



Joon's Temptation

By

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Chapter One

Belle Amity Compound, Earth 2356 post apocalypse

In the past decade, the Belle Amity Sisterhood had made great technological advances. Thanks to their trade agreements with the warriors of Enyo their breeding program flourished.

Mother Marian folded her hands, seeking guidance from the Goddess. For the sisterhood faced a new crisis.

Their ambassador to Enyo's Council of Elders was accused of interfering with internal politics. A warrant for her detention would be issued soon. If it hadn't already happened. She refused to believe that Joon would have been so clumsy as to be caught manipulating the Enyo elders. But, the seductive planet's warrior had a strange effect on young women and even her loyal Commander might not be immune.

The Holy Mother needed every skill she possessed to negotiate the delicate balance between supporting her officer and protecting the sisterhood's treaty with Enyo.

Quieting her mind, she composed herself to do the Goddess's bidding and opened the communication link with Commander Joon.

* * * *

Ten years earlier

Two millennia after the Great War, civilization still teetered perilously close to the edge of destruction. Most of those who had survived the nuclear and biologic disasters fell during the subsequent centuries of pillaging, plagues, and famine. Human and animal populations had not recovered from the devastation. Along with so many deaths, much of mankind's accomplishments had been lost.

In the first of Earth's darkest hours, the warriors, strongest of all the males, seized every viable spacecraft, escaping from the doomed planet with their mates.

The ever-dwindling numbers of humans left behind were largely sterile. As the years passed, those rare men, still capable of viable sperm production, fathered only female offspring. There had been no reports of a male birth in more than century.

Small bands of women toiled to carve out a meager existence, some formed nomadic tribes, and others roamed the land alone or in loose groups where the only law was survival.

One group of females, known as the Society of Belle Amity, quietly worked--protecting and advancing the knowledge of their sisterhood.

Even now, the skies stayed dark much of time, the winds fierce, and the temperatures bitterly cold. Though conditions on most of Earth remained harsh, through rigorous training and ruthless discipline, the sisters of Belle Amity progressed and even prospered. Their giant hydroponic conservatories, powered by harnessing the fierce winds, yielded an oxygen-rich atmosphere for the compound, in addition to growing

nutrient-dense produce. Their clever scientists synthesized what they could neither cultivate nor manufacture.

Except for sperm.

Their bank of frozen semen declined steadily. This critical shortage forced them to first restrict allocation to only those members of the collective, who had high breeding scores. And then they were forced to limit impregnation to proven breeders.

When the last men on the planet died, the sperm supply continued to fall with no hope of replenishment. With less than a dozen specimens remaining, the sisters of Belle Amity faced their own extinction.

Having run out of options, they planned a hazardous gambit, seeking the warriors, who'd abandoned Earth two millennia earlier, in a last desperate bid to re-supply the sperm bank.

The twelve-year intergalactic trip meant a risky transition into stasis, and an even more risky reanimation procedure, for the pilot. This hazardous feat was in addition to all the dangers inherent in any space flight. Despite the long odds for success, and the many challenges to be overcome, the sisters of Belle Amity proceeded. With the survival of their kind on the line, they carefully honed their most elegant weapon, Dalila Theron, for this critical mission.

As soon as was possible, a company of Belle Amity sisters followed Dalila's path. Under the Command of Joon d'Magique, the sisterhood arrived en masse on Enyo.

After a tense start, Commander Joon negotiated favorable terms for ongoing relations between the two worlds, becoming the sisterhood's first ambassador. .

* * * *

Enyo, 2392 post exodus

Joon set aside the ancient e-text on the extinct Centurions, which always gave her comfort, and folded her hands. With small adjustments of her dress, she composed herself to wait in the correct posture for Mother Marian's holo-conference to begin.

She never wondered why she waited. Waiting was part of what every member of the sisterhood did, a part of what a commander did, and certainly, a large part of what an ambassador did. She'd learned these things first hand. Since, her duty required her to fulfill all of these roles.

What she wondered about was whether or not she was still a woman.

She shifted, almost imperceptibly. Still, such restlessness was unacceptable in any Belle Amity disciple. She swallowed a sigh.

Normally, she excelled at waiting. Lately, it had been hard to school her mind to quiet and to maintain the rigid posture protocol dictated. As the peak of her fertility cycle grew closer, the waiting got even harder. It seemed that the older she got the more violently her body protested her barren state.

Last quarter, she'd been confined to bed for a miserable week. Here on Enyo the weeks were only seventy-two hours long, but even a three-day week was much too long when she was wracked with pain.

She concentrated on loosening her neck muscles, trying to forestall the headache

that threatened to make her discomfort worse. Her cycles had never been like this back on Earth.

Since her arrival on Enyo, her hormones had gone from mild rebellion to no-holds-barred guerilla warfare. She wasn't sure whether it was the abundance of testosterone exuding warriors, or the shocking encounter with Dalila, which was to blame. Either way, the misery was Enyo related and she couldn't help wishing that her tour here would end.

To distract herself from the uncomfortable vigil, she let her thoughts wander back to the last time she'd see Dalila.

The disciple had been desperate to know the truth of her mate's secret hearts. But, she'd controlled herself well, hiding the need from anyone other than another sister.

Joon had studied her openly. "There was another factor influencing my decision to persuade the councilman, do you wish to hear of it?"

Plainly, not all that sure, Dalila had said, "Please."

"Very well. You have a rare portion of courage, disciple. I would see your genes carried to future generations." Joon had smiled, pleased to share a positive assessment. Then she'd started to make the sign of the Goddess over the other woman, signaling the end of their conversation.

Dalila halted her with another question. "Kelvar and Dexon, did you....did you influence them also?"

"It wasn't necessary," Joon said with as much reassurance as the words could hold. "When I examined them, I read their hearts. You have no reason to doubt your mates' love."

"Thank you," Dalila said, bowing deeply. "I need to find them."

Joon had returned the bow. "The sisters and I will be leaving for New Eden, the capitol of Enyo, in a few minutes. I take my farewell of you now, disciple. May the Goddess keep you until we meet again."

"And you, Commander Joon."

And then she made the sign of the Goddess over Dalila, giving the sisterhood's blessing to Dalila's unusual union with the warriors.

When Joon had proceeded toward her craft, the deep growl of warrior voices halted her journey. Her steps slowed, she turned her head, glancing back at the lovers. Needing to reassure herself that all was well with the disciple and her mates.

The Enyo men had caged Dalila between them, speaking to her in their rough manner. She had nuzzled each man in turn, reassuring both warriors of her love.

Certain that all was well, Joon had tried to make herself leave. But, the three lovers had captured her curiosity and her gaze remained locked on the trio.

One of the twin warriors had untangled himself from the embrace, taking a stride away from them, and then he'd paused to say something to the man still holding Dalila.

Unconsciously, Joon had put her fist to her mouth, stifling a cry of loss. The strength of her reaction surprised her. It was an unconventional breeding arrangement. And yet, she'd sensed that the three of them belonged together.

Perhaps, Joon had tapped into Dalila's feelings, because the small disciple spoke

to the man leaving, plainly displeased about something. Soon the scolded warrior was kissing his mate. As the kiss continued, big hands cupped the small woman's bottom, pulling her flush against the warrior's hard body.

Though the evening had cooled, Joon had grown warm. Her breasts had tightened and the channel between her legs had grown liquid with wanting while deep inside her belly an even more fundamental need had unfurled.

Twisting in his arms, Dalila had captured the other man and pulled him closer. She'd kissed him thoroughly. He'd returned her caress with so much enthusiasm that Joon had found herself licking her own lips. And then he'd covered Dalila's breasts with his hands.

Joon hadn't been able to keep from noticing that Dalila's breasts were small, certainly no larger than her own. Shamefully, she'd continued to stare even as she projected an image of herself on board the departing craft, unable to tear herself away from the erotic scene, taking place in the privacy of the jungle.

The spaceship's engine roared to life. And still, Joon watched the lovers, straining her capacity for illusion by cloaking her presence among the lush tropical plants in order to move closer.

Dalila's warriors had worked together to strip off her uniform, and then theirs. At last, there had been no layers left between them. One man kissed the side of the disciple's neck, stroking from between her woman's slit to her back passage.

As the other man lifted Dalila, she'd wrapped her legs around the other's lean hips, opening her secrets to both warriors. Unable to resist, Joon edged closer, confident that her cloaking would protect her from discovery.

"Now, sweet Dalila?" One warrior growled against her mouth.

The man's deep voice made Joon's lips itch.

"Yes," Dalila whimpered, wriggling between the two incredible male bodies with their intimidating breeding shafts fully aroused--hard, long, and thick.

Joon's sex had fluttered hopefully, her gaze riveted on the scene.

And then they'd both plunged into Dalila's fragile body.

Joon had been frozen in terror.

Amazingly, the tiny disciple had not been ripped apart by the warriors' savage possession. Her cries had been those of unmistakable pleasure.

When Dalila had screamed in satisfaction. Joon had stuffed her fist into her mouth to muffle the moan of envy that rose from her throat, hungering for what she could never have--the magic connection between the disciple and her warriors.

The lovers' sounds, which had carried in the still of the night, pierced Joon's heart with a craving she'd been unable deny.

Even now, three years later, simply remembering the scene made her hot, itchy, and restless. Recently, her misery had been exacerbated by a hormonal imbalance, which she attributed to her imminent period of fertility.

If it weren't for the expected holo-cast from the Holy Mother, she would have put herself in a deep trance for the next few days until her breeding season had passed.

Reluctantly, Joon dragged her thoughts back to reality. The air above the holo-

port shivered, warning her of an approaching communiqué. Carefully, she schooled her features to reveal nothing of the storm that raged deep inside her very core.

* * * *

Since leaving the dying planet of Earth for the verdant tropical lushness of Enyo, the warriors had not grown soft. They continued to build on their strengths, developing a race of super-men. They'd made great technological advances and raised their collective standard of living to new heights. Importing rescued slaves to augment their ranks.

Only one problem resisted their researchers' efforts. The men of Enyo continued to produce male sperm--almost exclusively. Each year since their arrival on Enyo, the number of women born declined. After two millennia of predominately male births, the gender imbalance had grown critical.

Extensive exploration of their new galaxy yielded no viable female human life forms. Intergalactic travel remained extremely hazardous. In their most recent effort to increase the number of female births, the council of elders, who governed Enyo, had instituted a mandatory testing of all unchosen men.

Now, only those warriors producing significant quantities of X gametes were eligible to be chosen as a mate by a breeding woman.

The men ineligible for breeding grew restless and unruly. Children of either sex had become a pampered and indulged rarity. The few women, capable of reproduction, were both worshipped and closely guarded.

The ineligible males burned off their aggression by participating in war games, by playing extreme sports, and by indulging their carnal appetites with the ladies of light.

The ladies of light were unreal women, or if a warrior preferred--a lord of light, designed to match a man's fantasies. They existed only for the life of a single session in a holo-arcade unit. In theory, a warrior could indulge in the holo-world of sensual delights during his free time as long as no other patrons waited and his work credit balance remained positive. In practice, the waiting lines for the pleasure units were long. And warriors were always limited to one fifteen minute session.

With the influx of the Earth women, the breeding pool had been restored to a sustainable level. In exchange, the breeding eligible warriors of Enyo generously donated sperm to be shipped back to the Belle Amity compound on Earth.

Though the number of breeders had increased dramatically, the shortage of women remained acute. Warriors were still evaluated and rated as acceptable mating partners based on rigid standards of merit--physical, mental, and conduct.

* * * *

Mythos stripped out of his uniform. Stepping into the sanitizer he let the hot water, and then the warm air, remove the sweat and tension from his most recent mission. Before sleep, he closed and locked the entrance to his room to prevent interruption. The details of his sparsely furnished quarters hardly registered in his awareness. A clean sleeping couch and privacy were all he needed. An oversized seat with easy access to the enviro controls beckoned him to take his ease.

He ignored the promise of comfort until he'd assured his privacy. Only then did

he allow his tired muscles to relax into the ease of the customized chair built to handle his oversized body. He tilted back before activating his personal reader. Rapidly, he skimmed the headline news, moving on to his recorded articles.

Quickly scanning the sharp display, he eagerly absorbed every account the recorder had accumulated for him about the Earthling witch. Pausing the rapid scroll, he studied an image of the female magic wielder. Aware that he'd become obsessed with the alien woman, he still couldn't stop absorbing every scrap of information about her.

His obsession was illogical. The time he'd spent as a sex slave controlled by a Maldorean witch continued to fuel his nightmares. He rubbed the slave collar portal just under the skin on the back of his neck. As far as he could tell, it still carried the witch's ward. Though the woman was long dead, carrying her mark was hateful. A permanent reminder that he'd been too weak to prevent what was done to him.

So, what was it about the Earth witch that haunted him?

On Enyo, all women were rare. As an alien, he was ineligible for mating. And his treatment aboard the slaver had eliminated all pleasure from sex, leaving only a passion for revenge. Therefore, females were less than nothing to him. Except for this one strange Earth woman.

Maybe, that was part of the secret of the witch's appeal. She looked nothing like a Maldorean female. The magic wielder had the face of a fierce angel and there was an ethereal purity to her slim form. On the rare holo-casts he'd seen of her, she'd moved with impossible grace.

Her voice was a siren's song. Listening to her, he felt something, stirring deep inside. It was as if she spoke to him alone. A whisper of desire snaked past his defenses, and slipped into his system, making him shiver erotically.

For a second, he thought his cock had stirred. Then the usual nausea rose, threatening to choke him. Sickened by his fascination, and uneasy with the vague longing for a true connection like he'd never known, he finally turned off the recordings.

A dream fragment--flickered just outside of his conscious awareness. He never remembered dreams, except for the nightmares from his years in captivity. But, there were times when he awoke sticky from his own release. Those times had occurred after studying the Earth witch.

Clearly, she was dangerous.

* * * *

Killing time, Helax logged in to check his credit balance. In theory, he could overspend. But, in reality, he'd have to work on it. The Enyo Space Corps fed and clothed him. He got to fly the latest ships and he didn't have worry about how competitive the mating standards were. His nonexistent sperm count disqualified him from even the hope of consideration. His rating, a big fat F, was available to anyone with access to military records. The exact same information could be read--by anyone with a clue--with a glance at his personal tat.

It could have been worse.

No one knew why he was out of the breeding pool. Except for the lab tech, who'd run his fertility test. And even then, there'd been nothing to identify him other

than a numeric code. His shameful secret was safe.

He sure as fuck wasn't going to volunteer the humiliating fact to anyone. On a planet obsessed with breeding, it was bad enough being disqualified. If it got out that he was shooting blanks, he would be fighting to defend his warrior status every day for the rest of his miserable life.

"You ready to head out, man?" Mythos's baritone was a welcome interruption of Helax's gloomy thoughts.

They'd been friends ever since the big guy had entered Helax's cadet class.

Something inexplicable, but powerful had drawn him to the feral youngling. Amazingly, Mythos had accepted his tentative offer of friendship. They'd been together ever since. It was almost enough to make him believe in destiny.

"More than, bud--more than." He grinned at his friend and logged off the banking system, grabbing his shades on the way out.

He shook off the last traces of his serious mood, admiring his friend. Too bad the ladies of light were totally indiscriminating. Mythos would have impressed the hell out of a living, breathing woman.

As a non-native, his friend had the same F rating worked into his tat. But, it was a safe bet that the rippling mass of muscle wasn't shooting blanks out of his cock.

To make up for his totally fucked-up case of envy, Helax clapped the big guy's broad back. "I'll buy your first session."

His impulsive gesture yanked the big warrior's head around. "What's up--did you win the triple moon shot lottery?"

"Nah, I just like your ugly ass."

Mythos stiffened.

Ah shit, incredibly bad choice of words.

Helax knew how touchy his man was--shit, anyone who'd done time on a slaver had a right to his issues. The big guy never talked about that part of his life. He didn't need to--even an idiot knew what happened to slaves of both genders aboard the Maldorean mining ships.

He took a shot at fixing the damage he'd done. "Don't go getting twisted on me. I'm talking like in a totally hetro way, you big jerk."

A sorry excuse for a grin split his friend's wicked lips. But, he teased back gamely. "Sure, you keep to telling yourself that."

Helax laughed, but he hadn't missed the fact that his man had sidestepped the offer. As far as he knew, the big guy had never visited the ladies of light, which was just plain sad. He wondered if the big guy knew that holo-hos came in both genders.

Never mind, he clamped down on the stray thought. That was so not a conversation that he wanted to have with his touchy friend. Not in this lifetime. Heading for the exit, he called over his shoulder, "Coming?"

"No, I've got some business I need to take of," the big guy said.

Right, 'cause that's what horny warriors always did with their leave. But, all Helax said was, "Gotcha, catch you later."

It only took a few seconds of mirror time to convince Helax it was smart to stick

with craggy and natural. Unless he wanted to sign up for A total makeover, his situation was hopeless. Why bother to shave? The ladies of light didn't care and there was no one else to impress.

Heading out of the unit, he was less than a meter from the exit when his com-link chirped to life. A glance at the call identifier raised his eyebrows and straightened his backbone. He'd almost made a clean getaway.

* * * *

"Banishment," Joon echoed, unable to completely control a brief flinch of pain at the ugly word.

Mother Marian's neck bowed in sympathy. "I am sorry my child. The Council of Elders refuses to reconsider." She made a small sound of irritated pity. "Male egos."

Joon's thoughts raced, trying to imagine what she'd been accused of doing. Inevitably, she thought of the most recent addition to the Council. "Was it Cornish?"

"Yes, my child--we believe so. My sources say the newly seated elder is severely hearing impaired. Apparently, he's quite skilled in the ancient art of reading lips so much so that few are aware of his disability. His deafness rendered him immune to your voice. How he accused you without revealing his own flaw, I know not. Though it matters little. You have been accused of manipulating the Council by means of witchcraft. The warriors have no appeal process."

Before Joon had formed a sensible question, the holy mother continued. "There's precious little time. You must hurry, my child. Even now, it may be too late. Go as quickly as possible to the sisterhood's shuttle. The ship is an inviolate sanctuary. You'll be hidden until you are transported to the next craft leaving for Earth." The holy woman tilted her head as if she'd heard something. "May the Goddess protect you and keep you safe in her embrace." Hastily, she made the sign of the Goddess over Joon. The holocaust ended before she'd finished the gesture.

For a heartbeat, Joon stared at the ambassadorial quarters she'd been assigned. The unit had come with top-of-the-line conveniences, and comfortable furnishings. Though the unit was luxurious by Enyo standards, there was nothing of personal significance in the rooms.

Magic wielders did not permit themselves personal attachments or even feelings. To do so would interfere with their discipline. This made the yearnings she'd felt since arriving on Enyo all the more frightening. She willed away the fear that would only hinder what she needed to do.

Chapter Two

Enyo, 2392 post exodus

In one smooth motion, Joon rose then rapidly crossed to the exit. Footfalls warned her of approaching warriors. She was already too late.

Having trained for this moment, Joon grabbed her heavy cloak and reversed her direction without slowing her stride. She didn't dare hesitate for even a millisecond.

Dressed in her Commander cape of black syn-worsted, which was lined in scarlet syn-silk and had silver runes heavily worked into the deep border of the garment's hem, she was beyond conspicuous.

But, given the scarcity of women in New Eden, Enyo's capital city, her clothes mattered little. She was conspicuous simply by virtue of her sex.

Projecting a cloaking illusion that allowed her to blend into the background, she was safe from detection for the moment. The illusion rendered her invisible, but only as long as no one touched her, destroying the cloaking mist.

She stepped onto the modest balcony, calculated the distance to the next building and jumped. Flexing her knees, she landed on a corresponding balcony one level down from the one she'd just left. Rapidly, she picked her next target and got a running start before hurdling over the railing to yet another small balcony.

A warrior turned toward her just when she'd touched down less than a meter from where he stood.

"That was weird. I felt a chill," he said, speaking into a com-link.

Pitching her voice so low that it was barely audible and infusing it with an imperative, she said, "You're thirsty. You need to fix a drink."

"Maybe, I'm coming down with something. Now, I'm dying of thirst," he said before disappearing inside the unit.

The need for caution warred with her need for speed.

Caution lost.

She'd put a too little distance between herself and the warriors, seeking to detain her. She eyed a larger balcony, two floors lower, on the next building to the west.

Wishing she had a longer platform to give her a better start, she backed to one end of the small deck, ran smoothly to the edge, and launched herself into the air. Even with gravity helping, she failed to catch the next railing. The fingers of one hand barely held the bottom of the balustrade.

With her tenuous hold slipping, she stretched, trying to grasp a support post with her free hand. She missed and lost her tenuous grip.

Two floors flew past as she hurtled toward the ground before she stretched and grasped a railing.

Pulling herself onto the blessedly vacant balcony, she evaluated her situation.

Her right shoulder ached from the jarring it had endured. What was left of her pride smarted as if smug warriors had salted the wound. No matter how she looked at it, she'd been caught manipulating the Council of elders by an old man so hearing impaired that he was immune to her witch's voice tricks. This hurt.

Worse, it didn't make sense. She tried to recall the last time she'd influenced an elder and failed. Had her hormones eroded her controls so badly that she'd influenced the warriors without intending to interfere?

Of course, she had influenced them on a few occasions. So, what did the specifics of date and time matter? And yet....

She shoved the doubts and humiliation aside. Unless she stayed focused, she would be detained like a criminal. Far better for the sisterhood to have her vanish mysteriously than for her to be dragged off the planet in public disgrace.

The nearest terrace was too crowded with warriors, forcing her to make a series of longer jumps. Working her way further west, she cleared two more buildings in a series of uneventful leaps before she found an unoccupied ground level space to land.

Though tired, she felt better. With several residential towers between her and her hunters, her odds had improved. The minor success buoyed her spirits and she moved rapidly toward the sisterhood's shuttle and safety.

Fleeing like a common law-breaker wouldn't have been her first choice for leaving Enyo. But, she couldn't deny that she was very glad to leave. The idyllic setting and throngs of tempting warriors grated on her raw nerves, constantly reminding her of what she would never have.

She wouldn't be coming back. She left nothing important behind, for the simple reason that she owned nothing of consequence. She reminded herself, once again, that Magic wielders weren't allowed personal attachments to people or possessions. The discipline of their calling required such absolute concentration that all emotions were trained out of them from infancy.

So she'd been taught, and had always believed, prior to Enyo.

For three decades, she had lived only to train other disciples and serve the sisterhood. She'd risen to the rank of Commander, the youngest woman to ever achieve that distinction. And then she'd been honored to serve as the sisterhood's first Ambassador to Enyo.

Joon had never longed for anything.

Until Enyo.

This Goddess forsaken planet with its militant warrior population had cracked her flawless record of unquestioned discipline.

Now, she longed for the serenity of control. Even that longing was an unacceptable breach of her training. Straightening her already rigid posture, she sidestepped a cluster of warriors and cleared the last of the urban congestion between her and the sisterhood's shuttle.

The sleek rounded shape of the compact vessel with its elegant cameo of Gaia eased her heart. Until she spotted the pair of impressive male specimens, bracketing the shuttle's entrance.

The distance between them was wide enough for her to pass, but only just.

Despite the sultry evening, she wrapped the heavy cloak tight around her body, holding the edges to prevent an accidental brush of her heavy hem. Then she silently crossed the distance separating her from sanctuary.

The warriors scanned the area, but didn't linger on her form.

Her illusion was holding. She swallowed a sigh of relief.

The shuttle's human-sized entrance was open, though she knew it would be warded to repel anyone other than a member of the sisterhood.

When her foot made contact with the ramp, the man on her right lunged for her. Twisting, she avoided his grasp, slipping past him. Then something bit the back of her neck. Her fingers deftly found the dart and removed it. But she was too late, the drugs were already flooding her nervous system.

She struggled to analyze the unfamiliar compound, some form of sedative blended with an unknown narcotic. A ball gag was forced between her teeth, distracting her. She almost had the drug's components broken down. And then the last sliver of conscious winked out, plunging her into the cold blackness of the void.

When she regained consciousness, the blackness was still thick. For a few seconds time fear stole her reason. Her heart raced and only an act of will kept her from thrashing wildly. The Goddess held her tightly, infusing her with courage.

Slowly, she regained control of her breathing and her heart returned to a steady rhythm. Taking heed of the clues available, she concluded that she was bound like a feast day roast, blindfolded, and gagged. Cautiously, she extended her remaining senses, exploring her environment.

Something hard prodded her side. She feigned unconsciousness, forcing herself not to react to the indignity of being poked.

"She's still out cold." The man's voice was very close. It had the rough guttural accents of an Enyo warrior.

The edge of her cloak was nudged aside. This time she felt the damp warmth of a nervous palm even through the fabric of her garments as the warrior cupped her breast.

"Leave her alone, Ronson. The Gods alone know what she's capable of--she'd probably feed you your balls for breakfast."

"Funny, real funny," Ronson said Fear tinged both men's words.

Good, she thought. Stripped of most of her defenses, the warrior's fear was a welcome shield.

"She's so scrawny she's barely female anyway. I'd rather visit the ladies of the light, willing lasses every one." The rough voiced warrior grunted.

Good, she told herself again. With only a tiny bit less conviction. Why should she care what the barbarians thought of her body? True, she'd dreamed of being desired by warriors. But, her dream lovers had worshiped her slight body and touched her with tender concern. It had made all the difference.

* * * *

"Yes sir, I understand." Helax said, keeping his inflection crisp. Nothing in his tone betrayed his disappointment at the change in orders. His commanding officer

wasn't a warm and fuzzy kind of leader. Even by warrior standards, the man was cold.

After the call ended, Helax automatically scanned the area for Mythos. The big guy was still a couple of meters from the skywalk.

"Hold on, my man," he shouted after his friend.

His roommate's backside stopped and he angled his head enough for Helax to notice his usual glower was in full force. "What's up?"

"Leave is cancelled," Helax said.

Mythos's wide shoulders shimmied as if something disgusting had dared to touch him, but other than that he didn't look any more pissed off than he always did.

In a couple of strides, Helax caught up with him. "Come on, we're supposed to be on base and we're already late for our babysitting assignment."

"Who are we watching?"

"More like escorting, under guard, one of the Earth women."

"A breeder?" Mythos's gruff voice dropped even lower, clear down into the deep freeze region.

Don't I wish, Helax thought. Prior to the last minute assignment, he'd been looking forward to getting his freak on with the lovely ladies of the light. "What are the odds?" he snorted.

Mythos scowled in silence for the rest of the trip to a bullet car. As they locked themselves into the safety restraints, he asked, "Why didn't she use their shuttle?"

"What do I look like? The new Council Liaison?" Helax muttered irritably. He might've expanded on that theme, except he'd already inserted his ID into the vehicle's slot. The sudden acceleration put a stop to all conversation.

Since, there were no Earth males, at least there weren't any on Enyo, then this assignment involved a woman. Images of the breeders he'd seen on holo-cast played in his mind, making the ride to base entertaining.

Once they'd arrived, they were hustled off to suit up in the soft one-piece uniforms, which were standard issue for inter-galactic travel. After clearing a quick medi-check, they reported to their commander's quarters.

Maxim Krieg didn't encourage casual questions. Today was no exception. Although he addressed both of them, he only made brief eye contact with Helax. "You two will escort Commander d'Magique to Earth, where you will deliver her to the Belle Amity Compound, and then return to Enyo. Dismissed."

Saluting smartly, Helax held his rigid posture as he marched toward their ship. By the Gods, what had he done to earn this kind of punishment?

He only knew the Earth woman d'Magique by reputation, but none of it was good. Word was she was tall, bony, and colder than the dark side of the moons. What a fun date for the next couple of decades.

Mentally shrugging, he accepted his fate. There was no realistic alternative. Warriors--even hotshot space pilots--did not get any say in their assignments.

Ah well, it wasn't like he was missing out on mating rites with a prime breeder. Plus, Mythos was going too. Though the big guy wasn't exactly a fountain of laughs, he was head and shoulders above the rest of F-class losers. Plus, he was definitely the man

he wanted with him in any kind of trouble. Trouble was always the one certainty in every inter-galactic flight. Besides, there was no one he'd rather hang with and it wasn't because the two of them were the only F-class warriors in the whole space corps.

Sensing something wrong, he glanced at his friend.

The big guy had come to a dead stop. His lips were pressed together so tightly the flesh had paled. Then his man began to sway unsteadily.

"Hang on, man." He grabbed one of his friend's massive arms and threw it over his shoulders. "Let's pay the medics another visit."

The other man yanked back, so fast, and so violently, that he nearly flattened both of them. "No medics."

At two meters tall and one hundred kilos, Helax was no lightweight. Except, compared to Mythos. At a quarter meter higher and a solid twenty-five kilos heavier, moving the big guy was a challenge even when he cooperated.

Helax shouldered him against the wall. "Talk to me, man."

He shook his head. The whites of his eyes visible all the way around his pupils. If it had been anyone else, he would've said he was scared. But, he'd never known the big guy to show fear and they'd been through plenty of hairy situations.

In a world of warriors, Mythos stood head and shoulders above the rest of the population. Both literally and figuratively. They'd worked together for years, not once had he suffered even a hangnail. The man didn't do sick or tired. He especially didn't do scared out of his mind.

Keeping a shoulder planted against his friend's mid-section, Helax pinned him in place. Patiently, he waited for an explanation, wondering what in the seven hells was happening inside the big guy's mind.

Finally, the other man spoke. "I won't touch her."

Helax kept his voice soothing as he said, "Not going to be a problem, man. Witches aren't like breeders. They don't have feelings and the word is they don't like to be touched."

He prayed the rumors were true.

"Good." Mythos said. "You can let go of now. I'm fine."

Backing off, Helax asked casually, "What in the seven hells just happened?"

"Allergies."

* * * *

Mythos stomped off, unable to come up with any kind of logical answer for his friend. Self-disgust roiled through his system. Allergies, by the Gods--that was the best explanation he could come up with? What a pathetic loser.

He tried to shake off the sick feeling of dread that still lingered. He'd panicked. Absolute, unreasoning terror had slithered beneath his shields and infected him.

For too long, he'd been helpless--unable to break the fear's hold. If anyone other than Helax had been with him.... It wasn't something he wanted to think about--he would have strapped on a table for a full psych exam. Or worse.

The instant trip to scary town had blindsided him. Now it was time to put it behind him. He'd overreacted, simple enough--it wouldn't happen again.

Shaking in his boots over a woman. He'd seen women in New Eden and handled it fine. No big deal. After all, they'd all be in stasis for most of the trip. He would never have to touch her. Good thing, because he couldn't trust himself to touch any woman without killing her.

To be honest he wasn't sure how he would react to the witch. He'd been obsessed with her since the first time he'd glimpsed her on a holo-cast. Would she be easier to tolerate in person or would the reality overwhelm his defenses, rendering him a slobbering, cringing, pitiful creature?

Thank the Gods for Helax. If not for his bud's protection, he'd be in the midst of getting busted out of the Space Corps. Then what would he do? He lived to kill Maldoreans. Without a Space Corps commission, there'd be no fast ships, no blasters, and no dead Maldoreans.

All he had to do was avoid her for a couple of days until they were out of the solar system then they'd all go into a deep sleep for the rest of the journey to Earth. A few days--he could do that. He had to.

His shoulders shimmied, dusting off the last trace of his panic attack as he forced himself to move toward their waiting short-range ship. A massive intergalactic Grizzly class craft waited, already in orbit, above Enyo's rich atmosphere.

Along with the witch.

He pushed the disturbing thoughts aside, concentrating on the pre-launch checklist. No matter how many times he'd flown off planet, every blastoff was a thrill. Leaving the planet behind was still a dangerous undertaking. Takeoffs and landings were always critical--the most perilous part of every space voyage.

Once launched, the rest of the trip to the more powerful intergalactic Grizzly went smoothly. He turned off the big engines before they'd made visual contact with the ship that would carry them to Earth, maneuvering the delicate business of docking with impulse power without a glitch. He let out a breath of relief as the docking beam locked on, guiding them smoothly into the landing bay.

The Grizzly's crew stood at attention, welcoming them aboard. Mythos returned their salutes curtly, hurrying out of the bay as the waiting crew quickly dropped formality to joke with Helax.

"Better get out the hazard gear first, warrior," a departing officer said, aiming his words at Mythos's back.

He kept moving, ignoring the unnecessary warning. He had every intention of avoiding all interaction with the witch. Pretty manners and easy companionship were Helax's department. This left plenty of room for him to practice his weapons mastery and any tricky flying. The easy division of duties made them a good team.

Entering the craft, the witch's scent stopped him dead. The fear reached for him, wrapping itself around his nervous system, stealing his control. He stumbled backwards, bumping into Helax. "You first," he croaked.

Helax sealed the port, allowing the Grizzly to depart. Then he took the lead. "Not a problem--you doing all right, man?"

"Sure, I'm good," Mythos lied pathetically, waiting until Helax was a couple of

meters ahead before he followed him into the main cabin.

"What in the seven hells--." Helax yelled, and then stopped talking abruptly.

Mythos hurried ahead, concern for his friend stronger than his dread of the witch. Entering the main cabin, he saw Helax kneeling on the deck. A quick scan showed no visible injuries. "What did she do to you?"

"Nothing, man," Helax said sadly, meeting his worried eyes. "How could she? Look what they did to her." He leaned away, giving Mythos a clear view.

The witch was bound and gagged.

Mythos's stomach rebelled. He staggered to the head, clutched the waste bowl, and then heaved until there was nothing left to come up then he kept right on heaving. Finally, dragging himself off the floor, he leaned on the counter. When the shaking finally stopped, he cleaned his face and mouth with cold water.

Reentering the cabin, he forced himself to think rationally. He and Helax weren't slavers. The woman was not in danger.

But then, he looked at her. Dark eyes, wide with terror, were set in a small, pale face. Soft lips were pulled cruelly by a strange restraint designed to prevent speech. The straps holding it in place disappeared into a tumble of shiny black hair. Both her hands and her ankles were bound with tape.

He could smell her fear. And something much more dangerous.

He blocked all awareness of her other scents from his mind. It was her fear that had decided his actions. He crossed to where she lay. Nudging Helax aside, he scooped her up and carried her to one of the commander's seats, settling her in carefully.

After unsheathing his utility knife, he locked his jaw, and reached for her wrists.

The witch vanished.

Twisting, he mashed the cabin's entrance control. A series of clicks told him the exit was sealed. "Did she get past you?"

Hellex shoved his fingers through a brush cut, scanning the room. "She must have. Though, I don't see how."

Feeling terminally stupid, Mythos addressed the air. "I give you my word that no one here will hurt you. But, if you leave this room I can't protect you."

There was no response.

"Unless she found a way out of her bindings, she can't answer you," Helax pointed out logically.

"Right." Mythos lined up the tip of the knife with its sheath, giving it a small push to slip the blade back where it belonged. He didn't feel anything.

It was that tiny absence of sensation that triggered an internal alarm. Certainly, he should've felt the weight of the knife against his flank. But, the warning came too late.

The weapon was gone, vanished--exactly like the witch. Whirling, he grasped instinctively, touched a slight arm, and then clamped down hard on fragile skin and bone.

A sting alerted him that the sharp edge of his own weapon pricked his side. He knocked the blade away, nicking his knuckles in the process. It clattered to the floor.

"What in the seven hells are you doing?" Helax asked with genuine puzzlement.

"I've got her."

"You're wrestling air, man." Helax's tone was the soothing one he would've used on a fractious child, a drunk, or someone mentally unbalanced. It was easy to guess the group where his friend had assigned him.

"She's invisible," he growled, tightening his grip until he feared he'd bruise her.

Helax raised a skeptical eyebrow but said nothing, giving him the benefit of suspended judgment for now.

The ship's computer interrupted their discussion. "Please take your seats, and secure your safety restraints. We'll be leaving orbit in two minutes."

Turning to Helax, Mythos said, "Tell her my word is good."

"Are you sure she can hear me?"

"Reasonably."

"All right then," Helax muttered then his tone grew more confident, "Whatever Mythos says goes. His word is good. He's a Warrior."

Suddenly, where there'd been nothing, the witch stood.

Her dark eyes locked on Mythos as he carefully removed her gag. "No, he's not a Warrior. He's a Centurion."

"We'll be leaving orbit in sixty seconds," the ship's computer intoned.

There was no time for Mythos to question her about her strange statement. But, he'd sensed the truth of her words and he desperately wanted to know more.

Helax climbed into his seat. "Better strap in, leaving orbit gets bumpy."

"Would you help me?" The witch glanced at her taped wrists and ankles.

Reluctantly, Mythos picked up the knife and sliced through the last of her bonds, trying not to inhale the heady scent of her. Unrestrained, she was even more of a threat than before. Leaving her bound wasn't an option. Because it made him physically ill to the point of incapacitating him.

Quickly, he helped her into a seat and fastened the safety harness. Leaping into his own place, he slammed home his own fastenings as the ship shuddered violently before blasting out of orbit in a massive surge of power.

Within minutes, they'd broken free of Enyo's atmosphere. Each passing second lessened the gravitational pull of the planet. Soon, he'd activate the ship's gravity field to make movement easier.

"Thank you for removing the bonds, Centurion," she said gravely.

Her voice was low, seductive. The witch's scent wafted into his brain, prying loose long buried memories--none of them good. The Maldorean witch and her unholy friends had taunted him with the pungent juices of their excitement.

As much as he wanted to know why she'd called him a Centurion, he edged well away from her. Glowering at a safe distance, he said, "Stay clear of me, Witch."

Joon should have been intimidated. But, she shrugged gracefully, pretending an indifference he could tell was a lie. "As you wish. I thought you might be curious about your people."

His steps slowed. He didn't trust her. She was everything he feared most. And everything that fascinated him. He needed to avoid all contact with her to stay sane.

But, witches knew things and she dangled the most irresistible lure possible-- information about his origins. Maybe even his family.

Chapter Three

Enyo space sector, 2392 post exodus

Cautiously, he reversed directions, moving closer. Trying not to breathe the scent of her arousal. Though, thank the Gods, she smelled sweet and hot, nothing like a Maldorean witch. "If you want a playmate, talk to Helax."

"Oh, I will. He's mine," she said matter-of-factly.

Her calm declaration bothered Mythos. This made no sense. He wanted nothing to do with her. Why should he care whether she was interested in him? He dismissed the wound to his pride, demanding, "Tell me of these Centurions."

"Perhaps I will when it pleases me," Joon said coolly, obviously not the least bit intimidated by him.

Angry at himself for falling for her witch's game, Mythos turned his back on her.

"You stay until I dismiss you, Centurion." Her voice was still low and sweet to his ears. But, there was an unmistakable tone of compulsion.

Unwillingly, he was pulled toward obeying her. His stomach rebelling. He clenched his teeth and tightened his muscles, determined to resist. And prayed he would not disgrace himself by vomiting. Swear beaded on his forehead as he held fast against his enemy. "When you were bound and gagged I gave you my word that you would not be harmed aboard this ship. I've kept my word. Now, I give you fair warning, witch. I won't tolerate coercion or restraint."

"You are resisting my voice." Her expression remained exquisitely serene, but her tone held a note of surprise. "Don't make the mistake of underestimating me, Centurion. I have many talents."

"And I am willing to die rather than be bound or used," he said without anger or heat, hoping she understood how nonnegotiable this was for him.

She moved, closing the gap between them. Cool, slim fingers, wound around his forearm. Surprisingly, her touch didn't sicken him. He tolerated the intimacy warily. Cautiously, he silently admitted that her touch was not a distasteful sensation.

A single tear spilled down her pale cheek. Her neck bowed as if she'd been struck. "Upon my honor as a magic wielder, I would kill those who stole your innocence and hurt you so grievously."

The apology was formal, but there was no pity edging her words. She quivered with outrage for the sins of his past. It was strange to think of this frail woman avenging his hurts, but he didn't laugh at her declaration. Though small, the witch was strong, quick, and lethal.

"You sense the truth of my words." She assessed him with a new respect, bowing before him. "There's little known of the Centurions. You are the first I've ever met."

"But, there are others?" he asked.

"I don't know. The race was believed extinct. Do you remember anything of your family?"

He shook his head, swallowing bitter disappointment.

"If you would like it, I could try to access your deep memories. It is possible that you know more than think." She shrugged gracefully, simply offering, not promising him success.

"I will think on this," he said, and then asked, "What is your name?"

A faint blush flashed on her cheekbones as she offered her hand. "I'm Commander D'Magique, my personal name is Joon."

After a small hesitation, he accepted her hand, holding it briefly. "I am Mythos. I thought witches didn't like to be touched."

"We don't." She shrugged again. "Every contact floods us with the other's thoughts. It can be most disturbing."

"But, you want to touch me." He challenged her, finding no purpose, or excuse for avoiding the subject that worried him most.

"That's--you're different." Her words held the ring of truth, but at the same time, he sensed that she'd held back important information.

"Necessary," he said, guessing.

She nodded reluctantly. "Yes."

"You are much more--emotional than I expected. I thought witches weren't supposed to have feelings." He took a small step away from her.

Joon's neck bowed again, her voice tinged with an infinite sadness as she said, "It is true that we are trained not to have emotions. My conditioning has broken. There's something very wrong with me. Though, you do not need to worry. I would do nothing to hurt you," Joon said gravely assuring him of his safety.

Unless it is necessary, Mythos thought. He understood little about Joon's motives, but the witch had only earned a truce. Not his trust.

"What's going on my man? Am I running this ship by myself?" Helax asked.

Mythos hadn't even noticed him enter the cabin. An excellent reminder of how dangerous the witch was to his concentration.

Now, he had to wonder how much Helax had heard. He liked the guy, but he wasn't ready to confide the ugliness of his past to anyone. He needed to regain control of his reactions or the Warrior would notice something was wrong. And then it would only be a matter of time before he figured out why.

He'd rather eat his blaster than see pity in his friend's expression. At least, he hadn't sensed any pity from Joon. Her tear seemed to have been born of a fierce sorrow.

He scowled to hide the spreading warmth that her outrage on his behalf had engendered. Another witch's trick? Or genuine feeling?

And how would he ever know the difference?

* * * *

Sensing his worry, Joon gave his arm a gentle squeeze, half-apology--half-reassurance. His tension eased back to his normal alert readiness mode.

Was he aware he'd tolerated her touch? More than tolerated, he'd found comfort in the light contact she'd initiated. A long ways from what she wanted from him. Still, she took cautious encouragement from the amazing progress they'd made in so short a time. She only had a few days with the men. Despite the time constraint, success was possible, Goddess willing.

A frisson of guilt whispered along her spine. Then, years of training kicked in, reminding her that magic wielders were forbidden to consort with men. Though, there'd been scant mention of the rules during her apprentice years. Indeed, why should the sisterhood have wasted time emphasizing a meaningless restriction? There'd been no men on earth since long before her birth.

Yet, her rationalizations meant nothing now. What she yearned for was wrong.

Thankfully, Helax distracted her, flashing a winsome grin in her direction. The expression made him seem younger and more approachable despite a powerful warrior's body, rippling with strength and force.

"That was some great trick, disappearing like that. Can you teach me how to do it?" he asked hopefully.

Wanting to smile, she stayed serious, answering him honestly, "I doubt it."

"That's a pity." He held out a hand in uncomplicated lusty friendship. "I'm Helax by the way."

She accepted his touch, finding his mind so full of questions and excitement that her lips quirked into a brief smile. "Joon."

"You're more beautiful when you smile," he said.

Strangely, she detected no dishonesty in his words.

The guilty feeling seeped back, chilling her excitement. If she tried and failed, she would hurt herself and both men, perhaps irreparably. If it were only her, she'd be willing to risk everything for the chance of happiness.

Yet, how could she make that choice for them? She couldn't. Especially not for Mythos, who'd already been so grievously damaged by selfish females and depraved males. Since the mating bond required all three of them to have a chance of working--regretfully, she abandoned her secret dreams.

Breathing slowly, she waited for the tears that threatened to subside. Foolish to be so emotional, but her hormones were wrecking havoc on her control. She would have to be very careful to survive the next few days with her pride intact.

Once again, Helax came to her rescue. "Can you tell me how you disappear?"

"It's not that I disappear. It's that I suggest that you don't see me."

"Mind control?" he asked, clearly startled.

Her lips quirked again, wanting to smile. He was so young, so enthusiastic, and so beautiful.

"Suggestion," she corrected him gently. "If you were really determined to see me you could."

"Can you suggest other things?"

What harm was there in answering him? "Of course."

"Show me," he said, daring her.

"I could suggest that Mythos still had his utility knife."

The Centurion patted his flank, and then reassured, he reassumed his quietly watchful, more relaxed, stance.

Helax shook his head. "It's not there big guy."

"And I could also suggest that you still had yours," she grinned at the warrior, unable to suppress the sheer joy of playing with them.

Helax peered anxiously at his own sheath then scoffed, "But, I do."

"Then there's no possible way I could have both knives?" she asked innocently.

Both men crossed their arms and narrowed their eyes, answering in unison, "No."

She tossed the weapons into the air, catching them again easily.

The men scowled, clearly not amused by the harmless prank. She returned their weapons, shrugging off their disapproval. "A child's trick."

"A warrior never jokes about his weapons," Helax said.

"Of course," she agreed, not really understanding their touchiness. Yet, all too aware of the tension bristling where there'd been only lighthearted play just a few moments ago.

Men. Strange and incomprehensible creatures. More than two years on the male dominated Enyo and they remained as mysterious as ever.

Her thoughts wandered to her arrival on the beautiful green and white world, the first meeting with Dalila and her fierce proud warriors, willing to pay any price for just the chance to spend another day with their woman.

A sigh of longing escaped her lips.

"You look sad." Mythos said, roughly. His eyes were kind, inviting her to confide her troubles in him.

She forced a smile, saying lightly, "Do I? How odd, I'm trained to feel nothing."

What she'd said was technically true. He didn't need to know just how badly eroded her emotional suppression system had become.

The Centurion stared at her, making her want to squirm. She had the oddest feeling he'd read the lie of omission. She shook off her imaginings. That wasn't something warriors could do.

But then, Mythos was no ordinary warrior. Not that there was anything average about the men of Enyo. The warriors were the product of a breeding program as ambitious as the sisterhood's own rigid breeding selection process. Though, their results couldn't have been more different.

The Belle Amity Sisters had worked to produce the best breeders, and a few select specialties, scientists, explorers, and, rarest of all, magic wielders. The sisterhood's witches were trained to lead the breeders. Eventually, they took their place with the other holy women, protecting their assets, growing their knowledge base, and governing the citizens of the compound.

The Warriors had concentrated on strength, speed, and quick reactions, and must have selected for scientists and engineers as well. She'd spent hours negotiating with their Council of Elders, so they'd fostered leaders. Their belief system was so alien that she found it difficult to recognize it--let alone comprehend it.

Though they wouldn't be lovers, she tried to find comfort in the thought that at least she could learn more about the Centurion and enjoy the warrior's teasing for the next few days until they all entered stasis.

She suppressed a shudder at the thought of their primitive procedure, necessitated because the Warriors had not yet mastered subspace travel.

Goddess willing, she would wake up in orbit around Earth to live out her allotted years in service to the sisterhood, which was what she'd been bred and trained to do.

And yet, now that she'd met Mythos and Helax that choice seemed unbearably sad and wasteful.

To shake off the discouraging thoughts she asked, "What will you do when we reach Earth?"

"Depends on our orders." Mythos said.

"Why don't you check them?" she asked, curious.

"What difference does it make?"

"I'd like to know," Helax said.

The Centurion touched the console's clear panel. A feminine voice spoke, "Allowing time for refueling and any necessary repairs, the warrior crew of Space Corps ship seventeen will return to Enyo immediately."

"Shit, not even enough time to get laid, that's too harsh even for the Space Corps," Helax complained.

Shocked by his outburst, Joon blurted out, "You would have sexual intercourse without being mated?"

"Only every chance I get," he said, eyeing her with speculation that she found strangely flattering.

Logic said that she was the only woman Helax had ever been this close to, so there was certainly no reason to be pleased by his obvious interest. But, her heart beat faster and her eager breasts tingled with exciting new possibilities.

"I need your help checking a system problem." Mythos said, marching off without waiting for Helax's response.

Helax blew out a frustrated breath, muttering, "And it has to be right this minute." He winked at Joon before following Mythos into the bowels of the ship.

Watching his broad shoulders disappear reminded her again of seeing Dalila with her mates. Joon wanted the same thing, because she was still a woman. And Goddess help her--perilously close to ovulation--fertile.

Tricking honorable men wasn't how she'd dreamed of mating.

Though, the men's assumption that they were in control of what happened between them, prickled her pride. She was a commander and a magic wielder--a woman of worth.

Mythos and Helax were in a whole different class than the ones that she'd been dealing with as ambassador. She couldn't deny they'd set fire to her hormone enriched blood. Though, she had enough control to keep from letting the maddening men know how their mere presence affected her body.

True, her conditioning had eroded. But, all she had to do was hold it together for

a couple of days. In fact, why wait? The static state of suspended animation was similar to the trance-like state that the non-breeders used to endure the pain of their fertile cycles on Earth. At worst, she'd get relief from the hormone overload, which tortured her with unrelenting desire.

Her decision process was rapid. It was the right thing to do. While the warrior might be frustrated by her choice, the Centurion would be relieved. With her control crumbling, she feared it was the only way for her to keep her honor intact.

Scanning the unfamiliar console, she located the sleeping pod activation. Her fingers wavered over the panel even as she began lowering her respiration rate and slowing her heartbeat in preparation for pausing her life force.

* * * *

Helax followed his friend, stopping to rearrange his swollen cock as soon as he was out the woman's sight.

The big guy had to duck his head to enter the narrow access grid. This was good. Mythos was going to be unreasonable about the witch. So, he should suffer some discomfort too, at least a little bit.

He didn't need a nav-com to figure out his friend was going to warn him to stay clear of Joon. But, it wasn't like he was a green space cadet.

He got that she was dangerous. Maybe he was crazy, but damned if there wasn't something hot about a woman with a mind and body that qualified as lethal weapons.

The big guy didn't need sex, but Helax was wired up differently. He loved it and he was way over due. Besides, how many chances was he going to get to be with a real woman? He figured this was it--a once in a lifetime shot.

He blew out a frustrated breath. "Well, what in the seven hells was so urgent we had to examine it right this second?"

Mythos fiddled around for a long minute, silently testing a few circuits. Finally, he said, "The witch is dangerous. She should've remained bound and gagged. I am to blame for that mistake. I-I-couldn't bear seeing her like that."

Witnessing his friend's pain, Helax's irritation almost vanished. He patted the big guy's shoulder. "It's okay, man. Don't worry about it. It's a natural reaction for anyone who's served time on a slaver."

Mythos flinched as if he'd been hit with a stun blast. "You know about the Maldorean slave ship?"

Blast him to the seventh hell, he'd opened up his big yap and made things ten times worse instead of reassuring his friend. He fumbled for something to say that wouldn't dig his hole even deeper. "Yeah, I guess. Maybe. I heard something about it a real long time ago. Or maybe I got it wrong," he said cautiously.

"No," Mythos swallowed hard. "It's true. I was captured as a babe."

"Maldoreans, may they all burn in the seven hells for all eternity." Helax said with bitter intensity.

"Thanks," Mythos said, staring at his size nineteen boots as if a star chart were etched in their gleaming syn-leather.

Still searching for something to lighten his friend's mood, Helax said, "Listen my

man, the witch likes you. I mean really likes you--I think she wants to breed."

Mythos shook his head. "No, she's not ovulating, yet."

He looked at the big guy with fresh respect. "How do you know that?"

"I can smell her," he admitted.

For a minute, Helax thought the man was blushing. But, it must've been a trick of the lighting. Warriors didn't blush.

Then it occurred to him that Mythos had experienced sex with a real woman, probably lots of them. Even if they were Maldoreans, his man had actual, hands-on experience. Selfishly, he wanted to ask a thousand questions. But, knowing how much those memories pained his friend, he bit his tongue, clamping down on his curiosity.

Surprisingly, Mythos talked without any prompting. "On the slave ship, when I began to mature, the women...used me. I know now that such interactions are supposed to be pleasurable."

He quit talking for so long that Helax figured the big guy was done.

Finally, Mythos continued. "The sex had nothing to do with pleasure or even kindness. It was about power and helplessness and I was always on the wrong side of the equation." He shook his head as if to clear unwanted memories. "This is why I've never visited the ladies of light. The Maldorean witch ruined sex for me. I vowed that I would die before I'd ever let myself be used again. Somehow, Joon seems to understand this. And yet, I fear her. For she's weaving a sensual spell, tempting me in ways I never expected to feel."

It was a long speech for Mythos. But, Helax was too surprised to form any kind of appropriately sensitive response. Thankfully, the big guy didn't seem to expect one. It had been almost as if he'd been talking to himself.

After the silence had grown uncomfortable, Helax finally said, "You're still way ahead of me, my man. The only experience I've ever had has been the virtual variety and we both know real life is never anywhere near as predictable."

Mythos gave a rough bark that might've been a laugh.

"The truth is I only shoot blanks. So, I figured real women weren't even a theoretical possibility." Helax heard the words as they left his mouth with kind of a horrified relief.

He'd wanted to give something back to Mythos for opening up about his slave ship experience. Telling him about his non-existent sperm count hadn't been a conscious decision. The truth had just popped out of his mouth.

Now, holding his breath, he waited for the big guy's reaction, painfully aware that his friend's opinion meant way more than it should. Personally, he didn't give a fuck about his lack of viable sperm. It's not like he was cheating anyone. There'd never be a breeder for him. Even the witch, who'd been getting more irresistible with each breath he drew, wanted Mythos.

Helax didn't blame her, but secretly he'd hoped that his friend would reject her. Because, if the big guy gave into temptation then he'd be the odd man out in the happy couple loop. And as roomy as the intergalactic Grizzly was, it was way too small to make that kind of loneliness comfortable.

The big guy gave him an awkward pat on the back. "Sorry to hear about that, bud. It shouldn't mean anything. But, I know potency is a big deal to warriors."

It was Helax's turn to nod, emotions clogging his throat. His friend's acceptance of his flaw made his eyes burn with unshed tears.

Strangely, what he really wanted was to get naked with the big guy and the witch, but that little fantasy would cost him Joon's respect, and shatter the new level of trust between Mythos and him.

He ran a hand over his brush cut and swallowed hard before he even tried to speak. "If you don't want her--."

Mythos's broad shoulders stiffened. But, his voice was calm when he finished the sentence. "You do."

Then, the big guy did that weird shimmying thing where his whole skin seemed to twitch. "Be my guest. Be warned that Joon may have her own ideas."

Just the way the big guy said her name told Helax that Mythos wanted her himself. Though, given his history, it was entirely possible that the big guy didn't realized what it was that he felt.

What was worse, much worse, was the way the witch looked at his friend.

The next three days were going to be way too long and way too damn hard.

But, he'd walk through the seven hells naked and unarmed for Mythos. The man had saved his ass more times than he could remember. Though, giving up Joon and the possibility of real sex without even a struggle made that march through the levels of hell sound like a stroll on one of Enyo's beautiful beaches.

Helax tried to talk himself into indifference, but his body refused to buy it. That left him with only one choice--he'd have to fake it.

"On second thought, nah. She's too much for me, man. I'm sticking with the virtual babes. Speaking of which, isn't there a holo-unit on this bucket of bolts?"

Chapter Four

Enyo space sector, 2392 post exodus

The big guy blinked a couple of times, which was wildly emotional for Mythos, revealing how much Helax's offer meant, Centurion style. His voice was still rough when he said, "There's supposed to be one off the engine room."

"I'm checking it out. Seriously, my man, you should give simulated sex a try--you'd be in total control."

"Thanks, but there's no need," Mythos said. His lips quirked into one of his rare small tight smiles.

Since Helax was closer to the exit, he left first. He didn't look back.

* * * *

Mythos followed, contorting his too large body through the narrow access channel, careful to avoid bumping any of the delicate panels critical for running the ship. Maybe, he should have kept his fears about the witch to himself and let Helax make his own choices.

Examining his motives for warning Helax away from her made him cringe. He'd been fascinated with the magic wielder since he's first learned of her existence, studying everything he could find on her.

Though he'd dreamed of meeting her, he'd been ill prepared for the reality of the witch named Joon. Her skills were as remarkable as anything that had been recorded and then some. But it was her beauty had blindsided him.

The holo images had failed to capture her fiery reality. Every account of the witch had emphasized her inhuman lack of emotion. How wrong they'd been. While her control was impressive, the strength of her passion terrified him.

He simply had to avoid any contact with her. At least, to the extent it was possible to do so on the vessel.

As he passed the entrance to the pod room, a new scent assaulted his senses.

The witch was ovulating. And she hurt.

All his fabled strength was useless against her need. She'd stripped down to her undergarments. An irresistible curve of her bottom taunted him as she stretched to climb into a sleeping pod designed for a warrior.

He gripped the frame of the entrance so hard the metal creaked and bent.

Joon's dark eyes met his stare.

"Stay away from me," she warned, her voice husky with a raw and painful need.

Her suffering broke through his well-conditioned response of fear and revulsion in a way that nothing else would have. "You're hurting."

"And your presence is making it worse," she snapped.

Letting go of the abused frame, he turned to leave. "I'll get Helax."

"No."

Her tortured voice twisted into his gut, stopping him cold. "Helax is a provocateur--a catalyst--and only fertilization will stop the cramping."

"It would take both of us?" he asked, stunned.

"Don't worry about it." She bent over, wrapping her slender arms around her torso. She breathed in shallow pants for long minutes before the spasm eased. "I won't ask that of you. I'm going into stasis early. I'll sleep through the fertility cycle."

He nodded curtly. Though, the gesture was pointless. She'd already looked away, readying herself for another attempt to mount the sleeping pod.

Unable to look away from her round little bottom, he stayed.

A small whimper escaped from her throat, and then she fell, rolling into a fetal position, clutching her knees to her chest.

His feet closed the distance between them without him forming any conscious intent to move. "Let me help you."

"It's never been this bad," she said, grating the words out, pain coating each syllable she uttered.

Guilt swamped him as he realized that this was his fault. He was doing this, making her suffer. His presence was hurtful to her. He knew the sick feeling of being tortured. Knew exactly how horrible it was to be compelled to endure unwanted intimacy. And yet, he couldn't walk away from her while she was in so much pain.

Gently, he scooped her up, intending to settle her in the sleep chamber. She was warm, soft, and so fragile in his arms.

The reality of holding her threatened to destroy him. Careful not to bruise her tender flesh, he moved as if he were balancing a priceless relic. But then, her body arched so fast and with such strength, he had to tighten his grip on slight bones or risk dropping her.

He did the only thing he could think of to comfort her. He brushed his lips across hers. She opened her mouth to whimper and his tongue slipped in for a deeper taste of her mysterious sweetness.

For a few minutes, she eased in his arms. Then another cry of pain tore from her constricted throat. Instinct overrode judgment.

The need to ease her suffering was a primal urge-- stronger than any other consideration--even stronger than self-preservation.

She wrapped herself around him, her slender thighs encircling his hips and her arms winding around his neck. Her undershirt was tugged off and the thin fabric of her panties was easily ripped away. His uniform was peeled down in seconds, toeing off his boots, he stepped out of it, kicking free of the knot of cloth without disturbing his grip on her bottom.

Too late, he recognized the spicy under layer he'd sampled in her kiss. The taste should have warned him, but he'd ignored the danger. Now, her scent was stronger, unmistakable, and heady.

She was hurting, fertile, and aroused.

His cock responded to her need, hardening into steel, dripping with pre-cum, and

locking on her entrance like a heat-seeking shot fired from the ship's weapons. The reaction had been pure instinct, blindsiding him--like everything about the witch.

"Sorry," she groaned, undulating against him and working the head of his erection into her core.

Stumbling, he moved toward the wall, where he could pin in her place and thrust into her hot, tight, wet, channel.

There was only one imperative in his mind--filling her with his seed. Over and over again, until her pain stopped, or he died. And he didn't care which came first.

She weighed no more than an armful of syn-down. He crossed the distance careful not to jar her. He snagged his uniform from the deck, using it to cushion her back, before pressing her firmly against the wall. "Tell me if I'm hurting you."

"Not hurting--helping," she panted.

"Good." He bored into her softness. Moving as slowly as possible, he hit a barrier. But, her need compelled him to push deeper. So, he simply pressed harder and didn't stop until he was completely buried in the tight clasp of her liquid heat.

"Goddess, have mercy," she whimpered, writhing against the root of his cock.

The sensation was the sweetest torture, threatening his sanity, but there was no sickness and no terror.

And then he felt something strange.

It started with a tingling at the base of his shaft and grew rapidly more intense. Almost afraid to look, he stared down at where they were merged.

Hundreds of tentacles had sprung to life from his pubis. As soon as they made contact with her tender flesh, they writhed wildly, meshing with her soft folds.

"By the Gods." He flexed his hips, attempting to withdraw. The effort came too late. Her hips simply followed his--her sex completely locked with his.

"What is that?" Joon asked him calmly. But, her wide eyes locked on the writhing tendril still erupting from the base of his cock.

"I don't know," he admitted, sickly fascinated by the phenomena.

"It never happened before, when..." Her words trailed off in a throaty moan.

"No," he answered sharply and then asked, "Is it hurting you?"

He held his breath, afraid of her answer.

She bit her lip. "You're killing me--with ecstasy."

Then her tight sheath milked him with gentle contractions as she tipped over the edge into a blissful release.

Her orgasm filled him with tender pride, but it didn't trigger his release. His balls tightened further, sending a shard of fresh pain through his erection.

* * * *

No sooner had the last of the maddeningly erotic flutters from her slit eased, when the next round of heated contractions began. Her sheath began to spasm around his steely shaft. Another climax seizing her, plunging her back into rapture.

Finally, the milking contractions slowed. She panted softly, gathering breath to speak. "I tried to tell you, Centurion. You requite a provocateur." She paused to catch her breath. Instantly the pleasure rose, rippling through her again, stealing her thoughts.

A few moments later, when she was able to focus, she said, "There'll be no relief for either of us without him."

Knowing Mythos's history of sexual abuse at the hands of Maldoreans, Joon had been determined to suspend her life force early. It had been the only safe solution. But, once he'd touched her, the plan to be noble had ceased to be an option.

She bit her lip to keep from moaning, which would only push him harder. Feeling guilty because she'd hoped the old records were correct. At the same time, she prayed to the Goddess that Mythos would accept the need for the other man, and that Helax would be willing to join with them. Because without the help of the warrior, both of them would die.

Locked against his body, her strength already ebbed.

Mythos grew even tenser.

She didn't whimper about the slight hurt where her maidenhead had been shredded. Nor did she say a word about the threat of death from excessive rapture. There was no ease to be gained from adding guilt to the Centurion's troubles.

The ancient texts reported that most women expired after a dozen Centurion induced orgasms. There were certainly worse fates. Worse, the few females, who'd survived a Centurion's lovemaking died in childbirth. Indeed, that was the explanation for their extinction.

Yet, Mythos felt very real and very alive and she yearned to bear his babe.

Still young and strong, surely her bones were flexible enough to withstand the ordeal for both her and the infant.

She couldn't help wondering just how accurate the old records of Earth women's mating with Centurions were. At best, the accounts had incomplete. There'd certainly been no mention of the tentacles meshed with her most sensitive flesh.

The provocateur's role was only vaguely alluded to in the ancient text. Of course, there were no records of mating between Centurions, provocateurs, and magic wielders. When the ultimate warrior princes known as Centurions had walked on Earth, the entire Belle Amity Sisterhood hadn't existed.

The assertion the warrior's mating bond was permanent might well be mistaken, or not apply to them. Even if it were accurate, the bond couldn't be activated just by having sex. Because, if that were all it took, Mythos would've been mated to the first Maldorean female, who'd raped him.

Joon's speculation ended abruptly when his teaser tentacles locked fully with the soft tissue of her sex, preventing him from stroking. The small ticklers pulsed against her nerve rich petals, sending her into yet another breath-stealing peak.

She'd flushed even harder, remembering that she'd given him no choice but to mate with her. Even locked in his arms, she regretted her loss of control.

She couldn't regret the result.

Already weakened, after only a few climaxes, she wondered uselessly how accurate the reported numbers had been. Then, the unremitting stimulation from his teasers ended any coherent thought, while her body arched and contracted around the hard shaft stretching her feminine core.

When her awareness finally returned, Helax had joined them. The warrior had shed his uniform, baring a beautiful male body and an impressive erection. His cheekbones were as flushed as the voluptuous head of his shaft. Though not as long or as thick as Mythos, he was perfectly formed--an awe-inspiring sight. She swallowed, both nervous and excited about what was yet to come.

She stared at his straining shaft, unable to look away as he stroked himself. He spread the lotion, that Mythos had requested he use, generously over his hard rod with long sure strokes.

He soon turned his attention to her, applying the silky lotion from her stretched entrance to her tightly puckered anus, smoothing, soothing, and seducing another lavish gush of her own creamy moisture from her hot sheath. When he'd finished, he moved closer, placing a kiss on the base of her neck.

Then his hard chest curved against her vulnerable spine, pressing against the fragile angles of her shoulder blades. Warming, delighting, and cherishing her body as he petted her.

Strong, rough hands smoothed over her bare skin, lips, tongues, and teeth worshiped her everywhere. Her eyes drifted shut. She floated on pure sensation, no longer caring who touched her or where. After a lifetime without caresses, the men were overwhelming. Yet, it felt wonderful and she reveled in the attention shown to every centimeter of her body.

Perhaps inspired by the competition, the Centurion's ticklers stirred to new heights of erotic stimulation, impelling her into fresh soul-fusing climax. Caught up in the throes of unbearable rapture, the initial pain of the second invasion was easier for her to tolerate.

Tears of joy, spilled as the pressure from Helax's erection burned her delicate rear channel and found new pleasure zones--pushing her toward another peak before the last one had even fully subsided.

Keeping her securely in place with his chest, his hips flexed, stroking strongly, and deeply, in and out of her back passage.

He groaned with the effort of holding back his own release. "You are so tight, baby I'm not going to last."

Her fantasies of sex with two warriors had never come close to the sensations flooding her system. Sandwiched between the males, every section of her body was receiving adoration and more sensual attention she could handle.

Joon started to spasm in yet another orgasm that went on and on and on. She'd lost track of the peaks she'd experienced. Flushed from her hairline to her toes, her blood sizzled, and her very bones melted in the heat of their embrace.

"Our woman is tiring, but I need more." Mythos grated out the necessary words.

And then the Centurion captured her mouth in a wildly possessive kiss.

With Helax supporting her weight, Mythos repositioned his arms hard against her sides, gripping his provocateur's hips firmly. The Centurion set a desperate pace, urging Helax to a rapid fulfillment.

* * * *

A severe case of self-pity had damn near drowned Helax. No matter where he'd moved to, he heard the big guy's grunts and Joon's sexy whimpers. The vessel was way too small to allow for privacy. And the sounds of their lovemaking drove him past sanity into the white-knuckled sex maniac territory.

While he was truly glad that his man had managed to overcome his hang-ups about sex and witches. The situation still left him the odd man out of the happy fucking loop. Viewed from any angle, getting stuck as the unwilling audio voyeur sucked big time.

Finally, he snapped out of his misery, heading for the holo-simulator, since virtual sex beat the seven hells out of no sex.

His plan to get a little relief had one minor flaw. To get to the pleasure unit he had to pass the pod room. Nearing the entrance to the sleeping chamber, he couldn't help noticing they hadn't even bothered to seal the room.

In an act of self-preservation, he pressed the door's control. The mechanism creaked and shuddered then ground to a halt. A quick inspection revealed the frame had been bent. Apparently, his man had at least tried to resist.

Keeping his eyes trained on the opposite wall, Helax strode by, clearing the opening to the sleeping chamber.

Then Joon let out a whimper that snaked around his balls and tightened.

For a few seconds, he thought about crawling into the pod room and begging.

Before he'd totally humiliated himself by horning in where he wasn't wanted, Mythos growled, "Help us."

There was nobody else around, so he had to have been talking to him.

The big guy didn't have to ask twice.

Helax was a warrior. He lived to serve. He'd already toed off his boots. Now, he stripped off his uniform from his eager frame on his way into the sleeping chamber.

The witch's legs straddled his man's lean hips. While her breasts pressed against his massive chest, her head rested on his broad shoulders, exposing the vulnerable junction of her neck.

Leaning in, he kissed the tempting spot.

A pink flush stained her pale skin. She was fever hot against his lips and smelled sweeter than the rarest wine. He deepened the kiss, licking the fiery flesh and then suckling the sweet-spicy taste that was hers alone. Kissing her so hard that he marked her body only made him more desperate for her sweetness.

A rush of pure possessiveness poured through him. She belonged to him.

In a strange and slightly kinky way, so did Mythos. More accurately, the three of them belonged together. Kneading the soft curves of her bottom, he gently probed the puckered entrance to her rear passage.

If Joon hadn't been so exhausted and if the big guy had been a little less tense, Helax would have licked her from pussy to ass. But, both of them were already too close to collapsing to allow for savoring her charms.

His cock throbbed with eagerness to pump to the ultimate rescue. He ground his teeth, complying enthusiastically with the big guy's demand to ready her. After lubing

up, he gently probed her with one finger, then two before he aligned his painfully hard erection with her backdoor.

He pushed steadily, aware of Mythos's ragged breath. Beads of sweat popped on his forehead at the effort to control his need to thrust. Then she softened, easing around him. He slipped halfway into her dark channel. Her muscles clamped down on the invasion, nearly exploding his frayed control.

Tightening his abs, he waited for her tight passage to accept the rest of his length.

Abruptly, Joon sagged between them, unconscious.

He feared for her safety, but he couldn't have stopped. He pressed deeper, finally seating himself fully inside her hot passage. He widened his stance, brushing against Mythos's hairy thighs and felt a faint quiver in his friend's mighty limbs.

There was no time for finesse. While the big guy gripped his side, setting a ball-twisting pace, Helax stroked in and out of Joon's tight passageway. Each thrust brought him dangerously close to release. "I'm going to come."

"Not yet," Mythos warned, tightening his grasp on Helax's hips and upping the tempo until the pressure in his tightened balls was so great, he couldn't hold back for another nano-second.

He tried to warn the big guy, but a ragged groan was the only sound that emerged from his tortured throat. Hot spurts of cum exploded from his cock. His back arched, as if trying to push the sperm even deeper while white-hot bliss milked the last drops from his happy shaft.

Mythos grunted, his handsome features pulled into a fierce grimace, as he found his own satisfaction at last.

Then, his friend's strong legs began to buckle.

Helax eased his fall slightly. All three of them sprawled on the sleeping chamber's cool deck. "Is she okay?"

The big guy cuddled Joon a little closer. "Yeah, she just needs to rest."

Since he was in the better shape than the other two, he tugged his uniform over trembling legs, stuffed his feet into his boots, and staggered for the replicator.

Sanitation units were all well and good. But there were times when a warm damp towel was even better, and this was one of them.

He rapidly adjusted the device's settings to produce a batch of steaming linens. After quickly cleaning his still semi-hard shaft, he gathered the hot towels, heading back for the sleeping chamber.

Mythos met him in the passageway. The big guy was naked, his legs braced wide. Joon was still asleep cradled in his arms. His scowl was back to normal.

Holding out his arms for Joon, Helax offered a warm towel in trade. "Go on, get dressed. I'll take care of her."

The scowl deepened, but the big guy handed her over. After one last glance, he reversed course, already roughly toweling his heavy sex while he strode back toward the sleeping chamber.

"Bring her clothes," he called after the Centurion. All too aware that they had new problems. Loving Joon together changed everything between them.

Carefully, he sat down in the passageway where he cleaned her tender slit and the tiny entrance to her back channel. While he cared for her, his cock hardened, quickly growing as stiff as if he'd been deprived for months.

Joon's chest rose more rapidly, her nipples scrunching into sharp points, and her eyelids fluttered. Any idea of resistance evaporated in the sizzling need coloring her delicate features.

Shedding his clothes, he bent, licking his way toward one luscious peak. The tip was dark red and hard enough to wound his heart. Fearlessly, he licked on, sucking the sweet cherry topper hard against the roof of his mouth.

Instantly, she arched and moaned, writhing in his arms until her wet pussy was teasing his aching shaft. She pulled his head away from her breast, and eased the head of his cock into her entrance in one smooth move.

"I need," she feathered the words across his lips, and then captured his mouth in a blistering kiss.

Demons from the seven hells couldn't have stopped him from fulfilling her wishes. He surged into her tight sheath as fast as he could without hurting her.

Even as careful as he'd been, she flinched. But, when he stopped, she urged him on, saying. "More, I need more."

With his balls high, tight, and already screaming for release, he edged deeper still into the wet velvet furnace gripping his cock like a fist.

"More," she breathed against his lips.

He silenced her with a brutal kiss. Fuck yeah. He had more for her. He rammed the last few inches of his cock into her tight pussy. Then, afraid he'd hurt her--he froze.

She made sexy throaty noises as her delicate muscles milked him--reassured him.

"Slow down, baby. I want to make this good for you," Helax crooned softly against her lips.

"You might as well try talking to a volcano, bud. She wants what she wants," Mythos said with a rare hint of amusement. The big guy settled himself at her back, his big thighs bracketing both Helax's and hers. Gently, he stroked her from her arms to her hips, rubbing every accessible centimeter over and over again.

Joon arched into his touch like water running down a slope. "So good."

Seconds later, her pussy clenched harder around his rod while she jerked and moaned her satisfaction.

He didn't even try to stop his own climax, watching the pleasure take her pulled on his cock until it blasted mighty spurts of cum.

When he checked to be sure she was okay, she was breathing evenly and the desperate need had left her face.

"You did it," she purred.

Helax didn't know what he'd done, except get his rocks off inside the most incredible woman ever to draw breath. Whatever it had been, he was madly proud that he'd pleased her.

When he met her eyes, he shivered on the inside.

Here he'd been thinking what a hot number she was. Then, she'd gone beyond

cold in a flash--reverting to type. Good reminder that the woman with the sexy moves and the elegant curves was a lethal witch. But, the warning came too late for his heart.

Helax trailed behind Mythos and Joon, who had no problem keeping up with the big guy's ground breaking strides. The amazing part was she didn't need to exert herself to stay with him. She didn't walk so much as glide.

Damn him for a fool. Watching her move made him twitch with a sexual hunger that should've been long dead and buried. Even stranger, he wanted to protect her with an even fiercer need, and that flat out terrified him.

Chapter Five

Enyo space sector, 2392 post exodus

Joon towed herself off and stepped into the one-piece uniform Mythos had brought. Then, she slipped on boots, and wound her hair into a knot at the back of her head, securing the heavy mass with a couple of clips.

Deliberately, she'd explained exactly what Helax's crucial role as a provocateur was. After reading his deepest fears that his lack of viable sperm made him inferior, she'd had no choice. She'd held his hand all through the conversation, aware that Mythos listened but not allowing herself to worry about his reaction. When she'd finished outlining his crucial contribution, Helax had grinned with relief.

The warrior seemed immensely pleased by his role. Even now, he moved with a loose hipped swagger toward the control room. A dramatic change from his normal gait. Telling him he'd contributed a catalyst, which was a biological imperative for Centurion fertilization, had restored his confidence.

She slowed down, following the warriors, wondering about the complications her actions entailed. Mythos and Helax had a comfortable working relationship and a familiarity that spoke of a long-term friendship. Or rather, that had been the case before she'd interfered in their lives. Unfortunately, there'd been no opportunity for her to connect with Mythos to learn if he truly accepted Helax's vital participation.

The burning need to breed had been so intense. Her skin pebbled remembering the heat of desire. Logic told her the men had been just as powerfully affected.

She wondered if they felt things so intensely all the time. Dear Goddess, if that was true they must be half-crazed. She counted it a minor miracle that no one had been injured in the frenzied coupling.

Had it been a true mating? Would either--or Goddess help her, both--of the men be bonded to her?

Warriors bonded. How, or why, such bonds were formed she knew not.

Centurions were reputed to mate for life, but the details of those matings were long lost. As was so much of the lore about the ancient race of super warriors.

She had her hands full dealing with her own crumbling controls, especially now that she was breeding. Yet, irrationally, she longed for a true mating with both men.

While she walked behind the men to the main cabin, enjoying the view, the ship lurched violently, interrupting her thoughts.

The impact was so strong she bounced off the craft's surfaces almost as if the gravity field had abruptly failed.

After the warrior righted himself, he asked, "What in the seven hells was that? A particle storm?"

Mythos shook his head, his expression grim. "Tow beam."

"Maldorean?"

"Don't know," the Centurion grumbled. "The only thing I'm sure about is that we need to break the lock on the ship."

"I'll see if I can override it from the engine compartment," Helax volunteered.

"May the Gods smile on you," Mythos said solemnly, breaking into a sprint, amazingly fast for a man of his size.

A few seconds later, Joon entered the central cabin. "Can you identify the ship?"

The Centurion shook his head. "There's nothing there." He waved toward the blank display panel. "The ship's sensors don't register anything. I'm locked out of the helm. Nothing is working. Except for life support."

"Then our captors must be cloaked," she said reasonably. "There've been rumors about such a system being tested in this quadrant."

"Why didn't you inform me of this immediately?" Mythos glowered at her as if she were a Maldorean spy.

Anger heated her cheeks, in a silly illogical reaction to his accusatory tone. She wasn't an untried trainee, who blushed whenever an officer glanced in her direction. Straightening her spine, she managed to control her voice, speaking coolly. "I need the craft's viewer."

"Forget it, you can't see anything."

"No, you can't see anything. Stand aside," she said, adding an icy tendril of control under the words.

Mythos glared, not compelled at all.

This was the second time, perhaps the third, he'd resisted her. It was disconcerting, and strangely exciting to her, that he was uncontrollable.

He made his own choice to step aside then made a show of checking the craft's chronometer. "They've been locked onto to us for six minutes."

"It's small--a scout ship," she murmured, infusing her voice with the soothing tendrils he needed.

Taking us back home to the big bad mother shop. Unless she could find a way out of the trap.

* * * *

Clamping down hard on his fear, Mythos forced himself to ask, "Are there any markings on the vessel?"

Her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. If he hadn't been staring at her intently, he would've missed the small sign of distress.

"There's a strange, stylized beast on the outer hull atop the engine housing."

"What color is it?" he asked grimly.

After a slight pause, she said, "Red."

"A Griffin?" The words grated out of his tightening throat.

She frowned in concentration. "I'm not familiar with the term. This appears to be part bird and part lion."

"Maldoreans." Fear flooded him. Images of what the Maldoreans did with their prisoners assaulted his mind. Sweat trickled down his back and his subcutaneous slave

collar portal tingled. As quickly as he'd overheated, his blood chilled. He'd sworn he'd take his own life before he'd allow himself to be made a slave again.

Only the dishonor of leaving Joon and Helax to face the threat alone kept him from acting on his vow. His heart beat faster, his muscles clenched, and his awareness of his surroundings sharpened as his body automatically readied itself to meet the threat to his mates. But, that too was a problem.

His heightened senses increased his need for the dangerous witch.

He breathed through his mouth, attempting to minimize the seductive spell of her scent, trying to focus on the threat. But no matter what he did, her seductive fragrance teased him. It had changed subtly.

Deliberately, he inhaled her essence, scowling while he tried to pinpoint what was different. Unable to identify the change, he had to let it go. It didn't matter. His reaction to her remained the same. He wanted to touch her, protect her, and possess her.

Unfortunately, her mating heat had passed, leaving her coolly indifferent to his existence. A status he ached to change. In only a few hours time, he'd gone from woman phobic to Joon obsessed. It was a lot for a man to wrap his head around, but he was trying.

When she'd reached the ship's console, she hadn't waited for his assistance or instruction. She'd accessed the ship's viewer as if she'd been in the Space Corps for decades. Part of what had fascinated him about her was her mastery of the Belle Amity technology, which was light years ahead of anything Enyo had on tap.

Except for weaponry.

The Warriors excelled in firepower. But, what did witches need with blasters when they could fell a man with a whisper?

"Five life forms on board," she said calmly.

"Only five?" he asked, a spark of hope glimmering to life.

Joon nodded, studying the vessel he couldn't see.

A scout ship then, testing their new toy. He could kill five Maldoreans with his bare hands. If he could get to them.

"You don't have a teleporter?" she asked.

"No." Thank the Gods. He'd read her intentions with bone chilling certainty. The woman would've sent her molecules all over space in an instant. He resisted the urge to rub his arms to ward off the lingering chill of fear.

"What kind of range does your vessel's weapon system have?"

He shook his head. "The blasters are inoperative. The bastards wouldn't be towing us if we could fire."

"Hmm," she murmured, turning back to stare at the viewer, which remained maddeningly blank to him.

"Can you show me what you're seeing?" he asked.

She continued to study the display for a few seconds more. Finally, she said, "I can try. Give me your hand, Centurion."

Mythos didn't hesitate, surprising himself. He wrapped his rough hand around the smaller, softer one she'd offered him.

Instantly, the terror of being recaptured was slashed in half.

Even better--he saw the Maldorean Eagle with its identifying red Griffin. The vessel was small and fast, but lightly armored. "How is it that I can see this?"

She shrugged gracefully. "Must have been the...mating" Her voice trailed off, as if she'd lost interest in the subject.

Surprisingly, terror didn't swell inside him. He'd known from the start that there was never going to be anything casual between him and the witch.

"What of Helax, does it work the same way for him?"

"Perhaps," she said under her breath, avoiding his eyes.

He edged closer to her, waiting for the old fear to kick in, but nothing happened. Even standing a hair's breadth from the beautiful witch. He felt nothing except comfort and pleasure as awareness of her filled his senses.

Forcing his attention back to the vessel towing them, he said, "We could take her, if it weren't for the tractor beam. They can't have much range..."

Then the Eagle's mother ship appeared on the viewer. The ship filled the Grizzly's display.

Mythos stopped talking as his thoughts accelerated, fueled by a fresh flood of high-test fear. Already much too close, the Maldorean Imperial class monster was as big as the smallest of Enyo's moons.

"Clever," Joon murmured. "They're using the gravitational pull of the white dwarf, and the planet orbiting it, to conserve their energy source. The massive space station is positioned in the way a natural moon would have been. The opposing gravitational fields would maintain the huge ship with minimal energy expenditure for several millennia."

His pounding pulse made it hard to process her words. He grunted something that passed for agreement, fighting to control the mind-stealing fear.

While they drew closer, the host planet rotated, exposing a crescent view of brilliant blue swirled with white. The breathtaking scene reminded Mythos of the ancient Earth images he'd studied as a boy. He glanced at Joon.

As if she'd read his thoughts, she spoke softly, "Earth no longer looks like that. After the apocalypse, we had no capacity for space travel for more than two millennia.

Since, we've regained and refined extra-terrestrial transport systems, the Earth has been observed to be primarily gray when seen from outside the atmosphere. There are still oceans but they merely reflect the color of the sky, which is oxygen depleted and still heavy with dust particles.

The warriors had fled Earth long before he'd been born. It remained their home planet, an ethereally beautiful orb of blue and white, preserved by as a holo-image used to teach history to younglings.

If he'd ever applied logic to the planet's status then he would've realized Earth had to have changed profoundly. But, logic had never entered into it. On Enyo, Earth remained frozen in time. The planet was forever as it had been before the post-apocalypse storms ravaged the atmosphere, turning it into a hostile dust cloud.

Try as he might, the disturbing image refused to budge from his thoughts. It

clouded the reality of the unknown planet's beauty. The picture of an endless dust storm choking the atmosphere persisted, growing stronger and more detailed. Until it had taken on the weight of a paralyzing omen.

* * * *

Down on the mechanical level, underneath the main deck, Helax kicked the engine housing with no effect. Other than to make his left foot throb painfully. His temper had flared when Mythos updated him via the comlink. They were being towed by an Eagle. Limping slightly, he refocused on the problem. There had to be a way to break the Maldorean's lock. The helm override program had no effect. Diagnostics, maintenance--so far nothing had worked.

Aside from bruising himself against the equipment, he'd failed to accomplish anything. There had to be a way. However, he hadn't found it and time seemed to accelerate. Though the compartment was cool, sweat dripped from his forehead, burning his eyes. He knuckled away the irritation. A drop seeped onto the console fizzling as the moisture made contact with the sensitive circuits.

That was it. Water. If he could interrupt the Maldorean's hold on their ship's controls then they'd have a chance.

Problems bubbled up as fast as his hopes. He had to preserve their systems or the enemy would simply recapture them immediately. Plus, he had to do it fast.

The ship towing them would be making for home base with its prize at top speed. The small scout vessels had a limited range. At best, they were a couple of hours from the mother ship. At worst, only few more minutes remained before they were locked inside some monstrous Maldorean base.

Once in the hands of the enemy, execution was the best outcome they could hope for. And the least likely. The Maldoreans had devoted themselves to perfecting their slave conditioning process over centuries.

First, the three of them would be tortured for information--a brutal mind rape, which left the survivors with only enough intelligence to perform simple tasks. That would be the beginning of their new life as Maldorean slaves. Each of them would serve at the enemy's discretion--as brute labor, entertainment, or sex slaves.

Because of her Belle Amity conditioning, Joon would suffer more than either he or Mythos, even though the big guy's time on an enemy slaver had to be eating holes in his sanity. Each of them would enter their own personal seventh level of hell unless he figured out how to break the Maldorean's lock while somehow preserving their own vessel's functions.

He glanced at the chronometer. No pressure, anytime in the next two or three minutes would be fine.

If he failed to protect his mates, he didn't deserve to live.

He hurried to the replicator located behind the reactor's chamber to get water. But, how to insulate the vital ship's systems? There had to be a way.

What if the ship's computer failed? He'd never heard of such a thing happening. But, there had to be a backup provision. His mind raced through possibilities, hitting one dead end after another.

The holo-unit! The versatile unit was used for entertainment, training, and, of course, sex. In flight simulation mode, it should be capable of substituting for the craft's standard controls with some fast circuit switching. His hands trembled as he checked the time. The safety margin was now under two minutes.

No tests then.

He'd always been a wing and prayer kinda of guy.

He pulled circuits, reconnecting furiously. His unsteady fingers bent delicate connectors. He prayed that they weren't anything critical.

After two minutes, he straightened and sucked in a deep breath. Willing his arm to stay steady, he poured a thin stream of water onto the computer's father board.

A crackle or two, some hissing, and then the sound level went up, as did the electrical arcing. The lights flickered. The ship rocked. The gravitational field vanished.

Helax grabbed for a handhold and missed.

The access panel he'd grasped seared his palm. When he let go he floated away from the engine room's console, losing his bearings in the sudden blackness.

Aside from an occasional spark from the damaged systems, the room was as dark as a black hole. Each bump sent him spinning, further disorienting him.

He caught a compartment handle and righted himself. Stretching for the next hold, he felt empty space. Then he grasped the hatch frame and worked a bit closer to the holo-suite. His movements felt unnatural and uncoordinated in the gravity free environment, hurrying was impossible.

The distance of a few meters became an endurance race. Sweat streamed down his forehead and dripped under his arms. Finally, he felt the holo-suite's entrance, impelling himself into the unit. He anchored himself by wedging a foot under the seat, feeling for the edge of the access panel. His fingers found the recessed handle easily and the cover opened smoothly. He pressed the manual reset button and prayed.

Nothing.

The fatal flaw in his plan became glaringly obvious. There was no fucking power. The holo-suite controls required power. Same as every other damn thing on this miserable fucking ship.

* * * *

When the life support system failed, the lights went out, blacking out the viewer screen as well. But, it hardly mattered. They were close enough that the Maldorean space station filled the cabin's wide, un-shuttered, bow window.

The sheer scale of the thing was overwhelming. Joon timed her breaths, carefully controlling her body's reaction to the massive threat.

This near, the structure seemed to absorb all light and life. Aside from occasional flickers of brightness, quickly extinguished, the station's surface was a dull black. Not even a single red griffin to relieve the endless darkness. The base was as black as space itself, but without the starlight.

Although it was not cloaked, it was heavily shielded. She sensed nothing of the life forms that must be within the giant station.

From her viewpoint, the Maldorean scout ship towing them looked like an insect

approaching a mountain, the vessel hovered near the spherical base. Slowly, a bay door opened and the Eagle glided inside. The Grizzly continued to drift outside.

The towing beam had been disrupted!

Better yet, their capturers didn't seem to have noticed the change of status.

Turning toward Mythos, she asked, "How can we restart the vessel?"

"I don't know," he admitted in a frustrated growl. "Come with me. There has to be a way."

She clung to his side as he moved from one handhold to another. The short distance became an arduous trek. After a few minutes, they met Helax, working his way toward the main cabin.

"Were you able to access control from the engine room?" Mythos asked.

Helax grumbled, "Not exactly. I shorted out the father board. It should've interrupted the lock the Maldorean's had on us."

"It did." The Centurion pounded on his friend's shoulder. "Now, all we need to do is figure out how to restart this craft and get out of here before the Maldoreans notice they've lost us."

"Great, we've got plenty of time then. Being without power is almost as good as a cloaking shield. We'll be damn hard to spot until we get the systems back on line. By then they'll be in a different sector," Helax said, huffing with relief.

"Great plan, bud. Except that we're drifting outside the biggest Maldorean space base I've ever seen."

Joon cleared her throat. "Drifting might be a good thing. As Helax said, we're as nearly invisible as it's possible to be without a cloaking device. Does this vessel have a docking beam?"

"Absolutely," Helax said, excitement lightening his deep voice.

"And it's independently powered," Mythos added.

"If the beam's action could be reversed then it would repel us from the space station," Joon said quietly.

Helax cautioned, "In theory, but we're still dead unless we get life support running again."

"Granted, but it buys us time," Joon said persuasively.

Soon, the three of them were in the mechanical room. Helax swore as his fingers lost their grip on the cover that shielded the docking beam's controller. He tried again.

Mythos wedged closer, lending his strength, but the cover resisted.

Half an hour later, both men were struggling for breath and Joon had slowed her own respirations to conserve oxygen.

"A little light would help," Helax muttered.

The lack of oxygen was slowing her thought process. It took her a few seconds to comprehend his words. She snapped her fingers, igniting a simple glow effect and moved closer to where the men crouched.

"Don't ever do that on Enyo," Mythos growled at her in warning.

Joon fought an urge to smile at his harsh tone. Her Centurion was championing her--determined to protect her--even from her own foolish actions.

Helax simply grinned. "Thanks, babe. You wouldn't happen to have a circuit tool handy?"

"What does it look like?"

"Like this." He chuckled raggedly, lifting a thin metal devise from the inner edge of the drive's lower frame.

After a few seconds of tense effort, he turned to Mythos. "Ready to try power."

Joon anchored herself to his waist and the Centurion pulled them both to another access panel on the opposite side of the engine room. Once there, he rapidly opened the compartment and flipped down a lever.

At first, she felt nothing. Then, there was a small shifting, which she attributed to dizziness. Gradually, the sensation of movement increased and became unmistakable.

They'd done it. She tried to draw a deep breath, but the thin air didn't fill her lungs and darkness narrowed her vision.

Chapter Six

Enyo sector space, 2392 post exodus

Only her will kept her standing.

Mythos slumped to the deck. Then he lost his grip on the handhold, drifting.

She stripped off her uniform, using the thin material to tether him carefully to the cabin wall. The small room had many exposed system parts--the Centurion bouncing from one delicate set of circuits, chips, and connectors to the next would create disasters they didn't need.

Finishing the last knot, she checked on Helax. He still gripped the locking beam's handle, but his eyes were closed and his breathing more labored.

Her undershirt was sacrificed as a safety tether for the warrior.

As she'd seen Mythos do, she wedged her foot under the control panels to anchor herself. She scanned the modules looking for some clue to distinguish the life support controller from the others. The three panels were identical. Touching them lightly, she discovered traces of water on the bottom edge of one.

Carefully, she tugged at the cover. When nothing happened, she applied more force. Her arms trembled and she panted with the effort, cursing warrior strength that had cemented the cover in place. Then she drug in a precious breath for another attempt, demanding the strength of desperation from her tired muscles.

The cover creaked and gave.

She was lightheaded and had to blink to clear her blurring vision, before she could inspect the module. Willing heat and light into her fingertips, she traced the micro-components. The module was as foreign to her as the rest of the warrior vessel.

Even the shape of the Grizzly, large, rough, and menacing with its bear paw emblem, was as alien as the Maldorean Eagle's winged design. Neither vessel resembled the comfortable dome shape of one of the sisterhood's Athena class ships.

The sharp difference carried through every aspect of the vessel.

At last, her seeking fingers found a damp area and she amplified the heat in her fingertips to the point of burning. Trying to get between sections, she twisted and lost her anchor foothold. She tumbled to the unit's ceiling, banging her head. Disoriented, she missed the next handhold and drifting to the access ladder.

A rung of the access ladder flashed in the edge of her vision. She reached for it, connecting. For a long minute, she clung doggedly to the metal rung, gathering the strength for another attempt.

The oxygen level in the vessel was falling fast. The men were already unconscious and she was woozy. Hopelessness threatened her determination.

Drawing deep within herself, she found the will to try again. She pushed off the ladder, angling her body for the holo-unit, grabbing the handle as she floated past the

opening of the training facility.

A series of clicks became a rumble. The entire vessel hummed and vibrated. Lights flickered. Gravity yanked her to the deck.

For long moments, Joon simply lay there, exhausted.

"By the Gods, you did it woman." Mythos beamed and helped her up, handing her the uniform she'd used to secure him.

She swallowed, shaking her head. "I'm not certain I did anything. The ship just came back to life."

Helax joined them, tucking her top into one of his pockets. "Connectors must have dried out enough for the ship's computer to restart."

"Thank the Goddess," Joon murmured.

Any other words she might've added vanished from her lips as their small craft gave a sickening lurch. Her gaze flew to the warriors.

"The Maldoreans have another lock on us," Mythos said. His voice was calm, but his features were a rigid mask of despair.

Helax swung himself up the access ladder. The only comment he made was a muttered curse.

She ignored her protesting muscles, grabbing a rung. A hiss of pain escaped when her seared fingers came in contact with the ladder.

The Centurion enfolded her. "Let me see it."

Embarrassed, she held up her hand.

He encircled her wrist holding it in a grip of tender steel. "You're burned." He blew lightly across the injured fingers.

Inexplicably, the rush of air made her blistered hand feel better. At the same time, the Centurion's caring gesture woke strange feelings in her heart. Feelings of wanting to be closer to him. Feelings that she could not blame on the heat of mating. She shivered, tucking her arm away.

Before she could retreat, he captured her waist with one brawny arm and simply hauled her up the ladder.

* * * *

Setting her down gently, Mythos cursed viciously in silence. In the past millennium, nothing exciting had happened in the G sector. It was much too close to Enyo. He'd patrolled it countless times during his service in the Space Corps.

Not expecting anything more perilous than a mild particle storm, he'd allowed himself to be distracted by Joon. Now, his negligence had landed them in peril.

Had it been him alone, he would have faced the Maldoreans with a defiant grin--a warrior's death a welcome outcome. But, he'd drug Helax and Joon into his own private seventh level of hell. He would never forgive himself for letting them down.

"Tell me about the Maldoreans," Joon murmured.

Mythos swallowed a lump clogging his throat. "What do you want to know?"

"Are women as rare on their world as they are on Enyo?"

He shook his head no, and then spoke slowly. "Not yet, their women are different--very fierce. Most refuse to mate with their own men."

Joon raised one eyebrow. "What else?"

"The men are cruel." He lowered his voice not wanting Helax to hear. "The women are worse. Much worse." His skin crawled at the sudden influx of unwanted memories. He'd escaped their mind purge, having been captured as a child. This time there would be no mercy.

The massive Grizzly settled smoothly onto the deck in the center of a vast hangar. A long row of Eagles flanked their port side. On the ship's starboard was a wide aisle with a dozen Lion class intergalactic fighters ready for launching. The sheer size and overwhelming numbers numbed his mind.

Nothing happened for several seconds. Then the gigantic bay doors creaked and groaned as they closed, locking them inside the Maldorean space station.

Once the enormous bay was pressurized, they would be boarded. Mythos clamped his back teeth to keep from howling with terror at his own helplessness to protect his woman.

Joon threaded her slim fingers in between his, and suddenly his fears shifted. "You have to hide."

She started to speak, but he cut her off--there was no time for argument. "Enyo women are so rare they would never be exposed to the dangers of space travel. The Maldoreans won't be looking for you. This will work."

He considered, and discarded ten different possibilities, for concealing her.

"I could simply cloak myself," she said softly.

"Better do it fast," Helax said dryly, stepping close. "We've got company."

"So we do." Joon leaned closer still, draping an arm on the warrior's shoulder.

Helax went down without a whisper of protest. Mythos caught his friend, laying him carefully on the deck before feeling for a pulse.

"Does he do that often?" Joon asked innocently.

"No--." Mythos frowned, but he never got a chance to finish the thought.

Joon had applied pressure to his shoulder and he'd crumpled, joining Helax in unconsciousness. She crouched, taking a few seconds to arrange him more comfortably before she opened the hatch.

They were hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned but Joon had reasoned that she had a much better chance of achieving their escape than the men. Aside from their aggressive tactics, Enyo and Maldor had been at war for centuries. While the Maldoreans had no quarrel with the Sisterhood.

With any kind of reasonable odds, she would have backed Helax and Mythos to the ends of the galaxy. But, they were inside a Maldorean space station. The odds weren't just long--they were impossible. Therefore, fighting wasn't the answer. The cunning treachery of guerrilla tactics was what they needed.

Her specialty.

She lowered the ramp. As she crossed to the exit, she concentrated on projecting the illusion of glamour and feminine desirability. She'd seen plenty of the gorgeous breeders, but the illusion was one she hadn't used since her training days. She tensed, praying she could hold the mask.

A glance at the dark screen reflected a beautiful, full-breasted Amazon. She swallowed a sigh of relief, curving her lips into a seductive smile as the veil of beauty settled over her more convincingly. She stepped out of the Grizzly's shadow to meet the welcoming committee.

Three Maldorean soldiers trained their weapons on the Enyo vessel's hatchway.

Joon paused, holding her seductive pose. The simple act took a frightening amount of effort. Her strength was seriously depleted from their adventures, the illusion of beauty wasn't easy to maintain, and she was breeding.

Two of the three Maldorean males jostled for her attention.

From Mythos's level of fear, she'd been expecting monsters with bloody fangs and claws. But, aside from their uniforms-- black with red griffin insignia on the left chest--and their paler, more golden coloring, they could have passed for Enyo warriors.

The officer, who'd held back, spoke first. "What are you doing aboard an Enyo vessel, woman?"

She turned toward him, intensifying the projection of beauty, and infusing her voice with truth markers. "The barbarians captured me while I was visiting as part of an envoy from Earth."

He narrowed his gaze, studying her. "Where are the Enyo animals now?"

"They may have drunk something too strong for them." She shrugged carelessly. "Last time I saw them, they were sleeping peacefully."

"We'll see." He moved toward the Grizzly.

She shrugged, wriggling her fingers at him in a friendly gesture of farewell.

He stumbled, arms waving wildly before catching his balance. The small disruption had disoriented him, which had been her goal.

"Now, there's no need to get rough," she said, taunting the remaining men.

The suspicious officer scowled at his men, and then marched toward them. He was too late. His men were embroiled in an evenly matched scrimmage.

Already, her head ached from keeping so many different magic effects active at the same time. She needed to get one of the Maldorean's to open the bay and launch their ship, preferably with her on it.

And she needed it done within the next few minutes. If she took too long, Mythos and Helax would wake up and get themselves captured or killed. Or she would lose control of her illusions. She couldn't afford to take her time. With or without her aboard, the ship had to be launched. Fast.

The two soldiers fought more grimly.

Abruptly, she insinuated herself next to the difficult Maldorean officer, laying her hand on his arm with a casual assurance that was pure bluff. She lowered her lashes, adding a blush to her illusion and holding her breath.

She'd already established that this man was the least susceptible of the three, but he was also the one most likely to have the level of access she required.

His hand moved toward her face, cupping the side of her jaw with surprising tenderness. "So beautiful," he rumbled.

For a second, she was reminded of Mythos and faltered. But then, the deadly

peril to her warriors reinforced her concentration.

She pressed her imaginary curves intimately against the soldier's arm, purring invitingly. "Why don't you show me your station?"

"I'd rather show you my quarters."

"Just as soon as you show me your powerful equipment," she murmured, adding as much persuasion into her voice as she could manage.

"My pleasure," he said, tugging her closer as he moved them into a lift.

The controls for the massive hangar overlooked the deck. Her head pounded as she admired the officer's expertise. "How many men does it take to launch a ship?"

"I can launch a dozen Eagles in under a minute. A Lion takes a little longer. But, I don't need any help to get the job done," he assured her with smirk.

"Really?" she simpered sweetly, walking her fingers up his impressive arm.

"What would you have to do to get rid of the Grizzly?"

He frowned and rubbed his neck.

Her heart quelled. Her control over his mind was slipping away and the harder she tried to hold on to him, the faster her illusions unraveled.

"What's this?" he asked sharply, shackling her wrist painfully.

"I don't know what you mean." She tried to deflect his suspicion.

"Who are you?"

The console had an infinite number of possible command sequences. The only signs and labels were in an alien language. She needed him to show her the procedure and she'd run out of time.

"Show me how to launch the Enyo ship," she said, keeping her voice low and strong with compulsion.

"I don't think so." The Maldorean officer closed the distance between them by yanking her roughly against him.

It felt as though she'd been smashed into a solid wall. Her headache pulsed in sickening waves of pain. He fastened restraints, tightening them so hard that they bit into her wrists while he eyed her with open disgust. "You're too skinny to be a breeder. I don't know what you're playing at, but I know you're causing trouble."

"Yeah, but we love her anyway," Helax assured him.

Mythos simply growled, stripping the officer's hold on her effortlessly. He dwarfed the man, who'd seemed so formidable to her only a few seconds ago. "Remove her bonds."

There was no compulsion in his gravelly voice, but the vicious grip he had on the Maldorean officer carried its own imperative.

The second she was released, Helax issued his own demand. "Open the bay doors, shit for brains."

The officer's eyes flashed with defiance. "Not even for your life, Enyo parasite."

The Centurion shifted his grip, bringing the officer up on his toes. His golden skin paled to a sickly yellow.

"Fine, I'd enjoy crushing your nuts," Mythos said calmly.

"Do it and you're stuck here forever. The console is keyed to my palm."

"Don't let him go. He's lying about the controls and he intends to sound an alarm," Joon said. Freed from the need to project illusions, she'd been monitoring the exchange carefully, instantly reading the Maldorean's intentions.

"Doesn't matter." The officer managed a sneer. "Watch changes any minute, they'll blast you out of here if they have to. But since you don't want your skinny girlfriend's molecules spread all over the control room, you'll surrender, and then you'll be back on a slaver before you have time dry your tears."

Mythos tightened his grasp and the man quit talking. But, his words had already gotten to the Centurion.

"Is he telling the truth?" he asked grimly.

"Maybe, about the watch change." Joon rubbed her temples, trying to ease the still murderous headache. "There's something in his mind about a portal." She shook her head. "I can't make sense of it."

The Maldorean officer sneered at Mythos. "You remember how the slave collar connects to your central nervous system, right Enyo parasite?"

"Reznor, report," the voice outside the crowded control center was off--too regulated--not quite human.

Panic raced through Joon's veins--none of her magic worked on machines. High-level computers with their biologic components--maybe. But the mechanoid outside the door was more machine than human.

* * * *

Something had spooked Joon, but there was no time to worry about it. Signaling Mythos with a glance, Helax pressed the blaster into Reznor's sore crotch. "Recognize that, dung eater? It's set on five. High enough to put an end to your reproductive equipment, but you might survive."

The officer gulped and nodded his understanding.

"Good, now we're going to take this one step at a time. Get rid of your relief and no tricks."

"The bow doors are stuck again--could you override them for me before you log on duty?" Reznor asked.

"The doors have manifested a repeat malfunction?" the relief officer asked.

"Right--I need you to override the release from the bay."

"I must check the error diagnostic log," the new officer said.

Reznor spoke again, more firmly. "Negative, I've already confirmed the error with engineering."

The mechanoid hesitated, and then said stiffly, "I was not informed."

"Engineers," Reznor said with a dismissive snort.

"I will reset the lockout."

Reznor let out a breath of relief, turning toward Mythos with a grim face. "Okay, parasite. You have three minutes."

"I only need two," Mythos said evenly, twisting the Maldorean's neck in a quick, almost casual, but clearly lethal move. While Helax scrambled for the exit, he was aware of Mythos slamming the console with one massive hand, and then scooping Joon against

his side with his free arm. The big guy strode out of the control room with no sign of strain.

Helax held the door, jamming the lock with a blast from his sidearm before he hurried after his mates.

"Nice touch on the lock," Mythos said.

"Hope it slows them down enough," he mumbled.

When they arrived at the hangar's deck, the stern doors were still opening.

Much more worrisome, was the steadily shrieking alarm.

The Centurion ignored the noise, loping steadily for the Lion parked closest to the stern doors.

Helax increased his pace to keep up, expecting a stun blast in the back any second. He shot glances over his shoulder, but no one pursued them.

"Give me a couple of minutes," he called after the Centurion.

Mythos nodded, but didn't slow his pace.

After a quick scan of the area, Helax detoured to the Grizzly, parked in the center aisle. He ducked inside, taking only seconds to rig the main reactor to implode.

In under a minute, he was clear of the vessel, spotted his mates, and accelerated his pace.

Two strides from the ramp, a mechanic rolled out from underneath the intergalactic fighter. "Hey, what--." The Maldorean never finished his sentence. The big guy smashed his nose into his brain.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," Helax said.

"Ha," Mythos said. "All my sides are bad."

The alarm stopped.

The sudden silence made it possible to hear the sound of weapons being readied. An energy blast exploded less than a meter from his feet.

Helax returned fire, giving Mythos time to get Joon to safety. He felled the first three of the armored squad shooting at them. Then his weapon hissed--a warning its charge was low. He fired twice more, tossing the useless sidearm. A fresh burst of adrenaline sped him up the ramp. "Go, go, go," he shouted, hoping that the big guy could fly the alien craft. The hatch closed behind him. A good sign.

He followed his instincts to the main cabin. The craft's control panel had lit up, another good sign.

The way the big guy scowled at the command interface didn't boost Helax's confidence. "Can you fly her?"

"Maybe," Mythos said.

Joon tucked her slender arm under Mythos's massive left biceps, studying the display. "It isn't much different from the sisterhood's Athena crafts. May I?"

"Go for it," the big guy urged her.

Her full lips curved into a smile of pure temptation and she glanced at Helax to include him in her invitation. "I'll hold both of you to that."

His cock stirred with eager interest.

Then his witch turned her attention to the controls. Slim fingers flying in a

complex sequence as she concentrated on launching the craft.

Nothing.

She paused. Only her eyes moved as if she were visually retracing her movements on the command interface. Then even her eyes closed.

Mythos stood at her back, supporting her. She held out her left hand and Helax stepped forward to grasp it gently.

Instantly, he felt the bond between the three of them hum to life. His own eyes drifted shut as their thoughts merged. Console data streamed through his mind. Some from his own memory, some from Mythos, and some from Joon. Though, he would have been hard put to explain how he'd distinguished which thoughts were whose.

Holding their connection, her right hand danced over the interface once again.

The Lion shuddered to life.

His tension eased. Though, they still had to launch. All takeoffs were hazardous. Those of the heavier intergalactic vessels more so than the smaller fighter class models.

The bow viewer shimmered and then resolved into a clear display. The bay doors were already closing.

"Hold on it's going to be close," Joon said calmly, fastening her restraint system.

Chapter Seven

Enyo sector space, 2392 post exodus

The unwieldy craft wallowed as Joon coaxed and adjusted the unfamiliar controls. Then, the ship tilted to a ninety-degree angle and roared forward.

Still on her side, the bulky old Lion flew through the nearly closed doors. They had so little clearance that Helax was sure they'd left a layer of the outer skin behind.

Joon righted the craft, entering a new sequence of commands.

"Don't slow down," he warned. "If you can squeeze more speed out of her then do it now."

"What did you do back there?" Mythos asked.

Helax grinned. "Set the Grizzly's reactor to implode." He checked his chronometer. "Any second now."

Joon's fingers flew once more, canceling the previous set of instructions, and then coaxing a little more speed from the fighter.

The flare of light behind them announced the implosion. Several seconds later, a sonic boom followed the fiery brightness.

And then the shockwave rolled toward them as inevitable as time. There was nothing to do except ride it out and pray the craft held together.

The wave of released energy hit with a mighty jolt that rattled his teeth and every joint in the Lion. Then it passed. The ship lurched and settled back on course.

Warning lights flared to life, one after another.

Joon interpreted most of the signals while he and Mythos worked with the craft's diagnostic and repair routines to correct the damage.

* * * *

Finally, after what felt like hours of effort, the ship was secured. Mythos stood on Joon's right, not actually touching her, but close enough to drive himself crazy with her sweet-hot scent. Close enough that his hands itched to caress her soft skin. Close enough that his cock strained the front of his uniform.

And then she leaned her head on his shoulder, melting his heart with her trust.

He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat, and spoke to Helax. "Nice work, bud."

"Seemed like a good plan," the warrior said modestly. "This way they're going to think we were all blown to bits in the blast. Plus, it had to put a hole in their fleet. If we got lucky--maybe the space station itself will be scrapped."

"May the Gods hear you."

"As much as I like watching Maldoreans burn, I need to use the sanitizer." Joon straightened, gliding out of the cabin.

Mythos sank into the captain's seat. He swallowed a grunt as his tired muscles

eased into the comfortable chair. A trace of her special scent lingered, teasing him with torrid memories.

Suddenly, his body was much less tired. He stood and stretched luxuriously.

Helax opened one eye. "I'm not moving for days."

"I need to use the sanitizer," he said, keeping his tone casual.

"Yeah, sure. The same one Joon is using?"

Deciding that giving Helax an explanation would be a waste of breath, he headed for the captain's quarters.

"You're going to need me," Helax called after him.

The warrior had a point.

Mythos's lips quirked in a feral grin. A man needed to challenge himself now and then. And he had an idea that was definitely worth a try. Then his steps slowed.

Helax's light tone hadn't disguised his friend's need. The warrior hungered for Joon with as much desperate longing as he did. And who was he to stand between them? Without Helax, he couldn't even make love to her safely.

He reversed his steps, sinking back into the captain's seat with an exhale of frustration. His hard cock twisted painfully. His mindless erection added fuel to the slow burn inside. He adjusted his aching equipment roughly.

"Talk to me man. What's going on?"

"Nothing to talk about," he grumbled.

"Thought you were going to see Joon," Helax said mildly. "My mistake."

"Changed my mind."

"Right, that's why you're sitting there with a hard-on that's going to split your uniform." Helax snorted.

"My cock doesn't run my life," he lied.

"Whatever you say my man." Helax stood. "Maybe I should go see if she needs her back scrubbed or something."

"Maybe you sit down and stay put," Mythos growled. Instantly, ashamed of his selfishness. But, not ashamed enough to let Helax go without a fight.

"We both know you could wipe the deck with me. But, I'm tough enough and mean enough to make you pay for your victory."

"I don't want to fight you," Mythos said less belligerently.

"That's what I figured. I didn't try to stop you from seeing Joon."

"Only because you knew you couldn't stop me," Mythos grumbled, and then he dropped his head, cradling his face in hands. "Sorry. I'm crazy about the witch. I don't want her hurt. You're my best friend. I don't want you hurt. But, I can't see a happy ending for any of us."

"So, you want to start suffering now--no waiting?"

A bark of laughter escaped his throat. "You've got a point, bud. Want to come with me to check on our woman?"

Helax's grin wobbled, telling Mythos he'd made the right choice. He'd read the future as clearly as a star chart--neither one of them were going to wind up with the witch. They'd taken a big detour, but it changed nothing. They were still under orders to

escort Joon to Earth. After they dropped her off at the sisterhood's compound, they were under orders to return immediately to Enyo.

Leaving her was going to shred his heart. But, Helax was right--he'd be a fool to start suffering a second before he had to. He glanced back at his friend. "Coming?"

"Absolutely."

When he entered the captain's quarters, he paused for a moment to appreciate the luxury. The craft must've belonged to a fleet admiral. He'd never seen anything like it. The walls were draped in syn-silk, the deck was covered with a soft dense material that cushioned each step, and a huge sleeping platform dominated the room. The chamber was fit for queen--almost good enough for Joon.

He hurried on, suddenly very interested in visiting the sanitizer facility. The only slightly smaller room could have served as a pleasure suite. But, it was Joon, who held his eyes. Lovelier than any decorator's clever design. She leaned back in a small pool, steam rising from the gentle waves caressing her slight curves.

The memory of seeing her in the Maldorean's restraints flashed through his mind. Up until that had happened, being captured by the Maldoreans had been his worst nightmare. But, seeing Joon bound had eclipsed every previous fear. The terror still echoed in his head.

He had to assure himself she was unharmed. And nothing would do except for him to inspect every centimeter of her beautiful body.

In seconds, he'd stripped his uniform and lowered himself into the pool without waiting for Helax.

The warrior joined them, easing his large body into the steamy water. "That feels like heaven."

Mythos grunted, thinking Joon's soft body surrounding his aching shaft was his idea of paradise. But, he wasn't wasting time on senseless arguments. Instead, he turned to Joon. "I need inside you, woman."

He held his breath waiting for her response.

Her hand cupped his face. And he knew she shared his thoughts. Her presence was warm, loving, and intimate. She moved so her back was toward him, bracing herself on the side of the pool, she bent over and widened her legs

Helax slide between her and the edge of the pool, settling her hands on his hips and pinching her tight nipples. The warrior's erection bobbed eagerly in front of Joon's sensuous lips.

While watching the warrior tease her perfect breasts, Mythos gently explored the swollen folds of her sex with his own coarse fingers. His cock thrumming between her legs. He wanted her with an aching need. And yet, he wanted her as wild and desperate as he felt. But, she didn't look desperate. She looked like his most erotic dream.

With a wicked glance of pure seduction over her shoulder, she tilted her hips and his shaft grazed her entrance before he could stop himself. Worse, his control snapped and he pressed deep inside her hot, tight, wet sheath.

At the same time, he watched as her lips stretched around Helax's erection, swallowing much of the warrior's shaft.

If it had been anyone other than Helax, he would have ripped off his limbs and used them to beat him to death. But, Helax was different--closer than a brother.

More importantly, without the warrior, Mythos wouldn't be able to breed with her and swelling Joon's flat stomach with small Centurions was what he wanted to do more than anything else--even killing Maldoreans.

The base of his cock tingled and he reluctantly withdrew from her intimate clasp before the ticklers meshed too completely with her delicate folds. Even from behind, he couldn't control the connection. "Sorry, bud. I need your help."

* * * *

The heated pool with its pulsing massage action was sheer bliss. The hot water banished the last of the tension from Joon's body.

The already familiar, but still exciting scents and tastes of her mates teased her senses, building desire in silky layers. Each added level of stimulation more seductive than the one before.

Teasing Helax's hard cock with her mouth made him groan with pleasure. The sound added to her excitement.

"Enough, babe. I'm not ready to come," Helax said, staying her head with firm, but gentle hands.

She opened heavy eyes to narrow slits. The first thing she saw was Mythos's aroused breeding shaft. Reluctantly, she let go Helax's erection with one last leisurely lick of his glistening cock.

The men shifted places, Mythos now in front while Helax stepped behind her.

Straightening, she softened her stance further, arching her back to accommodate their possession of her body.

But, Mythos didn't plunge into her empty core. He leaned over, his lips nibbling her breasts. The tips tightened into hard points begging to be suckled. And still, he ignored her need, placing nibbling kisses on the upper and under slopes of her breasts--everywhere except the taut nipples desperate for contact with his talented mouth.

His hands roamed, caressing her almost everywhere. Finding unexpected pleasure points and creating new erogenous zones. Long minutes ticked by, as he held her hips still, kissing her breasts much too gently.

While Mythos deliberately neglected her erogenous zones, Helax didn't penetrate her rear entrance. Instead, he got busy kissing and biting the side of her neck where it met her shoulder and kneading her buttocks into liquid bliss.

A desperate whimper of need escaped. Her cheeks heated as she realized the sound had come from her.

"I can't hold on much longer," Helax muttered against Joon's neck. He worked a thumb into her anus, preparing her for what was to come. Then, his long, thick cock pressed against the seam of her bottom.

Apparently, Mythos had taken Helax's warning seriously, because he guided his powerful shaft to her feminine entrance as Helax pressed into her rear passage.

Had she been less desperate, she might've huffed over their deliberate erotic torture. But it was impossible to stay irritated when their steely shafts pressed deeper,

filling her. They stretched her willing flesh to pain, and then beyond the erotic hurt to a burning hunger that was all pleasure.

Once they'd penetrated her to their roots, the Centurion's ticklers worked against her tender flesh and the warrior stroked in and out of her rear entry. Her body eased to accommodate their size. Then, there was no room for anything except pleasure.

Mythos captured her mouth in a deep kiss, plunging his tongue into her the same way she knew that he wanted to stroke into her sex. She answered with equal abandon, sucking on his tongue as he plundered her mouth, staking his needless claim. Because, the Centurion already owned her heart, body, and soul in tandem with the warrior.

Ecstatic with the closeness she shared with both men she wriggled between them, kissing Mythos, and petting Helax. Every possible connection between her and the two men was filled and stretched and pleased so completely that she dissolved into a puddle of liquid bliss.

No longer was she a separate entity. She'd merged into part of new and perfect unit that happened to have six arms, six legs, and three loving hearts.

Almost immediately, the sensation of utter fulfillment pulsed through her in waves. One orgasm barely subsided before the next, even more powerful climax shook her to her very center.

The men were so close to her that the moment of their release was an explosive rapture, rolling over the top of her own fulfillment. Everything dissolved into nothingness as she rode the waves of pleasure until exhaustion stole her consciousness.

When she regained her senses, she was floating on her back still in the bathing pool, riding another glorious wave of pleasure.

Her legs were draped over his shoulders and Mythos lapped enthusiastically at her sensitized flesh. Just when she thought that she was too exhausted to reach another climax, Helax shifted, still supporting her neck and shoulders with one arm, he placed deep, sucking kisses on the sensitive tips of her swollen breasts. His kisses sent electric charges straight to her core.

Mythos drank in her excitement and increased the erotic tension with his wicked tongue, teasing her pearl of arousal. Then, he inserted a finger into her empty sheath, coaxing a bundle of interior nerve endings to life. Fresh moisture coated his invading fingers and he growled against her rigid nub. "You taste so sweet. Feed me more of your cream, woman."

"She creams for me," Helax purred, and then returned to suckling.

"Both," she panted as her body began to spasm in delight. "Of you."

Then, the shared ecstasy captured her. She had no words for the pleasure. And no need of them.

Whether it was minutes or hours that she remained unconscious, she didn't know or care. When her awareness returned, it brought a sense of loss that squeezed her chest.

She tried to shake off the powerful feeling of sadness.

The emotion was illogical. She was safe, snuggled between the men. There were no doubts about the strength of their commitment. There was no threat. And yet, the sense of loss persisted, sending cold chills down her spine despite the warmth of the

bathing pool and her mates' embrace.

A glimpse of the future?

The sisterhood had honed her talents into reliable tools, but reading the future--one possible future--had never been one of her gifts. Possibly, she'd picked up something from either Mythos or Helax, but both of them seemed at ease.

When she cautiously probed with her telepathy, the feeling of dread receded, growing fainter until only a tinge of unease nagged at her thoughts.

At last, the source of her dread crystallized in her mind. Even though the three of them were bonded, the men were still under orders to return her to Earth. Their time together was almost over. Soon, they would need to enter stasis for the long trip to Earth. When they left stasis, they'd be in orbit around Earth. Once they'd docked with a sisterhood shuttle, she'd never see the men again.

This coupling had been a farewell--the last time they would ever be linked so intimately. A tear escaped.

Helax captured the drop with his thumb. "Why so sad, babe?"

Unable to talk past the knot of emotion filling her throat, she shook her head.

But, the warrior wouldn't let it go. "Talk to me, babe."

Sobs racked her as she choked out her fear and guilt. "After everything we've been through, you still have to take me back to Earth. I can't stay with you on Enyo and be the mate you deserve, because I was banished."

"It wouldn't have mattered, babe. Neither of us is eligible to mate."

His tortured admission choked off her flood of self-pity. "Why not?"

He grinned. "I appreciate the compliment, babe. But, you can't change Enyo law. You know how hardheaded the elders are. I've got a zero sperm count."

"But that's because you're sperm is a catalyst. You're a provocateur," she protested, still indignant at the unfairness.

"Which I'm completely down with--it's an honor. But, it makes no difference to the council's rulings."

"And I'm an alien and therefore ineligible to breed," Mythos said calmly.

"Then come to Earth and stay with me," she begged, holding her breath while she waited for their answer.

* * * *

Underneath the muscle and bone of his warrior body, Helax's heart squeezed with pain. The tiny witch was part of his blood. He belonged to her in every possible way. How could he refuse her anything?

Yet, he'd sworn his oath to serve Enyo. And what was a warrior without honor?

An evil voice whispered, who would know? They'd lost their ship on the Maldorean space station. If the Enyo Space Corps were able to trace the Grizzly, they would assume they'd all been killed in action.

He looked to Mythos for an answer. The big guy's handsome features were contorted with the same agonizing choice.

"We can't, babe," he said, automatically speaking for both of them while begging her to understand.

She met his eyes, then darted a glance at Mythos for confirmation before her slender shoulders slumped in defeat. "I understand--it is a matter of honor."

Though her voice was soft and even, he felt her sorrow like a lash. Ignoring her pain was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

"Time to set a course for Enyo," he said gruffly.

Joon's eyes met his, for a second he glimpsed the fear she masked so well, before she asked, "Why Enyo?"

"Don't worry, we won't stop," Helax said.

Mythos cleared his throat, gentling his rough voice as much as possible before he explained. "It's too risky to jump to hyper-light speed from an unknown point."

Her full mouth tightened into a rosebud. "You're using hyper-light for all intergalactic travel?"

"How else?" Helax asked.

She shrugged gracefully. "The sisterhood uses subspace and wormholes."

"But, they're unstable." He shuddered, thinking of the risk.

"We don't find them so," she said primly.

The big guy scowled, but he said nothing, moving to the navigation console and entering the coordinates for the new course.

Helax was left with nothing to do except stare at the little witch, who owned his heart and soul.

He opened his arms in a wordless plea. After a brief, painful hesitation, she stepped into his embrace, letting him ease her unhappiness by sharing the hurt. Almost immediately, he felt the sweet caress of her thoughts melding with his, easing both of them as she read the truth of his feelings.

When Mythos finished with the ship's computer, he stood. "We could resign our commissions. After all, Enyo has no shortage of qualified pilots. They'd simply release us from our contracts."

Helax shook his head. "You're forgetting about the Lion. They'd never allow us to take a valuable war prize to Earth. The minute we report in, we'll be ordered to stay in orbit while the Space Corps makes arrangements to bring this craft back to an Enyo base to be disassembled."

"You're right. We'll be ordered to report for debriefing. Space Corps will want to know every detail about the Maldorean's base." The big guy shot a worried glance at the little witch still locked in Helax's arms.

Without thinking about it, Helax tightened his hold.

She brushed her lips across his in a tender kiss. "It's okay warrior. We'll find a way for all of us to be together."

He wished that he could believe her brave words. Experience had taught him his government didn't reconsider rulings. Joon had been banished. Therefore, the council would never sanction her mating with a warrior, let alone two. Even if the elders reconsidered their edict, there was still the problem of their ineligibility to breed and breeding was the only reason a mating was sanctioned.

A shudder of fear rippled through him, remembering the rare cases of warriors

who'd failed to impregnate their mates. The bond was legally dissolved, and the breeder given to another man. With fertile women still so rare, he understood the necessity.

Warriors mated only once. The warrior stripped of his woman always committed suicide--pain from losing his mate too great to bear.

Helax shoved away his gloomy thoughts. Why suffer ahead of time? They were hours from Enyo. Hours from losing Joon. Hours from death and madness.

As he slammed the lid on the depression that threatened his sanity, Joon softened beneath his mouth and he deepened the kiss they shared. He swept into her soft mouth, staking his claim. When the kiss ended, her eyes were heavy with passion.

"You are my life. As long as my heart beats, I will love you," he promised.

Her eyes darkened further at his pledge. "No matter what happens, you share my breath, my body, and my mind. You are my dearest love," she promised him softly.

Mythos loomed next to them, speaking gruffly, "I love."

She captured the Centurion's massive head in her delicate hands, meeting his worried eyes with calm reassurance. "I know you do my dearest one. I couldn't love you more than I do."

And then she kissed Mythos with such intensity Helax felt a tingling from his brush cut clear down to his flat feet.

Neither the big guy's declaration nor Joon's response diminished his love. The powerful three-way emotion surged, strengthening the bond flowing between them.

When Joon twisted back to face him, he was willing to step aside. But, she framed his face, kissing him deeply and he forgot everything except for the wonder of losing himself in her.

Mythos carefully stripped her clothes, never interrupting their kiss. Then Helax's own clothes were tugged off until there were no barriers between his hard, aroused body and her soft heat. Her long legs wound around his hips and his cock bore into the entrance to paradise. Wet velvet clasped his cock tightly. The base of his spine tingled and his balls tightened. Holding himself rigid, he breathed through the urgent pressure to erupt instantly, bathing her with his cum.

Slowly, he regained a measure of control and guided her hips, letting her ride him. With each plunge, the hard peaks of her perfect breasts raked his own turgid nipples, sending new jolts of erotic pleasure straight to his aching shaft. Every centimeter of her tight channel caressed his exquisitely sensitized cock. Soft moans of feminine need tugged on his balls, and her sweet-hot scent grew stronger, an aphrodisiac he inhaled greedily.

Impossibly, she tightened further, squeezing him with blissful pain. Strong, rough hands gripped his hips as Mythos slowly surged into her rear passage.

Joon's whole body tensed, and then she screamed as ecstasy shook her whole body.

Buried to his root in her core, the connection between them was more intense than it had ever been before. He felt Joon's climax like it was his own.

Helax's awareness of every portion of Mythos's excitement was almost as strong. He felt the Centurion's mighty erection, his aching balls, and his all-powerful love.

When the big guy exploded, shooting his seed into her rear entry, and the little witch continued to twitch in a prolonged release, Helax lost the battle to resist his own fulfillment. He erupted like a volcano, spewing hot love into her mysterious depths.

When he was capable of noticing things again, Joon was still sandwiched between them. Her exotic features were unbelievably angelic in sleep. Watching her was all it took to turn him into a pile of mush.

While he stared like an infatuated youngling, Mythos stirred and craned his neck to check the viewer.

"Not again," the big guy growled.

Dread seeped into Helax's bones as he turned, peering at the display.

* * * *

Mythos had glanced at the ship's viewer to gauge their position, aware they were getting close to Enyo's space. And therefore, it was time to input the coordinates for the jump to hyper-light speed.

The stars lined up with his expectations, confirming what he'd expected to find.

What he hadn't expected was the fleet of Maldorean Eagles--in attack formation, heading straight for an unsuspecting Enyo.

After Helax had blown a hole in the space station, destroying a whole slew of their fighters, Mythos had every reason to hope their enemy would have been too crippled to mount an offensive for weeks, maybe months, while the station was repaired and fighters replaced.

The sleek war-birds headed for Enyo meant either they'd had other hangars, or worse, there was more than one monstrous space station.

He yanked on clothes, without taking his eyes off the approaching fighters. As he stared, the ships winked out, one by one. Until the Lion's viewer displayed nothing, but the black void of space.

The fighters had activated their cloaking devise.

If he concentrated, he could track the Eagles' movement, by the absence of the star field their presence masked. But, the difference was too subtle to help Enyo's fighters. And he knew from bitter experience that the Maldorean craft didn't register on any Enyo sensors.

His gut tightened as the extent of the trap rammed home. Enyo was about to get blindsided by a fleet of lethal Maldorean fighters.

Chapter Eight

Enyo sector space, 2392 post exodus

Grimly, he adjusted the Lion's communicator to Enyo Space Corp settings.

"Lieutenant Mythos Hawkins, serial number 6973075090 there's a fleet of Maldorean Eagles entering E sector on course for Enyo's airspace."

"Try again dung eater." A ship killing blast from an Enyo fighter cub on patrol rocked the battered Lion.

"Hold your fire, Cub. We liberated the Lion from a Maldorean Space station."

Another blast, hitting their shield, was the Cub's only answer.

"Damage to engine, shields, and weapons systems," the ship's computer intoned. "Cloaking system is intact. Would you like to activate cloaking now?"

"Activate cloaking," he growled.

"Enter code sequence to activate cloaking," the computer said.

Mythos pounded the console. The cloaking system didn't activate. But, it did relieve a little of his frustration. "Shift power to maintain bow shields," he barked at the misbegotten Maldorean computer, changing the craft's course to engage the Eagles.

"Strap on the restraints, it's going to get rough."

"In a minute," Joon murmured. "There's something I want to try first."

Mythos nodded his understanding, both hands busy on the unfamiliar controls, making frantic adjustments to the craft's course and power allocation.

On the edge of his vision, Joon pressed a palm against the smooth surface of the computer interface.

"Try activating the cloaking again," she said.

Mythos barked at the computer. "Activate cloaking."

The computer repeated its demand. "Enter code sequence to activate cloaking."

Without hesitating, Joon entered a long sequence of numbers.

"Did it work?" Helax asked.

Joon took a seat, fastening her restraints. "We'll find out soon."

"What in the seven hells happened to the Lion?" The open com link with the Enyo Cub confirmed Joon's magic.

"Try listening, this time, flyboy. The Maldorean's have an operational cloaking system on board their fighters. There's a dung load of them below you, coming up on your six."

"Lieutenant Mythos Hawkins--sir?"

"That's right. In a few seconds, I'm going to feed you coordinates. If you want to live, prepare to fire on my mark."

"Yes sir."

The Cub pilot followed Mythos's orders, taking out two of the Eagles and

wounding a third before the Maldorean fighters returned fire, blowing him out of the sky.

There was no time to mourn the brave warrior's sacrifice. While Helax worked feverishly to repair their vessel's weapon systems, Mythos, repeated a call for reinforcements, strained his eyes to spot the fighters, and positioned their craft to attack.

To fire their weapons the Maldorean ships had to de-cloak. The moment of vulnerability was brief. Logic told him they would have the same disadvantage, even if he were able to get the Lion's weapon systems online.

Joon laid a soft hand on his arm. Instantly, he was able to see the Eagles, reminding him of his mate's powerful assets.

"What can I do help?" she asked softly.

Mythos was torn between growling at her for being out of her safety harness and relieved gratitude. The small witch had a connection with the vessel's computer that could make the difference between an instant fiery death and a possible shot at survival.

"Weapons," he growled.

Without breaking their connection, she flattened a palm on the vessel's computer interface, frowning in concentration. Perspiration beaded on her forehead. "There's much damage--long range blasters I can have in a minute."

"Make it thirty seconds, woman." He brushed a kiss across her cheek, keeping his eyes focused on the fighters, preparing to dive for Enyo's atmosphere.

His small witch didn't make a reply, closing her eyes to concentrate on her task.

"Hoo rah! I don't know how but blasters are coming on line--now!" Helax yelled, from the engine room.

Mythos punched in the last part of the firing solution, and turned to Joon with a grin of triumph, stretching his face.

She smiled back, continuing to maintain contact with him and the ship's computer as he binged in firing coordinates.

Helax worked equally hard, keeping the ship's systems functional as the fighters returned fire.

Mythos's focus shrank to killing Maldoreans, nothing else mattered.

Then, the small witch crumpled to the deck.

Instantly, his viewer went black.

His fingers felt wooden as he entered new firing coordinates based on the Eagles heading when they'd de-cloaked to return fire. A futile exercise in the rapidly shifting reality of battle.

However, the smart blasts he'd fired weren't easy to evade. The deadly implosions hit a fair number of their targets, judging from the fighters that had de-cloaked seconds before detonation had reduced them to cosmic dust.

The fireworks on the ship's display no longer held Mythos's attention. He bellowed for Helax even as he scooped Joon carefully into his arms.

An exploding Eagle wedged itself in one of their ports. A failed attempt to seek shelter. The resulting explosion took out the last of the pirated Lion's shields.

Busy trying to find Joon's vital signs, Mythos barely registered the latest disaster.

Helax entered the cabin. "We're out of fire power, my man." Then he saw

Joon's too pale form, lying still in Mythos's arms. "Is she--?"

Tears rolled down Mythos's cheeks and the lump in his throat choked any answer.

* * * *

The room was austere. Aside from a trace of the Goddess scent Joon associated with the Belle Amity ceremonies on high holy days, the clean linens on her bed, and the soft glow of syn-light, there were no clues to her location.

"Where am I?" The words creaked out in a hoarse whisper. She didn't expect any answer.

With in seconds, a sister glided into the room. A small smile softened her mouth. "Ah, you're awake, Goddess be praised."

"Goddess be praised," Joon echoed in her croaky voice. "I would hear news of the warriors--Mythos Hawkins and Helax Wilding."

"Warriors?" The sister frowned.

"Yes, they are my mates," Joon said, hearing the defiance in her tone and not caring how it sounded.

The sister took a step back, the equivalent of a scream of shock in one less disciplined than a member of the Belle Amity Collective. "But, you're not a breeder."

For the first time, Joon bothered to assess the other woman. She was tall and fair with the lush curves of a breeder. Her pretty face reflected her doubt.

With an effort, Joon schooled herself to patience, speaking softly. "What is your name little sister?"

"Calyxia, Commander Joon." She curtsied gracefully.

"Where are we Calyxia?"

The breeder hesitated. "Here?"

"What planet are we on?" Joon asked calmly.

The younger woman blushed becomingly. "Enyo, Commander. But, you're on the sisterhood's shuttle so you have nothing to fear."

Her words did not reassure Joon, but she let it go for now, asking, "How long have I been here?"

Calyxia shrugged. "You were here when I arrived from Earth a week ago."

A week, dear Goddess! What had happened to Mythos and Helax?

"I'm going to get Commander Moria," the disciple whispered, and then fled.

Joon's heart pinched with fear. Reaching to the far edge of the mating bond, she strained her telepathic sense, trying to connect with her mates.

Nothing. She felt nothing. She tried again, pushing hard past her limits, careless of her own safety. The connection with her mates was gone.

A small whip of a woman strode into the room. She pinched Joon's shoulder, while speaking sharply, "Stop it, Commander. Think of your babe."

The words penetrated the icy fear that held Joon captive. She stopped searching for her mates, drifting back into unconsciousness.

When next her eyes opened, she knew where she was. The Commander knelt next to Joon's narrow bed, waiting with the endless patience of the sisterhood's disciples.

"Welcome back," she said calmly. "Are you in control of yourself?"

Joon nodded, unable to speak around the knot of emotion in her throat.

"Good, I am Ambassador Moira, assigned to finish your term. I would examine you now. Do you feel strong enough to withstand the truth test?"

No, but what choice did she have? She prayed that she would survive the test. It would be the quickest way to ensure the sister's cooperation. If Moria recognized the truth of the mating bond that Joon shared with Mythos and Helax then they would gain a powerful ally in their quest for a government sanctioned mating. Still unable to speak, she nodded yes once again.

Moria's cool fingers pressed against Joon's temples. Joon practiced the cleansing breath techniques she'd learned as a disciple to stay calm as fears for her mates beat frantically in her mind, tightening the muscles in her neck and shoulders.

The test passed quickly, leaving Joon with no memory of the probe.

Moria stepped back, folding her arms. "Interesting. I've never heard of a magic wielder mating. And yet, the bond with both of your warriors is strong in you. I will pray for guidance."

"Pray quickly," Joon urged her departing back. "Warriors mate for life. If the bond is broken, I fear they will commit suicide."

The Commander whirled to face her. "That's barbaric."

"It is their way."

"I hear the truth in your words. Still, my path is not clear. I must seek counsel from the Goddess."

Joon paced in the small room, unable to wait with the proper patience.

Nearly an hour of Enyo time passed before Moria returned. She wore the heavy cape of a Belle Amity ambassador. "If you would accompany me, I need your word that you will not interfere, or even speak, unless I specifically ask you to do so."

"I so promise," she said, biting back a frantic plea to hurry.

"Very well. What are you waiting for?"

Startled, Joon met the Commander's gaze, finding glimmers of humor in the woman's dark eyes. As they set off, she forced herself to keep the sedate pace the other woman set as they traveled to the Council of Elder's headquarters.

The general meeting hall was deserted, but a quorum of Elders was negotiating land claim disputes in one of the informal conference rooms.

"Good day, sirs," Moria greeted the officials. "The warriors of Enyo have given generously to support the Belle Amity breeding program."

This statement was met with a hum of approval.

Moria held up a hand for silence. "In consideration for this kindness, the sisterhood wishes to share one of our talents."

Unaware of the compulsion in her voice, the elder's quieted, sitting straighter and listening avidly for her next words.

She spoke calmly but forcefully, keeping her face turned away from the council member who'd accused Joon of manipulating the elders. "Truth seeing is my gift. This talent allows me to penetrate any disguise--even ones crafted of magic. It also allows me to share what I see with others by simply laying hands upon the person hiding his true

nature behind the shield of illusion.”

Crossing to the elder, who'd denounced Joon, Moria clamped onto his forearm. The councilman shimmered, revealing the golden hued skin of a Maldorean.

“Let go of me, Earth witch,” He struggled to escape, but the petite Commander held him easily.

“Behold, the Maldorean, who falsely accused Ambassador Joon solely because he knew she could penetrate his disguise with a touch.”

Then, the room erupted into chaos.

It took long precious minutes for the Maldorean spy to be apprehended. Despair threatened to swamp Joon. It was lovely to be vindicated, but it did nothing to help find her mates. Remembering her promise, she pressed her lips together even more tightly, holding back words of anger and fear while Moria spoke quietly to the remaining elders.

More frightening time passed as Joon prayed the Goddess would keep Mythos and Helax safe.

At last, Moria returned accompanied by two burly warriors. Her features were calm, but her eyes held shards of pain. “Your warriors came to the embassy to petition for your remains three times each. This is as their honor demands. I've confirmed your understanding of their customs. Having failed to keep you safe, and prevented from disposing of your remains and thus perform their final duty, they are obligated to end their lives. Hurry, we may already be too late.”

* * * *

During the trip home, fury kept Helax's posture rigid. His fierce expression fit with the dress uniform he'd worn to plead at the Sisterhood's embassy. Neither his war face, nor his service awards, nor his immaculate uniform had impressed the disciples that guarded the sisterhood's secrets.

The women refused to tell him anything about Joon. Not even if there was going to be a ceremony to honor her spirit's passing.

While in the heat of battle with Maldorean fighters, Joon had connected with their pirated ship's computer, giving them weapon control and using her powers to penetrate the enemy's cloaking field. The prolonged contact with the alien computer had drained her life force.

When their weapons had been depleted, Joon had crumpled to the floor— never rising again.

Mythos and he had both tried to revive her with the craft's medi-unit. Nothing they did worked.

Enyo fighter cubs had arrived, routing the last of the enemy Eagles and saving Mythos and him. But, it had been too late for Joon.

During their debriefing, Joon's body had been given to the sisterhood.

After letting himself into the apartment he shared with Mythos, his impotent rage evaporated, leaving him only hopeless acceptance. His shoulders slumped with the weight of grief. Once he'd closed the door, his whole body sagged against the entry.

His friend sat stiffly, holding his hat. Other than that one departure, the big guy was in full dress uniform. A proud warrior made hollow by the loss of their mate.

"What did they say?" Mythos asked. His normally gravelly voice so hoarse with grief it was hard to understand him.

"They won't give us her body. They won't even--." Helax swallowed hard before continuing. "Let us see her to honor her spirit's passing."

Mythos rose slowly, swayed slightly, and then staggered to where Helax waited. The big guy batted blindly at his shoulder. "You shouldn't have to do this by yourself. I should have gone."

He barely felt the affectionate blows.

"It wouldn't have made any difference. Besides, you went yesterday." His voice was flat. He'd lost the strength to pretend there was hope.

The big guy shook his massive head in a denial that neither of them believed. When he spoke, his voice broke. "She's gone."

"There was no pulse," Helax said. The ominous words, first said a week ago, still crackled with raw pain.

"No pulse," Mythos echoed, sinking against the wall next to him. "She deserved a warrior's burial."

"So do you."

"I care nothing for that." Mythos dismissed the honors due him with a chop of his powerful arm.

Just as well, there were no ceremonies for warrior's who'd lost their mates. Their deaths were a private matter of honor.

Helax squeezed the necessary words past the tears blocking his throat. "Do you want to wait until tomorrow?"

"What for?" Mythos asked bleakly.

He was right. Why wait? It had been a week. Hope was gone. Their fatal grief only worsened with time. For the first few days, they'd both been too exhausted and numb to fully understand what had happened.

Then they'd taken turns pleading with the embassy, needing to say goodbye to Joon before ending their own lives.

"When you were out, I thought I felt her," the big guy said.

Helax nodded. "I know what you mean. I've thought the same thing a couple of times. I turn around expecting to see her--."

The big guy interrupted, "Let's do it."

Helax pushed himself upright, heading for the replicator. "Hang on man. It'll take a few minutes to produce enough of the poison for both of us." He entered quantities, blinking fast to clear his vision. When he had enough poison to guarantee their deaths, he brewed up a couple of Moon Blasters to mask the taste, carefully adding the lethal dosages to the flaming cocktails.

"Thanks," Mythos took his drink.

Helax sprawled on the couch next to his friend, and then raised his glass in a salute. "To Joon."

The big guy clinked glasses. "To Joon."

They both chugged the potent cocktails.

"How long--." The words stopped before Mythos finished the question. Helax's throat had already closed. He couldn't have answered. His eyes must've closed too, because everything got dark. He hated the dark. But then, the gentle caress of Joon's mind touched his. Instantly, his fears were eased. He'd done the right thing.

* * * *

Joon felt the tentative brush of Helax's consciousness, and reached for Mythos. Nothing. And then, Helax's faint connection ended.

Panic froze her thoughts, making her as helpless as the newest babe.

Thankfully, Moria retained her senses, pulling Joon mercilessly in her wake as they entered her mates' dwelling place. The commander's cool fingers dispensed with the entry's lock.

Inside the apartment, the men were sprawled on the floor. Neither was breathing. Joon hurried to them, gathering one of the dropped glasses. She sniffed, tasting the faint trace of the deadly cocktail that remained.

Her panic was forgotten as her mind raced to analyze the poison. An unfamiliar chemical sequence forced her to stop. Then, she remembered the drug the warriors had used to sedate her--it was close--very close.

At last, the solution popped. She snapped instructions to Moria, guessing at the amount of antidote needed and praying she was right.

Within seconds, Moria returned from the replicator with two injections. "I don't know warrior physiology. You'll have to administer both doses."

Fear threatened to freeze Joon again. The men were out of time. How could she chose, which mate to save first, knowing the other might be lost to her forever?

A surge of anger vanquished her panic. She wasn't parting with either one of them. She was going to save both of them.

Working feverishly, she injected Mythos and then Helax, trusting her instincts to guide the life saving antidote to their hearts.

Long minutes ticked by before the Centurion opened his eyes and smiled at Joon. "I'm in paradise then."

"Close enough," Joon laughed shakily.

Helax spoke. "Maybe, the Gods gave us a miracle."

Joon covered their faces with happy kisses, alternating between the two men.

When Moria spoke, Joon started, she'd forgotten the commander was there.

"Call me later," Moria said, letting herself out of the warriors' unit.

Mythos scowled at the door. "She refused to answer questions."

"I'm certain she regrets that decision," Joon murmured soothingly.

* * * *

It was a week before Joon found the time to call on the new Ambassador to Enyo. Mythos insisted that one of them accompany her. Helax lost the toss and applied for a land grant suitable for construction of their future home while she and Mythos met with the Belle Amity Commander.

"You're sure she's not a magic wielder?" Mythos asked as they waited for admittance to the ambassador's suite.

"I am quite certain," Joon assured him.

His scowl lifted. "Then you can make her do whatever you like."

She frowned at him. "You're stronger than Helax. Would you beat him into submission if he disagreed with you?"

"No," he grumbled.

"So you understand. I'm going to ask nicely for her help."

"And if she says no?"

She smiled at him sweetly. "Then we'll think about what else we can do. But, the sisterhood is dedicated to breeding the best possible humans. I seriously doubt we'll be denied."

Moria opened the door for them herself. "Welcome, Commander, Centurion."

The new Ambassador drove a hard bargain, but they reached agreement. Shortly after their official meeting, Moria delivered official sanction of their triad stamped with both Enyo and the sisterhood's seals along with the reversal of Joon's banishment.

Helax was equally successful, winning them a private island near enough to New Eden to allow for easy commuting.

* * * *

Moria watched the trio leave from her balcony. It was the place she slipped out to most often, loving the way the tropical breeze gently caressed her skin. She shivered, aware of her own lack of discipline. The ambassador's post on Enyo held perils she'd never suspected.

"It's very different from Earth isn't it?" Calyxia's soothing voice carried undertones of sensuous wonder. "I mean even in the compound the air is never this warm, this soft, and the artificial lights aren't anything like the white dwarf's rays."

"It is well that you are pleased with New Eden, it will be your home." Moria replied stiffly, upset at being caught off-guard.

"Only if I'm chosen," Calyxia said traitorously--too softly to be heard.

* * * *

"Just one more specimen to go," Joon said cheerfully, removing a fresh sample package from the sterile containment field generator.

Mythos let out a groan against her throat. "I had other plans for this load."

"As if this were your one and only," she chided him. But, he knew she wasn't serious, because her pretty eyes sparkled with laughter as she called to Helax. "Come on warrior, you must do your part."

"It's your job to inspire me," Mythos reminded her. His voice was rough, but she understood it was his attempt to tease.

She set the container down, eyeing his straining shaft boldly, prowling toward him with her irresistible grace. "Now, what could I possibly do to make this onerous duty a tiny bit more bearable for a mighty Centurion such as yourself?"

Before he'd come up with a truly wicked suggestion, Helax joined them. A happy grin lit the warriors face and he stripped without even being asked.

"Taking your clothes off would be a start," Mythos said, ignoring Helax's reckless enthusiasm.

Joon blushed prettily. "But, I'm--."

"Carrying our babe?" he finished her sentence as gently as his rough voice could manage, staring at her newly ripened curves. Every time he thought of the child, growing in her womb, two emotions assaulted him--arousal and a fierce possessiveness.

"Yeah," Helax said. "Lose the clothes, babe." Without taking his eyes from their mate's enchanting body, he added, "Great idea, my man."

"Thank you," Mythos said, watching Joon expectantly.

"If you insist," she teased--her cheeks now redder than before.

She toed off her shoes and socks, and then, very slowly, pulled the loose top over her head, exposing lush breasts barely contained by her thin undergarment. Beneath the swollen breasts, her top and panties no longer met, revealing a softly rounded belly.

Below the roundness sheltering the babe, the tiny panties barely hid her feminine secrets from his eyes. The scent of her arousal was rich, sweet, and musky in the air, filling him with fresh passion.

Fascinated by the changes in her small body, he traced the much larger and darker nipples. They puckered into hard points. Her reaction led to nuzzling, suckling, and sweetly fulfilled desires.

* * * *

Having satisfied their obligation to the sisterhood's rapacious breeding program. The triad settled into their new routine. One day a week, they commuted to New Eden in their personal shuttle. Where Joon trained pre-women, not yet mature enough to join the breeding pool.

Mythos and Helax alternated standing watch over their mate. When not with Joon Helax drilled new cadets. While Mythos spent his off-duty hours teaching Space Corp pilots to read and speak Maldorean.

The other two days of each week, the three bonded lovers spent their time as they pleased. Their pleasure always involved a great deal of snuggling.

The End