

A muscular man is shown from the waist up, looking directly at the camera. He is shirtless, and his physique is well-defined. The background is a deep red and orange space scene. A large, dark planet with a bright orange ring is visible in the upper left. Numerous star trails, appearing as long, curved lines of light, sweep across the background, creating a sense of motion and cosmic energy.

# CELESTIAL HEAT

ALI ATWOOD

In the year 2096, Feyna Sy Tordinay knows the price of love. Once she would have given her very soul to Ketrick DeSardon, but after a few, short weeks of tender romance and phenomenal sex, the dashing Starfleet captain left her in a storm of heartache. Now she's strictly business, a clinical psychologist on her way to the top. Is she troubled by the unexpected assignment aboard DeSardon's warship? Not a bit.

Darkly seductive DeSardon is running from his feelings, hiding dangerous secrets. Unbeknown to Feyna, she and Ketrick are cosmic mates with untried, magical abilities. Unbeknown to both of them, there are some scary beings out there stalking the couple, aiming to harness their talent through crossbreeding. To save themselves from an uncertain death, Ketrick and Feyna must revitalize an ancient power source—right after they blend their special powers by way of high-voltage sex.

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Celestial Heat

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# CELESTIAL HEAT

BY

ALI ATWOOD

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother--a woman of many talents. With  
love and thanks for always being there.

# PROLOGUE

The outer rim planet Rhunia.  
October 7 2096

**B**eldir Trunvar, sorcerer and pro tem leader of the once mighty Zanutian clan, sat alone in a subterranean chamber concealed beneath an illusionary forest.

Clad in dark blue robes, Beldir's seamed face was shadowed by the flickering energy stones he'd scattered on the cavern floor. In front of him, a rustic table supported a large, font-like vessel filled with clear spring water.

Picking up a tiny, alabaster bottle, Beldir tipped the pungent contents into the water, speaking in a forgotten language, "Ancient guardians, I am your servant. I call to the ethereal elements. Cast hither the power to unlock the sacred gateway."

Short seconds passed, then a booming sound reverberated through the labyrinthine of caverns, a warm wind whooshing around the hem of Beldir's robes. He glanced up to see a corona of

light hovering above him. Beneath the blaze of light, the vessel of spelled water began to froth and churn, emitting a low humming sound as it spiraled inward at very high speed. Gazing down into the whirling tunnel of water, Beldir stretched his senses through the gateway, the irises in his blue eyes turning black as he focused on the changes he sought.

He smiled.

Ah, yes, the new circumstances were in place, *the golden couple* soon to be reunited. While he'd wrongly tweaked things to bring them together initially, this time everything would proceed as prophecy promised, the couple's synergy through sexual congress aligning the ancient power source seamlessly, reviving an awesome magic to punish the unholy, Adbavalian enemy—a justice long overdue.

The stage was set, the players already in motion...

## CHAPTER ONE

Somewhere in the Kaaloun Quadrant

October 8 2096

*Are the fates against me, laughing as they toss me back in his path?* The notion drifted around in her mind as Feyna stared through the shuttle's wide window into the silent depths of space. While she admitted to having her fair share of curiosity about the mysterious and the magical, like most people, she presumed the largest part was generated by self-delusion or snake oil.

Still, knowing there were close to five thousand analysts currently attached to Starfleet Galactic, it did seem odd that she, of all people, had been selected to vet Ketrick DeSardon's crew. To add to the oddity, the Starfleet notification had zipped out of cyberspace hand-in-hand with a force-five gale. Unsuspectingly, with howling winds and sleet crystals pelting her office window, Feyna had



sipped steaming coffee while she called up the file on her comp screen, the cup nearly slipping from her hand when DeSardon's name jumped out from the crew-list.

*Dear God, no. Anybody but him!*

The rest of the day had been torture, trying to concentrate on her other work while she contemplated turning down the commission aboard DeSardon's warship. But then she'd reasoned that sooner or later she was bound to run into him somewhere. Plus, assignment refusals tended to throw up red flags. She'd worked too damn hard to have the Starfleet Psych Committee question her objectivity and self-control.

Coming back to the present, Feyna exhaled slowly to clear her mind, her breath fogging the inner surface of the window. Beyond, in the star-filled backdrop, a colorful solar storm streaked upward, flashing and swirling like an Old World fireworks display.

Pensively, Feyna raised a long, slim finger, tracing a path along the misted pane. She supposed there was one, small positive in all of this, a matter of pride. If Ketrick DeSardon still pictured her as the idealistic, looking-for-happy-ever-after girl he'd cast off five years ago, it would be interesting to see what he made of her as the self-sufficient Dr. Feyna Sy Tordinay, clinical psychologist on her way to the top.

She jumped when the armrest intercom tooted, the pilot's voice coming through as he glanced at her over his shoulder. "We're approaching the meet point, Doc, just waiting to get the all-clear from DeSardon's navigator."

Ignoring the fresh apprehension that curled in the center of her chest, Feyna raised a hand in acknowledgement. "Right, thanks Baz."

Looking back at his control board, the craggy-faced Baz continued to give verbal affirmation to the data appearing on his screen. "Yo, Star Stalker Six, confirm normal drive. Entering sector Charlie Kilo Fifty-Six, will approach on your mark."

Endless minutes seemed to pass while Feyna kept her amber eyes glued to the large, central viewing screen, her hand coming up several times to nervously smooth the glorious red hair secured in a business-like bun. She stilled, making a small sound of expectancy when a string of dazzling lights emerged from the blackness. Narrowing her gaze, she angled her head to make out the shape of the cruiser, her mouth parting on a small gasp. "My God, why did no one mention its size?"

Adjusting the left wing flaps, Baz gave a disinterested grunt. "Yeah, Stalker's a big-assed bitch, crammed to the gills with munitions."

Enclosed in a pulsing blue haze of force fields, the Dragon-class warship looked more like a small, armored city than a spacecraft. The vast,

black hull dotted with countless disks of light and outcropping apparatus that Feyna took to be vid and antenna equipment. Even from a distance, she could see the cruiser's multiple rows of missile launchers.

*Every bit as lethal as its Captain.* Easy, she warned herself.

"We'd better get you suited up, Doc. They've opened the tractor corridor."

Waiting inside the warship's airlock for the pressure to stabilize, Feyna heard several hollow pings as her transport released its grapple lines and audio links. Still new enough to space travel to be curious, she turned to peer through the airlock's rear aperture, watching the silver and red shuttlecraft rotate and power silently away. Fading to a tiny red dot before it vanished into the far reaches, leaving her on the cruiser for four, long weeks.

Feyna had speculated on who would meet her, almost certain it wouldn't be DeSardon. In the past days, it had crossed her mind several times that he might think she'd opted for this commission, aiming to try her luck with him again. In which case, he'd probably steer clear until he was obliged to see her for his own evaluation. On such a large vessel, that might be the only time they met.

That suited her just fine, she thought, by the time she faced him, she'd have settled in and he could see her at her best. So, most likely, it would be a junior member of the crew waiting on the other side of the door to greet her, one, no doubt, who can be spared from duties to escort her around the ship.

And hearing the release chimes sounding from inside, Feyna whirled hastily to face forward, the red light over the door going to green as the airlock's interior hatch slid open with a loud hiss of air.

Blinking at the sudden bright light, Feyna had to duck to step into the cavernous docking bay, feeling the thick, steel-plated floor reverberating from the throb of the ship's gigantic thrusters.

Waiting to assist her with her boarding suit were two, smiling engineers, dressed in their distinctive green uniforms. Responding to the older engineer's hand signals, Feyna raised her arms, giving the men room to unhitch her bio-pak. That's when she saw the third man standing at military ease five meters beyond.

*Oh, good God.*

Nothing, not one of her fading recollections had done justice to the reality. The six-foot-six, two-hundred-pound plus Ketrick DeSardon was still the most devastating man Feyna had ever seen. His shoulders looking a yard wide beneath the

Starfleet black and gold uniform, the narrow trousers outlining long, powerful legs before they disappeared into low cut, black skin boots.

Managing to get her mouth closed, Feyna was relieved her helmet's faceplate shielded her expression. *Why is he here, damn it, catching me off guard?*

Her next thought was how little he'd changed in five years. His swath of gleaming black hair was still long enough to touch his shoulders, tied back at the moment to reveal a face that was at once supremely masculine and darkly beautiful. The angles of his broad cheekbones and strong nose were a sharp contrast to his generously curved mouth—Feyna recalled all too well the magic that mouth could work on a woman. It was the eyes though, that made you catch your breath. Vividly turquoise, gleaming with intelligence and surmounted by a heavy slash of black brows.

In spite of herself, Feyna couldn't help but wonder what judgment those eyes would pass when they saw her as she was at present. At the same time, with the initial shock of seeing him wearing off, her faltering determination was reasserting itself. She didn't think for one moment he was here because he regretted his actions toward her. She guessed his appearance was strategy. In case she *was* carrying a torch for him, he'd come to extinguish it, let her know he

expected her to behave as though they were strangers while she was on his ship.

Which suited her perfectly, she thought. She'd take perverse pleasure in showing the self-serving jerk no emotion at all. And feeling the cooler air brushing over her skin as her helmet and pressure suit were finally removed, Feyna was glad her job had taught her to act, managing to look confident and relaxed as she straightened the neck and sleeves of her gray and blue, uniform bodysuit.

\* \* \* \*

She still moved with the grace of a dancer, Ketrick mused, watching Feyna step lightly out of the way of the engineers who carted off her boarding equipment to be checked over. She looked taller and curvier than he remembered, her full breasts jutting tightly against her form-fitting uniform, the knee-length boots emphasizing her long, well-shaped legs. When his gaze strayed to the faint outline of her pubic mound and his sex stirred behind the fly of his snug, black pants, Ketrick swore beneath his breath, grateful his tunic fell below his groin.

He'd known that greeting her in place of one of his juniors might turn out to be a bad idea he'd regret, but he'd gambled on a possible therapeutic effect—if she wasn't as unique as memory had

made her out to be, then he could put the past where it belonged.

Not a snowball's chance in hell. At twenty-nine, the naive, fresh-faced girl he'd bedded for two months had matured into a polished beauty who would turn heads on any street in the universe.

He stopped a pace away from her, summoning a quick, professional smile as he gazed down from his great height. "Doctor Sy Tordinay. Welcome aboard. It's a pleasure to see you again." If Feyna felt the power punch of his rich baritone and close proximity, her face gave nothing away, her big amber eyes regarding him steadily.

"Commander DeSardon. I'm honored you'd take time out of your busy schedule to greet me personally."

Not sure if he heard a hint of sarcasm in her tone, Ketrick inclined his dark head politely. "No problem," he said, but it was. Along with the paranormal abilities that quickened at puberty, his basic senses and emotions worked at a much higher level. As he inhaled the fragrance of Feyna's body beneath her perfume, his hormones were rattling furiously. He forced himself to settle down, using a mental technique he'd perfected.

"I imagine you've been informed," she went on in the same matter-of-fact tone, "that I'm late because my transport was forced to circumvent a large, flux storm."

Ketrick nodded. "Our pherics-room was tracking it. The storms are frequently occurrences in this quadrant." While he spoke, he focused his psychic talent, trying to see behind her remoteness. He was disappointed to discover she remained all but unfathomable to him.

He couldn't pinpoint if she was harboring resentment relating to their break-up or she'd simply moved on, as he'd tried to do. And though he had no idea what might come from this turn of events, he knew he owed it to her to broach the subject of their ill-timed affair.

Hopefully cry pax with her and part as friends at the conclusion of her stay. To that end, he kept his expression open and friendly, giving them both the buffer of chitchat. "You're looking well, Feyna. I hear through the gossip mill your career's a blazing success." Something pensive glinted in her cat-like eyes while it seemed to Ketrick that she moved imperceptibly away.

"Thank you, yes, things have been going well for me." She paused and added politely, "For you, too, I understand. They say you'll be getting your admiral stars before much longer."

Watching the movement of her plush lower lip while she spoke, trying not to think about sucking it into his mouth, Ketrick wondered if she'd actually kept abreast of his doings or, like him, she'd hurriedly researched the Starfleet data bank



in preparation for their meeting. He flashed her a self-effacing smile. "I'm afraid your source has been listening at the wrong doors. Admiral Stars aren't pinned without due consideration. It'll be a while yet."

And while he hunted his mind for another safe avenue of conversation, Feyna, as if to give herself a breather from the super-charged atmosphere, turned her head to survey the background again. "It really is an incredible vessel you have here, Commander." She watched a yellow, robotic-loader glide toward the covered cargo area, containing a vast amount of bulky equipment Feyna couldn't have begun to name.

Ketrick's attention had drifted to her tightly-bound hair, unconsciously recalling the silky feel of the red tresses flowing across his naked skin while she'd trailed kisses over his throat and chest, moving unswervingly southward— He blanked his expression as she turned to face him again, snarling at himself to get a fucking grip.

"I trust," she went on, "I'll be given a tour of the bridge before I leave. I'd be interested to see those new navigational systems they've been in raptures over back at Central Command."

"Of course." His voice sounded throaty. "You're welcome to see any part of the ship while you're here." But this tour he'd be cutting short. He indicated to a doorway at the far end of the

bay. "We go through there to reach the cabins and wardrooms."

\* \* \* \*

Unfortunately, for Feyna's self-control she'd seen DeSardon's gaze flicker to the swell of her breasts, her heart beating hard and fast as he adjusted his longer stride to hers with a few centimeters separating their bodies. Staring straight ahead, she pretended her nipples weren't tightening into taut peaks while she tried to figure out what was behind his unexpected show of charm, all the more strange because she got the impression there was reserve beneath it, as if he were acting against his better judgment. Added to that, it felt as though he was trying to draw a response from her, but what kind?

As if to pick up clues, her mind tumbled back to the night he'd walked into the local tavern filled with thumping music where she and two classmates were celebrating their final exam results...

Killing time before he met friends for dinner, DeSardon had been dressed simply in a black pullover and well-worn jeans, his thick, ebony hair flowing free. Making his way through the noisy weekend crowd with an unconscious masculine swagger, Ketrick's towering figure had drawn a

lot of interested gazes, most of them female.

Once Feyna and her girlfriends, Mysha and Silda, had reeled their tongues back into their mouths, they huddled together, discussing him in excited voices, joking that he looked like the poster boy for Wet Dreams R Us.

As her two friends saw it, this was an opportunity Feyna couldn't afford to pass up. At twenty-four, she was the only one in their group still a virgin. Unfortunately, none of the men Feyna had met so far had stirred her chemistry. And even though the new arrival did, Feyna still protested. "I'm not propositioning a veritable stranger. Plus he's way out of my league in looks."

"Cut it out," Mysha snorted. "You're gorgeous."

"And why," Silda wanted to know, "with your feminist convictions, are you balking at exercising sexual equality? You should be raring to push boundaries as you embark on your high-powered career."

"And get laid in every position." Mysha giggled. "How else are you gonna counsel patients with sexual issues?"

That was true. She needed some experience before she went into practice. And she did feel an overwhelming attraction to the handsome stranger, but mainly, it was the idea of being viewed as gutless by her friends. "All right, all

right, God help me, I'll do it."

The others let out muted cheers. Mysha leaning forward to whisper, "Remember, as it's your first time, make sure he goes down on you to get you thoroughly wet before he puts it in."

Her nerves sizzling at the wicked words, Feyna imagined how it would feel to have a man lapping at her pussy. And picking up her glass of cheap, blue wine, she drained it, sending a rush of heat through her throat and chest. "Wish me luck," she croaked, saluting with false bravado before she turned to walk toward the long, mirrored bar.

Silda called after her, "Remember, we expect to hear every last detail. A dreamboat like him is bound to have a textbook dick."

When a mocking voice inside Feyna's head asked what she'd do if Mr. Totally Hot took one look and told her to get lost, she did a quick survey of the other patrons to see if she recognized anyone within earshot. Bringing her gaze back to her quarry, Feyna noticed how broad his shoulders looked bunched beneath his finely woven black jersey. She let her gaze drop to his firmly rounded buttocks parked on the long-legged stool—even as a teenager whenever she'd thought of her ideal man, he'd always had a good solid ass on him. To her way of thinking there were too many men walking around with those flat, elephant-shaped butts.

What should she say to him? She tried to think of every piece of clever dialogue she'd ever heard. Drawing a blank, she prayed he'd come to her rescue and speak first. And stopping a couple of paces behind him, she stared at his glossy, black hair in breathless anticipation, working up the nerve to tap one of his broad shoulders.

He turned abruptly.

She froze with a hand half-raised, her brain scrambling. From a distance, he'd been a handsome, compelling figure. At close range his *wow* factor was electrifying, and his physique... Feyna could easily visualize him in medieval armor with a broadsword strapped to his side, his black cape ballooning in the wind as he reached down to sweep the damsel effortlessly onto his galloping warhorse. As the mental picture faded, Feyna finally registered what was flickering in the back of the stranger's eyes...confusion...wariness.

*Oh God, why hadn't I considered that he might be waiting for another woman...or a man?* That mocking voice in her head told her to look behind door number three—she didn't appeal. "S-sorry," she flustered before he could speak, "I thought you were someone else." She turned to flee, imagining her friends watching her humiliation.

A hand locked on her wrist. "Wait!"

Glancing back with fresh alarm, not knowing what to expect, Feyna felt as if someone had

switched channels, clicking her into a reverse reality. The stranger's perplexed expression had given way to one of intense awareness, his remarkable turquoise eyes alive and glowing with the masculine promise she'd hoped for.

"Did you *really* mistake me for someone else?"

As her system went back on high alert, Feyna was tempted to continue the lie, leaving him to make whatever moves he wished. But the strong fingers still locked around her wrist, doing incredible things to her insides, made her aware that his solid male body was twice her weight, easily able to contain her if she were crazy enough to want to break free. And that excited her in a way she'd never have suspected, a melting heat starting to dampen her panties. "No mistake," she blurted breathlessly. I came to ask—" she cast a glance right and left, lowered her voice to a whisper— "if you'd be interested in one night of no-strings sex?"

He was watching her face with complete fascination, probably speculating if she was a virgin, perhaps imagining himself as the recipient of her stored-up passion. "One night, no strings, eh?" His deep voice was shaded with gentle humor. "Would you like to have dinner first?"

Her pent-up breath gusted from her lungs. She nodded rapidly, eyes dancing with diamonds. "Yes...absolutely, I'd love to have dinner."

He smiled a slow, gorgeous smile, his white teeth gleaming against his tanned skin. "Well then, we'd better introduce ourselves. I'm Ketrick DeSardon."

Praying her face didn't look too sappy from delight, she extended an unsteady hand. "Feyna...Sy Tordinay."

"Feyna," he repeated slowly, the calloused hand closing around her softer one, bringing a dizzying feeling of recognition, as if he'd always been hovering at the edges of her mind. And recalling his initial shock at her appearance, she wondered if he'd been sharing her sense of déjà vu.

Ten minutes later, after DeSardon had texted a rain-check message to the friends he'd planned to meet, Feyna and he were preparing to leave the bar. When he came to his feet, Feyna sneaked a darting look downward to see his package, her breath hitching at the sight of the huge, denim-covered bulge between his thighs. Well damn, seeing that she'd given him a massive erection filled her with a heady sense of feminine power, picturing herself brazenly, popping his fly, slipping a hand in to pull out that big, hot cock —

"...which outperformed all expectations."

Snapping to attention in the present, Feyna blinked owlishly up at DeSardon. "Sorry?"

"My ship," he repeated, watching her flushed

face. "I'm sure Central Command must have mentioned that the entire Stalker Series have secured a wealth of new contracts for the coming year."

Hoping her erotic thoughts hadn't been visible in her eyes, Feyna scrambled to pick up the threads of conversation. "Yes...of course, people have been discussing it. The word is they'll have three new cruisers on line by the end of the year." She paused to breathe. "I understand all the department heads are recruiting in readiness."

DeSardon nodded, his intent gaze shifting over her again. "Good news for everyone then." He looked away to press the open-door plate, standing aside to let her precede him into the passageway. Then as he fell into step with her again, he changed the subject, "As you *are* so late, I was thinking you might prefer to have a light meal in your quarters and take the tour in the morning."

Still dwelling on their first meeting, Feyna reminded herself that he'd walked away eight weeks later without a backward glance. Though she'd despised every tear, she'd wept for days. For months she'd replayed the events leading up to the painful scene, never able to grasp what she'd done wrong. The demoralizing memory made her want to pit herself against him now. "No, if you don't mind, I'd prefer to have a quick go round, at



least see the office I'll be using."

He hesitated.

She widened her eyes with mock solicitude. "Unless, of course, you're due to go off shift and take your ease." She knew she was deliberately provoking him, but couldn't stop herself. "In which case, perhaps you can hand me over to someone else..." He didn't respond with the brusque remark she expected, the thick, fan of his dark lashes veiling his expression as he consulted the luminous dial on his wrist unit. When he looked up, his gaze was polite.

"I can spare a few minutes more to show you the allocated office on deck six, but the rest *will* have to wait until tomorrow." He turned to lead the way to a large reception area with a bank of elevators.

He'd agreed, but it still felt as if he'd gotten the better of her. She decided it would be best to avoid his gaze as much as possible, keeping hers fixed forward until the elevator doors binged open. Then she moved to the far side of the compartment to study the indicator lights while DeSardon positioned himself a little in front of her.

As they started up, Feyna tried to breathe shallowly, not to draw in the warm, sexy scent of him in the enclosed space. She remarked into the silence to dispel the unsettling sense of intimacy,

"As you're obviously strapped for time, after we see the office, I'd be obliged if you could at least direct me to the rec-center, so I can meet a few of the crew in a relaxed situation." She heard him inhale.

"You know, Doctor, there's no need to go over the top while you're here. Central Command won't know or care if you take a day or two to recover from the journey. And if you were trying to make a point back there, let me set your mind at rest. I'm perfectly comfortable with the fact that you're here to evaluate my competency, along with my crew."

*Ah-ha!* Mark one up for her side, she thought. He was edgy beneath the smooth exterior, even if only in relation to his job. She kept her gaze on the indicator lights. "I'm pleased you're at ease with the situation, Commander, but you're mistaken if you imagine I'm trying to wield authority over you." It wasn't a lie, she decided, she hadn't planned to oppose him. "I'm simply following my usual routine, getting a head start on work by meeting a few of the crew before I schedule formal appointments."

He turned his head so she met his unreadable gaze. "My mistake, I don't doubt you're very skilled at what you do."

Feyna could have told him that a woman, even at the end of the twenty-first century, *had* to be

better at her job than a man, fighting her way up every rung of the success ladder. She planned to be running Starfleet Psych in another five years.

Accordingly, when the elevator doors slid open on deck six and DeSardon motioned to a door half-way along the corridor, Feyna turned primly on her booted heel to stride briskly ahead of him.

Entering the compact office, Feyna ran a practiced eye over the data center's large comp screen, moving forward to study the crew names and job descriptions listed on the closest file-organizer.

Staying on safe ground, she continued talking shop, still referring to him formally. "Are there any of your personnel you'd care to discuss, at this time, Commander, someone perhaps whose behavior has become atypical?" Her gaze paused on the crew-list, pleased to see he had a female pilot. She continued, "There are various verbal and physical tells that presage trouble, unfortunately most are easily missed by the untrained eye."

"Then what's the point in bringing it up?"

His sharpened tone made her wonder if she'd touched more than one nerve. And turning her head, she saw he was still in the doorway, one shoulder propped negligently against the panel with his arms folded over his massive chest. Though his body language implied cool

indifference, his vivid eyes were watchful beneath those silky black brows.

And feeling a fresh charge stirring the air, Feyna belatedly realized it would have been wiser to have done as he'd suggested and retired to her cabin for the evening, where she could have gotten her emotions back on track without his distracting presence. "I supposed I asked because you're an extremely intelligent individual who appears to have more insight than the average male."

He gave her another long, considering look. "Then doesn't it follow that my crew will be sound if I had a hand in selecting them." And he didn't need a wet behind the ears shrink dispensing helpful hints was the unspoken subtext.

"So noted." She returned her attention to the organizers. "But if I do detect any problems, I trust you won't try to block supplementary testing."

He made a sound of disgust. "Drugs and virtual mind-bending, you mean."

"Proven methods," she snapped back. "What right do you have to criticize?" Whirling, she jolted in shock to see he was right behind her now. She was startlingly aware of his sensual mouth as he leaned in to emphasize his words.

"I'm entitled to my own beliefs, Doctor. While I effectively respect your profession, some of you

space shrinks manufacture troubles that didn't exist in the first place."

Feyna took a defensive step backward, her heart beating faster and faster from the unrelenting effect of his masculinity, and because he was pulling more and more unwonted responses from her, causing her planned detachment to go dreadfully wrong, she reacted unfairly—totally against character. "You know, it wouldn't bode well for your future if I were to report your negative feedback to the board. Have them think you've turned into one of those hardheaded spacers who regard any direction from Central Command as out-and-out interference."

Ketrick stilled, his eyes looking more blue than green as a lethal calmness came into them. "Are you threatening to ruin my career, Doctor?"

The resonance in his voice sent a chill of dark awareness through Feyna. She measured him from under her lashes, wondering what he'd do if she did go against him. She shook her head. "Disregard that remark. I've way too much pride in my profession to ever willingly misuse it. But," she added, to regain a measure of control, "I will test if necessary."

Seeing a hardening in his eyes again, she softened her stand slightly. "I'm sure none of us wants to see a recurrence of the disaster that

overtook that Serganian warship three months ago." A junior officer, upon learning his pregnant wife had been killed in a road accident, detonated an onboard missile, reducing the vessel and its two hundred crewmembers to a smear of debris.

\* \* \* \*

Ketrick let the statement pass, staring at Feyna's face while a strange feeling of disorientation gripped him. The air in the room was all of a sudden too thick to breathe as words whispered in his mind.

*What are you waiting for? Take her – train her. She's always been yours.*

\* \* \* \*

In the snap of a finger, he'd crossed to slam a palm on the sliding door-plate, sealing them in. When he turned to face her, Feyna was shocked at how dangerous he looked. Thinking she'd driven him to strike her, she scooted back several paces, a wave of adrenaline speeding through her bloodstream to trigger her body's fight-or-flight mode.

It didn't matter that she was a specialist in Nevarsis style hand-to-hand combat when DeSardon seized her, pushing her back against the

wall. Caging her so she felt the hard ridge of his arousal, her body turned to mush. “W-what are doing?” she flustered. “There’s no need for this. I’ve no intention of damaging your career.”

“Forget the job,” he rasped. “Don’t you feel it?”

She stared back uncomprehendingly, struggling to shift mental gears. For one wild moment, she wondered if she was dreaming or perhaps she was hallucinating. There was a strange sense of unreality about the way they were responding to each other, the room seeming to revolve while strands of sexual energy curled hotly around them, the press of his cock against her mound sapping her will.

“Give in to your needs,” he softly urged.

For a moment, the psychologist in Feyna kicked in to question if he was secretly enraged that she’d accepted the assignment—not taking heed of his kiss-off, so to speak—and this was all part of some intricate ploy to discredit her, encouraging her to make the first move. But then again, if security cameras *were* filming them, he’d be caught as well. And if it wasn’t a strategy, then amazingly, he still wanted her.

“I want you,” he confirmed, that fantastic mouth hovering a short breath from hers. “Take what *you* want, Feyna. Ignore everything else.”

Later, when she could think again, she would tell herself that something within him triggered a

weakness in her. Like a person with an addiction, she craved his particular brand of masculinity, the excruciating pleasure generated by his touch. Now, with a silent moan of despair, she reached up to grasp his thick tail of black hair, tugging his head down.

Ketrick's response was instantaneous. Meeting her open mouth halfway, he seized her bun, pulling her mass of silky hair free, taking handfuls to tilt her head while his mouth went to battle with hers. Sucking and plying, he caught her full lower lip for erotic nips, laving away the hurt, then stabbing forcefully with his tongue, sweeping inside her wetness to draw her smaller velvety tongue into his mouth.

The shock of the I-missed-you-like-crazy kind of kiss powered through Feyna like a lightning bolt, the exotic, male taste of him after her long deprivation unspeakably glorious. She met his assault with one of her own. Arching her body to press greedily closer, her hands clutched at his broad shoulders. Her heart pounding chaotically as she darted her tongue to tangle with his, reveling in his largeness and the tantalizing scrape of male bristle against her skin.

Feyna needed more. Seizing the initiative again, she slid up the wall, making them both cry out when she rocked the vulva that felt as if it had swollen to twice its size against the bow of his



pulsing shaft. And feeling the taut muscles of his shoulders moving under her hands, she wanted to feel the heat of his bare skin and tried to slip a hand under the hem of his close-fitting tunic. "Where's the opening?"

Eyes brilliant from urgency, he reached up to tear back the fastening strip, moving closer again as she shoved the black tunic off his shoulders, which dropped to the ground.

As desperate as she was, Feyna had to take a moment to drink in the sight of his wide, bronzed torso and lean waist, her hands, for pure animal pleasure, stoking over the incredible definition in his arms. She understood that some women didn't care for male body hair. She loved it, her fingers drawn like a magnet to his chest's warm, black pelt.

Gently, she circled his flat, dark nipples and he shuddered. When she bent to lap at them, she could hear his chest working for more air. His skin was slick and tasted salty, his masculine musk saturating her senses. *Yum, yum.*

"God, Feyna, you're killing me."

She reached down to the waistband of his trousers and fumbled.

He caught her hand. "You first."

Breathing in ever quickening surges, they both grappled with her zipper. "Hurry." She shimmed her hips free of her uniform while Ketrack reached

behind her to snap off her lacy, pink bra, the sight of her full breasts bouncing free from restraint making him still in fascination.

“Oh, baby.”

In the light, her curved softness gleamed like smooth ivory. Reverently, the warmth of his hands cupped the weight of her, kneading and playing ever so softly with her long, hardened, coral nipples.

Feyna could hardly draw a breath.

Groaning, he dipped to bury his mouth in her cleavage, nuzzling and licking. Murmuring something she couldn't understand before his avid mouth thrillingly covered a pebbled crown.

He licked thoroughly, teeth grazing before he his hot mouth suckled ferociously.

“God, Rick, Rick, oooh.” She writhed against him. She'd forgotten how skilled he was, her fingers tunneling through his loosened hair as he worked her harder and harder, her thundering blood harmonizing with the deep throbbing between her thighs. She needed friction. “Touch me.” She pulled his hand down.

“Umm.” Releasing an engorged nipple, he looked down at the satin triangle of her tiny, pink thong. He yanked roughly, pushing the scrap of fabric down around her knees, using his foot to send it to the floor.

Stepping out of the underwear, Feyna kicked it

away, widening her stance in welcome, sucking in a stuttering breath when his big hand came up to press firmly on her strip of copper-colored curls.

Feeling her abundance of hot, sticky dew, Ketrick gave a deep, rumble of satisfaction, moving a long finger to part her pouty, pink labia lips, thrumming her hardened clit, then pinching it.

Feyna bucked uncontrollably. "Oh, yes. Wo-o-o!"

His gaze narrowed on her heated face. "How long has it been, babe, since you've had a good going over?"

"Huh?" Realizing she was breathing as if she'd run a marathon, Feyna wasn't sure why he was asking or what he'd think if she told him he was the last great sex she'd had and it was at least seven months since her last bout of average, mainly disappointing sex. "A-a couple of weeks," she decided. "I've been busy."

She missed the quick flash in his eyes, her own gaze dropping sharply as he stepped back a pace to unzip and step out of his pants. The length of raw masculinity he pulled out of his white, military-issue briefs, sprang upward from its bed of ebony curls. It looked bigger and thicker than it felt through his clothes, kindling more fires in Feyna's belly as she stared at its silky-smooth skin and broad, plum-colored head. She wasn't sure

now which she wanted more, to taste it or feel the power of it driving into the depths of her body.

Ketrick knew what he wanted, his face taking on a ruthless look as he slid his hands under her well-rounded ass, hoisting her against the wall as though she weighed no more than a bag of feathers. Fresh thrills tripped through Feyna at his casual show of strength.

And with her thighs sitting on top of his corded ones, feeling his muscles working as he adjusted her and braced his feet, Feyna clamped her long legs around his lean waist, bringing the wet thump of his cock against her belly.

Quivering in anticipation, she looked down at his shaft, letting go of his shoulders with one hand to explore him from root to tip. So heavy, she murmured, getting more and more excited by the raunchiness of doing it upright.

Ketrick, with the intoxicating scent of her wet sex drifting up to fill his nostrils, fought to keep control, putting a hand over hers to guide her, both of them watching him probe her tiny, pink slit.

"Don't hold back," she whispered throatily. "Do me deep."

"You're still a naughty girl," he murmured, giving her a blast of dark pleasure when he impaled her with one, quick thrust.

Crying out loudly, she heard him hiss through

his teeth as her creamy flesh tightened around him like a sleek fist.

"God, you're still so small." Pulling out slowly, he made slight movements with his hips to stretch her taut muscles.

But yearning for a wild, rough ride, Feyna ran her hands up and down his back, pressing on his curved butt. "I can handle it. I'm wet enough to take all of you."

The words acted on Ketrick like an erotic lash, his hands using her rougher as he drew back and unleashed, driving himself to open her completely, the stunning strength of him strangling the rising cry in her throat. He began to move hard and fast.

Eagerly, she clung to his wide shoulders, her heart pounding furiously as she arched her pelvis strongly, matching him thrust for thrust. On the next upward stroke, her teeth scraped over his shoulder, nipping his jaw, following that, her vision wavered when, unbelievably, he sped up.

Delirious from pleasure, grappling for support on sweat-slicked skin, Feyna's breasts bounced at full tilt, her pussy squeezing and sucking every bit of satisfaction from the pistoning cock driving her buttocks upward again and again, her half-sobbing cries soaring higher and higher in counterpoint to the vigorous slapping of damp flesh.

Underscoring it all was that familiar sense of mental connection, of being absorbed into his mind, immersed in his pleasure along with her own. Wishing it could go on endlessly, she focused on his face, saw the sweat trickling into his sooty lashed eyes, lips drawn back over strong, white teeth as he fought to prolong the moment.

She wondered then, if she dared reveal her fantasies, where he fully dominated her, binding her hands before he took her from behind. Or the one where he'd kept her naked, tied to his bed like a sex slave, so he could sample her whenever he chose.

The images sent her over the edge, his name erupting from her lips like a feral mantra, long nails digging crescents into his skin, pushing him into a devastating release as she convulsed around him on a rapturous scream, the overload of feelings leaving her close to tears.

\* \* \* \*

"God. Sweet God." Desperately, Ketrick sucked air into his straining lungs. There were no words to describe what had just happened. He'd come harder than he'd ever come with any woman—even with Feyna the first time around. Reluctantly, he released his grip to let her legs slid slowly off his hips, dropping to the floor beside her.

When he became mindful again, Ketrick had no idea how long they'd lain in a sated, tangled stupor. He didn't want to move, taking pleasure in the feel of her drowsy, pliant body, the soft breasts pressed deliciously into his chest.

A few moments later, when Feyna mumbled and stirred, he opened one eye, but kept his head buried in her fragrant hair to hide his expression.

He was thinking now, replaying the last half-hour while inner chaos overtook him, remembering how it had started with those dictating voices in his head, urging him to mate.

Was it possible his body, by some means, had been seized by outside forces, the sex orchestrated from afar? Did they know, if they were still watching, that the scent of her warm, female skin was making him hard again? *Oh, shit!* Twisting free from her arms, he leaped to his feet, Feyna gasping in shock as she tumbled to one side. Grabbing up his pants, Ketrick yanked them over his fading erection. He had to get away and think things through. He'd explain what he could to her later. He still didn't understand all of it himself.

\* \* \* \*

Hugging her knees to her chest, Feyna's confused gaze studied DeSardon while he hurriedly dressed. Behind him, she could see the toppled

file-organizer he'd pushed aside when he'd had her up against the wall. She'd forgotten that, and everything else. In his arms, there had been nothing but her raging passions. She'd probably have the prints from his fingers on her butt for days, plus she was pretty sure she'd bitten him.

At present, seeing him shrug his tunic over his broad back while keeping it turned toward her, she just felt stupid, and rising onto her knees, snatched up her clothes, not bothering with underwear, just shoving it into her uniform's side pockets along with the pins that had fallen from her hair.

Darting another look at DeSardon, she saw him skimming his thick, black hair slowly behind his ears, apparently steeling himself to turn and face her. When he did look at her, his gaze lowered and jerked up again, as though he were trying to ignore the sight of her kiss-swollen lips.

He spoke with stiff restraint, "Look, Feyna, let me say first that I didn't plan for this to happen. There was no premeditation on my part, just a reaction to the moment."

Pulling up her long, uniform zipper, Feyna knew the shadows in her eyes deepened. One spur-of-the-moment fuck, rip her emotions to the marrow again and it was all a mistake. As much as she wanted to hurl verbal abuse, she would have gained nothing, she thought, if he could destroy



her again so easily. "No need to overstate the situation. You had an urge to seduce me again and passed with flying colors."

His gaze whipped up to hers. "Hold on. I didn't force you into anything. I'll admit I got things going, but from there on you were with me every centimeter of the way...*begging* for it, as I recall."

*Bastard.* She hated him so much more for standing there so stunningly tousled and virile, letting her see what she'd be missing every morning for the rest of her life. And she'd face the hordes of hell before she'd let him know the true extent of her fresh vulnerability to him. "Fine, we'll leave it that neither of us was to blame and both of us were responsible. Then again—" she needed to take some revenge— "If I'm perfectly honest, I suppose I *was* curious to see if your performance would be as good as I remember."

Seeing his black brows draw together in a V, she paused, bringing her hands up to sweep her disheveled hair up into a loose topknot, making him wait while she reached into a pocket to retrieve her hairpins. "I have to say you're still an amazing piece of man-flesh. Too bad that'll have to be it."

She didn't wait for his reply, crossing to the lift upended organizer and sort through the jumbled file-cubes, missing the frowning look he aimed at her back.

"So, what are you saying?" he asked illogically, as if she'd been the one to withdraw. "It'll never happen again?"

*When icicles spout in hell.* She turned, wheeling the organizer closer to the desk. Her amber eyes were still bright from the hurt she was at pains to hide as she faced him with folded arms. "As you said, we reacted to the moment, I can hardly use that defense next time." Her brows raised a fraction. "I don't have to remind you that we both have responsibilities and ethics to consider."

A short silence followed while he held her gaze, looking as though he wanted to say more. Finally, he glanced away with a quick nod. "Understood, we'll keep it on a business footing from here on."

Still not satisfied with the small settling of scores, the primitive part of Feyna considered whether it would be worth tempting him into a huge cock-stand one last time, leaving him wanting her while she walked away with her head held high. She'd think on it. And stepping behind her professional shield, she concluded, "Now that that's settled, I would like to get an early start on my work. I'd be obliged if you'd locate a steward to show me to my quarters."

\* \* \* \*

The hours of darkness were treasured. A time to

think and scheme, wits and insight sharp with no chafing human chatter to clutter the brain. At last, the plan that had taken more than a decade to synchronize was close to fruition. The two younger Zanutians together, in range of Rhunia, ready to be proto-shifted to the secured breeding cells. It was unfortunate the female had been delayed, postponing the transfer roughly a full Rhunia orbit of twenty-nine hours.

On the other hand, the couple's energetic sexual encounter in the office had been very entertaining. The tiny, hidden cameras affording a ringside seat, so to speak.

Still, with so much at risk, and lack of sufficient information on the hazards of their close proximity for longer than anticipated, it would be wise to thwart their natural attraction for each other without putting them on the alert. Not so difficult after that last scene in the office. Then once the elements were in motion, they would be powerless to resist.

The Adbavalian Empire would reign supreme.

## CHAPTER TWO

Much later that night, Ketrick sat bare-chested in his cabin, staring broodingly at the three fingers of costly Sai-Leaf Brandy he'd poured an hour ago. The day's accumulation of paperwork was untouched on his desk. He couldn't concentrate, his mind still burning with images of Feyna and the aftermath.

Remembering how her throaty sounds of pleasure had resonated in his mouth, the texture and flavor of her flowing through him like a potent spice. A deeper part of him now recognized why he'd never spent time kissing the women he'd bedded in recent years.

He wondered what thoughts occupied *her* mind at this moment. As the minutes ticked by, he felt more and more like a jackass for the way he'd treated her. Then again, if one allowed that anything was possible, her assignment aboard his ship and their resulting sexual interlude may well have been engineered.

By whom? Beldir?

Did he work alone or were others involved?

Ketrick paused with the thought, lifting the glass of fine brandy to his mouth. Perhaps he was letting imagination overwhelm him. While he didn't care to dwell on it, there had been a dreamlike quality to his meeting with Beldir five years ago, which had made him wonder at times if he'd unconsciously invented the episode as an excuse to separate from Feyna. That theory was supported by the fact that Beldir hadn't come back.

So what then was he to make of those voices in his head? Were they disjointed thoughts generated by violent lust, an unwitting response to Feyna's sultry vibrations, knowing what a tigress she was beneath that cool demeanor?

He sank deeper in his chair, taking another thoughtful sip of brandy. And now that she'd riveted him all over again, how was he going to handle it? Contain his hunger and not think about the mouth-watering curves beneath her uniform...the press of her little pussy against his heavy loins—

"Jesus." He looked down at the tent in the center of his loose, fatigue pants, maddened by this further proof of his weakness. Closing his eyes, he inhaled slowly and let it out through his teeth, trying to reason above-the-belt as he pulled

his rambling thoughts into some kind of order.

Even if he ignored the ifs-and-buts surrounding Feyna's arrival and whatever had triggered the sex, even if she still wanted him—which seemed unlikely from what she'd implied—none of it mattered because he was still a selfish bastard who wasn't ready to give up his travels and live terrestrially.

He blew out long breath. "I'd be crazy to dredge up the past," he murmured. "She's applied the closure and I'll abide by it." He tossed back the remainder of his drink.

"Dear boy, don't you think you've played the denial game long enough."

The breath wrenched from his lungs and Ketrick's brandy glass went flying as he launched himself out of the chair, swinging to face the intruder while he bunched into fighting stance. And seeing the glowing hologram of a blue-robed, elderly man floating near his closet, Ketrick's adrenaline level went through the roof. "God almighty, how did you project-up through our force fields?" It was impossible or so he'd believed.

Beldir smiled and gestured in obviation. "I'll explain another time, and don't look so shocked. I told you I'd be back."

Keeping his gaze glued to the shimmering figure, Ketrick lowered himself slowly back into

the chair. "As a matter of fact, I don't recall that you did mention a return visit. And my answer's the same as last time. I'm not signing up for the detail."

Something that looked like affection glinted in Beldir's shrewd gaze as he studied his tall, handsome nephew. "Sorry, my boy, but it's time for you to commit to something beyond your own satisfaction."

Ketrick was feeling as he had five years ago, as if he'd fallen down the rabbit hole—the comfortable world he occupied changed suddenly beyond his comprehension. He asked the question uppermost in his mind. "Did you—" he fluttered his fingers— "hocus-pocus things to bring Feyna to me, are you capable of that?"

Beldir stroked his white beard. "Hocus-pocus...interesting, I do try to keep abreast of modern idioms. And yes, I am capable, but in this instance I had nothing to do with Feyna coming here...it was preordained."

Before Ketrick could respond, the older man held up a finger.

"Believe me, I understand your natural resistance, raised by a family you believed to be your own, expected to defend a homeworld you've never visited."

"You've got it in one. My family's back on Leyostr."

“Your foster family,” Beldir corrected, “exceptional people, who did their utmost for you. However, your Zanutian blood families were masters among their races. Haven’t you wondered why, without conscious effort, your pre-cog and telekinetic powers have increased so markedly since we last spoke?”

Ketrick’s black brows came together. “Is that your doing, have you been coaching me from a distance?” The idea was hair-raising.

Beldir shrugged. “I’ll admit I’ve been checking on you at intervals, but the timing and development of your powers is entirely natural. Your physical reflexes and instincts, by the way, are also part-and-parcel of your ancient gene pool. It’s why you’re so good at what you do.”

Despite the feeling of inevitability clawing at him, he stayed firm. “Then whose voice was that in my head yesterday, urging me to fuc—mate with Feyna?”

Beldir shook his head. “Again, not guilty. Any voices you’re hearing are entirely your own...your higher self if you like.”

*Shit, worse and worse.* “All right, so when are you going to let Feyna in on your grand plan? I’d be interested to see how she reacts when you tell she’s an untried wizard destined to save your planet from warrior lizards.”

Beldir smiled. “Conveying the facts to Feyna is



your job, dear boy, as it was written in the sacred scrolls."

Ketrick grunted. "Not surprising, leave the dirty work to me. But you may want to take a closer look at those scrolls. Feyna made it clear she wants nothing more to do with me."

Beldir harrumphed. "Then you'd best get to work winning her affection back. Because her psychic abilities notwithstanding, Feyna has matured into a fine young woman, warm, intelligent and more important, strong. If you were totally honest with yourself, you'd admit your higher self has been mourning her loss these past years."

Ignoring the truth of that statement, Ketrick switched topics. "You've never told me much about her powers, simply that they would remain more or less dormant unless we married, accompanied by all that ancient rigmarole."

A sly smile curved Beldir's lips. "Perhaps I forgot to mention the side-effect of your mating. Feyna's talent was unlocked during your initial affair. Though she may not yet have become aware of the subtle changes in her perception, her abilities will increase from now on each time you couple with her, leveling off in time to match yours."

In spite of himself, Ketrick found that interesting, recalling a mixing of minds during

their love-making, which he'd chalked up to sexual compatibility, which they'd always had in abundance. "So you're saying we'll *both* add to our powers if we have sex again?"

"Indeed, and in view of the situation, it's necessary to continue strengthening your powers in that way, especially for Feyna as she needs to catch up. It's only when you both enter the Crystal Lake, on your home planet, Rhunia, reciting the sacred ciphers that the ancient source of power will revitalize totally, once that happens, your combined energies will be concentrated to a force that can kill, should you have to go up against the Adbavaliens."

Ketrick frowned. The trouble was the incredible tale was beginning to sound possible, very nearly reasonable. And it deepened his dilemma regarding Feyna. Then again, he doubted she would want to involve herself in the sorcerer's strange doings any more than he did. Additionally, Beldir may not be his blood uncle, that could be a ploy to apply more leverage. He made a decision. "I'm sorry, sincerely sorry for your planet's troubles, but I still can't help. And I won't involve Feyna in a situation that may well bring her harm."

Beldir stilled, looking askance. "Really, dear boy, you're not following me. You no longer have a choice."

Ketrick gave a quick snort. “Cut the crap—”

Beldir cut him off with a slashing hand. “Listen to me. And let me reiterate as I’m sure you didn’t absorb everything at our first meeting. The Adbavaliens invaded Rhunia in search of the supernatural powers owned by the two ruling Zanutian families. No one, including me, knows where the original Zanutians came from or when their benevolent reign over the ordinary citizens of Rhunia began...”

As the older man spoke, Ketrick felt a tickling at the back of his neck, indicating a sharpening of his paranormal senses. Normally, he automatically restrained the sensation, at this instant, he let it flow as Beldir went on.

“You and Feyna sprung from those two ruling families, and since you were both toddlers at the time of the Adbavalian invasion, your blood parents thwarted the enemy by spiriting you and Feyna away to be raised anonymously on separate, backwater planets. Now that the Adbavaliens have discovered your whereabouts, they’ll be coming for you both.”

Ketrick was shaking his head slowly. “I still can’t see what the Adbavaliens are hoping to gain. Our gifts can’t be taught, they’re intrinsic—Christ.” Revelation hit him full force. “The bastards are counting on our abilities being inheritable.”

“Correct”

“Are they...inheritable?”

“One can’t be sure what will be passed on through cross-breeding, but it hardly matters since the enemy *does* believe they’ll be able to harness your powers through procreation.” The older man paused to explain, “An Adbavalian female, similar to her reptile cousins, can birth two to three litters a year, and they’ve been cross-breeding with humans for some time now with excellent results. Once the Adbavaliens capture you, they’ll experiment fully, wringing you dry mentally to see what they can discover. In the end, when you’ve served your purpose, they’ll destroy you both.”

Though Beldir had his full attention now, Ketrick still resisted the idea of fulfilling some obscure prediction, but the possible danger to Feyna had triggered protective instincts he hadn’t been aware that he had. “All right, I’ll check out what’s on record concerning the Adbavalian invasion and I’ll talk to Feyna, but I doubt this will end in the way you expect.”

Beldir nodded, holding the younger man’s gaze. “We’ll see. Fortunately, we still have some time. The enemy can’t get to you while you’re on the ship. But be alert. Don’t let strangers come board physically or proto-shift remotely. I’ll return when we’re ready to leave—” The glowing image

blinked out.

“Hey, you didn’t tell me... Damn it.”

## CHAPTER THREE

The following morning, after a quick workout in the ship's gym, Feyna, dressed in a fresh, gray and blue uniform, was in the mess hall gingerly sipping a cup of Tensa-grain coffee. Back on her homeworld, Nevarsis, they still had enough forested land to grow real coffee beans. This simulated stuff lacked flavor and the caffeine zing she could really have used this morning.

For hours last night she'd grimly reflected on the episode with DeSardon that had been at once deeply humiliating and so damn exciting her heart stuttered again with the thought. In the end though, what had it meant to him...male ego, a further conquest, to prove he could?

Not that she hadn't made some conquests of her own in the intervening years. Frantic to find satisfaction after the breakup, she'd gone through men like clean underwear, experimenting with a ménage at one point, though lately she'd mainly given a sigh of relief when the lackluster sex was

over, leaving as soon as politely possible. She sighed with the depressing thought. After last night, no matter how much she told herself to stop using DeSardon as a benchmark, her emotions wouldn't pay attention.

"Ready to order, Doctor Sy Tordinay?"

Blinking back to the moment, Feyna glanced up at a tall, youthful, steward with a shock of white, blond hair and bright green eyes.

"The name's Lester, ma'am." Respectfully, he gave her a little bow, his interested gaze flicking over the blue and gold psych insignia above her left breast. "In case you didn't know, Doctor, the mess hall will do its best to cater to your personal preferences. Plus if you prefer to dine in your quarters at any time during your stay, we offer twenty-four hour room service."

The young charmer, who looked to be about twenty-two, the same age as Feyna's younger brother, Lucan, brought out her good humor, her mouth curving in a warm smile. "Thanks, Lester, that's good to know. For now I'll have..." She glanced back down at the menu. "Um, some re-hydrated fruit and cereal, please."

Pouring her a glass of water, Lester glanced up in mild surprise. "The fruit will be fresh, ma'am. The SS Six has an onboard conservatory."

Feyna's feathery brows rose sharply. "A conservatory..." There'd been no mention of it in

her familiarization pack. Her dimples flickered. "No wonder the recruitment lists have mushroomed in the last year."

The steward exchanged a wry smile with her. "Yeah, we all know how lucky we are in the ship. And," he added loyally, "in Commander DeSardon."

Yes, Feyna thought, trust DeSardon to control the *crème de la crème* of cruisers.

"Do you have a preference, Doctor? Today's harvest includes several soft fruits and berries, I think."

Feyna lifted her shoulders and smiled. "Sounds great, I'll leave it up to you." And as the young steward hurried back to the kitchens, Feyna picked up the cold water to sip and discretely scan the room. It had emptied out in the last few minutes, crewmembers hurrying off to begin their shifts.

\* \* \* \*

Off to one side, four tables away, slightly behind a pillar, Ketrick was drinking his second cup of coffee while ostensibly reading the previous evening's log sheets. From under his lashes, he watched Feyna, aware she hadn't noticed him in his out-of-the-way spot. He noticed she was wearing her shiny, red hair in a businesslike style



again, exposing the graceful length of her neck and her stunning profile, her plain uniform doing nothing to disguise the feminine lines of her body.

He had to mention his meeting with Beldir, and soon, but not in a public place. He didn't know how she might react to the bizarre tale, which she probably wouldn't believe anyway. He'd been awake most of the night, researching what was on record regarding the Adbavalian invasion of Rhunia. It matched what Beldir had told him, but then the elderly man may have gotten his information from the same public reports.

Personally, Ketrick was inclined to talk Feyna out of the trip to Rhunia, where the Adbavaliens had armies of people to capture them. Whereas, if he and Feyna went about their business, armed and alert, it would be difficult for the lizard race to grab them, sending a few of their people at a time. And though he was well able to take care of himself, he had to figure a way for Feyna to be protected once she left the safety of the ship.

Frowning with the thought, his gaze fixed on the outline of Feyna's breasts, Ketrick blinked when they turned to face him, snapping his eyes guiltily upward to collide with Feyna's equally surprised gaze. He watched her mouth part on a soft inhale, interminable moments seeming to pass while a heated current sizzled between them. Deliberately, Feyna broke the connection, turning

to face forward again as she picked up her coffee cup, her delicate throat working as she swallowed.

Ketrick looked down at the reports again, not surprised to feel his heart pounding. It had been there in her eyes, he thought, she still wanted him. What was he going to do about it? Now that Beldir had stuck his finger in the pie again, it was difficult to know how to proceed. But even allowing for the moral code and Feyna's assignment here, she wasn't a crewmember and they did have a history, what harm could it actually do if they had a few tangles between the sheets?

Plus, according to Beldir, the sex would boost her psychic awareness, which may save her in the long run. And while she might want to kick his ass at the moment, Ketrick thought, perhaps when he made her aware of the possible danger and came up with a plan to protect her, her view of things might shift. He glanced back at her. She was eating a large, strawberry, her tongue darting out to lick away juice, triggering a hot memory of her kneeling at his feet, slowly unzipping his fly –

“More coffee, Commander?”

Bringing his head up abruptly, Ketrick stared blankly at the smiling, female steward, uncomfortably aware of his hardened sex under the table. He cleared his throat. “Ah, no, I'm good...thanks.”

The steward moved on to the next table while Ketrick inwardly cursed, shifting to ease his tightened groin. Now he was going to need a cold shower...lots of them with Feyna popping up here, there and everywhere while she took stock of his crew, which gave him a stronger motive to get her into bed. And when he did, he reflected, he might be able to persuade her to stay on the ship until next landfall, two months hence. Then he could take a few weeks of the mountains of leave he had coming and stay with her until the Adbavalian situation was resolved.

He stilled when he realized his thoughts were pushing him into getting-back-together territory, not sure if he was motivated by gallantry, his dick or something he refused to name. Whatever it was, the sudden rush of anticipation sent his gaze flying back to Feyna's table. It was empty.

\* \* \* \*

*The man's making me reckless and crazed.* Stalking around the huge hothouse with its colorful range of crops, Feyna wanted to bang her head against the nearest tree. She had no idea what had alerted her to DeSardon's half-concealed presence in the mess hall or why she'd stared at him openly. It was almost as if she'd developed a new sensitivity to his magnetism and couldn't look away. And

now he was bound to think she was panting to have sex with him again.

She closed her eyes against the humiliating thought. *Oh God, if I can't stop my body from running amuck, I'll have no pride or principles left at the end of my stay.* She stopped pacing and pressed her fingertips to her temples. "All right, think, what would you tell a female patient in the same situation?"

Firstly, obviously, she decided, she would protect her vulnerability by taking avoiding action whenever possible. If, and when their paths did cross, she must remind herself that however much he might physically resemble a storybook hero, his character did not. He was a man like every other that she, in an official capacity, had come here to assess.

Ten minutes later, she was striding purposefully along the carpeted corridor on deck-six, ready to review the first of the crew's bios prior to their evaluations. She recalled her assigned office was halfway along the corridor from an elevator, but since she was approaching from a different direction today and there were several elevators spread along the lengthy corridor, she started checking door numbers.

A strong hand seized her arm. "Wha—" She got a blurred image of her attacker as she was pulled into a storage alcove. *Rape?* Even on a military

vessel it happened from time to time. Feyna didn't waste time screaming for help. Instinctively she jabbed her elbows sharply into her assailant's stomach. When he gave a satisfying grunt, she struck strongly downward at his wrists, breaking free to pivot sharply and punch upward.

Ketrick managed to block her fist before it connected with his face. "Whoa, you little firebrand, I prefer to keep my nose the way it is."

Breathing harshly through her mouth, anger outpacing logic, Feyna thumped him hard on the chest. "Damn it. What the hell are you doing hauling me into cubbyholes?" She paused to pull in a few more breaths. "I thought I was being raped for God's sake."

Ketrick's amused expression sobered. "Sorry, I waylaid you here because we need to talk to in private. I didn't know you were going to go wild on me." His eyes warmed again. "You have some good moves, by the way." He'd never been attracted to weak women.

When his sparkling gaze drifted from her eyes to her mouth, the look as palpable as a kiss, Feyna felt her heartbeat escalate for reasons that had nothing to do with her physical effort. Simultaneously, her brain slotted in to draw her attention to the dim intimacy of said cubbyhole and the fact that he was overpowering her again, blunting her individuality even as he made her

tremble with sexual awareness.

She pressed her lips together, distorting their plump shape as she firmed her features to thoroughly discourage him. "Look, if you're here because of what happened back there in the mess hall, it was entirely unintentional on my part. What we agreed yesterday still stands."

\* \* \* \*

When she tried to move passed him, Ketrick caught her arm. "Not until I tell you some things you need to know."

She jerked free from his grip. "I know all I need to about you."

God, he thought, she was difficult. "I'm speaking of *your* family history."

She made a scoffing sound. "What can you possible know that I don't?"

"That you're not..." He trailed off at the sound of voices and laughter drifting along the corridor. An elevator opened and closed. "We should continue this in a more private place."

She shook her head. "Not gonna happen. Say what you have to here and make it fast."

Looking at her sulky mouth, annoyed that she could apparently resist him without difficulty while he was being driven mad by lust, Ketrick fought the urge to grab and kiss her into

compliance. "All right, fine. You're not the person you believe you are and you've inherited magical abilities."

Silence reigned. Obviously that wasn't what she'd expected. She nodded slowly. "And my reply to that is why in twenty-nine years have I had no inkling of these magical abilities?"

Tossing up how much she needed to know at this point, Ketrick decided to stick with the potential danger. In her current mood, he thought, if he threw all of it into the fan, told her they were destined to perform a vital mission, involving an army of warrior lizards, she'd probably have him constrained and committed without delay. "I suspect," he said, "that you've had sporadic hints of your talent, which you didn't recognize. And from here on, because you do have these abilities, there's a possibility of danger, which means we need to discuss strategy..."

Her amber gaze held his. "In private, of course."

"That's why I'm here."

She gave an unladylike snort. "Nice try, DeSardon, but you should have reversed it and told me you were the one with the magical powers. Then you might have offered to read my palm."

It was his turn to look blank. "Read your palm?"

“Revealing that I’m destined to bounce on your mattress for the length of my stay.”

In spite of the situation, Ketrick had to smile. He couldn’t help picturing her sleeping on that mattress, rosy and naked after an exhaustive night of sex. “Okay, so you don’t trust me because of what happened yesterday. I’m trying to put that right—”

“And fuck me again?”

“Bluntly put, but yes, under the present circumstances that is—” He broke off when he saw the fiery chips flashing in her eyes.

“What is with you, DeSardon, some kind of kinky, macho game to see how many times you can stir me up and discard me?”

“Jesus, Feyna, what do you take me for?” He looked down when her finger jabbed his chest

“What I take you for is a man who doesn’t have the balls to tell me I’m still not worth the sacrifice of his freedom. That at the end of the day, nothing and no one will come between him and his sacred career.” She stopped and drew a seething breath. “Just FYI, you self-centered jerk, there are plenty of men out there, perhaps one in particular who will do his utmost to please me, because I’m more important to him than his damn job...” She trailed off with her breasts heaving, her expressive face registering relief at unloading. “Now if you’ll kindly move aside, I’d like to get on with *my* job.”



Ketrick stayed where he was, his voice deceptively mild while the atmosphere remained dynamic. "Are you saying you *have* a particular man in your life?"

She threw him a go-to-hell look. "Privileged information."

So there was a man waiting for her somewhere, he thought. He hadn't let himself dwell on the entanglements she might have had, a hard knot curling in his gut as he tried to picture her version of Mr. Right. His mind threw up an image of a Nordic-type named Sven with an arrogant smile on his thin lips. "Did you meet him through your work?" Ketrick persisted, wishing the bastard was here so he could smash a fist in his sneering face.

Feyna's eyes glinted with female satisfaction. "I'm not saying another word."

Beleaguered, frustrated and royally pissed off, Ketrick jerked her to him, crushing her breasts against his chest while he watched her eyes widen in alarm. "All right, so I'm a jerk." His gaze was fierce. "But I'm a jerk who's trying to help you, damn it. And if you believe nothing else, believe that I've never felt for any woman what I feel for you."

\* \* \* \*

When his mouth came down strongly on hers,

Feyna tried to control the rush of sensation and failed. Still, she pushed uselessly against the rock hard wall of his chest while it steadily pressed her back into the corner. The wounded, resentful part of her struggled against another humbling defeat.

Her primal self was caught by the base hunger she'd finally brought out in him, the strength of his mouth parting her lips, wet tongue thrusting deep and vigorously in an act of domination, the nudge of his thick penis against the top of her mound, making the blood pool in her loins, saturating her pussy with that familiar sweet ache. She clung to him then for support, the muscles in her legs going completely lax.

Ketrick groaned as her body subsided against him, moving his mouth over the wildly fluttering pulse points in her throat, then upward until his harsh breathing puffed around the rim of her ear. "I want you so damn much. Tell me what you want. What'll please you the most?"

*Oh God, anything.* One strong hand came up to caress her breast, unwonted pleasure shuddering through her when his thumb circled her areola. Helplessly, she moved into his touch, feeling his other hand caressing her bottom, fingers moving along its cleft, then lower, flexing on the back of her thighs, working slowly between and upward, touching her sex, feeling a hint of her wetness through the fabric.

"Did you know I can always smell how much you want me?"

Her breath heaved at his whispered words. Her paltry resistance swept away by his power as he captured her hand, holding it tightly against the pulsing hardness in his pants.

"This comes later, after I've put my mouth where it can do the most good. I've never forgotten the taste of your sweet cream."

That sent her reeling again. Unlike other men who went down on you mainly to make you more disposed to perform fallatio on them, Ketrick genuinely enjoyed putting his mouth on her sex. Her mind summoned a hot vision of his skilled tongue travelling slowly over her delicate swollen lips and crevice, nipping her clit while she gripped his unbound hair to hold him closer.

"God," he breathed when her hips rotated harder against his hand. "I love how you're always so hot for it. Are you imagining how it's going to feel when you come in my mouth?"

"Please..." She couldn't get the *stop* out. She wanted to push him away and crush him closer at the same time. And when his hand moved to unzip her bodysuit, ready to yank it down to her knees, her deeper self keened—she was akin to a lemming on the edge of a cliff, understanding that she was going over into the sea to drown, but unable to save herself.

It was the thought of his complete mastery over her, pulling feelings out of her again that he didn't even want that raised a barely surviving instinct, a last vestige of strength. Not realizing she'd shoved him until he stumbled backward, his surprised gaze caught a glimpse of her stark expression as she turned and ran.

"Never again," she shouted over her shoulder, her voice hoarse and close to tears. "Don't you dare lay a hand on me again." She refused to acknowledge the part of her shrieking in wild frustration.

\* \* \* \*

Breathing in harsh, fast pants, his whole body vibrating with the need to mate, Ketrick started to go after her to do what he didn't know. The sharp, buzz of his wrist communicator stopped him. "Shit." Lifting his arm to blank the unit's display screen, he tried to level his breathing. "DeSardon." He still watched Feyna's retreating figure.

"Commander, it's Jakon, are you able to come to the bridge? Routine inspection's uncovered a glitch in one of the drive systems."

Half an hour later, Ketrick was in his captain's chair, watching a group of his engineers examine machinery under open, metal casings. His mind though, was imprinted with Feyna's face as she'd

turned to flee. He supposed he might have handled things better, but then again, she'd barely let him get a word in. It was lowering to have had his lights punched out verbally by one, small female.

In his own world, he was wholly in control—running the ship or going into battle, his crew jumped to do his bidding. With Feyna, even using his out-of-the-ordinary senses, he'd apparently gotten the signals all wrong. It hadn't mattered to her that he'd turned himself inside out. She'd still pushed him away. At this point, he didn't have the first clue of what he was supposed to do. Write her a letter?"

He made a soft sound of disgust. Beldir would have to fill her in. Then if she wanted *his* support, he'd give it, but he suspected she do anything rather than take help from him. An unwelcome picture flashed into his mind—Feyna arriving home, rushing into the arms of the imaginary Sven.

Ketrick took a deep, cleansing breath. He would not romanticize her any more. He would focus only on the present, running the ship. "Jakon, give me an update."

Ketrick's engineer first turned sharply at his leader's command, holding an analyzing module that was flashing red. "It's as you thought, Captain, the alternator's shot. With luck we can

have a new unit run in by next shift's end."

Ketrick nodded, turning to give new directives to the blade-thin, female pilot seated to the right of him. "Maintain present heading and reduce speed to sixty percent sublight."

## CHAPTER FOUR

**S**omehow, Feyna managed to make her way to her cabin, staying there until she'd composed herself. After that, she'd hidden out in her office, working her way through the crew's bios and eating lunch at her desk.

It was early evening now, and though DeSardon hadn't tried to contact her, she was on tenterhooks, thinking he might appear at any moment. She was unable to stop wondering where he was, if he was thinking of *her*. She hated the treacherous part of her that was asking why she'd mindlessly shouted those final words at him.

She frowned at her comp screen, realizing she'd scrolled through another document without absorbing a single line. Picking up her coffee cup, she stared down at the cold dregs. "Damn it!" Kicking away from the desk, she splayed back in the chair, lacing her fingers behind her head. She needed to detangle the answer. In her work, she'd always been able to find the answer. Again, her

mind replayed his words, *I've never felt with any woman what I feel with you.*

There'd been sparks in his eyes when he'd spoken, she remembered, then again, horny men will say anything to have sex. That depressed her so much she switched her thoughts to the ESP angle. She didn't know what to make of it.

However much she might try to dismiss the supernatural, she knew she was being fast-tracked to the top by Starfleet because she was exceptionally good at her job. And the reason she was good at her job was her uncanny ability to discern her patient's feelings in ways her colleagues were apparently unable to. Fortunately, Feyna hadn't been asked to explain it because she couldn't.

She let her mind drift, recalling the strong mental connection she'd felt during sex with Ketrick. She'd forgotten about it afterward, probably because she'd been too busy being humiliated. She sighed. All in all, she'd blundered badly in the listening department. If Ketrick had been a patient, her inner analyst would have known exactly how to draw him out, learn what was on his mind. Instead, she'd scored cheap points off him. So now, the only information she was left with was that he still wanted her sexually —

Sensing a presence behind her — DeSardon her



first thought—she jerked upright in her chair, her body tautening with fresh tension as she slowly turned to face the entryway she'd left open. Seeing her steward, Lester, hovering in the hallway, Feyna's expression blanked with a flash of disappointment.

"S-sorry, to startle you, Doctor, I rapped on the panel, but you didn't hear me."

Relaxing and refocusing, Feyna tried to look cheerful. "Lost in the work," she told him. "What's up?"

His cheekbones pinkened. If he was hopeful the lovely doctor might notice him as man, he would have been disappointed to know her warmth toward him stemmed from reading his bio, which indicated he had a widowed mother who received most of his monthly credits. Plus, Feyna was touched that he'd seemingly taken on the position of her unofficial escort.

Stammering, Lester informed her, "T-the birthday party I mentioned when I brought your lunch. It's just starting...if you still want to go."

"Ah, yes, the party." She wrinkled her nose as she considered. Would DeSardon be in attendance? In which case, should she stay away? If she did, would it make her look weak? "I'd loved to go. Who did you say it was for, again?"

Lester gave her an endearing, lopsided grin. "Nels Magee, a good buddy of mine from the

Academy. He was one of one the engineers who helped you out of your pressure suit."

"Yes, of course, I remember," she said politely. "Give me a minute to freshen up." Snatching her tiny purse off the desk, Feyna went into the adjoining restroom. Moments later, after she'd applied fresh lipstick, she dug in her purse for her hairbrush. She wasn't primping for *him*, she told herself, pulling the pins out of her tight knot, but if he should approach—her stomach fluttered with the thought—she'd encourage him to tell her exactly what was on his mind. Then she'd consider if she would give him one more chance.

The music increased in volume as Feyna and Lester approached the rec-center. She'd been very impressed when she'd used the gym this morning, walking around to check out the wide range of entertainments available to the crew. At present, as the automatic doors slid open, she stopped and did a double-take.

The games room she'd seen earlier now housed a holographic disco. A boy band of droid musicians dressed in bold-colored bodysuits pounded out the beat on a U-shaped stage while younger crewmembers crowded the wooden dance floor, attempting to mimic the flashy, holo dancers who appeared to move amongst them.

Beyond the nightclub scene, Feyna noted there

were muted areas for those who didn't want to party and beyond that, lights glowed from the sports courts. "Wow," was all she could come up with.

Lester gave her a lively look, clearly taking pleasure in her reaction. "Yeah, we enjoy ourselves when we can, especially on the long hauls."

And heading toward the circular bar, he cut a path through the chatting, laughing throng, most of them nodding and smiling at Feyna, obviously aware of her identity.

"What's your pleasure, Doctor, soft or alcoholic?" From his inflection on the last, it was clear Lester wasn't sure if she'd consider herself permanently on duty, as it were.

"A glass of wine would be lovely," she told him. He wasn't too far off mark. Informal gatherings were often very useful in her line of work. Watching how a crew interacted, who buddied up to whom, who drank too much, who stood alone and wished it was over.

"Here you are." Lester handed her a glass of good, red wine, cheerily reporting, "They say they'll be serving a variety of finger foods shortly. And the cake will be handed out later." His green eyes sparkled. "You should see it. It's chocolate and humongous."

"Sounds great," Feyna said, envying his

enthusiasm. She was on a constant diet, always seeming to run ten to fifteen pounds over her ideal weight. She glanced around the disco again.

Lester took a long draught of his frothy, brown ale, watching Feyna watch the dancers. Evidently, he wanted to impress, let her know he was kept abreast of shipboard happenings, imparting conversationally, "From what I heard, the captain and bridge crew may not make it to the party. They're running in a new drive unit."

Sipping her wine, Feyna told herself she was relieved by that piece of news. She would be able to relax for a while. "Too bad," she answered, "but there's plenty of crew benefiting from the break of duty."

"Yeah, and the music's great, isn't it?" He paused, flushed. "W-would it be proper to ask you to dance?"

Glancing at his expectant, young face, Feyna realized with a surprised jolt that it was more than the festivities putting the dazzle in his eyes. Though she was adept at handling patients who'd formed a crush, she didn't want to hurt this boy's feelings. "A dance would be lovely, Lester, but I was hoping to mingle a little first, meet a few more of the crew."

His flush deepened. "S-sorry, I'm forgetting my manners." Glancing around awkwardly to see who he might introduce her to, he spotted the

ship's linguist standing alone, observing the revelry from the muted section of the hall. "There's Maynard Delferro, a great guy who speaks twenty-five languages at last count."

"A pleasure, Doctor Sy Tordinay," the tall, distinguished officer greeted. The light from the wall-mounted energy stones picked up the silver threads in his meticulously groomed hair as he bent to courteously to kiss Feyna's hand. "I do believe we hail from the same homeworld, though I haven't been back to Nevarsis in years."

When Lester excused himself to shuffle off into the crowd, Feyna chatted generalities with Delferro, who proved to be surprisingly entertaining. To let him know she wasn't one dimensional or pompous, Feyna asked about the restructured language study systems, then she joked about the mandarins back at head office. While they were debating interplanetary politics, a husky voice came from behind.

"It's Doctor Sy Tordinay, isn't it? I've been waiting all day to meet you."

Turning with a responsive smile on her face, Feyna's eyes widened with some interest as they took in a long-necked, big-breasted brunette sporting a pricey red Lupana skin dress with knee-high, black boots. At least four inches taller than Feyna's five-foot-eight, the woman looked to be in her mid-thirties, her straight, black hair cut

chin-length, revealed angular but attractive features. In fact, she looked as if she moonlighted behind a cosmetics counter—perfect, pale skin, heavily defined, green eyes and a crimson-glossed mouth that belonged in a lipstick ad.

Hands in pockets, relaxed and sure of herself, she went on, “I’m Tricera Charnos, the comms first. I was hoping you’d take a minute to parley with me.”

Not sure what the woman was aiming at, Feyna murmured a polite acknowledgement, finding it odd that Charnos’s frequent smile didn’t reach her eyes. They managed to stay flat and impenetrable even as they gazed at Feyna in such a searching way, she was forced to ask, since she didn’t usually forget a face, “We haven’t met before, have we?” That elicited, strangely, a burst of throaty laughter, as though Feyna had said something unbelievable funny.

“No, we’ve never met, but I do believe you know Seriah Meckono, who recently joined your psych department on Nevarsis.”

Her curiosity piqued, Feyna nodded slowly. “Yes, I know Seriah.” And didn’t care for her at all—educated beyond her intelligence and devious to compensate was how Feyna had judged her, and generally kept her distance. “How do *you* know Seriah?”

The statuesque brunette made an airy gesture.

"She was my roommate at university. I asked because she mentioned you in a recent letter." Feyna's brow creased. That was very odd. She didn't have time to ponder.

Charnos leaned in to stress in a lowered voice, "I've some information you should be aware of—" she darted a glance at Delferro, who was tactfully staring into the depths of his ale glass— "in private."

Oh, hell, Feyna thought, a damn whistleblower. While she was professionally bound to report all information gathered to Starfleet, Feyna's dislike of squealers and petty malice meant she would use her own discretion in the matter. Turning back to say goodbye to the charming Delferro, who kept his expression discreetly bland, Feyna dutifully followed the red-clad comms officer to a grouping of easy chairs in the far corner of the quiet area.

Once seated, Tricera got straight to the point. "While I don't like to tell tales out of school, I do need to warn you. Between us girls, so to speak, that although our illustrious captain is a skilled leader we're all proud to serve with, he can't resist a fresh, female face."

"I see." Had a bomb exploded in the room, Feyna couldn't have been more stunned. Despite Ketrick's sexual interest in her, she'd assumed it was a one-off, that he would obey the code and

keep strictly apart from female personnel. Calling on her training, Feyna took a slow sip of wine. "Has Commander DeSardon had relations with many of his female crewmembers?"

Glancing at the closest group of people, Tricera lowered her voice again. "As you can imagine, it's most unpleasant to accuse your superior of sexual aggression. And I won't name names, but I know for a fact he's worked his way through a goodly number of Starfleet's female officers and some enlisted personnel as well."

Aware she'd gone pale this time, Feyna could only stare as Tricera who seemingly had forgotten her objective informant role, jumped into full-scandal mode.

"I know about the enlisted women because two of them were discussing DeSardon in the laundry room the other day, going on about how he oozes hormones and stamina..."

As she listened and watched Tricera's face, Feyna heard a strange rushing sound in her ears, then her focus flashed out and in, as though she was viewing things from a distance. It popped into her mind that the comms officer was lying.

"...and their friend, who'd done it with him, reported that he was a phenomenal fuck..." Charnos trailed off, glancing around as if she'd suddenly remembered where she was. "Sorry for the crudity—" she grimaced — "but it *was* a direct



quote.”

Still feeling a touch disorientated, Feyna wondered what DeSardon had done to turn his comms officer so against him. If Starfleet should get wind of her accusations, it would definitely end the commander’s career.

\* \* \* \*

Well, that had gone well, Tricera thought, double-locking her cabin door before she sat down at her small dressing table to pull off her boots and remove the contact lens covering her greenish-brown, pupilless eyes. First, she reached into her mouth to pull out the minuscule voice-adaptor that modified her own deep, discordant rasp. She judged she’d played her part just right, leaving the female Zanutian ready to castrate DeSardon.

She wished she could have stayed longer at the party to watch the fun when they went at each other, but her own face had begun to itch beneath the humanoid mask, needing to breathe. Unfortunately, with the damn drive system delay, she’d be wearing her next mask for much longer. But it would be worth it, she told herself, rising to undress.

Her naked body, if you overlooked the brownish-yellow scales and six breasts, might have passed for human. And releasing the

bindings on her lower breasts, she sat down again to peel the skin-like substance from her face and neck.

Pausing for another moment, she stared fixatedly into the dressing table mirror, her large, oval-shaped eyes darkening to an intense, olive green as she thought again of DeSardon and what lay ahead. In less than one Rhunia day, he was hers and she would know in truth if his cock was large enough to satisfy her.

She'd done her duty as a princess of the Adbavalian realm—producing a litter of purebred young every six months to keep the race strong and intact. But secretly, she'd derived more sensual pleasure from humans.

Fortunately, as the crossbreeding had been amazingly successful, more than doubling the ranks of her peoples' slave workers, she was free to indulge with any human male she might desire.

And now, at last, she would have DeSardon and the incredible pleasure of milking both his seed and his unique power source. Ultimately, she would have to destroy him, her brother, the Emperor, Putranie, would demand it—but not until Tricera had had a good few of litters out of DeSardon. The female, Feyna, would go through the same intense testing, then she'd be given over to Putranie, who would try to get a child from her.

Rising, Tricera crossed to settle into bed, naked,

ready to dream her terrible dreams, her thoughts skipping back to DeSardon. It would be a joy to establish dominance over such a virile specimen.

Her blue, reptilian tongue flickered with the thought. She slipped a hand down to caress her speckled, hairless mound, pushing two scaly fingers into her wet sheath as she envisioned her prey spread out on what she liked to call her breeding bed, with his wrists and ankles shackled.

Pumped full of the Dolzuna plant's essence, DeSardon's shaft would stay erect for hours. Tricera moved her fingers, imagining how it would feel to slowly impale herself on his big, smooth cock, drawing up to take it deeper. Her split-tongue darted faster as she let her fingers match the rhythm in her head. Her body shuddering as her peak approached, leathery lids came down over her opaque eyes as her yellowish lips opened on a deep, reverberating yowl.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Stepping out of the shower, Ketrick wrapped a large, yellow towel around his waist, glancing in the mirror as he rubbed a hand over his shadow beard, wondering if he should shave again. Should he even go to the party when he knew *she'd* be there, walking around with that succulent, little body?

Prudence advised he give the bash a miss. With engineering installing the new drive unit, he had the perfect excuse. He often stayed close to keep an eye on procedures...

"Oh hell." He yanked off the towel, stalking into the bedroom to dress. He'd go to the damn party, he thought, make the polite rounds. Say a few words to his crew—fewer to Doctor Sy Tordinay—let *her* reopen the subject if she felt something needed to be said.

"Stop behaving like a dunderhead."

Ketrick froze with one leg inside a pair of clean, burgundy, fatigue pants. "Fuck."

The holograph of Beldir made a tutting sound.

Stepping into the other pant leg, Ketrick pulled them up and grabbed up the matching top. "Go talk to Feyna. She's the one who needs protection. I can take care of myself."

"I gather she turned you down?"

"Weren't you looking in your Crystal Ball or should that be Crystal Lake?"

"Yes, yes, very amusing. Why did Feyna turn you down?"

"Because she hates me and loves Sven."

"What?"

"Never mind, even if he doesn't exist, your plans to marry me off to Feyna are down the proverbial evac-tube..." He paused, studying Beldir's glowing image. "Why are you grinning?"

"Because it's clear you're smitten now. Which means you should be grateful I tinkered with your propulsion systems, buying you more time to secure Feyna's wavering feelings."

At first Ketrick's vivid eyes were questioning, then they darkened with anger. "You did what?"

"Calm yourself."

"How dare you tamper with my ship without consulting me."

Beldir continued as though the younger man hadn't spoken. "There's another reason I considered the slower speed a necessity. The Adbavalian princess is on the ship."

Confusion flickered in Ketrick's eyes. "Impossible. No one has boarded since we last spoke." He'd given strict orders.

"The Adbavalian secured a berth at your last landfall. She's been hiding out in the open, in human disguise as your comms officer...Tricera Charnos."

At the hint of danger, Ketrick snapped into military mode. He studied Beldir intently. "Are you certain about this?" He recalled that Charnos's references were excellent."

"What happened" Beldir asked, "to the communications officer Charnos replaced?"

Ketrick's gaze darkened as he recalled those events. "He died. The authorities wrote it off as a mugging that went wrong. You think it was her?"

"I'm certain of it."

Pictures of Charnos on the bridge, working competently at her station, flashed through Ketrick's mind. "Shit. How did I miss her differences? Aliens give off different vibrations." Though his gift may have made him feel like a freak at times, he'd come to rely on it more than he cared to admit.

"If you'd put time into honing your powers, as I suggested, you might have discerned Charnos's internal disparities. But the truth is, the Adbavalian does have a few talents of her own. For instance, she can compel a weaker species

with her voice and mask her thoughts for short periods when the conditions are right. She's probably been avoiding a face-to-face with you as much as possible."

Ketrick absorbed that, his eyes glinting with deadly concentration. "That explains my error of judgment. Why didn't *you* detect the enemy was aboard when we last spoke?"

The elderly man moved his arms in expansive gesture. "I slipped-up because the supernatural physics I use to project myself here limits my powers, plus I wasn't looking for her to be on your ship." He shook his head. "Never mind about that, the Adbavaliens only think they've outmaneuvered us. And obviously they're not aware yet that close proximity and sexual congress with Feyna will increase both of your powers or they wouldn't have waited so long. I imagine Charnos plans to approach and stun you, making you ready for transportation, in roughly four hours when the Adbavalian command centre is fully aligned with the ship."

A muscle started to tic in Ketrick's sculptured jaw. "Jesus, are you saying Charnos has some unknown, up-to-the-minute transporter that can penetrate my ship's shields?"

The older man's kindly face set into a cold mask. "Don't ever underestimate this enemy, Ketrick, they excel with technology. I'm sure, at

this point, the Adbavalian has lifted your DNA profiles. Plus for all we know, she may not need a visual, perhaps her equipment can lock on to your genetic substance and then when the time is right, away you and Feyna will go, landing in the Adbavalians' secured cells."

Ketrick stared speechless, visualizing Feyna being mauled by a large, lizard-like male. The image so unsettling, he began to pace the room. "Okay, if the enemy thinks they have the drop on us and were travelling slower, thanks to you, then I'll have time to isolate and deal with Charnos."

The older man shook his head vehemently. "No, absolutely not, you don't have the necessary power yet."

Ketrick shot him a piercing glance. "Using a Rad-displacer I do. Charnos will be dust before she gets a scream out."

"Don't even consider it. Things must happen as they were meant to. Putranie has obviously been aware for some time that practiced and perfected, the Zanutian power source could turn back armies. A considerable advantage when you're looking to expand an empire. Therefore, eliminating Charnos with an ordinary weapon wouldn't stop Putranie's advance toward universal domination, just compel him to act before we're ready to face him."

"And just how," Ketrick wanted to know, "are



Feyna and I supposed to avoid capture by a large chunk of Putranie's army while we make our way to this magical lake of yours?"

The older man seemed not to hear the question, cocking his head, as if listening to something beyond. "I've stayed too long. We mustn't alert the lizard princess ahead of the ceremony. I'll leave you the co-ordinates for the Adbavalian's base camp on Rhunia. Once you work out the exact time the location will align with the ship, you will preempt Charnos's strike by proto-shifting an hour early, north of her camp, to my location near Chastia's mount."

This time, Ketrick's black brows met in a solid, angry line. "Now I know you're crazy. I've seen maps of that mountain range. It's almost as large as the Old World Alps. If Feyna and I are even a touch off course, we might materialize inside a peak."

Beldir's wise blue eyes softened. "Trust in the prophesies, my boy. Things are unfolding precisely as they're meant to. The important thing at the moment is to find Feyna and augment your powers..." He hesitated, coughed. "Well...in crude terms, on this occasion, it's preferable to think with your gonads and not your head."

The sorcerer's image began to fade as the transfer coordinates for Charnos's camp and Chastia's mount popped into Ketrick's mind.

Beldir's voice drifted back, "Before you leave, look over the mental exercises you'll find in the data unit." A miniature silver cube appeared on the bedside table.

## CHAPTER SIX

**S**tanding in the spot where Tricera had left her, Feyna was having second thoughts while she glugged another glass of medicinal wine. *Had the comms officer been lying?* Feyna desperately wanted to believe it. Because while ignorance was never really bliss, it beat the hell out of knowing you were one of a pack rendered witless by the same double-dealing man. At least, she thought, she'd held DeSardon at bay when he'd waylaid her in the corridor.

She went over the scene with Tricera, considering once more her own state of heightened awareness. Perhaps she did have some psychic abilities, she mused, which needed to be explored. She brushed that aside to deal with later. At this moment, she needed to deal with the truth.

*Even if DeSardon isn't spending his time in a series of female crewmembers beds, is he going to change? No. Why? Because his interest in me has, at all times, been transitory and purely sexual. Why? Because the*

*bastard likes his life just the way it is.*

Filling with grim resolve, she took another mouthful of wine. She'd do as she'd intended all along, she told herself, vet the crew, get out and never look back.

Quickly, she mentally revised her work schedule. As planned, she'd begin interviews first thing in the morning, but from here on, she'd put in eighteen hour days instead of her usual twelve. The crew worked shifts, so timing wouldn't be a problem. Then if she waited to document her findings until she returned home, she might wrap the whole thing up in two weeks instead of four. Fired up, she glanced around at the clustered groups, looking for an escape route back to her office. If Lester or anybody else stopped her, she thought, she would plead a headache.

Starting to edge her way around the room, Feyna stopped dead with a silent curse when the sliding doors parted and DeSardon stepped through.

\* \* \* \*

While he'd taken Beldir's advice that it was best not to go poking a stick in the hole at the moment, it was impossible for Ketrick to do nothing, plus in the back of his mind, he knew if there was a chance of taking Tricera out, he'd do it and worry

about Putranie afterward. In the meantime, he'd notified Starfleet, who'd granted him an emergency leave. Additionally, he'd deployed a handpicked security team to keep a wary eye out for Charnos. His own narrow-eyed stare around the room reminiscent of a predator scanning his hunting savannah.

\* \* \* \*

All Feyna saw was how well his burgundy fatigues set off his dark coloring. And while she was itching to have it out with him, she still didn't know if Tricera had been lying, in which case, she thought, it was best to delay facing him until she was fully in control of herself again. Unfortunately, as far as she knew, other than emergency exits, the rec-center only had one doorway.

Deciding to wait him out, Feyna backed up to her original position, picking up her glass of wine on the way. Once she'd relocated DeSardon's tall figure in the crowd, she tracked his progress through the room, waiting to see if he headed toward a likely female. He surprised her, not stopping to speak to anyone, merely nodding with careless courtesy at those who greeted him. Apparently, she thought, he was putting in a quick, obligatory appearance, which meant she

wouldn't have too long to wait.

To take her mind off DeSardon, Feyna mentally reviewed a paper she'd recently read pertaining to the adverse effects of long-term, deep-space travel on certain individuals. At which point, the crowd in front of Feyna parted and DeSardon strode straight toward her.

Jerking away from the wall as if it had bitten her on the ass, Feyna swiftly schooled her expression to blandness while her overworked heart started to beat erratically, her mind racing through the possible reasons he would seek her out. The main one being that Tricera had been telling the truth. Somehow, Feyna thought, he must have found out about her conversation with Charnos and he was rightly worrying about professional repercussions. Perhaps he'd come to talk her into covering for him.

She wanted to scream as he halted in front of her that she didn't deserve what he'd done to her, what he was still doing to her. She spoke without taking her gaze from his face, "Why, good evening, Commander." *You tomcatting bastard.* "I do believe you're just in time for *cake*."

Ketrick squinted down at her. Then he leaned in a bit, pitching his voice low, "We need to talk, but not in public. My cabin's closest."

With his potent scent wafting into her lungs and a patch of that fascinating, ebony chest hair

visible through the V-neck of his fatigues, Feyna couldn't help but remember how it felt to press her lips into the warm, triangular hollow at the base of his exposed throat.

Appalled to feel her faithless hormones racing into her bloodstream, lining up to drag him off and fuck him till neither one of them could walk, she bit down hard on her lower lip, lifting her wine glass like a shield. "If it's personal, we've nothing to discuss. If you're worrying about your evaluation, I can confirm I'll be giving you my unreserved approval." It was the fastest way, she decided, to get rid of him and off this damn ship.

\* \* \* \*

Working with his talent fully open now, Ketrick could see that behind the nonchalance, the doctor was spoiling for a good fight. He'd deal with that later, he thought, at the moment, he was more concerned that a person of interest might be hidden in the crowd, watching them. "Forget the job," he told her, "it's irrelevant at the moment." His deep voice dipped lower, lips barely moving, "I need to know if you've seen my comms officer, Tricera Charnos? She's very tall...with dark hair."

\* \* \* \*

Naturally, Feyna misjudged the intense energy radiating from him as sexual. Added to that, he was speaking out of the corner of his mouth, indicating he wasn't looking for his glamorous comms officer on ship's business, which meant, Feyna decided, that Tricera had been telling the truth. Her lips thinned. "Ms. Charnos left a short time ago. I'm sure you'll know where to find her."

Still peripherally distracted, Ketrick snapped back with a laser look in his eyes. "Charnos spoke to you—" he darted another narrowed glance around the room— "how long ago? Never mind, tell me exactly what she said."

Feyna made a soft sound of disgust. "All you need to know is I won't repeat it, *at this point*. But you and I *will* be having a long talk before I leave and we're setting some strict ground rules for the remainder of my stay."

\* \* \* \*

Watching the rapid pulse ticking under the soft skin on her neck, imagining what the aliens would do to her if she were captured, Ketrick's chest tightened. "Whatever Charnos told you, Feyna, it's pure fiction. Now come on. We need some privacy to work things out." He slipped a hand under her elbow to urge her away.

Batting at his hand, Feyna gave him an



inconspicuous glare. "I'm not going anywhere with you. And don't you dare cause a scene. I've a career to think of, even if you're playing Russian roulette with yours."

With the minutes ticking, the danger increasing and aware that they needed to have sex in the next half hour or so, Ketrick was tempted to haul her delicious ass out of there without explanation. Instead, he used the last of his patience to try and seduce her back to his cabin. "Listen, Feyna, if I seem reckless, it's because you mean more to me than I can tell you." He recognized the truth, admitting again, that in a strange way, he was pleased by this new turn of events, which would force them to work together. And he realized that if it came to it, he *would* give up his life for her.

He leaned closer, his voice a velvety murmur. "It's understandable because of the way I've left things hanging between us that you're all but incapable of trusting me." Seeing curiosity in her eyes, he pressed his advantage. "I also know that beneath it all you still want me as much as I want you." Reminding himself of the shortness of time, he sped up, "So, I was thinking, until we can sort things, why don't you just use me again like a pleasuredroid."

He watched her eyes flare before they narrowed to amber slits, the air nearly vibrating from the force of her fury. "If you don't move away from

me *right now*, you testosterone hyped pig, I'll have you charged and proto-shifted off this ship so fast your plasma won't settle for days." Her rosy lips twisted into a sneer. "See how tough you hang when you're in sole command of the *SS Brig*."

Looking pleased with that, she nodded sharply, starting to shoulder him aside, whooshing out a stunned breath when he bent to scoop her off her feet. "For God's sake, what're doing—" Flinging an arm around his wide neck, she stared helplessly at the sea of heads, ducking hers to whisper frantically, "Have you taken complete leave of your senses? We'll both be ruined. Put me down at once."

Ignoring her words, Ketrick locked her soft curves solidly against him and strode swiftly toward the exit.

\* \* \* \*

Had she not been so busy being personally and professionally mortified, Feyna might have registered that he was acting out one of her secret fantasies, his body heat infused with untamed animal as he carried her effortlessly through the large crowd, murmuring to the surprised partiers they passed, "There's nothing to worry about. The doctor's suffering from a little space sickness. Go on with the celebration. I'll see her safely to her

quarters.”

Once they were out in the corridor, the embarrassment faded from Feyna’s face. “Look, Ketrick, I’m trying to deal with this as calmly as I can. If you put me down right now, I’ll go along with the space sickness bit and not press charges. Surely, you must know I wouldn’t have sex with you again even if you were the last man alive in the known universe, not even if my life depended upon it.”

\* \* \* \*

Ketrick threw her a long-suffering look. “Park your tongue for a moment and deal with this, sweetheart, *both* our lives may depend on it.”

Her burnished brows shot upward. “What the hell’s that suppose to mean.”

His irritated gaze slid sideways. “You had your chance. There’s no time now for the questions that might ensue. We need to have sex as soon as possible...I’m not sure he won’t be watching.”

Feyna blinked slowly and stared. “Watching? Who?” Her jaw slackened. “What, like a...a voyeur?”

With part of his mind working on the timing and mechanics of transferring down to Rhunia, plus briefing his deputy to take temporary command of The Stalker while it completed its

present mission, Ketrick tutted distractedly. "Not here, damn it, from afar."

\* \* \* \*

"Afar?" Her eyes grew wider still. She studied the set lines of his chiseled profile. *Ohmigod! Is it possible he's been delusional from the beginning and somehow, because of my obsession with him, I missed it?* It would explain a great deal, she thought, like his out of control sex drive. She turned her head in alarm when the cabin door swished closed behind them.

Obviously feeling the waves of apprehension rippling through her body, Ketrick tried to reassure her. "Relax, sweetheart, I'm not the one you need to fear. I'll never harm you. Just go along with me on this and then you'll understand."

Feyna wasn't the least bit mollified. Psychotics regularly blamed outside forces for their actions.

Having carried her through his office to the bedroom, Ketrick dumped her on the bed. "Stay put." He sat in a chair to take off his boots.

Feyna did as she was told, listening to her rapid breathing, while she worked out her next move, backpedaling to some extent. Surely, she reasoned, if he were unstable, it would have been detected long ago in one of his annual reviews.

But then again, as clever as Ketrick was, he

might have worked out ways to conceal his peculiarities. She'd been fooled on all fronts. Whatever the truth, obviously she was safer away from him at present. And she wasn't as helpless as he presumed. She never went anywhere without the tiny, twin blades of razor-sharp steel sheathed in her boots.

Staying absolutely still, she waited until he stood again to remove his clothes, then gradually, she slid her hands down her sides until she reached the sheathes holding the matching blades. Keeping her expression as immobile as possible, she inched them slowly upward. All the time her treacherous eyes, with a will of their own, took in views of supple bronzed skin, whorls of crisp chest hair and that fluffy inch that grooved his hard belly. When Ketrick bent his head to shuck off his fatigues, Feyna was off the bed like a typhoon-missile.

Three beats and he was after her, kicking free of his pants to run naked.

Not daring to look back, Feyna sprinted full pelt for the exit, her long legs leaping over low objects as she knocked chairs aside into his path. Once outside in the corridor, she could call for help—with two hundred and fifty personnel aboard, someone must be around. Reaching the doorway with her breath coming out in loud, frenzied wheezes, Feyna punched wildly at the

open-door plate, watching the metal panel fly open, vibrate from the thud of Ketrick's fist smashing the close-plate and then slam shut in her face.

"Stay back," she screeched, springing sideways before he could grasp her. She stooped into battle stance with the wall at her back. "Don't make me use these, I'm expert." She wielded the thin blades threateningly at the vast expanse of solid, naked muscle.

\* \* \* \*

Ketrick's breath was coming out as fast as hers. He said nothing, watching the whites in her darting eyes. As much as her antagonism was exasperating, the primitive challenge she presented at that moment was unbelievably arousing.

\* \* \* \*

Feeling the waves of danger and sexual heat rolling off him, Feyna couldn't keep her gaze off his exposed crotch. God help her, she thought, even though she knew he might be the king of fruitcake land, her body was still lusting after him. How bizarre was that? Through sheer grit, she brandished her blades again, "Please, I don't want

to hurt you. I just want to leave.”

His gaze glittered predatorily, locking with hers. “Not possible.” He feigned left and lunged.

She slashed out blindly, watching a red line blossom.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Lying flat on Ketrick's bed, Feyna surreptitiously moved her magtron-cuffed wrists back and forth, seeing how much play he'd left in the ligature beam that tethered her to the wall behind the bed. You are not to enjoy this, she warned herself. The man may be unbalanced.

She glanced back at him. He'd stemmed the bleeding in his upper arm and was digging around in the first-aid-kit for a healing plaster. Despite the stabbing, he'd restrained her without hurting her. She studied him carefully. He didn't look deranged, just deliciously naked—all hard, corded muscles and supple hair-roughened skin.

She could see between his long, hard thighs that his shaft had softened, curving down over his large balls. When she first knew him, she hadn't known that women licked and sucked men's testicles, not that any man since had motivated her in that direction. But at present, lying here on the sheets that held the rich, man scent of Ketrick, she



would willingly lick and suck his balls, all over – She broke off when her pussy started to pulse helplessly with anticipation. *Damn it, woman, get your mind out of the gutter and find out what's going on with him.* “You forced me to act,” she called out. “D-did the cut go very deep?”

Turning his head, Ketrick's turquoise eyes met hers with riveting intensity. “It won't stop me from fucking you, if that's what you mean.”

She swallowed twice, wondering if, because her sex life had been so erratic over the past years her reproductive system had in some way gone off kilter, sending her ovaries into hormonal chaos. It was the only thing to explain why a proud, rational woman who had come to actively dislike a particular man would be waiting in a state of quivering arousal for said man's penis to swell to its fullest length so he could use it on her...over and over...in any way he wanted.

*Jeez!* She tried again to summon some logic, as if it might bring her body to its senses. She dodged around the scary bit concerning another entity controlling him, asking instead, “Would you at least tell me why you're risking a brilliant career to play sex games when I know you couldn't be less interested in me personally?” In case he thought that was a bid for a compliment, she added quickly, “If you're addicted, there are several excellent clinics I can recommend, and it

doesn't need to go on record."

Ketrick didn't look up this time, muttering as he stuck the seal down on the invisible bandage. "Save the shrink speak. Lie back and enjoy your captive fantasy."

Feyna stilled because he was spot on. She snorted to throw him off track. "Captive fantasy, that's some rationale for rape. I'll make you pay the consequences, you know." The sardonic look he shot her said she was lying through her teeth, but he admired her moxie.

"If it'll make you feel better you can scream."

"Oh right, like the cabins aren't soundproof."

He quirked a wry eyebrow.

So there it was, she thought. There was nothing she could do to stop him. But then, as he rose to move toward her, stopping at the side of the bed to stare down at her, pride whispered, *Your legs are free, there's nothing to stop you kicking out at him.* Her faithless limbs just lay there. Worse, when his hot gaze raked over her and his breathing picked up, she had to fight to keep her legs from splaying open in a wide, welcoming V. "I hate you," she said lamely.

"Unfortunately," he conceded in a husky whisper, "every fresh sight of you threatens to drive me crazy. Whatever Charnos told you, Feyna, it's complete crap."

*Every fresh sight...* She desperately wanted to

believe him, even as she warned herself that it was lust talking. In the next instant, she gasped in shock when he used one of her own blades to slice her uniform and, her cream lace undies in two. "My God, why didn't you warn me?"

"Relax, I only plan to give you pleasure." He looked down, letting his gaze roam over her nakedness as he inhaled her sensual scent. And even though he must have seen how sticky her copper thatch was, he asked, as if he needed her to admit how she felt about him, "Do you get as wet for him?"

Her brow creased. "Him?"

"Never mind." He knelt on the bed, giving her a mouthwatering view of his awesome torso and iron-hard thighs.

Her body hummed in anticipation as she imagined his strong hands sliding along her thighs, perhaps his mouth... Her gaze dropped when he stroked his cock and fondled his heavy balls, moving his thumb over the glistening head of his shaft.

"D'you like what you see?"

She swallowed saliva, her pussy upping its hungry throb. "You may say you're going to give me pleasure—" her voice was breathless— "but I'm still saying no to all of this."

He smiled. "Of course you are, but let's discuss your pleasure anyway. Where would you like me

to begin—with these?”

Gently, he ran his forefinger downward, between her quivering breasts, making the muscles in her belly contract. Moving up again, he circled one of her long, coral nipples. It went diamond hard, turning a deep shade of crimson.

“Mmm-hmm, just begging to be sucked.”

Feyna turned her head to the side, to hide her expression.

“Hmm, and these sexy hips.”

He moved his hands to smooth over the curve of them while Feyna fought desperately not to make a sound. His hands slid inward along the gentle swell of her belly.

“Ah, but here’s where you’re loveliest.”

He traced a finger through her sticky curls, noting the extra wetness seeping onto her thighs.

“Look at me.”

She started at his sharp tone, turning her head to look into his gleaming turquoise eyes.

“Watch what I do to you.”

Obediently, she looked down, watching him trace a forefinger over her swollen feminine lips, fighting not to tilt her hips as he separated her delicate flesh with the lightest of touches, his finger dipping deeper to massage her glistening, pearly bud, making it buzz. She caved then, a moan escaping through a ragged breath.

He went deeper still, gliding along her welling

delta, lifting his finger to his mouth to enjoy the rich, sexual taste of her. "Umm, so sweet and creamy, so ready for me."

"My body," she said weakly, "not my mind."

He stared for a moment. "Let's hope you're wrong there."

She frowned at the cryptic remark while he moved more purposely between her legs. Grasping her shapely calves to push her limbs apart, he took the time to admire the center of her body again before he bent to blow across her juicy, pulsing flesh.

Oh God, she thought, how she wished for his tongue...ahh, just where he'd put it, pressing hard on her clit, which he circled and then kissed. Feyna bit her lip to keep her own tongue from darting out in response to what he was doing.

With firm strokes, he licked her crimson slit up and down, then he rolled that clever tongue into a strong point and pushed inside her, every silken thrust flooding her pussy with fresh moisture, making her scent grow stronger.

"God, you taste incredible." He changed direction, slipping down to the puckered rosette of her anus.

She realized she was panting and tried to stop.

His head came up so her dazed eyes were even with his. "You've never stopped wanting me, have you?"

"Think what you like."

"Why can't you admit that you've dreamed of me taking you like this, having you at my mercy?"

"Have not," she foolishly persisted.

"No, then how about like this?"

In a flashing instant, he released the magtron-cuffs and flipped her over onto her stomach, her startled cry muffled as she was pressed face down onto the white sheets. Resetting the manacle controls, Ketrick straddled her from behind. A moment of silence followed as he enjoyed the sight of her lush, up-thrust buttocks.

"I forgot to mention your beautiful ass, didn't I?" He smoothed his warm calloused hands over the sumptuous curves. "So beautifully rounded and fuckable. I've always wondered how those pretty cheeks would look shaded crimson."

The air seemed to thicken and crackle as Feyna held her breath. Had he guessed all her darkest fantasies? Though he'd given her bottom a couple of love pats in the past, she'd never had the courage to ask for more, in case she repulsed him. She tried to look back at him, to see his expression, but her hair fell over her face, blocking her vision.

"What do you think?" he continued softly. "Do you deserve a good spanking for stabbing me?"

She trembled all over, imagining the feel of his hand coming down hard on her bottom, the stinging pleasure of it. The heady thought

banished the last of her pride, admitting with relief that she might as well enjoy the rest of it. "If you think I deserve a spanking," she whispered, feeling fresh fluids seeping down her spread thighs.

"Master."

She went utterly still, feeling the hot puff of his quickened breath close to her ear.

"From now on, I'm your master and you'll address me as such. You're a bad girl who needs chastisement and you're not to come until I tell you. Do you understand?"

God, whatever was going on with him, she loved it. "Y-yes, Master. I won't come until you say so."

"Very good. Self-control and obedience, stick with it." The muscles in his broad back bunched as he leaned down to slip two small tit-clamps out of his bureau.

Feyna gasped in surprise when the tiny teeth bit onto her nipple.

"You always did enjoy the nip from these. Cry out if you like, no one will hear."

She felt the rasp of his chest hair against her back as he twisted the clamps. She whimpered.

"That's the way, let it out."

Now his unbound hair brushed against her skin, his clean sweat surrounding her as he bent to gently bite her on the shoulder. Twiddling the

clamps, he moved to ravish the sensitive area on the side of her throat, the level of painful pleasure upping as he removed and refastened the clamps.

When she felt the weight of his thick erection brushing the back of her thigh and then the huge, crown pressing against her swollen petals, her heartbeat upped to a thunderous pace. She tried to press against him.

"Uh-uh." He moved away from her, reaching for a pillow to slide it under her stomach.

Feyna gave a yelping cry when a sharp swat landed on her backside.

He smiled with male satisfaction, watching her quivering ass as he swatted her again.

Never imagining the pleasure would be this intense, Feyna's mouth parted with short, little pants, swept into a series of shuddering spasms.

Despite the need flaming along the length of his shaft, Ketrick took the time to blow on her pinkened backside.

She felt his hair-roughened legs sliding against the insides of hers, nudging them further apart. Two strong fingers delved into her drenched pussy, her grateful moaning rising to a high-pitched cry when he skillfully found and stroked her G-spot.

"You're not to come," he said sharply.

Feyna squeezed her eyes closed, her shackled hands clenching as she arched her spine to give



him better access, battling not to plead with him to ram himself in and fuck her senseless.

Using his finger, he drew juices from her pussy up between her ass cheeks, circling his thumb around the pink rosette of her anus, blowing on it before he repeated the erotic action, keeping her on tenterhooks, wondering if he was going to thrust a finger into her butt.

Her control broke. "Oh God, oh God, anyway you want, but please do it."

Smiling darkly, he gripped her hips. "Are you sure, absolutely sure?"

"Yes, damn you, yes." His fingers dug into her soft skin. She felt the tip of his organ brush against her pussy before he thrust firmly into her wetness. She made a guttural sound as he stretched her, giving just what she wanted. Hearing him taking measured breaths, she understood he was using superhuman restraint to keep from coming.

"To do this right," he managed, "I think we should try and peak together."

Not sure what he meant, wanting to come, not talk, Feyna moved her hips back into his rhythm, the tight rounds of his butt flexing as he pulled his cream coated cock out almost to the tip to plunge again, making her shudder with ecstasy.

This time he pulled out completely and took a gentle bite of her ass. As the moment stretched, Feyna's eyes darted backward in anticipation. Was

he oiling himself?

During their time together, she'd come to enjoy anal sex, but never with anyone else. The one other man she'd allowed to take her that way had just discomfited her. At present, as a warm dollop of lube landed on her puckered anus, a shuddering thrill raced up her spine.

Feeling him spreading the lubricant in slow tantalizing circles, Feyna craned her neck again, managing to see through her strands of hair that he was studying her greased rosette with dark concentration, as if he were imagining how good her tight passageway would feel.

He caught her gaze. "You've been dreaming of being a naughty girl, haven't you?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

"Yes, master or sir."

"Yes, Master." She gasped as he pushed a coated finger into her waiting anus, arching as a female-dog would.

Ketrick delved deeper before he withdrew his finger, using his knees to spread hers again, positioning his pulsating prick. "And here it goes." He pressed gently at first, a centimeter at a time.

"Aaah." Her body fought the invasion.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No, Master."

"That's good because this is the right way for a

thoroughly, dirty girl to be taken, isn't that right?"

"Yes...sir." Her forehead dropped to the cool sheets.

He pressed firmer and firmer.

"Oh God."

He pushed passed her ring of muscles, surged inside with a deep groan of satisfaction. "Does it hurt?"

"Aaah, yes, sir, it burns."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No, not unless you want to, Master." Because it brought indescribable pleasure, she wondered again why it should feel so wrong with the other guy and so great with Ketrick who, putting a hand between her legs to test her pussy, found her dripping and forced her to take a bit more. She hissed through her teeth.

"Take it," he rasped against her ear. "Move upward. Feel the power of your master's cock" He pumped her slowly, keeping a steady rhythm.

She loved it, reveling in the ruthless manhandling. She felt powerless yet amazingly strong, taking him as completely as he did her.

He started to go faster, his harsh breath sweeping her sweat-streaked skin.

She sensed again that he was using superhuman control to keep his orgasm at bay. The heavy stab of his cock was so far in she felt the brush of his pubic hair as well as the thump of his

balls against the sides of her burning backside. She was astonished that she seemed to be discerning some of his thoughts along with her own.

*Perhaps it was meant to be. I've never felt so primitive with any other woman.*

In her mind, Feyna glimpsed a dazzling white doorway, but close to going over, she brushed the distraction aside. In this moment, he belonged to her totally, the damp, sweaty strength of him and the wildness as he gave vent to the full brunt of feral need.

When the glory broke over them in the same stunning moment, she shuddered violently. "Yes, yes, yes."

Ketrick threw back his dark head with a wild resounding roar.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Feyna opened her heavy eyelids slowly and looked down at the top of Ketrick's dark head. She could feel his warm breath puffing against her shoulder, his face buried there. At some point, her arms had been freed and presently rested loosely on the muscled slabs of his long back. The mind-blowing sex had left her with an amazing sense of completeness and Ketrick's raw acts of possession fulfilled all her dark fantasies. She sighed. *Where do we go from here?*

"I suppose I tell you who you really are."

The suddenness of the announcement made her jump, her sex befuddled brain blanking. "What?"

Ketrick lifted his head, his eyes looking as surprised as hers. "I read your thoughts."

She studied him, her stomach sinking as she surmised that he was harking back to the constellation thing because he didn't want to talk about *them*. Her hands slid off his back. She shifted away. "I thought I was supposed to be the

undiscovered psychic?"

His gaze hadn't wavered from her face. "You are. We both have the gift."

She stared in watchful hesitation. "Wait a minute. Are you trying to say that you read my thoughts exactly just now?"

He nodded, still studying her expression closely.

Her mind raced back over what she'd been thinking regarding him fulfilling her fantasies. She sat more upright, pulling the sheet around her. "That's a little unnerving. Why haven't you mentioned it before?"

"I tried, you wouldn't listen."

She waved that away. "You know what I mean. Why didn't you mention it *before*, when we first met?"

He glanced away and huffed out a breath. "Because it's not the sort of thing you tell a woman upfront. And five years ago my abilities weren't that strong. Plus, the way it works is not usually a word-for-word kind of thing, mainly I just get the gist of people's thoughts and only if I concentrate."

Well, now Feyna had her answer regarding the flashes of intuitive she noted that didn't quite gel with the rest of him.

"If it makes you feel any better," he continued, "you've been impossible to read. This is the first

time I've received your thoughts verbatim, so to speak. Added to that, I'm not sure if this being inside each other's head is for the moment or permanent."

Further pinpoints of confusion appeared in her eyes. "Inside each other's head?"

"I'll get to that."

Feyna thought back to her feeling of heightened awareness when she'd spoken with Tricera, which reminded her that she still didn't know if the comms officer had been telling the truth. "I think you'd better start at the beginning and don't leave anything out."

"Yeah." Absently, he rubbed a hand over his stubbled jaw, seemingly organizing his thoughts. "Let me get a drink first."

Left hanging with questions lining up to take a number, Feyna watched him move off the bed, distractedly following the curve of his magnificent butt as he moved away from her and on his return, she appreciatively studied his heavily, bobbing penis.

\* \* \* \*

"It's very strong," he cautioned, handing her a glass of his special brandy.

Feyna held it in both hands and took a delicate sip.

Ketrick sat in the chair opposite, studying her expectant face. With the rumpled sheet tucked around her naked breasts, her rich cloud of red hair pouring carelessly down her shoulders, he thought she looked enchanting. It struck him with some shock how bad he had it for her now.

He'd deal with that later. Presently, she had to know what she was facing. However much he might want to downplay and shield her from the looming danger, that was impossible. And though this was the perfect time to tell her that their mutual orgasms were somehow capable of strengthening their powers, Ketrick for reasons he couldn't explain, decided to put that on hold for the moment.

"I'm not sure of the best way to approach this."

"Whatever it is, just come straight out with it, the suspense is killing me."

He nodded. "Okay, straight out then. The abilities we've inherited have put us both in serious danger, which means in the next few hours we'll be transferring down to the rim planet, Rhunia, to be married by way of an ancient Zanutian ceremony." For a second, even the room seemed to be holding its breath.

"Married...where?"

*Well hey, I hadn't expected tears of joy, but she doesn't have to look horror-struck.* "It's one of the steps," he explained, "that we need to take to save



ourselves from the beings hunting us.”

“I’m confus— Hunting us?” She stared at him as if he’d just grown another nose in the center of his forehead. “What are you talking about? Who’s hunting us?”

“The Adbavalian emperor, Putranie, and his sister, otherwise known as Tricera Charnos. They plan to capture and mate with us in expectation that our psychic gifts will be passed on to offspring.”

Because the color had faded from her face and her eyes looked as if she’d been snapped out of a trance, Ketrick didn’t go on to mention the other detail—the nasty habit the Adbavaliens had of using the inhabitants of the planets they conquered for food as well as slave labor.

“The story gets crazier,” he told her,” and it’ll go quicker if you listen to everything before you ask any more questions. But first—” because he knew she didn’t consider him worthy of her trust any longer and he needed her to have confidence in him, he wanted to clarify— “in case you’re wondering, I have not, at any time, been intimate with any of my crewmembers. That was a clever ploy by Charnos to set us against each other.”

While the thoughts whizzed through Feyna’s head, Ketrick attempted to latch on to them, to see what she might be feeling at present. He got nothing that was clear this time, deciding the

earlier reading was probably a fluke. Perhaps the real mental melding Beldir had talked about would only come into effect when Feyna and he faced the enemy.

With that sobering thought, he took another swig of brandy and started his story. "I came into my abilities at puberty while your talent, as I mentioned, lags somewhat behind." From there, he went through Beldir's past and recent visits, detailing what he'd been told concerning their Zanutian history—how they'd sprung from the two ruling families, inheriting their supernatural powers. By the time he'd explained the actions they needed take to offset the Adbavalian threat, Feyna's incredulous gaze had sharpened to a knife's edge.

\* \* \* \*

Because the story was as farfetched as he'd promised, it was difficult for Feyna not to revert to her original take that he was paranoid, but not dangerously so. But gradually, on some profound level, she recognized that she was hearing the truth. Dismally, she reflected that she'd been right about him, even if a cosmic force had deemed they were destined to be together, it wasn't enough to make him sacrifice his freedom, his knee-jerk reaction had been to separate from her as swiftly

as possible. Only when the unthinkable threatened would he consider marrying her.

She took a wild shot at trying to read what was going on in his mind at present, but getting nothing, she shelved it along with the threatening danger. Because what had hit her hardest was discovering the family she'd believed to be her own all these years were strangers. "So if I have it correct," she said quietly, "since we were toddlers at the time of the Adbavalian invasion, our blood parents, to save us from harm, had us shipped off to separate backwater worlds to be anonymously fostered."

He nodded. "That's about it."

While Feyna ruminated on that for a moment, she quickly recalled that she'd felt more than a sense of heightened awareness while she was speaking to Charnos. There'd been something darker in the air, as though she was picking up emanations of menace. It hadn't registered fully at the time because she'd been too shocked by what Charnos was telling her. At the moment, she had to wonder how many other tip-offs she may have gotten over the years and not recognized. "What happened to our true families?"

Ketrick glanced at the wall for a second, then looked back at her through eyes clouded with empathy. "According to Beldir they were executed the moment the Adbavilians discovered we'd

been spirited away."

Feyna waited until she was sure she could speak. "What I don't understand is how, if the Zanutians were so all powerful, did the Adbavalians manage to gain the upper hand?"

"Yeah, that was my first question. It seems our ancestors were betrayed by one of their own, a younger son, who lacking a strong talent, crept away to try his luck with the enemy. The bastard coordinated the invasion, secretly drugging our forebears' food. Fortunately or perhaps significantly—" he moved a hand in a speculative gesture— "our blood parents were called away unexpectedly at the time, taking us with them. But once the majority of Zanutian children were captured and confined somewhere off planet, the adults dared not use their power. As I understand it, they lived simply in the old ways, so there'd never been a need for an army. It was easy for the Adbavalians with their advanced technology to capture and make slaves of virtually all of the ordinary Rhunian people. Those who fled to the windswept eastern side of the planet still live like nomads in underground caverns. And that's pretty much all I know."

Calling on her training again, Feyna deferred compassion to play devil's advocate. "Well, the invasion is on record, so I have to believe that most of story's true. But the part about you and I

being the *golden couple* may well be wishful thinking on the part of this Beldir person."

"Yeah, I considered that, but as Beldir himself pointed out, it hardly matters since Charnos and her brother accept it as the truth. My security squad hasn't been able to locate her and there're no plasma trails indicating her transfer off the ship..."

"...she's in hiding, waiting to transfer *us* off the ship," Feyna finished for him with a common-sense approach to something that would give most women the screaming meemies.

He continued to explain, "Plus Charnos seemingly has equipment that can breach the ship's shields."

Even as a tiny shudder went through Feyna, she drew a calming breath. She wouldn't let herself think about being captured or what might happen afterward. "Okay, you said the Adbavalians had no knowledge of this Crystal Lake on Rhunia. Tell me more pertaining to its supposed power source."

Again Ketrick explained what he knew.

"My God, telekinetic energy channeled by some mystic power to a force strong enough to kill. I've never heard of such a thing." She studied him. "You must have read up on the subject, do you think it's possible?"

Again Ketrick's gaze reflected his appreciation

for her matter-of-fact approach. "While I haven't come across anything to indicate it's feasible," he supplied, "we'd best hope that it's true or else we might be running for the rest of our lives."

She shivered again, but the apprehension was tempered by the knowledge that she'd have his strength beside her. They'd be working as a team. "All right, so if we do this thing, transfer down to Chastia's mount, get married in the old way, etcetera. What does Beldir expect us to do if, and when, the Adbavalian threat is resolved?" What will you want to do, was the silent undertone.

If Ketrick heard her, he didn't show it. "Well, as Beldir will have fundamentally gotten what he wanted, we can separate if we wish. Though I'm sure he has hopes we'll settle on Rhunia and breed him up a fresh batch of wizards."

Blocking her reaction to that, Feyna overlooked the fact that Ketrick's ambivalent reply might have been a test of *her* true feelings. "So basically," she said, "we go back to doing what we were doing before this happened."

"I suppose so."

With that, Feyna discounted his earlier dialogue as sex driven. Sadly, it seemed, lust *was* the limit of what he was able to feel for her. With which she made it clear, "In case you're worrying, I'm not planning to try and trap you into a permanent relationship. *If* we live to tell the tale, we'll

separate immediately afterward. I want more from a man than you can give.”

\* \* \* \*

Lying in breathless silence behind the air vent grill above them, Tricera slithered backward along the long, linking tube, feeling as though she'd tumbled into unexpected clover. Not only had she spotted the security squad before they'd caught sight of her, but now there was no need to transport her prey through the ship's shields, which required precise timing and further risk to herself, as they'd be on the alert. She could leave when it was safe, using her hand-held transporter and wait for the Zanutians to show up on Rhunia.

She laughed at how easy it was going to be—how much better for her than she'd imagined. Once she entered the Crystal Lake in place of the Zanutians, she would emerge with intoxicating power, destroying her ineffective brother to assume her rightful place as supreme, matriarchal leader.

Unlike Ketrick and Feyna, she didn't doubt for one moment that the power source was real. On the other hand, she didn't believe for one moment that they needed to be married and recite gibberish to access the force or that they were true wizards. The old man had fabricated it all. As

they'd rightly guessed, he was hoping they'd settle on Rhunia and create his daydream dynasty. Instead, she thought with a satisfied smile, DeSardon would be the star attraction in the harem she'd set up. And with Putranie gone, she would maintain her Zanutian toy for as long as he amused her.



## CHAPTER NINE

Sometime later, Tricera was concealed behind a large bolder encircled by her company of personal guards. Although she'd arrived early at Chastia's mount and gotten the lay of the land, she still had no idea of the whereabouts of the Crystal Lake. Her reptilian eyes glowed red in the pale light of Rhunia's twin moons as she watched the three, Zanutian humans approach along the narrow forest path, Feyna and Ketrick walking a few meters behind Beldir.

The fact that none of them had sensed any danger as yet supported the theory that the genuine power source did indeed reside in the lake and whatever talent these three owned was damned weak. Out of the blue, it occurred to Tricera that perhaps the reason the Zanutians hadn't used magic against her people during the invasion wasn't linked solely to the capture of their children. More likely, the power they garnered from the Crystal Lake needed to be

recharged at regular intervals and the Zanutians hadn't been able to slip past the prevalent Adbavalian patrols to visit the lake.

It made perfect sense, she thought, and it made her green blood boil to think her ancestors had been duped for so many years. Not to mention the time *she'd* wasted tracking down DeSardon and Sy Tordinay merely to discover they were probably no more talented than herself.

Her yellowish lips tightened with determination. She vowed that once she learned the location of the lake and she'd extracted the sacred ciphers—just in case they were needed—she'd make that self-claimed sorcerer, Beldir, pay dearly for his deceptions and the damned inconvenience of having to sacrifice her ten best troops—all onlookers had to go if she was to preserve the secret.

Looking off into middle space for a moment, Tricera let herself imagine how it would feel to be filled with the sort of colossal power that would allow her to strike them all down with a sweep of her arm. She could have an orgasm just thinking about it.

She snapped back to the present when she felt the ripple of anticipation running through her unknowing troops. At last, her prey was entering the small clearing ahead of her. Throwing up a forestalling hand to control her men, Tricera

warned in a penetrating whisper, "Wait for my command. They're all to be taken alive. Nobody fires their weapon, unless I order it."

Conscious of her wrath, Charnos's hulking guard's moved their thorny-scaled heads from side to side, exchanging uneasy looks as they braced themselves for the charge.

\* \* \* \*

It was Feyna who turned first at the sound of heavy, thundering feet. The air illuminated by light-sticks as huge, dark forms rushed up to surround the trio of humans. With lightening reflexes, Ketrick snapped his laser free, springing to shield Feyna and shove her behind him.

"God," she gasped at the sight of the Adbavaliens in their natural reptilian form. "How did they track us so soon?"

"They were waiting for us," Ketrick muttered, livid that his sharp-edged senses had failed him yet again. Plus, the tiny weapon in his hand was good only at short range. Darting a glowering look at Beldir, for not allowing him to bring a Rad-displacer, Ketrick heard the older man transmit silently as they'd been practicing.

*No, dear boy I'm neither crazy, nor leading you into a deathtrap.*

Advancing swiftly with her vaporizer-rifle

drawn, Tricera halted in front of the Zanutian couple, her brownish, reptilian features reflecting her elation as she assumed an imperious pose, speaking without the voice adaptor in her own inharmonious accent, "Throw down that puny weapon, DeSardon, and step away from the woman."

Ketrick ignored her, tightening his grip on Feyna.

She whispered, "Please, Ketrick, don't risk yourself for me." She desperately wanted to be able to stand back-to-back with him. Wondering again why Beldir had forbidden them to bring viable weapons. Her boot knives were worthless in this situation.

"Madam Charnos," Beldir spoke up, "despite what your species has done to mine, I cannot in good conscience, allow this go further without giving you and your troops the right to leave this planet in peace. You have no idea what you're dealing with right now."

One of Tricera's moveable eyelids flicked briefly in Beldir's direction. "Shut it, old man. In case you've forgotten what *you're* dealing with, I own this planet and everyone on it." She looked back to Ketrick. "If you don't step away from her *now*, she dies."

*Do as she says*, Beldir hurriedly put in. *The Adbavalian doesn't intend to kill Feyna unless you*

*leave her no choice.*

Feyna wasn't party to the soundless communication between the men. Though she'd tried to practice the mental exercises while they traveled, as yet she couldn't hear any of their unspoken words.

Ketrick, seething with fury, flung down his weapon. His hands balling into fists, he watched one of the fearsome guards come forward to cuff Feyna's slender wrists. She stood straight and still, showing no fear as she bravely faced whatever grisly end Charnos had in store for her.

It suffused Ketrick with feelings he hadn't thought he was capable of. When another guard moved forward to slip a black slave collar with a chain attached around Feyna's slim neck, Ketrick couldn't bear it, his mindless, forward movement forestalled by the barrel of a vaporizer pressed tight against the back of his neck. Feeling desperate for the first time in his life Ketrick shouted at Tricera, "Feyna doesn't have any power. It's me you want. Let her go and I'll do whatever you say."

Charos laughed mirthlessly, displaying her elongated eye-teeth. "But of course you will, my pet, and often." She signaled to a guard who came forward to cuff Ketrick's hands and snap a collar around his corded throat.

Tricera taunted Ketrick. "I can't imagine how

you ever acquired a reputation as a strategist, transporting down to a foreign stretch of land without decent weapons or backup." She stepped closer, pushing her weapon against Ketrick's hard belly, watching his fine nostrils flare. "Ah, but then, your race has ever been overconfident, you males all but childlike in your inability to restrain yourselves. How does it feel to have become a class of male chattel, mine to do with as I please?"

The fury of the warrior blazed up in the Ketrick's eyes.

Tricera's blue forked tongue darted in and out, her moveable eyelids lowering over her feverish gaze. "You can't imagine," she snarled, "how much I'm going to enjoy using you in my harem."

At the same time, Beldir, now wearing his own slave collar, again advised, "Please, Madam Charnos, leave the planet peaceable while you still have the chance. As it was written, so shall it be."

Evidently viewing the elderly man's words as the grandstanding nonsense that had duped her ancestors, Tricera lifted her weapon as if to strike him, hesitating when she seemingly recalled that she still needed him. "Enough of your toothless threats," she snapped. "Once you've shown me the location of the lake, if you beg, I'll spare you and the female."

Watching the exchange closely, Ketrick didn't need his talent to know Tricera was lying. As if a

veil had been lifted, he was able, all at once, to read her thoughts. He looked questioningly at Beldir, who nodded imperceptibly.

*I've lifted the minor obstruction spell I cast. It was necessary to misinform you and Feyna for a while to fool the Adbavalian.*

\* \* \* \*

Even as Beldir spoke, Feyna's head started to spin as if she'd drunk too much wine. Then everything stilled and looked clearer, the surrounding sounds and smells sharper, the low murmur of Beldir's voice inside her head jolting her.

Before she could comment, Ketrick, naturally keen for action, demanded of Beldir, *Okay the blinders are off, what's your plan?*

*First we lead her to the caves,* Beldir replied, *while you two concentrate on that fixed-flaring technique we discussed. After that, we'll do what's required.*

"Well, what's it to be?" Tricera snapped. "We've wasted enough time."

"All right," Beldir replied. "But you promise you'll let Feyna go free."

Feyna almost objected before she realized it was part of the deception. Then she let her mind empty for a moment trying to focus on the mental exercises Beldir had explained.

While Tricera, with her anticipation obviously

building rapidly, growled impatiently, "Yeah, yeah. Now move it." And when the group started off at a normal pace, Tricera signaled to her troop leader, who quickly moved everyone into a forced run.

*Feyna, if you can hear me, whatever happens, I want you to know that I love you and I'll regret into infinity, any pain I caused you and the time we might have spent together.*

The unexpected declaration whispered inside her head, took Feyna utterly by surprise. *I can hear you*, she quickly communicated back to Ketrick, hot tears springing to her eyes. *Whatever I said to the contrary, you've always been the one, Ketrick, no one else came close.* If she was going to die, she might as well be truthful.

*I apologize for eavesdropping*, Beldir cut in, *but all that will have to wait. You must concentrate now on blending power, balancing each other before you unleash.*

Alert again to the surrounds, Feyna saw they were entering a large cavern.

Tricera brushed past Beldir as she shouted to her troops, "Bring all the light-sticks and spread out." Charnos strode purposely ahead along the perimeter, her keen gaze running over every split and fissure, stopping now and again to examine larger crevices.

Ketrick quickly asked Beldir, *What now? How do*



*we to make it to the lake ahead of them without getting killed? Can you tinker with the guards' minds?*

*The Crystal Lake exists, Beldir transmitted, but it has no power.*

When Ketrick and Feyna turned equally incredulous expressions toward Beldir, he divided his gaze between them. *It was a ruse, to draw Charnos out into the open.*

In the ways of men, Ketrick reacted with anger. *What is this, fucking piecemeal? We need to know everything, now. If the lake's bogus, how do we defeat them?*

In a flash, Feyna understood, *The power's already here, in us.*

*Just so, Beldir said, delighted by her rapidly expanding perception. The elementary parts of the force have always existed within the two of you, waiting for this day. I used the lake as bait for the lizard because I was aware she couldn't risk bringing too many troops with her to discover its whereabouts.*

Tricera, seeing nothing but rock, turned back to confront Beldir. "Where is it? I promise you if this is a trick, I'll flay each of you into mincemeat and enjoy your flesh with a fine off-planet wine."

*She's done precisely that with some of our relatives,* Beldir passed on to the others while he moved his arms in a gesture of entreaty toward Tricera. "Please, you have to give me a minute. It's been a while since I've been in the caves. Usually you can hear the chinking sound the crystal makes."

At that, Charnos stilled, cocking her head attentively. "Shh!" she told her guards, "stop that tramping around."

With the Adbavaliens' attention turned away from them, Beldir told Feyna, *Now, relax your mind and walk through the white door when it appears.*

Ketrick urged Feyna, *Reach down, Feyna, find your mental warrior and come into me.*

Feyna tried to narrow her concentration, but feared she was still too new to her talent to do what was needed.

"I don't hear a damn thing," Tricera snapped, turning back to look at the Zanutians, her eyes revealing that some atavistic sense was warning her she was being deceived. Sprinting forward, Charnos caught hold of the chain attached to Feyna's metal collar and she choked a little as she was dragged back against the rock wall. "Let's find out," Tricera hissed, looking back and forth at the men, "just how much little Feyna matters to you both. If I don't see the lake in ten minutes, she dies."

Feyna worrying that she wouldn't be able to do as Beldir was asking in time, considered which maneuvers she might use to incapacitate Charnos. If she was going down in flames, she preferred to jump, not be pushed. Even with her hands cuffed, she could use them. A sharp kick to Tricera's thigh with an organ crunching punch to her belly in

quick succession would have Adbavalian floundering backward before she could fire her weapon, perhaps giving Ketrick a chance—

No, Beldir silently shouted at Feyna, *that sort of action's unnecessary and might get you killed. Please, just trust in what we rehearsed.* “Madam Charnos, please, calm down. I’m still trying to hear the crystal. I know the entrance was roughly two thirds along the rock-face. Tell your men to try over there, six meters behind you.”

Keeping her hold on Feyna, Tricera narrowed her pupilless eyes on the spot. “You and you—” she jabbed a finger at her two of her men— “look over there.” While her troops loped over to the indicated area, Tricera pushed Feyna’s metal collar upward, unsheathing her two inch claws against her captive’s tender skin, the green of the Adbavalian’s eyes glowing manically as she drew a tiny stream of Feyna’s blood, the sight of it seeming to whet the lizard princess’s appetite to draw more. “Now, she warned in her grating voice, “you have five minutes before she dies.”

Beneath her own mix of fear and anger, Feyna felt Ketrick’s fury throbbing and focusing in her brain while her own inner combatant flexed. There was a moment of stillness and then she became aware of something taking shape in her mind. *I can see it, the white door,* she transmitted with a rush of relief.

*Keep looking at it. Walk through.*

Feyna concentrated, reaching out to Ketrick with her psyche, feeling the greater pulsing force beyond the door. The sensation was incredible, similar to sex, but different.

*Come through it, sweetheart, come into me.*

"There it is," Tricera abruptly cried, her flat features coming alive again with triumph. "I hear the chinking from the lake." She jerked Feyna away from the cavern wall, pulling her captive toward the sound.

At the same time, Feyna felt a warm center of heat tingling in the nape of her neck, traveling along her arms, then surging through her system, making her body stiffen and quiver.

Tricera turned to glance at Feyna, grunting at what felt like a sharp blow to her head. Defensively, Charnos leveled her weapon, which was knocked invisibly from her hand, the force behind it making her stagger backward.

From there, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Feyna wrenched free from Tricera's grip before the Adbavalian could recover her balance. Ketrick ran to gather Feyna into his arms and Beldir murmured some ancient words.

"Get them," Tricera turned to shout at her closest troops, but they were standing like statues, staring at her blankly. When the Charnos looked back at Beldir, the elderly man was bringing the

outstretched hand he'd pointed at her men back to his side. Evidently, the dread princess still believed she could come out on top, shouting at Beldir, "Do you dare go against me? I'm made of sterner stuff than my lackeys."

Beldir gazed at her sadly. Clearly, she was too maddened and set on destroying him to be mindful of the silence surrounding Ketrick and Feyna who stood shoulder-to-shoulder.

*What are we supposed to do?* Feyna asked, a sense of vertigo gripping her as a low roaring noise filled her ears.

Experiencing the same disorientating symptoms, Ketrick squeezed her hand. *Open ourselves to the power.*

*And focus it on Charnos,* Beldir added, watching the couple's gazes turn inward while the psychic plane they shared produced an invisible storm. Blue streaks of energy started to power around their heads.

Simultaneously, Tricera bared her fangs and extended her lethal talons, the thin flaps of skin on her sides lifting to assist her ascent as she leaped into a shrieking, death strike. "You're dead, old man, meat for my table tonight."

Caught in a blaze of blue light, Tricera's ferocious expression switched to shock, then confusion and finally fresh fury as her body was lifted further into the air. Cursing in her native

language, she jerked her body to try and free herself, looking down at the Zanutian couple, who were standing like unseeing sculptures. Evidently, Tricera assumed the power aimed at her had been garnered from the magic lake. "How did you do it without my knowledge?" she screeched. When another shock of light sent her body into a slow turn, her eyes showed fear for the first time. "All right, we can share the power...we can share the planet."

"It's too late," Beldir told her, taking no pleasure at all in the situation. "Even if I believed you would truly relent, the force cannot be drawn back now."

Ketric and Feyna were dimly aware of others' dialogue, feeling as if a white-hot river was flowing through every cell and blood vessel in their bodies.

Tricera's body began to turn more rapidly. She thrashed her arms and legs in desperation, snarling and cursing again. "You won't win. My brother will avenge me. None of you will escape his punishment." Incredibly, she picked up more speed, her struggling limbs slammed to her sides as she went into a spooling whirl. Faster and faster she went, resembling a humming pinwheel until at last she fell to the ground on a long, piercing scream.

She didn't crumble into dust. She gradually

faded until there was nothing but a misty, green smear of her on the ground, the air in that area palpitating with smoke and ozone, like the aftermath of a lightning strike.

## EPILOGUE

A week later, Ketrick and Feyna were in sitting in the midst of Rhunia's white sand dunes, sharing a bottle of wine while they watched the sun sink slowly into the silvery, blue sea. They'd both been surprised by the sheer beauty of the planet and it was hard to believe how much had happened in so brief a period of time.

Tricera's destruction had changed everything, Putranie, in fear of his own life, decamping shortly after he heard the news. As simple as that, Rhunia was restored to its rightful citizens who were steadily returning to the cities and surrounding farms.

"So," Ketrick asked, keeping his gaze on the dying sun, "do you still want to separate?"

Feyna didn't betray by a flicker of an eyelash how her heart lurched at the question. Once the danger had passed, so had their ability to see into each other's minds—that was fine with her, she valued her privacy.



On the other hand, she'd wondered a thousand times in the past days if Ketrick was relieved he hadn't had to marry her and was currently regretting the love words he had given her. When people believed they might be going to die, they grabbed at what they had, said all kinds of things. With options reopened, most returned to their original mindsets.

And as she started to ask, as casually as she could manage, if *he* wanted to separate, accusations popped out of her mouth without thought or plan. "If you had feelings for me, why did you end it the way you did, leaving me wondering what I'd done wrong?" To her dismay, her voice wavered at the end.

As she might have predicted, he looked uncomfortable, his eyes flicking to hers, then back to the sunset. However skilled he may be as a lover, however poignant his words to her when they were facing death, that moment had passed and he was back to being a normal man, uncertain how to deal with strong emotions.

She watched him pick up the wine bottle and refill their glasses, drinking most of his before he met her watchful gaze again. "Okay, let's run this. In the beginning, when you exploded into my life, you made me feel things I'd never felt before. Everything seemed stronger, more complex." He inhaled. "I recognized that you had me at a

disadvantage emotionally. It terrified me and, in a way, pissed me off."

Fear and hope waged war as she cleared her throat. "I had no idea...I would never have pressured you."

"You did just by being." He paused, drank from his glass again as though his throat was dry. "Truthfully, I was ready to walk even before Beldir materialized. After that, with my career just taking off, it was easy to tell myself there was no room in my life for a full-time relationship."

He paused again to draw a sustaining breath. "For a while, with adventure ahead, it was easy to believe I'd done the right thing. But on a deeper level, I missed you more than I expected, certainly more than I wanted. And though I tried to lose myself with other women, it wasn't the same. I never felt...in synch." His dark brows flickered. "Obviously my mystical genes were blocking me."

Feyna stared. Though her heart had almost stopped at what he was telling her, he hadn't said he loved her. To her ears, it sounded as if he were still feeling trapped by their genetics, the sex they'd shared making him feel like an animal pairing off at the given time. She suspected, if he could, he'd wish it all away, which meant she had to set him free even though it would kill her.

She shifted her gaze to the ocean again as a squeezing hurt centered in her chest. "I appreciate

the honesty, Ketrick, but I think, after what we've gone through, it might be best if we do separate for a while. Give ourselves time to regroup in our own surroundings, decide what we honestly want."

"I want to know if you're still hankering after Sven?"

Her dulled gaze swung back to him in confusion. "Sven?"

"All right, forget him, I'll explain later. You said you wanted more from a man than I can give, do I still fall short in your eyes?"

Her pulse gave a couple of quick jumps. "No, but I don't want you to stay with me out of a sense of obligation, aware that you might come to resent me."

He nodded. "Okay, but as I've done my level best to live contentedly without you and failed, I don't see that there's any point in trying it again."

She stared. Her throat worked silently as she struggled to get words out. "A-are you saying you want a future with me?" She told herself she could do the long-distance thing. Wait for him to finish his travels if she knew he cared. "Are you sure...completely sure?"

With aching gentleness, Ketrick reached out to tuck a glossy red curl behind her ear. "What I'm sure of is, I don't want to live without what makes us click the way we do. So I'll be leaving Starfleet

if you'll marry me."

Cohesive thought vanished. *Oh God. He was giving it up to be with her.* A warm glow shimmered along her nerve endings, looking like a young girl as she nodded like a fool. "Yes, yes...absolutely."

"Hey, sweetheart." He mopped her happy tears with his fingers. "If you're willing, I'd like to stay on Rhunia and work to rebuild it. But you don't have to abandon *your* career. You can travel just as easily from here."

It was impossible for her to focus on work at the moment. Like Ketrick, she'd taken a leave of absence and she would tailor her career to their new life once they'd settled into it.

"So do I get to hear how crazy you are about me?"

Meeting his roguishly glinting gaze, Feyna inhaled on a watery laugh, punching him playfully on the arm. "I never stopped loving you, you big lummo."

"Well then." He drew her forward and up to face him. "We'd better start making the first of those tiny wizards for Beldir." Framing her face gently, he bent to sweetly kiss each of her dimples before he closed his mouth over hers. Irresistible soft lips brushed and moved on hers, strong hands gently caressing her hair and back, making her hum with pleasure when his tongue dipped and curled with hers.

She touched and tasted, shuddered and moaned when he cupped her buttocks to lift her against his straining erection. She felt his need tangling with hers, but the primitive feelings were mixed with a deeper intimacy now. Not wildfire, but a low, smoldering heat.

When he caught at the waistband of her loose, blue trousers, pulling them down along with her white, satin thong, she was all of a sudden aware of their position, glancing around for onlookers.

"We're sheltered by the dunes," he murmured, flicking open the catch of her bra before he turned his head to bite her lightly on the throat. "I love this spot here." He licked over it. "Did I ever tell you how good your skin tastes?"

"Hmm, I prefer yours."

The dying sun dappled over them. The air was filled with their sighs and murmured love words. With doubts permanently laid to rest, the joy Feyna was feeling and the physical thrills were increased tenfold. Realizing she could have him whenever she wished, the notion brought out a sudden recklessness.

Without warning, she used a familiar combat move, swinging her arms to break his hold, his breath rocketing from his lungs as she flipped his massive weight onto the red blanket, straddling him with wildness racing through her blood. "Now, Commander, we'll have sex the way

*I want it."*

Grinning broadly, his vivid eyes adored her. "Be gentle with me, Doc."

"Hah!" She yanked at his loose, white shirt, tearing open the buttons, trapping his arms in the sleeves. "Pucker up, mister, or I may have to get rough." As always, his lips intoxicated her, the one kiss becoming another and then another.

\* \* \* \*

When she left his mouth to enjoy the hard, breadth of his bare chest, Ketrick closed his eyes, letting his hands skim and stroke slowly over her back, gliding on pleasure while her hungry mouth moved over him like a fever, kissing at several different points before she licked, then gently sucked.

Ketrick drew quick, anticipatory breaths while he waited for what was to come. The muscles on his abdomen bunching and quivering as she started down that thin strip of hair that led to his sex.

Her bare breasts brushing against his hard thighs as her hands moved to unzip his fly. Spreading his beige shorts, her hand sifted almost reverently through his black curls, then along the length of his jutting shaft. A grateful groan rumbled in his chest when the heat of her mouth

closed around him.

\* \* \* \*

He mumbled something Feyna couldn't make out because of the noise from the breaking waves. She took it as encouragement, licking over his ridges and crevice before she took him deep, hearing him groan softly as she ran a hand along the underside of his cool balls to roll his scrotum.

She'd always loved the texture and taste of his cock in her mouth, had always been empowered by the knowledge that she was giving him a first-class blow job. When he groaned deeply, his hips jerking, indicating he was close to coming, her cheeks moved in and out as she applied full suction.

\* \* \* \*

He surprised her, pulling out of her mouth with a rough sound in his throat, toppling her onto her back. "I want to be inside you when I come." Her smile was totally feline as he shifted his long, hard weight, pressing her down into the blanket before he braced up onto his elbows to look down at her ready sex. It pulsed in anticipation.

Near to bursting, Ketrick battled for control, using his strong thighs to spread hers wide,

groaning loudly as he pressed his rock-hard cock into the glistening, pink folds between her legs. The tight gloving of her hot interior made him grit his teeth, managing only a few tantalizingly, slow thrusts before a desperate need made him speed up. Gratefully, he felt her undulating contractions tighten around him as her body quickened for climax.

She arched higher.

He drew back and pounded into her. "I'll make you happy," he gusted against her neck. "I swear it."



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Ali Atwood was born in England and now lives in the US. She enjoys the outdoors – horseback riding and golf. The books she writes are the type she likes to read, happily-ever-afters with a solid plot, strong characters and loads of sizzling sex.