge to cry stronger, the discovery that she'd screwed up again, but what difference did that make now, when Tariq was so disgusted with her he wasn't even interested in punishing her himself?

Swallowing the urge to burst into tears, she lifted her arms and drew her knees up, hoping if she did well enough today, Koryn would tell Tariq and he'd get over being angry with her.

His touch was harder to endure and remain perfectly still and compliant than it should have been. She'd been deprived of any release at all until she'd thought she would go completely mad, but Tariq had removed the belt and given her the wondrous orgasm. She'd been allowed another when Koryn had come to her and yet almost the instant Koryn touched her-before he touched her-she was warm and then hot and then feverish with the need boiling in her veins and near to weeping with the strain of holding herself perfectly still and allowing him to make it worse.

She was relieved when he moved between her thighs, not because she would have release, because she wouldn't, but because she knew it would give her a little respite once he'd

come. She could rest before he started again.

She thought he must be as big as Tariq-at least as big as the machine. No matter how wet they made her, her flesh screamed from the strain when they penetrated her. She began panting for breath with fear the moment she felt the head of his cock against her, felt the skin begin to burn with the strain of stretching around him because it always got much worse before it began to ease and allow the pleasure dominance again.

He curled his arms beneath her and grasped her shoulders bearing down on her from both ends. Relief flickered through her when she felt his cock head enter her but it wasn't much of a relief. Once inside, his flesh continued to stretch hers to the point of burning until he'd driven the thick member so deep she could barely catch her breath.

He paused, panting. It allowed her body to slowly adjust to his girth and the burning pain eased. The muscles along her channel began to flutter with excitement the moment he withdrew and thrust into her again. She reached her peak with the dread she always felt now, knowing all that would happen was that her body would strain and strain to pitch her over the top without success. She began to claw uselessly at the sheets when he began to pound into her so hard and deep that the quaking inside of her reached a new level of torment, moaning and then gasping out keen cries that were closer to screams. He shuddered, rammed into her hard a handful of times as his cock jerked and spewed his hot seed inside of

her and finally leaned weakly against her, pressing her into the mattress in spite of the fact that he was holding most of his weight on his arms.

He uttered a pained grunt when he pulled his flaccid member from her and rolled to one side. Emerald felt her throat close with misery and loss.

It threw her into complete confusion when Koryn caught her chin, tipping her head to one side and covering her mouth. His kiss was languid, but still filled with enough heat to make the muscles in her channel clap together a little frantically. He rolled to his back when he broke the kiss and lay with his eyes closed. She thought he might have fallen asleep. She closed her own eyes, willing the heat to leave her. It made it worse when they started again, but it gave her a little respite and she'd learned to appreciate even a few moments respite.

She'd cooled enough that she was beginning to drift toward sleep herself when she heard Koryn swallow. "Kiss me, Em."

She opened her eyes and turned to him, levering herself up high enough to reach his mouth when he didn't lift to meet her. He held perfectly still while she fitted her lips to his and made the motion that made her lips cling to his. He swallowed audibly again when she lifted her head to look at him questioningly. He met her gaze with a look she couldn't entirely understand. "Touch me-kiss me as if you're making love to me."

Emerald felt her heart contract almost painfully. Shifting her

weight, she rubbed her face against his, turning to kiss his cheeks, his eyes, to rub her nose along his and then returning to his lips. He opened his mouth and covered hers when she nibbled at his lips, twined her tongue with his and stroked it and then sucked on it when he thrust his tongue into her mouth. He caught her head between his hands when she would've withdrawn to explore further, holding her while he sucked hungrily at her mouth and tongue.

He allowed his hands to drop again after a moment, allowed her to break the kiss. She balanced her weight on her chest, stroking him with her hands as she explored his throat with her lips and then his chest. He moved restlessly beneath her, kneading her arms and shoulders and back and buttocks as she worked her way across and down his broad chest to his belly. He caught her beneath her arms and dragged her up his chest when she began to stroke his cock, reaching behind her to spread her cleft and spearing the head of his cock into her.

"You're so wet for me, baby," he gasped hoarsely as he pressed her downward to engulf more of his shaft. For several moments, he seemed content to saw shallowly in and out of her and then he pushed her upright and caught her hips, drawing her down over his cock as he pivoted his hips to drive deeper and deeper.

He stopped, panting for breath when he could go no deeper. Emerald had been panting so hard for breath she felt dizzy. Leaning forward to brace her hands on him she began to move, leaning forward and pressing back faster and faster,

trying to find a rhythm he liked. He settled his hands on the tops of her thighs, rocking her back and forth until she began to move the way he wanted her to. He seemed to force his hands to relax then, catching his breath, holding it, and then expelling it gustily. "Gods, baby! Gods! You feel so good."

Emerald felt her body peak in response, felt her muscles convulse so hard around his thick shaft that it spiked with pain and pleasure in almost equal measure. He caught her arms abruptly, dragging her against his chest and rolling on top of her. She grunted at his frantic, pounding thrusts and lost her breath entirely when he bore down on her, driving as deeply as he could as his body began jerking and shuddering with orgasm.

* * * *

Tariq stared down at Koryn and Emerald, struggling with the emotions roiling inside of him and finally moved to the table and set down the tray he'd brought. Koryn jerked and pushed himself upright the moment the metal hit the table, staring at Tariq blankly. "What time is it?"

Tariq's lips tightened. "Around seven."

Koryn frowned. "Morning? Or evening?"

Tariq sent him a deadly look. "Evening," he said tightly.

Koryn's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"I'm serious."

He struggled off the bed, staggered around in a confused circle for a moment and finally grabbed his discarded uniform from the floor and headed into the bathroom. Tariq glanced from Koryn's retreating form to Emerald. She was awake. She pushed herself up and stared at him. "You might as well rest until he comes out again," he said dryly.

She blinked at him, but she lay back down.

He settled at the table to eat his own portion of the food while Koryn bathed and dressed. When he came out, he sent Emerald in to freshen up.

"What have you been up to all day?"

Tariq's face tightened. "I went out to look over the grids the search parties hadn't gotten to yet."

"Anything that looks promising?"

"No. It's a waste of time." He got up when Emerald returned and told her to sit down and eat, pacing. "I've recalled them to give them a break while we consider new grid searches. The only two groups we've managed to find were near easily accessible water. I've arranged to send surveyors out in skimmers to look for small patches of cultivated ground near rivers, streams, and lakes while the men rest up for the new search. The ships are being prepped for the next grid search."

He paused. "You'll be on one of the ships when they go out again-you and Emerald. I've arranged a flight crew of androids. The story is that you'll be dropping the search team off and the crew is to take you to a place we discovered where you can get DNA samples. Instead, you'll leave immediately for Centaurian. I've given the androids the coordinates we figured out-and I deleted them from my system. You should have time to reach the stream beyond this system and fold space before anyone even becomes curious and they won't be able to track you after that.

"We'll have to move Emerald the same way we moved the other woman into my quarters. I hate it, but I don't see an alternative. She's too small to pass for an Anunnaki woman or I'd just get a uniform and have one of the androids escort her."

Koryn and Emerald had both turned white by the time he finished. Koryn recovered first. "You've already made all the arrangements?"

"Yes."

Koryn blinked. "How many days do we have?"

"Two. The ships will be prepped and ready to go day after tomorrow and everything else will be ready by then. The skimmers are going out tomorrow to find the most likely spots for the grid searches."

"But ... two days! I don't know if I can pack in two days."

"You can't take anything you aren't wearing. Emerald will be in your 'equipment' case." He turned to look at Emerald. "I think we need to sedate her. I wouldn't suggest it if I thought we could trust her to be quiet, but we can't risk it. See if you can find something that won't" He stopped and glanced at Koryn, showing the first crack in the veneer of his cool, business-like façade, and cleared his throat. "You know."

Koryn stared at him blankly for a moment before he finally realized what Tariq was talking about. "It isn't going to hurt the fetus-whatever I use. She isn't far enough along yet."

Tariq nodded jerkily. "Good. That's good then." He frowned. "I think that covers it. If you think of anything I might have forgotten, though, be sure and let me know."

Koryn pushed his plate away and sat tapping at the table, thinking. "Supplies?"

"There are always extra for emergencies. It should be more than enough to get you to Centaurian."

Koryn frowned. "We don't know that the Dinjin didn't hit that colony, too. What if we get there and discover there's nothing there?"

Tariq shook his head. "There's a livable planet in that system, regardless-or should be. You'll have the ship for shelter, plenty of weapons, supplies for a couple of months. If you can't locate any survivors and the situation is too ... disagreeable, you'll need to consider one of our more remote outposts. I

don't have any other suggestions."

"But ... what about the baby?" Emerald finally asked weakly.

Tariq swallowed convulsively several times.

"I'll be with you," Koryn answered for him. "That's one of the reasons he's sending me with you-to take care of you."

Her chin wobbled threateningly, but she merely looked down at her lap.

Koryn got up. "I need to go my lab. I've been here all day."

Tariq's face hardened, but he merely nodded.

When he'd left, Tariq studied Emerald for a few moments. "Go to bed. You should rest."

She got up and crossed the room, climbing into the bed. Tariq went to his desk and sat down. He discovered it was a waste of time. He stared at the holo-screen for hours, scrolling through report after report and had absolutely no idea what he'd read. When he finally checked the clock for the fourth or fifth time and saw it was nearing mid-night, he turned his system off and got up.

He thought Emerald had long since gone to sleep-hoped she had. Either he wasn't as careful climbing into bed as he'd thought and woke her, though, or she hadn't been asleep at all. She shifted against his side and curled her arm around him,

burrowing her face against his chest. "Don't send me away. I'll be good."

Tariq swallowed with an effort. "Koryn's going to take you to one of the Earth colonies, baby. It's going to be alright."

He felt hot tears hit his chest. "Punish me. I know I deserve it. Beat me. Just don't send me away. Please?"

Shifting onto his side, Tariq pulled her against him, curling his arms around her to hold her close. "I don't want to hurt you and you don't deserve to be beat. It might hurt the baby."

She curled her fingers into his flesh. "The chair then. That won't hurt the baby and you wouldn't even have to stay to watch me. I don't deserve to get breaks for resting anyway. I know you and Koryn haven't been able to get hardly anything done because you've had to spend so much time disciplining me. You could do whatever you needed to do and I wouldn't even be any trouble."

"Shhh," Tariq said, lifting a hand to cup her head. "No more discipline. You aren't going to be a slave, baby. I won't have to worry that someone will take you away from me that might hurt you. You'll be safe and my baby will be safe. Koryn will stay and take care of you. He loves you, you know."

Emerald started sobbing. "But you don't or you wouldn't throw me away just because I was bad."

"You aren't bad. You were just never meant to be enslaved and

I'm not throwing you away. I'm sending you away to protect you because I ... because it's the right thing to do."

"You don't want me anymore," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry! I'll never be bad again! I promise. Please? Can't you just punish me and keep me? I don't want to go away. I want to stay with you. I love you, Tariq. Please?"

Tariq pushed her away, wiping the tears from her face with his hand. "I wish you did," he said gruffly. "But you don't, baby. You just think you do because of what I've done to you. In a little while you'll get past it and you'll realize you only thought so because I made you feel as if you needed me."

"But ... Tariq!"

He silenced her with a kiss. She curled her arms tightly around him, kissing him back feverishly. He leaned away from her when he broke the kiss and removed the belt, dropping it over the side of the bed. He covered her mouth again when he leaned over her, kissed her throat and her breasts and then returned to her lips for another deep kiss. The second time he moved down to fondle and suckle her breasts, he ran his hand down her belly, found her clit and teased it with his finger. She was so feverish with need that she came almost immediately, gasping and shaking all over.

He stroked her soothingly until she'd caught her breath and began building the heat again with his touch, with kisses. She spread her legs eagerly when he finally shifted over her, cradling him between her thighs, lifting to meet him when he

found her opening with his turgid flesh. She wrapped her arms and legs tightly around him when he began struggling to enter her, panting with anticipation. She'd already raced upward toward another peak by the time he'd sunk deeply inside of her. He'd barely set a steady rhythm when she came again. He slowed until the spasms passed and began to increase the tempo again, building more heat. It roared into flames as he began to drive into her at a pace that told her he was nearing his own culmination. The first jerk of his cock set her off again. She clung to him as she rode the waves of ecstasy trying to hold on even as the strength left her and she felt herself sinking toward oblivion.

He was gone when she awoke. She saw they'd left food for her but she was in no mood to eat. Instead, she spent the day pacing restlessly, trying to think of something she could say to convince Tariq not to send her away.

He was wrong! She did love him! She loved him so much she could hardly breathe when she thought about it. It had nothing to do with the discipline, whatever he thought! At least not the way he thought it did! It was because he'd done it to protect her! It didn't even matter whether or not he was right and it was something he needed to do to protect her! All that mattered was that he wanted to and that he had never hurt her-as arrogant as he was, as convinced as he was that he hailed from a race so superior to hers that she was nothing but a possession-a thing.

She felt like crying all over again when she remembered how

happy he'd been that she'd seemed to grasp the role she was meant to play, how eager he'd been to dispense with the discipline and reward her! He'd made love to her. He might not think so. He might still be trying to convince himself he was merely fucking her and enjoying his sex slave, but she didn't believe for a moment that he would've been so careful, so tender, if she didn't mean something to him!

He was just trying to be noble, damn him! She didn't want him to be noble!

If he was so worried that her behavior would get her into trouble on Niribu, she didn't know why he wouldn't just come with them! She didn't care where she was as long as she was with him!

Koryn came to bring her noon meal instead of Tariq, but she could see even he didn't mean to stay long. She clung to him when he told her to go rest. "Don't take me away! Please? I'll do anything you or Tariq want. I will. I'll be really, really good!"

Koryn released a heavy sigh and sat down with her again, cradling her against him. "This is for your own good, baby. Tariq has some powerful enemies-well, one really, really powerful one. He'd take you away from Tariq purely for spite-and because he can and the gods only know what he would do to you to torment Tariq. Kill the baby you're carrying, for sure, whether it killed you at the same time or not. I don't want that. Tariq doesn't want it. I know you think we punished you purely for meanness, but that's because you just don't understand what life on Niribu would be like for you. Slaves

have no rights-none! Just looking at an Anunnaki the way you have me and Tariq would be enough to warrant a public beating-or a private one. They could do anything they wanted to with you-anything! They could make you wish you were dead.

"We aren't trying to punish you by taking you away. We're trying to protect you, to save you. I know you'd rather it was Tariq, but he's a lord and beyond that, he's in command of this mission. He can't leave. If he could, I'm sure he'd take you himself."

She clung to him. "I don't understand. Why did Tariq think he could have me if he couldn't? He just doesn't want me anymore, does he?"

"If you understood the Anunnaki, you'd understand. He's a lord and he's powerful and wealthy. Usually, he can do just as he pleases and have what he wants. He's used to thinking that way. This isn't one of those times, although I don't think he realized it to begin with. He thought that he could supply the Anunnaki with enough breeders that there wouldn't be a real dispute about him making his choice. That's the biggest problem. There are too many men more powerful than he is that need a breeder and if there aren't enough for everyone, then the more wealthy and powerful will have and everyone else will do without. We're at war now with the Dinjin, and that changes things, too. Acts that might ordinarily be considered fairly minor and punishable by fines or short imprisonment become crimes against the people-treason-and that's usually

a death sentence."

He tipped her chin up. "You can't fight us on this, Em. You'll get me and Tariq killed and the gods only know what'll happen to you. What Tariq proposed is treason. We needed breeders desperately before the war. No matter who wins, Anunnaki will die and when they do, then our situation becomes more desperate. We've ... interbred so much we don't dare breed without bringing in fresh contributors."

Emerald stared at Koryn in horror. "You can't do it! I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you or Tariq because of me! If I can't stay with you anyway, just send me with the others. I'll be good. I understand now and I won't be any trouble. And ... maybe later you and Tariq could get me back?"

"We can do it and we will. Tariq has a good plan. It's doable and the best possible solution for all of us. I'll admit I get the best part of it," he said, smiling faintly. "I get to go with you and take care of you. But this is what Tariq wants, too. He'll know that you're safe and he'll know his child is safe. If that wasn't important to him, he wouldn't take the risk."

He stared at her face for a moment. "And it isn't nearly as risky for us as it sounds," he added. "They'll never know Tariq had anything to do with it. I'll be charged with treason, but I don't plan on hanging around to be executed, so it doesn't matter."

Emerald didn't believe him. She wanted to, but she didn't. She was too afraid for them, though, to argue anymore or beg. If

they were willing to risk so much for her, then they might do something even more dangerous and risky if she didn't do as she was told.

?

Chapter Fifteen

Tariq watched grimly as High Councilor Mylor's ship settled slowly toward the ground. When the gang plank began to lower, he approached the vessel, waiting at the foot of the gangplank until the door opened and Mylor marched down it, followed by a full platoon of guardsmen. Uneasiness flickered through him when the guardsmen immediately deployed upon reaching the ground.

He bowed when Mylor stopped in front of him. "Lord Mylor," he acknowledged the man, bowing in accordance with his station. "It is an honor that you've come to inspect our progress."

Mylor smiled thinly. "The honor is all mine, I assure you, Lord

Tariq." He lifted a hand. "Seize him!"

A jolt went through Tariq, but he aborted his instinct to lash out at the guardsmen that seized him by both arms. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he growled, sending Mylor a deadly look.

"Arresting a traitor. Where's the female?"

Tariq's jaw tightened. "I'm afraid you'll have to enlighten me on that one. There are a lot of females here. Which one are you referring to?"

"The one you've been keeping hidden in your quarters," Mylor responded smugly.

Tariq felt his heart skip several beats. "The one named Emerald? I sent her to Niribu."

"You sent 'a' female of the general description. You didn't send the breeder you'd appropriated for yourself."

"I put her on the vessel myself," Tariq said through gritted teeth.

"Debra, you mean? The one we found when the ship arrived."

Tariq shrugged easily. "I didn't know that was her name. I called her Emerald."

Mylor's eyes glittered. "So we won't find her in your cabin?"

"Not unless she was beamed back."

"Hmmm. I think maybe we'll just check the ships in the hanger bay."

Tariq felt a cold wave wash over him at that. His mind went chaotic with the effort to think of some way to divert Mylor long enough for the ships to leave. "The only breeders on my ship are those waiting for transport to Niribu," he responded tightly. "I'll be happy to escort your men to search my quarters and then we can search the hold."

"I'd be wasting my time, though, wouldn't I?"

He turned away from Tariq and instructed the men to go directly to the hanger and board the transports there. "The transports were about to take off," he said tightly. "We've worked out a new grid search area that looks promising for survivors. The council won't be happy that you're disrupting our search."

"Oh we won't delay them long. Just long enough to remove the geneticist, Koryn, and the breeder Emerald."

"What the fuck does any of this have to do with Koryn? He's going to collect more DNA samples for regeneration."

"Well, if he isn't harboring the breeder we're looking for, then there won't be any problem at all." He glanced at the men holding Tariq. "Take him into the hold and lock him up."

"I'll have you on charges of false imprisonment of a lord of the council!" Tariq snarled.

"I don't think so," Mylor said pleasantly.

Tariq considered resisting when they began pulling him toward the ship, but dismissed it, realizing it was futile. He might be able to get away, but he had no way to warn Koryn and no time to reach them. He considered trying to escape anyway, wondering if there was any possibility, at all, that he could somehow reach them and free them if he did.

It seemed unlikely to impossible. He would be trapped on Earth unless he could somehow steal one of his own ships and they would be on Niribu. It seemed to him that the only option was to go with them and try to free the three of them once they were together.

Not that that was much of a fucking option, but then again, he had friends on Niribu. He had some hope of getting help there.

Clearly Mylor had been informed of the entire plot, although how the fuck the son-of-a-bitch had learned of it he was damned if he knew. No one knew except him and Koryn and Emerald.

And the androids he'd bribed to take them.

One of them had to be a fucking plant!

What were the fucking odds that he would've picked Mylor's plant, though, out of all the androids onboard?

It seemed astronomical, but he couldn't think of any other way Mylor could've found out, and he wasn't just fishing. He knew exactly what the plan was. If not for that, he might've thought it was someone else that Mylor had sent to spy on him, but he'd never discussed the plan except in his own quarters with Koryn and Emerald and in his office with the androids and he had both of those areas scanned regularly for surveillance devices.

Maybe Koryn hadn't been as careful?

He shook the thought. Who would Koryn have discussed it with?

He'd been pacing his cell for nearly thirty minutes when they brought Koryn in. They shoved him through the door and he promptly collapsed. Tariq went to him, turning him over. "Gods! You fool! What did you fight them for?"

Koryn roused enough to open the only eye that wasn't swollen shut. "Seemed like a good idea at the time." He swallowed a little sickly. "They got Em. I couldn't stop them."

Tariq helped him to his feet and walked him to one of the bunks. When he'd helped him settle, he strode to the door. "He's needs a medic!" he growled at the guards he could see.

"They're going to execute him for treason when we get to

Niribu. I don't see the point."

"The point is he hasn't been tried or convicted, you son-of-a-bitch!" Tariq bellowed. "Get him a gods damn medic!"

"S alright," Koryn muttered. "Juz bruised and banged a lit'le. Think I might'a loss a toof."

Tariq struck the wall with his fist angrily and moved away from the door. There was nothing in the fucking cell but the two bare cots. After considering it a moment, he reached up to grab the sleeve of his uniform near the seam and jerked at it until he'd managed to separate a small section. Wedging his fingers in the hole, he tore the rest of the seam and then took his sleeve to the tiny fountain basin that supplied the water to the cell.

Koryn complained the entire time he bathed his wounds.

"Shut up!" Tariq growled. "I need to see if any of these need attention. There's too much blood to tell."

"What the fuck you gon do if they do?"

"Bind you up the best I can with your uniform."

Koryn uttered a half hearted chuckle but broke off in the middle of it. "Think my ribs'z cracked."

Tariq was relieved to see that the battering seemed to be from fists, not that those weren't hard enough but they could've been worse, and that there was little more than broken skin-no

deep cuts he needed to worry about closing. He didn't know if there were broken bones or not, but he couldn't do anything about it if there were. His main focus was to make sure he didn't bleed to death. He examined his mouth and saw two teeth were bleeding but they were still in the sockets.

His ribs looked as if he'd been stomped. Fury washed through Tariq. He'd been down already or they couldn't have stomped him, the cowardly bastards!

He tore one of Koryn's pant legs off to bind his ribs. "Better?"

Koryn grunted. "A little. Thanks."

Tariq patted his shoulder lightly. Getting up, he moved to the other bunk and sprawled on it.

"You din ask about Em."

Tariq lifted an arm and draped it across his eyes. "I can't ... think about that right now."

"She did good. She's ok, Tariq. "

Tariq swallowed audibly. "Not if Mylor has her."

* * * *

Tariq's face hardened when he read the message he'd been given. Uttering a string of curses, he waddled it and stalked back and forth across the cell several times like a caged animal. It was a far larger cell than the one they'd been

confined in on the trip from Earth, but Tariq was angry enough it still took little more than a half a dozen strides to pace from one side to the other.

"I guess that means Biccel isn't here either?" Koryn asked glumly.

"He's with the fleet," Tariq said tightly.

"Well-now we know why Mylor was so hot to get us back and start the trial. Everyone you know that might have any influence is with the fleet. We're running out of time. They'll have closing arguments tomorrow or the next for sure and it isn't going to take the jury long to come back with a guilty verdict. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect every fucking one of them was on the bastard's payroll."

Tariq sent him a pitying glance. "All of them are on his payroll or they wouldn't be sitting there. Mylor doesn't like to leave things to chance."

Koryn stared at him hard for several moments. "This isn't a joking matter, Tariq! We're in a hell of a mess here. We're going to fry-literally."

"I wasn't fucking joking! Do I look amused to you?"

"I was actually hoping it was graveyard humor since that's going to be our next fucking address. You can't think of anybody else to contact?"

Tariq uttered a disgusted huff and flung himself down on his cot. "I already contacted everybody I could think of. They either ignored my plea or they're gone. That was the last of them."

Koryn was silent for a while, digesting that, trying to come to come to terms with their situation. He discovered he couldn't. Everything that had happened since they'd been seized seemed unreal, more like a nightmare than reality. Even their location in Traitors Gate seemed too surreal to fully grasp. They were the only prisoners-the only two men the ancient prison had held in his lifetime. "How do you suppose they managed to get the vids?"

"I don't know," Tariq said tiredly. "Believe me, I've spent a lot of time trying to figure it out. I had the cleaning droids set to sweep for surveillance vids every day. The only thing I can think is that they developed some new technology that the droid couldn't detect. They couldn't have used anything long range. I had the entire room shielded."

"Unless they came up with something that could penetrate the shielding. It was damned poor quality. I don't know how the fuck anybody could recognize any of us from it."

"They didn't have to. He could've made anything up at all and they would've sworn they recognized us from the vids."

"But he didn't and that's what bothers me. He wouldn't have known what we were doing and been able to get there before we could pull it off."

"I think that was where we ran out of luck and he ran in to it. I know somebody on the ship has been giving him regular reports. They wouldn't have known anything about Emerald at all if that wasn't the case, but none of the vids are more than a few days prior to when we set the plan up. Like you said, Mylor couldn't have gotten there between the time he would've received that particular report and the time he did. It isn't possible. He had to have been on the way already and gotten that in route."

Koryn considered that. "I suppose that means the ruse of sending the woman didn't work. That was what he was going to use as proof of treason."

"I think so. But he lucked up and got something even better from whoever's been reporting to him and managed to get there before you could leave with her."

Koryn was silent for a little bit. "I wouldn't mind so much if we had at least succeeded in getting Em to safety. Gods! It's driving me crazy! I wish to hell I at least had friends in low places and could hire somebody to either kill that son-of-a-bitch or snatch her from under his nose."

Tariq sat up and stared at him. "My gods, Koryn! You're brilliant! I could kiss you!"

"Don't! My mouth's still sore," Koryn said, grinning. "What did I say?"

Tariq ignored him, summoning the guard down the hall. "I have

an android named Aeon. If you'll fetch him here to me, I'll make it worth your time."

Avarice gleamed in the man's eyes for a moment and then he frowned. "How are you going to pay me locked up in here? Anyway, don't they take everything from anybody that commits treason?"

Tariq smiled easily. "Luckily for me, I don't trust too many people. I have a few ... resources they won't have found."

The guard glanced up and down the corridor and moved a little closer. "How am I gonna get it? If I go get the android, how can I trust you'll pay me?"

Tariq frowned. "You know where my estate is?"

The guard nodded.

"In the garden under the fifth stepping stone from the east side of the fountain, you'll find a small gold box. It's filled with coins and yours if you go down to the receiving center and find Aeon and send him to me. If you get him here, I'll tell you where to find something of equal value."

The guard frowned. "They got guards there!" he said indignantly.

"I didn't tell you it would be easy," Tariq said tightly. "It's a lot of gold, but if you don't have the balls to go get it"

"And you'll tell me where to find more if I get the android here?"

"You'll have the gold one way or the other. It isn't as if I could shortchange you. I'm just saying, the box for the favor. A handsome tip if you show me I can trust you."

The man nodded. "I can't leave for another hour. This android's at the receiving center, you say?"

"Or the nearest whore house. You might want to check that first. Tell him I have something to give him."

"What have you got in mind?" Koryn asked when the guard had left again and Tariq moved away from the bars and began pacing.

Tariq settled on the bunk next to him. "There's an ancient woman down in Old Town that I know. She'll take Em in and take care of her if Aeon can get her out of Mylor's clutches and I think he might be our only hope of it."

Koryn looked horrified. "That's where all the freaks are!"

"And that's why she'll be safe there. Cleme can keep her hidden and nobody will ever think to look for her there."

Koryn considered it for a moment. "You think you can trust her?"

"I know I can. She was my nursemaid."

Koryn looked horrified all over again. "What the fuck is she doing there if she was your nursemaid?"

Tariq glared at him angrily. "She bore a child long after I was grown. She took it there to keep it from being destroyed-like everyone else down there. I bought her a house and settled a trust on her. She'll take care of Em for me and help her when the baby comes."

Koryn looked at him apologetically. "Sorry. I should have known it was something like that."

"Yes, you should've!" Tariq growled, jolting up from the bunk and pacing again.

"I really am sorry. It was just such a shock. Old Town. It's hard to believe anybody would want to go there."

Tariq sighed. "They don't want to. It's the only place they can go where they won't be mistreated. Nobody bothers them as long as they don't have to look at them. They would've made her abort the child if they'd known she was pregnant, but she kept it secret. She wanted it even though she knew the chances were high that it was going to be ... defective. She finally broke down and begged me to help her. I would've made other arrangements. I wanted to, but she insisted. I don't like her being there, but she says she's happy."

"How long since you last saw her?" Koryn asked in surprise.

"I went to see her before I left for Earth. It upsets her if I leave

without telling her," he said a little stiffly when he realized Koryn was staring at him. "What?"

Koryn shrugged. "Nothing. It's just ... I don't remember my nursemaid," he confessed.

"Because you had a mother," Tariq said testily. "I only had Cleme. My mother died when I was an infant and they fucked up her genetic sample and couldn't regenerate her."

"I didn't know that! Gods! How the hell did they manage that?"

"The gods only know! An accident in the lab, they said. She'd already been cremated. It was too late to get another. That was when they passed the law that no one was to be cremated without three samples being taken. One for regeneration, the other two for insurance-and no more than one in a lab at the time-Terra's Law?"

"I didn't know that either. How long have we been friends?"

Tariq sighed. "I don't know ... half our lives, give or take."

"A hundred and fifty years, at least, and you never told me any of that!"

"It didn't come up," Tariq said dryly.

Koryn sighed. "We're getting old."

"I'd hoped to get a hell of a lot older."

"Me, too. Were you planning on going for another one?"

"I hadn't actually given it any thought, to be honest. Father didn't approve. He said one lifetime ought to be enough for anybody. He felt differently when mother died."

"Yeah, well it turns out he was probably right. If the old ones hadn't been around since fucking forever-and fucking, we wouldn't be in the fix we are now with our gene pool in such a gods damned mess!"

Tariq released a pained breath. "I'm inclined to agree with you, but I wouldn't have met Em otherwise. I can't regret that."

Koryn blew out a breath. "Maybe if we'd done something differently it would've turned out better."

Tariq uttered a snort. "That's the problem with these things, Koryn. You take a different path, you get different results. There wasn't another path that would've taken us to Em. There's no point in what ifs anyway."

The guard distracted them. "You got a visitor, Lord Tariq."

Tariq looked at him surprise. He'd said he couldn't leave for at least an hour. He didn't believe enough time had passed for him to have found the gold, and Aeon, and made it back, but his heart thudded with hopefulness just the same. "I'll see him."

"It ain't a him. It's Lady Seana."

A jolt went through Tariq. "Tell her I'll see her."

"Lady Seana? I thought you said you tried everybody you knew and they were either with the fleet or wouldn't come?"

"I guess she changed her mind," Tariq said slowly.

"You don't think she'll help us?"

Tariq frowned. "I don't know. I honestly don't think she can."

They fell silent as they heard the brisk click of heels against the floor. A few moments later, Lady Seana reached the door. "Oh! My poor baby!" she exclaimed. "This is a horrid place! Just horrid! I don't know how you can bear it!"

Tariq smiled. "Not much choice, actually," he said ruefully. "I didn't think you'd come."

She gave him a scolding look. "So little faith?"

"Well," Tariq said, grinning. "I know you, Seana. It's a horrid place-not the sort of place you like to go."

She considered it. "Actually, I really, really didn't want to come, but I've sat in that court every day trying to get a chance to speak with you and it looks like there just isn't going to be a chance. I didn't want you to ... uh" She let out a huff a breath. "I am so angry with this ... this ...!"

"Farce?" Koryn supplied.

She glanced at him and smiled. "Yes! That's the word I was looking for! It's a ... it's a ... Well, I don't know the word for it, but mark my words, it is! I wanted to come by and tell you how much I appreciated the gift you sent me! It was so thoughtful of you and I am sooo enjoying it!"

Tariq chuckled. "Not as much as you enjoyed me, I hope?"

"Of course not, baby! You know how much I adore you! Anything I could do for you, I would! You know I would!" Her expression fell. "I've been trying to do something to help get you out of here. I really have. If I'd just known about that damned vid! I would've had someone take care of it, because that's all they have, really!"

"Apparently, that's enough," Tariq said dryly. He moved closer. "I didn't figure you could help me get out of this. There is one thing you could help me with, though."

She lifted her brows. "What?"

Tariq covered her hand. "The breeder Mylor took-Emerald. If you could arrange to have someone remove her from his care, I can pay. I still have resources."

Anger flashed in her eyes. "Really, Tariq! That's really, really bad of you! Asking me to risk getting in trouble for your ... sex toy!"

"She's carrying my child, Seana. I'm asking you to protect my child. I wouldn't ask otherwise."

She studied him thoughtfully. "So you're saying you don't care what happens to her afterwards?"

"He'll need his mother, Seana."

"Well! As if I couldn't take care of him!"

"Of course you could. You'll make a wonderful mother. You'll want a nursemaid, though, right? You aren't going to want to spend all your time chasing them around-yours and mine-wiping snotty noses and cleaning their asses."

Her lips curled. "You can be so crude, Tariq! Honestly!" She frowned thoughtfully. "They are rather nasty little savages when they're young, though. I'd certainly have to have a nursemaid."

"You'll at least consider it?"

She frowned. "I'll think about it. I have to go now, baby. I think I might catch something in this nasty place if I stay much longer and anyway, that horrid man said I could only have a few minutes." She glanced up and down the corridor and then stuck her tongue out, waving it at him. Tariq was taken aback until he caught a flash of white. "Kiss me before I go, baby," she murmured huskily.

Tariq pressed his face to the bars obligingly, opening his mouth over hers when she pressed close on the other side. He smiled at her when she leaned away. "That wasn't at all satisfactory! I think I may have picked up germs from the

bars!" She reached in and patted his cheek. "I'll come back to see you tomorrow!"

When she'd left, Tariq glanced around and then moved to the bunk where Koryn was sitting and then spat the note she'd passed into his palm.

Koryn looked queasy. "I don't blame you. I wouldn't have wanted to kiss her either. She's old enough to be your mother!"

Tariq snorted. "She's on her fourth life. She damned near shoved it down my throat. I'd forgotten that tongue." He patted the note dry on the leg of his pants and carefully unrolled it.

Koryn crowded close to read it over his shoulder, blocking the little light he had.

"Gods damn it, Koryn! I can't fucking see! You're blocking the light."

"Well? What does it say?"

Tariq blinked at it, turned it over and stared at the single word on it. "Unless the ink's run it says 'tonight'."

"Tonight what?"

"That's all it says. 'Tonight'."

"Well, that's fucking cryptic! A good thing she didn't shove it down your throat! We would've had to wait until tomorrow to

read it."

Tariq sent him a drop dead look. After a moment, he wadded the tiny piece of paper up, put it back in his mouth, and swallowed it.

Koryn was looking at him with his upper lip curled in revulsion. "I can't believe you ate that."

"I didn't think it would be a good idea to leave lying around. They could match the writing."

"You could've flushed it down the toilet."

"I expect I will, but it'll be less readable then."

"I didn't need to hear that."

"You brought it up."

"What do you think she meant?"

Tariq frowned. "I don't know. She always was a little ... unpredictable."

"You and her were lovers?"

"That was a while back."

"She was still old as hell."

Tariq let out an irritated breath. "She was lonely. I was horny. I

figured what the hell?"

"So what happened between you two? She seems to still be fond of you."

"She nearly fucked me to death and I had to work up an escape plan. That's when I got transferred to Pater for a while- It cost me a bundle to bribe my senior officer for transfer orders, by the way. By the time I got back, she'd taken a new lover. I've managed to evade recapture ever since and maintain a friendship, but I have to watch myself around her."

Koryn shuddered.

Tariq sent him an annoyed look. "She isn't that bad. She looks good ... for her age. She was a beauty when she was young."

"Yes, but you weren't with her then."

Tariq grinned abruptly. "No, but my cock was lonely. She was easy enough on the eyes and a lot of fun-easy to get along with. I would've stayed longer if not for the fact that she's insatiable. And actually I was pretty happy about that-at first." He glanced Koryn speculatively. "Don't tell me you've never been with an older woman."

Koryn looked uncomfortable. "Not that much older."

"She wasn't even middle aged at the time," Tariq said irritably.

"This time around."

"I didn't know it was fourth time until later," Tariq said testily.

"I was with a second timer for a while."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I thought she was my age. It pissed me off when I discovered it was her second time around."

"Why the hell would it piss you off? What difference does it make?"

Koryn reddened. "I was a virgin at the time."

"Somebody has to have some experience," Tariq pointed out dryly. "It isn't a hell of a lot of fun when neither one of you know what the fuck you're doing."

"I take it from that that you were with a virgin the first time."

Tariq merely grunted. "If we're doing true confessions here, it's your turn."

"I'm a scientist," Koryn said dryly. "I have led a very boring life. Even I think I've had a boring life."

"Up till now."

"This isn't the kind of excitement I always yearned for I can tell you!" Koryn said testily.

"You've never been in imprisoned before?"

"Thankfully, no. I came close a couple of times back in my college days, but I always managed to slip through the net when the civil patrol showed up."

"Your college must have been a lot more fun than the military academy was."

"That wouldn't be hard. Why did you go there? I've heard it's hell."

"My father-your confessions."

"Like I said-boring. I spent more time in college than out of it. I've got a dozen degrees in the sciences-which you already know-and not much else. I've had a grand total of six lovers and none of the relationships lasted more than a handful of years. I'd look up from the microscope one day and they'd be gone. Not even a note to say 'kiss my ass!'"

Tariq chuckled. "It can't have been that bad!"

Koryn shrugged. "It wasn't really. I've been content enough. I just haven't had many highlights and the most excitement has been almost discovering something."

"You're one of the top scientists in your field," Tariq pointed out.

"If some of the old bastards would die, I'd be at the top," he said jokingly, then swallowed a little sickly. "They take samples

every year. The top people don't have a choice. They'll bring me back."

Tariq was relieved that he didn't have to think of a response. The guard returned and this time he had Aeon with him. Tariq surged toward the door. "Give me a few minutes with him."

The guard frowned. "Tell me where to find my tip and you can have as much time as you want."

Tariq studied the man a moment. "There's a lion at the gates of my father's old estate. You'll find another box like the one you have in its throat."

Nodding, the guard hurried off. Tariq met Aeon's gaze. "I've got a better offer for you than the one I made before, but it'll also be harder. You interested?"

Aeon studied him for a moment and finally nodded.

"Mylor took my woman. I spoke to Lady Seana about getting her out of there, but I don't trust her to do it for me or that she'd take care of Emerald even if she did. I know you can get in there. No one ever pays attention to the androids. Get her out for me and take her to the old woman named Cleme in Old Town and I'll tell you where to find a box of gold."

Aeon studied him for a long moment. "She won't be safe there," he said finally. "Lord Mylor considers her a great prize. He'll take the city apart searching for her."

Tariq stared at him in consternation for several moments and glanced at Koryn. Koryn got up and joined them.

"Do you think you could get her on the next transport back to Earth?"

Aeon looked startled. "Perhaps."

"I hired a crew to take Emerald to one of the human colonies. They have the coordinates. If you can get her back to Earth, the six of you can take her to the colony and No one will know you're androids. You can take a woman for yourself if you can find one and live among the humans as a free man," Tariq said urgently.

For the first time Aeon's face showed real emotion-disbelief. "We would still be what we are. We can't change that."

"No, but you don't need to to live as men among men, to have the life of a man."

Still, Aeon hesitated. "Mylor destroyed your child. She is weak. It will be difficult to move her."

Tariq had feared as much and it was still a crushing blow to hear it. He couldn't catch his breath for several moments, let alone speak.

"Get her out of there!" Koryn growled. "Just get her on the transport."

Aeon bowed. "I will do my best. What android will I seek?"

"Teril," Tariq managed. "Find Teril."

?

Chapter Sixteen

Tariq exploded with rage when Aeon had left. He was still cursing and pacing the cell and slamming his fists into the walls when Koryn finished throwing up. Weaving a path to the bed, Koryn sprawled out weakly on it and watched Tariq pace back and forth until he was dizzy, his own anger and frustration mounting as the nausea passed.

He couldn't think of anything to say-because there was nothing to be said. They couldn't kill the bastard. He would've liked the chance to get his hands on him as much as Tariq did but it wasn't going to happen and both of them knew it.

The baby was gone. They couldn't do anything about that either.

He pushed it from his mind. It only frustrated him and angered him more and he didn't know any other way to deal with it. He felt like pacing and cursing and pounding the walls. He felt like he was angry enough to tear the wall down, but it hadn't worked for Tariq yet and he doubted it would for him either.

It made him sicker wondering if they would ever know if Aeon succeeded in rescuing her.

He wanted to know that at least before he died.

"He'll get her out," he said finally, more to reassure himself than Tariq.

Tariq paused, panting for breath, and turned to stare at him. After a moment, he moved to his cot and dropped down on the edge, holding his head in his hands. "I told her I'd protect her."

"You tried."

"That isn't good enough!" Tariq bellowed. "I should've done something as soon as you suggested it. I should've thought of it myself. She would've been safe then, but I was too fucking selfish. I couldn't give her up."

Koryn sat up and held his own throbbing head. "I couldn't either. That's why I offered to take her."

Tariq tilted his head up to look at Koryn and swallowed sickly.

"I knew he'd abort the baby. I kept telling myself he wouldn't notice, that I'd get her out somehow before he found out, but he knew I was breeding her. He probably had her checked as soon as he got her onboard."

"There was nothing you could do about it! I'd love to blame you for it, but I got the shit kicked out of me for trying to protect her and you see how fucking effective that was!"

"I could've not bred her."

"Hindsight is always perfect. I didn't think about it either. All I could think about was that as soon as you did I could have her. You think I don't feel like shit about it, too?"

Exhausted from their anger and frustration, heartsick, they both lay back on their cots after a while, staring up at the ceiling.

"Do you think there's any chance one of them might get her out before they execute us?" Koryn asked after a while. "I'd just like to know."

"I don't know," Tariq responded. "Aeon knew a lot more than I'd expected. Of course servants always talk. If she's ... weak from it, though, it might make it easier for him to locate her." He was silent for several minutes. "Seana will let us know. If she succeeds, she'll want credit and if she doesn't she'll complain that she tried and she was gone."

"You think?" Koryn asked hopefully.

"If she holds true to form and I expect she will."

Koryn had almost managed to drift off to sleep when he heard a sound just outside their cell. He frowned, listening, and finally turned his head toward the door when he realized the sound was coming from that direction. He discovered when he did, that Tariq was already halfway across the room. Moving against the wall like a shadow, he flattened his back against the wall next to the door.

"Lord Tariq?" said a male voice barely above a whisper.

Tariq hesitated.

The door opened. "Lady Sean"

Tariq had already jumped the man and had him in a headlock, cutting him off.

"Lady Seana sent me," the man grunted.

Tariq held him a moment more and released him.

Shrugging his shoulders, the man turned toward the door again. "Hurry."

Koryn bounded off his bunk and joined Tariq at the door. Wondering if they walking into some kind of trap, he followed Tariq and the unknown man stealthily down the corridor. There was a guard at the end sprawled face down on the floor. They stepped over the dead man and kept going. After the second

turn, Koryn realized they weren't going out the way he'd come in and his uneasiness increased, particularly when they reached an old stair and descended. They went down four flights and ended up in a tunnel-like corridor that was pitch black. Even with his acute vision, it was all he could do to see where he was going.

"What is this place?" Tariq asked after a few minutes.

"Sewer now."

No wonder it smelled so fragrant, Koryn thought ruefully!

It seemed to him that they followed it for miles, wading knee deep in water part of the time and sometimes through waist high water. After what seemed several hours, Koryn noticed a lighter patch in front of them. He discovered when they finally reached it that it was the opening where the sewer water spilled down into the canyon below the prison.

They paused in the opening. Tariq leaned out far enough to look down and then searched the walls on either side.

"They're coming," the stranger said.

"Who's coming?" Tariq asked sharply after casting a quick look behind them.

"The crew flying Lady Seana's ship."

Koryn gripped the man's arm. "Did she get Emerald? The

breeder?"

The man shook his head.

Koryn felt his heart sink.

"I don't know. This was my part of the mission."

Koryn had begun to wonder if the damned ship was coming after all when he saw movement along the canyon. His heart slammed into his chest wall, doubt warring with hope while he tried to decide whether it was the ship they were waiting for or a patrol. Tariq stepped back and plastered himself against the wall as the ship came even with them. It stopped, hovering, and then began to move sideways toward them. When it was little more than a couple of yards away, an opening appeared in the side and the gangplank extended toward them like a tongue.

The man who'd led them, leapt toward the gangplank, landed solidly and disappeared inside. Tariq turned to him. "You next. Don't look down."

"You had to fucking say that, didn't you?" Koryn snarled when he'd looked down and felt his belly take flight. Shaking the image from his mind, he gauged the distance and jumped. He hadn't taken the movement of the gangplank into consideration. He lost his balance and went down on one knee, nearly pitching over the side. Scrambling up again, he bounded toward the opening just as Tariq landed behind him. Tariq bowled him over as he raced in behind him.

The man who'd led them bowed when they picked themselves up and Koryn realized for the first time that he was an android. "Lady Seana sends her love and wishes you a safe journey and a happy life."

"Emerald?" Tariq asked sharply.

The android lifted his arm and gestured toward the rear of the ship. Koryn started to follow him when he turned and raced down the corridor and then stopped. He turned to look at the android. "Where are we going?"

The android shrugged. "We await further instruction."

"I'd say the first order of business would be to get the hell out of here," Koryn said sharply. "Tariq can give you the coordinates when he's checked on Emerald."

The android frowned. "Any direction?" he asked doubtfully.

"Milky Way galaxy. For now, just use the coordinates to reach Earth. That's the general direction anyway."

* * * *

Tariq paused outside the door, suddenly uncertain. After a moment, he pushed inside and looked around, half fearful that he would discover Emerald wasn't there after all. He saw almost immediately that she lying on the bed in the middle of the room, however.

A knot swelled in his throat as he stared at her, trying to tell himself that it was enough to know for certain that she was with them and finally safe. He didn't want to wake her.

Besides, he could smell the stench from the sewers on himself.

After a long moment, he turned and moved quietly toward the door again. He'd almost reached it when she called out to him. He stopped and turned back, discovering she'd pushed herself up on the bed to look at him.

His gaze flickered over her hungrily for a split second before it pierced his mind that she was clothed in the nearly transparent sheathe of a sex slave-in the colors of the house of Mylor. A nauseating collection of thoughts and emotions collided inside him all at the same time.

"Tariq?"

Shrugging off the disorienting, conflicting emotions at the fear he heard in her voice, Tariq returned to the bed, kneeling beside it. "How's my baby?" he asked gruffly.

She struggled across the bed toward him and threw her arms around his neck. "I missed you so much! I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

Tariq felt a knot swell in his throat. He hadn't thought he would see her again either. "I stink like hell, baby. I took a stroll in the sewers and at that it wasn't much worse than that stinking

prison cell." He wrapped his arms around her, though, hugging her tightly to his chest because he couldn't dismiss the need to assure himself he wasn't dreaming.

"How did you get out? How did I get here? Where are we?"

He chuckled, disentangling himself and leaning away to cup her face in his hands. "We're home."

She blinked at him in confusion. "Home?"

He searched her face. "Yes. Home is where ever you are. Now let me get cleaned up so I can cuddle you properly."

She sat back when he released her. "I could bathe you," she offered.

"Not this time, baby. Rest."

Getting to his feet, he headed into the small bath that adjoined the master cabin-or in the case of this particular ship, the mistress' cabin. When he'd stripped and dropped his uniform in the cleaning unit, he took a quick, hot shower, scrubbing himself ruthlessly to get rid of the stench. He was too impatient to stand still for a full drying cycle and stepped out of it while he was still damp, striding back into the bedroom and climbing into bed with Emerald. She scooted toward him even as he settled, pressing tightly against him as he curled his arms around her.

"Koryn?" she asked after a few minutes.

"He was right behind me. He's safe."

She sighed, nuzzling her face against his chest. "How did you manage to get away?"

He uttered a derisive snort. "I bribed and begged every son-of-a-bitch I've ever known. Seana finally came through for us."

Emerald stiffened and Tariq tensed. After a moment, she relaxed again and went back to nuzzling his chest and then kissing him.

He groaned. "Don't baby. You can't and I want to so bad I'm dying here already."

She tensed again. "You know I lost the baby."

The rage he'd felt instantly rose in him again. He fought a round with it and finally subdued it. "You're safe. That's the important thing."

She began crying. "I'm so sorry, Tariq. I didn't know what they were giving me."

"Let's don't talk about it. I wanted to kill the bastard when I heard about it, but all I want right now is to get you some place safe where I won't have to worry about that happening to you ever again."

She sniffed her tears back, pressing tightly against him. "Where are we going?"

"Centaurian, I hope."

Emerald was silent for several moments. "I was going to take my daughter there. It was the first colony outside our own system and the most well established. It's supposed to be beautiful."

"Hopefully we'll find out. I did the best I could to get all the coordinates, but the data was damaged and encrypted besides," Tariq said drowsily. "Don't be pissed off with me if I nod off. I haven't slept worth a shit since they took you."

* * * *

As exhausted as Koryn was once the adrenaline of escaping left him and relief had swamped him to discover that Emerald was safe, he only managed to sleep fitfully. His need just to see her with his own eyes and feel absolute certainty nearly overrode his discomfort at interrupting Tariq more than once. He thought the certainty that she would be more interested in seeing that Tariq was alright played a part in his reluctance to interrupt their reunion. He knew how she felt and he still didn't want to actually face it, to see the proof that would remove the small hope he nursed that she'd cared enough to be worried about him, too.

Taking a smaller cabin, he bathed the stench of prison off and the smells from the sewer that he didn't particularly want to identify and lay down on the bed, struggling to absorb the fact that he wasn't going to die after all-probably wasn't. At least,

he thought wryly, he didn't have to face the hideous execution that had awaited him. He might still be incinerated if the authorities managed to catch up with them, but that didn't seem nearly as bad as being marched into a room to stand waiting for the furnace blast that would melt his skin from his body and then his muscles until even his bones were ash. Of course, from what he understood, nobody ever lasted much more than five minutes, but he'd had minor burns. He wasn't unfamiliar with pain. He knew how long five minutes felt when the pain was excruciating.

Shuddering, he pushed the thoughts from his mind and turned it to trying to imagine what life was going to be like if they did make it to this new world and it occurred to him that more had changed than he'd realized-everything in point of fact. Neither he nor Tariq had a position on this new world. They would have to make one for themselves. It was almost as scary a thought as it was ... exciting, he decided.

He wasn't sure of how it was going to affect his arrangement with Tariq in regards to Emerald, though, and that disturbed him. Technically, she wasn't a slave anymore since she was beyond the reach of the Anunnaki nation. She would have the same freedom and rights that she'd had before among her people-although he didn't have a clue of what those were. No one had ever spent much time considering that the humans might develop their own way of looking at things, their own rules of civilization, but Emerald had certainly made it abundantly clear that it was entirely different to them.

When he woke to the sound of Tariq's familiar tread in the corridor outside his cabin, he got up and went to collect his uniform from the cleaning unit where he'd left it the night before. It smelled better and it didn't look filthy, but it offended him to have to put it on anyway, partly because it brought his prison stay to the forefront of his mind and partly because it hadn't fared particularly well. It was the next thing to rags and he'd never had to wear anything that looked so bad, let alone be seen in it.

His eagerness to see Emerald warred with his reluctance to present himself looking so shabby, but his need to reassure himself that she was alright finally won out. Tariq, who seemed to be searching the small galley for something to eat, flicked a glance at him as he came out, but he didn't say anything when he immediately turned toward the rear cabin.

She was sitting in a casual chair in the small cabin. She looked up when he came in, though, and smiled when she saw him. "Koryn!"

It did strange things to him, overset his entire system so that he couldn't decide how to react. Feeling short of breath and weak kneed, he moved to the bed and dropped down on the edge, lifting his hands. "Come here, baby."

She got up immediately and surged toward him. He'd intended to look her over for signs of abuse, but when she rushed to him with such obvious eagerness, he forgot everything. Need exploded inside of him. Pulling her between his thighs, he looped one arm around her to hold her tightly

against him and threaded his fingers through her hair. Dragging her head back, he opened his mouth over hers to suck at her soft mouth greedily and then explore the warm cavern. For a few moments, it appeased his need to taste and touch her when he'd thought he never would again, and then it wasn't enough. He broke from her lips and explored her face and then her throat and then he lifted her high enough that he could explore her breasts.

"Gods damn it, Koryn! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Koryn jerked his head up guiltily when Tariq's thundering voice exploded unexpectedly around him, staring at Tariq with blank, fevered eyes for several moments before anger and possessiveness rolled over him. His face hardened. His hands tightened on Emerald. He tensed, feeling the urge swell inside him to counter Tariq's challenge.

"She just lost the baby, dunce!"

Koryn glared at him for calling him a dunce even though he immediately felt like one-and worse. He swallowed convulsively several times. "I wouldn't have taken it any further," he said tightly, knowing as well as Tariq did that it wasn't likely he could've stopped himself before much longer whether he'd recalled her condition or not.

He discovered he needn't have worried that Tariq would be too judgmental about his lack of control. There was a glazed look in his own eyes as his gaze flickered over Emerald. "We

can't right now ... can we? She has to have time to heal."

Koryn's heart fluttered. His gut clenched. "It depends on when he did it. If he checked her right off and discovered you'd bred her, he would've acted then, in which case she might have had time to heal from it-it's been nigh a month. If I had any way to check her, I could tell you. Unfortunately, I don't have a damned thing."

"There's where you're wrong. Seana's a health freak. I always thought it was strange that she was so fearful of getting sick when she'd been regenerated four times-and hadn't once had any serious medical problems that I ever heard about-but she was. I can guarantee you the sick bay is well stocked."

Koryn stared at him in disbelief. "She has a sick bay on her private yacht?"

Tariq shrugged and grinned. "I told you she was a freak about her health! You didn't notice how unnerved she was about the possibility of germs in the prison?"

"Yes, well the place was a cesspool! I would've been more worried about it myself except I figured I wasn't likely to live long enough to die from anything I might catch down there," Koryn said dryly. "Where is it?"

"I'll show you after we eat." He turned his attention to Emerald. "Come on, baby. You need to eat something. It looks like the bastard's been starving you."

"I was ... unhappy," she countered. "He said he would make me eat if I didn't."

Tariq's expression hardened. "The son-of-a-bitch won't make you do anything ever again. I guarantee you he'll never get his hands on you again if I have to kill him."

She paled. "I think that android did that already."

A jolt went through Tariq. "What android?"

"Aeon. He said you sent him to get me and then Mylor came in and I didn't see what he did. They fought and then Mylor was on the floor and there was blood everywhere. I only caught a glimpse and then Aeon leapt toward me, grabbed me, and threw me over his shoulder and then he ... ran and crashed through the window. I guess I blacked out." She frowned. "I remember others and then I felt a sting and the next thing I knew I woke up and you were standing over me."

Tariq stared at her for a long moment and finally dragged her close. "Sounds like your escape was more exciting than ours," he muttered. "It's a gods damned shame we'll never know for sure. I don't suppose you know what happened to Aeon?"

"He's here," Koryn said. "The one that helped us, Daris, said that the servants sent to fetch Emerald had captured another android trying to flee with her. They put him in the hold." He shrugged at the look Tariq sent him. "I never thought about it being Aeon. I thought he was one of Mylor's servants."

Tariq set Emerald away. "You two wait for me in the galley. I'll be back shortly."

Koryn stared at him in surprise when he turned abruptly and left. Shrugging he settled a hand on Emerald's back and urged her toward the section of the ship that made up the galley.

It was a private luxury ship, unlike Tariq's, which was a warship, and the galley was far more compact and included a lounging area. He told Emerald to sit down on one of the chaises and headed into the food preparation area to see what was available. Tariq returned while he was studying the fresh foods somewhat doubtfully. He had Aeon with him.

"You let him go?" Koryn asked in surprise.

Tariq's lips tightened. "I'm sure as fuck not going to reward him for ripping Mylor's head off for me by keeping him locked up!"

Koryn felt a little queasy. As badly as he'd wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch himself, ripping his head off seemed a little unnecessarily ... violent. "All the same, he was a lord."

"Accident of birth," Tariq growled. "He had no honor and no nobility. Somebody should have done the world a favor and killed the bastard sooner."

Koryn had to agree. "You don't think it's setting a bad

precedent?"

"I don't. We aren't bound by the laws of the Anunnaki any longer. We're dead men if they catch us. We can never go back. We need to try to adjust to that. I believe I'm actually looking forward to it. I don't think I realized just how sick to death I was of everything about my life until I realized that wasn't going to be an issue much longer. Or maybe it was when we came through the sewer and I saw freedom?"

Koryn had thought much the same thing and it was still hard to accept that their fortunes had changed so radically. He didn't think he was going to have any easier time adjusting his way of thinking than Emerald had had. "What about Emerald?"

Tariq turned to study her. His lips curled into a slow smile. "She's my woman. Aren't you, baby?"

She smiled at him. "And Koryn's."

Tariq frowned and flicked a hard look at Koryn. Koryn wiped the grin off his face.

Shaking his head, he pushed Koryn aside and began looking for cooking apparatus.

Koryn moved out of his way, but he didn't retreat. "You aren't planning to actually ... prepare a meal?"

"That's what I had in mind."

"You know how to do that?" Koryn asked, more than a little doubtful.

Tariq snorted. "Like I said-I went to the military academy. They assume the possibility that we might find ourselves stranded ... without servants," he said dryly. "Stick around. You'll want to learn this, too. I doubt we'll have servants where we're going."

Koryn stared at him in disbelief, trying to figure out how he was going to focus on his work if he had to do everything else besides. "But ... We have the androids! Are they just going to drop us off and go back?"

Tariq shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm figuring they bought their freedom and they can make their own decisions. That's what I told them."

Koryn's lips tightened. It seemed to have escaped Tariq that he was still making fucking decisions for everyone! The flare of anger died after a moment as it dawned on him that he'd volunteered to give up everything long since when he'd told Tariq he would take Emerald to her own people to keep her safe. He hadn't considered what all 'giving up everything' entailed, but he could hardly blame that on Tariq.

Clearly, slavery wasn't anything humans were very familiar with anymore or Emerald wouldn't have had such a hard time grasping it. It almost seemed strange considering it was the humans they'd adapted the practice from to begin with, but he supposed the advances in their technology had made it unnecessary. The early humans hadn't had androids for labor,

after all.

He frowned as it occurred to him to wonder if the Anunnaki had given the humans the idea for slavery after all. It was possible since they hadn't known the androids they'd brought with them were their creations.

Well, they had, they just hadn't grasped that the androids had been created in labs or the fine distinction between them and a completely biological entity.

Which made it all the more bizarre, to him, that Tariq had taken it into his head to 'free' them.

The meal Tariq cooked was surprisingly good. When they'd finished Emerald offered to clean up, which almost seemed as strange to Koryn as Tariq cooking. It annoyed him. He was anxious to check her, but Tariq not only seemed pleased about it, he seemed to think it was some sort of rite of passage or something of the sort-that it was a pivotal point for all of them in beginning their new lives.

He discovered Tariq hadn't exaggerated the extent of Seana's sickbay. Few commercial or even military vessels were as well equipped. It heartened him beyond the fact that he discovered everything he needed to perform a careful and accurate examination of Emerald. His life had begun to seem as if it had been turned completely upside down and was spiraling out of control faster than he could acclimate himself to the changes. This, at least, was familiar ground. Beyond that, it appeased the niggling fear at the back of his mind that

he would discover his own knowledge and skills virtually useless to him or anyone else in the situation he'd found himself in. It wasn't that he wasn't willing to learn or that he felt that he couldn't, but it was comforting to know he wouldn't be completely useless until and unless he did.

Just as importantly, he didn't think Emerald would see him as being useless.

He completely forgot his discomfort by the time he'd examined her. She'd lost more weight during her ordeal than he liked, but she was strong and healthy and mostly recovered from losing the baby as far as he could see—at least physically.

He studied her face when he'd helped her to sit up again. "How are you feeling?"

She looked surprised and then smiled faintly. "I thought you would tell me."

He found himself smiling back at her. "I can tell you that you're in excellent shape and healing from the abortion, but only you can tell me how you feel."

She sobered at the mention of the baby, frowning as if she was wrestling with something. "It didn't really seem real to me until Mylor was so pleased about getting rid of it that he had to gloat about it. I hadn't gotten far enough along to feel the changes. Now ... I think it hurts more to know it's gone when Tariq was so happy about it." She met his gaze again. "Mylor said that I was ready to breed again."

Koryn felt a mixture of emotions at that comment-primarily rage at the thought that the bastard had intended to breed her at all and partly because he'd meant to replace Tariq's seed immediately with his own. Neither thought completely vanquished the excitement that she was right-she was ready to be bred again, fertile, and healed enough, he was sure, to make it safe to do so.

She looked distressed. "I need it to be Tariq's baby-we both do."

His excitement crashed, leaving the taste of bitterness in his mouth. He nodded, his expression taut. Emerald caught his hand when he would've turned away, however.

"Tell me you understand that this is something I need to get over the grief of losing his baby-and that he needs to get over his own grief. I love you, too. I don't want to hurt you anymore than I want to hurt him-and I want your baby." She smiled at him, lifting a hand to caress his cheek. "We have time, now, and the chance to have a real life together. I wanted to have your babies-yours and Tariq's-when I thought that I would only be a slave to you two and I wasn't important to either of you beyond that. We can be a family now, though, have a family and raise our children together.

"Isn't that why you and Tariq rescued me? Isn't that why you're taking me to the colony-so we can be together?"

Koryn swallowed with an effort. "That was what I intended, or

at least hoped for, when we made the plans before," he said slowly, but he hadn't expected or particularly wanted Tariq to be part of that.

"It's what I want, too."

"Yes, well it's entirely different," he said irritably.

"Beyond the fact that it's my choice, how is it different?"

He stared at her blankly.

"You aren't a slave girl anymore. That's how it's different! It's one thing to share a slave, and completely different to share the woman ... you love."

Emerald smiled at him and slipped her arms around him. "You loved me before or you wouldn't have risked your life to save me from Mylor and a life of slavery."

He put his arms around her, holding her tightly. "This isn't some warped idea of avenging yourself on both of us for ... what we did, is it?"

Emerald chuckled and leaned away, cupping his face in her hands. "Of course it is! I'm going to torment both of you forever by loving you as much as I can and having your babies."

He grinned reluctantly and pulled her close to kiss her deeply. "You're going to have a hard time convincing Tariq that this will work," he murmured when he broke the kiss.

"I convinced you it would."

He sighed. "Because I love you and I know that you love Tariq and I'd lose if I tried to convince you to be my woman instead," he said wryly.

Emerald frowned at him in consternation. "I don't love you less than I love Tariq. I just don't think it's fair or right of either of you to expect me to make a choice between you now when you didn't give me a choice before. I couldn't help but fall in love with both of you."

She shook her head at him. "You know how stubborn I am. I want both of you and nothing less will do."

Emerald could tell just from Tariq's expression that he'd monitored her and Koryn when Koryn had taken her to examine her. Anger and determination glittered in his eyes. "Well, what's the verdict?" he asked when he'd studied her for a long moment and finally transferred his attention to Koryn.

"He says I'm ready for you to breed me again," Emerald volunteered.

?

Chapter Seventeen

Tariq's cock leapt at the suggestion and began to inflate faster than his mind could process Emerald's announcement.

Not that he'd needed to hear it from her. He'd monitored Koryn's examination and had not only seen the results of Koryn's tests himself, he'd seen and heard everything that passed between them afterwards.

It was the fact that Emerald had announced it herself that had his cock leaping to attention even though his mind was still churning with doubts regarding the wisdom of immediately impregnating Emerald again.

He didn't think that he would've experienced quite as much turmoil if Emerald hadn't said that she needed it to help her get through her grief over losing the other baby. He realized it wasn't in him to want to deny her anything-especially anything that would comfort her after what she'd been through because of him. Beyond that, although he hadn't consciously acknowledged it himself or even been aware that he felt the loss himself, anything beyond the fury and helpless frustration that had consumed him, he knew she was right. He was angrier that they'd hurt Emerald and put her at risk than anything else, felt anger because of his guilt and remorse from having failed her, but he also felt the loss.

Their situation had changed dramatically, however, and although he was still trying to come to terms with it, he'd felt like Emerald belonged to him-still felt like she did. He hadn't wanted to share her with Koryn to start with. Even though he'd acknowledged that it was a political necessity, even though he'd considered it essential to keeping Emerald, it had irked the hell out of him from the first.

He was ready to dispense with it now that circumstances had changed. Unfortunately, there were two road blocks to that-his word, and Emerald's announcement that she loved both of them and expected them to continue as a fucking threesome!

He was inclined to think the change in their situation relieved him of obligations that were directly connected to the situation at the time-giving his word to share-but he wasn't as comfortable about it as he wanted to be. And he didn't know what the hell to make of Emerald's insistence that she loved them both.

Actually, he did. He knew just as well as Koryn did that they'd conditioned Emerald not only to accept them but to become emotionally dependent on them. He'd been well aware that that was what they were doing all the time. It hadn't particularly bothered him that he was 'conditioning' her devotion-as long as he had it because he hadn't expected their situation to change so radically and he'd known that, once she was under his control that would continue.

All he could think while he stared at Emerald was that he

desperately wanted to leap at the offer and that, if he did, then he wouldn't be allowing himself time he might well need to convince her she really did love him.

Because the very moment he got her pregnant, both her and Koryn would expect things to go back to what they'd been before.

He didn't especially like the idea of gambling, either, gods damn it! He thought it was probably unlikely that he could impregnate her as quickly as he had before. The odds weren't generally in favor of that, regardless of how fertile both parties were.

But he might and he didn't harbor any doubts that Koryn would be fucking hovering over her with the gods damned scanner like he had the first time!

Actually, considering how badly he was backed up, the odds were probably very much in favor of impregnating her instantly.

If he did, though, wouldn't that insure her as his?

He knew damned well it wouldn't, not considering the fucking mess he'd created!

He cleared his throat, glancing from one to the other, trying to think of some way to stall for time until he'd had time to consider the situation and decide upon the best course-or find some gods damned birth control method-other than abstinence!

"That's ... great news! Thing is, though, our situation is rocky right now and I have to wonder if it wouldn't be better, for everyone concerned, to wait ... at least until we have some idea what we'll be facing once we reach Centaurian."

Emerald blinked at him, her face slowly turning red and then the color completely receding to leave her pale, although he couldn't decide what emotions inspired the fluctuation.

Koryn merely gaped at him a moment before he frowned thoughtfully. "I hadn't considered that," he said slowly.

Relief flooded Tariq. "Exactly!" he said, warming to his theme. "I mean, we're not sure we're completely out of the woods as far as pursuit goes, and we don't know what's ahead of us. I don't want to add any risks to the situation."

Koryn nodded. "I'll head back to the sick bay and see if, by chance, Lady Selena had any birth control available. I intended to do a thorough inventory anyway."

Tariq glared at his back as he retreated, realizing he'd created just the fucking situation he'd wanted to avoid-since there was no reason they couldn't share Emerald if he wasn't trying to breed her and they had birth control.

"I thought you wanted me to have your baby," Emerald said neutrally.

Tariq's anger flared upwards a notch. That was a prime example if he'd ever needed one, he thought bitterly, that it

was never a good idea to act on impulse on anything of importance. It was on the tip of his tongue to order her to the cabin to assume the position. He struggled with it a moment and finally took a step forward, hauled her into his arms, and strode purposefully toward the rear cabin. If she wanted proof of his devotion, by the gods, he was damned well ready, willing, and able. She was going to be gods damned lucky if he didn't blow her head off when he came!

Although it flickered through Emerald's mind that Tariq had decided to continue their discussion in a more private place, his hard, purposeful expression was unnerving to say the least. "Tariq?" Emerald said uneasily as they reached the cabin and she emerged sufficiently from her surprise to find her voice.

He didn't acknowledge the question in her voice by more than a hard glance and a tightening of his lips and Emerald's uneasiness mounted as he strode through the door of the cabin and it closed behind them. Instead of setting her on her feet, he crossed the room and deposited her on the bed, following her down. She was still trying to gather her wits when he dragged her beneath him and opened his mouth over hers.

A jolt went through her when he captured her lips beneath his hard mouth. It created a fresh wave of pandemonium within her, but as brief as it was, it left her completely vulnerable, defenseless against the warmth she instantly felt waft through her as her senses burgeoned. His taste and scent, the urgency of his touch, decimated the last of her defenses. She

sank beneath a tidal wave of heat, floating, drifting, anchored only by his bulk to the bed beneath her. The last of her doubts as to whether his actions were motivated by anger that she'd questioned him or desire vanished as she felt the raw need emanating from him in heated waves, felt it in the tremors of his hands as they skated over, and the hunger of his mouth.

Within moments, he divested her of the flimsy, hated sheathe she'd been forced to wear as a slave of the house of Mylor. She shivered at the faintly rough texture of his palms and fingers as they glided over her, awakening every nerve ending and spreading the pleasurable warmth. The possessiveness of his touch comforted her even as it aroused her.

She'd begun to despair of ever feeling his touch again. Despite reason, despite her denials both to herself and to him, she'd begun to think of Tariq as being as close to god-like as a mortal could be and yet Mylor had shaken that deep core of certainty that Tariq could and would triumph over anything thrown at him. Whenever he'd come to her, he'd gloated over Tariq's imminent execution, regaling her with the nightmarish details of what that entailed until she'd begun to fear there was no hope for him or Koryn or herself.

Sleeping in the shelter of his body the night before had appeased her need for reassurance and comfort, but it had done nothing for the barely acknowledged fear that he no longer wanted her, that she'd been so tainted by Mylor's touch that it had turned Tariq's desire for her to disgust. She'd been certain it had when Tariq had politely refused her offer to

shelter and nurture his child within her body, certain she'd lost that tenuous hold she'd had upon his affections, that it was as dead as the child she'd lost.

The play of his mouth and hands over her did far more than arouse her senses to a fever pitch of excitement and anticipation. It began to heal the wounds within, soothed fears even while it thrilled her.

She began to tug at his clothing after a few moments, desperate to feel his bare skin beneath her palms and against her. He struggled for some moments to remove them without breaking off his exploration and finally gave up. Rolling from the bed, he stripped impatiently and dove at her again. Her excitement reached a new level when she felt the brush of his bare skin against her own and for a few minutes she was too focused on gathering the scent of his skin on her own and the feel of it inside of her to think of anything else.

"Tariq ... come inside me," she gasped when he'd pinned her to the bed to explore her breasts with his mouth.

He tensed, releasing the nipple he'd been tormenting and burrowing his face between her breasts. "Baby," he muttered, his voice hoarse and tinged with self-deprecating amusement, "I won't do you any good like that. I'll come before I even get in." He lifted his head and played with her other nipple, nipping at it with his lips.

Emerald clutched him tightly. "I don't care. I need to feel you inside of me. Please?"

He lifted his head and met her gaze, swallowing with an effort. His expression tautened. "Don't say I didn't warn you," he growled, shifting over her abruptly and curling his hips to press the head of his cock against her sex.

She braced the soles of her feet on the bed, pulling at him impatiently in response.

Heaving a heavy breath of defeat, Tariq curled his arms tightly around her and thrust his hips. The moment the tight band of her flesh engulfed the head of his cock, a red haze of mindless need enveloped him, shattering his control and what little remained of the battle with his conscience. A modicum of reason remained, a small voice in the back of his mind urging him to take care, reminding him of her frailty beside a hulking brute like himself, but the raw need to drive inside of her and expel his seed was so insistent it took all he could do to pay that any heed at all. Truthfully, he wasn't certain afterwards that he had. He was so focused on the war he was waging with his body to keep from coming instantly and the battle to claim the channel of flesh beckoning to him and, at the same time, resisting every effort to gain ground, he feared his slow claiming was more a matter of an inability to do what he wanted than the consideration for her that it should have been.

He lost even that much reasoning ability once he'd managed to burrow deeply enough to feel her flesh fist around his cock like a vice. He paused to try to drag in a breath of air when it felt as if his chest was going to collapse and tried to decide whether he'd driven deeply enough to withdraw at all without

being shoved completely out again. Deciding after a moment that he was going to lose it and come all over the bed if her muscles squeezed him completely out, he sucked in a reviving breath and struggled to seat himself a little more deeply. His balls drew up ... all the way to his throat, threatening to choke him.

Expelling an explosive breath, he pumped his hips experimentally to see just how much movement he could allow himself and promptly lost his train of thought when he felt the muscles gripping him ripple in response. Beneath him, Emerald uttered a low groan and stiffened. Goosebumps erupted along his back. She bucked against him, pulling him deeper, and he felt her muscles convulsing around his cock like massaging fingers.

His body responded instantly by seizing up, forcing a choked groan from him as the spasm ejected a stream of semen. Catching his breath, he began pumping into her frantically in short, deep thrusts until the spasms finally passed, leaving him feeling as if it took every ounce of strength with it.

Braced on his elbows and knees, he paused to catch his breath, to relish the release for a few moments and gather enough energy to lift himself off of her. She grasped both of his buttocks when he tensed to move away.

"Don't pull out yet."

Tariq felt his heart execute a dizzying leap, felt the heat that had just left him center in his belly again, bringing his cock

semi-erect. Tightening his hold on her, he rolled over and carried her with him. She scooted back along his belly once he'd settled, pushing his cock deeper. He was more than a little inclined to pursue the promise of pleasure offered by the tight hold of her sex along the length of his, but he hadn't caught his breath from the first time-yet.

She felt tiny draped over him, abruptly raising his awareness of the difference between them-because she was tiny compared to him-and yet her weight was substantial enough to dispel the flicker of uneasiness that came with the awareness. She'd come. He didn't think she would have if she'd been in any kind of distress other than acute sexual arousal.

He lifted his hands and skimmed them lightly along her back, tracing her form, and finally settled them on her buttocks, pressing her more firmly down on his cock. It sent sharper currents of pleasure through him and he felt himself grow fully erect inside of her. She lifted her head to stare at him. He tilted his own head to meet her gaze, wondering abruptly what was going through her mind, wondering why she'd been reluctant for him to pull out. He knew why it had appealed to him. He just wasn't certain why it appealed to her.

"I'd kiss you," he murmured huskily, "but I'm enjoying you right where you are way too much."

Her lips curled in a knowing smile and she dipped her head to plant a kiss between his breasts.

"If I had my way I'd keep you there."

She chuckled. "There's an image."

He thought it over and grinned lazily. Gripping her hips, he rocked her back and forth along his length until she caught the rhythm and began to move languidly. He focused then on exploring her with his hands. He'd forgotten how much pleasure it gave him just to touch her, but then again he'd never had the opportunity to grow as familiar with her as he wanted. As arousing as he'd found it to discipline her when he'd thought he was training her as his slave, it had almost been as unsatisfactory as it was pleasurable.

Actually, it had been more unsatisfactory, he thought abruptly, and not merely because he'd felt compelled to ignore his own urges until he was nearly mindless. He'd wanted to make love to her and he hadn't dared allow her to see just how deeply she affected him. He wasn't sure he dared now and yet he knew if he didn't give her something the chances were far greater, now, that he would lose her than they'd been before when he'd been so worried about it.

She had to want to be with him. He didn't think he'd fully assimilated that until that moment. He'd trusted in the dependency that he'd woven into her mind when he'd pleased her until it was torture and then rewarded her, but he'd known all along that that wasn't true love.

What he felt was, though. He would've realized it sooner if he hadn't been working so hard to convince himself it was pure

lust and the drive to produce an heir.

It was the scariest fucking thing he'd ever encountered and his dick thought so, too. It deflated as abruptly as if it had sprung an air leak.

Emerald lifted her head and stared at him in dismay. He could see she was struggling with whether to mention it or not, wondering if it was something she'd done, or not done.

Rolling to his side, he dumped her onto the bed. He needed distance to consider both his situation and his feelings, but he realized immediately that he wasn't going to get it. If he left now, Em would be convinced he didn't want her or care about her and beyond that, it would leave the fucking door wide open for Koryn to step in. He wasn't about to let that happen, regardless of his doubts.

"You didn't ... like the way I was doing it?" she asked after a moment.

Fuck! It wasn't embarrassing enough he'd lost his erection? She wanted true confessions? He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It wasn't that. I just ... thought about something."

She paled. She didn't leave him in doubt long, though, of what thoughts that comment prompted. "Mylor?"

He clapped his hand over her mouth before he even thought about it. Actually, that was what he'd intended. It was a little

disconcerting to discover his hand covered most of her face and not only silenced her, it cut off her air. He removed his hand. "Don't say that or think it!" he growled. "I tortured myself with that enough while I was in that stinking prison." He sucked in a calming breath at the look on her face. "I want to forget it. We both need to put it behind us. Leave it in the past where it belongs."

She looked more distressed instead of less. Her eyes teared up, chasing his anger at the reminder of Mylor with a healthy dose of alarm. "Gods, baby! Don't do that! You know it tears me up when you cry!"

She swallowed convulsively, blinking her eyes rapidly to dispel the tears but that only made them roll down her cheeks. Uttering an irritated breath, he slipped the arm he'd been propped on beneath her and drew her against his length, rubbing his hand soothingly along her back. To his relief, it calmed her.

"What you said before ... about the baby ... that was really why you wanted to wait?" she asked tentatively after a few moments.

Tariq wrestled with himself. "That was part of it," he said finally. "It was one thing to breed you when I thought" He broke off, realizing that by the time he had gotten around to breeding her their situation was already looking dangerous enough he should have refrained then. He could've spared her the ordeal Mylor had put her through if he hadn't been so gods damned focused on claiming her-spared her that part, anyway. He

didn't think he could've done anything to protect her except making the decision to send her away sooner, and it had taken all he could do to make himself let go of her then. He tightened his hold on her reflexively at the memory.

"What was the other reason?"

"What?" he asked blankly.

"You said that was part of the reason."

He mentally kicked himself. "Most of it, really. It isn't that I want to wait. I just think it could make things more dangerous for you and it would be better to assess our situation and find a place to settle before we breed again."

She wiggled against his hold until she could look up at his face. He met her gaze, trying to think of another argument to distract her, and finally released an irritated huff. "Koryn will be all over you the very gods damned minute the test turns up positive!" he growled.

Emerald bit her lip and ducked her head again, brushing a kiss along his chest. "It could take days of dedicated fucking before it takes, though."

Tariq felt his pulse leap. His cock wasn't far behind. Not that it didn't rankle just a tad that she'd referred to it as fucking, but he didn't see any way to argue about her terminology without making a confession he wasn't sure he was ready to make. It was bad enough she had him twisted in knots without giving

her more ammunition until he felt a little more confident she wouldn't turn it against him.

Instead, he dragged her up for a kiss. "There is that," he murmured huskily when he broke from her lips a few moments later to explore her throat. "Gods, Em! I've missed this. I'd begun to think I wasn't ever"

"Don't think about it," Emerald whispered when he broke off, seeking his lips again.

* * * *

Surprise and then anger washed through Koryn when he returned from checking the sick bay for birth control and discovered both Emerald and Tariq had vanished. It didn't take more than a moment to figure out where they'd disappeared to. After glaring at the closed door of the cabin for several moments, he finally headed back to the sick bay to perform the inventory he'd planned. He discovered it was far harder to focus on his work that it generally was, mostly because of the images that kept forming in his mind and the anger that arose each time it did.

It pissed him off to be sent off on a fool's errand when Tariq, clearly, hadn't had any intention of holding off on breeding Emerald again, regardless of what he'd said.

He considered that for a while and realized once he'd cooled off a little that he hadn't actually been manipulated as he'd first thought. Tariq had obviously been angling to outmaneuver him

and had only intended to stall for time until he'd had time to consider a plan.

That pissed him off more when he realized Tariq had thought to keep Emerald to himself by refusing to breed her right off. Short of reneging on his word, however, he was foresworn and Tariq was too much a man of honor to break his word.

No doubt that was like a knife in his gut now! Just as clearly, he was trying to decide whether his honor required that he keep a promise made under completely different circumstances.

Well, he was right in one respect! Things had certainly changed a great deal! Class rank no longer applied to any of them when they'd broken from the society it had sprung from. He was Tariq's equal, not his social inferior.

He considered that angrily for several moments and realized that, regardless of social standing, he still didn't feel like Tariq's equal.

Because he wasn't. Tariq could kill him inside of five minutes if it came down to a deadly contest. He would've liked to believe that wasn't so, but he knew better. If Tariq had let himself grow soft once he took his place on the lower council-maybe-but he hadn't and Koryn doubted it would've made a hell of a lot of difference even if he had.

It wasn't as if he had no idea of how to defend himself. A certain amount of fight training was required of everyone-

whatever their station or life goals. He hadn't particularly relished getting his face, or his ribs, kicked in, however, and he spent most of his time in his lab. Barring the occasional verbal battles, he hadn't actually had a lot of opportunities to use any of the training he'd had.

Tariq, on the other hand, had been in training or in battle much of his life.

It occurred to him rather forcefully that it might be time to brush up on his battle skills. He and Tariq had already come to blows over Emerald twice and he had a bad feeling that there might be more battles ahead.

Unless he bowed out.

It didn't take more than a second to realize he wasn't going to. Reason might triumph over pretty much any other obstacle, but he couldn't give Emerald up without a fight. He didn't think he could've if she'd told him she didn't care about him. He sure as hell couldn't when she'd made it clear she did.

He might not have any other choice but to continue to share her with Tariq as they'd begun, but he couldn't give her up completely.

By the time he'd finished inventorying the contents of the sick bay, he'd decided that love might just have tainted his reasoning abilities. He and Tariq had been best friends for much of their lives. However possessive Tariq was of Emerald or unpredictable his temper where she was concerned, he

didn't think it was going to come down to a battle to the death and since beating him to a pulp wasn't going to change Emerald's mind and Tariq had to know that, there would be no point to it.

Except, possibly, satisfaction for Tariq.

It couldn't hurt to brush up on his self-defense techniques, he decided, since defending himself was all he had any likelihood of accomplishing. Tariq wasn't just far more skilled than he was. He outweighed him by a good fifty pounds-of rock solid muscle.

Tariq convinced him that reasoning, at least, was completely sound when he met up with him in the galley in search of food. He hadn't bothered to dress, proof, if he'd needed it, that Tariq fully intended to head directly back to Emerald as soon as he'd found food.

Tariq looked him over and scowled. "We won't be needing the birth control."

Koryn's lips tightened. "I'd deduced that."

Tariq narrowed his eyes. "And before you trot down to sick bay to collect a scanner, I'll tell you straight out-if you come near her with a gods damned scanner I'll shove it so far up your ass you'll play hell ever finding it again."

Anger flashed through Koryn, potent enough that he had to wrestle with the urge to punch Tariq in the face. "I guess that

means you disposed of your word of honor along with everything else you left behind on Niribu," he growled.

Tariq flushed, balling his hands into fists. He looked so furious for several moments, Koryn tensed to duck and mentally reviewed the ship behind him in case he needed to find an escape route quickly. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," he said after a long moment. "If you were anybody else, you'd be spitting out your teeth right now."

Koryn fought another round with his temper. "She'll only be fertile three days."

Tariq looked more murderous at the reminder. "True," he finally responded tightly. "She'll probably want to rest a while after that."

The taunt almost provoked Koryn into tossing aside all sense of self-preservation. He wasn't certain it wouldn't have except that even as he tensed to spring, he saw that Emerald had come to the door of the cabin and was watching the two of them.

"You said you understood," she said, drawing Tariq's attention.

He didn't recall saying anything of the sort! In point of fact, he knew fucking well he hadn't! Emerald had distracted him by embracing him and telling him she loved him and he'd kissed her and lost what little brain function he had left.

"Go back to bed, baby," Tariq growled.

She met his gaze for a long moment and then flicked a look at Koryn before returning her attention to Tariq. Folding her arms under her bare breasts, she leaned against the door frame. "I didn't like it when the two of you decided to share me as if what I wanted didn't matter-which it didn't-to either of you. I was nothing but a possession. I fell in love with both of you because, despite your arrogance, despite the things you did, despite your complete disregard for my rights as a human being to make my own decisions, I realized that, in your own way, you were trying to protect me ... because, I thought, I actually did matter to both of you. I'm not your possession. I'm not a thing. I'm a person and I would love to be your woman-to both of you. Because I love both of you. It worked before. It can still work, but you'll both have to get past the belief that your wants and needs are more important than mine and that I only exist to be your possession.

"You can still hold me against my will. I'm well aware of that, but you're going have to decide whether you want to own me and not have me, or have me and not own me. I don't know-maybe it would help to consider how you would treat an Anunnaki woman?"

Tariq scowled at the empty doorway when she turned away. When the door closed, he flicked a look at Koryn to see what he thought about Emerald's announcement. It made him feel better to see that Koryn was as outraged as he was.

"If she had a clue of how a woman of the Anunnaki would

behave she wouldn't have made that suggestion!" Koryn muttered after a moment.

Tariq frowned. "She has a point," he said slowly.

"If she did, she would already have cut your throat and mine, too!" Koryn retorted.

"I didn't mean that literally," Tariq said dryly.

Koryn glared at him. "Even figuratively. Setting aside the fact that she's about half the size of an Anunnaki, does she seem like any Anunnaki woman you've ever met?"

"She isn't Anunnaki," Tariq said. "Of course she doesn't behave like our women. Her society was completely different."

"Exactly my point! An Anunnaki of what rank? Because it seemed to me that she was suggesting a woman of our class and no man in his right mind would chose a concubine of the same class. There would be constant bickering over who outranked whom in the connection and whose decision was final!"

"Gods, Koryn! You confuse the hell out of me, and I don't need the gods damned headache!"

"You're confused? I'm fucking confused! What the hell did she mean?"

"She wants to be considered an equal partner. Love her and

she will return it. Try to possess her and you will lose it."

Tariq and Koryn both turned to look at Aeon when he spoke. Koryn couldn't help but notice that Tariq didn't look nearly as outraged as he felt when they exchanged a glance. It wasn't bad enough Emerald had decided to rebel? Now the fucking androids felt like it was perfectly alright to stick their damned noses in where they weren't welcome? "I don't believe I addressed that question to you," he responded coldly.

Tariq shrugged. "I think he put it fairly succinctly, though." He studied Koryn for a long moment. "I'm still breeding her, though, gods damn it! You can damned well wait until I'm done to scan her."

Koryn took instant exception to the tone. Fortunately, before he could voice his objections it occurred to him that Tariq had acknowledged their previous agreement and he decided to leave well enough alone. In any case, Tariq distracted him in the next moment.

"We need to divide the cooking."

He blinked at him in disbelief. "I can't cook."

"Well, you need to learn!"

"Exactly how the hell am I supposed to do that out here in the middle of nowhere? There aren't any instructors!"

"I will prepare this meal and instruct you as I cook," Aeon

offered.

Koryn had to fight the urge to throttle the bastard. "You're an instructor droid?"

Aeon bowed his head. "I was not given that task, no. I have been assigned as a guard unit. However, I was programmed to perform in whatever capacity needed."

Even the gods damned androids knew every damned thing they might need to know about surviving, Koryn thought angrily, wondering abruptly if he should have focused his entire studies on the sciences. It hadn't occurred to him that he would ever need other skills, however.

"You need to get used to not referring to them as androids," Tariq said evenly. "We owe them our lives. We owe them for saving Emerald when we couldn't."

Koryn wrestled with the urge to inform Tariq that he hadn't had any part in the arrangements and that, therefore, he wasn't obligated to anything Tariq had promised. He tamped the urge after a moment. As much as he resented Tariq's arrogant assumption that he was still in a position to order everyone around, he was grateful and it was a meager repayment for what they'd risked. "True," he said finally. "And I suppose it's never too soon to get into the habit."

Tariq nodded and glanced at Aeon. "Bring me and Emerald a tray when the food's done."

Koryn glared at his back indignantly as he strode down the corridor once more. "Maybe you need to adjust your attitude a little yourself?" he pointed out tightly.

Tariq halted and turned to look back at them, frowning. After a moment, his brow cleared. "Please?"

Aeon bowed. "I am always honored to serve you, Lord Tariq."

Rolling his eyes, Koryn stalked to one of the lounges and sprawled on it.

"It will be far easier to learn, I believe, if you watch," Aeon pointed out.

Koryn sent the android a startled look and then glared at him, but he got up and followed him into the galley, watching him carefully as he selected the ingredients.

"What are you going to prepare?"

"Roast beef with potatoes, carrots, and peas."

Koryn's interest instantly peaked. "Great! I'm starving and I haven't had anything like that in ... I'm damned if I remember. Since I left Niribu the first time. I wonder why Lady Selena didn't just stock the ship with space rations? It would've been more convenient."

"Her servants have said that she prefers the luxury of freshly prepared food to the convenience of her servants," Aeon

responded neutrally.

"Well, I prefer fresh food, too, but it doesn't keep nearly as well."

"There are space rations in the hold. She had no idea how long our voyage might be."

Koryn frowned. "She risked a lot to help us. I hope to hell she's going to be alright."

"She loves Lord Tariq. She thought the risk was worth it. In any case, her servants rebelled and stole the ship and left her bound and gagged. It will be reported as a theft and they will be reported as rebels. I'm confident she thought of everything ... and she has a great deal of political influence. Beyond that, I killed Mylor, who would've been her greatest danger."

"You killed him for Lady Selena?" Koryn asked, surprised.

"I killed him for Lord Tariq and for his lady," Aeon said. "Lady Selena's servants would have killed him if I hadn't. He was dead either way."

"Our lady," Koryn growled.

Aeon sent him a long look, but he merely bowed. "I killed him for Lord Tariq and Lady Emerald because she is also his lady. Also because he destroyed the child and Lord Tariq could not avenge the death of his child himself."

Koryn felt his appetite vanish at the reminder, but his interest was fairly caught once Aeon began to prepare the meal. "This is a bit like working in the lab, actually. I don't suppose the measurements need to be quite as precise."

Aeon shrugged. "It will not blow up if the measurements are not precise, but it may taste like hell."

"Yes, well failed experiments are always a disappointment."

"Particularly if it is one you intended to eat."

?

Chapter Eighteen

Emerald studied Tariq's sleeping face, enjoying the rare opportunity to examine him to her heart's content. Despite their own advances in slowing the aging process over the past several decades, she still found it hard to accept that either Tariq or Koryn were as old as they'd implied. They appeared much the same age as she was.

Then again, they'd 'resurrected' her, and her age was as deceptive as theirs. She'd been twenty eight when she'd fought her last battle, however, and she supposed they must have brought her to that age physically when they'd regenerated her. She didn't see that she looked any differently in the mirror than she remembered.

She'd always found it disconcerting when they called her child, although oddly enough, when they'd ceased and begun to call her baby that had pleased her, because it 'felt' like a term of affection. She still thought it was ... and she still had some doubts about the way felt about her.

She shouldn't have. They'd risked death to protect her-a horrible death if she could rely on Mylor's gloating and she thought she could trust the bastard in that if nothing else. She couldn't imagine that they would have if they hadn't loved her.

And yet ... could she really trust that they looked upon death the same way she did? As the ultimate sacrifice?

Beyond that, did they even have the ability to feel love as she perceived love? She thought that was the main source of her anxiety, that their society hadn't prepared them to perceive love in the same way. They both still thought of her as something they could own rather than a person. She wasn't certain they would ever be able to really see her in any other light, regardless of what she saw as efforts on their part to do so. She didn't think it was because she was a woman. From things she'd heard and seen in her brief stay on Niribu, it

wasn't any more uncommon for women to hold positions of power and wealth than men ... but those were women of the Anunnaki. She was human and she had a feeling that was a preconception they would never really overcome.

And maybe, in many ways, the Anunnaki were superior and they were justified in thinking they were.

It made her wonder how women had coped with their roles as inferiors for so many generations on Earth when even women of the same class as their husbands were still considered beneath them simply because they were born women.

She shrugged the thought off. She didn't think it would be any great hardship to deal with-annoying-but not insurmountable simply because she didn't feel inferior. She also didn't have a problem allowing them, mostly Tariq, to believe he was the 'boss' and his word was final. There were always ways around that and she didn't particularly care if she had to work around it.

"Now what's running through that mind, I wonder?" Tariq murmured in a husky voice still laced with sleep, startling her.

She smiled when she focused on his face again and saw the curve of his lips. "I was just thinking that you're a beautiful man," she said teasingly.

His face darkened. He stretched and curled his arms around her, dragging her closer. "Insatiable wench!"

Emerald chuckled. "I'm sated. My eyeballs are floating."

Tariq uttered a snorting laugh. "You're fortunate your skull's intact. I had a hell of a backup that first time around."

Emerald felt her belly clench at the reminder of his stint imprison, but she was more than willing to do her utmost to erase those terrifying weeks from her mind. Lifting a hand, she stroked his hard cheek. "As horrible as everything was, I'm glad it turned out like it did. If your plan had succeeded I would never have seen you again and I don't think I could've borne that."

Several emotions chased across his features. "I never wanted to send you away. You know that, don't you?"

Emerald nodded, tilting her head to brush her face along his. "I know. You wanted to protect your baby. I understand."

She heard him swallow. "I wasn't thinking about the baby when I made the arrangements."

Emerald felt her heart skip several beats. "You weren't?"

"I" He hesitated for a long moment. "I care about you, Em. I know it might not seem like it to you, but I'm trying ... to adjust."

Emerald closed her eyes, relishing the words even though it wasn't quite what she'd hoped to hear. "Maybe I should tie you up and torment you for hours on end with the most exquisite

pleasure imaginable?" she said teasingly after a moment.

He drew back to study her face, but he relaxed when he saw she was teasing. "Believe it or not, that was every bit as tortuous to me," he said dryly.

She sent him a skeptical look.

"I see you don't. You wouldn't look so doubtful if you had any idea how much I wanted you or how long I waited."

She was inclined to be pleased about that admission and began to think, once she'd thought back over it, that maybe she hadn't considered it from his viewpoint at all. As beleaguered as she'd been, she'd been keenly aware of his arousal. She doubted anything he'd done to her would've been nearly as exciting if she hadn't sensed that it affected him as much as it did her.

"You can at least concede I wasn't unmoved," he said dryly.

Her lips curled in a smile. She leaned toward him to nibble at his hard mouth. "Maybe I'd still like to tie you down and torture you," she murmured.

He rolled onto his back and laced his fingers behind his head. "Baby, you can do anything you want. I'm not stopping you."

The invitation was too tempting to resist. She straddled his waist and settled to exploring him with her fingers and her lips until she touched a spot on his ribs along his side and he let

out a choked grunt, flinching all over. Intrigued, she returned to the spot and dug her fingers in a little more deeply. His reaction was more pronounced that time.

Emerald lifted her head and stared at him, suppressing the urge to laugh. "You're ticklish."

"I'm not."

She studied his face assessingly and abruptly dove for the tickle spot on either side of his chest. He jackknifed, uttering a choked laugh as he grabbed her hands and held them. "Gods damn it, baby! That hurt."

Emerald bit her lip, trying to look remorseful. She knew damned well it hadn't hurt. He just didn't want to admit that he was ticklish. "I won't do it again. I promise."

He narrowed his eyes at her but he finally released his grip on her hands. The moment he did, she dove for the spot again. He uttered a choked laugh, bucked her off and rolled over on top of her. "You've no sense of honor!" he muttered with both amusement and irritation.

She shook her head. "Not a bit!" she agreed cheerfully. "Anyway, I had my fingers crossed. It didn't count."

"Is that a fact?"

She felt smug until he found her ticklish spot and tickled her until she couldn't catch her breath. "Stop! Stop!" she cried,

laughing. "I can't breathe!"

He stopped. Emerald sucked in a reviving breath and goosed his ribs again. He laughed, grabbing her wrists and pinning her arms above her head, but he sobered as soon as he had, his expression becoming intent. She stared up at him worriedly. Instead of tickling her again, he abruptly dropped closer and covered her mouth in a heated kiss.

Emerald felt an instant response inside of her to the heat his kiss despite the days they'd spent in a heated tangle, striving over and over to reach the pinnacle. It almost seemed they reached fever pitch faster each time, and perhaps they did, she thought dreamily. He was certainly no less desirable and he'd learned just how and where to touch her to stir her. She welcomed him into her when with love and joy when he reached a point of impatience to join with her, enjoying their deep connection on every level. And when they both reached culmination within moments of one another, she yielded to exhaustion and sank beneath the blanket of bliss that beckoned her, buoyed by the certainty that she'd given as much as she'd taken.

She struggled to curl her lips into an appreciative smile when she felt Tariq arrange her against his side afterwards and begin to stroke her in wordless appreciation. She'd almost reached the dark gateway when he rolled onto his side and tightened his arms around her.

"I thought I'd go completely insane when they took you from me," he murmured raggedly. "I was far more focused on

getting too you than getting out or I might have managed it sooner." He paused and tightened his hold. "I love you, Em."

* * * *

Alarm instantly went through Emerald when she and Tariq finally emerged from seclusion and joined the rest of their party in the lounge for the evening meal. Koryn didn't just look as if he'd had little sleep in the past three 'days' since they'd escaped. He was battered and bruised. She couldn't decide whether to comment on it or not, but she knew he hadn't shown any signs of having been in a fight before she'd joined Tariq for a marathon breeding session.

Tariq noticed, too, and he wasn't the least bit restrained in his reaction. "What the fuck? Did you get in a fight with the lab equipment?"

Koryn narrowed his eyes at him, his lips tightening.

"We have been sparing in the hold. Koryn pointed out that we did not know what we might encounter and therefore it would be wise to polish our skills."

Tariq lifted his dark brows and studied Koryn assessingly for several moments.

"I don't have fucking nanos to help me heal faster," Koryn pointed out tightly, clearly defensive about the fact that he looked the worse for wear when none of the others did.

Emerald felt her chest tighten in commiseration, but she resisted the urge to rush to him and fuss over his bruises, fearful that would wound his pride even more. There was no doubt in her mind that he felt like he wasn't 'manly' enough beside Tariq and she suspected he thought she loved Tariq more because of the way he was. Well, she supposed in a way she did. She certainly loved him in a different way. Then again, they were different. They would be if Koryn had been a soldier as Tariq was and even if he'd been just as skilled at fighting.

He still fulfilled her need to feel protected. He still fulfilled her sexual needs. And beyond that, he had a lot to offer in many other ways.

She didn't think he'd want to hear that either, though, or that it would make him feel better. "Unless something terrible happened on Centaurian, I don't see that fighting skills would be crucial. It's certainly something one wants to have, and to feel confidence in, of course, but it should be a civilized place—even if it is a frontier colony. Of course, you don't need to concern yourself about your other skills, so there's no point in focusing on polishing those."

Koryn looked so much better when she'd finished that Emerald was glad she'd considered carefully before she spoke.

Although he relaxed considerably, his expression was wry. "I can't say that I've mastered food preparation either. I'm damned if I can figure that out, though. I always measure

everything carefully and follow the instructions."

Emerald smiled at him. "I'm not terribly good, either. I never had much opportunity to prepare anything but prepackaged meals. I've always heard, though, that it's technique as much as anything else." She frowned. "I think we all need to practice that. From what I heard, the colonists had all decided that a simpler way of life was far better in the long run. It was part of the requirements of potential colonists-to be willing to live at a very basic level-growing most of their own food, making do with mechanical or manual tools, rather than electronics, and renewable energy sources."

She discovered when she glanced around at the others than even the androids looked appalled. It took an effort to keep from smiling.

Tariq frowned. "What sort of economic system did they have? Or do you know?"

Emerald considered it, struggling to remember what she'd learned when she'd been considering becoming a colonist. It hadn't just been a very long time ago, though. It had been a lifetime for her and even though she'd regained bits and pieces of her memories, she had an uneasy feeling that she had 'forgotten' as much as she remembered. "It's primarily a barter system, I think."

The men exchanged indecipherable looks. "That might make things difficult in getting started," Tariq said grimly.

Emerald looked at him in surprise. "That's not true-not necessarily anyway. They'll have to have a standing army-and a peace keeping force-and most of you have those skills. And Koryn knows so much about science, I imagine his skills will be in demand, too-If nothing else, as a doctor."

Koryn perked up considerably. Tariq looked like a thundercloud. "I have other skills beyond the military," he growled.

Emerald flicked a dismayed look at him, realizing that the harder she tried to build up Koryn's self-esteem, the angrier it made Tariq. She forced a smile, giving him a heated gaze. "I know you do," she murmured.

Tariq's expression went blank for a split second before color climbed into his cheeks. He grinned, but it looked a bit more embarrassed than arrogant.

"The thing is," she continued after a moment, "I don't really know all of you that well and I don't know what you can do or have done in the past. I was just pointing out what I did know that would be useful. Now that you've brought it up, though, I think it would be a good idea for all of us to work up sort of a resume of training and experience. We'll have to petition the council to become colonists and the more skills, the more desirable.

"I spent a lot of time with my great-grandmother when I was a child. She taught me several different needle crafts that I think I could claim as a skill, at least, claim some familiarity with

them. I expect that would be in demand since no one's really done much in the way of handwork in generations. I've had military training, too-not like you guys, of course, but some and some battle experience."

"You aren't going to be a fucking soldier!" Tariq growled implacably.

Emerald gaped at him. When she glanced at the others, however, she saw that all of the androids looked disapproving and Koryn looked as outraged as Tariq. Her lips tightened with annoyance.

Koryn got up abruptly. "I think we should run a scan and see if you're breeding. I'm going to faint if you aren't when Tariq was so gods damned dedicated to the task," he added, his voice laced with anger, "but we need to be sure."

"I hadn't planned to offer my services for the military-especially since I probably am pregnant!" Emerald said tightly. "I was merely pointing out that I had that to offer as a colonist."

She followed Koryn from the lounging area to the sickbay, however, more because she was irritated about their attitude than because she felt a need to know, immediately, whether she was or she wasn't pregnant.

She discovered once she'd settled on the examination table and Koryn had scanned her, however, that he had far more on his mind than checking her or even concern about her taking a job as a soldier. In point of fact, he didn't seem to have but one

thing on his mind.

Having scanned her, he set the scanner aside decisively. "Yes. You're breeding," he said briskly, and then climbed onto the examination table with her before she even realized his intent.

Not that she would've objected to his intentions, but she thought the examination table a precarious perch for two when Koryn was big enough to take up the entire bed himself. His hunger was contagious, however. Despite the fact that Tariq had satisfied her enough to prevent her from feeling needy anytime in the near future, Koryn himself, her anxiety to please him and make up for neglecting him, and the sense of desperation she felt in him were enough to thoroughly arouse her.

She wouldn't have considered denying him anyway, or even demanding more foreplay, but fortunately she didn't need it. She was wet for him long before he tore at his clothing to dispense with the impediment. It was a struggle to envelop his turgid flesh regardless. She didn't think there was a hair's worth of difference in the size of the two men, unless Koryn was slightly larger, but it was thrilling enough to feel his slow possession that she was on the brink of coming by the time he managed to claim her fully.

It was as well she was. He was too needy to have much control. The moment she began to quake with her climax, he groaned like he was dying, shuddered, and began to pump frenziedly to spill his seed into her. "I'm sorry, baby," he

gasped when he'd finally stopped shuddering.

Emerald stroked his back. "Don't be, baby," she murmured. "It was wonderful."

He jerked his head up to study her face for a long moment and finally relaxed. Scooting backwards carefully, he disengaged them and nuzzled her neck. "I don't know how I managed it," he said wryly. "I thought I was going to explode before I even got in."

"Me, too," Emerald said with a blissful sigh.

He chuckled. "I thought I was going to fall off this fucking thing. Remind me not to try it here again."

Emerald smiled. "I don't know Does this convert like the chair in Tariq's quarters? I was just thinking that might be fun-except with you pounding into me instead of that thing."

She felt his cock rise against her thigh. He hesitated. "I think we need to get back before I end up having to fight Tariq. Not that I'd mind on several levels, but I might not be in any shape to make love to you for a while afterwards," he said with self-deprecating amusement.

"Well! We can't have that!"

Tariq gave both of them a hard look when they returned, but he forbore commenting on the length of time they'd been gone or the fact that both of them looked like they'd been doing exactly

what they had. "I'm going to assume the test was positive," he growled.

Emerald grinned and rushed into his arms. "Yes! We're going to have a baby!"

To her relief, the tension left him. He was grinning at her shakily when she pulled away to look at his face. "Seriously?"

She chuckled. "Absolutely."

"Damn I'm good!" he said jokingly.

Koryn glared at him. "And you only had to fuck non-stop for three days to accomplish it!"

Seeing that they were bristling at one another again, Emerald searched for something to distract them. "I wonder if it'll be a girl or a boy?"

It distracted them. "It's bound to be male," Tariq said a little indignantly.

"You never know," Koryn retorted.

"I guess we'll find out!" Tariq growled.

"I guess we will!" Koryn snapped.

Emerald glanced at the androids a little unhappily.

"I would not care," Aeon said. "It would be enough to know that

"I'd sired a child. But I will never do so."

Tariq turned to look at him uncomfortably and flicked a glance at the other androids. "Fortunately, Koryn's one of the best geneticists we have," he said pointedly.

Koryn glared at him, but once he'd glanced at the other androids, he relented. "It's not impossible. You were engineered not to have that capability, but I might be able to do something about that-I emphasize might! I'll just have to see if it's doable."

"It would be far more likely that we might find a woman who would have us if that was possible. No woman will want us if we cannot give them a child," Aeon said.

"Oh! That's not true!" Emerald objected. "Even if Koryn can't fix the problem-and I'd be willing to bet he can-you have a lot to offer, besides being very handsome!"

That pleased Aeon, but both Koryn and Tariq narrowed their eyes at her and then looked Aeon over with hostility.

"Let's eat!" Emerald said abruptly. "Whatever that is smells wonderful and I'm starving!"

* * * *

There were days when Emerald actually thought they were making a lot progress in learning to function together as a family unit and days when she despaired that they would ever

find a comfortable alliance. She made the mistake of deciding to join the men one day when they'd all gone into the hold to spar. It not only inspired both Koryn and Tariq to dispense with friendly rivalry and try to kill each other, but the androids showed an inclination to be more violently aggressive, as well.

She'd fled as soon as she realized that her presence was all it took to inspire all of them to try to 'show off' their killing skills, but even the androids looked the worse for it for days and Tariq and Koryn were too banged up to feel much interest in sex for a couple of days. The respite was nice. It was exhausting trying to appease both men and she didn't dare beg off when they were just looking for excuses to tear into one another.

In point of fact, she began to suspect they were going to fuck her to death trying to outdo each other. After the second week of their journey, she finally told both of them that she was going to expire if she didn't get a little rest and she damned well didn't believe their needs were that damned frequent. They were going to have to stop fucking her as if the pussy was going to dry up or vanish.

They'd been indignant, of course, but to do them justice, it at least brought their attention to the fact that she really was exhausted-either that or they were both exhausted and decided it was a good enough excuse to preserve their 'manliness' and give her a little breathing room. She didn't care as long as she could have a full night's rest from time to time.

They were fortunate enough that they escaped without incident beyond the nightmare of the escape itself. Although they kept a keen eye on their wake the first week, there was no sign of pursuit and Tariq decided it was safe enough to alter course for the star system that was their ultimate goal.

They reached the outer rim after four weeks and Emerald didn't think she was alone in considering it a very good thing that it hadn't taken longer. The fresh foods hadn't lasted much past half the trip and they'd switched to space rations, which were tolerable enough except when compared to the fresh foods they'd had before. Beyond that, although the ship had seemed really spacious when they'd begun, by the fourth week the walls had begun to close in on everyone.

Emerald viewed their arrival at the Omega star system with a mixture of hope, relief, and fear, the first two of which waned after a few days while the other grew when they weren't hailed and saw no sign of any other crafts. It wasn't until they'd settled into orbit around Centaurian that their attempts to make contact were successful.

All of them were gathered on the bridge waiting anxiously as Mikail, one of the androids, tried to illicit a response from the ground. Emerald felt weak all over when a call was finally met with a crackle of static and they could hear a weak transmission from the planet. "Identify yourselves!"

Emerald surged forward before Mikail could respond. "Tell them we're refugees seeking asylum."

When Mikail glanced at Tariq for confirmation, Emerald looked at him questioningly. He was frowning, clearly considering the advisability of it. "It would be admitting we have a price on our head," he said grimly. "If others find their way here, they might consider it in their best interests to simply hand us over."

Emerald hadn't thought of that. "But they won't know about Centaurian. You said"

"We are at war with the Dinjin. There is no saying they won't manage to get the information from them or some of the slaves they free. I don't think we can afford to take the chance."

"They're going to know you aren't human," Emerald said uncomfortably. "If it was only one of you, they might just think you were really big-but all of you?"

"Tell them we're lost," Koryn suggested. "Tell them we had to divert from a radiation storm and it damaged our systems."

"We'll have to fucking damage the systems!" Tariq growled.

"Maybe we should have considered this a little earlier?" Emerald said uneasily. "I honestly hadn't thought about it being a problem, though, until we didn't get hailed before. But they either didn't have anything strong enough to pick up the signals, or, and this is the part that worries me, they think we might be a threat."

"If they thought that, they would've already launched a ship to intercept!" Tariq pointed out.

"They have launched two," Aeon offered helpfully.

"Shit!" Tariq snarled.

"Gods damn it!" Koryn seconded him.

"Tell them we're lost and seeking asylum," Tariq said abruptly. "We'll think of an excuse to cover it before we land-or damage the fucking ship to cover the lie if we have to." He glared at Koryn. "Take Emerald back to the lounge and see what the two of you can come up with that won't involve fucking up what might be our only backup plan."

Chastened, Emerald retreated with Koryn.

"If he hadn't been so gods damned preoccupied with fucking he might have considered it before!" Koryn said loudly.

"And you weren't preoccupied with fucking?" Tariq bellowed after them.

"It isn't my job ...!"

Emerald caught Koryn's arm and tugged until he followed her to the lounge. "You've been saying for weeks that he wasn't a lord anymore and he wasn't in charge!" she reminded him irritably. "It isn't going to help if you two start arguing again. The problem is all of ours!"

Koryn flushed, but he began pacing the lounge, his brow furrowed in thought. Abruptly, he halted and turned to look at her. "I've got it! We're from a different universe and we got sucked through a black hole and ended up here and we can't go back!"

Emerald frowned. "Is it possible to go through a black hole without getting crushed?"

Koryn stared at her. "Some of them-theoretically. If they're small enough and the ship is well enough protected. Do you think they'll know that?"

Emerald considered it. "If they don't know the theory, they'll just think it's a lie." She thought about options. "They'll know I'm human. I think we need to focus on a story that will cover that."

"We picked you up on Earth and decided to take you to your people!"

Emerald sent him a look. "Supposing they swallowed that, how are you going to explain a petition to become a colonist?"

He frowned at her. "I was never any good at lying."

She smiled at him. "I know. I love that about you."

He crossed the lounge and dragged close for a kiss. Unfortunately, Tariq arrived at the lounge about that time. "Can you get your mind off of fucking long enough to focus?"

"What did they say?" Emerald asked breathlessly when she'd pulled away from Koryn.

"They're going to let us land," Tariq said tightly. "But that's only because they could see the ship is a yacht and not armed- nothing visible anyway. I don't think they bought the story about us being lost. It's gods damned hard to navigate a ship without a computer and nothing else would explain 'lost'."

"You should've just told them we were seeking asylum and that would've given us time to think of something before we landed!" Koryn said tightly. "Now we're stuck with the 'lost' story!"

Tariq glared at him.

"You were the one that suggested it!" Emerald said irritably.

"We have agreed that we will claim that we rebelled and took you three captive," Aeon said, joining them.

"No!" Emerald said immediately. "They might decide to imprison all of you for being rebels. It's too dangerous. After all you've already done, we can't ask you to do that!"

"And they might decide we're the bad guys and throw us in prison!" Koryn added indignantly. "I don't think I want to end up in another prison."

Tariq studied all of them and finally shook his head. "I think we're going to have to go with the truth and hope for the best."

"I can't help but notice you don't look very hopeful," Koryn said dryly.

Tariq shrugged. "They're bound to think, whatever we say, that we brought trouble. We might have an advantage if they decide to imprison us until our pursuit catches up with us, though. They won't know half of our group is androids and, hopefully, the prison won't be strong enough to hold them. We'll just have to play it as it unfolds. I don't see any option-now." He moved to Emerald and pulled her close. "Truthfully, I don't think we could've come up with anything that wouldn't be questioned. As Emerald pointed out, we'll stand out as aliens among them and they'll know by now that this is an alien craft."

* * * *

Emerald was too anxious to appreciate her first view of the colony of Centaurian-not that there was much of a view from the back of a military transport. There was no longer any doubt in her mind, unfortunately, that the Centaurians viewed them as a threat-the Anunnaki, anyway. She'd grown accustomed to their size. She rarely thought about it anymore except when something happened to draw her attention to it.

The guards that had met them at the foot of the gangplank as they disembarked brought it sharply to mind, however. She wasn't certain they'd even noticed her. They'd taken one look at Tariq and Koryn and visibly recoiled, holding their weapons far more threateningly. She didn't think they'd felt any less threatened by the androids. Although they were noticeably

shorter than the Anunnaki, they were still nearly a head taller than any of the soldiers that had met them.

She remembered thinking the first time she'd seen them that they had to be a race of giants. No doubt that was what was running through the minds of the soldiers and they weren't happy about the possibility of having them as enemies.

They were taken to holding cells and told that they would be informed when the council was ready to review their 'story'. Neither Tariq nor Koryn had said anything up until they were escorted to separate cells, but both balked at that. "She stays with us," Tariq said implacably.

Emerald sent him a pleading look. "It's alright, Tariq. I'll be fine."

"She's breeding," Koryn said tightly. "If you harm her"

The soldier in charge glanced from one to the other and finally studied Emerald. "She's human."

"I am," Emerald said. "I was a soldier of the federation. We're here because of me ... because they wanted to protect me."

The soldier looked at Tariq and Koryn skeptically. "You can explain everything to council. In the meantime, you'll occupy separate cells." He unbent slightly, however. "You won't come to any harm. I'll see to it."

She glanced at Tariq and Koryn again. "I'll be alright."

She could tell they still wanted to argue, but Tariq, at least, seemed to realize that it was pointless and might create problems for them when cooperation might not. He nodded stiffly at the soldier and watched them as she was escorted to a cell and locked in. To her relief, Tariq and the others allowed themselves to be imprisoned without argument.

As soon as the majority of the soldiers had filed out, leaving a half a dozen within view to guard them, Tariq spoke to Koryn in their language-which she, unfortunately, didn't understand any better than the guards.

"No talking!" one of the guards barked. "We'll move you if necessary."

Quiet fell over the building except for the occasional sounds of the soldiers as they shifted or coughed or spoke between themselves. Emerald turned finally to survey her cell and moved to the hard cot along one wall. After examining it, she decided it was clean enough and sat down to wait.

Hours passed. Despite her anxiety, Emerald dozed off. She was roused a little later as food was brought around. It was pretty horrible stuff, but she nibbled at it and lay down again. The next time she woke, the artificial lights were off and sunlight was filtering into her cell through the small window in the door. Groggy, she wondered if it was the light that had awoken her for a moment before she realized that the sounds she heard were the rhythmic tramp of feet.

Realizing their escort had returned, she rubbed her eyes, smoothed her hair the best she could with her fingers and got up. A face appeared at the window of her cell. She recognized him as the soldier who'd been in charge the night before. "The council has convened. We're here to escort you and your party."

Emerald nodded and stood waiting while the door was unlocked. She saw when she entered the corridor that the others had also been removed from their cells. They'd been placed in restraints and she felt her heart sink. Trying to tell herself as she was fitted with a pair of cuffs that they were merely being cautious, she fell in between Tariq and Koryn as they were escorted out and loaded onto the same transport, or one just like it.

She caught a glimpse of a crowd of gawkers as she climbed into the transport. Most of them were gaping at the Anunnaki, although she heard a woman's voice speculate on her presence among them.

There was another crowd waiting when they were allowed out of the transport, larger than the first. Despite everything, Emerald couldn't help but feel her spirits rise to see so many of her own people, all appearing strong and healthy and prosperous. The building they were escorted into was a boon to her spirits, as well. It was a large, well constructed building that had clearly stood for some time. She managed to catch a glimpse of the city as they reached the portico and pleasure filled her at the sight of it. It could've been most any small city

on the Earth that she'd known. Her chest tightened with a sense of homecoming she hadn't expected.

The hearing room inside was hardly vast, but it was a large room that also proclaimed Centaurian as a colony that had been well established.

They were escorted to the front, just beneath the dais where the council members sat.

She lifted her head to study them when she'd been seated, trying to decide from their expressions just how much trouble they were in.

The high councilor, a mature woman of indeterminate age, spoke first. "Which of you wishes to speak for your group?"

Tariq stood immediately.

Her brows rose almost to her hairline. "Where are you from?"

"Niribu."

The woman stared at him hard for several moments, almost as if she was trying to place the name. "This isn't one of the Earth colonies," she said finally. "Not but what it's clear you aren't one of us."

"We are called the Anunnaki."

"And you are?"

"Lord Tariq."

Surprise flickered in her eyes again. She leaned closer to one of the other councilors who spoke to her. "Since you aren't from one of our colonies and we've never heard of Niribu, I'm assuming that you've traveled a great distance?"

Tariq nodded. "We have, Lady. We hope to become colonists of Centaurian."

The councilor frowned. "I think we need to have a few questions answered before we get to that."

"I will be happy to answer whatever I'm able to."

"Who is the woman and why is she with you?" one of the other councilors asked abruptly. "She isn't Anunnaki."

"No. We took her from Earth."

"And she led you here?" another councilor demanded, clearly angry.

"She did not. She didn't know of this place. We found the information within the computer of one of those who attacked Earth."

That caused a general commotion and not just among the councilors. The high councilor banged her gavel until the room quieted. "What attack?"

Tariq frowned. "It was long before we arrived. We hadn't

determined when it happened when we left Earth and returned to Niribu. All we know is that Earth was attacked and there were few survivors."

"But the woman was one?" the high councilor asked sharply, an odd hitch in her voice. "Stand up and approach!"

Unnerved at the abrupt order, Emerald stood up, glanced at Tariq uneasily and then strode purposefully toward the dais.

The high councilor looked down at her, slowly rising from her seat. She'd turned so pale Emerald wondered for several moments if she was ill. "What's your name?"

"Emerald."

The woman swallowed convulsively several times. "Emerald?" she asked faintly.

"I was Corporal Emerald Johnson of the 11th Earth reserves battalion."

The woman's chin wobbled. "Mother?"

Emerald stared at the woman blankly for several moments, feeling as if the floor had fallen out from under her. She'd thought she was imagining things when she'd noticed the woman seemed familiar. "Cara?"

"Oh my god!" she exclaimed. "It is you!"

She pushed her chair out abruptly and raced toward the end of the council table. Emerald met her there, flinging her arms around her daughter and hugging her tightly. Both of them were sobbing so loudly that it wasn't until they managed to compose themselves a little that they thought about the room filled with people.

Cara mopped her face with her hand and glanced around and then addressed the rest of the council. "It's my mother! She was one of those who stayed behind to fight the invaders!"

Glancing distractedly at the others, she met Emerald's gaze again. "Who are they?"

Emerald reddened. "Tariq and Koryn are my men. They rescued me and brought me here. The others are ... their friends who helped us."

Cara shook her head and turned to the council members again. "I'll speak with her in my office."

"What about them?" Emerald asked when Cara took her hand and tried to lead her away.

Cara looked at the men. "They'll wait here until you've explained everything to me." She hesitated. "Remove their restraints."

Emerald threw Tariq and Koryn a reassuring glance as Cara led her from the hearing room through a door at the back the councilors used to access the room. As they made their way

down the corridor outside, she studied Cara, as appalled to see her daughter was older than her as her daughter no doubt was.

It was unsettling, dismaying to think of all the years they'd missed even while it thrilled her to see her daughter when she'd never thought to see her again.

It was disturbing on another level, as well, she realized when Cara had dragged her into her office and caught her shoulders to study her face. "You look just like you did when I last saw you," she said after a moment, wariness in her eyes now. "Tell me how that's possible."

Emerald swallowed with an effort, but there was no point in trying to lie. "I died there, Cara. They resurrected me."

A look of horror crossed Cara's features and then anger and disappointment. "You aren't my mother!"

Emerald felt tears clog her throat. "I am your mother."

"You're a clone of my mother!" she said angrily.

"I know how everyone feels about cloning, Cara, but I am your mother. I'm not just a copy. I remember everything. I remember the way you looked the day I sent you away to protect you. I remember before that when you and I talked about coming here so long ago to become colonists. Please ... don't look at me like that when I've waited so long to see you again. I would never have had the chance if it wasn't for them. The aliens

overran us. They killed everyone they could find."

Doubt flickered in her eyes. "How could you remember ... any of those things?"

Emerald shook her head. "Don't you see? I couldn't if I wasn't your mother. They could've simply cloned me and I would have been just a copy, but I'm not. I'm Emerald. They resurrected me. I remember the day you were born. I remember your first tooth-your first crush. I remember the terrible argument we had when I told you I'd gotten a ticket for you. You begged me to stay. You threatened to run away." She swallowed with an effort. "And I locked you in your room so you couldn't."

"I was so angry with you!" Cara said. "And angry with myself that I'd warned you."

Emerald opened her arms hopefully. "I didn't want to send you away, baby, but I wanted you to have a chance at a life and you didn't have one there."

Cara hesitated and embraced her again, weeping. "I want you to be my mother. I know you aren't, but I want it to be so."

Emerald stroked her hair, trying to sooth her as she had when she'd been little. "I feel like me. I couldn't remember much at first and I was so afraid, but then the memories began to come back and ... I felt them all. I didn't just remember them as if they'd happened to someone else." She leaned away after a moment to study her daughter's face, saddened that they'd missed so many years. "Did you meet a nice young

man? I never dreamed you'd become a high councilor! I had such hopes in sending you here, but I didn't know you'd do so well!"

Cara chuckled abruptly. "Neither of us were terribly young by then. I kept waiting and hoping you'd come. Finally, I accepted that you wouldn't and I started my family without you. I've got three children-and three grandchildren." She shook her head. "You know what? I've just realized that I've got nothing to complain about! I'm glad they resurrected you and gave me the chance to see you again. I don't care how it was done. I feel like I have my mother back and that's all that matters."

Emerald was so relieved she cried all over again. Finally, they both dried their eyes and settled to talk. Cara had barely been in her teens when she'd sent her away, though, and she was leery of how much her daughter might have changed over the years, so she was careful in explaining what had happened. Unfortunately, there was no way to avoid explaining why she'd been resurrected. She glossed over the slavery issue, however, and told her that a more powerful Anunnaki lord had decided to claim her and that Tariq and Koryn had decided to flee with her rather than lose her. It was close enough to the truth, she decided. No one needed to know that the Anunnaki thought that it was their right to enslave the human race and it wasn't likely to win friends for any of them if it was known.

She just hoped she would have the chance to tell the others her slightly revised version of the truth.

To her relief, she did. When her mother decided she'd heard

enough to make a decision, she escorted her back to the hearing room and cleared it of spectators so that she and the other council members could discuss their situation and come to a decision. She was allowed to leave with the Anunnaki and they were taken to a hotel near the council building to rest and wait to hear their fate.

Koryn, she discovered, true to form was more preoccupied with the 'science' of the development than anything else. "Even considering that time is unpredictable from one place to another in space, it doesn't seem to me that your daughter would still be alive after all this time. Of course, we never did figure out how long it had been since the invasion, but even so What is the typical lifespan of humans now?"

Emerald shook her head at him. "It's been a while-I don't know what it is now. The average life expectancy when I was alive before, though, was around two hundred."

Both Tariq and Koryn looked startled. "That long?" Tariq echoed. "Humans didn't live nearly that long the last time we studied them."

"I guess that would explain it then," Koryn said thoughtfully. "They don't extend by resurrection I don't suppose?"

"I don't think so. Everyone was opposed to human cloning in my time, although they did clone species of animals that were endangered, and Cara wasn't especially pleased when she realized I had been."

"Why the hell not?" Tariq growled. "She seemed happy to see you-hysterically happy."

"It's just the way we look at it," Emerald said tiredly. "I think she's still having a hard time accepting that I'm really me."

?

Chapter Nineteen

It had been a long, tiring day for all of them and Emerald was looking forward to a long, hot shower and bed when she finished cleaning the kitchen. Hearing voices outside the window, she looked out, surprised to discover Tariq and Koryn were on their way back in. Either they'd made short work of their own chores or it had taken her longer to clean up than she'd thought.

Drying her hands, she went to the table to collect Anna from her chair. She'd just lifted the baby to her hip when the two

came in. Tariq's eyes lit instantly when they settled on the baby and he crossed the room to take her. "She's too heavy for you to carry around now," he said chidingly, grinning at the baby as she smiled at him and began jabbering, as if she was trying to tell him something.

Emerald smiled at both of them indulgently. "You just use that as an excuse because you like holding her."

His eyes gleamed with amusement. "I need an excuse?" He returned his attention to the baby, disentangling her little fist from his hair. "That's daddy's bad girl. Aren't you, Anna?"

She grinned at him, wrinkling her nose.

Emerald chuckled. "Quit telling her that! She thinks it's a compliment!"

Koryn had joined them. He slipped around behind Emerald and pulled her back against his length, running his hands down over her belly and cupping the growing mound. The baby obligingly kicked and then began to do jumping jacks. It was almost as if she knew it was her daddy and she was so excited she wanted to leap into his arms. "Don't get her stirred up! I'm tired."

He bent down to kiss the top of her head. "It's nice outside. Come sit with me on the porch and I'll rock the baby to sleep."

"Which baby?" Emerald asked with amusement.

"Both of my babies," he murmured against her ear.

She was tempted. She might have declined except that Tariq apparently liked the idea. He'd headed toward the porch with Anna.

Taking her silence as an assent, Koryn tucked her under one arm and guided her through the house and out onto the front porch. Tariq was already occupying one of the huge rockers, Anna perched on his lap and watching the movement of his finger as he pointed out the stars in the sky that were distant galaxies and named them off in his own language.

"That's why we can't understand a word she says," Emerald said, vaguely disapproving. "She's trying to speak your language and mine at the same time."

Tariq sent her an indulgent look. "She's smart. She'll learn both."

Koryn planted himself in the other rocker and pulled her down on his lap, carefully arranging her so that her back was to Tariq. It was one of those 'subtle' moves they still made to exclude each other whenever the opportunity arose. Not that she was complaining! They almost never got into really heated arguments anymore and they hadn't come to blows since Anna was born. She sent him a chiding look and turned around.

Irritation flickered across his face, but he relaxed when she settled her head on his shoulder, curling an arm around her

and splaying his hand on the mound of her belly. "It didn't take you guys long to do your chores," Emerald murmured lazily as Koryn set the rocker into motion.

"Aeon had already done everything. We just stayed to talk a bit."

Amusement flickered through her. "To avoid kitchen duty, I don't doubt."

Tariq didn't even have the grace to pretend that wasn't the case. He grinned, but he focused it on Anna.

"It was your night," Koryn reminded her.

Aeon came around the corner of the house about that time, still dripping from a fresh bath-which she didn't doubt he'd performed under the hose in the yard. She didn't know if it was purely out of courtesy to make sure he didn't track anything nasty into the house or because he wasn't comfortable with their living arrangements. She thought it was a little of both. It was hard to ignore the fact that he avoided the house-and her-as much as possible.

Maybe it was just her imagination, though?

If he really did want to avoid her why had he moved in to start with? Loyalty to Tariq?

Possibly, she decided. Unlike the others, who'd found a woman and settled down within the first year after they'd

arrived, Aeon hadn't seemed to have any luck with the opposite sex-which baffled her. To her mind, he was far more handsome than Mikail or Daris or even Nicholas. He was quieter than they were, though, seemed shy around her so maybe that was it?

He hesitated when he saw them on the porch and then continued as if he hadn't, moving around the porch and finally settling on the steps with his back against one of the posts.

"You still planning to go into the city tomorrow, Aeon?" Tariq asked lazily.

Aeon glanced at him. "Yes."

"I don't suppose I could prevail upon you to take Em and the baby? She wanted to do some trading for a few things. I have to go to Middlebrook tomorrow to inspect the fortifications they've been working on to discourage the natives from pilfering."

Aeon glanced at her, his gaze settling on her face for a long moment and then sliding down to her belly and Koryn's hand resting there.

"I'd take her," Koryn volunteered, "but I have a dozen appointments tomorrow."

Emerald saw the reluctance in Aeon's face. It stung, but she dismissed it. "Stop it! I can manage just fine by myself. Don't bother Aeon. He's got enough to do."

He looked away. "I would be honored to escort your lady," he said after a long moment, his voice tight with reluctance.

Emerald's hurt deepened. She couldn't for the life of her figure out what she'd done that made Aeon so reluctant to be around her. She was always friendly, always had been. It wasn't just gratitude that he was the one who'd rescued her from Mylor-and been beaten and thrown in a cell in the hold of Lady Selena's ship for his pains by Lady Selena's men! That was part of it, but most of it, she thought, was because she saw that he was miserably lonely and she wanted to banish that look from his eyes.

Except he wouldn't let her. She always had the feeling that he was holding her at arm's length-she supposed because she was Tariq's lady, but she didn't see why that prevented them from being friends!

Actually, he confused her. He'd never once returned from the city without bringing her something-usually another flower for her flower garden. He'd been bringing her flowers since they'd received their land lot-even before they'd built the wood frame house. In fact, he'd helped Tariq and Koryn build the house and when she'd mentioned that she'd always loved flowers and wanted to make a flower garden so that she could be surrounded by flowers, he had noticed-not Tariq or Koryn-Aeon. And although he'd only moved in a few months earlier to help them around the farm, he'd visited them often before that and brought her flowers.

It was just odd that he went out of his way to find beautiful, exotic flowers for her and trade for them and yet was so ... distant. It was almost as if he was afraid to get too close.

Of course, she supposed that was because of Tariq-maybe Koryn, too, but mostly Tariq, she thought because he still thought of Tariq as his lord.

She released a pent up breath. "It's alright, Aeon. You don't have to take me just because Tariq asked."

"He wants to take you," Tariq murmured. "Don't you, Aeon?"

Aeon turned to look at Tariq hard. "Yes," he said after a moment.

"He just doesn't trust himself around you," Koryn added.

Aeon surged to his feet abruptly and sent Koryn a hard look.

Emerald was startled by the comment herself, but Aeon's abrupt move distracted her even as she glanced at Koryn and she turned to look at him instead. Dismay flickered through her. She hadn't seen such a look of rage on Aeon's face since he'd confronted Mylor about hurting her.

"Koryn! Don't tease him! It's alright, Aeon. He didn't mean anything by it."

"No. I just wanted to see if Tariq was right And I see he was."

"I have not touched your woman," Aeon growled. "I have not looked at her in any way that was disrespectful."

"Don't get too bent out of shape about it," Tariq drawled easily. "A man has needs. It isn't as if we don't know that."

Even with the shadows of darkness, Emerald could see Aeon flush. She felt her own face heat.

"I manage my ... needs," Aeon said through gritted teeth.

"No very fucking well when you can't be around Em without staring a hole through her," Tariq said dryly.

Emerald sat up abruptly. "Tariq! What in the world has gotten in to you?" She glanced reproachfully at Koryn. "Both of you!"

"Well, there's no subtle way to handle this," Tariq said somewhat irritably, getting to his feet. "You're part of the family if you want to be, Aeon, and if Em wants you to be." He paused beside the chair where Emerald sat. "If you can find it in your heart, Em, I'm not going to object."

Emerald gaped at his back as he went into the house to put his sleeping daughter to bed.

Koryn got up and set her own her feet. "I'd say three was a crowd-well, it is a fucking crowd, but so is two and Tariq's right. The poor bastard is miserable and only you can do something about it. It looks like he's here to stay anyway. If he's going to be sharing all the work and helping us take care

of you, he deserves a little more than a roof over his head and food to fill his belly."

He glanced at Aeon. "Anyway, we're never going to find out if my efforts worked any other way. He sure as hell isn't going to get any other woman pregnant when he won't touch one."

Emerald turned to look at Aeon uncomfortably when Koryn had stalked inside. "I don't know what to say," she murmured after a moment.

Aeon stared at her for a long moment, seemed to debate with himself and stepped onto the porch. Emerald held her ground with an effort as he moved closer, halting only when he was hovering over her. He studied her for a long moment and finally lifted his hand to caress her cheek. "Say that you want me ... or that you do not. They have said that I can have what I have wanted since the first time I saw you. I know I should not leap at what they have offered, but I find I cannot resist. The gods know that I have tried not to love you. I tried to tell myself that I could not love you, that I had not been designed for such things, and yet I know that I do. Do you feel that you could love me ... even a little, lady?"

Emerald felt the breath leave her. Remorse filled her at that last, chasing the shock and filling her with warmth. "Oh Aeon!" she whispered, regretful that she'd so taken his friendship for granted that she hadn't considered that she might have wounded him many times in her thoughtlessness. "I already love you ... and more a little!"

He released a pent up breath and slipped his hand to the base of her skull, shifting closer until his body brushed hers. She lifted onto her toes to meet him when he bent his head toward hers and matched his lips to hers.

His kiss shook her to her core. Right up until she felt his lips on hers, until she breathed his breath and took his scent inside of her, she'd thought she merely cherished him as a dear friend and the hero who'd saved her from the villainous Mylor. His touch dispelled any notion she'd held that she felt nothing but friendship, however, admired him only because of that one moment of heroism or even for the fact that he was pleasing to her eyes.

They were both shaking with need by the time he lifted his lips from hers. Without a word, he scooped her into his arms. Instead of taking her inside and to the room that was his, however, he carried her down the steps and into the garden he'd made for her-with love, she realized at last-settling her on the soft grasses at the center and following her down.

Regret and discomfort filled her when he'd undressed her and exposed her body, misshapen with advanced pregnancy. She wondered how he could possibly find her the least bit attractive, but he bent his head to kiss the mound as if it was his child housed there and not Koryn's, and his expression when he lifted his head and looked at her was filled with heated desire. "I want to watch my child grow here as I have watched Lord Tariq's and Koryn's," he murmured as he dipped down again and kissed his way upward to her breasts.

Emerald was torn between delight at his touch and anxiety right up until he began to suckle her breasts hungrily. She forgot everything then. Even her perceptions narrowed to that one point where his mouth pulled at the sensitive nub that tipped her breast, sending electric charges through her that took her breath away.

He rolled onto his back after a few moments, carrying her so that she was splayed on top of his chest and belly and urged her to sit up and take him inside of her. She needed no urging. She was nearing a sense of desperation to feel him inside her and she sat up at once, settling on her knees as she grasped his turgid flesh and stroked it for a moment before she lifted away and aligned his body with hers.

Her eyes drifted closed of their own accord as she felt the pressure build against the mouth of her sex and then her flesh yield reluctantly to his possession, but she watched his face from beneath her lashes in the moonlight, saw it grow more taut as she slowly engulfed his flesh. It sent a surge of anticipation through her.

He sat up abruptly, coiling his arms around her tightly and pressing her down until he was so deeply inside of her she could scarcely catch her breath. He sought her lips again, spearing his fingers in her hair and guiding her mouth to his, holding her while he sucked hungrily at her lips and then her tongue when he'd coaxed it into his mouth. He broke the kiss almost as abruptly as he'd begun it, pressing his forehead to hers. "It feels ... like heaven inside of you, Em."

Emerald's heart leapt, hammering with a fresh burst of excitement. She nuzzled his face. "It feels like heaven to have you inside of me, Aeon."

He expelled a ragged breath and began to move, lifting her and pressing her down again faster and faster until he attained the rhythm he needed. Emerald was past awareness of anything but the feel of his flesh gliding back forth along her channel and the climb of her body toward ecstasy. She sucked in a sharp breath when the first wave hit her, jolting her so hard she tensed all over. Aeon shuddered, uttered a hoarse grunt and began driving into her faster. She felt his cock buck inside of her and then the scalding heat of his seed bathing her channel. It sent her soaring to a higher level, seemed to intensify the convulsions of her climax until she was gasping and moaning incessantly.

For several moments afterwards, they simply leaned together, shivering in the aftermath. Aeon leaned back after a moment, carrying her down with him. She was too weak for several moments to move, but the baby had other ideas. It began to kick at the restriction.

Aeon uttered a husky chuckle and rolled to his side. "She objects to the blunt rod poking her," he murmured.

Surprise flickered through Emerald, but she smiled against his chest. "Apparently."

"Does she always do that?" he asked after a few moments.

"She doesn't like being crowded," Emerald murmured sleepily and then yawned.

"I have worn my baby out?"

"Your baby was already worn out," Emerald muttered ruefully.

"A fantastic climax was all I needed to put me in a coma."

Aeon's arms tightened around her. "You are my baby. I did not think that I would ever touch you as I wanted to."

Emerald nuzzled his chest and kissed a spot above his breast bone. "If you'd said something sooner you wouldn't have had to wait."

He shifted away from her to study her face. "Truly?"

Emerald roused enough to touch his face. "Truly."

"Now and forever," he murmured.

Emerald smiled ruefully. "Just the four of us-and the babies, of course-one very large, and hopefully very happy, family."

"I am happy."

"It doesn't take much to make you happy," she said teasingly.

"Only you."

* * * *

Emerald hadn't realized just how big her happy family was until they all gathered at the farm to celebrate the day of settlement and her daughter Cara, and Cara's daughters and their men and their daughters arrived.

Cara looked at her askance when Aeon finally got up, settled her in the chair they'd both been occupying, and strode away to 'help' the other men gathered around the spit where they were roasting a pig. Emmy, her namesake and Cara's eldest daughter, sent her a look of amusement. "I know it's none of my business ... but when did he become part of the family?"

Emerald caressed her belly. "Years ago-unofficially. Officially about nine months ago-just before I had Koryn's daughter, Sybil."

Emmy chuckled, shaking her head. "I thought that sappy look he had on his face the last time I was here was telling. I would've spaced the 'happiness' out a little more, though."

Emerald shrugged. "I wanted to wait until Sybil was at least a year old to breed again, but Aeon wanted to 'practice'. I have to say Koryn's fertility treatments are ... effective," she added ruefully.

"I think half the colony would agree with you," Cara said. "The other half is just grateful he came up with something non-chemical to use as birth control that didn't involve abstinence. Speaking of which"

Emerald reddened. "Like I said," she said pointedly. "None of

us had anticipated such a quick turnaround. I informed all of them that there wouldn't be any more babies in this house ... not for a while anyway!"

"I take it that Koryn and Tariq were a little outdone when they discovered Aeon had planted a boy?" Emmy asked, chuckling.

Emerald grinned. "They tried to pretend they weren't-not that they don't dote on their girls-but you know men!"

"Not as well as you do, clearly," Emmy retorted. "I don't know how you handle having three Anunnaki! Both of my men annoy the shit out of me most of the time and make me wonder why I agreed to two! Mom always said you were a hell of a woman. I just thought she was exaggerating."

Emerald smiled and reached over to squeeze Cara's hand. "It's a hell of a job, but someone has to do it!" she retorted, laughing. She saw when she glanced their way that her laughter had drawn her men's attention. She sent them all a smoldering look and blew them a kiss. "Anyway, I love them and they love to love me ... and they're very, very good at absolutely everything they do. They're Anunnaki after all-and naturally perfect in every way."

"Mom!" Cara said, exasperated.

Emerald laughed. "I was wondering when you'd express your disapproval."

"I don't disapprove ... exactly," Cara said. "You're a lot wilder than I was, though!"

"I doubt that! You were thirteen going on thirty and a regular little hellion before I sent you here."

Cara shrugged but reddened. "I knew I shouldn't have told you all of that! Alright, so the apple didn't fall far from the tree."

"They rarely do."

The End