



Just My Luck
Gail Koger

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This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language. This material is meant for mature audiences!

Gail Koger

Previous Works

The Ghost Wore Polyester

Just My Luck

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Gail Koger

Dedication

*To Darcie, Dorothy, Dawn and Paula. Couldn't have
done it without you.*

Prologue

In 2015 something nasty found our world. They call themselves the Tai-Kok. My stomach roils as I remember that first psychic contact. Their hunger felt like a slap in the face. It was sharp, visceral and constant. They were malevolent, depraved ghouls who lived to eat. Literally. Their image is forever burned into my mind. Tall, hairless, skeletal humanoids with a mouth full of sharp metal teeth. To complete the total gross out, three blood-red eyes glared out of skin so transparent you could see their bones and innards. Ewww.

How they found our world or why they consider us good eatin', who knows. The few peace delegates who tried to communicate with them got butchered. After that, everyone was too busy running for their lives.

The Tai-Kok ate their way across Europe and the Middle East until they had the bad luck to capture a suicide bomber. He blew himself up over the Pacific. And, lucky us, the ship he'd attacked crashed outside of Tucson, Arizona. We salvaged their technology and have been using it against them ever since.

Having psychic abilities is a family legacy of mine. Another family trait is everyone, and I do mean everyone, is either in law enforcement or the military.

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My brother, Quinn, and I just happen to be the strongest psychics in the world. Which kinda makes up for me being the baby of the family.

Kinda, since I'm what you'd call a trouble magnet, too. This can be a good thing or a bad thing in my line of work. I opted for being a cop. Finding bad guys easily is good, but they never want to go to jail, which is bad. Since I'm sorta pint-sized, the only thing keeping me from being shot, stabbed or otherwise mangled on a daily basis is something I call my spidey sense. It's like internal radar that warns me of approaching danger.

I'm also telepathic. Relax. I can't read your thoughts. The only minds I can read are those of other psychics, which pretty much means my entire family. Since the mind reading works both ways with my family, that can be a real pain in the butt. They're always ragging on me about something.

When I was a teenager, it made dating hell. Dad would pop in with a 'Kaylee Lynn Jones, what the hell is that punk's hand doing on your breast?' Or Mom would break into a make out session with, 'Kaylee, sweetie, a lady doesn't allow a guy to stick his tongue down her throat on the first date.'

You get the picture. Add my brothers into the mix and I had 24/7 surveillance. And they wonder why I'm twenty-five and still a virgin. Go figure.

My other talent is critter control. Dogs, cats, birds, you name them, I can control them, call them, wind them up and sic them on someone or something. This is a talent which comes in real handy when dealing with alien freaks or low-life

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scum bags.

Besides being a cop, I also work officially as a Siren for my brother, Quinn. Part of my job description is mentally scanning our galaxy for any signs of the Tai-Kok. They call us Sirens because we're the early warning system that keeps the human race from becoming an all-you-can-eat banquet for the Tai-Kok. And it's a battle that we must win or face extinction.

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Chapter One

Two weeks ago, while I was searching the asteroid belt for Tai-Kok ships, I sensed an alien presence. It was male. Definitely not human. I sensed his utter aloneness. His grief for those taken from him and his burning need for vengeance resonated so deeply within me that I instinctively reached out psychically.

Big mistake. Now he's in my head and dug in tighter than a tick on a hunting dog. No matter how hard I try to dislodge the little shit from my mind, he won't leave. And, just my luck, his hold on me is getting stronger. For the time being, my uninvited guest seems to be content to just observe. That and growl whenever anything male gets near me. I mean, c'mon. It's like having a rabid pit bull stuck in your head.

My last date was a total nightmare. Not only did my brothers show up at the bar and interrogate Joe as if he was a suspect in a homicide, but my own personal pit bull went into attack mode.

Mine, he snarled in my mind and, an instant later, Joe leapt to his feet, screaming hysterically about monsters and ran from the bar. And my wonderful brothers thought it was the funniest thing they had seen all year.

Lucky me. An asshole alien stuck in my head and a family that treats me like I'm a few bricks

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short of a full load.

Okay, so I went a little crazy when my parents were slaughtered in front of me and it's made me a bit of a risk taker. Killing the Tai-Kok is the only thing that keeps me sane. Hell, my brothers should have been happy that I started dating again. But, nooo, they just had to go and ruin it.

It's not like I have a lot of free time. Between battling alien freaks and chasing bad guys, I'm lucky to get a few hours sleep. Which makes me a tad bit cranky.

Okay, a whole lot cranky and I said a few things I shouldn't have. This is a bad thing when your entire family are also your commanding officers. My youngest brother, Jake, is my sergeant. Caleb, the middle brat, is my lieutenant. Quinn, the oldest, is commander-in-chief of the Siren program.

Good ol' Uncle Derek controls all police activities for Arizona, and, to top it all off, Uncle Saul is a freakin' four star general who has total control of the western states. So, I'm totally screwed when I run off at the mouth.

The bathroom door suddenly shuddered under a heavy blow. "Dammit, Kaylee,

if you use up all the hot water again, I'm kicking your ass." That's Jake, and he's got all the charm of a rattlesnake. The door shuddered again. "Kaylee! Don't make me come in there."

I turn the water off. He would, too. "Asshole."

Caleb popped into my mind. *Get your ass in gear.*

Sir, yes, sir. God, I really, really hated living

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with my brothers. After my parents died, they simply packed up my apartment and moved me into their spare bedroom. Said it was to keep me from doing something stupid. Un-huh. They were just jealous because my Tai-Kok kill ratio was higher than theirs.

Jake banged on the door again. "Don't forget it's your turn to fix breakfast."

Imitating his ex-girlfriend's southern drawl, I asked sweetly, "How'd you like burnt toast and peanut butter, sugar?"

"How'd you like warrant detail again, runt?"

Crap. Me and my big mouth. "Pancakes?"

"It'll do."

I quickly dried off, slathered on moisturizer and applied a little mascara.

Your form is very pleasing.

I jumped about a foot, smearing mascara across my face. Shit! How was he...? I met my own gaze in the mirror. God-dammit! I quickly turned around. *Go away, you freakin' pervert.*

A phantom hand caressed my right breast. *Soon you will be mine.*

Holy shit! I slapped frantically at my chest as fingers stroked my nipples. *Stop it!* I threw a series of mental punches. *Go away and leave me the hell alone!*

Never. You keep the beast at bay.

Beast? The sensation of thousands of stinging fire ants suddenly boiled across my mind. I clutched my head. "Shit! Tai-Kok."

Enemy, my pit bull hissed, his rage filling my

mind. His hatred rivaled mine. His need to kill the murdering bastards equaled mine. United in our need for vengeance, we opened our senses and reached out, searching the vast emptiness.

There. Behind the moon. A ship. Hundreds of them. Hungry for blood. Ready to kill. So were my pit bull and I.

We probed the ship until we found a crew member whose mind was weak and easily controlled. We overwhelmed his feeble defenses and commanded him to destroy the ship. For all his possessiveness, my inner pit bull and I could work together just fine.

Through his eyes, we watched our puppet dutifully obey our psychically sent instructions. We pulled away from his mind an instant before the Marauder became a raging inferno. A dark savage joy filled us. The Tai-Kok invaders were dead. All of them. Dead. Dead. Dead.

A sharp blow stung my face. “Kaylee! Snap out of it,” a voice commanded.

Anger flared through us and my fists shot out, striking hard flesh.

Caleb bellowed, “Dammit, Kaylee, knock it off!”

Ice cold water suddenly doused me.

What? Confusion swirled through me and I instinctively fought against the alien presence in my head. “Get out! Get out! Get out!”

My link with the pit bull broke abruptly and I struggled against the hard hands holding me down. “Let me go.”

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“Not until you quit kicking the shit out of us.”

My eyes popped open and I gasped in horror. I was buck-ass naked and pinned to the shower floor by my brothers. “Are you nuts? Get off me.”

Jake eyed me cautiously and swiped at his bloody nose, “You okay, runt?”

“Yeah, sure.” Totally freaked that my brothers had seen me naked, I wriggled free, grabbed a soggy towel and wrapped it around me. “What the hell is going on?”

His left eye rapidly swelling, Caleb turned the water off and growled, “You tell us.”

Tell them that I had an alien stuck in my head? Gee, let me think. First, there would be the ass chewing. Then, they’d probably take away my guns and stick me in some boring desk job. As if that would stop me from killing alien freaks. And last, but not least, the really fun part, they’d probably do a psychic intervention.

Yeah, lying was good. “Thought I sensed a Tai-Kok ship. No reason for you to go all commando on me.”

Caleb’s green eyes glittered with menace as he said calmly, “You merged with an alien entity and blew up a battle cruiser. Quinn confirmed the destruction of a Marauder on the back side of the moon.”

Jake towed off his hair. “Lucy, you’ve got some ‘splaining to do.”

God, what a snot wad. “You think I blew up one of their ships? That would make me like a hero or something, right?”

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Caleb leaned down until we were nose to nose. "You want a fucking medal?"

I cringed. "No, sir. Dead freaks are a good thing. I don't see what you're getting all pissy about."

"Pissy?" He jabbed a finger in my chest. "I get pissy because my little sister has a death wish." He poked me again, "I get pissy because you continually disobey orders." Another jab. "I get really pissy when you lie to me. Either you start telling me the truth or I'm hauling your ass to the Bunker."

God, this was bad on so many levels. I edged towards the door. "Ah, well, you're just gonna get mad"

Jake's arm shot out, blocking my retreat. "Ya think?"

He really was a snot wad. I took a deep breath and spilled my guts about the pesky pit bull stuck in my head.

Caleb and Jake bellowed in unison, "Are you fucking nuts?"

I took that as a rhetorical question and kept my mouth shut.

In rapid succession, Caleb spat, "What species is he? Where is he? What kind of ship does he have? How powerful is he?"

I answered back just as rapidly, "Dunno. Dunno. Dunno. Not sure."

Jake eyed me suspiciously, "Dunno?"

I shrugged. "Mostly he just growls."

"Growls?"

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“Yeah, like a pit bull.”

They both stared at me in exasperated disbelief, and then Caleb snapped, “We’ve called a family meeting and until we decide how to deal with this alien you befriended, you’re on bunker detail.”

“Bunker detail! But...befriended? He’s not my friend.”

Quinn slid into my head, *then what is he?*

Don’t know exactly. Maybe he’s just lonely and wanted some company.

Oh, he wants you all right.

Crap. How’d they know about that? *He hates the Tai-Kok as much as we do.*

That’s the only reason we haven’t attacked him.

For some reason the idea of him being hurt bothered me. A lot. Hell, I didn’t even know his name or what kind of critter he was. What if he out creeped the Tai-Kok? Ewww. *Before you guys do anything stupid, how about I ask if he’s interested in an alliance?*

No! Under no circumstances are you to link with him again, Quinn commanded. *Got it?*

Yes, sir.

Chapter Two

Sucking in ragged gasps of air, I sagged against a bullet pitted wall and wished like hell that my luck wasn't so shitty. Seemed like I was always running for my life. And it was always 120 degrees in the shade and I was always wearing twenty pounds of body armor and equipment. You'd think with all the freakin' running around I did, I would finally lose that last stubborn five pounds. I snorted. Yeah, who was I kidding? Give up chocolate and beer? Never gonna happen.

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes and looked for a good hiding place. I'd just shot Luis Vargas, one of the meanest sonovabitches to ever cross the border, and now every member of his gang was out for my blood. Lucky me.

Heat waves quivered across the buckled asphalt lot like restless spirits. My gaze locked on the burnt remains of a Walmart store. If I could reach it... A bullet buzzed past my head and embedded in the dumpster next to me. I flinched back. Shit! I linked with Jake. *Could really use some backup here.*

We're ten minutes out. Hold your position.

Hold my position? Was he nuts?

Caleb popped into my head, *You started a fucking gunfight with the Sonoran Cowboys?*

How was I suppose to know they used bunker three five zero for their drug deals?

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*You should have scanned it before you entered.
It was a sealed bunker, sir, and the question
is... how did they get the friggin' access code?*

*A furious pit bull surged into my mind. Your
males are incompetent fools. How difficult is it to
protect one small female?*

Jake snapped, Pretty damn hard.

*Oh, hell, now Mister Growly turns into Chatty
Kathy? Butt out, this is a family discussion.*

*Mister Growly's rage burned through my mind
as he replied, If she dies, I will destroy your world.*

*How about we destroy you instead? Caleb
snarled and threw a mental punch. Whoa! I blocked
his blow. Can we save the chest thumping and
whose balls are bigger until later? Like when half
the Mexican mafia isn't trying to kill me? A shriek
broke from me as a volley of gunfire turned the
dumpster I was trying to hide behind into a sieve.*

*Shit! Shit! Shit! I returned fire and fled back
down the alley.*

*I winced as the rest of men in my family
suddenly crowded into my head.*

*Kaylee Lynn Jones, how could you pull another
damned fooled stunt? I heard this time you hooked
up with some goddamned alien and took out a
Marauder. That was Uncle Saul, the four-star
general, at his blustery best.*

Why is that a bad thing?

*Uncle Derek barged in with a brain-shattering
bellow, Are you the fucking moron that started a
firefight with us at a DEFCON One alert?*

Yes, she is, Quinn replied.

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Snitch. *Look, as much as I'd like to chat with y'all, I'm kinda busy ducking bullets right now.* My stomach clenched with dread when I realized I was out of ammo.

Mister Chatty, aka the pain-in-the-ass pit bull, announced abruptly to all of my bitching relatives, *Her weapon is disabled and she is being herded into a trap. You have less than sixty of your seconds to reach her.*

Oh, hell. I opened my senses and scanned the area. Yep, two dozen gang bangers with itchy trigger fingers had me surrounded. And nothing I could use for a quick backup but two freakin' alley cats and some pigeons.

Wait a minute. A slightly hysterically laugh escaped me. A whole shitload of pigeons. Wonder if those idiots ever watched Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* on the late show? Betcha not. This was gonna be fun. I cut my link with my family and summoned the pigeons.

Imagine my surprise when several thousand pigeons, a couple hundred sparrows and even some parakeets answered my call. The enormous flock turned the morning sky black.

A bullet whizzed past my ear. Seconds later, my winged warriors swirled madly around me, forming a protective barrier. Okay, they really couldn't stop bullets but the sight of them was way cool.

"Sic 'em," I commanded and they did. My own little kamikaze bombers just pecked the living hell out of the gang bangers. Terrified screams soon filled the morning air.

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You're one sick bitch, Jake declared.

Yeah, I know.

My psychic radar shrieked a warning. Shit!

I spun around as a bald, tattooed dude stepped out of a doorway and fired off two rounds. The bullets smashed into my chest, hurling me backwards. I slammed into the wall and crumpled to the ground, fighting for breath, fighting to stay conscious and trying like hell to ignore all the shouting in my head.

Before I could move, a gun was jammed against my temple.

"You the Siren?"

Huh? Sucking in a lungful of air, I gasped, "Why?"

He jabbed me with the gun. "Are you?"

I nodded, groaning as he planted a knee on my back and started patting me down for weapons. I struggled feebly and the pressure increased until I could no longer breathe. The alley swirled around me and everything faded to black. The last thing I heard was that damned growling.

* * * *

Fire ants boiling across my mind brought me abruptly awake and I bolted upright. Pain seared through my chest and I groaned as everything came rushing back.

Where was I? I looked around and a hysterical giggle broke from me. The morons had locked me in a bunker. Since I knew all the access codes, escaping wasn't going to be a problem.

I struggled to my feet with a moan. Getting

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shot was a bitch. I opened my uniform shirt and examined the two 9mm bullets lodged in my Kevlar vest. The big question was why was I still breathing?

I clutched my head as the burning ants sensation grew stronger. What the hell was heading our way? I reached out and searched the heavens. There. A ship. Not Tai-Kok. Something different about it.

It is cloaked, my friendly neighborhood pit bull answered.

Cloaked? You mean it won't show up on our radar?

It will not.

And they're coming to visit because they think we're good eatin', too?

The Rodan do find human flesh pleasing but their primary goal is to capture the Sirens.

So, they're in cahoots with the Tai-Kok?

They have formed an alliance.

God, this just keeps getting worse and worse.

I'm almost afraid to ask but what do these critters look like?

The image of a creature some mad scientist in a bad horror movie would cook up formed in my mind. The Rodan looked like a kinda weird combination of rat and dinosaur. With lots of teeth and claws.

Made me wonder what kind of teeth Mister Growly had. Probably not a good time to ask.

So I settled for *Wow, these Rodan would give T-Rex a run for his money.*

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They are efficient hunters who I intend to wipe from existence.

The menace in his tone sent shivers down my back. In that instant, I knew without a doubt that he was a merciless predator with really big teeth. *Wipe from existence, huh? Okey, dokey. Works for me. What kind of ships do they have?*

An onyx hulled, bullet-shaped space ship bristling with weapons arrays popped into my head. *Whoa. Bit of an overkill isn't it?*

They think to escape my wrath.

Gotcha. So not happening. And these soon to be extinct critters want us Sirens for what?

Psychics' brains are considered a delicacy.

Sorry I asked.

Quinn's, Caleb's, Jake's and Uncle Derek's frantic minds burst into mine and I was bombarded with, *Kaylee, you scared the piss out of us! How badly are you hurt? Where's the asshole who shot you? Where are you?*

Sorry. I'll live. Don't know. In a bunker and I've got some bad news and some really bad news.

Jake inquired dryly, *Something wicked this way comes?*

Yeah, something called the Rodan. Who just happen to be good buddies with the Tai-Kok and they've got some kind of nifty stealth technology.

I could feel Quinn scanning for them. *You sure? I'm not picking up anything.*

I rubbed my aching head. *Yeah, I'm sure. There's a shitload of them.* I flashed them the images Mister Growly had shown me and filled

them in.

Jesus H. Christ, Uncle Derek said, his dismay evident. *How long do we have?*

One of your hours, my pit bull answered him.

I'll sound the alarm, Caleb said.

Stay put, Kaylee, I'll be there in five minutes.
Try not to start another gun fight, Jake commanded.

Kinda hard to do without a gun. But I gave him an obedient, *Yes, sir*.

The air raid sirens began to wail.

The bunker doors slid open and I found myself face to face with three Sonoran Cowboys. Lucky me, the bald, tattooed dude was back, too.

I raised my hands as they leveled their AK-47's at me. God, I was really tired of finding myself staring down the wrong end of a gun barrel.

I gave them a friendly smile, "Hey, guys. Did ya know that assaulting a Siren is federal offense? Not to mention really stupid. I mean, c'mon, kill us and who's gonna warn you about the Tai-Kok or other alien critters? Huh?"

Jake growled in disgust, *Shut the hell up. Do you have any fucking idea who that is?*

The moron who shot me. Who was also giving me a really creepy, dead-eyed serial killer stare.

If you'd quit sleeping through briefings, you'd know that moron is Raul Vargas, the head honcho. Caleb's been tracking him for the last two years for that string of homicides and armed robberies.

Thought he'd be bigger.

The gunman standing next to Raul surveyed my

carrotty red hair, green eyes and my rather fragile appearance and snorted, “Don’t look like no lethal weapon to me.”

I rolled my eyes. Okay, I’ll admit I look as harmless as a bunny rabbit. But this bunny has teeth and if I ever got my hands on that stupid reporter that started the whole “Lethal Weapon” thing, I was gonna kick his skinny butt. “Look, fellas, I know you’re pissed at me, but right now we’ve got a whole shitload of trouble heading our way.”

Raul’s cold eyes filled with fury. “Tai-Kok?”

“No, something just as bad. The Rodan. As I see it, we have two choices here. You can kill me and let these Rodan chow down on your women and children or we can go kill us some alien monsters. What’s it to be?”

A savage smile on his face, Raul tossed me a rifle. “Kill us some monsters.”

Okay, that was way too easy. I quickly checked my weapon for ammo. Damn, fully loaded.

Guess the rumors were true. The Tai-Kok had eaten this thug’s entire family. I stepped aside as they filed into the bunker. Shit, who would of thunk it? Me, teaming up with the head of a vicious street gang.

Chapter Three

Two small, onyx hulled ships set down in the parking lot of a Safeway store. Made sense: we shop for food here and the monsters do, too. Raul and I hunkered down at the checkout counters while his goons dragged the newly unconscious customers into the back.

Who the hell keeps shopping when the sirens go off? And the looters! God, it drives me nuts. Even a five-year-old knows that after they hit us with the electro-magnetic pulse, you have about ten minutes to get to a shelter before they unleash the stun ray.

Any idiot caught out in the open wakes up to a monster chowing down on their innards. You'd think after five years, they'd get it. But no, there's always a bunch of morons out there with the attitude of "It can't happen to me" and we're risking our lives to save them. Bitter? You betcha. I've lost a lot of good friends because of them.

I tensed as the hatches slid open and I got my first look at the Rodan raiders. Kinda reminded me of a pint sized T-Rex with scaly purple skin. I mean, these guys were even shorter than me. Maybe four feet tall and wearing some kind of funky chain mail armor.

A dozen of them poured out of the ships.

When they hit the door, we unleashed a lethal

barrage of lead on them.

“Time to die, you fucking monsters.”

A laser blast disintegrated the counter next to me.

“Shit!” I dove behind a display of toilet paper, let off another volley and ran like hell when the display glowed brightly and vanished. What the hell was going on? I thought they wanted us alive.

On my hands and knees, I scrambled among the aisles as the laser bolts flew wildly. “Shit! Shit! Shit!” Shelves of food were vanishing around me faster than bridal gowns at the annual sale.

Raul made a mad dash for the back exit. A laser beam flashed out like a fiery snake, striking him in the back. His mouth opened in a silent scream and for a brief second he glowed a bright red and then he was simply gone. *Shit! Jake!*

Keep your head down.

An explosion rocked the entire building and pieces of ceiling rained down on me. I hit the deck as a squad of Marines swept through the front, laying down a volley of laser fire. I crawled behind a display of body armor when more Marines came storming through the rear door, catching the Rodan in a cross fire.

The laser blasts finally stopped zinging overhead. I raised my head and took a cautious look around. I breathed a sigh of relief. Not a single Rodan left. And even better my radar was quiet.

A pair of combat boots stopped next to me. “You okay, ma’am?”

“Just peachy.” I stared up at the big, strong

Marine standing over me and grinned. Hot dang. What a cutie!

A rumbling growl sounded in my head. *You are mine*. I erupted to my feet and growled back, *like hell*.

The Marine looked around in alarm. "Did you hear that, ma'am?"

"Yeah, all the time."

He took my arm and urged me forward. "The Colonel wants the medics to check you over."

"Not necessary," I told him, trying to tug free of his rather steely grip. "Really, I'm okay." Did he think I was going to make a run for it?

We walked through the shattered front doors and I saw Caleb, Jake and Uncle Derek storming towards me. Uh-oh.

Running was a good idea. I pulled against the Marine's grip. "I think I left my rifle inside."

His hand tightened. "Now, ma'am, why would you need a rifle with us here?"

My temper flared and I jerked my arm free. "I'm a cop and a Siren, you moron, and you will not talk to me like..."

I yelped when Caleb's hand clamped down on my shoulder. God! He had the Vulcan death grip down to an art form.

"Say thank you to the nice Marine," Caleb commanded.

"Thank you." I glanced up at his face. Oh yeah, he was beyond pissed.

Uncle Derek glared at the Marine. "Dismissed, soldier."

The coward saluted and hurried off.

Jake scowled at me. "You look like hell."

"Thanks."

Uncle Derek's furious gaze settled on me. "What in God's green earth were you thinking? Merging with this unknown alien and then starting a gun battle with the Sonoran Cowboys. Have you lost your mind?"

"When did killing freaks become a bad thing?"

"You've had a fucking death wish since Mom and Dad died. It's gonna stop now," Jake barked.

"Damn right," Uncle Derek added. "We packed up your suitcases and we're shipping you to Quinn."

"What? There's no way I'm going to the Bunker. Besides, you need me here."

Caleb snorted. "The hell we do. You're a liability and lately a piss-poor cop."

I blanched. "You really believe that? I have the best kill ratio and my arrest stats are above average."

Jake let out a long breath. "Jeezus, Kaylee. You just don't get it. It's not about kill ratios or how many arrests you've made. It's about survival. Yours."

"I'm not leaving."

Caleb leaned down and looked me dead in the eye. "You're going if I have to duct tape you to the seat."

I met his gaze and spat, "Not happening."

Jake threw his hands up in disgust. "The Tai-Kok and Rodan want you dead. They know you're a Siren."

I groaned. “Because of that stupid footage Channel Five got on me. And who the hell came up with that swell idea to nickname me the ‘Lethal Weapon’ anyway?”

Uncle Derek gritted his teeth and snarled, “Saul’s noticed that since it aired, they’ve been targeting the Phoenix area. You’re too valuable of an asset to lose. You’re going to the Bunker.”

My temper flared. These bossy pricks weren’t taking away the one thing that got me up in the morning. “You know what. You can have this fucking job. I quit.” I turned to stomp off.

Caleb stepped in front of me and I dropped into a combat stance. “Get out of my way.”

A savage smile twisted Caleb’s lips. “You think you can take me, runt?”

No. Not even on a good day. Did I mention that the men in my family were all six foot five and built like pro wrestlers? And me? I’ve five three and a hundred and twenty.

As much as I’d like to kick the living shit out of him, it wasn’t gonna happen. I dropped my arms and let my shoulders droop. “Sorry, guys,” I gave them a weak smile. “I know I’m being a bitch. My chest’s killing me. Got any chocolate on ya?”

Caleb stared at me for a long moment. His body still poised to take me down. Shit, if I so much as flinched, I’d be eating the pavement.

I gave him my best woebegone face. “I’d settle for some Tylenol.”

He let out a long breath and ruffled my bangs. “You’re drivin’ us nuts. This berserker thing has got

to stop. Until you get control of it, the Bunker is the best place for you.”

Berserker thing? I’m not that bad. Just really into my job. “I have it under control.”

Jake snorted and held out a candy bar. “Sure you do.”

I stepped out of Caleb’s kill zone, pivoted on one foot and took off like a rocket. I might be small but I could outrun all of them. There was a lot of yelling and cursing behind me.

A Marine lunged for me. Ducking under his outstretched arms, I lashed out with one foot, catching him in the knee and knocking him into Caleb’s and Jake’s path. They all went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

I grinned, darted around a Hummer and slammed into an unmovable object. Powerful arms closed around me. I looked up. Shit, my cousin. “Hey, Ethan.”

“Not real smart to rile Caleb up, squirt.”

I could feel Caleb breathing down the back of my neck. Fury radiated off him like a blow torch.

“I’ve got her”, Ethan said, a note of command in his voice. “Why don’t you go cool off?”

“We’ll talk later.” Caleb promised darkly and left.

I tested my cousin’s hold. I couldn’t budge an inch. Not only had Ethan gained the meritorious rank of colonel, he was a poster child for the Marines. Hard body, chiseled features and the perfect killing machine. Hoo ra. “I’m not gonna be locked in an underground bunker with a bunch of

paranoid military types.”

His massive hand caressed the back of my neck. “Still eatin’ you alive, isn’t it? And killing the Tai-Kok is the only thing that eases that big hole in your heart. I’ve seen the tapes. Your parents’ deaths weren’t your fault.” In his mind’s eye he watched those tapes again, and I went along for the ride.

To my utter dismay, tears rolled down my cheeks as that horrible day replayed in my head. I could see Phoenix’s once vibrant downtown area as an incinerated ruin. Smoke billowing from the skeletal remains of the skyscrapers. Marauders and fighter jets screaming overhead. Me, shoving my way through the panic-stricken people, trying to get to my mother’s building.

Then I saw her. A freak had my mother pinned to the ground and was ripping chunks from her chest. And I froze. I just stood there, watching it eat her.

A shudder shook me. God, then Dad was there, screaming as he emptied his gun into the monster. But it wouldn’t die. Squawking like a demented duck, it cut him in half with one swipe of its metal claws. Something snapped inside me and I went all commando on the freaks.

My memory is still a little hazy about what happened after that. When I came out of what Caleb calls my “berserker” state, I was kneeling by my parent’s bodies. The area was littered with dead and dying Tai-Kok and I was surrounded by a shitload of critters. Seemed I had called in every

dog, cat, coyote, pot-bellied pig and just about everything that flew, crawled or slithered.

Ethan shook me gently. "Did you see? It wasn't your fault."

Guilt clawed at me. "I froze."

"For God's sake, Kaylee, that thirty seconds wouldn't have made a difference. Your mom and dad would still be dead."

My spidey sense went on red alert. "Rodan!"

Ethan shoved me down and threw himself on top of me. A second later, a laser blast incinerated the Hummer.

Pain rolled over me and I fought to breathe. Which was kinda hard with Godzilla on my back.

Godzilla shifted off me and instructed, "Stay put and keep your head down."

"Okay, sure." Yeah, right. I was getting the hell out of Dodge. Just as soon as I got my breath back. A laser bolt took out a shopping cart beside me.

"Shit!" On my hands and knees I scrambled behind a clothing donation box. Good move, Kaylee. Like a wooden box offered any protection. The parking lot spun dizzily around me and I sagged against the pavement, fighting back the blackness. I wasn't gonna end up on the dinner menu. The peculiar hissing crackle of laser beams stopped suddenly.

Caleb roared, "Kaylee!"

Guess, the Marines had won the day. Hoo ra. I struggled to my feet, took one step and the ground rose up and smacked me in the face.

* * * *

Trapped. I was trapped. The Rodan were everywhere. My men. Pain and grief swept through me as I surveyed the dead, sprawled like broken dolls in pools of gore. I rammed my last clip into my Glock and wiped the blood out of my eyes. My breath came in labored gasps, and I could feel my broken ribs grinding against each other.

No. Not me. Caleb! It was his pain. His despair. Something slammed into our chest and pain exploded through us.

I jerked upright with a scream. "Caleb! Omigod, Caleb." I looked around frantically; my gaze flittered over the IV poles, heart monitors, medical supplies and weapons. Ambulance. I was in an ambulance. I scrambled off the gurney. I had to get to Caleb.

"Going somewhere?" Ethan stood in the doorway.

"Caleb's in trouble," I shrieked at him. "We've got to help him." A sob broke from me. "I can't lose anyone else. I can't. I just can't."

Ethan approached me slowly, his hands upraised. "Calm down. It was just a dream."

"It's not a dream. Try to link with him."

Ethan frowned and I could feel him reaching out.

I pulled a Glock off the wall and checked the load.

"I can't link with him, neither can Jake or Derek," Ethan said, his mouth a hard line.

"The Rodan ambushed him." I wiped at the tears rolling down my cheeks. "All his men are

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dead.”

“God, Kaylee. He’s still alive?”

“Yes.”

Jake burst into my mind, his fear was my fear.
Where’s Caleb?

I concentrated. There. I could feel his life force. *Somewhere in the downtown area. Do you feel him?*

Yes. He’s hurt.

I know. We don’t have much time.

We? You’re not going. It’s a trap. They want you.

No shit, Sherlock. But we need a distraction and I have some little friends in mind.

Uncle Derek butted in, *It’s too big of a risk.*

I can pull this off. Please, let me help. I’ll stay out of the fighting and just handle recon and critter control. Once Caleb’s safe, I’ll go to the Bunker. Girl Scout’s honor.

Ethan snorted, *You were never a Girl Scout.*

Very funny.

I could feel Uncle Derek’s reluctance. *Got a bad feeling about this. At the first sign of trouble, you’re outta there. Got it?*

Yes, sir.

* * * *

The sun dropped behind the jagged remains of Chase Bank tower, casting a menacing silhouette on the street below. I tried to shake off the sensation of impending doom but that icy knot in my stomach wouldn’t go away. God, this had to work.

From our perch on top of a parking garage we

had a bird's eye view of the area.

Smack dab in the middle of Central Avenue sat two anti-grav sleds loaded with unconscious people. Caleb was on the second sled. With only a couple of foot soldiers guarding them, it looked like a simple grab and run.

Yeah, a piece of cake, if you discounted the twenty T-Rexs hidden in the surrounding buildings. The minute we hit them, they'd be on us like white on rice. Plus, there were a shitload of ships hovering fifty miles up. We had five minutes tops, to rescue the people and make it to Tunnel Three. If we didn't, the dinner bells would be ringing.

It's time, Kaylee. I frowned, I could feel Jake's fear. For a moment the impossible horror of the situation almost overwhelmed me. Then I got mad. Okay, it was my PMS that shoved me into a fighting mood. Hey, it's good for something. I reached out with my mind and summoned the killer bees. *Critters in play.*

Uncle Derek added, *The surprise packages are set.*

A massive cloud of killer bees descended.

I did a little happy dance as the Rodan raiders broke from cover, roaring in pain and fury as they batted frantically at the bees. Woo hoo! It'd worked.

I put a monster in my cross hairs and fired. Absolute glee filled me as it died. Their armor sucked big time.

Several Rodan stumbled out of the buildings, a green foam oozing from their mouths. Well, damn,

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who knew those little critters were so deadly to the Rodan's chemistry? I ducked as a laser bolt sizzled past my head.

Explosions rocked the area as the fleeing Rodan set off trip wires.

Got 'em. Jake's relief flowed through my mind. A little banged up, but alive. We're headed for the tunnel.

Ethan pushed my sniper rifle down. "Let's go."

I glared at him, adjusted my scope, and fired. The bullet ricocheted off a lamp post. A second later, a Rodan toppled into the street.

"Damn. I could use a sniper like you on my squad."

"Uh-huh and what about my regrettable lack of discipline?"

Ethan shoved a motorcycle helmet on my head. "Oh, I think I could make a Marine out of you." He kick-started a converted Suzuki motorcycle.

"So not happening." I climbed on behind him.

He gunned it and we shot down the ramp.

I tightened my grip on him. Shit! Zooming down the ramps at a hundred and twenty was worse than one of those amusement park rides that scares the living hell out of you.

Fishtailing wildly, the bike skidded around a corner and roared down Central.

Wet your pants yet, runt?

Prick! *Did I tell you Mary Beth's back in town?* I felt him stiffen. *Oh, and I gave her your number.*

I hung on for dear life as we squealed around a pile of debris.

Just My Luck

If you did, you can't run far enough or fast enough.

I pried my eyes open and peeked over his shoulder. Oh, thank God, I could see the sleds. I might get out of this alive after all.

Uncle Derek warned, *Four minutes, folks.*

I scanned the area and my relief vanished in a stomach clenching jolt of shock.

The Rodan ships were three minutes out and closing fast. *We've got about two minutes before things get real interesting.*

Our squadron of fighter jets will intercept in five, Uncle Saul advised. *Just hang tight.*

Hang tight?

Ethan roared up to the side of the sled and with one arm heaved me onto it.

Hey! What the hell are you doing?

I'm gonna create a little diversion. He spun the motorcycle around and took off.

Uncle Derek! Stop him!

He can buy you some time with the Hell Fires.

Ethan touched my mind with a gentle caress. *I have some bolt holes, runt, don't worry.*

Hoo ra, Jake growled.

God save me from testosterone.

I heard that, Jake said. *Get your butt to the back of the sled and make sure none of them fall off.*

Yes, sir. I crawled over a three hundred pound man to get to the rear of the sled. My knee mashed his groin. "Sorry, buddy."

He moaned and thrashed about. "Monster."

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“Yeah, and won’t you make a tasty meal?” The next thing I knew his size twelve had connected with my rear and I was launched off the sled.

Catapulting through the air, I saw a palm tree hurtling towards me. I twisted and managed to miss it by a scant inch.

My triumph was short lived as I landed on a half dead bougainvillea bush. “Oooh, shit!” Talk about a pain in the butt. “Ow. Ow. Ow.” I finally fought free of the vicious thorns, jerked my helmet off and whacked madly at the bush. “I’m coming back here and pruning your thorny ass!”

My spidey sense screamed bloody murder and I took off at a dead run after the sled. Three Rodan were closing fast. A stun bolt sizzled past my shoulder.

I ducked down an alley and skidded to a stop. Aw, hell. About a dozen more were coming this way, too. I crouched behind a dumpster. Shit. Shit. Shit.

My pit bull groused, *You have a knack for finding trouble. That will stop once you are mine.*

Buzz off. You’re messin’ with my concentration.

Kaylee! Jake cried in alarm, *Where the hell are you?*

Got booted off the island.

What?

I’m in the alley west of Central and Thomas.

Two ships just set down a block over.

Where the hell are the jets?

Uncle Derek snarled, *We lost them.*

Just My Luck

Just fucking terrific. I'll try for the bolt hole on Thomas. I hated the five by six bunkers. I always felt like I was stuffing myself in a concrete coffin.

I could feel Jake's alarm. *I'm coming back for you.*

No! You can't risk all those people.

Dammit, Kaylee.

Don't do it, Jake.

I broke the link and quickly scanned the area. The monsters were getting closer. My gaze settled on a bomb crater. What the hell, it might work.

I popped out, fired off a couple of rounds at the Rodans at end of the alley and ran like hell. A beam of incandescent red whizzed past my head.

Working like a charm. I bolted out of the alley, shot at the monsters coming down Central and dove into the crater as a fury of bolts whizzed wildly overhead.

When the firing stopped, I peeked out. Dead Rodans everywhere. Yes!

Hoo ra, squirt. You'll make a mighty fine Marine.

Jesus, kill me now.

Uncle Derek linked with me. *We've got you on the surveillance cameras. Go back down the alley and go west on Earl.*

Copy. I increased my pace, scanning the area nervously. Too many Rodans to track.

A huge Rodan wearing heavy metal armor dropped down in front of me.

I leaped back and emptied my Glock into it. To my horror, the bullets bounced off harmlessly. Not

good.

The creature hissed, exposing needle sharp teeth.

I backed away from it and gaped when in my mind I heard it...no...her say, *Sssiren I come for you.*

Holy shit! Guys, did you hear that? She's psychic!

Uncle Derek answered, *We copy.*

Yessss. Her reptilian eyes glowed a weird yellow. *You mind talk, too.*

I surveyed the tail, black armor and strange star fish shaped device on the side of her scaly head. *You're not like the others.*

Hunter. The creature pointed at the dead Rodan behind me. *Not easssy kill.* In a lightning fast movement, she spun around and used her tail to send my gun flying across the alley. The tail lashed out again, wrapping around my throat and jerking me off my feet.

Ssimple. Catch Ssiren.

I jerked my mace out and sprayed the Hunter in the kisser. She shrieked in agony and hurled me across the alley.

I turned my forward momentum into a roll and somersaulted to my feet. "Not so simple."

Hostiles twelve o'clock, Uncle Derek yelled.

I reacted a second too late and a Rodan grabbed me from behind, twisted my right arm behind my back and clamped a shackle on. I pulled the knife from my neck sheath and stabbed him in the throat. Mustard colored blood gurgled from his mouth as he toppled over.

Just My Luck

I ducked a blow from the second one, kicked him in the nuts and beat the holy shit out of him with the shackle.

Several voices cried, *Watch out!*

Agony seared through every cell in my body and with a moan, I crumpled to the pavement. Damn! Stun rays hurt like a sonovabitch.

I watched helplessly as the Hunter walked over to me. She squatted down and lightly ran a claw down the side of my face. *Ssiren good fighter. I keep head as trophy. Much honor.* She clamped the shackle on my left wrist, picked me up and jogged toward a waiting ship.

Mind-twisting panic flared to life. Honor? My head on a wall? Oh, hell, no. *Ethan! You have any of those Hell Fires left?*

Pinned down. Jake's coming.

Yes, I could sense him. But, oh God, he was too far away for a rescue. Fear skittered along my nerves. I wasn't going to die like this. I touched Jake's mind. *Shoot me.*

His anguish rolled over my mind. *Can't.*

The hell you can't! I don't want my head displayed as a damned trophy. Please.

The Hunter carried me up the ramp. *Do It!*

Bullets slammed into the Hunter's armor and ricocheted off the ship. The doors slid shut.

Kaylee! Jake's scream of grief and horror echoed in my head.

I love you, I said and broke the link.

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Chapter Four

The Hunter slung me over her shoulder and carried me off the ship into some kind of landing bay. I tried to look around but everything spun dizzily around me. Too many Rodans. My spidey sense was in overload. I threw up my shields.

Something brushed against them. I shuddered as I sensed a terrible hunger. A great need.

Then I heard them. People. Hundreds of people. Crying. Screaming. Begging not to die. The coppery smell of blood was overpowering. I opened my eyes and flinched in absolute horror. It was a slaughter house. Guttured corpses hung from the ceiling. My stomach roiled and I struggled against the Hunter's grip. Omigod! Omigod! I couldn't die like that.

The Hunter dug her claws in. *Not die here. You for Kavik.*

My fury roared to life. *You are one dead monster. Do you hear me? I will kill you.*

I could feel the Hunter's amusement. *Sssiren has no clawss. No weaponss.*

I will find a way. You know I have killed many of your kind.

Yess. Cause much damage. Catch you givess me honor. Kavik wantss you above all other humansss. Eat ssslowly. Want you feel much pain.

The only ones feeling pain would be them when

Just My Luck

I blew them to kingdom come with my handy dandy boot bomb. They were the military's answer to cyanide pills. This way we took the bad guys with us. Hoo ra!

Doors slid open and the Hunter carried me into a corridor. I felt her surprise and I was suddenly dropped face first on the floor. Pain blossomed in my nose and I could feel blood running down my chin. Crap.

Kavik. I bring the Sssiren.

A large battled-scarred Rodan, wearing a spiffy leather uniform, grabbed my shirt, hauled me upright and sniffed me.

Sssiren can mind talk.

Kavik's reptilian eyes slowly surveyed me. *How many like you?*

A whole shitload and you are one dead monster.

Kavik gave a guttural bark and licked the blood off my face. Ewww! He was tasting me. My stomach heaved and I vomited all over his spiffy uniform.

Kavik roared, exposing his rather awesome teeth, shook me like a rag doll and hurled me at the Hunter. *Give it to the Coletti.* His snout wrinkled in disgust, Kavik stomped away. *Taste nasty.*

Lucky me.

Ssiren smart. Die fast. I will display your head for all the otherssss to see.

Gee, you shouldn't. Really. It's not necessary.

I honor Ssiren.

That's so sweet of you. I caught the brief image

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of hundreds of heads floating in stasis jars. Holy Mother of God. I struggled feebly against her hold.

The Hunter dragged me down the corridor, opened a door and threw me in head first.

I slammed into a wall and slid to the floor. Stars danced across my vision. I was getting really tired of this.

A low rumbling growl sounded. Could this day get any better? I managed to peel back an eye lid.

Two glowing red eyes floated in the shadows.

Well, shit. I jerked upright. The cell spun wildly around me and I fell back against the cold metal deck. Crap.

My spidey sense went on red alert. I forced my eyes open and focused on a large pair of knee-high leather boots. What big feet you have, Grandpa. I raised my gaze, following the boots up muscular legs, to a massive chest straining the material of a dirty black jumpsuit to a face that could grace the cover of a men's fashion magazine.

I blinked. Wow! The only thing marring his model good looks was the thick black hair hanging in untidy clumps around his face. Even with the bad haircut, he was hot! Really hot. Hey, maybe my luck was finally changing.

Or not. He was watching me like a hungry predator, eyeing his prey. He wanted something from me. But what? I reached out and touched his mind. Holy shit! My blood!

His gaze feral, he hissed, exposing deadly looking fangs.

A fucking vampire! Oh, this was so not

happening. I had to be hallucinating.

The hallucination was a sudden blur of motion. An outstretched hand reached for me. I shrieked like a little girl and dove to one side. His fingertips brushed across my back as I rolled into the corner.

Bellowing in fury, the vampire charged again, only to be jerked to a stop by a chain attached to his boot.

I let out a sob of relief. "Oh, thank you, God."

The vampire snarled, leaned forward, reaching for me. I flattened myself against the wall and his hand missed me by inches.

Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god. This was what the Hunter meant by dying quickly.

He squatted down. His glittering red eyes were a stark contrast to his copper-colored skin. His hunger beat at me.

I wriggled my hands under my butt, brought them up in front of me, and grabbed the lock pick from my bra.

"A fucking vampire. A god damned fucking vampire. This could only happen to me." My hands were shaking so badly, I could barely hold onto the pick. I worked the lock. "C'mon. C'mon. You can do this."

I slanted another look at the vampire's massive arms. God, he made my brothers look puny. "Just had to be on steroids, didn't ya, fang boy?"

The vampire's fangs receded and his eyes changed from red to gold. He looked at me intently and a voice in my mind, commanded, *Come to me, Kaylee.*

Gail Koger

That voice. My stomach lurched in horrified recognition. Holy hell. He couldn't be my pit bull? Could he? *You're Growly guy?*

His lips drew back in rage. *Come to me. Now.*

What really big teeth you have, Grandpa.

The beast grows stronger. I need you.

Yeah, to suck me dry. I slammed my shields shut. Fear curled through me like a living thing. I could feel him prowling along my shield like some great cat, testing it, probing for a weakness. A white hot sensation pierced my mind and suddenly he was in my head. I threw a series of mental punches.

Get.

Out.

Of.

My.

Head.

He blocked the blows and I could feel his presence trying to encircle me.

You are my chosen. Yield.

I threw up another shield. *According to Kavik, I taste nasty. You really don't want to bite me.*

He hissed and his fangs grew even longer. *You will obey me.*

Go fuck yourself, I gritted, fighting back the sudden urge to offer him my neck. I gave the lock pick a desperate twist and the shackles snapped open.

His eyes glowed a fiery red and a sharp, stabbing pain exploded in my head. I doubled over, gasping for air.

“Noooo! Stop.” A tremor shook me at how easily he penetrated my defenses. I struggled to hold him back.

A low growl rumbled in the vampire’s throat as he continued his relentless assault.

Oh God, he was too strong. My gaze fell on my boots. My suicide bomb. I fumbled in my pocket for my lighter. Time to blow him and this fucking ship to kingdom come. I pushed the sole of my boot back, exposing the fuse.

You will not destroy yourself.

The lighter fell from my suddenly nerveless hand. I reached for it again and a vise clamped around my skull. I shrieked in agony as I fought desperately to hold my shield. Sheer panic made me grab the shackles and swing them at his head.

The vampire’s hand snapped out and with one yank, I was suddenly in his arms. I punched him hard in the face.

He rolled, pinning me under him. I screamed as his fangs sank into my neck. I struggled wildly. *I’m not dinner! Let go of me!*

The vampire tightened his grip and kept on sucking. My vision grayed and his thrusting mind swept away my last shield, baring my mind to his assault. I could feel his triumph as he took possession, plundering my memories as his hands claimed my body.

My pain and horror floated away as I fell down a long, black tunnel. Hey! What do you know? There really was a light. Betcha my parents would be waiting for me on the other side. I moved

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eagerly towards the golden glow.

Anguished cries stopped me. My brothers. My family. They felt me dying. Their grief was overwhelming. So much pain. I couldn't bear it.

Then fang boy was there, grabbing me, refusing to let me go. *You will not die. Drink.*

I was thirsty. So very thirsty. My mouth opened and I swallowed. Hmmm. Tasted strange. Warm. Kinda salty.

Salty! I fought him. *No.*

Drink. More of the foul stuff rolled down my throat.

My berserker rage flared to life and I fought my way out of the tunnel. That sonovabitch wasn't turning me into a vampire. My eyes flew open and I looked into his burning gaze. *If you've turned me into a fucking vampire, so help me God, you are so dead.*

Not vampire. I am Coletti.

Whatever. I sprout a pair of fangs and you're dead meat.

He crushed me to his chest. *Only warriors have fangs.*

I sensed his tremendous relief. He needed me alive. I filled the void in him and pushed back the terrible loneliness. I could feel his implacable resolve to make me completely and utterly his.

So not happening. A low rumbling growl sounded in my head. *Stop with the growly shit. You gotta a name?*

I am Talree. I claim you.

I met his predatory gaze and licked my lips

Just My Luck

nervously at the stark possessiveness
in his golden eyes. *And if I don't wanna be claimed?*

His fangs slid out. *You have no choice.*
I pushed against his chest. *The hell I don't.*
His fingers encircled my neck. *You would prefer your head in a stasis jar?*

I swallowed hard. *No. Not really.*
Accept my claim and I will kill every Rodan on this ship.

I pointed to my boot. *I can do that myself.*
Do you know how to fly one of their ships?
No, but...
You wish to die? To leave your people unavenged?

I shuddered as the image of the slaughter house smacked me in the face. Their cries still echoed in my head. *If I accept your claim, I'm what? A walking blood bank for you?*

Choose now. The Hunter returns. He cupped my chin in his massive hand and forced me to meet his mesmerizing gaze. *Do you choose life or death?*

Life. I chose life. *I accept your claim.*
A triumphant smile curled his mouth. *Show me how you unlocked your shackles.*

Sir, yes, sir. I pulled the lock pick out of my bra and with a simple twist popped the lock.

He removed the shackle. *You are a most stubborn female.*

Yeah, I get that a lot.
My spidey sense jangled a warning. The Hunter was outside the cell.

Gail Koger

Talree bared his fangs. *Play dead.*

I took one look at his hard, merciless face and nodded. Jeezus. He and Caleb had intimidation down to an art form.

He tossed me from him. I rolled over and lay unmoving on the cold metal floor.

The Hunter opened the door, weapon held ready and grabbed my leg. I kicked her hard in the face. "Put my head in a fucking jar, will ya?"

Do not play with my food, Talree barked in my mind and, with a lightning fast movement, seized the Hunter and sank his fangs in.

I edged away. Good, he was gonna drain her dry. My gaze fell on the weapon.

Did I really want to be a walking blood bank?

Talree commanded, *Stay.*

My mind got hazy and I literally couldn't move. My temper flared to life. Oh, hell, no. This asshole was so not taking over my life. To my utter surprise, the compulsion holding me in place vanished. I snatched up the weapon and bolted. I had to free the people from the slaughter house.

Talree's roar of fury followed me. *You accepted my claim. Does your word mean nothing?*

I increased my speed. *Yeah, well, I'd have said just about anything to keep you from eating me.*

I will bind you to me.

You can try, fang boy.

Danger!, my inner voice screamed. I spun around, whipping my weapon up.

Shit! The corridor was empty.

An instant later, I sensed Talree behind me. I

ducked under his lunge and bolted.

He appeared in front of me.

I spun around and, dammit, there he was again. How in the hell was he doing that?

His gaze one of pure menace, he stalked towards me. *There is no place you can run that I cannot find you. I will never let you go.*

Well, wasn't that just peachy. This was probably the stupidest thing I'd ever done but...

I attacked. Talree blocked all my blows easily, his gaze assessing my technique. *Your battle skills might work on puny humans, but they could never defeat a Coletti warrior.*

Prick. I launched myself into the air and kicked out with all I had. Talree caught my legs and suddenly I was hanging upside down. Well, hell.

My radar went off. Talree clamped me to him, there was a disorienting moment of blackness and, suddenly, we were behind a cargo bin. What the hell just happened?

He dropped me on my head and ordered, *Stay*.

One minute he was there and then poof. He was gone. Neat trick.

I rubbed my head and got stiffly to my feet. A gentleman, he wasn't. I peered around the bin and saw a scruffy Rodan enter the room, a weapon in one hand.

Uh-oh.

Talree popped in behind him and with one quick movement broke his neck.

I took off running, skidding to a stop when Talree suddenly appeared in front of me. He

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grabbed my braid and yanked me to him.

“Ow! That hurts!”

Do not run from me again.

I tried to pry his fingers off. *Okay, I won't. Please, I have to stop them from slaughtering my people.*

You cannot help the dead. He clamped me to his chest. Another dizzying moment of blackness hit me and then we were standing in a large hanger filled with ships.

Dead? How'd you know they're dead?

Something dark and predatory moved in his eyes. *Their blood no longer calls to me.*

That's it? I dug my nails into Talree's hand as he towed me over to a ship. *I'm not a freakin' dog. Let go of my hair.*

No. He tapped at some funny looking symbols set into a glowing display panel. Lights flashed across the panel.

Listen. If you want to cut and run, go for it. I'm not leaving until I see their cold dead bodies with my own eyes, got it?

Another flash of inky blackness and we were standing on the bridge of the ship.

I guess that was a no. I rammed my elbow into his groin.

A low growl rumbled in Talree's throat. *You try to disable me?*

Damn, he hadn't so much as flinched. *Yeah, well, I had to give it a try. Doesn't work on you, huh?*

A red glow bled into his eyes. *It does not.*

Just My Luck

He shoved me roughly into one of the command chairs and fastened the battle harness around me.

I eyed his groin. *No, balls, huh?*

That you still live is truly amazing.

Been talking to my brothers?

Alarms began to clang.

Damn. Things were about to get interesting.

Talree dropped into the chair next to me and fastened his harness.

Sure you want to take me with you? I can be a lot of trouble.

Of that, I have no doubt. His fingers flew across the control panel.

The ship rumbled to life.

He touched the targeting screen and a laser bolt flashed out, blowing the hanger doors into a million little pieces.

I frowned. How'd I know that was a targeting screen and that was a...

With a tremendous roar the ship catapulted out of the landing bay, slamming me back against the seat. Shit!

An endless fall of stars filled the view screen. I always wanted to go into space. Just not with a really cranky vampire.

The view screen shifted. The Rodan mother ship hung over Earth like a malevolent toad. Its black hull bristled with weapons. *Maybe this would be a good time to run like hell.*

A warrior never runs.

Yeah, that's what General Custer said and look where it got him.

Gail Koger

Be quiet, female.

So I have a tendency to babble when I'm scared shitless. Live with it.

Talree flashed me a black look and touched the targeting screen again. A second later several missiles shot across the view screen and scored a direct hit on the landing bay. A blinding white explosion lit the screen and the ship disintegrated into a cloud of vaporized metal.

Whoa! Good shootin', fang boy.

His lips drew back in a feral snarl as a beeping noise sounded. The targeting screen had lit up like a Christmas tree. Twelve fighters were headed our way.

I guess they're a tad bit cranky cause you blew up their pretty ship. A small fighter suddenly materialized on the view screen, firing its laser cannons.

Talree rolled the ship sharply and unleashed a barrage of laser fire.

The fighter suddenly vanished in a geyser of metal and crimson flames.

Another daring banking maneuver and he brought our ship in behind another enemy ship. A fireball mushroomed, filling the screen.

Damn. You're good.

I am Coletti.

G forces slammed me back against the chair as the ship accelerated sharply and went into a nauseating series of twists, banks and dives. What? He felt the need for speed?

I looked at the targeting screen again and

groaned. Speed was good. Two dozen ships were hot on our tail. The ship shuddered and shook as we took hit after hit.

I felt Talree's fierce concentration and savage joy with the battle. He hated the Rodans as much as I did and his glee over their deaths echoed mine. Yeah, paybacks were a bitch. I grinned as the blips on the screen grew smaller and smaller.

My gaze fell on the firing controls on the console in front of me. Well, that's weird. They were kinda like the controls on Jake's X-box. Even weirder, I knew how to use them. I grabbed the controls, sighted in on the bad guys and started firing.

The blackness of space was suddenly lit with blazing fireballs. "Ha! Eat that, you scaly creeps!" I shot down two more fighters.

I sensed Talree's astonishment as bogeys rapidly disappeared from the screen.

What? You think girls can't shoot?

I have chosen well. I shivered as mental fingers brushed my mind. It was both intimate and possessive.

I wiggled in my seat. *Enough with the touchy-feely crap, okay?*

I've not even begun.

The sensual promise in his voice made me squirm even more. I had a sick feeling that if I didn't get off this ship soon, I'd find myself flat on my back. And not in a good way.

The targeting screen was suddenly empty.

Ah, you can just drop me off anywhere. I can

Gail Koger

find my own way home.

A menacing smile curled Talree's mouth. *Even now you think of ways to escape me.*

I watched the moon flash by in the view screen. *You really don't want to keep me. I'm pure bad luck.*

He looked at me. The eerie, unblinking stare of a predator. *I will never let you go.*

On the rear view screen Earth shrank rapidly from view.

A vise clamped around my heart. *I want to go home.*

We are. Tanith.

Turn this damn ship around. Now. Take me back to Earth.

No. He touched an emblem on the control panel and space turned a strange silvery white.

Chapter Five

It ends now.

Every cell in my body went on red alert. Uh-oh. I unfastened my harness and scrambled out of the chair. My frantic gaze searched for some place to hide. Damn, did it have to be such an itty-bitty ship?

With unhurried movements, Talree undid his harness and stood.

I stared up at him. Did he have to be so fucking big? *Why me? There have to be thousands of women on your world begging for the chance to be with you.*

Something primal and carnal flared to life in his fierce stare. *I desire only you.*

Yeah, well, disappointment's a bitch, but you'll get over it.

I jumped as invisible fangs suddenly nipped at my neck. *Stay the hell away from me.*

Or what?

Phantom hands caressed my breasts and a thumb feathered my nipples. My body clenched in reaction.

Come to me.

I took an involuntary step forward as liquid fire raced through my body. No! I backed up as the horrible truth hit me. If he took me, I would be his forever. *I don't have sex with strangers.*

Gail Koger

Not a stranger. I am your mate.

I shuddered as a ghostly mouth began sucking my right nipple. *We're not even the same species. Our parts won't fit.*

They will fit.

I hissed as mental fingers slid down my stomach and glided between my legs. An electric shock jerked my body as the fingers penetrated me. *Stop it, you horny bastard.*

But you are such a tasty meal. He moved towards me, a predator stalking his prey. *Take off your clothes.*

No. I moaned as the fingers moved deeper inside me and my body began to vibrate with need.

A hot tongue licked my clit. I clenched my fists as lightning arced through me. Another lick and my knees buckled. I crumpled to the floor as I rode a crest of pleasure so intense I thought I would explode. "Oh, God. Oh, God, I'm so screwed."

Yes. Talree tilted my head up and fastened his mouth on mine. Whoa! Kissing was universal. Who knew?

A growl of annoyance sounded in my head as Talree's tongue invaded, tasted, possessed. He began thrusting into my mouth, the rhythm matching the movement deep inside me.

I was dimly aware of him unbuttoning my shirt. A part of me was screaming blue bloody murder. Another part of me welcomed his invasion, embraced it.

My mom's voice suddenly echoed in my head. 'Kaylee, sweetie, a lady does not allow a guy to

tongue fuck her on the first date.’ Mom? Omigod! What was I doing? I fought off his sensual web and jabbed my thumb into the hollow in his neck.

Talree made a funny choking noise and released me. Hot dang! It worked. I scrambled to my feet and made a mad dash for the weapons locker.

With a roar of fury, he lunged after me and grabbed my arm. I twisted, used his forward momentum against him and hurled him over my shoulder.

He bounced off the wall and rolled to his feet. A mocking laugh filled my head, *Nice move, little one. But it will not save you.*

He vanished and a second later massive arms wrapped around me, lifting me off my feet. *Cheater!*

I kicked wildly as he shucked off my boots and pants. *No! I won’t be raped.*

Not rape. Claiming. His mind ruthlessly seized control of me, branding me, claiming me body and soul until it was impossible to know where he started and I ended. His hands and mouth moved over me possessing, consuming every inch of my skin.

My body convulsed as he thrust inside me. Something struck my womb and penetrated it. I screamed as corkscrews of fire ravaged my body.

Mine, Talree roared in my head, bucking into me again and again. The world shattered and spun away.

Spasm after spasm shook me as I fought to get my breath back and my swirling senses under

Gail Koger

control. Lordy. Was it possible to die from sex?

I hurt in unexpected places and the knowledge that he could take control of my mind scared the living bejesus out of me. I had to get away from him.

Hard hands clamped around me. *Still, you fight me.*

I opened my eyes and glared at him. *Get off me.*

You are my mate. The bond we now forge is unbreakable.

Unbreakable! You mean... A till death do us part kinda thing?

Yes, my touch will become necessary. You will come to crave it.

Not happening. I gasped as something inside me hardened and grew larger. He began to move, possession in every stroke.

I whimpered as explosions of pleasure overrode my survival instincts. I couldn't stop myself from moving with him, touching him, kissing him. Our minds merged and we became as one.

* * * *

Danger! I automatically reached out with my senses, searching for the source. There. Something was wrong with the hyper-drive. Hyper-drive? Huh? My eyes popped open and I looked around in confusion.

A hand stroked my stomach. *Shsssh. You are safe.*

The last few hours came roaring back and horror flooded me. *Omigod. Omigod. I had... I had...*

Talree nipped at my neck. *Sex with me. The bond is complete.*

I shuddered. Not good. I wanted to fuck his brains out. God, was this bond thing for real? I looked down at the large hand caressing my stomach. Oh, crap! I was buck naked, too. Clothes! Where were my clothes?

My spidey sense started screaming. Holy shit! I leaned over the command console and took us out of hyper-drive.

Talree bolted upright, his hand tightened on me as he scanned the console. *What are you doing?*

Keeping us from going boom.

Talree dumped me in the other chair and started punching symbols on the console. I could feel his growing alarm.

I scrambled out of the chair, grabbed my clothes and hurriedly dressed.

The ship bucked and did a one-eighty.

Arm flailing, I tumbled around the cockpit and smacked head first into the console. Little stars danced across my vision and I could feel blood running down my face. Shit, I was gonna end up looking like a damn prize fighter.

The ship tumbled again.

As I flew towards the ceiling, Talree snagged me and pulled me into his lap. I clutched at him when the ship spun again. *Think I'm gonna be sick.*

You will not. He mucked about in my mind and the nausea faded away.

A sigh of relief broke from me when the ship stopped spinning. I kept my eyes closed, hoping

Gail Koger

and praying the dizziness would go away. *How bad is it?*

The damage to the hyper-drive has overloaded the power relays. We need to land.

Any good choices?

One. He lapped at the blood running down my chin.

Oh, ick. Do you have to do that?

Your blood is a gift from the Goddess and not to be wasted.

Uh-huh. I wiggled as he licked his way down my throat. He was turning me on. How sick was that?

He tilted my chin up. *Drink.*

My eyes popped open and my gaze flew to the blood running down his arm. *Oh, hell, no. I'm not a fucking vampire.*

You need my strength to survive what is to come.

No! I won't. I felt him in my head and to my utter horror I latched onto his wrist and sucked his blood like a freakin' leach. Ewww. Total gross out.

The smell of burning rubber invaded the room and the ship shook wildly.

Talree dumped me in the other chair. *Strap in.*

A planet blanketed in thick gray clouds appeared on the view screen.

The console lights dimmed and died. Shit! That can't be good.

The ship pitched radically and I gasped as it suddenly plunged towards the surface at terminal velocity. I grabbed the armrests and began to pray.

Talree's hands flew across the console. The

Just My Luck

emergency backup systems came on line and the roar of the engines became deafening.

G forces slammed me back against the seat. My teeth slammed together as the shaking grew worse.

The stressed metal shrieked and groaned. The ship's violent vertical descent slowed and began to level off. My sigh of relief turned into a gasp as systems shorted out, spraying sparks across me.

The ship rolled and something clawed the bottom of the hull. With an abrupt suddenness, the vessel slammed to a stop.

A piece of metal smashed into my head and everything went black.

* * * *

Kaylee, wake up. Kaylee, open your eyes, an insistent voice nagged.

I frowned as I realized someone was licking my face. I glared up at Talree. *I'm not a freakin' lollipop.*

He crushed me to his chest. *Thank the Goddess.*

Can't breathe.

His grip loosened slightly. *The ship is sinking.*

Piss poor pilot, huh?

He dropped a hard kiss on my mouth and poof. We were standing on the hull of the ship.

A surreal nightmare of blackness, rain and the cries of a thousand life forms greeted us. Lightning bursts continuously turned the night brighter than mid-day. One blast revealed an ancient carcass crawling with maggot-like insects.

Another flash illuminated trees with huge

Gail Koger

tentacles for branches.

Another bolt showed thick soupy water where a hideous silhouette floated on the surface.

Another flash showed a dark, oily tongue snaking out from a monstrous, toothy face with jaws that would do a crocodile proud.

This must be what hell looks like.

A bark of laughter broke from him. *You may be right.*

I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck. *Bunch of really hungry-looking varmints out there.*

Grim determination tightened Talree's face. *We will not die here.*

With a groan the ship began to sink into the ooze.

Now I knew how the people on the Titanic felt.

A flash of inky blackness and we appeared on the burnt out remains of a building. The twisted metal rose around us like some grotesque skeleton. *What was this?*

The space port.

Oh, crap. Don't suppose there's a city or something nearby?

Two hundred clicks to the north.

Torrential rain hit in a claustrophobic wave.

Talree pulled me under a metal overhang and handed me a laser pistol. *It's ready to fire. I will try to salvage some supplies.*

I wiped the rain out of my eyes and leveled it at his chest.

He bared his teeth in a lethal smile. *Go ahead. Think you can make it out of here on your own?*

Find your way back to Earth? Live without me?

No, I didn't, probably not and I had no idea. My gaze fastened on the humongous snake dangling behind him and I pulled the trigger.

Talree grinned and popped out.

Damn. Wonder if he could teach me that.

A plaintive cry sounded nearby. I tightened my grip on the weapon. The feeling of being truly and utterly alone struck me like a body blow. I was stuck on a hostile, alien planet with only an oversexed vampire for company. I didn't know where Earth was or even how to find it.

No way out. No way to survive without him. A freakin' vampire who had taken over my mind and body.

A sob broke from me. God, what was I supposed to do? How did I fight him? I needed to talk with my brothers. I needed to feel them in my mind. With every ounce of strength I had, I reached out searching. There! Quinn! I touched his mind. *Quinn!*

Kaylee! Thank God, we hoped you were still alive. Where are you?

I don't know. Some alien hellhole.

What? How?

Talree. He's a Coletti and he sort of rescued me. Actually, he more like kidnapped me. He thinks I belong to him. Can you believe that?

Focus, Kaylee.

Sorry, I'm kinda freakin' out here. I don't know what to do.

Can you get away from him?

Lightning snaked across the sky revealing a

Gail Koger

bloated white shape moving through the slimy gray mud. *Not an option.*

Can he keep you safe?

A sudden wave of weariness rolled over me. *Yeah.*

Stick with him.

Tears rolled down my face. *I love you guys.*

Love... The link snapped.

I jumped about a foot when Talree popped back in with a backpack and a laser rifle.

"Still here? Not fleeing into the swamp to get away from the nasty vampire?"

I glared at him. "Glad you find this so funny."

His thumb wiped away my tears. "You are safe with me."

"Un-huh." My mouth dropped open. "Holy hell. You're speaking English. How?"

Talree's voice was a purr of satisfaction. "I took the knowledge from your mind."

I stared at him in horror. "Just took it, huh?"

He gave me an unholy smile. "Your mind is very compatible to mine. As is your body."

Shit. Shit. Shit. I suddenly had the overwhelming need to feel his hands on me. And God, could he kiss. No! Not good. Bad, Kaylee. Hey! Wait a minute. "This knowledge works both ways, doesn't it?"

Alarm darkened his eyes. "Yes."

Ha! Had him a little worried, didn't I? "Okay, here's the deal. If we're going to survive this place, we have to work together, right?"

He nodded.

Just My Luck

“So, partner, we’re going to forget all about this claiming thing and you’re gonna keep your hands to yourself.” I held out my hand, “Deal?”

He took my hand and jerked me to him. “The Goddess sent you to me when my need was the greatest. It was my right to claim you. You agreed to my claim and now you are mine.”

Jeezus, it was like talking to a rock. “News flash. I don’t belong to you. You can’t take over my life.”

Talree picked me up and laughed. “You do and I have.” His mouth settled on mine. *And I’m a hell of a good kisser.*

Eavesdropping is rude. I melted into his embrace.

Gail Koger

Chapter Six

A feeble sun peered through the thick clouds. Wisps of spider fine mist swirled around the twisted metal.

Well, hell. It wasn't a nightmare. I was sprawled across Talree's chest, my head nestled beneath his chin. His massive arms were wrapped around me, holding me close. Like I was gonna do a vanishing act here? C'mon. I wouldn't get two feet before something nasty ate me.

What scared me the most was that I craved his touch. His body was a source of comfort and gave me a sense of stability in a world gone mad. It had been so long since I felt safe and protected. Shit, it was probably some kind of freaky mind control.

Your feelings are as they should be. We have bonded.

I stared up at Talree's face warily. Yep, freaky mind control.

His gaze settled on my neck. I could feel his growing hunger. He needed blood to survive. I needed him to survive. I could do this. Earth's survival might very well depend on me. If the Coletti joined our fight...

The Rodan and Tai-Kok are our enemies, too. They must be destroyed.

I watched his fangs slide down and I tilted my head back. *Good answer.*

A wolfish grin curved his mouth as he accepted my offer.

My body clenched as his fangs pierced my neck. I tried to ignore the heat building in my womb and forced myself to look out at the swamp.

It seemingly stretched forever. Rackety croaks and echoes of alien birdsong filled the air. The stench of rotted vegetation was overwhelming. Glimmering white trunks of thick sausage-like trees poked out of the sludgy gray water. Their tentacle-like branches stretched towards the sun. God, I was so far from home.

Talree licked the puncture wounds on my neck. "Your blood is truly a gift."

"Gee, just what girl wants to hear."

"Ah." A large finger trailed down my breast. "I love the way you feel when I slide into your hot tight..." I smacked his hand.

"Knock it off." I pointed at the jungle. "How in hell do we get through that without getting eaten?"

"I will teleport us."

"Two hundred miles in one pop?"

"No. Until I cleanse myself of the Gyan, the best I can do is a click or two."

"They drugged you?"

His rage and humiliation rolled over me in a horrifying wave. I caught brief glimpses of him being tortured and starved. Helpless to fight back. Shit. Gyan was like Kryptonite to the Coletti.

Omigod. I'm so sorry.

He stiffened in affronted male pride. *Save your pity. I don't need or want it.*

Gail Koger

The last thing I'll ever feel for you is pity. I know you'll make them pay for what they did to you. Like I know they'll pay for slaughtering my people. We clear on that?

He stared at me for a moment, then smiled. A predator's smile, with lots of fang. *Yes. You have a hunter's heart.*

I'm a cop. Hunting bad guys is what I do.

He snagged the backpack and stood, pulling me up with him. *Now, I understand your brothers' fear. Once you catch the prey's scent, you won't stop.*

Would you?

No. In that we are much alike.

Wait! What about the sun? Won't it turn you into a crispy critter?

I am Coletti. Not vampire.

He hustled me out into the sun. *Guess you can't change into a bat, either?*

No. There was a flash of blackness and we were standing hip deep in the sluggish water. Odd clumps of splotchy red slime clotted the surface. The stench of rotted meat filled the air.

"Ugh, smells like something big up and died."

"It did."

That's when I noticed dozens of gigantic rib cages protruding from the muck. A grotesquely preserved shrine to the dead. Shit!

My radar had been in overload since we crashed. Seemed like every living creature in this quagmire was hell bent on eating us. "How about we get out of here before whatever did that comes back."

Just My Luck

We teleported again and again and again. Each time the stagnant ooze awaited us. The slime clung to me and leaked into my boots. Sweat stung my eyes and rolled down my face. The humidity didn't seem to affect Talree. Lucky him. All I wanted was a large glass of ice tea and some serious time in an air-conditioned room.

A million times later, we popped in on a small island of stone. An eerie silence surrounded us. No birds. No insects. No critters of any kind. As if everything had been stilled, silenced by an ungodly, destructive force. The trees were veiled in shimmering white silk.

"I've got a real bad feeling about this place."

Talree snapped his rifle up, "Yes."

A burning sensation crept across my mind. Almost like I got from the Rodan but different. Whatever it was, it was malevolent and hungry.

I frowned and looked at the trees again. Was that a web? I stepped closer and a sticky substance caught at my face. I jerked it away and an exotic mortuary of the dead fell on me.

I freaked. Hey, you would, too, if you had thousands of creepy crawlies swarming all over you. Dead or not.

Talree watched for a moment in utter amazement as I screamed blue bloody murder. I jumped around like a crazy person, fighting to get free of the webbing. "Get it off! Get it off!"

Talree surged into my mind, halting my panic attack and pulled me free of the web. *Stop! They are dead. They cannot harm you.*

Gail Koger

I glared up at him as I frantically brushed dead critters off me. *It's a fucking web. How big do you think the fucking spiders are?*

Me and my big mouth. Down popped an enormous spider, the spittin' cousin of a black widow on steroids.

Shrieking like a banshee, I pulled my laser pistol and blasted the hell out of it.

A dozen more of its relatives descended from the trees.

I went into my berserker mode and started killing. I was dimly aware of Talree at my back, firing steadily at the incoming spiders.

Kaylee, Stop. Talree commanded. *All the Kotsors are dead.*

What? The red haze cleared from my mind and I automatically scanned the area. Zip. Nada. Nothing. No big creepy-crawlies left. I let out a shaky breath and rubbed at my skin. God, I still had the heebie jeebies.

With a baleful glare, Talree took my weapon. "You cannot, will not lose control like that again."

I rolled my eyes. "I hate spiders. Okay? I mean really, really hate spiders."

"Yet you pursue the Rodan and Tai-Kok without fear."

I shrugged. "It's not the same."

"How is it not?"

"Okay, it's kinda stupid but about a year ago, I pissed Caleb off when I killed a few Tai-Kok without a back-up.

I felt Talree's hiss of disbelief. *You attacked*

eight of them! Alone!

You wanna hear the story or not?

Continue.

"Anyway. As punishment, I got warrant detail. Which Caleb knows I really hate. The morons always rabbit on you. You ever chased some idiot in hundred and ten degree heat?"

Talree shook his head and rubbed at his forehead as if he'd just developed a raging headache.

"So, I went to arrest this guy on a stupid dog at large warrant. I mean, c'mon, dog at large? It wasn't like he was going to do any serious time. Those bureaucratic idiots failed to inform me that the unstable little creep collected spiders for the university.

"He was unloading his catch when I arrived. Before I could say boo, he threw a container of wolf spiders in my face. You ever seen a wolf spider?"

A tremor shook me. "Let me tell ya, big hairy ass spiders. I was seriously freaking out when the asshole knocked me into the back of his van and locks the damn door."

I rubbed at my skin and shuddered. "God, they were everywhere. I can still feel those damn things crawling on me."

"How long did it take you to capture him?"

"About an hour. I introduced his balls to my Taser."

"When we return to your world, I will kill him for you."

Gail Koger

"Aw, how sweet. But a little too late. The Tai-Kok ate him about six months ago."

I felt him mucking around in my mind and the creepy crawly sensation faded away. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Children wailed in my head.

I froze. *Did you hear that?*

Yes.

I reached out, searching for the source. *Hey, sweeties. Where are you?*

Mother dead, they cried.

It's okay. It's okay. We'll help you, but we need to find you first.

Don't know. Lost.

Talree pointed to a thorny octopus tree draped in webbing. *There.*

A big arm wrapped around my waist and we popped in next to the tree.

I peered through the silken strands. Little emerald eyes stared back at me. *Hey, guys.*

Want go home.

Talree cut the web with his knife.

I held out my hand, *C'mon. It's okay. We'll take you home. C'mon out.*

I stiffened as six little golden tarantula-like spiders crawled up my arm. *Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Talking spiders!*

Talree chided, *The universe is filled with thousands of intelligent life forms.*

I twitched as they swarmed up my neck. *Yeah, but spiders?*

Your spidey sense is quiet, is it not?

Yeah, well. The vibes they gave off were innocent, child-like. But...

You would leave them here to be eaten by the Kotsor?

Lord, just lay the guilt trip on. He knew damn well I was raised to protect and serve.

One of the little guys crawled across my chin and peered up at me. *Scared.*

I very carefully touched its silky fur with my finger. *I know, sweetie. Talree and I won't let those nasty Kotsor eat you. Okay?*

Promise?

I shot Talree a glare because I could tell he was laughing his ass off. *Yeah, I promise.*

My radar went on red alert. I could sense dozens of Kotsor scurrying through the trees. *Uh-oh, time to get the hell out of Dodge.*

There are more coming from the west.

Just fucking terrific.

Chittering in alarm, the babies suddenly swarmed my face. *Shit! Shit! Shit! Off the face. Off the face!*

Wouldn't you know it, they moved to the top of my head. Damn, to protect and serve was getting harder and harder. Ignoring Talree's snort of amusement, I linked with them again. *The big guy here is going to teleport us out of here.* I gave them a mental picture of what to expect. *You ready?*

They clung tightly to my hair. When we sensed their agreement, Talree's arm tightened around me and poof. Another dizzying moment of total

Gail Koger

darkness and we popped in on a small island covered in a spongy fibrous mass.

Thousand of armored insects bombarded us. I shrieked and batted frantically at them as they bit and stung me. The babies chirped happily and out of the corner of my eye, I saw little tongues snapping up the bugs.

Talree clutched me in a viselike grip and suddenly we stood on the branch of an enormous sausage tree.

I squirmed madly. "Omigod. Omigod. They're in my clothes."

The babies swarmed over me and I watched in amazement as their busy little tongues snagged the creepy crawlies. I'll be damned. My own personal bug zappers.

I shucked off my clothes and shook out more of the pests. The little guys pounced on them. Tremors shook me as I looked around for more. God, I hated this place.

My gaze settled on Talree. Buck naked, he pulled a winged bloodsucker off his chest and squashed it with his fingers. Whoa! Nice abs.

My fingers itched to touch him. My eyes skimmed downward and I did a double take. No penis! No balls. No pubic hair. Well, that was strange. There was just a slit in the pelvic skin.

Talree growled in my mind, *What?*

Uh, it's just on my planet guys have...you know...penises and uh...you don't seem to have one. I know you do, cause...ah...I...ah.

Felt it? The slit opened and out slid his penis.

I blinked. Freaky and kinda weird. It was snake-like with a frill of barbed flesh around the top.

Weird? Freaky? He stalked towards me, taking scary to a whole new level.

Oh, hell. I took a step back. I'd forgotten the cardinal rule. Never ever make fun of a guy's penis. Even if it weirded you out.

Weirded out? The menace in his voice sent chills down my back.

The snake was getting bigger, straining towards me. *No need to get all snarky. I was just a little...uh... surprised.*

He popped in and grabbed me by the back of my neck. *You find me disgusting? Repulsive? Is that why you fight my touch?*

I swallowed hard. *No. No. You're not repulsive. You're one hot looking guy. It's just...I'm not used to being with a man. Okay? You're my first and you're so not like the men on my planet. I projected the image of Caleb's penis into his mind. See what I mean?*

A sudden grin curved his mouth. *My apologies. I see you were expecting something small and flaccid. The sight of a Coletti's member was simply too much for you.*

Ah huh. Should I tell him that was Caleb's penis at age ten? Nah.

His tongue laved a bloody wound on my shoulder, sending jolts of electricity sizzling through me. *Ah...Kotsors?*

Too far away. His marauding hands stroked and caressed. My knees buckled and he followed me

Gail Koger

down. His busy tongue lapped at my skin.

Not in front of the kids.

The babies are eating.

Ah... My blood heated and I writhed like a wanton. Something brushed across my stomach and shoved at the entrance to my womb. *Whoa! Wait.*

Our parts fit, Talree growled, pinning me beneath him. He surged into me again and again. I screamed as wave after wave of pleasure exploded through me.

I lay there unable to move. Yep, he had killed me with sex.

Something silky slid across my face.

My eyes flew open and I stared up at the little guy perched on my nose.

What doing?

All the babies crowded around my face. Jeezus, major buzz kill. Ah, *we were ah...*

Laughter rumbled in Talree's chest.

I smacked him. *All right, smart guy, you explain it to them.*

The babies stampeded over to his face.

Our people need to join like this to...to remain strong...and to make babies.

Babies! Omigod! Omigod! I struggled to get free of him. *Get off me.*

His arms clamped around me. *You are in no danger of having my child.*

A tidal wave of relief hit me. He was right. Different species. Oh, thank God.

"The idea of having my child horrifies you?"

The slaughter house fresh in my mind, I met his

furious gaze. "Right now. Yeah. Until the Rodan and Tai-Kok are defeated, I can't and won't have children. It's too big a risk."

His hand caressed my face. "I'm sorry you have seen so much death."

The babies scampered back to my head, chittering in alarm.

What's wrong, guys? I reached out searching for the source. Shit! Kotsors. A bunch of them. "Think we pissed them off?"

"Undoubtably." He handed me my slimy clothes.

"Yuck." I reluctantly got dressed.

"When we reach the trading post, I will buy you more."

"With what? I don't think they'll take my credit cards here."

"We must find, kill and skin as many Afulas as we can."

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but what's an Afula?"

The image of a twenty-foot long monstrous crocodile-like creature popped into my head. "Good God, you've got to be kidding?"

"Each hide is worth five thousand credits."

"I can see why. How many do we have to kill to get out of this hellhole?"

Talree wrapped an arm around me. "Twenty."

The babies tightened their grip and poof. We teleported to an island of stone that shimmered a hallucinatory white against the red water.

This was one freaky ass world. "And how do we kill these Afulas?"

My spidey sense screamed a warning.

Gail Koger

The babies chittered loudly.

Talree shoved me behind him as one of the monstrous reptiles charged out of the water, its toothy jaws snapping viciously. In one smooth movement, he brought up his rifle and shot it between the eyes. It collapsed less than a foot away.

My hands shaking, I pointed my pistol at it. "Twenty, huh? Piece of cake." I spun around as its mate surged out of the sludgy muck and drilled it between the eyes. "Got a knife?"

Talree grinned and gave me a hard kiss. "I have chosen well."

Several hot, sweaty, bug bitten, Afula killing hours later, we had the creatures skinned. I smacked a blue fanged butterfly crawling up my leg and flicked it to the babies. Chittering, they fought over it.

They were kinda growing on me. Cute, kept the bugs down and didn't creep me out like the Kotsors. Still couldn't get them to tell me their names. They just started wailing when I asked.

I dug out one of the emergency ration bars and gnawed on it. No matter how much I pretended that it was a big juicy burger loaded with cheese and guacamole, it still tasted like dirt. God, I'd kill for a cold beer and a shower.

I gagged as the wind shifted. Jeezus. Dead Afulas stunk to high heaven. I sniffed my shirt. Shit. I smelled just about as bad as they did.

A grunting roar sounded nearby. A massive head popped out of the water. And another and another.

Just My Luck

"Uh-oh. Talree?"

Talree held out his grimy hand. "Come."

I took his hand. The kids swarmed up my leg and settled on my head.

Several Afulas charged out of the water and began ripping chunks out of the carcasses. Another rushed us. We popped out as the monstrous jaws reached for us.

Gail Koger

Chapter Seven

We appeared on the deck of a huge, dilapidated floating barge. I looked around. The ancient metal buildings were rusted out and covered with globs of fungus that hung like ragged curtains. A motley collection of alien traders crowded the walkways. Most humanoids and some not so much. Big bug thingys. Ewww.

A grin tugged at my mouth at the babies' startled amazement. I knew just how they felt. A bit like *Alice In Wonderland* when she fell down the rabbit hole. In unison, they asked, *Can we eat them?*

Talree ran a gentle finger over them. *Just the little ones.*

I twitched when a cockroach with way too many legs crawled by. I wanted to grab a broom and whack the living hell out of it. Someone could make a fortune selling Raid here.

I blinked. I'll be damned. Some things were universal. A whore house. Females of an assorted variety perched under a tattered awning. Wearing nothing but metal bands around their necks, they flaunted their wares.

My mouth dropped open as one very limber woman leaned down and licked her own pussy. Yeow! *Don't look, kids.*

I quickly followed Talree into a trading post.

The dim interior was filled with clothing in all sizes, odd looking vegetables and fruits, trinkets, medical kits, skins, weapons and some weird ass heads lined the walls. Wonder if the Hunter ever paid this place a visit?

See if you can find some clothing for us.

I grinned. Hoo boy. Nothing I like better than shopping.

Talree dropped the skins on a battered counter. Rotted curtains parted and out stepped a rodent-like creature wearing a richly embroidered yellow caftan. I took another look. No, that was mold. Ewww!

Talree gave a slight bow and broke into some kind of lingo that sounded like a bunch of clicks and whistles. I linked with him and the clicks and whistles became words. "Master Trader, I have twenty Afula skins. Notice the texture and color."

My gaze scanned the displays. Where to start? I spotted a pile of overalls. Oh, yeah. While the kids kept the area clear of wildlife, I sorted through them looking for anything free of mold.

I found a pair that looked like it would fit me and held it up. God, all of them were an icky mildew green. I scraped the fabric. Ewww. I threw it back and found another pair. Dammit, a nasty mustard green, but at least it was free of mold and critters.

I rooted around some more until I found a pair that would fit the big guy.

A bunch of glass containers caught my attention. I wandered over and concentrated. The

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symbols became words. Yipee. Shampoo! Soap! Insect repellant! And a comb. I snagged them and noticed the knives. Hot dang.

My arms piled high with goodies, I staggered towards the fruit and vegetables. I picked up something that looked like an apple but smelled more like a pear. I added some to the pile. Damn, where was a shopping cart when you needed one?

Females. Put them in a shop and they buy everything in sight.

I peered up at Talree. *I can put some back.*

He sorted through the pile and examined the knives. *No, you did well.*

Ah, the knives are mine.

He tested the blade. *Very lethal.*

All the better to kill stuff with. You get enough for the skins?

Yes. He took my goodies and handed me a bottle. *Datol. Nectar of the Goddess.*

I pressed the cold bottle against my face. Omigod. It felt so good. I took a swallow. Beer. Ice cold beer. Or what passed for beer in this neck of the woods. *Bless you.*

While Master Trader Mahaab shows me his boats, I've arranged for a meal for you.

My stomach rumbled. *Food! Real food? Where?*

He grinned and pointed to some tables under the awning. *It's not a burger and fries but I think you'll be happy.* He tilted my chin up with one hand and his eyes bore into mine. *Do not talk to any of the traders or wander off.*

I glared at him. Prick. Out of the corner of my

eye I saw the cockroach thing crawling across the porch and shuddered. *Not gonna be a problem, boss. You really think I want to go sightseeing here? Or talk to that?*

The Romi could be a very intelligent creature.

I don't care if it's freakin' Albert Einstein, it gives me the willies.

You must learn not to judge a life form by its looks. I am a Warlord and as my mate you will travel to many worlds and meet a variety of species.

Warlord!? How in the hell had I missed that? So, you just run around the universe conquering planets?

Can you think of anyone better suited to stop the Rodan and Tai-Kok from slaughtering your people?

He had a point. And you're going to help us out of the goodness of your heart?

Talree threw his head back and roared with laughter.

Yeah, didn't think so. I thought the Rodan and Tai-Kok were your enemies, too?

They are. But lucky for you and your people, my father is the Overlord of our clans. Instead of demanding total surrender, he'll accept a fee for our services.

And what would that be?

A deadly cold seeped into his eyes. The men of your world seem to be incapable of protecting their females. We won't make that mistake.

They protect us. Kinda. Sorta.

Gail Koger

Talree raised a disbelieving eyebrow. *You are a Siren, a valuable asset to your people and, yet, here you are.*

Yeah, well. Damn. They'll never let you take the women.

I don't want them all. Just females like you for my warriors.

I was afraid of that. Sorry to disappoint ya. But I'm one of a kind.

He smiled, showing a lot of fang. Of that I have no doubt. But the females of your clan are psychic. Just like you.

Shit! Shit! Shit! You can't...

I can and will.

He dropped a hard kiss on my mouth. Go eat.

You just can't...

He popped out.

"Coward," I yelled after him. Well, hell. It kept getting worse and worse. Let the Tai-Kok and Rodan continue their raids or give in to the Coletti demands. Knowing United Command, they'd turn us over without hesitation. I had to warn my family.

My stomach rumbled. Right after I ate. I hurried over to the table and sat down. God, I was starving. A naked rodent female with a neck band scurried out and placed several dishes of food on the table.

What? Didn't the men here believe in clothes for their women? I smiled my thanks and she bolted. Well, that was kinda weird. Had the kids freaked her out? Nah, not my sweeties.

I dug in. Omigod! It was so good. Some kinda

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beef stew. Hmm. Or not. I'd better stick with beef. Didn't even want to know what kind of critter it came from. I tasted the other dishes. A mixture of yummy fruit and what tasted like collard greens. I scarfed them down.

The kids scampered down my arms and snagged the blue ant thingys crawling over the table.

I glanced over my shoulder. Where the hell did the waitress go? I saw her peeping out of the doorway and held up my empty bottle.

She disappeared inside. Hmmm. Way too timid. Wonder if the Master Trader was an abusive asshole?

Loved putting their kind in jail. And there probably weren't any women's shelters on this festering hellhole.

The stench of rotting garbage hit me. Oh, gag me. I looked for the source and saw two filthy pig men walking towards me. Their hot gazes roved over me. C'mon, they couldn't be that hard up, could they?

One of them grabbed himself and thrust his hips suggestively. Now, was that nice? I touched their minds and heard, *No owner's band. She's ours for the taking.*

Oh yeah, when hell freezes over. I shifted my hold on the bottle. *Stay here, kids.*

The babies chittered in alarm.

I rose to meet them. "Back off."

They kept coming. Okay, wrong language.

The first one made a grab for me. I ducked and cracked him upside the head with the bottle. His

eyes rolled back and he toppled over.

The second little piggy lunged for me. I grabbed his outstretched arm, twisted and hurled him down the stairs. He tumbled out into the street and landed in a pool of scummy water. Probably the first bath he'd had in a very long time.

Piggy number one lurched to his feet with a big ass knife in one hand.

"Here I am, a tourist on this foul piece of shit and you go and cop an attitude." I lashed out with a solid side kick, knocked the knife out of his hand, spun and drove my foot into his gonads. His eyes bugged as he doubled over and wheezed for air. Another kick sent him crashing down the stairs.

Talree appeared, all predator, with the eyes of death itself. Grabbing both trappers, he hurled them into the swamp below.

I walked over to him. "Ah, they're gonna get eaten."

Talree's merciless gaze met mine. "No one attacks my mate and lives."

The peculiar roar of the Afulas sounded from the swamp and the trappers started screaming.

"That's really sweet and all, but you can't just leave them there. On my world we put bad guys in jail. We don't kill them."

"This is not your world." He wrapped a possessive hand around my neck. "Look around."

I did. The ragtag assortment of trappers and traders watched him warily. And yeah, even the freakin' bug things looked worried.

"They fear me."

“Uh, yeah, you can be a pretty scary guy. But I can take care of myself. I had it under control.”

He leaned down. “But now they know you belong to me. None of them are foolish enough to challenge me.”

I glared at him. “Dammit, I’m not a possession to be fought over.”

Every inch a Warlord, Talree’s hard gaze surveyed the area. “Have I not claimed you? Have I not made you mine?”

“Okay, we had sex. But on my world, when a guy wants to claim a girl, they get married. ‘Kay?”

“Ah, you wish for the bonding ceremony. When we return to Tanith, my father will perform it.”

God, it was like talking to a rock. “I don’t want to marry you. Can’t you get it through your thick skull? I want you to let me go.”

Menace filled his eyes, “Do you? You want me to walk away? Leave you alone and unprotected on this planet? No way of getting home. Knowing that your people will continue to die needlessly?”

I groaned in frustration. “You’re driving me nuts. I just want to go home. Okay?”

Talree didn’t say a word. He just stared down at me, giving me his big, bad, scary face.

I twitched. Yeow! It worked so well. “Okay, I know I need you to survive here.”

“Is that all?”

Well, hell. Time to suck it up and eat some crow. “You’re handy to have around.”

“And?”

“You’re a pretty good kisser.”

Gail Koger

“Anything else?”

“The sex is okay,” I mumbled.

Phantom fingers caressed my body. “Just okay?”

I sucked in a shuddering breath. “Fucking terrific. Is that better?”

He grinned. “I think a shower will cure your bad temper.”

My anger melted away. “Shower? For real?”

“Yes.”

“Let me get the babies.”

Not too long later, I stood under the stream of lukewarm water, letting it wash away the stench of the swamp, relishing the feeling of being clean. Talree poured soap on my scalp and massaged it in. I groaned. It felt so good.

His hands slid down my body as he gently cleansed the grime away. His clever fingers moved back up my body and I shivered as they caressed my breasts.

I got twisted up with lust every time he touched me. Not good. Not good at all. As much as I hated to admit it, the bond between us was growing stronger every day. I didn’t know if I had the strength or the will to break it.

I noticed the lines of stress around his mouth, the fatigue in his eyes and took the bottle of shampoo from him. “Turn about’s fair play. Let me wash your hair.”

He stiffened and anger tightened his face. “No.”

I touched his mind, flinching from his impotent

rage. I saw him being chained down, beaten. His vision clouded with blood, remembering when he lay helplessly as his betrayer cut off his warrior's braids. The ultimate humiliation for a Coletti warrior.

Stretching up, I grabbed his chin. "Hey! They can never take away who you are here." I touched his chest.

"Short hair doesn't make you any less of a man or warrior. You saved me and blew that fucking mother ship up all by yourself. Those aren't the actions of a coward. They're the actions of a warrior. A Warlord."

He stared at me for a moment in disbelief and then crushed me to his chest. "The Goddess chose well. My Teka."

"Can't breathe."

Talree loosened his hold and placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. "I'd be honored for you to wash my hair." He handed me the shampoo and knelt.

I poured some in my hand and went to work. "If I had some scissors, I'd trim it up for you."

"No, I wish to remember what was done to me."

"You sure? I've cut my brother's hair before."

The kids skittered into the shower in hot pursuit of a purple roach. "You go, guys. Get that nasty thing." Yikes, the nasty thing spun around and made a beeline for me. I shrieked and jumped around as the babies chased it around my ankles.

Laughing, Talree scooped me up, threw me

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over his shoulder and carried me to a ratty hammock. This hellhole's idea of a bed. He laid me on the yellowed sheets and kissed me tenderly. His mouth was so addictive.

Fire raged through my blood and I met him kiss for kiss. Talree's artful hands caressed and explored my body until I lost myself in him. His fangs sank into my neck and the world exploded.

I clung to him with my heart pounding frantically. *Wow!*

He framed my face with his hands and kissed me gently. *Yes, wow.*

I snuggled into him and closed my eyes. He stroked my back until he fell asleep.

Talree groaned and twitched in his sleep. I brushed the hair off his face. Poor guy was exhausted. I flinched as I caught flashes of him being beaten and tortured to the point of insanity.

I merged with him. *It's okay. You're safe.*

I won't become your beast.

Beast? Two glowing eyes appeared in my mind and a menacing growl rumbled in my head. Shit. I shook him. *Wake up.*

In one swift movement, I found myself pinned by his merciless strength. His fangs at my neck. I screamed, "Talree! Stop!"

The red bled from his eyes. He rolled and I was cradled against his chest. His hand roamed over me, comforting, stroking, easing my fright. "I never meant... I would never harm you."

I gulped. The hammock's violent rocking was making me seasick.

Talree let out a low, throaty laugh and stretched his body out. The rocking stopped. "Better?"

"Oh, yeah. Think I've taken one too many knocks to the old noggin."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For giving me the ability to laugh again."

"Aw, that's really sweet." I kissed him. "You're very welcome."

"The beast still rides me."

"You said something about a beast. It was almost like you were afraid you'd turn into a werewolf or something."

"Not a werewolf. Something much much worse. A Coletti needs his mental connection to his family, his clan. It's part of who he is."

I nodded. "Like I need to feel my family. Even if they're a pain-in-the-butt most of the time."

He smiled and stroked my back. "If you take that connection away with Gyan, keep us isolated, beaten and starved, we begin to revert to our primitive selves."

"Ah, the glowy eye thing."

"That's part of it. Once we've turned feral, our minds change and become animalistic. The need for blood is overwhelming and we become almost unstoppable killing machines."

In his mind's eye, I saw a monstrous beast suddenly appear. I shuddered. It took deadly to a whole new level. Eyes glowing a fiery red, it charged a group of warriors and literally ripped

them apart with his tusk-like fangs.

“Yeow! Couldn’t get much worse than that. Could it?”

“Imagine an army of such creatures.”

“Holy shit! Who would do that?”

“My betrayer.”

“Why?”

“He wants control of the Clans, of our worlds.”

“The betrayer is family, isn’t he?”

His pain, grief and loss exploded into a burning rage as Talree spat his name out, “Malik. My brother.”

I stroked his face, trying to ease his torment. “And he just gave you to the Rodan? Knew what they were going to do?”

“Yes, just as he knew what they would do with our cloaking technology.”

“That lowlife creep.”

A faint glow filled his eyes, “Malik taunted me, said he would unleash me at the Feast of Musa. He said he would watch as I tore my father, my mother, my half sister to pieces.”

“God, he is so going down.”

“I could feel myself changing, becoming feral. Then, your mind touched me, your rage mirrored mine, your need to kill was mine. You became my instrument of vengeance. My anchor. Without you, I will become that.”

I grabbed his chin. “Never. Do you hear me? It’s not gonna happen. You’re a Warlord, remember? The big bad.”

The glow faded from his eyes. “The big bad?”

“Yeah, the scary guy. You know, the boogie man? The guy who’s going to put the fear of God in Malik and stop his little plan of universal domination.”

“Yes.” His fangs slid down and there was something terrible in those golden eyes. “He will die.”

“Have you tried to reach your family since we escaped?”

“I cannot sense them.”

“Damn. They need to be warned. When we first linked, you communicated with my brothers through me, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, it should work in reverse, right?”

I could feel Talree’s excitement. “Merge with me.”

I did and in his mind I saw his father, Zarek. The Overlord was one big, mean-looking dude. His chiseled features and deadly amber eyes kinda reminded me of Uncle Saul.

He looked like someone you sure as hell didn’t piss off and live to tell about it. A tailored black uniform emphasized his massive frame and on each arm he wore large gold warrior’s bracelets with elaborate designs. An etched gold headband denoted his rank of Overlord and held back his gray dreadlocks.

I found his pathway. Hmmm. It was blocked all right. I created my own and reached out. *Zarek?*

I winced when his mind snapped around mine. *Who are you?*

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Yikes, definitely the big bad. I could see where Talree got his scary face from. *I'm Kaylee, Talree's mate.*

His grip tightened. *Do not lie to me, female. My son is dead.*

Ow. Ow. Ow.

Talree surged through the link. *Not dead, Father.*

Zarek's disbelief and joy swirled over us. *My son! It is you. I don't understand. Malik said you were dead. That Zandar of Clan Sobek had murdered you.*

No. Not dead. Betrayed and given to the Rodan.

I listened as Talree told his father how Malik had trapped him and his warriors. I caressed his back as he emotionlessly detailed his time as a prisoner on the Rodan ship, our meeting and escape. His fury rose as he laid out Malik's plans to take control of the Clans with an army of ferals.

A cold chill ran down my spine as Zarek's grief and shame turned into an icy rage. The predator had been unleashed and Malik would find no mercy. He would be hunted down with a relentless ruthlessness.

He has shamed our Clan and betrayed his own people. His life is forfeit. Where are you? I will send a warbird for you.

Jabal. You need to warn the other Clans. He plans to attack at the Festival of Musa.

He will be stopped. Zarek turned his attention to me and I felt like a bug under a microscope. A

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warrior. Most unusual. Not easily controlled, strong willed and with a unique ability. You have chosen well, my son. She will stand at your side without flinching.

Welcome to our Clan, my daughter. You saved my son and for that I will always be grateful.

No big. We kinda saved each other.

I felt his sudden amusement. She has no idea of what she is to become. I hope I am there to witness it. Be careful, my son. And with that he was gone.

Okay, what'd he mean by that?

Alarm flashed in Talree's eyes. That you will become my life mate.

I smacked his chest. So help me God, if I grow a pair of fangs, you are so dead.

Only warriors have fangs.

And what am I? Chopped liver?

A jolt of electricity zinged through me as he ran his marauding fingers down my stomach and slid them inside me. Hey! You can't distract me with...

His mouth closed on mine and I lost my train of thought. Sneaky bastard.

Gail Koger

Chapter Eight

A Kotsor dropped from the ceiling and crawled towards me. I could feel its hatred, its hunger. It was going to kill me. I tried to move but something sticky pinned me to the floor. Nooo!

I bolted upright, gasping for air. The hammock swung wildly and tossed me on my butt. I scrambled off the floor, grabbed my pistol and looked around wildly. No Kotsor. I took a shuddering breath. God. A nightmare. Just a fucking nightmare.

What's wrong?

Nothing. Bad dream.

Mental fingers brushed my mind in a caress.
Come back to bed.

In a minute. Gotta pee.

I went into the bathroom and splashed water on my face. A purple roach crawled down the wall. Ick! I grabbed my boot and smacked the hell out of it.

Kaylee?

Just a roach.

I felt his mental smile before he went back to sleep. Where the hell were the babies? *Kids?*

Help us, they wailed.

In my mind's eye, I saw a gargantuan fat man covered with bright red tattoos dump them in an enormous glass terrarium.

Oh, hell, no. *I'll be right there.*

I dressed hurriedly, strapped on my laser pistol and shoved my knives into the sheaths. Now I was loaded for bear or fat assholes who tried to hurt my kids.

Talree shifted restlessly in his sleep. I froze. Shit, what was wrong with me? I didn't need his permission. He wasn't my boss. I was a cop. I could deal with this. No reason at all to wake him.

So why was I tiptoeing to the door? I sighed and answered my own question. Because he did the big bad so well.

Deep down, I knew he would never hurt me, but he still scared the bejesus out of me. I slipped out and flew down the stairs. I'd snag the kids and be back before he ever knew I'd been gone.

There. The kids were inside a place called Kotsor. Aw, c'mon. Are you kidding me? Kotsor? Oh, hell. More icky critters.

I stopped at the entrance and peered inside. A bar. Rivers of yellow mold ran down the walls and out onto the floor. Where the hell were the health inspectors?

The tables and chairs were so rusty I was surprised they didn't collapse under the weight of the humanoids and other things sitting on them.

Save Grandma, the kids cried.

I glanced at the terrarium and did a double take. That was the biggest fucking Kotsor I'd ever seen. It crawled towards a golden tarantula the size of a dinner platter. Crap. Couldn't be itty-bitty spiders. Hell no, they had to be gargantuan, King

Gail Koger

Kongs of the arachnid world.

The kids cowered behind big momma. Gotta be Grandma.

Help us, they shrieked.

Coming. I hurried over to the counter. The tattoo-covered asshole was the bartender. I blinked.

Oh ick. His pants were down around his ankles and he was banging one of the poor prostitutes with all he had. Every time he slammed her against the wall, his hairy behind quivered and jiggled like gelatin. Total gross out. If that sight didn't put you off sex, nothing would.

I snuck behind the bar, climbed up a ladder, popped the lid on the terrarium and blasted the hell out of the Kotsor. Yellow guts splattered the glass. *C'mon, kids*.

They scurried over to Grandma and chittered their concern. She had gotten herself webbed to the floor. Aw, hell. I took several deep breaths and crawled in, grimacing as spider guts squished beneath my boots.

I took a quick look at the bartender. Still bangin' the hell out of that poor woman. Jeezus, I'd find the nearest knife and cut the damn thing off.

My skin crawled as I hacked my way through the webbing. Good thing Talree had done his mind meld thing or I'd be freakin' big time. I bent down and held out my hand. *You kids okay?*

They swarmed up my arm chittering happily. I laughed as they snuggled around my face, their

sticky little tongues smacking my face. I stroked them with my finger. *Love you guys, too.*

Grandma. This friend. Saved us.

I stared down at Grandma. Omigod, she was so fucking big! But, I could do this. I could do this. I plastered a smile on my face. *Hi, I'm Kaylee. Nice to meet ya. Sorta.*

Intelligent emerald eyes surveyed me and there was a sudden buzzing in my head. I swayed as everything spun dizzily for a moment. Then with an almost audible click I heard her say, *I am called Tae. I owe you my life and that of my children.*

Wow, how did she do that? *Nah, you don't owe me. Killing Kotsors is a real pleasure. Believe me. Nothing I like better than blowing them into itty-bitty pieces.*

I let out an awkward laugh. *Sorry, I'm having a bit of a problem coping with the wild life on this planet.*

Tae stared up at me and the buzzing started up again. *You fear us?*

Yeah, sorta. But the kids have been a big help. I tickled one of them. *Huh, cutie?* The baby giggled. Who knew spiders could giggle?

And yet, you truly care for them.

What's not to like? Cute little guys and we help each other. I keep the Kotsors from eating them and they keep the insects from eating me. Fair trade.

You are a most unusual humanoid.

That's me, one of a kind. I bent down and cut away the webbing. *How'd you end up in here?*

Gail Koger

I was searching for Woo and her children. The fat one caught me in one of his traps. Most embarrassing.

I hear ya. Got trapped myself and ended up on this hellhole. Ah, no offense.

None taken.

I looked over at the loudly grunting bartender and shuddered. Oh ick, he just shot his wad. *Let's get the hell out of here.*

Tae crawled up my arm and settled on my shoulder. God, if Talree could see me now, he'd be so... ah, pissed. Way pissed. I climbed out.

The bartender pulled up his pants and turned around. His eyes widened when he spotted the spider guts and his gaze zeroed in on me. Didn't take a genius to figure out I was responsible. Not with spiders hanging all over me. Lucky me.

Fatso started screaming and waving his arms around.

I knew how he felt. I wanted to do some jumping and screaming myself. Hey! Was that asshole cussing me out? I concentrated and his words took form.

"You fucking bitch! I'm going to kill you."

I sighed, millions of miles from Earth and all they can call you is fucking bitch. Ya think they could come up with something more original. But no. Always the same old, same old.

The bartender reached behind the bar for his weapon.

Not nice. I drew my pistol and blasted him.

Jumping back, he roared in pain and rage, and

lumbered towards me. "I'm going to squeeze the life from you."

Fat chance. Literally. The guy could barely walk. C'mon. The best he could do would be to fall on me.

Wheezing for air, he stopped and glared at me.

I gave him a jaunty wave and headed for the door.

"I will give a hundred credits to any one that kills that female."

Oh, hell.

A short, squat humanoid stepped in front of the doorway and grinned.

Yeow! He was in serious need of some dental work.

Three pig men stepped out of the shadows with big ass knives in their grubby paws. The biggest one snarled, "Your mate killed our partners, now we kill you."

"Okey-dokey. No other takers? I want this to be a fair fight."

They looked at each other and laughed.

Kids, take Tae up to our room. You'll be safe with Talree.

I could feel Tae's astonishment. *You want to fight them?*

I grinned. *You betcha. I need to vent some hostility and there's nothing like a good fight to do that.*

The men started for me.

I held my arm out and Tae and the kids scrambled up the wall.

Gail Koger

The humanoid charged me. I stepped to the side, rammed my fist into his solar plexus and hooked my right foot behind his heel and in a fast sweep, knocked him flat. Before he could get up, I kicked him in the face.

I back somersaulted out of range of the piggies' knives and grabbed a metal pole from the wall. I twirled it. "You guys ever heard of Nin-po?"

Fatso yelled, "Kill her."

The three little pigs charged.

"Didn't think so. Just consider me the big bad wolf." I swung the pole, catching the first one square in the jaw. His head snapped back and he fell like a poleaxed steer.

Another swing and I nailed the second one in the groin. He doubled over and I dropped him with a hard blow to the back of his skull.

The third one slashed at me with his knife. I danced back and smacked him across the temple. His eyes rolled back and he collapsed to the floor.

I twirled the pole. "Anyone else?"

Terror in his eyes, Fatso fled through the back door.

"Guess not." I turned around and froze. Oh, shit!

Talree stood in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest and wearing his scary face. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Yep, pretty much."

He stalked towards me. "You will never leave my side again without my permission. Do you understand?"

“You bossy prick!” For a long moment, I considered whacking him with the pole. I could get in a few good hits before he took me down.

Talree’s arms dropped to his side and his stance shifted.

Tae popped in with, *Is it wise to attack him?*

Only if you’re suicidal. And I wasn’t that stupid, yet. I sat the pole down on the counter.

“Explain.”

“Fatso captured the kids and was going to feed them and their grandma to the Kotsor. He got a little miffed when I annihilated his little pet and offered a hundred credits to anyone who killed me.”

Talree glanced at the gut-splattered glass. “Grandma?”

I pointed to the wall. *Tae, this is Talree, my warden. Talree this is Tae, the kids’ grandmother.*

He straight armed a fourth piggy as he charged into the room, dropping him like a rock. *It is an honor to meet you.*

The humanoid male tried to crawl away. Talree grabbed him and threw him through the wall.

Whoa! Right through the fucking metal wall. There was a loud splash as he hit the water below. An Afula roared and the screaming started.

Talree picked up the piggies and started chucking them out the hole. Uh-oh. The big, bad Warlord was a bit worked up.

The babies chittered in alarm and I could feel Tae’s growing agitation.

He turned on me and growled, “In the future,

when there is a problem, you will tell me and I will deal with it. Not you.”

My temper flared to life. “Listen fang boy, I’m a trained police officer and if there is one thing I know how to do, it’s fight.”

“I forbid it. You are my mate and you will obey me.”

“Obey?” I literally saw red. “Obey?” I grabbed a chair and climbed up on it. I just hated it when he towered over me. “I won’t be treated like I’m some fluff-brained twit, you moron. I’m a cop.” I poked him in the chest. “What part of that don’t you get? I put my life on the line every fucking day to protect the men, women and children of Phoenix from the Tai-Kok. And I’m damned good at my job.”

Talree plucked me off the chair and held me at eye level. Aw, shit. They were doing the glowy thing. Maybe if I punched him in the throat, I could make a run for it.

And go where? Shit.

His teeth bared in a menacing snarl, Talree hissed, “No one, not even my most trusted warriors, would dare speak to me in that tone.”

Okay, running was out. I bared my teeth and snarled right back. “Maybe it’s time someone did. You can stop with the big, bad, scary face.” I winced, damn that came out way too squeaky.

“You know, what you need is one of those blow-up dolls that you can fuck all night and it never talks back. All you want me for is blood and sex. I’m not your whore. Do you get that? I want a partner. Not a keeper.”

The glow faded from his eyes. "You need a keeper. I now understand your brothers' continual bad temper. Keeping you alive is a full time job."

"I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself," I yelled.

He raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Shit just happens to me."

"With terrifying regularity."

"Didn't I warn you that I was a trouble magnet? You should have left me on Earth."

"That was never an option."

I felt him ruffling through my mind. "Hey, stop that. It tickles."

The ruffling stopped and a satisfied smile curved his mouth. "On your world before approaching an armed suspect, a cop calls for backup. Correct?"

Well, shit. Nailed me on that one. "Yeah." Okay, I'll admit I'm a bit of a risk taker, but hey, you can't follow the rulebook all the time.

"Then you will tell me when you sense trouble. I am your backup." He shook me. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." God, he was as bad as Caleb.

"And you have never been my whore. You are my bond mate. A great honor on my world." He nuzzled my neck. "Blood bank you'll have to live with."

Talree cradled me against his chest. "If you were to die, the beast would be unleashed. I cannot allow that to happen. You must stay safe. Do you understand?"

Gail Koger

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “There aren’t any guarantees in life. You can get killed anytime, any place. I learned that a long time ago. Life is dangerous. This place is dangerous. The Rodan and Tai-Kok are still out there and then there’s Malik.”

My spidey sense went on red alert. I reached out searching for the source. Oh, shit! There were about fifty pissed off trappers heading our way.

Talree held out his arm to Tae. *We must leave.*

The babies scampered up his arm and settled on my head. I was really grateful when Tae perched on Talree’s shoulder. We popped out as the trappers stormed in.

Chapter Nine

We appeared on the deck of a small barge. In the bright moonlight, I could see that the metal was rusted but, thank the Lord, free of mold and fungus. Talree opened the door to the cabin and allowed Tae to crawl off.

His eyes glowed an eerie red as he lit a lantern. Oh, hell, he was ready to blow. I mumbled to myself, “What kind of moron pisses off a Warlord?”

The babies interjected, *You do. You moron?*

Tae’s laughter sounded in my head. *They have a point.*

I rolled my eyes. Shit, I just had to broadcast that. *It’s not the same.*

Talree grabbed my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. *Is it not? Do not leave the barge. I’ll be back.* He popped out.

What? He was the Terminator now? Aw, hell, he kinda was. With all that pent up rage, he was gonna do something stupid. He had to prove to himself he was still the big, bad Warlord. God, Malik had really done a number on him.

But, dammit, he wasn’t bulletproof. Just the thought of him being hurt or, god-forbid, killed, made me go cold with fear. If I lost him... My stomach lurched sickeningly. I needed him. Really needed him. Life without him would be...

Oh, crap. My goose was done cooked. All my

Gail Koger

plans to ditch him went up in smoke. We were mated for life. I literally couldn't leave him. Shit. Shit. Shit.

I had to get to him before he got himself killed. I headed for the dock.

You will not leave the barge.

If you think I'm gonna sit idly by while you take on that bunch of goons by yourself, think again.

His mind ensnared mine and a growl rumbled in my head. *Go back inside.*

To my horror, I turned and walked back to the cabin. *You prick!*

Stay, Talree commanded and his rage was like a living thing.

I flinched and fought against his control. *I'm not a fucking dog.*

Do not push me now. You will not like the consequences.

I tried to break free. Pain exploded in my mind and I dropped to my knees. *Stop!*

You will not put yourself at risk again. Do you understand me?

Yes. The pain vanished. A shudder shook me. Oh God, what was I going to do? I couldn't, wouldn't live this way.

You will learn to live as a Coletti.

My temper flared. The fucking asshole! *And being a Coletti is taking on fifty armed men all by your lonesome? While the little woman stands in the corner, sobbing hysterically? Not happening. So, go do your big, bad Lone Ranger act. Hi-yo,*

Silver!

And don't you ever chew my ass again for doing the same thing.

I am a Warlord. They knew that you belonged to me and still they attacked. Now, they pay the price.

Ooooh, the big scary.

Exactly, he snarled and broke the link.

Yippee-ki-yay. Ride em,' Silver. Shit. Why did men always have to prove their masculinity?

I blew out a long breath and looked out at the swamp nervously. Never knew what kind of critter was getting ready to pounce.

The white trunks of the sausage trees glimmered in the darkness. Rackety croaks, the roar of Afulas and the whine of a zillion insects filled the night air. I gasped as hundreds of glow bugs danced in the darkness. Wow, how pretty.

Those pretties like to suck your blood, Tae commented.

Yikes! Thanks. I quickly shut the door and looked around. On one wall was a tiny galley complete with a refrigerator. I opened it. The jerk did have his good points. It was full of beer, fruit and vegetables. The other wall was storage and a curtained off itty-bitty bathroom. At the back of the cabin was a bed.

I grabbed a beer and plopped down on the bed. Are your males bossy pricks, like mine?

Sometimes, but if they displease us, we just eat them, Tae replied.

Oh shit. Really?

Gail Koger

Yes.

Whoa!

The babies giggled.

At least, that's what I keep telling Datlow, my bossy prick of a mate.

I grinned, a spider with a sense of humor. Gotta love it.

Tae snagged a glow bug and chowed down hungrily. *Why did you come to our world?*

It's a long story but the short version is that we crashed-landed here.

Ah. She snagged another bug. *Start at the beginning.*

Okay, one way to keep my mind off Talree and his suicidal tendencies. *I'm from a planet called Earth. Five years ago the Tai-Kok attacked our world.* I gave her mental pictures of them, their ships and of their savage attacks.

They are much like the Kotsors.

Yeah, both are ruthless killers.

And your leaders stopped them?

I snorted. *Not exactly. Even after the Tai-Kok slaughtered hundreds of thousands of our people, there were some who felt that we should negotiate with the monsters. That if we just talked to them, we could get them to agree to a peace treaty. Yeah, right. They ate the peace delegates. Butchered them on live TV.*

That's when our leaders finally got it. We fought or we died. The first year, a lot of us died. The second year we managed to bring down one of their ships and salvaged their technology. We've

been using it against them ever since.

Tae crawled onto the bed. *You lost family?*

My mind flashed back to that horrible day and I shuddered. *Yeah, my parents.*

I grieve for your loss.

The babies snuggled against my neck and their little tongues smacked my face. I stroked them. *Thanks.*

Where did you meet your bossy prick of a mate?

On a Rodan ship. Got myself captured and thrown in his cell. Not one of my better days. I laughed. Thought he was a vampire. I showed her mental pictures of our first meeting.

He took your blood?

Oh, yeah, they had starved him and the big, bad vampire about sucked me dry. Then he forced me to drink his blood. Ick.

He is a Kotsor! I will eat him for you.

Eat? They ate people? Holy shit. Aw, *that's really sweet of you to offer, but I kinda like having him around.*

A loud explosion rent the night.

I looked out the window as a rippling fire ball blossomed from the Kotsor Bar.

That idiot was going to get himself killed.

I linked with Talree. Through his eyes I could see the deck was littered with bodies. Shit. Shit. Shit. I could feel the beast. Its savagery. Its need to kill. *You can't sink the barge.*

Can I not? With a savage growl he added, *They would have killed you.*

Gail Koger

What about those poor women? Are you going to feed them to the Afulas, too?

Talree's gaze fell on a prostitute who cowered in a corner. Her expression was one of blind terror.

You sink the ship and she dies with the others.

I felt his rage drain away.

Come back to the ship. I promised Tae we would take her and the kids home.

At his hesitation, I added, *Please, I need you.*

He popped into the cabin. *Do you?*

I stood up on the bed, wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him. *Yeah, I do. You can't get dead on me. Okay? I'd be stuck on this hellhole forever.*

He tilted my head up. *Is that the only reason?*

No, but I'm still pissed at you. I'm not cut out to watch from the sidelines while you get your ass kicked. Okay?

I did not get my ass kicked.

Today you did the ass kicking, but what happens if the next time you're outnumbered? You expect me to stand there and do nothing? If that's the kind of mate you want, you'd better undo this damned bond and find some little mouse on your world.

The bond cannot be undone. We are mated for life.

If you die, what happens to me? Your father gives me to some other warrior?

His arms clamped around me. *I will kill anyone that touches you.*

Kinda hard to do if you're dead. So, partner,

Just My Luck

from now on, I'm your back-up.

Got it?

A smile touched his mouth. Yes, ma'am.

Good. Now why don't you fire up that barge engine and we get the hell out of here.

* * * *

A mist crawled over the festering of plants. The mirror black surface of the water was dotted with hard cabbage-like flowers. Each was colored in vivid shades of red and pink. Studded spikes sprouted from the center of the flowers and stunk of rotted flesh. Hundreds of weird mosquito type insects flitted about the spikes.

Talree guided the barge through the floating garden. From my perch on top of the cabin, I kept watch for killer critters. My inner radar was tingling. Someone or something was out there watching. But I couldn't sense any danger. Yet.

Tae wiggled in my lap and I started stroking her again. If she was a dog, her tail would be wagging. Who knew spiders loved to be petted?

Taborlin lies beyond the forest of the dead,
Tae said.

I looked ahead at the tangled network of raised roots that spread from a skeletal forest of trees.
Pretty eerie looking place.

It is haunted.

You're shittin' me. With ghosts?

Yes. The Old Ones made their last stand here.

I take it that it didn't go well for them?

They defeated their enemy, but the weapon they used destroyed them, as well. Now nothing

Gail Koger

grows or lives in this place.

Maybe we should go around.

As long as we don't linger, it is safe.

You sure? I don't want to glow in the dark or grow another head. I could feel Talree's amusement.

That danger is long past.

Un-huh. I linked with Talree. Did you get that? Can we go any faster?

No, too much debris.

I felt a sudden tension in him and followed his gaze. Holy shit! Hundreds of web covered bodies hung from the trees. Ah, Tae.

They are a warning to keep the trappers out.

Pretty damn effective one. So, any moron that wanders into your territory, gets eaten?

Yes.

Any chance they'll want to eat us, too?

I will not allow it. You are under my protection.

Swell. I stared up at the bodies as we chugged by. The shriveled husks swung in the wind. Every one of their faces was frozen in a macabre mask of horror.

Talree brushed a reassuring caress across my mind. Nothing will happen.

Hello, shit magnet here.

The engine made a loud grinding noise and stopped.

I glared at Talree. See, I told ya.

He gave a grunt of disgust as smoke boiled from the engine compartment.

The babies screeched and clung to my hair.

Tae let out a blood curdling shriek and skittered up my chest. She clutched my shoulder and shook. Wow! Fire scared the living hell out of them.

“We got a fire extinguisher?”

Talree grabbed a thin metal tube, flipped open the hatch and sprayed the contents into the smoke.

I stroked Tae and the kids. *You guys okay?*

Tae shuddered. *Trappers set our city on fire.* In her mind’s eyes I saw the fire explode in the night. I could feel the unbelievably hot flames on my face as it ate its way towards me and my family. Fear tore through me as we fled in panic. Quick, ravenous, it roared after us, chasing us through the city, killing anything in its path.

Talree suddenly appeared in the flames. *The fire is out.*

The images vanished.

I took a shuddering breath. It had been so real. *I am so sorry, Tae.* The bodies suddenly made horrible sense.

Concern in his eyes, Talree massaged the back of my neck. “You okay?”

“Yeah. How bad is it?”

“I think our good friend, Trader Mahaab, sabotaged the engine.”

“What? Why would he do that?”

“For the bounty.”

“Holy hell. The Rodan know where we crashed?”

“Yes.”

Gail Koger

“That’s why the trappers attacked last night.”

He nodded grimly.

“How long do we have before Malik and his bunch show up?”

“A day at the most.”

“Crap. Can you fix it?”

“Of course, I am Coletti.”

Un-huh. Good thing Dad insisted I take those mechanic courses. “I’ll help. I’m pretty good at fixing things. We got tools?”

It took us three hot, sweaty hours to take the engine apart. Another two hours to fix the problem.

The setting sun turned the fog from pink to cinnamon to scarlet. I sat there for a moment admiring it. Kinda reminded me of the sunsets at home. I smacked at a bug. Minus the horde of insects.

A flash of movement caught my eye. I turned and for a brief moment, it was almost like the trees were moving. Nah, had to be the fog. The trees moved again. I grabbed the sniper rifle and sighted in.

Holy hell! The trees were literally crawling with Godzilla size spiders. Okay, they weren’t really that big. But, fuck, big enough. *Ah, Tae, I think Datlow and his troops are here.*

She scrambled from the cabin with the babies trailing behind her. *Where?*

I pointed.

Talree stepped out to take a look. Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Webs caught his chest, arms and legs, pinning him to the cabin. He roared in fury and

struggled to break free.

I ducked and dodged as web balls flew in my direction. Now, was that nice? I took Datlow's brain wave patterns from Tae's mind and in my best cop voice, commanded, *Stop shooting at us! We're just bringing Tae and the kids home. We mean you no harm.*

A web ball streaked by, missing me by inches. *What part of, we mean you no harm, don't you get, assholes?*

Tae jumped in front of me. *Stop! They are under my protection.*

You know the law. Any of their kind who enter our lands dies.

Six big ass spiders dropped onto the deck and crawled towards us.

Real friendly bunch, aren't ya? Does the fact that we risked our lives to get the kids out of a fucking Kotsor nest matter? Or the fact that I saved Tae from being eaten by Fatso's pet Kotsor?

I felt Datlow's sudden rage. *You were trapped by the fat one? You carry my children and you put yourself at risk?*

Blabbermouth, Tae hissed.

Sorry. I gasped when it finally hit me, Omigod! You're pregnant?

Anger radiated from Datlow as he approached Tae. *When I'm finished with you, you will never disobey me again.*

I stuck the sniper rifle in his face. *You lay one finger...er...fang on Tae and I will kill you.*

Splat! The sniper rifle was suddenly jerked out

of my hand. Oh, hell.

Thirty pounds of enraged spider slammed into my chest, knocking me flat. I yelped as my legs and left arm were suddenly webbed to the deck. Deadly black fangs erupted from Datlow's shiny golden fur and streaked for my neck. I jammed my knife against his body. *You bite me and I'll gut you.*

You dare to threaten me, female?

Crap, just what I needed, another big bad. *Gee, let me think.* I poked him with the tip of my knife as his fangs elongated. *It's not a threat, it's a promise. I won't let you hurt Tae or the kids.* I gave him another jab. *Got it?*

A rumbling growl sounded from Talree as he strained to break free.

The kids hissed at Datlow. *Not hurt friend.*

Datlow hissed back. *Your friend needs to be taught a lesson.*

And the next thing I knew, my brave kids charged down my face to attack him. *Off the face. Off the face.*

Sticky goo splattered my right hand, gluing it and the knife to my chest. Oh, crap.

Gut me? His fangs pierced the skin on my neck.

The babies bit him.

He reared back in surprise.

Tae jumped on my face. *You'll have to kill me, too.*

Hard time breathing here.

Datlow pounced on her and they tumbled around the deck, fighting.

I groaned when he easily pinned her down.

Just My Luck

Do you yield, female?

The kids swarmed his back and began biting the shit out of him.

Way to go, kids!

The spider warriors charged over and grabbed them with their fangs.

Nooo! Let them go! I sawed desperately at the webbing. Don't hurt them.

My babies squeaked frantically and I sawed harder.

Datlow growled at Tae, *Yield and they live.*

Tae quivered and stopped struggling. *I yield.*

I could feel Datlow's triumphant satisfaction. *You ass. What kind of jerk beats up on a pregnant female?*

Talree surged into my mind, *Kaylee, do not antagonize him further.*

Your mate needs to be taught proper respect for males.

I am working on it.

What?

She is stubborn like my Tae.

Very and a warrior.

As is Tae. We should discuss training techniques.

When I get loose, I'm gonna kick your ass.

A temper, too.

The babies wailed.

Let my kids go.

Datlow crawled over to me. *But she will make a good mother.*

That's when it hit me. He was laughing! *What's*

Gail Koger

so damned funny?

I cannot believe there is another female like my Tae. What are the odds?

You're not going to eat us?

Datlow crawled up on my chest and stared down at me. No, humanoids always leave a bad taste in my mouth. But if you point a weapon at me again, I will put you in the trees with the others. Do you understand?

Yep, got it.

Good. He bit off the webbing pinning me down. I scrambled to my feet and held my arm out for the kids. They flew to me, chittering in distress. I stroked them. It's okay. I won't let the big creepy spider hurt you.

Maybe I should bite you.

I looked over at Tae, who lay motionless on the back. Omigod, are you hurt?

I have not given her permission to move.

What! You prick! How dare you treat her that way?

I heard Talree's groan an instant before webbing encased me in a thick sticky goo and I was jerked straight up into a tree. Hey!

You were warned, Talree said, not an ounce of sympathy in his voice. You must learn to respect other species' customs.

Like you do when you conquer a world? Or take women who don't belong to you?

We do what we must to ensure our survival.

That's a piss poor excuse for taking what you want.

Just My Luck

I could inject her with venom, if you like,
Datlow offered. *It would shut her up.*

I broke the link. God, men were such jerks.

The kids gnawed their way through the webbing. *We go down.*

I grinned. Good babies. My glee turned to horror as I was suddenly falling. Oh, hell. I hit the water with a loud splash and sank into the murky depths, still entangled in the web.

Afulas rose from the bottom of the swamp, eager for a good meal.

Kaylee! Talree's roar echoed in my head.

The babies shrieked and I could feel them floundering on the surface.

Tae's scream of horror followed me down, down, down.

I sensed an Afula beneath me. Oh, hell! It was just like a very hungry gator. In utter panic, I reached out and grabbed its mind. *No bite!* I could feel its confusion and tightened my grip as the massive body bumped into me. I started to slide off, but the webbing stuck fast and I was suddenly riding the damned thing. Omigod. Omigod. *Up! Up!*

We shot towards the surface.

My lungs began to burn. If I blacked out, I was gator bait. *Faster,* I commanded.

We erupted from the water and I sucked in a lungful of air. Holy hell, that had been close. I glanced around. Where was the fucking boat?

I jumped when a grunting roar sounded less than a foot away. In the dim light I saw a massive head pop to the surface. And another. And another.

Gail Koger

Talree!

I am here.

My eyes darted around frantically. *Where?*

Something furry dropped down beside me and I let out a shriek.

Calm yourself, female, Datlow instructed and gnawed at the webbing gluing me to the scaly hide.

Calm? You want me to be calm? I'm riding a fucking Afula and there's a bunch more ready to start chowing down!

A beam of incandescent red sizzled by and struck the Afula gliding towards me.

It roared in agony and flailed about.

Another beam hit it and it stopped moving.

The monster beneath me suddenly thrashed wildly, trying to dislodge me. Shit! I tightened my grip on its mind. *Stop!*

It quivered, but obeyed.

I watched in horror as the others moved in and started tearing huge chunks out of the dead one. *Get me out of here!*

Suddenly I shot straight up. "Hey!"

Another web struck me and I was flying through the air. "Eeeek!"

Splat! Webbing caught my feet and I bobbed six feet over the swamp.

Massive jaws erupted from the water and a mouthful of needle sharp teeth reached for me. I screamed like a little girl. "Talree!"

A laser bolt struck it. The monster fell back with a tremendous splash and its buddies attacked. Ugh. They were like a school of piranhas in a

Just My Luck

feeding frenzy.

Datlow crawled over me. *You make an awful lot of noise, female.*

I fought the webbing. *I'm gonna kick your ass.*

You can try.

He bit through the webbing and I fell, again.

You fucking bug, I screamed. Instead of hitting the water, I landed in a familiar pair of arms. I shuddered in relief.

You will be the death of me, Talree gritted, cradling me against his chest.

Shit magnet, I sniffed, fighting back tears. *I want to go home.*

There is no going back, Talree snapped and carried me inside the barge.

Gail Koger

Chapter Ten

Hot! I tried to kick the furry blanket off me. I frowned when it chittered in irritation and clung to me. Huh? Everything came rushing back. Oh, hell. I opened my eyes. “Eeeekkk!” There were spiders everywhere. On me, the bed and the walls. And where the hell were my clothes?

They’re our guards, Tae said sleepily.

What! *Guards?*

Our bossy pricks decided it wasn’t safe to leave us alone. Something about trouble magnets.

I rolled my eyes. *They aren’t trying to kill each other, are they?*

Tae laughed. *No, they have become friends.*

Great. Just what we need is two bossy pricks teaming up to figure out ways to train us.

What they don’t know is that we are the ones training them.

I laughed. *You got that right.*

That’s when I noticed our guards giving us the evil eye.

Using my best cop voice, I ordered, *Off the bed.*

They didn’t budge an inch.

Off the bed!

They just stared at me.

Well, hell, I must be losing my touch.

The kids stirred on the pillow. *Want us to bite*

them?

No! That's all right. I glared at the warriors. *Look, fellas, I need to pee and I'm hungry. So get the hell off of me!*

They reluctantly crawled up the walls.

The spiders probably didn't give a rat's ass that I was buck naked. But all those eyes on me made my skin itch. I jumped out of bed and rushed into the tiny bathroom.

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I sat on the pot and hissed when I realized the little creeps had followed me in. *Out! Get out!*

A warrior with streaks of gray in his fur climbed down the wall until we were almost eyeball to eyeball. *If we leave you alone, unguarded, your mate will kill us. If he does not, Datlow will.*

I sighed. Just fucking terrific. *Okay. Whatever.*

Doing my business with a bunch of spiders watching was right at the top of my to do list. Not! I hurriedly finished, splashed some water on my face and shrieked when I caught a glimpse of myself in the piss poor excuse of a mirror.

Holy hell. My hair was matted to my skull by dried swamp scum. I looked down and winced. The rest of me wasn't much better. I looked like I'd been mud wrestling and lost. No wonder Talree hadn't hung around. Probably stank to high heaven, too. God, I'd kill for a massage and some serious time in a spa.

Rain splattered against the hull. I grabbed the shampoo and soap. *Okay, boys, I'm going outside for a shower.*

Gail Koger

The old guy grumbled, *Females.*

Grabbing my filthy coverall off the floor, I stomped outside and started scrubbing. Once I was clean of mud, I went to work on my coverall.

The warriors crouched around me, chittering their displeasure.

Oh, bite me, I snapped.

They all charged me.

Holy hell! I jumped back. *Stop! It's just a figure of speech.*

In my mind I could hear them snickering, laughing their asses off at scaring the poor little humanoid. *Har. Har. Very funny.*

You are easily frightened, female, the old guy said.

Am not.

He brushed his leg across my foot.

I twitched and jerked my foot away. *Nothing personal, but I don't like creepy crawlies. Okay?* I gave them a mental picture of my run in with the wolf spiders.

A few of our small cousins crawl on you and it turns you into a scared little petka? As I said, easily frightened.

Arrgh. Petka was their version of a bunny rabbit. I flashed them images of the Tai-Kok and me killing them. *Am I still a petka?*

Ah, you are a killer petka. Pardon our disrespect.

How'd you like to get drop kicked off this boat, old man?

The old man leaped straight off the deck and

landed on my shoulder. I staggered under the sudden weight and froze when his fangs nipped my neck.

How'd you like me to suck you dry, Petka?

I gulped. *Nice trick. You gotta a name?*

I am called Bey.

Okay, Bey, why don't you just crawl on off and let me get back to my laundry.

As you wish, Petka. He slowly inched his way down my body.

Oh, give it a rest. You've made your point, I said, trying to shake him off my leg.

He clung to me. *You humanoids have a word. What is it? Ah, yes, the word is please.*

I drew my fist back to pop him one.

His fangs chomped down on my leg.

God damned creepy crawlies! I glared down at him. *Please get the fuck off my leg.*

He hopped down and the other warriors gave him a spider version of the high five.

God save me from males and testosterone.

The babies giggled. *Uncle Bey says he taught squealing female a lesson.*

Arrgh. When I got back to Earth I was stocking up on Raid and coming back here to spray the hell out of these creepy little buggers.

Tae's laughter echoed in my head. *My brother is one...how do you say...ah...one tough cookie.*

Your brother, huh? Figures. Now I can't fry him.

A web ball glued my foot to the deck. *You could try, Petka.*

God damned bug, knock it off.

Gail Koger

Datlow said you were to learn respect.

Ooooh, you fucking asshole.

Talree growled in my mind, *Kaylee! Behave yourself.*

Sir, yes, sir. I tugged wildly at my foot. *Where the hell are you?*

Doing recon. Try to stay out of trouble and don't irritate the warriors. The link broke.

Believe me, I'd been trying since I was four. But trouble always found me. I gave my foot another tug. Shit! I took a deep breath and looked at Bey. *Could you please release my foot?*

He crawled over and slowly nibbled the webbing off. What a prick! Next time I needed a shower, I was gonna be armed to the teeth.

Bey nipped my toes and rubbed himself against my leg.

So help me God, if he started humping me, I was kicking his... Agony seared through every cell in my body and I crumpled to the deck with a moan. Fuck! Stun rays hurt like a sonovabitch.

Bey jumped on my chest, poised to fight. *You are injured, Petka?*

Tae, the babies and a dozen other warriors poured out of the cabin, fangs elongated and ready for battle.

I could feel Tae scanning the area. *I sense no enemies.*

I twitched and tried to sit up. What the hell had just happened?

The babies and Tae crawled on my chest. *Kaylee, where are you hurt?*

Horror flared to life. Omigod! It was Talree! Someone had shot him and I got hit with the blow back. I reached out frantically. *Talree!*

His mind touched mine and I could sense his pain and rage. *I still live.*

Is it the Rodan?

He hissed in pain as a booted foot connected with his ribs, again and again and again. *Rogue... Coletti.*

My berserker rage flared to life. *They are so dead.*

No! Cannot... risk... you. Pain exploded in his head and I fell into the blackness.

Petka? Petka? Bey prodded my mind insistently.

Ack! He was giving me such a headache. *I'm not a fucking bunny rabbit, asshole.*

Don't die, the babies wailed, their sticky little tongues smacked my face.

I opened my eyes. Spiders, spiders everywhere. Shit, if this didn't get me over my bug phobia, nothing would.

Tae peered down at me. *Kaylee?*

Then it hit me and I jerked upright with a cry of horror. *Talree! Omigod. I can't feel him.*

He still lives, Datlow said.

Tremors shook me. *You're sure?*

Yes. He projected the image of a huge, scarred-face Coletti warrior into my mind. *This one called to him, said his father had sent him. When your mate stepped out of the trees, he was shot. A rusty metal barn took form in my head. They took him inside.*

Gail Koger

How badly was he hurt?
I cannot tell. His mind is closed to me.
Another tremor shook me. *Oh, God. How many warriors?*

Through his mind, I saw twenty Rodan and Coletti guarding the outside of the barn.

Black despair almost overwhelmed me. Then I got mad. Okay, the lack of chocolate helped push me into a psychotic rage. Those assholes were so going down. From now on, when a Rodan heard my name, they would run screaming in horror. Ditto for the rogue Colettis.

I jumped up, pulled on my wet coverall and quickly braided my hair. I just had to figure out a way to rescue him. Critter control? It'd worked before, but against that many warriors? If only my brothers weren't a zillion miles away.

You are not alone, Petka. Looks like I'm stuck with a bunny rabbit name. Great.

You saved my mate. The Tabor always repay their debts, Datlow stated.

Do not worry, we will free your bossy prick, Tae added.

I just stared at them for a moment. *You mean it?*

You put yourself at risk for us. Can we do any less?

I hugged Tae. *No one could ask for a better friend.* God, who would of thunk it?

Me, best friends with a spider?

The babies bounced up and down. *We help. We help.*

Aw, that's so sweet. I pressed them to my face and kissed them. *Thanks, guys.*

Bey skittered away as if he was afraid I'd kiss him, too. Fat chance.

I went inside the cabin, pulled on my boots and started grabbing weapons. I needed to get there quickly. The only way to do that was teleporting. Time to get some much needed help. I reached out and linked with Zarek. *I need your help.*

What is wrong?

Talree has been captured by rogue Coletti and the Rodan.

His rage struck my mind like a physical blow.

I gasped and fell to my knees. Omigod. One wrong answer and he would kill me.

Bond mate or not.

How did this happen?

Shit, he made ferals look like pussy cats. I quickly showed him the image of the scarred-faced Coletti and told him what Datlow had seen.

Balldar! Are you sure this is the rogue?

I am sure, came Datlow's calm reply.

Zarek grabbed Datlow's mind and I could sense a brief intense battle.

I felt Datlow's shield shatter under the force of Zarek's attack.

Stop! I threw up a shield to protect Datlow.

You defy me, female?

Omigod. Omigod. I was going to die. *To save Talree, yes.*

The fierce pressure on my mind stopped and I could feel Zarek's approval. *You will do well as a*

Gail Koger

Coletti.

Uh-huh. I need to get to Talree now. And the only way to do that is teleporting. Can you help me?

If Balldar has my son, we have little time. Show me where you need to go.

Datlow?

The image of an island formed in my mind. A rusty metal barn squatted in the middle of the muddy ground. Trees black and dead-looking rose up on one side. The branches swayed and a shimmering veil of silk sparkled in the sun. Beneath the blackened trunks, skulls of long dead creatures grinned a hideous welcome.

Kotsor nest?

Yes, Datlow replied. These rogues are arrogant and foolish and soon dead.

I grinned. Damn, the moron's camp was only fifty feet from the nest. All I had to do was rile them up and bam! *Where's a good place for me to pop in?*

A huge sausage tree appeared in my mind. *The second branch, just below the lightning damage.*

Zarek?

He surged into my mind and took total control. I flinched at his intrusion and it took every ounce of my control not to start screaming hysterically. This guy scared the living hell out of me. Then I felt his concern for his son and knew without a doubt that he truly loved Talree. Aw, how sweet.

Are you ready, female?

Kaylee. My name is Kaylee. Not female.

Just My Luck

Datlow groaned. *Forgive her, my lord. She means no disrespect. Her concern for her mate makes her act rashly.*

Zarek tightened his grip until it became painful. Ow. Ow. Ow.

My son will have his hands full with this one.

Ah, your lordship, time's wasting.

He laughed and brushed a gentle caress over my mind. *I think I like you.*

Oh, gee. *Thanks? What do I do?* Dozens of furry bodies suddenly attached themselves to me. *Hey!* There was a flash of blackness and I stood on the tree branch.

Chapter Eleven

Off-balance, I teetered wildly. Shit! Shit! Shit! The combined weight of the spiders was too much. My knees started to buckle and my arms flailed. I tried to get my footing. I staggered to the right, then to the left. My boot slipped off the branch and I plunged towards the ground.

Tae and all my new best buds bailed.

I grabbed frantically at the passing branches, trying to break my fall.

Splat! A web smacked my back. I squeaked in surprise as I was suddenly jerked back up.

And then whoosh, back down I went.

It was like being attached to a damn bungee cord.

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

Just when I thought I'd lose my lunch. We slowed.

Wheee! The kids cried, *Do it again!*

Let's not. Holy hell! I bobbed like a crazed jack-in-the-box ten feet above a Coletti warrior.

Zarek hissed in rage and snarled, *Haas.*

Haas sensed me and looked up.

I waved all friendly like. *Hi there. I could use some help here. I seem to be stuck in a web.*

You are the Siren.

Bingo! That's me. I bet there's a big reward for finding me.

His eyes widened in surprise.

He drew his laser pistol.

Wait! Don't...

He fired.

The webbing snapped and I slammed into the ground at his feet. Crap.

He flipped me over, planted a massive knee in my chest and took my pistol. *A very big reward. The Rodan want you badly.* He sniffed and with a low growl rose, lifting me straight up. He sniffed my neck again and hissed. *You stink of Talree.*

You don't smell so good yourself, asshole. Ever tried soap and water? A good deodorant wouldn't hurt, either.

Zarek groaned in disbelief.

Haas snarled, exposing his fangs. *I will suck you dry.*

Datlow dropped down.

I think that's his line, I said a second before Datlow sank his fangs into the warrior's neck.

His grip on my neck tightened and just when I thought he was going to choke the life out of me, his eyes rolled back and *timber!* Down he came.

Right on top of me. Aw, hell. I heaved, pushed, shoved, wiggled and squirmed. And god dammit, I couldn't get the three hundred pound mountain of muscle off me.

Some help here!

Splat! Splat! Splat! The mountain shot up into

the tree.

Zarek released his grip on my mind and I let out a relieved breath. Jeezus, it was like having Darth Vader in your head. Creepy and way scary.

A guttural moan sounded from above. I reached out and flinched. Zarek was interrogating Haas. If you could call it that. He was shifting through his memories and not caring about the pain he caused or the damage he did. And poor Datlow was along for the ride. Zarek had hijacked his mind and was using him as a tool. Guess he felt my little female mind wasn't up to the task. Thank you, Lord.

My radar went off. Shit! A Rodan was headed my way. I looked up into the tree and leapt for the lowest branch. Great! I was too damn short to reach it.

Splat! A web smacked into my shoulder. "Eeeek!" Up I went.

Splat! Another web hit my chest, jerked me forward and I smashed face first into the tree trunk. Ow!

Your mate was correct. You do need a keeper, Bey grumbled.

I gave him my best intimidating cop stare.

He sniggered.

Yeah, didn't work real good on perps either. They usually saw how itty-bitty I was and grinned like hyenas. That was until I kicked their sorry asses.

Bug off, I snapped and reached out to the Kotsors. Weird brain patterns. Not as intelligent as Tae and her people. But mean as hell. Damn. I just

couldn't figure out a way to connect to them. Hmmm. Time to call in the cavalry.

I linked with Quinn. *Hey, big brother.*

Kaylee! His joyful relief swept over me and he gave me a mental hug. *You okay?*

Before I could reply my head was full of family. Jake, Caleb, Ethan, Uncle Derek, Uncle Saul, Aunt Tess, Sam, Casey and Sarah all vying for my attention. Their love and concern enveloped me and I soaked it all up. God, I loved them. *Hey guys, one at a time.*

Caleb jumped in first, *Are you still with that vampire?*

His name is Talree. And... Hey! I never said he was a vampire.

Tess dived in with, *Hon, you've been broadcasting a lot of uhmmm... interesting images.*

Omigod! I linked privately with Tess. *Please tell me you guys didn't get any...ah...R rated images.*

Oh, lordy, the two of you melted my panties right off.

Oh, shit! And the guys, did they...

'Fraid so.

My face burned. I could never look any of them in the eye again.

Bey nipped my hand. *Are you going to introduce me?*

I glared at him. *Wasn't going to.*

I don't fucking believe it, Jake gasped. *Are you talking to a fucking spider?*

Hard to believe, huh? Boy, would this get their attention off my sex life. *Guys, this is Bey, a Tabor.*

Gail Koger

He's sort of my guard. Bey, this is my family.

An honor to meet Petka's family.

There was a stunned silence, then Sarah just had to ask, *Petka?*

Oh, hell.

Bey projected the image of a Petka. *I named her such as she is easily frightened.*

Laughter filled my mind.

Har, Har. You'd be a little jumpy, too, if you saw all the creepy critters on this hellhole. And believe it or not, my new best friend, Tae, is a spider.

Tae and the kids crawled into my lap. *I am the one honored to call you friend.*

The babies chirped, *We family, too.*

Yes, you are. Aren't they adorable?

There was a long silence. Then Tess quickly agreed, *Yeah, cute little buggers.*

I grinned. *It's okay, I had the screaming meemies when I first saw them.* I quickly filled them in about the kids and Tae's rescue.

Ethan gave me a mental pat on the head. *Hoo ra, runt. Good goin'. I've got those enlistment papers waiting for you when you get back.*

I snorted, picturing Talree's face if I told him I wanted to be a Marine. So not happening. *Look, guys, I need your help. I've got myself a little situation here.*

Groans filled my mind.

Caleb sniped, *Calamity Jones strikes again.*

Ignoring the urge to whack him a good one, I quickly gave them the 411 and projected an image

of the Kotsor. *I need to rile them up, but their brain patterns are really weird.*

Jesus, Uncle Derek gasped. Those are ugly, big ass spiders.

Tell me about it. I need to get them mad enough to attack the rogue Coletti and the Rodan. Got any ideas, Tess?

When it came to critter control, my aunt was the best. I could feel her studying them. *There. See that spike in the pattern?*

Yeah, I see it.

That's how we get in.

What's your battle plan? Uncle Saul, bless him, always had strategy on his mind, but, hey, what else would you expect from a four star general?

I'm going to use the Kotsors to kill, maim and otherwise mangle as many of the perps as possible. While they're distracted and, believe me, having those things charging ya, is a real hair raiser. That's when Datlow and his warriors get into the barn and do some recon. Then we hit them with a second wave of creepy crawlies, herd the survivors towards the swamp and sic the Afulas on them. I gave them a mental picture of the gators.

Ethan hooted. *That should do the job.*

Or get her killed, Jake interjected.

You're good at critter control but those are awfully big critters, Caleb warned.

Uncle Saul commented, *Good plan. If you can pull it off.*

Sam added, *I can see why you're a bit wiggy. I would be, too.*

Gail Koger

I think she needs a whole shitload of Raid,
Casey said with a shudder.

Haas moaned and thrashed about.

I looked over at him and gasped. Datlow and another warrior had their fangs buried in his neck and chest and were literately sucking him dry. Haas's skin collapsed until he was a desiccated corpse. Ick!

Honey, get the hell away from those creatures,
Tess ordered.

Not really an option.

Uncle Saul demanded, *What aren't you telling us?*

A whole hell of a lot.

Suddenly Zarek was in my mind. *Introduce me.*

I gulped. Fury radiated off him. Jeezus, he made Darth Vader look like little Orphan Annie. *Guys, I'd like you to meet Zarek. He's Talree's father and Overlord of the Coletti Clans.* What I really wanted to say was, he's a fucking warlord conquering any planet that takes his fancy. And we're next on the list. But my survival instincts, such as they are, stopped me. That and the pressure Zarek was exerting on my mind. Ow. Ow. Ow.

I am honored to meet my daughter-in-law's family.

Everyone shouted in unison, *You're married!*

Ah...kinda.

Kinda? Either you are or aren't, Uncle Derek growled.

Zarek turned his lethal attention on my family.

She is my son's life mate. This bond cannot be broken. Ever.

There was a stunned silence, then Caleb growled, *Was this bond forced on you, Kaylee?*

Yikes! How did I answer that without getting us all killed? The hot sex, of course. *I love him?*

The tension level dropped considerably.

I felt Zarek's approval. *Once they return to Tanith, there will be a bonding ceremony and all of you will attend.*

I don't think that's a good...

Zarek blocked my thoughts. *Do not.*

So help me God, if you hurt my family, I will find a way to kill you.

He laughed, genuinely amused. *None of them will be harmed.*

I hear a 'but' in that.

He smiled and gently caressed my mind. *Such loyalty. The Goddess has blessed us. You have my word as Overlord that none of your family will come to harm.*

Uncle Saul demanded, *Anything wrong, Kaylee?*

Zarek interjected calmly, *She was worried about her dowry. I simply assured her that the fee would be met in other ways.*

Yeah, they were taking all our women. I flinched at Zarek's warning touch. *Gotcha. Zip it.* I turned to my family. *As much as I love talking with you guys, I've got to rescue Talree. Are you in?* And just like that, their power surged into me.

And, boy, was Zarek impressed. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. I'd worry

about it later.

I concentrated on the Kotsors and with Tess's help went to work. Ugh. They were a twisted, almost psychotic bunch. Pushing them into a killing rage was way too easy. We focused their minds on the Rodan and Coletti. *Enemy! Must kill.*

They swarmed from the trees and were on the Coletti and Rodan so fast my head swam.

Tess hissed, *Speedy little buggers, aren't they?*

The Coletti warriors jerked their weapons out and turned to meet the attack. But it was already too late. Web balls flew like bullets. Splat! Splat! Splat!

The warriors' battle cries turned to screams. The Rodan went down, their roars of agony echoed through the swamp.

I gritted my teeth, struggling to maintain control of the deviant monsters I held back for the surprise attack. Zarek added his strength to ours and the surge of power was almost unbelievable. Holy hell, he was strong.

More Coletti warriors popped out of the barn and started picking the spiders off.

Damn, they were good shots. But so was I. Picking up the laser rifle, I put the barn in my cross hairs, fired three volleys and smiled as the bolts punched a gaping hole in the metal.

That big enough, Datlow?

Yes.

I brought in the second wave of Kotsors, forcing the rogues and Rodan back towards the swamp. *You got 'em, Tess?*

Just My Luck

We have them, Zarek responded.

I released my control and reached out to the Afulas.

The scaly, big ass crocs charged out of the water and it was like feeding time at the zoo. Blood and body parts flew in every direction. What the Kotsors didn't get, the gators did.

The screams stopped abruptly.

The silence was jarring.

I sucked in a shuddering breath. Thank God. It had worked.

Hoo ra, runt.

Whoa! Now that's an attack of the killer critters, Jake crowed. No lame ass bees or birds.

Uncle Saul asked, *How many made it back to the barn?*

Uncle Derek added, *A better question would be if they realize Kaylee is behind the attack.*

Zarek answered, *Five still live. And yes, they are aware.*

So, think it's time for me to do a little knock and talk?

Zarek asked, *Your warriors in position, Datlow?*

We are ready, Datlow responded.

Kaylee? Talree's voice was a hoarse whisper.

I'm here. Don't worry. I'm getting you out.

What! No!

Wanna explain it to him, your lordship?

Father? I could feel Talree's relief as Zarek's mind embraced him. Balldar, Haas and Hotan have joined with Malik. They plan to attack your warbird at Tigre.

Gail Koger

Haas has been dealt with and before he died, he eagerly told me of Malik's plans. They will be the ones trapped, hunted and killed.

Yeah, and end up as tree ornaments.

Zarek touched my mind. *Go. Now.*

Sir, yes, sir. I quickly broke my link with Talree. Okay, I was taking the coward's way out. There was no way in hell I wanted him to know what I was up to. By the time Zarek filled in him in our little plan, it would be too late.

You ready, Bey?

To go into battle with a petka. No.

I gave him the finger and started climbing down the tree.

Be careful, Tae called.

Hey, I've got the old guy with me. What could go wrong?

We come, too.

No, sweeties, you have to stay and guard Tae. It's a very important job. Okay?

The kids scampered after me.

They stopped and their little furry bodies puffed out. *We do good.*

Warriors do not chatter endlessly, Petka.

A web smacked my shoulder and suddenly I was sailing from tree to tree like Tarzan on a vine. *You fucking bug!*

The web snapped, catapulting me straight at the barn. Ooooh, shit! The ground rose up to meet me and I turned my forward momentum into a roll. I somersaulted to my feet.

Bey landed beside me. *That is how a warrior*

travels into battle, Petka.

Gritting my teeth, I fought down the urge to fry his little ass, turned and banged on the barn door. “Knock. Knock. Avon calling.”

Here we go. Calamity Jones at her best, Caleb groused.

Talree’s growl rumbled in my head. *Knock. Knock. Avon calling?*

God, what a cranky butt. *It’s a cop thing.*

Bey snorted, snagged my pistol and scurried up the side of the barn with it. Damn, now I couldn’t turn him into a crispy critter.

The door swung open and Balldar glared down at me.

And in perfect Coletti high speech, I said, “Greetings, one who is about to die. Ready to surrender?”

Everyone groaned. I think I even heard Zarek groan. What? Was my high Coletti that bad?

With a bellow of fury, Balldar grabbed the front of my coverall and yanked me inside. Guess so.

My feet dangling a good foot off the floor, Balldar shook me like a rag doll. “I am going to take you again and again while your mate watches. And when you finally beg me to kill you, I will give you to the Rodan.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I said, searching for Talree. Then I spotted him, hanging from a chain in the ceiling. Omigod! His poor battered face was crusted with blood. Those bastards were so going down.

Oh, hell, she’s gonna blow, Jake moaned.

Gail Koger

I punched Balldar hard in the throat.
Choking and gasping for air, he dropped me and staggered back.

“Yeah, hurts like a mother, doesn’t it?”

Balldar’s face turned an interesting shade of purple as he fell to his knees.

The other Coletti warriors drew their big ass swords and started for me. Their expressions said they were going to enjoy cutting me into itty-bitty pieces.

If she dies, I turn feral, Father, Talree hissed with fury.

She is in no danger, Zarek assured him. *Datlow?*

Keep their attention on you, Petka, came his reply.

Like that was a problem? I backed up.

“Who are you?”

I turned.

A holographic image of Malik floated in mid-air. His flat, dead eyes and blunt features had a brutal quality to them. The aura of ruthlessness was enhanced by a knife scar across his right cheek. What? He get hit by an ugly truck?

“I’m your worst nightmare. Surrender or die.”

More groans sounded in my head.

And the bastard laughed. “Do you know who I am?”

The Coletti warriors encircled me, poking at me with their swords.

“Sure do. You’re Malik, a traitor to his clan. A back-stabbing little creep who has a very short time to live.”

“Gut her and Talree becomes my beast.”

“So not happening.”

Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Dozens of web balls hit the warriors, gluing them in place. Their faces contorted with rage, they roared in defiance.

Can you shut them up, Datlow?

Our pleasure. The spiders dropped from the ceiling and started chomping. One by one the Coletti fell silent.

The link to my family suddenly shattered as Zarek surged into my mind and took control. His rage was so great, I threw up a shield and tried to hide behind it.

Talree wrapped his mind around mine. *I’ve got you.*

I clung to him.

Zarek spoke through me and suddenly my voice was deep, harsh, full of authority and simmering with a barely controlled wrath. We spat some kind of phrase at Malik.

Malik stiffened and for a brief moment fear flashed in his eyes. Then, a nasty little smile curled his mouth. “It is you who will die, old man.”

“You are dead to me, to the Clan,” We said. You will be hunted down and face the rite.”

“Maybe, but your precious Talree will die first. I’ve instructed Hotan to destroy Jabal.”

Holy crap! Can he do that?

Yes, Talree and Zarek answered.

Zarek linked with someone and commanded, *Now!*

A thunderous explosion sounded and Malik’s

image popped in and out. Smoke billowed behind him and alarms sounded.

“We will see who dies first,” Zarek growled through me and just like that he was gone from my mind. I shuddered in relief. I never ever wanted to do that again.

Search for the warbird, Zarek snapped.

Yes, sir. I reached out with my mind and there it was. Why, that lying little creep. It wasn't a warbird. It was a Rodan mother ship heading our way. Of course, with my shitty luck, it was loaded with all those spiffy new weapons. We had fifteen minutes to get the hell off this planet or get blown to smithereens.

Bey, my pistol! It dropped into my open hand. I turned and fired a burst at the chain imprisoning Talree.

It broke. He dropped to the floor and with one quick movement snapped his manacles off.

“Die, brother.”

His fangs bared in a snarl, Talree faced Malik. “I challenge you to Ditkar!”

Malik laughed. “The dead cannot fight. Your warriors are now my beasts. And soon many more will be.”

Another blast sent a shower of sparks spraying across Malik.

Five of Zarek's warriors popped in behind Malik.

Malik pulled a huge sword and bellowing a war cry, charged them.

The image disappeared.

Just My Luck

“Talree, we’ve got fifteen minutes before the Rodan ship opens fire.”

Two of their cloaked Marauders are a click away. Take one and join me at Tigre, Zarek commanded.

Talree grabbed a device off Balldar’s belt and wrapped an arm around me. *Datlow, to me.*

Dozens of furry bodies jumped on us.

We popped out.

Chapter Twelve

A burning tendril of fear crawled in my gut as another fierce salvo rocked the ship I was flying. I must have been nuts to think I could pull this off. "Don't worry, boss man," I mimicked myself. "I can fly the ship. Nothing to worry about. Piece of cake. Can do it in my sleep. My ass!" I had six Rodan fighters on my tail and I couldn't shake them.

Talree had already shot down a dozen bad guys and was in a down and dirty fight to the death with the mother ship.

Me? Two kills. So far, desperation, sheer terror and blind luck had kept us from being blown to smithereens.

Maybe you should ask for help, Tae cried.

Bey crawled up on my shoulder. *Are you going to let us all die, because you are a frightened child? We are the last of our people, Petka. Ask the Overlord for help.*

I glanced around at the several hundred spiders clinging to the metal. Dammit, the little creep was right. Time to suck it up.

The babies chattered in agreement.

My little space craft bucked and shuddered.

Every nerve in my body screaming in protest, I linked with Zarek. *Your lordship, I know this is getting kinda old, but I could really use your help.*

Another bombardment buffeted the ship.

Just My Luck

Again? I felt him scan my mind. *I cannot believe my son agreed to this.*

We couldn't leave them behind and they wouldn't all fit into one ship.

You, my little catalyst, are going to make life very interesting.

He merged with me and suddenly I was a fighter jock. Hot dang! My fingers danced across the command console and the ship rolled sharply, then banked hard to the right and poof! We popped up behind the Rodan Marauders. My right hand closed around the firing control and I unleashed a lethal barrage of laser bolts on their asses.

The view screen lit up like the Fourth of July.

Whoo hoo! Take that, you scaly creeps!

I felt Zarek's answering grin. That's when it hit me. Darth Vader was actually getting one hell of a kick out of this and in the process I was learning combat maneuvers that had taken him years to ace. Even more surprising, I was having a hell of a lot of fun, too. God, who would of thunk it? Me and the Overlord, best buds.

We followed in close pursuit of the remaining Marauders, firing. The ships disintegrated into clouds of vaporized metal. *Yippee-ki-yay, mother fuckers.*

Yippee-ki-yay?

It's an old Earth saying. From a movie.

I felt him shift through my memories. *Ah, very apt.*

I gave him a mental kiss on the cheek. *Thank you.*

Gail Koger

In my mind, he gave a slight bow. *It was my pleasure.*

Talree linked with me and I could feel his worried concern. *Kaylee?*

Doing good. Your dad and I just kicked their scaly butts.

I am grateful for your help, Father.

She is a good pupil.

I beamed. He wasn't so scary after all.

Ah, I'm no longer Darth Vader?

I winced. *Sorry. You can be a little ummm... Intimidating.*

I have practiced a very long time to become the big bad.

I about fell off my chair. Omigod, he was teasing me! *Yeah, well the practice has paid off. Sir.*

As it should. Zarek switched his attention to Talree. *And you, my son?*

The Rodan mother ship has been destroyed, Talree said with a savage joy.

Excellent. He broke the link.

Mental fingers brushed my mind in an intimate caress. *You did good.*

I leaned into Talree's presence, soaking up his essence. *I was getting my butt kicked until your father took pity on me.*

A ghostly kiss was pressed against my forehead. *Even though he scares the bejesus out of you, you asked for his help.*

If I died, Malik would have won. We can't have that, now, can we?

Just My Luck

No, we cannot. His mouth covered mine and his tongue invaded, tasted and possessed.

Wow! Psychic sex rocked.

“Ack! Ack!”

What the hell? I looked around.

Bey heaved and hacked like he was trying to cough up a hair ball.

You okay?

Watching humanoids perform sex acts? No, Petka, I am not okay, Bey snipped.

How’d you like to go swimming in deep space, hairball?

Talree’s laughter filled my head. Try not to kill each other. And he was gone.

I glared at Bey. You are such a prick. It was just a kiss.

There are some things that even a seasoned warrior should not have to endure.

He crawled off in a huff.

Tae and the other female spiders laughed.

I think the old guy needs a woman.

I have tried but he still grieves for Skita.

He lost her in the fire?

No, she was killed by the Kotsor.

Omigod, how horrible. Guess I’d better apologize for being so mean.

Do not. You, my friend, have gotten him to interact, to fight again. A great feat. And we are all so very grateful to you and your mate for giving us a new beginning.

A wave of guilt hit me. Because of us, they had lost what little they had left. I’m really sorry you

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got dragged into this mess. I never meant for you to lose your home.

Tae crawled up into the co-pilot's chair. Her pain and loss was echoed by my own. *We have both lost those we loved. We've had our homes, our cities invaded and destroyed.*

I closed my eyes, fighting back the anguish that came roaring back.

But that is in the past. Now we rebuild and start again. And I will lay my babies on Malik's still beating heart and watch as they slowly drain the life from him.

My eyes popped open. Whoa! Piss her off and die horribly. But then again, all the pain and misery that Benedict Arnold had caused, it was a fitting death. *Girlfriend, you've got a deal.*

A warning flashed on the console. I hit the diagnostic key and the ship's computer spat a bunch of data across the view screen. Hmmm. Looked like the power relay had some kind of glitch. I linked with Talree and showed him the screen. *You know how to fix that?*

Yes, power down and I'll talk you through it.

Two hours later, I was ready to beat my head against the bulkhead. Ever tried to fix anything with two zillion spiders underfoot? Well, let me tell ya, it's a freakin' nightmare. And, boy, did I need some chocolate.

Talree laughed. *The little ones are just trying to be helpful.*

Yuck it up, fang boy, you're not the one covered with sticky strands of webbing. I'm

practically glued to the damn floor.

Phantom hands massaged my stiff neck. *Better?*

I melted into his touch with a groan. The man had magic fingers. A hiss escaped me as his fingers moved south. *Whoa! Let me finish before you start pulling that crap.*

This kind of crap? His fingers probed and stroked.

I wiggled frantically. *You're messin' up my concentration.*

Good. His fingers slid between my legs.

Lightning arced through me and I rode a crest of pleasure so intense I came right then and there. With hundreds of fascinated eyes fixed on me. My face burning with embarrassment, I lay there quivering. God, one touch and he lit me up like a Christmas tree.

"Ack! Ack!"

Give it a rest, you eight-legged freak! I already felt like I was wearing a neon sign that flashed "Lust R Us".

Bey groused, *It would be better if you gave it a rest, Petka, and concentrated on fixing the ship.*

You know, Tae said some of the females found you attractive. I reached out and stroked his fur. *And the gray is a real turn on. Betcha I could fix you up. Get you a little action.*

With a chitter of horror, Bey took off.

Guess not.

You are a truly evil female, Tae chortled.

Yeah, I know. Three brothers give you a lot of practice.

Gail Koger

I felt Talree snap into warrior mode. *What's wrong?*

Marauders.

My stomach clenched. *How many?*

Nothing I cannot handle. He pressed a hard kiss to my mouth and was gone.

Like that was going to keep me from being worried?

What has happened? Are they in danger?

I glanced up at Tae. *More Marauders.*

She gave a chitter of alarm and Bey came flying back. *How close are the enemies?*

Two hours behind us. Talree's dealing with them. I pried the tool I needed off my leg and inserted the relay back into place. The power board started humming. Good as new.

The babies chattered happily. *We go now?*

We go now.

Twisting, heaving and turning, I managed to break free of the webbing. Aw, hell, the freakin' tool was stuck to my hand. I tried scraping it off. Nope, not working. Prying didn't work either.

Bey rumbled, *Give me your hand.*

I held it out and never once flinched as he quickly bit the webbing away.

My spidey sense screamed a sudden warning. Aw, hell, my shitty luck just kept getting better and better. I reached out scanning for the source. A ship and closing fast. Where the hell had it come from?

Bey demanded, *What do you sense?*

Something nasty. I scanned the ship. Thirty malevolent, depraved, very hungry Tai-Kok. I

frowned. There was something weird about them. Kinda perverted. Pirates? Shit. They were freakin' pirates who attacked any ship that came within scanner range. Guess every species had their criminal elements.

I flinched as their hunger slapped me in the face. Did I have a sign painted on my back that said "good eatin'?" 'Cause it sure as hell seemed like everyone wanted to chomp on me.

I gave Tae and Bey a good look at them. *Pretty creepy folks, huh?*

Tae laughed. *They want to eat us.*

Bey snorted. *They have grown careless and do not pick their prey carefully.*

Don't you just love that about them? And the really good part is... There's only thirty of em'. Those were my kind of odds.

The kids bounced up and down on my head. *We bite them. They die.*

I stroked them. *My very brave little warriors. But I need you to stay with me and watch for any bad guys creeping up on me. Okay, sweeties?*

We watch, they crowed. We bite. They die.

I just grinned until Bey added, *The children's venom is deadly.*

Oh, hell. *One bite and...*

Dead before you take your next breath, Tae finished.

And nobody thought to tell me this? Hey! Pretty important stuff here.

The alarm sounded. I bolted for the bridge with Bey and Tae hot on my heels. I brought the Tai-Kok

ship up on the view screen. Hell, it looked a lot like a Stealth bomber but blood red and bigger. A whole lot bigger. Couldn't out run them and we were seriously outgunned. So we'd play possum.

I think we should do the polite thing and invite them over for dinner. Okay with you guys?

All my friendly neighborhood spiders shouted their agreement. Their rage beat at me. That and they were kinda hungry, themselves. They wanted, needed to kill the ghouls. God, what a blood thirsty bunch. Yep, my kind of people. Aw, hell, I was starting to sound like a warlord.

Time to make the Tai-Kok fat, dumb and happy. I hit a symbol on the console and babbled hysterically, "Anyone out there? Please, I need help. My hyper drive is damaged. My life support is failing and my mate is dead. Please, can anyone hear me? I need help."

The big nasty scanned us and slowed.

I grinned. Working like a charm.

Zarek suddenly roared in my head, *What are you doing?*

I jumped about a foot. *Jeezus, you scared the living hell out of me.*

He tightened his grip on my mind and growled in a menacing voice, *Kaylee.*

Just invited some folk over for dinner, I squeaked and looked at the view screen.

Zarek bellowed, *You invited Tai-Kok pirates for dinner!*

Ah, yeah. I mean, we obviously can't out fight their ship. So I figured we just make like a Trojan

horse. They bring us onboard and when they unwrap their pretty little present, they get the surprise of their lives. They're on the dinner menu. Having Zarek in my head in full Overlord mode was scary as hell and I just kept babbling. The odds are in our favor, your lordship. Thirty of them against two hundred pissed off, hungry warriors ready to start chowing down.

Zarek laughed. An evil kind of laugh that sent chills down my spine and made me want to run screaming for my life.

Tell them your cargo is Wartock Beetles.

Yes, *sir*. I hit the send button and with a very convincing hysteria cried, "Please someone help me. My life support is failing. I have hundreds of Wartock Beetles. You can have them. Just help me. Please, can anyone hear me?"

Our ship shook as a tractor beam latched on.

See? Not to worry. They took the bait.

Does Talree know of this?

I winced. *Ah...not exactly. What's the point in gettin' him all upset? I mean, there's really nothing he can do to help. Besides, he's busy fighting the Rodan and I didn't want to mess up his concentration. Sir.*

These pirates have never been defeated or lost a ship.

With all respect, my lord, they have never met us in battle, Bey stated.

Yeah, look how easily they took out Malik's goons. They never knew what hit em'.

Tae added, *When we spring our trap, the prey*

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become the predator.

The babies chirped, *We bite. They die.*

Zarek chuckled. *Yes, little ones, they die. Take the Captain alive, the rest you may do with as you wish.*

I waited for Zarek to leave my mind. When he didn't, I sighed. *You're gonna hang around, huh?*

You would deny me the chance to see the Tai-Kok pirates defeated?

I bowed to the enviable. If he didn't want to leave, I sure as hell couldn't kick him out. *It would be an honor to have you observe and give us advice.* Yeah, made me feel right at home. Head full of a bossy relative.

He gave my forehead a mental kiss. *Very diplomatic, small one.*

Hey, at least he hadn't called me runt.

My spidey sense flared to life. Three pirates knocking at my door. *You guys ready to kick some alien butt?*

They all scurried to the ceiling.

I walked to the docking doors. Time to play the helpless little female. Tough job but someone had to do it.

The doors slid open and three creepy dudes dressed like wannabe Goths strode in.

I wanted to yell "Trick or treat?" But I settled for screaming blue bloody murder and running for the bridge. And pirates, being pirates, they gave chase. I kept waiting for them to yell, 'I'm going to use your guts for garters, my pretty.' But they never did, dammit. Pretty piss poor pirates.

Just My Luck

Ducking, dodging and diving under their lunges and blows, I kept the ghouls busy as my spider warriors spewed from the ship.

I heaved a breath of relief when Zarek hitched a ride with Bey. My relief was short lived when one of the pirates managed to grab my braid. Ow! My head was yanked back and I got a bird's eye view of its ghastly mouth as rows of oxidized metal teeth came at me. *Babies! Bite!*

And my wonderful kids did.

The fiend made a funny rasping sound and dropped to the floor, dead as a doornail.

Which didn't make the other two very happy. They whipped out their pistols. Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Tae and her two young nieces, Bo and Zi, let them have it.

I gave them a thumbs up. *Good goin', girls.*

They all chittered excitedly.

I smiled up at the Tai-Kok as they squawked and struggled against the webbing. *Ya see, it's like this. I'm not on the dinner menu, you are.*

Chapter Thirteen

Chirping in distress, Tae abruptly dropped from the ceiling, dangling on a thick strand of webbing.
It is time!

Time for what?

Bo and Zi totally freaked, skittered back and forth on the ceiling, chittering like crazy.

The kids bounced up and down on my head.
Babies come!

A smooth white shape protruded from Tae's furry rear.

Holy hell! Babies! The babies are coming now?

Yes. Tae squirmed and wiggled.

An egg sack dropped into my hands. *Omigod! Omigod! I don't know what to do!*

The mid-wife/doctor, Bir, rushed in, snatched the egg sack from me and attached it to one of the Tai-Kok pirates.

Oh! Gotcha. Little guys need a food source. I caught another egg sack and handed it to Bir.

My radar screamed a warning. Pirates! And close. I roared, *Bo. Zi. Enough!*

They screeched to a stop and froze.

God, how scary was that? I sounded just like Zarek! Yikes! *Bo, I want you and Zi to help Bir with the births. Okay?*

Yes, *Lady Warrior*, they both intoned and scurried to help catch the egg sacks.

Lady Warrior? I kinda liked that. *Tae, I'm gonna go kick some pirate ass and I'm leaving the kids here as your guards.*

The babies puffed up proudly. *We bite. They die.*

I stroked them. *You betcha. You watch that door and kill any nasty Tai-Kok that comes in, okay?*

We warriors.

Tae hissed, *Bring them to me and let my children drain the life from them.*

Okey-dokey, someone was definitely hormonal. *You got it, Tae. Anything you want. Pickles, ice cream, sardines or pirates. I'll get 'em for ya.* I hurried out.

Whoa! And I thought my PMS was bad. A fist slammed into my face, hurling me back into a wall. Stars sparked across my vision and I slid down to the cold metal deck. I shook my head to clear it. Walked right into that one, dammit.

A thick wad of drool splashed my hand. I looked up. Ewww. I'd been slimed.

A Tai-Kok ghoul stood over me. Who dressed them? Goths R Us? Lots of metal spikes and leather. Blood red, of course. Kinda matched their weird ass eyes. Oh, ick! Slobber ran from the corner of its metal mouth and dripped on the floor. The pirate quacked at me and exposed its awesome pointy teeth.

"Chew this, Daffy." I drew my boot knife and flung it with everything I had.

The knife buried itself in the fiend's throat.

Staggering back, it tried to draw its weapon.

I pulled mine and shot him first. "Quack. Quack. You're dead."

My spidey sense shrieked. Like some crazed acrobat, I somersaulted backwards across the landing bay. Dozens of laser bolts followed, searing the deck inches behind me. I dove behind a small ship in the cargo bay, flinching as a bolt barely missed me.

From my hiding place, I surveyed the Tai-Kok stalking me. Looked like it had gotten into a fight with a porcupine and lost. Dozens of metal spikes sprouted from its skull. How in the hell did it sleep?

Vicious quacking noises spewing from its mouth, think Donald Duck on meth, the pirate advanced on me. I touched its mind. Freaky bizarre brain waves. I could only get bits and pieces. Male. The captain of this fine vessel. Way pissed off and he wanted to chew me into itty-bitty pieces.

So not happening. I dropped a hand to my holster and froze. Omigod! My pistol was gone.

The Captain made a weird honking noise and held up my pistol.

Oh, hell! Just my knives left. I looked around frantically for another weapon. My gaze settled on a long metal pole lying on the floor. Better than nothing.

I concentrated as he honked again. Eat. He was going to eat...something. I peered cautiously around the ship and gasped in horror.

The limp form of a young warrior dangled over the Captain's gaping maw.

Just My Luck

Nooo! My berserker rage flared to life and I hurled my knives. The first struck his gun hand, sticking it to his leg. The second pierced the hand holding the warrior.

An ear-shattering screech echoed around the landing bay as the Captain hurled the warrior away and pulled the knife out of his hand with his teeth.

Grabbing the pole, I rolled under the ship, swung it out and up, catching the ghoulish captain behind the knees and knocking him flat on his ass. Another swing and I swatted my pistol out of his reach.

Quick as a snake, he hurled my knife back at me.

I dove to one side, hissing as cold metal sliced across my stomach.

The Captain jerked the other knife free and went for his gun. I whacked the hell out of his injured hand with the pole. The pistol and knife went flying across the landing bay. He let out a shriek of pure rage and lunged at me.

Dimly in the back of my head, I heard voices clamoring for my attention. *Busy.*

Go away, I told them. I twisted like a cat, dropped to one knee and hurled the pirate over my shoulder. He slammed into the wall with a satisfying thud.

He was on his feet in an instant and coming at me again.

I ducked under a punch, blocked a second with my forearm, pivoted on the balls of my feet and drove my left foot into his groin.

The Captain doubled over with a keening wail. Well, what'd you know? Tai-Kok had balls. I unleashed a series of snap kicks into his face, sending him crashing to the floor.

Honking like a demented duck, Metal Mouth surged to his feet and grabbed my arm. In one fluid motion, I brought his extended arm up and over my right shoulder, thrust my hip into his mid-section and sent him flying. Smack! Right into another wall.

"Yesss!" My fist shot up and I did a little dance.

Zarek's cold fury crawled along the edges of my mind and I could hear the patter of dozens of little feet headed my way. Aw, hell, the cavalry was coming. The big bad was probably pissed 'cause I beat him to Captain Pointy.

As the Captain climbed to his feet again, I grabbed the pole and started swinging. His head snapped back from the first blow, the second caught him in the jaw, and the third struck him in the stomach, dropping him to his knees. "I'm gettin' real tired of people trying to eat me and mine."

Bey and two dozen spiders scurried into the landing bay. I glared up at them. *He's mine!*

Of course, with my shitty luck, Talree chose that moment to check in on me. He got one good look at the pirate and roared in horrified rage, *You're fighting a Tai-Kok?*

Rolling my eyes, I dropped the ghoul with a hard blow to the back of his neck. *Actually, I'm beating the living shit out of him. The asshole*

thought he could eat one of my warriors. I whacked him again. "But you won't make that mistake again, will ya?" I hit him once more for good measure. "Isn't that right, Metal Mouth?"

I felt Talree scan the area. By the Goddess, you're on their ship!

No, it's our ship now. The Tai-Kok thought they'd have us over for dinner. But we pulled the old Trojan horse on them and now we have a pretty new ship.

You... You captured the ship?

Zarek laughed at the astonishment in his son's voice. The Tabor took the ship without any casualties and in less than ten minutes. They will make a fine addition to our Clan.

I gave the spiders a high five. Way to go, Bey! Clan status.

Caleb butted in, How badly are you hurt, Kaylee?

God, you're such a blabbermouth.

Talree's temper went up a notch. You thought to hide your injury from me?

I've had worse and...

Have you no sense? What made you think you could take on a Tai-Kok and win?

Hello? Kill them all the time and who's on the floor moaning? Not me. It wasn't like I was taking on a Warlord or anything. He's just a pirate.

Just a pirate! Do you know why he's the Captain?

'Cause it's his ship?

Only the biggest, the most brutal, the most

Gail Koger

ferocious Tai-Kok become Captain.

Kinda like a Warlord, huh?

*I could feel Zarek trying hard not to laugh.
Would you challenge me to hand-to-hand combat?
Or Talree?*

Ah, no. I'm not that stupid.

Yet you attacked the Captain.

Actually, he attacked me. A girl's gotta defend herself, right? And since I kicked his ass, I don't see the problem.

*And now you see Calamity Jones at her best.
Wanna take out some bad guys, you just send her in and in less than an hour their compound's a smoldering wreck, Caleb interjected.*

It wasn't my fault that damn meth lab blew up. Okay, it kinda was. All those pigeons flying around, knocking things down. Who knew?

Caleb snorted. And the Mexican Mafia? It took you, what, twenty minutes to burn their whole compound down?

They were going to shoot that DEA agent. I had to stop them, didn't I?

Never saw so many fucking rattlesnakes in my life.

I grinned. God, had they freaked. Wasn't my fault all that automatic weapons fire started a grass fire.

Never is, Caleb said with a laugh.

Don't you have someone to arrest? Some hoodlums to harass?

Caleb sobered. I know he got you at least once with the knife. How bad is it?

With a growl, Talree did a quick inventory of all my injuries and commanded in his big, bad scary voice, *Go to the sick bay. Now.*

I glanced down at my blood-soaked jumpsuit. It was starting to hurt a bit. *What about Captain Pointy here?*

Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat!

Thanks, Bey.

It is my pleasure. Now that you have your warrior's fangs, I would fight at your side again, Petka.

Huh? Warrior's fangs? Ah, thanks. *I thought we made a pretty good team.*

Talree twitched in alarm. *Father?*

I frowned when they abruptly moved to a private link. Well, that's kinda rude. Made me think something was rotten in Denmark.

Caleb asked, *You okay? He treating you right?*

I gave him a mental hug. *I'm fine. Talree's taking good care of me.*

You could never lie worth a damn. What aren't you tellin' us?

Yikes, time for a diversion. *I wanted it to be a surprise, but Talree promised me the Clans' help in keeping Earth safe from the Tai-Kok and Rodan. Isn't that great?*

They don't strike me as the benevolent do-gooder types. What do they get out of it?

Zarek interrupted coldly, *What would you give to keep your people safe?*

Caleb let out a weary breath. *A pint or two.*

Dread tightened my stomach. Omigod! *What*

Gail Koger

happened? Was someone hurt?

The family's fine. London got hit hard. If Sam and her team hadn't been there for training...

I grinned with relief. Kamikaze Sam and her little bag of tricks. How long did it take her to send them running for their lives?

Forty minutes.

Talree gently stroked my neck. Kamikaze Sam?

My cousin. You think I'm a trouble magnet? Wait til you meet Sam.

An honor I look forward to, Zarek remarked.

Crap. Me and my big mouth. Ah, she's kinda busy. Saving the world and all. I doubt she'll have time to fly to Tanith for something as silly as a wedding.

What the hell are you babbling on about? You and Sam are best friends. Even if she was in a body cast, she'd find a way to attend your wedding, Caleb said.

Jeezus, what a blabbermouth!

Talree tightened his grip on my neck and growled, Sick bay, now, Kaylee.

Okay. Okay. Where is it? Zarek planted the information in my head. Thanks, your lordship.

Caleb went nose to nose with Talree. You don't treat her right and you're a dead man.

Caleb!

Talree just smiled. A not-very-nice predator kinda smile. She is my bond mate. I would die for her.

Aw, sometimes he could be so sweet.

Good. Caleb scanned me. And you need to feed

her more, she's getting kinda skinny.

He broke the link an instant before I could smack him. Jerk.

Tell me about this Kamikaze Sam, Zarek instructed.

I concentrated on my pain, letting it fill my head. *Could this wait? I'm not feeling so hot.*

Zarek roared with laughter. *Imp.*

Talree smacked my butt. *You will show the Overlord proper respect.*

I glared at him. *I'm not five years old and you aren't getting your grubby paws on Sam.*

How do you plan to stop us, daughter?

Haven't a clue but I'll figure something out.

With a snarl, Talree grabbed my mind in a punishing grip. *You would fight to the death to save your family. Do you expect me to do any less?*

His pain and guilt rolled over me in waves. He had led his warriors into a trap and had been forced to watch as his friends, his brethren were brutalized, tortured and demeaned. I could feel his helpless fury at their fate, the grim determination to find them, to keep them from turning feral.

I had saved him. Sam and the others were his only hope. Without them, his friends would be forever lost.

I let out a long breath. *You're right. I'd do exactly the same thing.* I ran a soothing hand over his face. *We will find them. Make no mistake about that. And I think Malik should spend some quality time with the Tabor. He'd make a great tree decoration.*

Gail Koger

Talree wrapped himself around me and his mouth closed over mine. White-hot heat streaked, danced and consumed.

“Ack! Ack!”

God damn it, Bey.

Chapter Fourteen

I stared at the mirror in total horror. Greenish-gold eyes stared back at me. I touched my face. My skin was now a pale copper color and my hair had darkened to a rich, glowing auburn. I started to shake.

How many times had I drunk his blood? Dear God, this couldn't be happening. Please... Please don't let me have... I bared my teeth. Shock and mind-twisting panic tore through me. Fangs!

Bey's words came back like a body blow. "Now that you have your warrior's fangs."

A moan tore from me as everything suddenly clicked into place. My knees buckled and I collapsed to the floor. I searched my mind and the information was abruptly there. The barbs on Talree's penis excreted an enzyme that triggered a cellular change and altered other species DNA to match that of the Coletti.

By forcing me to drink his blood, Talree had given me his strength, his ability to heal and had sped up the process. Once the conversion was completed, I would no longer be human but Coletti. And that rat bastard expected me to give him children? Ha!

What had that jackass said? Oh, yeah, 'We do what we must to survive.' As if! It was just a piss poor excuse to go out and lie, conquer and steal

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whatever took their fancy. And if you objected, too bad, so sad.

My God, so many lies. Was anything he told me the truth? Tears poured down my face. Was the bond nothing more than a form of mind control? Anguish, despair and loss hit with a shattering crash and I sobbed uncontrollably.

Tae, the babies and all the female Tabors, suddenly covered me in a furry blanket of comfort. Their voices soothed and offered hope.

I was dimly aware of Talree's presence and of his increasingly angry demands to know what was wrong. I flinched away. I couldn't bear his touch.

I cried harder. I loved the jerk. No! No, I couldn't, wouldn't love someone who would do this to me. Betray my trust. Turn me into something alien. *Go away*, I shrieked.

And suddenly he was gone from my mind. My best buddies had thrown up a protective shield. I wrapped my arms around Tae and sobbed, *What am I supposed to do?*

Go on. Start over.

He'll never let me go.

Because he can't. He needs you.

Yeah, I'm his little walking blood bank and I'm someone handy to fuck. The rest is just a lie.

Is it? Maybe he was afraid to tell you the truth. Maybe he knew you would react like this.

Have a fucking meltdown, you mean?

Yes.

I've had so much taken from me. Now I'm supposed to give up my humanity, too?

Perhaps you are being given a gift.

A gift? How do you figure that?

You now belong to a powerful clan who can protect your people from the Tai-Kok and Rodan.

And all they want in return are the women in my family.

Is that so much to ask?

Yes. I flinched as the images of the Rodan's slaughter house rose up in my mind. So many dead and here I was, whining and moaning about my fate. I wiped away my tears and sat up. Sometimes to protect and serve was a real bitch.

What advantages will you gain from becoming Coletti?

I took a deep breath and concentrated. Whoa. A life span of over a thousand years. I'll be stronger, harder to kill, never fall ill to the diseases that plague my planet and if injured, I'll heal quickly.

I brightened. And teleporting is way cool. Zarek and Talree are experts at mind control and have superior telepathic powers. So, who knows, I might get some of theirs.

I smiled at the dozen of spiders surrounding me. God, who would of thunk it? I loved them. Eight legs and all. I hugged Tae. *But the very best thing I've gained, is a terrific friend like you.* I stroked the furry bodies pressed against me. *And I have a wonderful new family.*

I laughed as dozens of sticky little tongues smacked me. *Sorry I'm being such a wuss. When do I get to meet the new babies?*

Gail Koger

The shield dropped and I winced as Caleb shouted, *She never cries! What the hell did you do to her?*

Ethan roared, *If you've hurt her, I'll rip your fucking heart out!*

I did what was necessary to keep her safe, Talree bellowed back.

She was sobbing like her heart had been broken, Quinn growled. *You sleepin' around on her?*

Holy crap! Ah, guys.

Maybe she's sick and tired of you treating her like a whore, Sam growled.

Guys!

Whatever she's been holding back is tearing her apart, Uncle Derek snarled. *You bring her home now!*

I will never give her up, Talree hissed.

My spidey sense screamed to life. Rodan. A bunch of them. At the top of my lungs, I screamed even if it was mentally, *Shut up!*

There was a stunned silence.

A girl's entitled to have a meltdown every now and again. But, I'm fine now. Got it?

Tess touched my mind, seeking reassurance that I was truly okay. *Hon, if you need to talk, I'm here.*

Sam added, *If you need me, I'm there. Even if I have to hijack a fucking mother ship.*

I hugged them both. *Thanks, guys. I love you, too. Now, just back off. I have to go kill some fucking Rodans.* I broke the link, ignoring their cries of protest.

Talree barged into my mind and I hauled off and punched him as hard as I could.

Get out, you lying sack of shit!

It shouldn't have happened. No female in our recorded history has ever gotten fangs.

Well, fuckadoodle doo. I've got them. If that wasn't bad enough, you stole my humanity from me. Turned me into a blood sucking Coletti.

It was necessary.

Necessary! I hit him again. You and Malik have a lot in common. You're both back-stabbing, lying betrayers.

Enough, daughter, Zarek interjected, his tone edged with steel.

I wiped at the tears streaming down my face. Crap. He was right. Enough with the waterworks. Cops and warriors didn't cry. If you'll excuse me, your lordship, I need to go kill something. Aw, hell. You've turned me into a fucking Warlord.

You have a warrior's heart, Talree said with a quiet emphasis. That's what drew me to you.

My blood drew you.

No, it was your heart.

God, how incredibly sweet. I wanted to melt right into him and let his magic fingers... Shit! The manipulative asshole and his funky mind control. You aren't getting off the hook that easily. Now get out!

No! You belong with me.

I fought back the urge to give in to Talree's desperate need. I ruthlessly ignored the rat bastard's dismay and growing anger. Do I?

Gail Koger

Let her go, Talree, Zarek instructed. She needs to deal with what has happened. It took your mother a full cycle before she would allow me to touch her again.

Holy hell. Stealing women must be a family thing.

Go. Kill the Rodan, he snarled and broke the link.

Zarek seized my mind. *Daughter.*

Ow. Ow. Ow. *Yes, sir?*

You have one cycle to accept your destiny. No more. If you cannot, I will adjust your memories. Do you understand me?

Yes, sir. Total mind wipe, sir?

Something like that.

Okay, gotcha. Sir.

Now let's go kill some Rodan.

Ah, you're coming along for the ride, sir?

Do you think your piloting skills are sufficient?

No, sir. I'd appreciate the help.

The targeting screen was lit up like a Christmas tree. Rodan everywhere. I didn't recognize the two large ships they were blasting the hell out of.

Who are they fighting?

The Alliance.

I shuddered. The predator in Zarek had roused. It was cold, remorseless and utterly ruthless. *And the Alliance is?* Dammit, that came out way too squeaky.

Our enemies.

I felt his savage delight when one of the Alliance ships flared brightly and disappeared from

the screen. A dozen Marauders swarmed around the remaining ship, hammering it with laser cannons.

This was going to go over like a lead balloon. *Ah, sir. The Rodan are my enemies and I really really need to blow them into itty-bitty pieces. So, if you have a problem with me helping the Alliance, I can muddle through on my own.*

His scary index shot off the charts. *You think you can defeat them without my help?*

I can try.

As you wish. And he was gone.

Was that wise, Petka?

I glanced over at Bey who perched comfortably on the co-pilot's chair. Hmm. Didn't look like Zarek had gone very far. *Probably not.*

I did a mental scan of the area and grinned. *Ah ha! Gotcha. You sneaky bastards.*

Bey studied the targeting screen. *Sneaky bastards?*

Watch and learn. I punched in a bunch of coordinates, hit a button and unleashed a shitload of missiles. The view screen lit up as three cloaked mother ships disintegrated into cascading balls of flame and debris.

Whoo hoo! Better than fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Being a Siren does give you an excellent strategic advantage.

Said the sneaky Warlord. *You betcha it does. I'd love to see Malik's face when he finds out how many of their pretty new mother ships we've blown up.* I hit the button again and unleashed the

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wrath of God on the Marauders. As the blips vanished off the screen, I did a little victory dance. Bada-bing, bada-boom. And then there was only one.

Crap. The surviving ship had docked with the badly damaged Alliance battleship. The fucking monsters were probably already chowing down on the Alliance crew.

My gaze skimmed over the hundred or so spiders clinging to the walls and I asked, *You guys want to go grab a bite to eat?*

They all chittered in agreement.

* * * *

We swarmed through the Alliance ship like a plague. Dead or webbed Rodan dotted the corridors behind us. My radar went into overdrive. Not only were there twenty or so Rodan still breathing, the ship's hyper-drive was getting ready to blow.

I reached out searching for the Alliance officers. Shit! Only twelve still lived. Three were trying to hold the bridge and the rest were barricaded in engineering.

I'll get the ones on the bridge, if you guys can rescue the ones in engineering.

Bey snorted. *You think they will come with us willingly?*

Hell no, they'll probably take one look at you and start shootin'. Web 'em.

You heard the Lady Warrior. Go.

And off they scampered. My own little S.W.A.T. team. Gotta love it.

Bey dropped down on my shoulder. *I am your*

up back.

Back-up. The term is back-up.

They will all be dead by the time you stop your idle chattering, Petka.

Resisting the urge to bash his little head into the wall, I quickly scanned the bridge. Got a mental fix on the Rodan and Alliance officers and teleported. There was a flash of inky darkness and poof. I appeared on the bridge with all my parts in place. Hallelujah! I did it!

The floor shifted violently. Holy hell! I tumbled off the back of a Rodan. Its furious gaze met mine. Displaying its awesome teeth, it roared in displeasure.

“You guys ever brush your teeth?”

Bey snipped, *When you are finished discussing oral hygiene with the creature, would it be too much to ask that you kill it?*

The short, Chinese-looking dude the Rodan had pinned to the deck, squirmed frantically and rasped, “Pistol.”

I kicked it over to him and he shot the Rodan in the throat.

The monster crumpled on top of the poor guy, leaking yellow goo all over his spiffy red uniform. His arms and legs wriggled desperately.

“Sorry.”

Bey spat some webbing on the monster and heaved it off the officer. *I thought our purpose was to save them, not kill them?*

I said I was sorry.

The goo covered officer, leveled his pistol at

me and scrambled back to where his two buddies sprawled unconscious on the floor. "Who are you?"

"Now is that nice? Seeing how I just saved your ass and all."

Fury flared in his eyes. "Who are you? You're not Tai-Kok."

"Do I look like a fucking pirate?" I bared my teeth at him. "See? No metal teeth."

You just fanged him.

Oh crap. "Relax. You're not on the dinner menu. My name is Kaylee and this handsome guy is Bey." I pointed behind him. "And those are my friends."

His eyes widened in alarm and before he could move, splat! A web ball nailed him.

Major Zan. A pleasure to meet you again, Zarek said pleasantly.

The Major stopped struggling and spat, *Zarek. I should have known you were behind the raids.*

Just fucking terrific. Testosterone at its finest. My temper flared and I slammed their minds with the images of the slaughter house on the Rodan ship. Of our burning cities, of the butchered corpses the monsters left behind and of the grade school littered with children's mangled bodies. I hammered the Major hard with visions of his own men's mutilated bodies.

Major Zan's face drained of color and he stared at me in stunned horror.

Even Zarek was shocked. Good. I had their attention. *While you guys are trying to prove who's got the biggest balls, cities are being destroyed.*

Hundreds of thousands of innocent souls are being slaughtered every fucking day.

Who gave the Tai-Kok and Rodan the Coletti's cloaking device and a bunch of nifty new weapons? Malik, the lying, conniving traitor who tried to turn his own brother feral. Who tried to kill you, his own father. The great manipulator who pits the only ones capable of stopping his little plan of world domination against each other.

And here you are falling for it. Giving him plenty of time to build his army of ferals. After you've blown the hell out of each other, he walks in and takes over. And no one will be safe. Your worlds will look like mine. But all you want to do is kill each other. Well, have at it. I'll find a way to stop him myself. I turned to stomp off and tripped over the dead monster. *Crap!*

Zarek fixed his deadly attention on me. *Careful, daughter.*

I scrambled to my feet to make a run for it and before I could even take a step, Zarek grabbed my mind. *Bey, see that our guests are taken to the ship.*

As you wish, my lord.

I won't apologize. I squeezed my eyes shut when I felt him ruffling through my memories. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* He was going to mind wipe me.

You are not to blame for your parent's deaths.

I stiffened as the horrible day came roaring back. *If I hadn't frozen...*

He tugged at the memory and the pain faded. *You would have died as well.* He stroked a gentle

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hand over my mind. *None have ever dared lecture me. Not even my closest advisors would question my decisions. Yet you do.*

I swallowed back my fear. Malik knows you. How you think. Your battle strategies. What buttons to push to start a war. You need to do the unexpected.

Join forces with the Alliance?

It is the last thing he'd expect. My internal radar screamed. We need to get the hell out of Dodge, the hyper-drive's getting ready to blow.

A flash of darkness and I stood on the bridge of the Tai-Kok ship. I dropped down onto the command chair and took us away from the crippled battle ship.

Chapter Fifteen

Kaylee's right, Father, Talree said. Malik's trying to provoke a war between us and the Alliance.

Relief flowed through me. My rat bastard agreed with me. Maybe he wasn't a total jerk after all.

But being right does not excuse Kaylee's disrespect or her assault upon you. I will see that she is properly disciplined.

The rat bastard was so dead. I flinched when he surged into my mind and wrapped himself around me tightly. *Let go of me.*

Never.

I fought his hold, desperate to get free before I gave in to the need building inside me. I couldn't budge him an inch. Dammit.

Go, my son. Punish her as you see fit.

Was that laughter in Zarek's voice? There was a flash of blackness and poof! I was flat on my back on the Tai-Kok Captain's bed. *Hey!*

Be quiet, female. You will not moan or scream while I punish you. And with that, Talree started his sensual assault. Without pity, his marauding fingers stroked and caressed until I was screaming with pleasure so intense I thought I would die.

You screamed. You must be punished again. Corkscrews of fire ravaged my body as he started

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his psychic seduction all over again.

My senses spinning, my body quivering and struggling to get my breath back, I croaked, *You're still a rat bastard. You should have told me the truth.*

If I had, you would have run from me.

Damn straight. Right after I shot your ass.

Into a swamp full of hungry creatures.

He had a point. God, I just hated that. I shoved at him. *The bond is nothing more than mind control. You took away my choice. My freedom. My humanity.*

And you, Lady Warrior, are my life. My heart. My soul. We are as one and I will never let you go.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I searched his mind. He meant every word of it.

No funky mind control?

No. He pressed a kiss to my forehead. *Even the Overlord has difficulty controlling you.*

I brightened at the thought. *Really?*

Don't push your luck. My Father has a nasty temper.

No kidding? I hadn't noticed. My spidey sense tingled in alarm. I reached out searching for the source. Holy hell! The kids were playing on Major Zan. I shot to my feet in horror. 'We bite. They die,' rang in my head. *You don't think...?*

We popped into the holding cell.

Ramrod straight, the still webbed Major sat stiffly on his bunk, staring at the small spider perched on his nose. Chittering in glee, the rest bounced up and down on the head of a tall

humanoid with silver hair and pointy elf ears. Pretty hot looking guy, if you were into the elf thing. I rolled my eyes when Talree issued a warning growl. As if.

"I see you've met my kids, Major," I said in Galactic Basic.

He transferred his gaze to me. "The small one did say you were their mother."

I held out my arm. *C'mon, sweeties*. The kids scurried up to my neck. I stroked them. "Surrogate mother. I rescued them from a Kotsor nest."

The elf snorted in disbelief. "You? Fought and killed Kotsors? Impossible. Females are incapable of killing."

"Don't get out much, do you?"

His molten silver eyes flashed with fury. "Am I to believe their preposterous story that you, a small female, single-handedly captured the Tai-Kok ship and defeated its captain in hand-to-hand combat?"

I narrowed my eyes. Sarcastic ass. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

Hampered by the webbing, the elf gave a half bow. "I am Captain Jubal of the battleship Trek."

"Ah, would that be the battleship that just got blown to hell?"

Kaylee, I thought you wanted to prevent a war, not start one, Talree said with a laugh.

I hate smug assholes. I smiled at the furious elf. "So, you don't think a female could kick a Tai-Kok's ass?"

"Captain," Major Zan warned.

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Jubal ignored him. "No, females are for breeding and caring for the home place. They do not have the ability to fight."

Talree laughed so hard I was afraid he'd pee himself.

I surveyed elf boy from head to toe and shook my head. Male chauvinist pig, no doubt about it. He really needed someone to show him the error of his ways. I pulled out my knife. "Care to put that little theory to a test?"

"You wish to fight me?"

"My, you are a bright one."

Through gritted teeth, the captain hissed, "And when I win, you will release us."

I shrugged. "Okay, you gotta a deal. But if I win, you and your men work for me."

Talree sobered quickly. *What are you doing?*

Getting us a crew.

"Captain Jubal! Do not be a fool," Major Zan commanded.

"You have my word as a Farin, that if you defeat me in fair combat, my men and I will serve you."

"She's Coletti," Zan exclaimed in disgust.

I bared my fangs in a predatory smile.

"It matters not. She is still female," Jubal responded confidently.

God, what an idiot.

Yes. He is, Zarek said a little too smugly.

Shit. The Overlord was up to something. I cut them both free. *Bey, can you bring the Alliance crew to the landing bay, please?*

I could feel his disgust. *The captain is arrogant, proud and easily defeated.*

My thoughts exactly. I gestured to the door. "After you, gentlemen."

Jubal stalked out.

"He is a highly trained combat officer," Major Zan warned. "It would be in your best interest to stop this foolishness."

I leaned close and whispered, "I'll let you in on a little secret. Not only am I a highly trained combat officer, I'm a cop." At his confused expression, I added, "An enforcer of our world's laws. I'm also a combat tactics instructor." I patted his arm. "Relax, I'm not going to hurt him... much."

"Are all the females on your world like you?"

"Pretty much. If you don't fight, you die in a Tai-Kok or Rodan slaughter house."

The Major looked a bit queasy. "Excellent point."

I walked out into the landing bay.

Jubal had removed his shirt and was doing a series of complicated stretching movements. His pale body had the taut, sinewy strength of a street fighter.

I turned my attention to Talree. *Okay, out, buster, I'm fighting him on my own.*

I will not allow him to harm you.

Please, like he's going to hurt me. Besides, we need a crew. Promise me you won't interfere.

Very well. You have my word, he rumbled in displeasure.

And your lordship, do I have your word as well?

Yes, daughter.

Shit, he was definitely up to something. But what? I scrutinized the battered officers who kept nervously eyeing the Tabor warriors perched on the ceiling. First thing I was gonna do was get rid of their glow-in-the-dark red uniforms. How the hell did they ever do any covert ops without getting shot to pieces?

“Here’s the deal. If Captain Jubal defeats me in hand-to-hand combat, you’re free to go. But if I win, you will serve as my crew for the next...ah...

Year, Zarek supplied.

“For the next year.”

The officers took one look at itty-bitty me and broke into relieved grins.

A brutish, thick-necked grizzly bear of a man shook his head sadly. “Were you unable to give your mate children? Are you of so little value that he would allow you to come to harm?”

Talree growled his displeasure.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.”

He gave a stiff bow. “Zye, I am head of security.”

“Do you people even know how to fight the Rodan? ‘Cause you did a pretty piss poor job. Twelve survivors out of a crew of what? Several hundred?”

His face flushed with rage. “We were ambushed and our hyper-drive disabled. When we lost our weapons systems, they boarded us.”

“Like I said, you have no fucking idea how to fight them. You had the manpower to kick their

asses. Instead, your men were butchered.”

Jubal stalked over to me. “Enough of this needless chatter, female.”

Hmmph. Had he been talking with Bey? I picked up a metal pole and offered it to him. “This is the only weapon permitted.”

He shook his head. “I won’t need a weapon to defeat you, little female.”

Yeah, you do, Caleb commented.

Moron’s thinkin’ with his balls, bad move, Jake added.

Ethan joined in, *Twenty bucks says he won’t last two minutes.*

I shook my head in disbelief. *Who invited you guys to the party?*

Zarek, they all said in unison.

I should have known. “You ready to do this, Jubal?”

He slashed out viciously with his fist.

I ducked. Guess that was a yes. I blocked the next blow and adroitly dodged alternating cuts and jabs.

The guy knows how to dance, Quinn observed.

Caleb quipped, *But can he dance the Mamba?*

I hate to dance, I replied and drove my foot into his knee. He went down and I rammed my knee into his face. “Did you know that the Rodan have female hunters?”

Jubal wiped at the pinkish blood running down his face and shot to his feet. “No, I did not.” With a snarl, he rushed me.

I ducked under his outstretched arms and

kicked him off his feet. He smashed face first into the deck. "Underestimating a female's capabilities can be a fatal mistake."

In a startlingly quick movement, he leapt up, grabbed my arm and pulled me into a bear hug. "You will release us, now, female."

His men cheered loudly.

"Can't do that. Really nice move, by the way. But it can be countered like this."

I twisted, jabbed my elbow repeatedly into his stomach. Yeah, I'll admit it, I did enjoy his grunts of pain. I was spending way too much time with Warlords. I tossed him over my shoulder and watched as he crashed nicely into the wall.

Jubal rolled, kicked out sharply, knocking me off my feet and slammed his size twelve boot into my nose.

My head snapped back and I felt the blood spurt. My PMS roared to life. God-dammit. Anywhere but the nose!

Caleb groaned, *Now he's done gone and made her mad.*

Jubal launched himself at me. I brought up my knees and feet and with a hard thrust, sent him flying over my head. He hit the wall with a thud.

Somersaulting to my feet, I grabbed the pole and twirled it until Jubal came at me again. I was done playing nice.

Sidestepping his charge, I delivered a solid blow to his jaw, sending him into a spin. The next blow caught him in the kidneys and the third in the stomach. He fell to his knees with a moan. The

fourth blow caught him at the base of the skull, dropping him to the floor.

Game over, Jake crowed.

Hoo ra, Caleb and Ethan shouted.

My Lady Warrior, Talree said, pressing a kiss to my mouth.

Nicely done, daughter, Zarek commented.

Major Zan bowed. "My compliments. You are truly a warrior."

When Jubal made no attempt to rise, I turned to my new crew. "I do believe I've won."

The men all stared at me in stunned disbelief.

I bared my fangs. "Anyone else care to give it a shot?"

With a roar of fury, a young officer charged me. My strength suddenly increased twenty fold as I swung the pole out. It caught him across the chest and flipped him end over end. He slammed into the wall and dropped to the floor, out cold. *Thanks, guys.*

I felt all the men in my life grin in satisfaction.

The Alliance officers advanced on me.

Pretty piss poor losers, Ethan said.

Guess they want to get eaten, Jake added.

"You're either my crew or my enemy." I shoved the metal picture of webbed remains of the Tai-Kok into their minds. The pirates' faces were frozen in a macabre mask of horror. "Do you honor Captain Jubal's word or do you wish to join my enemies in the hold?"

They froze as my spider warriors dropped down on them.

“Enough!” Major Zan stepped between us. “She won fairly. Are you without honor?”

Jubal struggled to his knees. “I serve the Lady Warrior.”

The men bowed stiffly and said in unison, “We serve the Lady Warrior.”

I stared at their sullen faces. They reminded me of the rookies at the academy after I kicked their asses. Time for a little hard ball. “Just remember that if you try to harm any of the Tabor or sabotage this ship, you will not only have to deal with Talree, but the Overlord. And gentlemen, you do not want to make them angry.”

Zye stepped forward hastily. “What are your instructions, my Lady?”

“I’ve had command of this ship for less than a day. We need to do an inventory of the holds and weapons systems.”

“I will start immediately.” He bowed and hurried off.

“Any of you guys engineers?”

An older humanoid built like a tank and with an ugly, flat face stepped forward. “I am Wulf. I was head engineer on the Trek.”

“We took a couple of good hits from the Rodan. Do a systems check and make sure nothing was damaged. Since this is the first Tai-Kok pirate ship ever captured, we need to know what makes it so deadly and a plan to defeat any other pirates who try to take the ship back.”

Wulf gave a bow. “As you wish.” He pointed to four other men. “I will need them.”

“Fine. Go.”

An officer with green skin and exotic features stepped forward and bowed. “I am Shrek, the medical officer. May I attend your injuries?”

Shrek? Get out. “Your name is Shrek?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

I eyed his tubular ears. The universe definitely had a sense of humor. Who knew? “Please, Captain Jubal kicks like a mule.”

Shrek ran a scanner over my face. “You need to start ducking more often.”

I grinned at him. “I try. But I have this nasty tendency to irritate people.”

“So it would seem.” He pressed a small hypo to my nose and the pain vanished. “Better?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Jubal got slowly to his feet. “My apologies, my Lady. For a female you have a surprising expertise in combat.”

Time for a little show and tell. I grabbed his mind and forced him to live through the Tai-Kok and Rodan attacks. The monsters attacking and my fellow cops and I fighting them off. The scream of fighter jets overhead as they fought against the Marauders. The smoke from the burning buildings and the butchered corpses scattered over the ground. Then I shoved graphic images of the gutted women and children in the slaughter house into his brain.

“This is what will happen to your cities and families. Your women will learn to fight or they will die. Do you get that?”

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Jubal's face turned a pasty white. "I did not know. By the Goddess, I did not know."

"You ready to fight the monsters?"

Jubal bowed. "To the death, my lady."

I looked at Major Zan. "And you?"

He gave an elegant bow. "Yes, my lady, I am."

His eyes full of horror, Shrek bowed. "As am I."

"We are ready to fight also, my lady," my crew said.

Shit! I had broadcast it to the entire crew. Or had I? *Your lordship?*

They now know what the Tai-Kok and Rodan are capable of.

And that their cities are no longer safe, Talree added.

"You guys ready to learn how to fight the bad guys?"

The crew answered as one, "Yes, my lady."

Chapter Sixteen

Psychic power that rivaled Zarek's abruptly flared to life. Whoa! Where had that come from? I reached out searching for the source. Major Zan. Holy shit! The man had some totally awesome shields.

Wonder if Zarek had any idea of just how strong he really was. And the sneaky little bastard had linked to his superior and was updating him on the situation. Couldn't hurt to do a little eavesdropping. Now could it?

This Coletti female with an army of Tabor warriors and a captured Tai-Kok battle cruiser destroyed the five Rodan mother ships attacking you? Even those that were cloaked? And this same female and her warriors boarded your damaged warship, killed the Rodan butchering your men and then rescued the survivors?

God, what a prick! Bet he was related to Jubal.

I know how insane it sounds, Commodore. If I hadn't witnessed it myself, seen what she can do, I would find it difficult to believe, too. But she is a highly skilled warrior and she did defeat Captain Jubal in hand-to-hand combat. Her fighting style and psychic abilities are unlike anything I've ever encountered.

Truly amazing. And you believe her story that Malik went rogue and gave the Rodan and Tai-Kok

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the Coletti cloaking technology and weapons?

It's not a story, you fucking moron. It's the truth. Ignore his warning and a whole lot of people are going to die.

I felt their startled alarm before they both snapped into battle mode. I threw up a shield. *Whoa! Before you do something really stupid, you should know, I can draw on Talree's and Zarek's strength if need be.*

The Commodore hissed, *Can you, female?*

Kaylee. My name's Kaylee, not female. Jeezus. What's up with you guys?

An energy barrier sprang up around me.

Pretty cool barrier, guys. Is that supposed to keep me in?

Yes, The Commodore snarled as he probed my shield.

Time for show and tell. Probably gonna piss the big guys off. But if I was really careful maybe they wouldn't notice me drawing on their power.

Yeah, I know. Who was I kidding? I doubted Zarek would actually kill me or anything. Hopefully. Probably get punished again. Like that was a bad thing.

The barrier grew tighter and tighter. I tapped into Talree's and Zarek's power and broke through it. *Like I said, part of being a Siren is the ability to draw on other's powers.*

Attack me if you want, but you won't like the consequences and it will put any chance of a partnership between you and the Coletti in the toilet. Do you really want to face an army of ferals

in battle? Or have the Rodan and Tai-Kok attack your home worlds?

Major Zan hastily added, *My own intelligence operatives said Talree and a number of his warriors had disappeared. Twelve merchant ships have vanished in this sector alone in the last week. While we were investigating the destruction of the civilian outposts, we were attacked.*

The Rodan and Tai-Kok have declared war on your worlds, gentlemen. You can fight or you can die. I showed the Commodore images of the carnage inflicted on our world. *They spare no one, not even the children.* I projected my memories of the butchered school kids. Of the monsters chowing down on babies.

The Commodore grabbed my mind. My shield wavered but held. Crap. He was as strong as Talree. Not good. Not good at all. If I didn't do something quick, all hell was going to break loose.

I dropped my shields, latched onto his mind and relived that horrible day when my parents were killed. Then I hit him hard with the blood and gore of the slaughter house. I made all my pain, my horror, my guilt and rage his. *I will do whatever is necessary to stop them. Now do you understand why?*

With a moan the Commodore broke free. *I apologize for doubting you, Major. Her abilities are truly unique.*

An extremely pissed off Zarek popped into my head. *Daughter, did you think I would not notice the drain on my power? In the future, you will*

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leave diplomatic matters to me and my son. Do you understand?

I winced at his punishing grip. Ow. Ow. Sorry, sir. *Won't happen again, your lordship.*

Zarek turned his attention to Zan. *You are to be congratulated on your shields, Major. Most impressive.*

Zan gave a slight bow. *You honor me.*

The Commodore demanded, *Is it true? Malik has gone rogue?*

We all flinched as Zarek's rage flared to life. *The betrayer has shamed me and my clan. Have no doubt that he will be hunted down and punished.*

I groaned and clutched my head as a thousand fire ants crawled across my mind.

How many Rodan do you sense, daughter?

I reached out, searching the heavens. *Holy shit! They must want us really bad. Five mother ships and a warbird. We've got about twenty minutes before they're within missile range. How the hell are they tracking us?*

The Marauder, Zan answered.

Crap. We need to jettison it.

I will attend to it, the major responded and he was gone.

You must evade them until Jaylan and his warbird can assist you.

The battle cruiser Wazir can be within strike range in forty minutes, the commodore stated.

Hmmm. My sucky diplomacy seemed to have had a positive effect on the commodore.

Talree slid into my mind with a growl. *Your*

talent for getting into trouble is growing.

Yeah, well. It seemed a good idea at the time. My brothers don't call me Calamity Jones for nothin'.

He sighed. Come about to coordinates thirteen point twenty-four mark thirty-five. The Ta-Cas asteroid belt will slow them down until I can reach you.

Yes, sir. I popped onto the bridge, quickly relayed the coordinates to Captain Jubal and explained the situation. "Your piloting skills up to a little hide and seek?"

A feral smile twisted his lips. "Yes, my lady."

An asteroid the size of Dallas hurtled towards us at warp speed. Oh, shit! Oh, shit! We're gonna die! At the very last second, Jubal flipped the ship and the asteroid sailed past, missing us by an inch or two.

It missed by meters, Petka. Not inches.

Shit! I was broadcasting again.

The babies bounced up and down on my head. Wheeee! Do again.

Jubal gave a slight bow. Your wish is my command, children.

"For God's sake, keep your eyes on the fucking scanner." I cringed as the ship skimmed under and over and around tumbling asteroids.

Wheee. Fun!

Fun? I let out an eeeek and clutched the armrests as another huge hunk of rock rushed straight at us. At the last second, the ship ducked under it. Holy crap! My nerves couldn't take much

more of this.

I glanced over at Jubal who was grinning like an idiot. Glad someone was having a good time. I looked back at the scanner. Another Rodan ship had bitten the dust. Okay, I'll admit it. Jubal was a damned good pilot. If I'd been driving, we'd be splattered all over the universe by now.

I closed my eyes and searched for the remaining ships. Two Rodan ships left. Unfortunately, the pilot of the warbird was as talented as Jubal.

I heaved a sigh of relief when we cleared the asteroid field. I laid in the mother ships coordinates into weapons control and hit the buttons. Kaboom! And then there was only the big, bad warbird.

My spidey sense went on red alert. The warbird was right on our ass. I detected the Coletti warriors an instant before they appeared on the bridge. Holy shit!

Bey! Rogues! Spinning to meet the threat, I ducked under an outstretched arm and rammed my knife into the rogue's chest. He staggered back and was hit by a dozen web balls.

I caught a fleeting glimpse of another warrior slammed back against the wall by two dozen web balls before huge arms clamped around me, pinning me against a massive chest. There was a dizzying moment of blackness and I was suddenly on the warbird's bridge. Oh, shit! I struggled frantically. *Talree!*

An enormous Coletti strutted over to me. The prissy bastard was a bit overdressed for combat. A

brilliant green uniform made out of some kind of velvet and loaded down with enough medals that I was surprised he didn't topple over. His warrior's braids had gold and jewels woven into them. Hmmm. Bet he was gay.

He stared at me with crocodile eyes and laughed. "The Rodan fear you?"

We bite. He dies.

No! Hold really still, okay?

'Kay.

Talree merged with me and my voice was suddenly harsh, male. "Only cowards use females as shields, Hotan. Meet me in combat and die like a warrior should."

"Your female is now Malik's property, beast."

Hotan's hot tongue laved the side of my face. Ewww. Gross! I kicked him in the stomach as hard as I could. The prick only laughed.

"Does she scream when she comes?" His slimy tongue slid over my lips.

Definitely not gay. I sank my fangs into the disgusting thing and jerked my head back, ripping a chunk out.

Blood gushing from his mouth, Hotan jumped back with a furious roar. "You will regret that, female." He punched me hard in the face.

Stars danced across my vision and the room spun dizzily. Talree clutched me tightly. *I will come for you.*

I know.

Hotan grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him. "Know this, Talree. Your precious mate will

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be Malik's whore. And when you come for her, he will drain the life from her as you watch. Then you will become his beast."

A hypo was jammed against my neck and everything went black.

* * * *

The babies chittered in alarm and dim voices called to me.

"Go away. Tired," I mumbled.

The kids' sticky tongues smacked my face. I pried open an eye. What?

You not die, they all cried.

Everything came crashing back and I bolted upright. A shackle bit into my wrist, yanking me back down on the narrow bunk.

"Omigod!" I reached out desperately for Talree but found only a horrible empty black void. Oh, God, where was he? Had something happened to him? I tried to link with Zarek. Nothing. Just that awful emptiness.

In total panic, I reached out to my family. *Quinn? Jake? Caleb? Anyone? Please, answer me.*

I could barely hear Caleb's faint reply. *Kaylee? Are you hurt? Do you know where you are?*

I looked around frantically. *A cell. I'm in a fucking cell. My God. What did they do to me?*

The kids answered, *Tae says you injected with Gyan.*

Caleb's voice was a distant whisper, *Can you escape?*

I don't know. The Gyan's messin' me up big time.

My spidey sense tingled weakly. *Babies, back in my hair.*

The cell door swung open and Hotan stood there with an evil grin on his face. He unfastened his pants and his penis snaked out. "Do you scream when you come?"

"Like you're ever gonna know."

He shoved me down on the bunk and tore at my jumpsuit. "You will be screaming when I'm done with you."

Babies bite!

My beautiful kids did.

Hotan gasped in agony and stumbled back. "What? What did you do?"

"Me? Nothing." I held out my hand and the babies crawled on. "These little darlings bit you and you have about thirty seconds to live, asshole."

With stunned disbelief in his eyes, Hotan pulled out his big fucking knife and took a step towards me. His knees buckled and he fell.

"Did you really think I'd let you rape me?"

Fury burning in his eyes, he dragged himself forward and raised the knife.

"You won't have time to use that. You're already dead."

With a funny rasping groan, he collapsed to the floor.

I pulled the lock pick out of my bra and quickly unlocked my shackle.

Tae knows bad man dead.

I stroked them. *My very brave little warriors. You saved me from a fate worse than death.*

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We warriors. Protect. They die.

Yes, *they do*. I took his knife and peeked out into the hallway. Rock walls. *Tell Tae we're on a base.*

We tell.

My radar tingled.

Bad men come.

I ran down a corridor, trying doors. Finally one slid open and I darted inside. A horrible stench hit me. My stomach rolled. God, what was that smell? I turned and gagged. Bodies. Dozens of mutilated bodies hung from the ceiling. Omigod!

The kids chittered in alarm and clung to me.
Bad. Bad.

I stroked them. *Don't look. Don't look.*

We go. We go now.

A male voice demanded, *Free me.*

Where are you?

Here.

Something moved in the shadows. I eased around the gutted bodies and gasped.

Chained to the wall was a nightmare come to life. Tentacles squirmed about his snake-like features and his compelling yellow-green eyes burned with rage. Black armor-plated skin covered his massive well-muscled form. My gaze dropped and I blinked. Whoa! Naked and hung like a stallion.

Scary.

I'll say.

A rumbling growl sounded and he bared some really terrifying fangs.

Just My Luck

Bad men come.

Shit! I ducked behind a corpse.

A Coletti warrior appeared. "Come out, little female, we want to play with you."

"Play with this." I hurled my knife, smiling when the rogue grabbed his throat and jerked it out. With an icky gurgling noise, he sank to the floor, gasping for air.

Another one popped in behind me.

I shoved a corpse at him and ran for it.

With a roar of fury, he lunged after me and grabbed my arm. I twisted, used his forward momentum against him and hurled him over my shoulder.

He slammed into the boogie man, who reared up, wrapped his massive legs around the rogue's neck and broke it.

Whoa! Pretty damned impressive.

I walked over to the boogie man. *The Rodan and rogue Colletis are my enemy, too. They have butchered and eaten my people. I'm going to kill as many as I can. But I'm kinda outnumbered and could use some help killing them.*

Free me. I kill.

God, I hoped he meant that in a good way.

Chapter Seventeen

Free me. Sounds pretty easy, right? Wrong. Boogie Man was a good eight feet tall, give or take an inch. And his hands just had to be chained above his head. So I climbed the intimidating, naked guy. The scary part was that he seemed to be enjoying it way too much.

How did I figure that out? Kinda hard to miss his one hell of a hard-on. Did I mention he was hung like a stallion? A really big stallion? Hopefully, it was just a morning woody. A really scary woody.

The kids shivered on my head. *We go. Bad place.*

Tell me about it.

Morty's forked tongue flicked out, caressing my lips. Omigod! Please. Please. I'm begging you, Lord, please don't let him be... you know, interested in me. We were way different species. Shit, so was Talree and that sure as hell hadn't stopped him.

The giant's tongue slid into my ear. Just fucking terrific! He was coming on to me. He was so not sticking that monster dick in me. No way. No how.

And God, I didn't even want to think of what Talree would do. I gave him my most intimidating glare. *Knock it off or I'll leave you here.*

His tongue flicked my nose. *Not leave. Need me.*

Yeah, I couldn't, wouldn't leave Mister 'Omigod look at the size of that' Boner for the Rodan. I did need a back-up. I shuddered as the creepy tentacles slithered inside my overalls and crawled over my breasts.

Jeezus, it was like being groped by an octopus. I smacked frantically at them. *Stop! You horny bastard, cut it out. I have a mate.*

Not bonded. I claim you.

No. No. And, hell, no! Talree's my bond mate and he will come for me.

Coletti Warlord, he hissed in distaste.

Yeah, the big bad. So behave yourself. I pulled myself up on his massive shoulder and worked the locks.

All the while trying desperately to ignore his big ass fangs pressed against my crotch. Ewww. Gross. He was sniffing my private parts. Could this get any worse? *What's your name?*

Tihar.

I unlocked the first shackle and gulped when his hand clamped around my waist. Did I mention his enormous fucking claws? *Okay, Tihar, I could do this a whole lot faster if you'd stop with the sniffing shit. I'm not a fucking dog.*

Soft.

Yeah, no armor plating, big guy.

Caleb called faintly, *Kaylee, you okay?*

Just peachy. I smacked at the tentacles playing with my nipples. *Stop it!*

Caleb gasped in horror. *What is that?*

Haven't a clue. Says his name's Tihar. I

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unlocked the other shackle and swallowed hard as his arms closed around me. *Put me down.*

No.

The babies swarmed down my neck. *We bite. He dies.*

Tihar bared his fangs. *Can't kill.*

The babies bit him repeatedly.

Oh, crap. Not a twitch. Not even a tremor. Nada. Just my shitty luck. I was stuck with horny guy. My spidey sense tingled. *More bad guys coming, buddy. Put me down so I can fight.*

The kids scurried back to my head.

He dropped me as six rogue Coletti warriors popped into the room. *I kill.*

One minute he was in front of me and the next he was literally tearing the rogues to pieces. His attacks were too fast for the eye to follow. Just a blur of motion and then body parts and blood went flying in every direction. I wiped the blood off my face. Ewww.

We go. Now?

Yes! We go now. Ducking a head, I grabbed a pistol and ran for my life.

A black blur zoomed by and grabbed me. "Eeeek!" We streaked down the corridor and any Rodan or Coletti we passed were dead before they hit the floor.

Tihar stopped suddenly and snatched the weapon out of my hand.

My head spun. Whoa. *What are you? The Flash?*

Askole. His tentacles suddenly clamped tightly to my head.

What the hell!? To my utter horror, Tihar pushed his way into my mind. *Hey! Get out!* Ignoring me totally, he sorted through my memories and easily blocked my pathetic attempts to stop him.

Damned Gyan screwed up my control. I hit him as hard as I could in the throat.

I felt his amusement. *Little soft skin wishes to fight me?*

Hell, yes! I slammed the palm of my hand into his nose.

His head snapped back. He stared at me in surprise and then laughed. At least I think it was a laugh. It was more of a cackling howl. *Very good, Lady Warrior. If we are to survive, we need your skills.*

One of his tentacles stung my neck. A cry broke from me as liquid fire streaked through my body. *Ow! That really hurts.* My stomach knotted in agony. *What did you do?*

Your body must be cleansed of Gyan. He held me against his chest as I thrashed wildly. The pain grew and grew until all I could do was scream.

The voices of my family called to me, demanding, pleading with me to tell them what was happening.

The babies chattered in distress.

The pain suddenly vanished and I sagged against him, struggling to breathe.

Better?

Better? I swung at him.

He blocked the blow. *Fierce little soft skin. Are*

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there more like you?

Caleb shouted, Kaylee! What the hell is going on? Are you okay?

Yeah, just fucking terrific. Tihar was cleansing my body of Gyan. Hurts like a mother.

Are you the head of her clan? I wish to examine your females. I will pick one. Give you a good bride price.

Oh no!

Caleb snorted. Are you kidding me? We aren't giving you any of our women. You're not even the same species.

Think only Coletti can alter DNA? His tentacle curled around my face, stroking my skin.

Alter DNA? What the hell is he talking about?

Go now. Talk later. No one denies Askole.

Just friggin' terrific. The cat was out of the bag now. I reached out and tried to link with Talree. I could feel his rage and concern but I couldn't connect with him. I tried Zarek, same thing.

You cannot link with your mate until he pays me for your return.

What! You're holding me for ransom?

Askole's are traders. We find things of value and sell them. I found you. You are worth much to the Warlords.

You ungrateful jerk. You didn't find me. I found you and kept you off the dinner menu. You owe me! Big time!

My radar went on red alert. A whole shitload of rogue Coletti warriors were heading our way. Do you know where their power generators are?

Yes. And zoom, off we went. The Coletti warriors? Bits and pieces of them littered the hallway behind us. Rambo had nothing on this guy.

Thirty seconds later, we were standing in front of the generators. Whoa! What a ride. He'd make a fortune at an amusement park.

I examined the machinery and dug the C-2 explosive out of my boot. I showed it to Tihar. *Very powerful shit. What's the best place to put it?*

Tihar touched the control panel. *Here.*

I attached the plastic explosive to it and lit the fuse. *Now we run like hell.*

Zoom! We tore down the corridors, leaving another trail of dead bodies behind us.

Wheee! Go faster!

A thunderous roar sounded. The floor heaved and buckled as the entire complex shook violently.

I peeked over his shoulder. A cascading ball of flames raced after us. *Go faster!*

Tihar put on a burst of speed, ducking and dodging chunks of debris that rained down from above.

The lights flickered and died.

We burst into the landing bay.

The firestorm gushed out of the corridor torching everything in its path.

A siren began to wail. An instant later, liquid foam sprayed from the ceiling, dousing the flames.

I wiped the crap off my face. At least it got rid of some of the blood. I probably looked like a victim out of one of those slasher movies. I groaned as fifteen extremely pissed off rogue Coletti

warriors popped into the landing bay.

Tihar shoved the pistol at me and attacked. He kinda reminded me of the cartoon version of the Tasmanian Devil. A twirling tornado of death. Blood, bits and pieces of warriors flew in every direction, splattering me. Ewww. I took cover behind some crates and grimaced. My overall had bits of Coletti on it. Total gross out.

A volley of laser bolts suddenly raked the area. The twirling tornado abruptly stopped and Tihar crumpled to the floor.

Omigod! He had gaping wounds in his shoulder, side and thigh.

On the catwalk above me, a rogue, his fangs bared in fury, sighted in on him again.

I shot the asshole, watching as he toppled off the catwalk and landed with a splat on the floor beside Tihar.

My spidey sense screamed and I grabbed my head as fire ants danced their way across my mind. Holy shit! Dozens of Marauders were heading our way. I had about ten minutes—tops—before things got really interesting. Just my shitty luck. The rogues had called for reinforcements.

I ran over to Tihar and let out a shuddering breath as his yellow-green eyes met mine. He was still alive. *More Rodan are coming. Can you stand?*

He struggled to rise. *Cannot. Go. Leave me.*

No. My people never leave a wounded soldier behind. Ever. I wedged my shoulder under his and heaved. *C'mon, big guy, move your butt.*

He got to his knees.

Just My Luck

I grunted and tried to leverage him up. *Jeezus, you must weigh four hundred pounds. C'mon, you can do it.*

My human and Coletti family linked with me and power flowed into me. I lifted him easily. *Thanks, guys.*

Caleb asked, *Do you know what planet you're on?*

No. All I can see is red sand.

Roma, Tihar rasped.

Copy. Talree says something is blocking his attempts to link with you.

I gave them the 411 on Tihar and his ransom deal.

Whoa! Your guy's got quite a temper. Hate to be in Tihar's shoes when he catches up with him. Zarek says a warbird can be there within a couple of hours.

What? Are they taking the scenic route? They won't even make it in time for dessert. In about ten minutes or so a whole bunch of Rodan are coming for dinner. Tell him to step on it.

Tihar staggered and went down on one knee.

With a groan, I hefted him back up. *Jeezus, think I just gave myself a hernia.*

Dying. Go.

Quit being such a wuss.

Wuss?

Weak. Baby.

He bared his fangs. *Not weak baby.*

Prove it.

He lurched towards a shuttle. *That's it. Just a*

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few more feet, big guy. You can do it.

He tottered inside and collapsed in the co-pilot's chair. *Not weak.* His eyes rolled back and he slumped over.

No, you'd make one hell of a Marine. Ethan would love to recruit you. Hoo ra! I belted him in. I grabbed the med kit and sprayed a shitload of some kinda antibiotics crap and liquid bandage on his wounds.

My spidey sense went on red alert. Holy hell! The Rodan were ahead of schedule. Don't you just hate it when dinner guests arrive early?

I reached out in desperation. There had to be some kind of critters in the area. There! Wasp-like creatures and a funky-looking black scorpion bug thing. I smiled and there were thousands of the little buggers. Even better, they were already angry over their nests being invaded by the base. So I riled them up even more. *Sic'em, boys.*

The wasps swarmed into the air turning the bright red sky black. Like a biblical plague, they descended on the Rodan. The monsters took one look at them and ran for the base. Right on cue, the scorpions popped out of the sand and started stinging the shit out of them. The cloud of wasps swooped down and the Rodan disappeared inside the swirling mass. Roars of fury and pain filled the air.

"Paybacks are a bitch, suckers."

I punched it and the shuttle shot out, cutting through the horde of insects. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the monsters convulsing on the sand.

Just My Luck

The link to my family shattered and Malik's sinister voice sounded in my head, *Very well done, female. Your talents are quite unique. My brother chose well. But what was his, will now be mine.*

Over my dead body.

If you insist.

An air pocket bounced the shuttle up a hundred feet and a laser beam missed us by inches. Holy shit!

Can you teleport, little female?

In my mind's eye I could see him locking weapons control on our shuttle. I quickly unbelted Tihar, wrapped myself around him and teleported.

A flash of inky darkness and then we were falling.

Down.

Down.

Tihar smacked into the sand and I crashed into him.

A ribbon of dazzling energy flashed. With a loud boom, the shuttle exploded into a rolling cloud of smoke and flame.

A moan broke from Tihar.

I rolled off him. *Sorry, big fella. You kids, okay?*

Scary. Not do again.

I hear ya. Every muscle in my body protesting, I sat up. An endless vista of blood red sand stretched forever. In the distance, shimmering mirages danced under the unforgiving sun.

Very impressive. But how long can you keep it up?

I jumped on Tihar and teleported us a hundred

feet away.

A blinding red bolt seared the sand where only seconds ago we had been sitting.

Malik mocked, *Is that the best you can do?*

An energy beam raced towards us.

My berserker rage flared to life and I teleported us again and again and again and again. But death kept following us, creeping ever closer.

Leave me, Tihar whispered.

Not an option. Sweat stung my eyes and rolled down my face. The sun was as merciless as Malik. Fear knotted my stomach, I was at the end of my strength and the bastard knew it.

Surrender or die.

Don'tcha just hate it when they throw your words back at you? I snarled, *There are some fates worse than death. Having you touch me is one. Bring it on, asshole.*

My stubborn survival instinct kicked in and from somewhere deep inside me came a final vestige of angry strength. I teleported us an instant before he could fry us.

Another crash landing. I could barely summon enough energy to move off Tihar. The asshole was jerking me around like a fucking puppet on a string.

Tentacles repeatedly stung my hand and arm and Tihar rasped, *Honor. Know you. Free.*

With a mocking laugh, Malik surged into my mind, pinning me to the scorching sand. *Poor little female. Beaten so soon?* Ghostly hands squeezed my breasts and twisted my nipples. *What was Talree's is now mine.*

His penis snaked across my stomach. *Never!* I grabbed the disgusting thing and twisted and squeezed with all my strength.

His bellow of agony echoed in my mind.

With a roar of fury, Talree slammed into Malik, knocking him out of my head. I could feel my mate's single-minded ferocity as he exchanged vicious mental blows with his brother. Each one a deadly, ruthless predator. Each without mercy. Both determined to kill the other.

Well done, daughter, Zarek declared, engulfing my mind in a gentle embrace. *You unmanned him quite effectively.*

Talree took a nasty blow and I instinctively reached out.

A harshness in his implacable face, Zarek stopped me. *No. He must do this alone.*

His mind brutally relentless, Talree hammered Malik. Striking him again and again. His voice one of pure menace, he growled, *You dare to touch my mate?*

After I kill you, she will be mine. I will enjoy breaking her to my touch.

My internal radar screamed to life. Holy shit! I could sense eight rogues throwing up some kind of energy barrier around Talree. That fucking coward. I thrust the image at the Overlord. *Malik's luring him into a trap!*

A killing rage flared to life in Zarek's ice-cold eyes. *You are correct. They are fucking cowards.*

I shrank back as the merciless predator was unleashed. A savage killer ruthlessly honed by

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battle. Something dark and terrible in his eyes, Zarek bared his fangs. *And they will die as such.*

One minute we were in the burning desert, the next we were in the cool darkness of a vast warehouse. *Wait here. We will come for you.*

But sir... He was already gone.

Chapter Eighteen

Caleb bellowed in disbelief, *Arrested! How the hell did you get arrested?*

It was surprisingly easy. It had to be one hundred and thirty degrees out in that friggin' desert. No water. No shade. No rest. Malik chasing us around, doing his best to kill us.

So by the time Zarek popped us into town, I was pretty damned hot, tired and thirsty. When I saw that really awesome fountain, I couldn't resist. Hey, all I wanted to do was cool down. Who knew it was such a big no-no?

Jubal exclaimed, *By the Goddess! It is a true miracle you didn't start a riot.*

Ah, well, the folks in the marketplace weren't real happy. But after I flashed a bit of fang, they backed off.

In unison, Jake and Caleb asked, *Fang?*

Oh, shit! How in the hell did I explain that I was no longer quite human without a major blowup? I couldn't, so I ignored the question.

Anyhoo, I was laying there enjoying the water when this horrible little troll hauled me out and started yelling. Boy, talk about a nasty temper, he'd give Uncle Saul a run for his money. Got all up in my face about the blood and pieces of Coletti floating in the water.

Jake hollered, *Pieces of Coletti! Blood!*

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Word to the wise. Never get anywhere near an Askole warrior when he goes into battle mode. Believe me, it's a total gross out. 'Cause anyone stupid enough to take them on, gets pureed. I mean, body parts and blood go flying in every direction. Get the picture? And lucky me, I had been standing a little too close to the action.

His amusement evident, Major Zan added, *Retreat is always the best option when confronted with the Askole.*

Did I mention how cranky the troll was?

Caleb groaned. *Oh, God. What the fuck did you do?*

I sorta resisted arrest.

You did what? That was Uncle Derek.

I couldn't go to jail. Now could I? I mean with all the Rodan out to get me and who would take care of Tihar?

But you are in jail, Petka.

God, was the whole world listening in? I glanced around the dreary little cell. Yeah, right nice accommodations, too. For a third world country.

You wouldn't believe how fast that horrible little troll whipped out his stun gun and nailed my ass. Fried the hell out of my synapses. Thank God, my radar's back on line and I can finally mind talk again.

I will have the Captain of the Wazir bail you out, the Major stated, trying hard not to laugh.

Aw, that's so sweet of you but it won't be necessary.

Jake growled, *Why not?*

'Cause I'm breaking out of this joint.

There was a chorus of groans.

Don't have much of a choice, guys. There are about thirty Rodan heading this way and I think there's a rogue joining the party.

His tone one of mild curiosity, Major Zan asked, *Does Talree or the Overlord know of this?*

Did he think I was nuts or something? *They're busy fighting Malik and his goons. Besides, I can handle this.*

There was a long silence.

I rolled my eyes. God, you'd think I was a complete fuck-up who went around blowing stuff up and getting into trouble. Okay, I'll admit that I'm kinda disaster-prone and have the world's worst luck. But you'd think my family would be used to my little problem by now.

I took a deep breath and asked, *Is there any way you can contact Tihar's family, Major? Let them know he survived the attack on the trading outpost and that I'm doing all I can to get him home alive?*

I will personally contact them.

Great. Thanks. Ah, you might want to mention that he's a tad bit shot up.

Another chorus of groans.

What? Like it's my fault?

How badly is he injured? Was that a note of anxiety in the Major's voice?

I flashed him a mental picture.

I felt Zan's horrified disbelief. *And he still*

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lives?

Surprised me, too. I patched him up the best I could but he needs a doctor.

Fucking unbelievable. That was Ethan. His skin is armored!

What? Was this a party line? Yes, it is and that's why he's still breathing.

Jake let out a long suffering sigh like his ulcer was kicking up again. I'm almost afraid to ask, but what's your plan?

The kids swipe the keys. I let all the bad guys out and that horrible little troll will be too busy rounding them up again to worry about little ol' me.

Oh, God. Couldn't tell if that was Caleb or Jake.

Once you break out, that horrible little troll has the authority to shoot to kill, Jubal announced.

You're sure the Rodan are coming? Uncle Saul had joined the party.

I rubbed my aching head. Real sure.

Talree and the Overlord will not be pleased, Petka.

Tell me about it. I gasped when a snake tattoo suddenly appeared on my right hand. Shit! Where the hell did that come from?

What's wrong? They all asked in unison.

Freakiest thing. This snake tattoo just popped up on my hand. Weird, huh?

I felt Jubal's utter disbelief. A tattoo? He marked you?

Tihar didn't claim me did he? I mean, I told him Talree was my bond mate. And he is so not sticking that monstrous dick in me.

Monstrous dick? Caleb's protective big brother instincts kicked in. He was coming on to you?

Ah, kinda.

He just whipped it out? Uncle Derek was definitely pissed.

No! No. It wasn't like that. He was naked when I found him.

Naked, huh? Ethan's tone promised some major ass kicking.

C'mon, guys. He was chained to the friggin' wall when I rescued him. And I couldn't help but notice that he's hung like a stallion, okay?

Caleb snorted. Talree's gonna kick his ass.

Major Zan demanded, When did Tihar sting your hand?

Just before Malik tried to rape me. Why?

I winced when they all yelled, Rape you?

I quickly gave them the 411.

Uncle Derek laughed. Twisted his dick, huh?

You betcha. Then Talree showed up and started beating the snot out of him.

Describe your tattoo, Major Zan commanded.

Okay. It's black with some kind of green and blue writing up the back. A funky sorta cobra-like head with freaky glowing yellow eyes and the tail wraps around my forearm. Please tell me he didn't mark me as his mate.

No, the tattoo is a sign of great honor. It signifies that you belong to his clan and have

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displayed unusual valor against the enemy. Only two males have been given a tattoo in the last millennium. Both Coletti.

Big surprise there. How sweet of him. But a cop's motto is to protect and serve. No matter what the species. And we never ever leave a wounded comrade behind.

My guys all shouted, Hoo ra!

Jubal asked, Hoo ra?

It's kinda a battle cry.

Two of my kids crawled into the cell, dragging the keys behind them on a strand of webbing. Good babies.

They chittered in excitement and streaked up to my head. We go now?

We go now. I unlocked the cell door and peeked out. The coast was clear.

Be careful, runt. And see if Tihar would be interested in becoming a Marine.

God, Ethan was the eternal recruiter. Yeah, I'm sure that's right up there on his to do list.

Keep your head down, Caleb growled.

Love you, too. I broke the link and scanned the area. The nasty little troll was doing his paperwork. If I wasn't so fucking tired, I'd kick his ass. As it was, I was having way too much trouble just standing up. I crept down the hallway and peered in the next cell. "Pssss. Pssss."

A dozen heads turned in my direction.

I opened the door. "Jail break! Run for it," I commanded in Galactic Basic.

They all looked at me like I was crazy and

didn't budge an inch.

"You don't want out?"

A squat humanoid with Brillo pad hair got in my face. "You trying to get us killed, you crazy bitch?"

"But..."

"Go or I will call Soulcar."

"Jeezus, what kind of pathetic criminals are you?" So much for the great escape. My radar went on red alert. The Rodan were here and, so far, the nasty troll was refusing them entrance to the jail. "Guess you think Soulcar is tough enough to hold off thirty or so Rodan all by himself. Good luck with that." I started to close the door. "When they're chowing down on your innards, just remember I gave you the opportunity to escape."

All twelve rushed out, almost trampling me in their haste to flee. Well, that's more like it. My gaze settled on the weapons locker and I whistled loudly. "Hey! Wait!"

They all stopped and looked back at me.

I opened the locker and held up a rifle. "You might want to take a weapon with you. The Rodan looked pretty hungry."

They all rushed back and I handed each a rifle. "Get your families out of here."

The building shuddered violently. Damn, they were using a laser cannon. Smoke drifted down the hallway.

The pathetic losers took off out the back door. I was tempted to follow them but I couldn't leave the foul little troll to face the Rodan alone. I loaded up on weapons.

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My spidey sense tingled and I looked over my shoulder. Soulcar stood behind me, wearing a really pissed off expression and his laser pistol was pointed at my head.

The babies quivered in my hair. *He mad.*

Oh, yeah. Keeping my hands in plain view, I turned around slowly. "You can't fight them alone and I don't plan on being on the dinner menu."

He didn't even flinch when a laser bolt punched a hole in the wall a scant inch over his head. "You are still in my custody."

The building shook from another cannon hit and debris rained down on us.

"You gonna turn me over to them?"

The troll pushed on the wall and a trap door slid open in the floor. "No. Go."

I scrambled down the narrow staircase with Soulcar right on my ass.

"Why are they so determined to take you?"

"I stop them from eating people. And I just blew the hell out of their base. Which kinda pissed them off."

He surveyed me from head to toe. "You did this alone?"

I sighed. Another male chauvinist pig. "I had some help from Tihar, an Askole." I showed him my tattoo.

He did a double take at seeing it. "You did not have that when I pulled you out of the fountain."

"No, just appeared."

"Where is this Tihar?" He hit a switch and the trap door slid shut.

“In a warehouse down the street. I need to get him to a doctor. He’s pretty shot up.”

“Come.” He trotted off down a dimly lit tunnel.

I followed him. “Where does this come out?”

“In the marketplace.”

I quickly gave him the 411 on the situation. The troll came to an abrupt stop and I crashed into him.

“Something wrong?”

“You belong to the Warlord Talree?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

“He will not be pleased that I locked you up.”

“Probably not. Just pray the Overlord doesn’t show up. Now, he’s one scary dude.”

“You will take the Askole and leave our city.”

“Be happy to oblige but what about the Rodan?”

“I will deal with them.”

“All by your lonesome?”

“I do what I must to protect my city.” He hit a switch and the wall slid open to reveal total chaos. Women screamed blue bloody murder as they ran wildly in every direction. Panic-stricken vendors grabbed what they could and fled the marketplace.

An Askole warrior flew over their heads and crashed into a wall.

“Holy hell! What could throw a big ass Askole that easily?”

The crowd parted and I about peed my pants. A feral. A fucking feral. Up close and personal they were beyond terrifying. Tusk-like fangs bared in frustrated fury, he clawed at a metal display case.

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A troll female cowered behind it.

Soulcar let out a cry of horror. “Rhoa!”

God, I hoped critter control worked on them. I reached out and grabbed his mind. *NO! No hurt.*

The creature kept ripping the display case to shreds.

So not working. I concentrated harder. *Stop. Now. Bad feral.*

The feral grabbed for the woman, his terrible talons missing her by inches.

Soulcar shot him.

Shrieking in rage, the feral whirled around and charged me.

Oh shit! I sent an urgent cry to my aunt. *Tess! I need your help. Now!*

What’s wrong, hon?

I somersaulted across the courtyard, only seconds ahead of the creature’s deadly claws.

That wonderful troll shot him again and again and again, until the feral turned and rushed him.

I rolled to my feet. *I need help getting control of that.*

Omigod! What is that?

A feral.

His eyes glowing a fiery red, the creature whacked Soulcar, sending him sailing across the courtyard. He landed in the fountain with a big splash.

The beast lumbered over and fished around for him.

“No! Bad feral. Not dinner,” I yelled, firing almost point blank into his face. With a roar, the

beast chased me around the fountain. My adrenaline pumping, I ducked, dodged and evaded those three inch claws and snapping jaws.

A laser beam smacked the feral in the head.

I gasped. Propped against the wall, barely able to stand, Tihar fired again.

Tihar! Are you nuts? Get out of here!

You risked your life to save mine. Can I do any less? Tihar blasted the beast again and again.

Sniffing the air, the beast turned and examined Tihar. *Askole. Taste good.*

His legs buckled and my courageous Askole warrior fell.

Oh crap! “Hey! You. I taste good, too!” The creature turned and I hurled my knife.

The beast jerked the knife out of his throat and with a bellowing roar, came for me again.

Tess merged with me and as one, we reached out. *No! Stop! No kill.*

The feral stopped and looked around in confusion.

I sucked in a shuddering breath. Thank you, Lord. *You are a Coletti warrior. Not a beast.*

Hungry, The creature rumbled and moved towards me.

We bite. It dies. My brave kids swarmed up his legs and bit him again and again. But he kept coming.

Crap. *Babies off.* Drawing on every ounce of strength we had, we fought to hold him. My family joined our link, adding their power. But still the creature came. I felt Jubal, Major Zan and the

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Commodore connect with us and finally the feral stumbled to a stop.

The slobbering beast was a scant foot away. I backed up slowly. *You are a Coletti. A warrior. Do you remember?*

Must kill. He grabbed my shoulders.

A cry of agony broke from me and blackness danced along the edges of my mind. If I passed out, I was dead. Dozens of Askole warriors merged with me, giving me enough juice to block the pain. *No! Not kill. You are a warrior. Not Malik's beast.*

Eat heart.

God, now I knew how that chick in *Aliens* felt with the jaws of death only inches from her face. *Talree. The Warlord. Do you remember him?*

Talree? Friend. Dead.

No. Not dead. Looking for you.

Talree and Zarek merged with us and a tremendous surge of energy flowed into me.

Tess gasped. *Holy crap.*

As one we took control of the feral's mind.

Kassun! Release her, Talree commanded. *She is my mate. You will not harm her.*

Kassun shoved me away. *Not harm.*

I swayed as the marketplace spun dizzily. An Askole warrior scooped me up and backed away from Kassun. A dozen warriors wearing funky black armor with horned helmets formed a protective circle around me. Grimacing in pain, I noticed the blood dripping down my hands and my blood soaked overalls. Not good.

Talree ran a soothing hand across my mind and

the pain stopped. *I've got you.*

I clung to him. *About time you showed up. He was getting ready to slice and dice me.*

We came as soon as we realized what Malik had done.

I winced at Talree's grief as the kid's venom finally kicked in. It moved with a deadly speed through Kassun's body. *I'm sorry, I tried critter control but I wasn't strong enough to stop him.*

It's not your fault. Once he gave in to the blood frenzy, he was lost.

The madness cleared from Kassun's mind as he began to die and for a fleeting moment I caught a glimpse of the fierce warrior he'd once been. A man who gently cared for his ailing mother. His joy at teaching children to fish.

Zarek demanded, *Kassun, where are the others?*

Fleeting images of a barren rocky world with three moons flashed through his mind. *Coletti. I am... Coletti.*

Talree's sorrow was overwhelming. *You are Kassun. A warrior. My friend. Never Malik's beast.*

My spidey sense screamed a warning. *Rodan.*

Kassun growled. *Tormentors come. Not go back.*

We won't let them take you, I promised.

I die a warrior. Kassun spun and charged the Rodan.

We watched with a combination of horror and grim satisfaction as Kassun tore the fucking monsters to shreds.

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Kassun staggered and fell to his knees. *Warrior.*
Not beast.

Zarek gently touched his mind. *You die with*
honor.

Chapter Nineteen

Malik's sneering face loomed over me. *Soon, you will be mine.*

With a cry of horror, I jerked awake and fought wildly against the arms binding me to a rock hard body. "Nooo! Never!"

Ssssh. I've got you. You're safe.

Talree. I shuddered in relief and clung to him. *Please tell me he's dead.*

His hands stroked and soothed. *He escaped.*

Shit. It's my fault, isn't it? You were kicking his butt and the coward sicced Kassun on me to get away.

He rained gentle kisses over my face. *You, Lady Warrior, are all that matters. You are my life. My heart. My sometimes annoying, never boring, catastrophe waiting to happen mate.*

I moaned at the sheer pleasure of his mouth. *God, you're such a sweet talker but you should have killed him. I could have hung in there a little longer.*

And let Kassun rip you to shreds? Never.

But, Malik...

Cannot hide from us. We will track him down and kill him. Never doubt that.

His lips traced a sensuous path down my neck and his velvet tongue swirled over my nipples. Flames licked through my body and I literally

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burned for him. I ran my hands over his hard corded muscles, caressing, enticing, and teasing. God, I loved how he felt, tasted.

Suddenly, the need to taste his blood overwhelmed me and the next thing I knew, my fangs were buried in his chest. Hot, rich blood filled my mouth. Holy hell! What was I doing? Ewww.

Don't stop. Please, don't stop, Talree groaned.

Hmmm. I sucked another mouthful. He shuddered beneath me. Another mouthful and a cry of intense pleasure tore from Talree as his body arced and shook.

Whoa! Instant orgasm. And I know this is hard to believe, but blood is way better than chocolate.

Yes. His fangs sank into my breast and I came apart as his mouth sucked erotically. With one quick stroke, he buried himself deep inside me. My inner muscles rippled and clenched around him as he thrust again, and again and again until a firestorm of ecstasy took us over the edge. We clung to each other as our bodies shook from the multiple orgasms roaring through us.

Ack. Ack.

God damn it, Bey.

Tess panted, *Hon, could you give us a little warning next time? I just came in the checkout line at Walmart.*

What?

Caleb bellowed, *I just drove my fucking car into a building. I don't fucking believe this.*

Horror rolled through me. Omigod!

Just My Luck

God damn it Kaylee! I've got a boner the size of Texas, Jake howled in outrage.

Talree started laughing.

I smacked him. It's not funny.

It sure as hell isn't, Ethan snarled. *This old lady thinks I'm coming on to her and whacks me with her umbrella. In the groin. Twice!*

Uncle Saul roared, The Joint Chiefs didn't find my hard-on a bit amusing.

I am so sorry.

I haven't lost control and shot my wad like this since I was thirteen, Quinn snapped.

The women at the Rotary Club think I'm a randy old goat, Uncle Derek growled.

Three of them invited me over for coffee.

That's one way to get a date, I offered feebly.

They're all over seventy and have bladder control issues, Uncle Derek retorted.

Look on the bright side, at least they're experienced, Jake chortled.

Her voice coming in panting gasps, Sam asked, Does he have any brothers, uncles or cousins?

Zarek answered, There are many to choose from.

I groaned in embarrassment. You, too, sir?

Yes, daughter.

Crap. Tihar?

Tell the head of your clan that I will offer twice the bride price for one of your women.

Great.

Warlord, you are to be envied, Captain Jubal added. *It is rare to find a female as responsive as*

the Lady Warrior.

Oh hell!

Indeed, Major interjected.

Just shoot me now.

Grinning, Talree planted a hard kiss on my mouth. Yes, she is, indeed, a treasure.

The High Commander is most anxious to meet such a talented female, Tihar added.

God, this was way worse than having your nude pictures plastered all over the Internet. The whole friggin' universe had gotten to see me in action. I pulled the sheet over my head and babbled, I'm so sorry. I never meant... I didn't realize...

Talree pulled the sheet off and kissed my forehead. Please be assured that I will block my mate's energetic responses in the future.

Uncle Saul grumbled, Good. My old ticker can't take that much excitement.

I pulled the sheet back over my head.

Caleb groused, I'm taking the repair bills out of your savings, runt.

Okay. Whatever.

Tess gave me a mental hug. It's okay, hon. But, God, I really need a drink. And a man in my bed.

Sam popped in, Meet ya at Rico's. And, Kaylee, he's a keeper.

Yeah, that he is. Talk to ya guys later. I broke the link.

My oversexed mate pulled the sheet off and trailed kisses over my body. I pushed at him. "We are so not doing that again."

"Oh, I think I'm up for the occasion."

“Not. Funny. The whole universe knows what we were doing.”

“And I am the envy of every male.”

I glared at Talree. “I’m not stepping foot out of this room. Ever.”

“They are holding a feast in your honor. You must attend.”

“Wild horses couldn’t drag me out of this room.”

Talree just raised one eyebrow.

Okay. One determined Coletti could drag me out. So I went with the standard female response of “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“My father is bringing proper clothing.”

“So not going.”

He kissed my belly. “There will be large amounts of food.”

My stomach rumbled. “They’ll all be staring at me.”

“Yes, and wishing you belonged to them.” His hand slid between my legs and caressed my clit. Pleasure hot and wild slammed over me and I came again. “Shit! You tryin’ to kill me?”

“What better way to die?” He penetrated me with one hard thrust and began pumping into me, harder, faster until the room spun away in a haze of utter rapture.

My radar went off. My eyes popped open and, over Talree’s shoulder, I saw the Overlord himself standing there, watching us with amused disbelief. Holy fucking shit!

I smacked Talree upside the head and shrieked,

“Your Dad’s here! Watching!”

With a groan, Talree sagged against me. *You couldn’t have waited another five minutes, Father?*

No, we have much to discuss.

Could this day possibly get any worse?

Talree rolled off me and carefully tucked the sheet around me. “Better?”

“Why don’t we tape our little sexual escapades and put them on pay-per-view. That way the poor jerks that missed the first showing, can watch it at their own convenience.”

She gets a bit cranky when she’s hungry.

So it would seem.

Embarrassed beyond belief, I wrapped the sheet around me and scooted to the head of the bed. *Go away.*

Zarek raised an arrogant eyebrow. *You think to command me?*

Kaylee! Apologize at once.

I gaped at Talree. “Are you kidding me?”

“The Overlord goes where he wishes.”

Zarek stared down at me, his eyes cold and menacing.

“Does it have to be our bedroom?”

Talree let out a choking laugh.

With a sigh, the Overlord sat down next to me, picked up my right hand and examined my tattoo. “You continue to surprise me, daughter,” he said in perfect English.

“Right back at ya, sir,” I answered, trying to tug my hand free.

“Most would be on their knees begging

forgiveness. But not you.”

“How would your wife feel if someone popped into your bedroom while you were getting it on?”

“Kaylee!”

“I’d be forced to make a bloody mess of the idiot.”

“Exactly.”

Zarek swung his long legs up on the bed and leaned wearily against the wall. “I need more warriors with your courage. Malik’s poison has spread through the Clans. Mogok and his warriors ambushed me at the Festival on Tanis.”

Talree growled in outrage. “I should have gutted him at Kessle.”

Death in his soulless eyes, the Overlord smiled.

I flinched as I picked up on Zarek’s memories of the battle. He’d gone all commando on Mogok’s ass and slaughtered his warriors and him single-handedly. All twenty of them. When the Overlord unleashes his inner feral, it isn’t a pretty sight. Blood and gore literally covered every surface in the festival hall. The few survivors had thrown themselves at his feet and begged for mercy.

My stomach roiled as those terrible images flashed through my mind. All of them had been savagely killed. Zarek didn’t take betrayal very well. The bloody carnage also made me wonder if he had a bit of Askole in his ancestry.

Talree growled, “Where was Voss?”

Zarek let out a long breath. “Voss was found unconscious in a storeroom.”

“Why would they let him live?” Talree’s eyes

began to glow.

“That is the question.”

“You think he has joined with Malik?”

“I cannot believe he would betray me but...”

“Maybe that’s exactly what Malik wants you to think. I mean, he probably knew Mogok would fail and he had to have a backup plan. Right?”

“The sneaky bastard knows you. What would make you doubt your trusted warriors. What would push you into killing them. He wants you isolated and alone. Paranoid and easier to kill.”

Zarek and Talree stared at me in disbelief.

“Hey. You know the old saying, ‘divide and conquer’?”

Talree leaned down and kissed me. “The Goddess has, indeed, blessed me.”

Zarek stroked my Askole tattoo. “No female in our history has ever received such an honor.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a large silver bracelet etched with intricate designs. “This commemorates your battle with the rogues, the capture of the Tai-Kok ship, the destruction of the Rodan’s base and giving Kassun an honorable death.” He handed it to Talree. “Your mate has proven her worth as a warrior.”

Pride evident in his face, Talree clasped it around my left wrist. “This bracelet demonstrates your new warrior status, Kaylee. No female has ever achieved this. It is a great accomplishment. We are honored, Father.”

Okay, this was going way beyond weird. Me, naked on a bed with two guys, one of whom was

my father-in-law, and not only do we have a battle tactics discussion, but he decides to present me with some kind of freakin' award?

"Gosh, I don't know what to say. It's really beautiful." I gave Zarek a quick peck on the cheek. "Thank you, sir."

"You are very welcome, daughter."

"You mentioned something about clothes?"

He pointed to two garment bags lying across a table and at the two sets of boots beneath. "The gray one is yours and hopefully the boots will fit. You are a very small female."

I tugged my hand free. "Yeah, I'm itty-bitty all over."

Talree cupped a breast. "Not all over."

I rolled my eyes. Okay, I was a little top heavy. "Knock it off," I hissed. "I think I've been humiliated enough for one day."

Zarek touched my mind and my embarrassment suddenly vanished. "There is no shame in making my son happy. To find a mate who matches our sexual appetites is a gift beyond measure."

Talree kissed my shoulder. "A gift I shall guard carefully."

"You guys are so full of it." With all the dignity I could muster, I crawled over Talree.

His hand snagged the sheet. "No goodbye kiss?"

My gaze flicked to the Overlord, who watched with amusement. "No."

I jerked and tugged trying to get free and fell off the bed, minus the sheet. God, just kill me now.

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Laughing, Talree picked me off the floor and wrapped the sheet around me like a toga. “You’re becoming quite the little exhibitionist.”

“Jerk!” My face beet red, I grabbed my bag and boots and fled into what the Tai-Kok considered a bathroom.

Their version was a tiny closet size room where you hit a button and some kind of sonic blast zapped you clean. The toilet was this round fish bowl doohickey that literally sucked. You sat on it and the suction left you with a nice red ring around your butt. Not fun. No soap. No running water. No mirror. No towels. No toilet paper. The bathroom was definitely getting a refit.

I opened the bag. Silky black underwear that fit perfectly. Too perfectly. Having the Overlord know my bra size was way weird. But, then again, he had gotten an up close and personal view of the cellulite on my butt.

Your butt is as smooth as a baby’s, Talree reassured.

God, you’re such a liar.

Coletti women never get cellulite.

Really? Pulling back my panties, I twisted and turned, trying to get a good look at my butt. I’ll be damned, it was smoother. Better keep this side effect from Aunt Tess or she’d be first in line for a conversion.

Next came a stretchy black body suit with sleeves that ended just below my elbows. The sleeves were the right length to show off my awesome tattoo and warrior’s bracelet. I turned it

this way and that. *Where the hell is the zipper in this thing?*

Tell it to open, Talree said.

“Open sesame.” And I’ll be damned, it did. Cool. *Some kind of nano technology?*

Something like that.

I wiggled into the body suit and, to my utter surprise, the material crawled around me until it clung like a second skin. Whoa! Kinda like being groped by a boa constrictor. “Close.” The opening vanished.

I took out a sleeveless black knee-length tunic made from some kind of velvet-like material with a silver design woven into it. It was utterly beautiful. The designs matched those on my bracelet. I pulled it on and knew that I was gonna dazzle them tonight.

Hurry up, Kaylee. We have to do your warrior’s braids.

Warrior’s braids? I quickly stuffed my feet into my new knee-high black boots. I did a little jig. They fit perfectly. Hot dang! They even had sheaths for my knives. I looked in the bag but no knives. *Are my knives in your bag, Talree?*

It is not considered proper etiquette to be armed to the teeth when meeting with the High Commander.

Gotcha. I feel a bit naked without ‘em.

I will buy you a hundred. A thousand. As many as you want. Whenever you want.

You’re such a sweetie. I walked into the bedroom and my mouth dropped open. Whoa! All

those Hollywood hunks had nothing on Talree. His solid black tunic was tailored to emphasize his massive shoulders and the body suit displayed his muscular arms and thighs to perfection. He wore large silver warrior's bracelets on each arm and an etched silver headband that denoted his rank of Warlord. "Wow! You clean up real nice."

His gaze caressed me. "As do you."

The Overlord cleared his throat.

I switched my attention to him and was surprised to see he was identically dressed except his warrior's bracelets and headband were gold. Golden strands were even woven into his warrior's braids. "You look very dashing, too, sir."

"I am honored that you noticed."

"Your surprise appearance kinda got me flustered, sir. I'm usually a bit more observant."

"A good warrior never lets the unexpected throw them off."

"Yes, sir."

Zarek pushed me down on the bed and started weaving thin chains with little silver bells on them into small braids on the left side of my head.

I fingered one. "They're really pretty."

"Detja thought you would appreciate something feminine."

"Aw, that's so sweet of her."

"Mother is many things, but sweet is not one of them," Talree said as he quickly plaited strands of silver into two braids at the right side of my face.

"Oh. I guess she'd have to be tough as nails to be an Overlord's wife."

“You have no idea,” Zarek said as his nimble fingers continued to braid my hair.

A nervous giggle escaped me. The Overlord made one hell of a hairdresser. Who would of thunk it?

“You tell anyone of this and I will shave your head,” Zarek growled.

“My lips are sealed. Sir.”

Talree suddenly clamped a metal band around my throat.

“Hey!” I grabbed my neck. “Omigod! An ownership band?”

“Yes, now all will know that you are mine.”

“It’s so fucking feudal.”

“It is our custom and one that you will abide by.”

“But...”

Talree tilted my chin up and gave me his best cold-eyed Warlord stare. “I need to focus on finding Malik, not fighting off every male that wishes to claim you.”

He had a point. Half the universe thought I was some kind of oversexed nymphomaniac. “Okay, but you’re wearing a wedding ring and I’d better not catch you so much as looking at another woman’s ass.”

A laugh broke from him and he hugged me to his chest. “You have my pledge that I will never look at another woman’s ass.”

Chapter Twenty

We stepped into the corridor and my kids swarmed up my legs. I laughed as their little sticky tongues smacked my face. *Hey, sweeties.*

My kids babbled, *Much blood. We afraid you die.*

Shrek and the doctors on the Wazir made me all better.

Not do again. Scare us.

Scared me, too. I stroked their fur. *But you were so brave.*

Talree caressed them. *We are very proud of you.*

The babies chittered happily. *We protect. We bite. He dies.*

The Overlord ran a gentle finger over them. *The Lady Warrior is very lucky to have such special protectors.*

The babies scampered to the other side of my head. *Who big scary?*

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Out of the mouths of babes. *Big scary is Talree's father, Zarek.*

Who other scary?

I turned. Yikes! A huge mountain of a man, stood behind the Overlord. Voss. One look at his menacing presence and I knew without a doubt he was a stone-cold killer.

The burn scar on the right side of his face twisted his mouth into a permanent sneer. His pale gold eyes were fixed coldly on the baby perched on his nose.

Holy shit! I rushed over to him and reached for my kid. *I am so sorry.* The instant I touched him a jumble of sensations hit me. Voss's fierce loyalty to Zarek. His humiliation at being seduced and drugged by a pretty Coletti woman.

I felt his horror and fury at not being at the Overlord's side when he was attacked. The utter misery at knowing Zarek suspected him of betrayal. A deep aching loneliness and an intense longing for a mate of his own. I jerked my hand back. Whoa!

I felt Talree's concern. *Kaylee?*

Voss would never betray your dad. But some bitch did. I flashed him the image of the woman. *Know her?*

Miree, Talree hissed. Mogok's daughter.

She has been mind-wiped along with all the other females of Mogok's Clan, the Overlord announced, his rage barely contained.

Yikes! Guess it was better than being gutted like the rest of the Clan. I reached for my baby. *C'mon, sweetie.*

Me stay with Voss.

Ah, I don't think that's a really good idea.

The child is safe with me, Voss rumbled, holding out his hand.

My baby crawled on and announced proudly, *I have chosen my name. To honor my mother, I will be known as Woo.*

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I got all teary-eyed. Tae had warned me that when my kids chose a name it was the first step towards adulthood. Oh God, soon I'd be an empty nester! *It's a very good name, sweetie.*

Datlow, Tae and Bey scurried up to us.

I wiped at my tears. *She's chosen Woo as her name.*

Tae jumped on my shoulder. *It's a wonderful tribute to your mother.*

Woo crawled up to Voss's shoulder and perched there proudly. *Me warrior. Kill many.*

Shit. And they had. God, I was such a bad mom and we were spending way too much time around Warlords. *Ah, sweetie, we only kill when someone tries to hurt us or someone we love, okay?*

'Kay.

The rest of my kids began playing with the bells in my hair. *You guys decided on your names yet?*

The bells jingled loudly. *Pretty.*

Enough, children, Tae said sharply. The jingling stopped abruptly. *Bir is waiting for you in the nursery.*

Want go, they all wailed.

Datlow snapped, *Now, children.*

They swarmed down my leg and scooted down the hallway.

You are not being firm enough with them, Petka.

I glared at Datlow. *They watched the Kotsors kill their mother and every villain in the universe has been trying to kill us, so cut them a little slack.*

Talree wrapped a warning hand around my neck. "Kaylee."

"Kids need time to be kids."

"Children need a firm hand," Talree stated.

"So, you're telling me you're going to be one of those dictatorial hard-ass kind of dads?"

Wearing spiffy dress uniforms, Major Zan and Captain Jubal joined us in the corridor. They both bowed to Zarek. The Major took one look at my furious expression and Talree's big bad Warlord face and asked, "Should we come back?"

"No," Zarek sighed. *Bey, to me. The transporter beam should activate shortly.*

"Transporter beam?"

Datlow jumped on Talree's shoulder.

"What transporter beam?"

A glittery blue light engulfed us and the next thing I knew we were all standing in a large dimly lit chamber. Damn, Gene Roddenberry had the whole transporter beam thing dead on. Who knew?

Spot lights suddenly flared to life, lighting a menagerie of terrifying fanged creatures which were all frozen in mid-attack. "Holy shit!"

"The High Commander's trophies," Talree commented, his gaze fixed on the far side of the room. "For the record, Warlords *are* dictatorial hard-asses."

"I know you're genetically hard-wired that way but..."

Talree, Zarek and Voss snapped into battle mode as out of the shadows stepped a dozen Askoles. Tihar had picked a terrible time to show

off.

Jubal and the Major started swearing.

The Askoles marched towards us like medieval knights of old. Their black plated armor and horned helmets seemed to absorb the light until all you saw was their glowing yellow eyes.

“Houston, we have a problem,” I muttered.

Tae tightened her grip on my shoulder. *When do we not?*

I shot an anxious glance up at Talree. One look at his glittering red eyes and I knew I had to stop this macho bullshit before it got out of control.

I teleported directly in front of Tihar. *Tihar, how are you feeling?*

I felt his shocked astonishment at my sudden appearance. He came to an abrupt halt and his glowing gaze fixed on my neck. Thankfully, he didn’t notice his warriors crashing into each other. Kinda spoiled the effect he was going for.

I am well, Lady Warrior. His armored hand touched my neck band. *I see the Warlord marked you.*

Talree popped in behind me and growled, *I guard what is mine.*

Not carefully enough.

Give me a friggin’ break.

Tae groaned. *And the bloodshed begins.*

In sheer desperation, I mentally grabbed Tihar’s balls and gave them a hard twist.

He gave a startled jump backwards, slammed into one of his warriors and knocked him on his ass.

Woo chittered with glee.

Voss's jaw dropped.

Tae's laughter sounded in my mind. *You are a true genius.*

Talree and the Overlord roared, *Kaylee!*

I glared at them. *What? You think I'm going to let you fight over me like I'm some bitch in heat? Not happening.*

With one wary eye on me, Tihar hauled his warrior upright. *Bitch in heat?*

I flashed them a metal image of two pit bulls fighting over a bitch. *I earned warrior status, did I not?*

Yes, daughter, you did. Zarek's expression said he was seriously rethinking that decision.

I scowled at Tihar. *You gave me this tattoo as a sign of respect, right?*

Yes, Lady Warrior.

Then you will all treat me with the respect I deserve and not as a piece of fucking property to be fought over. I gave everyone my best scary face. *Got it?*

All the men stared at me like I had grown three heads.

What?

Tihar growled, *Are all the females on your world as fearless as you?*

Talree started laughing.

Voss looked like he wanted to smack me a good one.

They are, without a doubt, quite unique, the Overlord said dryly.

I can say unequivocally that the Lady Warrior is

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one of the most unusual females I've ever met,
Major Zan added.

For some odd reason, that seemed to please Tihar. *Tell the head of your clan that I will triple the bride price.*

You betcha. They'll just love the idea of having their DNA swapped out for yours.

Tihar preened. *With our DNA, they will not be child-sized or weak.*

Talree and the Overlord stared at him in disbelief.

I think you've just been insulted, Tae grouched on our private link.

Oh, yeah. He forgot that itty-bitty me saved his ass not once, not twice but three times. And I think I've figured out a way to keep them from killing each other.

How?

By being myself, of course. I walked around Tihar examining his metal body suit.

You know, this is totally awesome armor. Bet it scares the bejesus out of your enemies. The way it sucks up all the light is pretty nifty. Since I'm always getting shot at and attacked, you got anything that would fit me?

Tihar gave a cackling howl and pressed an emblem on his gauntlet and the armor shrank until it only covered his chest and legs. *We do not make armor for children.*

Very funny, but on Earth we have this saying, 'Good things come in small packages'.

Very small packages, Tihar howled.

I was seriously considering giving his balls another twist when Talree clamped me to his side and snapped, *Do not.*

Spoilsport, I snapped right back.

The Overlord interjected hastily, *I was told that you have a new armor that can be customized to fit our warriors.*

A salesman at heart, Tihar perked up and motioned to one of his men. *Atol.*

Atol stepped forward and Tihar started his sales pitch. *This model of armor is lightweight, flexible and the controls can easily be adapted to your bracelets.*

Talree inquired, *Do you have design schematics?*

Tihar punched his gauntlet and a 3D image of the armor popped up and rotated in mid-air. *The metal is a combination of Trillian and Jackton.*

The metalwork is superb, Talree commented, releasing me to point to the meshed joints. *Will the junctures withstand a laser blast?*

I linked privately with Talree. *While you drool over the armor, Tae and I are gonna look at the monsters.*

Stay in my line of sight and do not cause any trouble.

What! I wasn't three years old or a total fuck-up. *Are you kidding me?*

Talree slanted me a warning glare.

Okay. Okay. I'll be a good little girl. But shit happens.

The Overlord fixed his menacing gaze on me.

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Shit will not happen. You will not insult anyone, start a fight or cause any type of disruption. Are we clear?

"You left out spitting," I mumbled under my breath.

Do not disappoint me, daughter.

His tone made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. *I won't, sir.*

The Overlord and your mate are worse than Datlow, Tae grumped.

Tell me about it. I stomped over to the displays. *Maybe I should find a nice closet somewhere and hide.*

Tae chittered in amusement. *With your luck, the closet would be full of assassins.*

I laughed. *Yeah, trying to blow up the ship.*

It is unfortunate that our males insist on treating us like children.

Instead of confident females who get the job done.

Exactly.

And we can kick ass with the best of 'em.

Bey huffed, *Petka, it's not your warrior skills but your talent for creating chaos and havoc that makes us want to web you to the nearest wall for our own safety.*

Butt out! This is a chick bitch session and males are not invited.

For that we are all eternally grateful, Talree rumbled.

I think webbing her to the wall is an excellent idea, Voss added.

And I think Woo biting you is an equally excellent idea.

Woo giggled. *You funny.*

Daughter, Zarek snapped.

Yikes! Sorry, sir. Going to look at the monsters, sir.

Tae remarked, *A little short tempered, isn't he?*

You've no idea. I examined a creature that looked like a cross between a shark and an armadillo then moved on to an enormous mosquito bug thingy with serrated teeth. Hanging from its belly was a long thick tongue. I walked around to the back of the creature and squatted down. *Any idea what that does?*

Tae crawled under the mosquito and squinted up at it. *Not a clue.*

Talree let out a mental roar, *Kaylee!*

What?

I can't see you.

Aw, c'mon. I'm on an Askole ship with you and the Overlord. What could possibly happen?

Shit magnet, he reminded me. *Now get out where I can see you.*

Okay, but first... I flashed him the image of the mosquito bug thingy's belly. *What the hell is that?*

There was a lot of male snickering in my mind before Talree answered, *Its penis.*

I twisted my head for a better look. *Really? Poor lady bug gets her ass licked?*

Cackling howls filled the room.

Giggling, Tae crawled back up on my shoulder.

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You are one devious female.

It's a gift. Keep 'em focused on silly me and they'll forget to kill each other. I hope, I answered on our private link.

As I walked over to the Afula display, every male in the room watched me with a stupid grin on their face. It was almost too easy.

An elderly Askole, wearing a gold tunic and pants made out of some kind of mesh-like armor, ambled out of the shadows and gave a slight bow. *I am Sariel.*

I bowed back. *I'm Kaylee and this is Tae.*

His sharp gaze surveyed me from head to toe. I returned the favor. He was kinda short for an Askole. Just a bit under seven feet and he wasn't as massively built as Tihar.

Even though he was cloaking his abilities, I could sense the power clinging to him. I grinned at him. What's your game, old man, I thought to myself.

Almost as if he had read my thoughts, he grinned back, exposing some really awesome teeth. *I would be happy to answer any anatomy questions you have.*

I just bet you would. *How kind. I've never seen so many fascinating creatures.* I pointed to the Afula. *This big boy is the only one I'm acquainted with.*

Sariel is more than he appears to be, Tae commented on our private link.

Yeah, he reeks of power.

The High Commander?

That'd be my guess.

Sariel gestured to my warrior's bracelet. *A very impressive accomplishment. Tell me how you captured the Tai-Kok ship,* he commanded.

Ah, he didn't quite believe that little ol' me had done the impossible. What else was new? I gave him a slight bow and started talking, *Taking the ship was really quite easy. I just pulled the old Trojan horse gambit on them.*

Not to brag or anything, but I can spin a yarn with the best of 'em. So, by the time I got to the bit about using the Wartock Beetles as bait, I had drawn quite a crowd.

I embellished my little drama with mental images of the Tai-Kok chasing me around, of Bey and the Tabors pouring from the ship unnoticed and finished with the pirates all webbed up and squawking loudly.

You could say they were a bit surprised to find themselves on the dinner menu.

My group of Askole cackled and howled so hard, Talree and the Overlord popped in behind me. *Daughter?*

I winced as Talree's hand clamped tightly around my neck in a possessive gesture. Ow! *I was just telling the High Commander how we took the Tai-Kok ship.*

A very clever ruse but you must tell me how such a small female as yourself was able to defeat the Tai-Kok captain in hand-to-hand combat, Sariel instructed.

Her fighting style is as unique as she is, Zarek

inserted and quickly gave them mental pictures of me fighting the pirate.

Sariel fixed a speculative gaze on me. *Could you teach this fighting style to my warriors?*

I nodded. *I'm going to teach defensive tactics to my new crew. I can always fit in a few more.*

The Overlord interjected, *I'm sure we can negotiate a fair price for her services.*

Sariel bared his teeth in a frightening smile. *Shall we discuss terms over some Adele?*

Excellent idea.

A massive wall slid back to reveal buffet tables loaded with all sorts of food and another huge ass monster that resembled a prehistoric werewolf.

Whoa! What is that?

That, the High Commander declared proudly, is a Gourman.

We all trooped over to inspect his pride and joy. *I'm surprised it didn't eat you.*

Sariel cackled, *It tried.*

Talree ran a finger along the foot long talons. *What did you use to bring it down?*

A Taken laser rifle.

Good choice, Talree said in approval. It makes the hunt all that more challenging.

Tae tittered on our private link. *Challenging or stupid?*

Stupid. It's like taking a knife to a gunfight. Think all that testosterone causes brain damage?

Talree's intimidating glare locked on me. Eek! I was pretty sure it would send most seasoned warriors running for their lives. Made my knees

quiver a bit.

Do you think he stands in front of a mirror and practices that look?

Omigod, you are so bad, I laughed.

Yes, she is, Talree responded, moving towards me.

Eavesdropping is rude, I countered and scuttled around the werewolf in an effort to avoid him.

And you are a bad influence on my mate, Datlow hissed.

Am not. I came to an abrupt stop at the deadly look Zarek was giving me. Yikes! Turning to make a run for it, I collided with a humanoid female carrying a tray of glasses filled with what looked like clotted blood.

The blood slopped over on the tray. "Ooops. Sorry. My fault."

She bobbed in a slight bow. "I humbly beg your pardon, my lady."

I frowned. Well, that was freaky weird. The waitress was one big mental black hole. *Can you sense her, Tae?*

No.

Bring us more drinks, female, Tihar barked.

The waitress scurried away.

My cop's instincts triggered, I followed. I had a gut feeling she was bad news.

Talree snarled. *Kaylee, come back here.*

Got some blood on me. I'm just going to see if she has something I can clean it off with.

I touched the waitress's arm. "Excuse me, do you..."

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My radar screamed blue bloody murder and a jumble of images slammed over me. The waitress killing people. A lot of people. She was a fucking assassin. Hired to blow up this ship.

Omigod! Hired by an Askole. The bomb was in the werewolf. And the timer was rapidly ticking down. I relayed the images to Talree.

The bitch's eyes widened as she realized I knew exactly what she was and what she had done.

Before I could blink, she had a knife in her hand and was doing her best to drive it into my chest. I grabbed her knife hand and twisted until she screamed.

Talree's roar of fury echoed around the chamber.

Tae jumped on the assassin's shoulder and chomped down on her neck.

A glittery blue light engulfed us. "Oh, fuck!

Chapter Twenty-One

We appeared in a small room carved out of pink stone. The assassin gasped, twitched and collapsed to the floor, deader than a doornail. Hmmm. Tae's venom seemed to be just as deadly as the kids'. Who knew?

Tae spit and hacked. *Ack! Ack! Ack! What a nasty tasting kitch.*

You mean bitch?

Yes, that is the word. Nasty, nasty bitch.

Probably all that bad karma, I answered. My gaze locked on the peewee sized Rodan asleep at the transporter controls.

Peewee suddenly jerked awake, his eyes bulged and with a squeaky roar he fumbled for his laser pistol.

I teleported over to him and grabbed the gun. The little snot was stronger than he looked and wouldn't let go of the freakin' pistol. It kept discharging, forcing poor Tae to duck and cover. She finally had enough, spat a web ball and jerked it away.

Now, most Rodan would have tried to bite my head off or rip me in half with their claws. But not this guy.

Nope. I think he'd been watching way too many matches from the World Wide Wrestling Federation. Peewee picked me up and body slammed me to the

floor. I kicked him off his feet and put his head in a scissor hold.

The little snot rose to his feet with my freakin' legs still locked around his neck and shoved me over his head. I smashed into the floor and before I could move, Peewee did a standing back flip and hit me in the chest with both of his legs, knocking the air out of me.

Okay, this guy was seriously pissing me off. With a rather pathetic wheezy growl, I sank my fangs into his thigh and ripped out a huge chunk. I was so done playing nice and besides there weren't any referees here now, were there?

Peewee's screech was cut short when Tae buried her fangs in his neck. His eyes rolled back and he keeled over.

Thanks, but I could have taken him.

As you so aptly put it, we need to get the hell out of Dodge.

Good point. One look at the transporter controls and I groaned. Fried. Big time. I tried to link with Talree. Weird. It was like I could receive but not send. Which was probably a good thing. He was way beyond pissed.

I had broken the Overlord's four commandments. Shit had happened. Big surprise there. I had insulted someone. Not such a surprise. I had started a fight and caused a disruption of biblical proportions. Hello, shit magnet.

Okay, Zarek probably wouldn't kill me. He'd just mind wipe me and take back my warrior's bracelet.

Just My Luck

But, on the positive side, I had warned them about the bomb, right? And stopped the assassin. So, really I'd saved the day, right? Kept everyone from being blown to kingdom come.

The Overlord wouldn't be too mad, would he? Shit, I was so dead.

I can't link with my bossy prick.

Me, either. The bad guys must have some kind of energy shield. Let me see if I can connect with my family. I reached out. *Caleb? Jake?*

Kaylee.... Looking... Need... The link broke.

Crap. It was like having a bad cell phone connection. Well, at least they knew I was okay.

No luck?

Nope. We're on our own. Wonder if Peewee here knows where we are and how to get out of this place?

You have most of the Warlord's abilities. Can you do a memory sweep?

Don't know. Let's give it a shot. I bent down and placed my hands on Peewee's head and tried to merge my mind with his.

Jeezus, this guy was dumb as a rock and the venom roaring through his system sure didn't help, either. All I could get was mental pictures of him unloading a shitload of weapons into a massive underground warehouse.

Frustrated, I instinctively drew on Talree's and the Overlord's power. Shit, still nothing but a bunch of jumbled images of the interior of the base. The mess hall, the barracks, and... Ewwww! A bunch of naked Rodan in the community shower. Their

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penises resembled swollen, rotted cabbages. Ick. Ick. Ick. I was never gonna get that image out of my head.

Tae started hacking again. *Ack. Ack. Ack. What horrible, disgusting creatures.*

Tell me about it.

A firestorm of energy suddenly surged into my head and a menacing voice roared, *Kaylee!*

I recoiled in horror as I sensed a virulent rage and overpowering need to kill. Holy shit! With every ounce of power I had, I fought to get free of the terrifying entity. It wrapped around my mind and held me in an unbreakable grip. *Why do you fight us?*

That was a dumb ass question. *I don't want to die, you dipshits.*

I frantically threw up a shield but within seconds it shattered. Scared shitless, I began shaking so hard my teeth chattered.

Tae clung to my shoulder trembling with fear. *How do we defeat that?*

Haven't a clue.

Kaylee? Daughter, do you not recognize us?

Omigod, it was Talree and the Overlord. Their merged minds were the scariest thing I had ever encountered. A shudder shook me. All that rage was directed at me. God, I was so dead. *Sorry. I'm so sorry. I know I'm not supposed to draw on your powers. Just... Just needed...*

They gently stroked my mind. *We frighten you?*

I gulped and fought down my terror. *Uh, yeah. Together you're just a teensy bit overpowering. I*

know you're angry at me but I had to stop the assassin. I mean, I couldn't let her blow up the ship, now could I?

I could feel their amusement. It seems your fearlessness has its limits.

My temper flared. Tae and I are fine, thanks for asking.

Their sigh sounded in my head. We knew it couldn't last. Where is the assassin?

I looked over at her lifeless body. Dead.

How did you detect her?

Everyone has brain wave patterns. She didn't, it was like a mental black hole. I flashed them the sensation. Kinda triggered my cop's instinct. The instant I touched her, she knew the gig was up and tried to stick that big ass knife in me.

Had you informed us that you sensed trouble, you would not be stranded on an enemy base. Alone. Now would you?

Ah... Well... I didn't want to bother you if it was something stupid, and I'm not exactly alone. Got Tae as a back-up.

Their grip tightened painfully. In the future if your radar so much as twitches, you will inform one of us. Do you understand?

Ow. Ow. Ow. Gotcha! It won't happen again. Cross my heart and hope to die.

If it does, you may wish you had died.

Oh crap! In other words, I'd better run like hell. Yes, sir. Shit. That came out way too submissive.

Enter these coordinates into the transporter.

Gail Koger

451.1 mark 321.2.

Can't. It's fried.

Show us the controls.

I walked over and scanned the blackened mess.

Sorry, Peewee put up quite a fight.

Peewee?

My gaze settled on the pint sized Rodan sprawled on the floor. *I was trying to scan his mind but I don't think the moron knows where this base is.*

Merge with us.

Oh, crap.

Do as they ask, Tae whispered, still shaking with fear.

I opened my mind and let them in. I could sense their utter relief that I was alive and unharmed. The big shocker was the lengths they were prepared to go to get me back. Like declaring war on the Askole. Which was kinda sweet of them, but a bit suicidal.

An even bigger shock was that the Overlord actually liked me. A lot. But big eeek! He was determined to resolve my horrible lack of discipline and teach me proper obedience. Good luck with that. And to my total amazement, there wasn't even a hint of a mind wipe in my future. Whew!

But the biggest bombshell was their pride in me. By stopping the assassin, I had brought honor to the clans and my mate. Whoa! Who knew?

Not such a surprise was their delight over the fact that the Askoles now owed them a huge debt.

Boy, were they going to take full advantage of that.

Their strength and desires became mine and, as one, we probed Peewee's feeble brain. A confusing jumble of images rolled across our minds and we sighed in disgust. He was a moron.

Peewee shivered, shook and died. A dark sticky substance oozed from him.

Oh ick! I jumped to my feet and tried not to breathe. Rodan piss would give a skunk a run for his money.

The weapons must be destroyed before they can be used against us, Zarek remarked.

Don't worry, I'll figure some way to get a signal to you. I flinched at the sudden flare of rage from Talree.

You take too many unnecessary risks. Do I have to chain you to my side? Or implant you with a tracking device?

What? Don't be ridiculous. I'd never let that happen.

Talree growled, *Do you think you could stop me?*

Stop a Warlord hell bent on something? Not in a million years. Just because you're stronger than me, doesn't make it right.

I need to know where you are, every second of the day.

Gosh, how romantic. In a sick, stalker kinda way.

I think I liked you better when you were shaking with fear, Zarek commented. *At least you showed the proper respect.*

Gail Koger

That's not respect. It's sheer terror.

Exactly, they said in unison.

Dimly I heard Voss say, *The High Commander is here.*

Don't do anything stupid. We will find you.
With a loud snap, the link broke and they were gone.

Stupid? Aw, c'mon. Have a little faith. I rubbed my aching head. *Well, that was fun.*

Fun as in facing down a horde of Kotsors?

Nah. Fun as in going eyeball to eyeball with a hungry T-Rex.

With very sharp teeth.

I grinned. *All the better to eat you with, my pretty.*

The Warlord is very talented with his tongue.

Omigod. I was never gonna hear the end of that. *So how do you and Datlow get it on?*

I suggest we find that weapons depot.

Coward. I did a quick scan of the area and teleported us.

We popped into a narrow dimly lit corridor. I examined the massive vault-like door of the depot. Whoa! It'd take a nuclear strike to blow it.

Do you feel that?

Yeah. I put my hand to the cold metal. There was some kind of energy field flowing through the door and walls. Teleporting was definitely out. My gaze locked on the security keypad. But not a problem. I had the security code.

I walked over to the keypad and typed in Peewee's code. Mind melding with the moron had

paid off. Who knew?

With a shuddering groan the massive door swung open. We stepped inside. The huge cavern was stuffed to the gills with weapons and explosives of all types. I rubbed my hands together. *Hoo boy! So many weapons. So little time. Where do I start?*

Tae snickered. *You're worse than the babies when confronted with a swarm of Teskes.*

What can I say? I was raised around military types. Weapons give us a hard-on.

Drawing on Peewee's memories, I walked up and down the narrow aisles and weaponed up. A nice Taken laser rifle, two laser pistols complete with holsters, two nifty knives and a whole shitload of grenades.

I stopped at a crate filled with explosives, grabbed some timers and went to work.

When these babies blow, every ship in the galaxy is gonna register it. I let out an evil laugh. *Even Malik's.*

You are a wicked, wicked female.

It's a talent. I set the timer. *Now, let's go steal a shuttle.*

We popped into the landing bay. A really empty landing bay. *Crap! This isn't good.*

No. It is not.

Me and my shitty luck. I scanned the area. Wait. There. I teleported us across the immense chamber. Under a tarp was a rather battered skimmer. Probably held together with spit and chewin' gum but beggars can't be choosy.

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Can you get it started?

I climbed on and hit the start symbol. Nothing. I hit it again. Still nothing. I hit the diagnostic key. The scanner flickered to life. The energy cell was barely functioning. Fuck. I smacked the screen and raised my eyes heavenward.

“Whatever I did to piss you off, I’m sorry.”

Who are you talking to?

The Big Guy.

Who?

He’s like your Goddess.

Ah.

My radar went on red alert. Rodans!

How many?

Ten to twenty. But, on the bright side, our transportation problem seems to have solved itself.

With a groaning clang, the landing bay door slid open and a shuttle swooped in, zigzagged wildly, bounced off the walls before finally coming to a sudden slamming stop.

Whoa! He’s either a piss poor pilot or badly injured or...

The shuttle door opened and a dozen or so very intoxicated Rodans staggered out.

Drunk as a skunk. I shook my head in disbelief. These morons were guarding the base? *Couldn’t make it any easier for us, could they?*

No, they could not. Datlow would eat any warriors who acted so foolishly.

If Malik’s planning on being master of the universe, he needs to hire better help. I teleported

us inside the shuttle.

The pilot stared at us for a long moment, like he couldn't quite believe his eyes.

"Boo."

The dumb ass gave a snorting gasp and fumbled for his gun.

Tae hammered him with a dozen web balls, driving him backwards towards the door. As he tottered in the doorway, I nailed him with a couple of stun bolts and *timber!* Out he went. *Never drink and drive, asshole.*

I popped into the pilot chair and punched it. We shot out of the landing bay and were twenty miles away before the drunken fools even realized what had happened.

A laser beam flashed out, missing us by a good mile.

Nice try, dipshits.

A thunderous cracking boom sounded and blast waves violently shook the shuttle. I fought the wildly bucking craft as pieces of debris hammered the hull. *Shit! I think I overdid the explosives just a bit.*

Ya think?

I giggled helplessly. Having Earth slang come out of a spider's mouth was hysterical. *We are women. Hear us roar!*

Tae chittered in amusement. *I think our bossy pricks will be the only ones roaring.*

Too true. I did a double take on the view screen and gaped at the rippling fireball rising high into the sky. Magnifying the image, I watched in

Gail Koger

total amazement as the ground around the base heaved and buckled and collapsed into a gaping crater. Dense black smoke poured out of the ruins.

Hoo boy! Malik's gonna be so pissed.

Not to mention the Askole traitors tracking you, Talree snarled.

What? You said the weapons needed to be destroyed. I blew them up. You needed to know where we were. Now you do. So what's the problem?

The two renegade Askole fighters on your tail.

Can't you shoot them down?

Not in range yet.

Oh. Definitely a problem. This bird's unarmed. My spidey sense flared to life. Crap. They were coming up hot and fast. *How long before you are in range?*

Five minutes.

Like my life wasn't exciting enough. *Hang on, Tae, gonna try a little kamikaze maneuver Casey told me about.*

Tae tightened her grip. *Kamikaze? As in suicidal?*

Yeah. Casey said not to use this maneuver unless you were about ten seconds away from being shot down.

And we are?

The tracking scanner screamed a warning. *Oh, yeah.*

As the two black bat-shaped fighters filled the view screen, I hit the reverse thrusters and wrenched the ship hard to port. The shuttle bucked

and shuddered and slowed.

The fighters screamed by. A second later, dozens of laser bolts pummeled the desert sand.

Brilliant tactical move, daughter.

Thank you, sir. I leveled the shuttle out a hundred feet over desert, put it on autopilot and stood. I just wished my next move was as smart. I really hate bailing in mid-air. The landings really suck.

Talree roared, *I won't allow it. You aren't experienced enough to teleport at that speed. One small mistake and you could end up splattered all over the desert.*

Hey, I'm gonna get splattered one way or another. And it's not like I haven't done it before.

What! When?

When Malik shot down our shuttle. At least this time I'm not lugging a four hundred pound Askole with me.

I felt Talree's stunned horror. *Unbelievable. That you still live is a miracle.*

I hear ya. If it's not one bad guy, it's another, trying like hell to kill me.

The tracking scanner screamed another warning.

Tae clung to me. *Can we debate this at another time?*

I grabbed the laser rifle and teleported.

Talree slid into my mind and took control. And poof! I appeared on the red sand in an upright position and not a hair out of place. I planted a mental kiss on his mouth. *Thanks, babe.*

Gail Koger

Babe?

It's a term of endearment.

Ah. Like Tekka?

Yep. I squeaked as he wrapped me in a rib cracking hug and gave me a hard kiss.

You are my life, Tekka.

Aw. How sweet.

Kaylee, Tae snapped on our private link. You need to concentrate on those fighters heading our way.

God, you're such a worry wart. You act like they're trying to kill us or something.

They are.

Yeah, but just remember, someone had to hire those morons back at the base and guess who's at the top of my list?

Tae chittered with glee. The masters of the universe?

Wannabe masters, I corrected with a grin. All puffed up with their own importance and dumb as rocks. Pity the fools, for they have not long to live.

To prove my point, the renegades released a shitload of missiles on our poor shuttle. Didn't check for life signs, did ya, buddy boys?

The missiles slammed into the shuttle and, with a loud cracking boom, a fireball mushroomed in the pale red sky. Pieces of flaming debris rained down over the desert.

Right on cue, two deadly laser beams flashed from the heavens and nailed the fighters. Smoke and flames erupted from the crafts as they tumbled

Just My Luck

from the sky.

I did a little jig in the sand. *Girls rock. Yes, we do. Yes, we do*

Chapter Twenty-Two

My giddy joy died a sudden death when two funky looking parachutes blossomed in the sky. *Aw, hell. That freakin' armor makes them indestructible?*

Tae chittered in alarm. *What do we do now?*

You run like hell until I can come for you, Talree answered.

A wave of dizziness hit me. Whoa. I shook my head to clear it. *How long do we have to play hide and seek?*

We'll be within transporter range in ten minutes.

You do know how to give a girl a good time, I chortled as all my stress and anxiety just floated away.

We are women, hear us roar, Tae tittered, almost falling off my shoulder.

I snickered and belted out, *We are women. We are strong. We are invincible. We are women and nothing's gonna keep us down. Bring it on, assholes.*

Talree groaned in disbelief. *Did you hit your head or breathe in any type of gas?*

Nope. Just believe in girl power.

Tae giggled. *We are invincible. We are female. We can do anything. Hear us roar.*

Has to be Tricordian gas, Zarek growled as he

examined my mind. *Kaylee. You will do exactly what we tell you. Do you understand?*

Okey-dokey, don't gotta yell.

Get to the ridge, Talree commanded. Now. The rocks are full of iridium and will distort their scanners.

Bossy pricks, always trying to ruin our fun, Tae snipped.

You tell 'em.

Kaylee, they both roared in unison. Get to the ridge.

Okay. Okay. Take a chill pill. My gaze settled on the eroded towers of black rock that reared from the crimson sand like giant monsters out of some old fable. "Cool rocks."

A titanic explosion rocked the desert floor and sent an ocean of flame hundreds of feet into the air. Whoa! Just like the Fourth of July. Only better.

What is that?

Huh? Something big was flipping end over end through the air. Is it a bird? Is it a plane? I peered through the scope on my rifle and began to giggle hysterically. Nah, it's the weapons depot door. *Faster than a speeding bullet. Able to take out bad guys with a single splat!*

Beep. Beep, Tae howled.

Wile E. Coyote move over. Without a care in the world, I stood and watched the door hurtled my way. *Beep. Beep.*

Kaylee! Move it. The traitors are less than a click away.

Hey! I see 'em! I waved and yelled, *Woo hoo.*

Gail Koger

Over here!

And the nice Askole traitors headed straight for me.

Gonna work like a charm. You'll see.

By the Goddess, Talree hissed in horrified disbelief and seized control of my mind. Poof! I popped over about twenty feet away.

SPLAT! The door nailed one of the Askole renegade in the exact spot I had just been standing. *See. Nothing to worry about. My plan worked perfectly. Beep. Beep.*

The other Askole asshole jerked out his laser pistol. *When I'm done with you, soft skin, you will be begging me to kill you.*

Well, that's just rude.

With a snarl, Talree teleported us again and again and again until we were standing at the base of the ridge.

My stomach roiled and my head spun. *Whoa. Feels like I've been on a two day bender.*

Tae hacked and spat, *Like I ate too many Teskes.*

Tricordian is a very powerful neurological gas. When it's released into the air, it tricks your brain into secreting an overabundance of serotonin and endorphins, Zarek lectured. Your Coletti blood should neutralize the effects.

My giddy euphoria abruptly turned into a bad case of PMS. *And while we were so fucked up, they could walk in and take over without firing a shot.*

Exactly, Zarek stated.

I shuddered. *God, if they used that on Earth,*

we'd be sitting ducks.

Fortunately, Tricordian is very difficult to obtain, Talree added.

Really? They seem to have a whole shitload of it.

Had, Tae pointed out.

Good point. My spidey sense flared to life. The surviving Askole asshole zoomed towards us at light speed.

With a snarl, I brought my rifle up, sighted in and shot him in the chest. The impact knocked him on his ass. *Ouch! That's gonna leave a bruise.*

He got up. I nailed him again. *Really pissing ya off, ain't I, buddy?*

His roar of fury echoed across the desert.

Her temper as frayed as mine, Tae egged me on, *Shoot him again.*

So I did.

Talree let out a menacing growl and tightened his grip on me. *What are you doing?*

He's not the brightest bulb in the pack, so, if I piss him off enough, get that testosterone flowing, he'll start thinking more with his dick instead of his head.

A sound strategy, Zarek commented.

Thank you, sir. Sweat trickled down my back as I set the timers on two grenades and buried them in the sand. *Let's see if I can lure him in.*

No! You will not risk yourself. Talree grabbed me and teleported me to the top of the ridge. *We'll be in transporter range in two minutes. I will deal with the traitor. Not you.*

Gail Koger

Spoilsport. I watched as the Askole zipped to a stop a few feet away from the grenades and I waved, all friendly-like. *Looking for me?*

The moron jerked his pistol out and started shooting.

Shit! I hit the deck as bolts sizzled inches over my head.

I'm going to drain the life from that idiot, Tae snapped. Slowly. Painfully.

Whoa! Who knew PMS was universal? *You go, girl.*

Boom! Boom! A geyser of flame rose high into the air sending a shower of blazing shrapnel down on us.

I winced as pieces of hot metal and rocks pelted down on me. *I think the plan worked perfectly, don't you?*

Tae hissed, *He better not be dead. I'm hungry. Really hungry.*

Yikes! Where was the chocolate when you really needed it? I quickly peeked over the edge of the ridge. *Good news, he's still alive! And the bad news is...* My spidey sense went on red alert. *He's right behind us.* I grabbed Tae and teleported.

Talree shouted, *Watch out!*

Bam! I slammed into some kind of energy field. Snap! Crack! Suddenly, I was doing a good imitation of Super Girl as I hurtled through the air. Twenty feet later a boulder rose up and smacked me in the face.

I crumpled to the ground, my limbs trembling spasmodically and I couldn't move if my life

depended on it. And it did. *What hit me?*

Askole armor is capable of generating an energy field that stops any attempts to teleport.

Couldn't have mentioned that a bit sooner? I tried to move and let out a yelp. Shit, my whole body felt like it was on fire.

Tae groaned, *You're right, it does hurt like a sonovabitch.*

The renegade Askole staggered over and plopped down on the boulder. Little sparks of energy cracked and popped around his badly damaged armor. *You know, I'm going to have to kill you.*

I know you're gonna try, I answered, eyeing his bloody wounds.

For a small soft skin, you are a formidable warrior.

Ah, thanks.

You must be the female Malik is so determined to capture.

Yeah, that would be me. Yee-flippin'-haw. The stupid gas had made him a regular Chatty Cathy. Lucky me.

Very lucky. Keep him talking, daughter.

Oh, God. Broadcasting again.

The Askole leaned towards me and whispered in my head, *Is it true that you captured a Tai-Kok ship?*

I whispered back, *Yes.*

Think I could get a tour? I've always wanted to see inside one.

Uh, sure. Why not? Uh... just curious but were

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you responsible for the Askole outposts being taken?

He beamed with pride. A flawless, brilliantly executed plan. Zab disabled the weapons controls while I flooded the outposts with Tricordian. He cackled. Capturing Tihar was an added bit of brilliance. The Rodan promised to eat him a piece at a time.

This guy was a perfect candidate for a tree ornament.

Tae snipped, Does the fool realize that every word he says is being broadcast to the entire known universe?

You have nice breasts for a soft skin.

That would be a no, I responded to Tae on our private link.

What made you join up with Malik anyway?

My father denied me my proper place in the clan, he snarled. I should have had my choice of trading runs and a ship of my own. But the old fool refused. Said I wasn't skilled enough or warrior enough to lead. He let out a cackling laugh. So I killed him.

Damn. Talk about cold-blooded. You murdered your own father?

Images flashed across my mind of the terrible deed. The cowardly little creep had drugged his father and left him alone and unarmed to face that monstrous werewolf.

Once my assassins blow Sarii and all the Clan leaders to the heavens, I will take my rightful place as High Commander and all those fools will

bow down to me. Good God, what a fucking moron. He had no clue that his master plan had tanked. I seriously doubted the delusional creep would be breathing much longer, either. *Wow! High Commander, huh?*

He puffed up and preened. *I am a mighty warrior.*

Yeah, I can tell.

He fixed a suddenly lustful gaze on me. *You will breed fine warriors. I have decided to let you to live. You will be my mate and rule at my side.*

Gosh, that's so sweet of you, but I've got a mate.

Does his weapon equal mine?

Weapon?

And Omigod, he started stripping down. *Talree, where the hell are you?*

Fifty-eight seconds.

Look!

He stuck his poor, pitiful little dick in my face. Tihar he was not. *Talree, for God's sake, come and kill this fool.*

Twenty seconds.

My weapon is tremendous. He rubbed my crotch with the pathetic thing.

Ewww. I was so burning this outfit.

He pulled at my body suit. *Soon you'll be screaming in pleasure.*

The only one screaming is you, Tae spat and like some rabid dog she latched on to his dick.

The moron shrieked blue bloody murder and did this funky kind of chicken dance while batting

frantically at Tae.

Glittery blue lights filled the ridge. Poof! Talree, Zarek, Tihar, Sarel and a bunch of other Askoles stood there. Slacked-jawed in amazement, they watched the traitor jump around madly while Tae hung from his private parts and made rather frightening chittering noises.

Don't just stand there, help her!

Talree grinned, exposing his wicked fangs. *I don't think she needs any help.*

The Askoles pounced and knocked him to the ground with Tae still clinging to his pitiful weapon.

All humor vanished from Talree's face when he got a good look at me. He scooped me up and cradled me against his chest as he examined my injuries. "When I'm finished with that fool, he will be screaming for mercy."

I stroked his face soothingly. "Don't worry, babe. Tae's got it handled."

The idiot's shrieks of agony combined with Tae's furious chittering and the Askole warrior's howling cackles of pure enjoyment.

"She's very tenacious."

"Yep, grip like a pit bull." Suddenly, things got real quiet and I called to her, *Sweetie, you okay?*

The warriors parted and I could see Tae spit out his now really itty-bitty, shriveled sausage of a dick. She scampered over to me. *He will never use that disgusting thing again.*

Nope. Limp Dick is definitely out of business.

Zarek laughed. *It seems, daughter, that you are not the only one capable of unmanning males.*

We are women, hear us roar! We shouted in unison.

The Askole all stared at us in astonishment and each clamped their hands over their dicks.

God, what a bunch of wusses. *And our legend continues to grows*, I giggled to Tae.

We are strong. We are invincible.

“Nothin’ gonna keep us down,” I belted out at the top of my lungs.

Talree tightened his grip on me. “Where’s Shrek?”

Visibly relieved, the Overlord replied, “Here he comes now.”

Covered in Tabors, Shrek rushed over and gave us a quick bow. “This is getting to be a habit, my lady.”

“You’ve got the cutest green ears.”

Shrek shot a worried look at Talree and quickly opened his medical bag.

Datlow pounced on Tae, rolling her this way and that, looking for injuries. *Thank the Goddess you are unharmed. You are never leaving my side again.*

Let’s make some babies, Tae crowed and latched onto Datlow.

Whoo hoo, go for it, girlfriend.

Bey groused, *Petka, you are a very dangerous female.*

I shrugged, *It’s a gift.*

Zarek snapped, “The antidote. Now.”

Shrek quickly injected me and jumped back as Tae tried to bite him.

Gail Koger

Bey and Datlow webbed her to the ground.

I don't think they like our singing.

Bossy pricks always spoiling our fun, Tae complained, chittering her fury as Shrek injected her.

A wave of dizziness rolled over me and I squinted up at Talree. "I think I'm gonna puke." And I did. All over his pretty new boots. "I'm so sorry," I wailed and burst into tears.

"Shrek!" My pissed-off mate roared, trying to shake the mess off.

Another injection and my stomach settled. "Thanks." I patted Talree's leg. "Why don't you go clean that crap off? In this heat, it's gonna get rrrrealllly stinky."

He let out a long suffering breath and sat me on the rock. "Don't move."

Feeling like a complete and utter fool, I rubbed the tears off my face. "Not gonna be a problem, boss."

He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. "Bey's right. You are a dangerous female."

"Aw, you say the sweetest things."

Shrek ran a scanner over me. "Why don't we get you cleaned up."

"That bad, huh?"

He grinned. "You look like a warrior who won a great battle."

A laugh broke from me. "And got the crap beat out of her in the process."

"That, too."

Ack! Ack! Tae hacked and coughed. *Did I really*

suck that idiot's dick?

I think the proper term was weapon, and yeah, you did.

Tae hacked some more and wiggled against the webbing holding her down. *Let me up.*

Both Datlow and Bey roared, *No!*

A huge Askole stormed towards us. His tentacles squirmed wildly about his head.

"Whoa! Someone's in a bad mood."

"That's Limp Dick's brother," Shrek said, giving me another injection.

"Oh. Great. Nothing like finding out your brother is a murderous asshole."

"Valdirk is clan leader now and his brother's actions reflect badly on his leadership abilities and diminish the clan's honor."

"Gotcha." Didn't think he'd try to hurt me. Not with Talree and the Overlord close by but with my luck, who knew?

Valdirk stopped in front of me and all his pain, horror, guilt and rage smacked me in the face. Poor guy, I knew exactly where he was coming from.

So I took him along on a little show and tell. I forced him to live through my parents' murder and let him feel my pain and guilt at my inability to stop it. Then I shoved graphic images of Rodan's slaughter houses and the butchered Askoles into his brain.

We need warriors of your skills to stop Malik and his goons. Will you help us? Will you join our fight?

His eyes full of shocked fury, he knelt down.

Gail Koger

Yes, Lady Warrior, we will join your fight. I pledge my clan's aid and we will not stop until every one of them is dead.

I clasped his arm in a formal warrior's embrace. *You honor us.*

He bared his fangs in a really scary smile. *No, Lady Warrior, you honor us.* His tentacles stung my arm, adding his clan sign to my tattoo. *My clan owes you a debt that cannot be repaid.*

That's when I noticed he was kneeling in my puke. I fought back a giggle.

Should I say something? Nah. Instead I flashed Valdirk pictures of the Tabor's nursery, complete with all its rather gruesome webbed-up dinner guests. *Your brother wanted a tour of my ship. How about we give him one?*

He threw his head back and let out a cackling roar.

Chapter Twenty-Three

My stomach grumbled and growled. God, I was starving. And there wasn't one good reason for me to hang in sick bay another second. Not when, a short distance away, there was all that food.

I felt fine. Okay, I still had the unfortunate tendency to giggle insanely or burst into tears, but, other than that, I was good to go. Just because Talree had donned his scary Warlord face and growled, "Don't leave this bed," didn't mean I couldn't go grab a bite to eat. Now did it? What's life without a little risk? Huh?

I looked over at Tae who was webbed to the bed next to me. *How about we blow this joint and go get something to eat?*

She chittered in glee. *What those bossy pricks don't know won't hurt them.*

Exactly. Pulling out the knife I had hidden, I cut Tae loose. Hey, a good cop always has a backup piece. And I'm a damned good cop. Plus, I'm a sneaky bitch. So, sue me.

Chittering giddily, Tae scrambled up my body to perch unsteadily on my shoulder. *Let's blow.*

I popped us into the banquet room and noticed the empty spot where the stuffed werewolf had once stood so proudly. A giggle escaped me. *Imagine having the big bad wolf appear in your view screen.*

Gail Koger

Knock. Knock, Tae chortled.

I should kick Jake's butt for telling her all those stupid knock knock jokes but I answered, *Who's there?*

Boo.

Boo hoo?

Boo. I'm the big bad wolf and I'm gonna eat your ass.

I laughed hysterically even though it wasn't a bit funny. What was up with that? *God, Tae, that was really awful.*

Yep, pretty bad. Tae teetered and almost fell off my shoulder.

I grabbed her. *Whoa! Careful. Wonder when this crap is gonna wear off?*

Don't know. Don't care.

Me, neither.

My gaze surveyed the tables of food. Where to start? Datol! I rushed over and grabbed a bottle. And it was still cold. I danced a little jig. "Yes, there is a God." I chugged down some and sighed. Nectar of the Goddess.

Blood worms, Tae cried and launched herself across at the table. She pounced on a bowl full of wiggling black worms. *Oh, yum!*

Shrek ran frantically down the corridor.

Hmph. I sampled some fruit. Wonder what's got him so upset?

Twenty seconds later, Shrek tore back down the corridor. His expression was one of blind panic.

I let out a piercing whistle and yelled, "Shrek! Wassup?"

He skidded to a stop, whirled around and let out a sob of relief. "My lady! Thank the Goddess."

"What's got you in such a dither?"

"The Warlord," he cried and hurried over to me. "He left you in my care and you vanished. If you aren't in sick bay when he returns, he will kill me."

"Nah. He wouldn't do that."

"Yes. He would." Shrek took a shuddering breath. "He said I would join the Tabors for dinner in the nursery."

Tae raised her worm-covered face from the bowl. *Never had a doctor for dinner.*

Shrek gaped at her and snatched the bowl away. "You can't eat these."

Yes, I can. Tae snagged the bowl with a strand of webbing and tugged.

He tugged back. "No! They'll increase your levels of intoxication." Shrek spotted the bottle of beer in my hand and yelled, "Put that bottle down."

"God, what a party pooper." I chugged some more Datol.

"My lady, please."

Tae jerked on the bowl. *Let go.*

The doctor jerked back. The webbing snapped and the bowl hurtled straight over Shrek's head. The worms flew through the air and smacked into an invisible boogie man who was sneaking up on us with a very visible, very large knife in one hand.

We all goggled in disbelief as the blood worms latched onto the previously invisible guy and

started chowing down. With a loud shriek, the guy dropped the knife and tore frantically at the worms on his face.

“Well, you don’t see that everyday.”

“Lotian assassins,” Shrek gasped in horror.

Those are my blood worms, Tae hissed and fired off a dozen web balls.

Every one of them missed and the guy continued to stumble around, screaming in agony.

I stared at the floating web balls. Well, hell. I picked up a bowl of what looked like puked up blood and hurled it at the web balls. The clotted blood splashed over several hulking forms. Not good. Not good at all. *I can’t sense any of them!*

Me, either, Tae replied, firing off another volley.

Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! And whoo hoo! One invisible guy webbed to the wall.

Way to go, Tae! I tossed a bowl of eyeballs in some sort of blood sauce at the remaining one.

The big creep caught the bowl in mid-flight and tossed it back.

The stuff splattered over my face and hair. “You want a food fight?” I yelled, picking an eyeball out of my hair. “I’ll give you one.” I started chucking everything I could get my hands on.

Praying frantically to the Goddess, Shrek joined in, lobbing bowl after bowl.

That damned assassin kept lobbing them right back.

A glob of bloody brains landed in my hair and my temper flared to life. “What kind of fucking

assassin are you? Huh? What kind of lame ass idiot comes to a job unarmed?"

A knife flew towards me. "Way to go. Piss off the trained assassin," I muttered to myself, grabbed a metal tray and deflected the blade at the last second.

Thunk! A moaning groan sounded behind me. I turned and watched in amazement as the knife staggered this way and that before hitting the floor. A few seconds later a very dead assassin became visible.

Tae giggled. *Bet he wasn't expecting that.*

I slipped in some mashed eyeball and grabbed the table to keep from falling.

Another knife whizzed over my head. Crap. More assassins.

"Must you anger them?" Shrek hollered.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time." My radar screamed to life and I reluctantly linked with my bossy prick.

Hey, babe. Grabbing more bowls, I kept throwing them wildly around the room. *We seem to have an infestation of invisible assassins. And I'm picking up some kind of problem with the hyper-drive. You might wanna check that out.*

Lotians, he snarled. *You're not in sick bay.*

What makes you say that?

Because I'm standing behind you.

I whirled around. Yikes. He had his big, bad, scary face on. *I can explain.*

A flying bowl caught Talree square in the face, drenching him with a sticky black sauce.

“Oh, hell.”

“You are a menace,” he growled, pulled his laser pistol and bam, bam, bam, he shot all the remaining assassins.

Invisible assassins, no less. Color me impressed. “Slick!”

He leaned down, sauce dripping off his hair, fangs bared and said calmly, “You have a knife in your boot, and yet, you made no attempt to use it or teleport to safety?”

“Uh, I forgot?”

Let’s make a run for it, Tae whispered.

Talree’s hand clamped around my neck. *I think not. You two are going back to sickbay with Shrek. You will stay there until the Tricordian has been cleansed from your systems.*

My radar went on red alert. *Sorry, but I can’t really do that right now.*

Red bled into his eyes and his fangs lengthened. *You dare to disobey me?*

I shrank back. Damn, he had the Overlord’s terrorizing demeanor down pat. *Who me? Wouldn’t think of it, babe. It’s just I kinda need to go to the bridge and blow some Rodan to itty-bitty pieces. But, hey, if you want to let the sneaky little bastards go, that’s your call.*

Poof! We were standing on the bridge. The Askole crew gaped at us. Guess they had never seen a Warlord covered in chocolate sauce before.

An eyeball fell off my head and rolled across the floor.

The weapons control officer cackled.

Talree's control snapped. He grabbed the hapless fellow by the neck and tossed him into the far wall. *Anyone else find this amusing?*

Holy hell! I scurried over to the weapons control position, quickly fed in the coordinates and hit the button. On the view screen, an explosion lit the blackness of space. Gotcha! Now where was the mother ship hiding?

There. At the edge of the solar system. What was so dammed important that they would risk taking on the Alliance, the Askole and us? I groaned.

You ever had one of those 'duh' moments? When you could just kick yourself for missing the obvious? What if Talree's missing warriors had been held on the base I had blown to hell?

I scanned the area and let out a sigh of relief. I could sense three Coletti warriors with the same kinda funky brain wave patterns of the feral. Thank you, God.

I looked up at my big bad Warlord and said, "I've got some good news and some even better news."

* * * *

We teleported into an inky darkness.

Talree growled in my ear, "Don't move."

Hello? Can't see jack shit here. Where am I gonna go? But since my mate's temper was still a little iffy, I answered obediently, "Yes, sir."

A blinding white light flared. Blinking, I looked around. The blast had done a lot of damage. Huge chunks of concrete and rebar littered the corridor.

Gail Koger

My radar sounded a warning and I pulled my pistol. "Uh oh, we've got company."

Zarek, Talree, Voss and Tihar surrounded me, scanning the darkness.

A black and red cobra-like head shot out, snagged Tihar's armored leg and jerked him off his feet.

Sand shark!, he cried as the finned critter dragged him down the corridor. Of course, Tihar being such a big dude, the sand shark was only able to drag him about ten feet before he got snagged on the rubble.

I ran over to him, seized control of the monster's mind and yelled, *Bad sand shark! Spit him out!*

Hungry, Bad Sand Shark hissed. His six inch fangs stubbornly clamped around Tihar's leg, he kept trying to jerk all four hundred pounds of enraged Askole through a two foot opening.

Spit! I yelled again while Tihar kicked the snot out of him.

Talree grabbed my arm and jerked me back. "Get out of the line of fire."

"I've got it under control. Jeezus, have a little faith."

"While you still have Tricordian in your system?"

Okay, he had a point. I tightened my grip on the sand shark's mind and commanded, *Spit him out! Now!*

Hungry, he repeated, but dropped Tihar's leg.

Tihar scrambled backwards, leapt to his feet

and blasted the living hell out of the poor creature.

I stared at the blackened remains. *You really didn't have to do that.*

Yes, I did. He blasted it some more.

Kinda overkill, isn't it? I mean you're wearing armor. He couldn't really hurt ya.

"Be quiet, daughter," Zarek snapped, "before I shoot you."

God, what a crabby bunch. "Yes, sir."

Voss gave me a deadly look and stroked his sword.

I stuck my tongue out at him. I know, I know. Pretty juvenile but I was on testosterone overload.

Talree shone his light on a metal door blocked by huge chunks of concrete. "I can sense them. Lior, Badon and Adal."

He thrust the light into my hand and started heaving five hundred pound chunks of debris out of the way like they were nothing.

My spidey sense went to red alert. I opened my mind, searching for the source.

Crap. Whatever it was it was directly behind me. I looked over my shoulder and glowing red eyes stared back. Holy hell. *Ah, guys. I think they got out.*

So it would seem, Zarek said an instant before they attacked.

Talree shoved me behind him. I stumbled over a piece of rebar and went down. The light rolled off to one side and got kicked around like a soccer ball, giving me brief glimpses of the fight.

Tihar flying through the air.

Gail Koger

Talree and Lior rolling around on the floor,
beating the crap out of each other.

Zarek and Badon exchanging brutal blows.

Adal stalking towards me.

Yikes! I scrambled behind a slab of concrete.

Voss grabbing Adal in a chokehold.

Talree struggling to keep Lior's fangs out of his
neck.

Blood pouring down his face, Zarek burying his
fangs in Badon's throat.

Omigod, either the sedatives Shrek had given
us to use on the ferals weren't working or they
hadn't gotten the chance to use them. Either way,
the good guys were in big trouble.

My radar screamed blue bloody murder. Two
glowing red eyes appeared out of nowhere.

"Oh shit!" I jerked my pistol up and before I
could fire, he was on me, crushing me against a
massive chest. I yelped as fangs sank painfully into
my neck. Shit! Shit! Shit! I twisted and squirmed
but I literally couldn't move. My arms were pinned
against his chest and my legs trapped by the debris.

There was only one way left to fight the feral. I
hailed off and mentally punched the asshole as
hard as I could.

A low rumbling growl sounded and the feral
tightened his grip to the point that I could barely
breathe and kept on sucking.

That's when I realized we were moving. I was
so not being kidnapped again. I summoned every
bit of power I had and hit him with it.

The feral roared with fury and flung me from

him.

I smacked into a wall and teleported to the landing bay before Snarly Guy could grab me again and drain me dry.

Poof! Snarly Guy followed me. I backed away from him.

Shit, he was one big dude. Hard to tell what he looked like under all that grime. Poor bastard's gaunt torso was covered in cuts, bruises and obvious signs of torture. Even shaved bald, he still had the big, bad thing going for him. He snarled and pointed my pistol at me.

Yeah, like that was gonna work. I waved my fingers at him. *Bye. Bye.* I teleported out into the sand and summoned a shitload of sand sharks.

He surveyed the dozens of fins cutting through the crimson soil and disappeared.

I scanned the area and palmed Shrek's tranquillizer ampule. This guy wasn't acting a bit like Kassum. Also, where were his tusks and claws? Did that mean... Steel-corded arms closed around me.

Poof! We appeared in some kind of storage area. I stabbed the ampule into the feral's leg.

Roaring in fury, his hand closed around my wrist and he forced me to drop it. I shifted my balance and tossed him over my shoulder. Snarly Guy crashed into the wall, shot to his feet, took one step and toppled over.

I sagged to the floor in relief. "Well, that was fun."

Talree popped in, every inch an enraged

Gail Koger

Warlord. A kinda beat-up Warlord, but still knee-quivering scary. I pointed to the guy. "One of yours?"

My sweetie plucked me off the floor and gave me a hard kiss. "That is Zandar, Warlord of the Sobek Clan."

"Ah. The guy that Zarek thought murdered you. Betcha he wants to kill Malik as much as you do."

He grinned and kissed me again. Did I ever mention that Talree's a great kisser?

Chapter Twenty-Four

My temper at the boiling point, I popped into the nursery. Normally, the thick lacy webbing that covered every square inch of the hold would give me the heebie-jeebies. But not today. Not after what they had done.

Wassup, girlfriend. Tae loved using Earth slang and I usually found it hysterical but not today.

I let out a growl of rage and exploded, *Those lowlife, fucking bastards! The Overlord has always been a sneaky, conniving asshole. But Talree... I wiped away my angry tears. I thought he cared for me. Maybe even loved me a little. But to do this...*

Tae stopped webbing eggs to the Askole traitor. *What did he do?*

What didn't they do? First they held me down and put a fucking tracker in my arm. The big jerk said he was tired of my disappearing acts and now he would know where I was at all times.

You do get kidnapped a lot, she pointed out, adding another egg.

Whose side was she on? *I'm a cop. I'm trained to handle stuff like that.* I frowned. *Are these your babies?*

No, Bir's.

Oh, I didn't know she was pregnant.

She surprised us all.

Whoa. Spiders had illicit sex? Who knew?

Gail Koger

Anyway, I reminded Mister Dickhead that not only did I defeat a Tai-Kok captain and got us this nice ship, I was also the one that blew up that freakin' Rodan base and got the Askole on our side.

You go, girlfriend.

And didn't we stop the assassin from killing everyone?

We are women, hear us roar.

Plus, we were responsible for blowing up that damned ammo dump and exposing those traitors.

We are women, we are invincible, Tae cried, really getting into the moment.

The Askole traitor moaned.

Shut up! we shouted in unison.

And to top it all off, I found some of his missing warriors. How does he repay me?

With great sex?

No! By taking my family, I wailed. All of them.

All the females of your clan?

Okay, they might have missed a few third cousins, but they took the majority of them. They even grabbed all the men and loaded them on the ship, too. Those assholes have my family thinking that they're coming for my bonding ceremony. That it's gonna be one big party.

Those smelly bastards.

How do I tell them they're really prisoners and not honored guests? How do I explain that I'm not quite human anymore? What do I say to Tess or Sam or Casey or Sarah when they learn that they get to mate with a bunch of slobbering ferals in hopes of saving their sanity?

Sorry? The sex is great? Having fangs isn't too bad? And hey, you get to live for a thousand years? Oh, and yeah, your DNA gets swapped out for theirs? Maybe I'll save the best for last. They can seize control of your mind. Won't that be fun?

The nursery was suddenly full of female spiders. They crowded around me chittering their concern.

I stroked them. I don't know what to do.

Eat them, Bo suggested.

Web them to the wall until they listen to you,
Zi added.

Woo inquired, How did you find out?

I kinda eavesdropped on a meeting they were having with Sariel, Tihar and Major Zan. Since I'm a female, I wasn't invited. They wouldn't be signing a peace treaty or forming a coalition with the Alliance and the Askole, if I hadn't butted in. Did I even get a thank you for my efforts? Hell, no. They acted like it was their idea.

Tae chittered in disgust. *Those ungrateful, bossy pricks!*

And the best part is that they actually invited the Alliance brass and the Askole to my bonding ceremony before I even knew anything about it. How could Talree do that? Does he think so little of me?

Maybe he wanted it to be a surprise, Tae said.

Oh, it's gonna be a surprise all right. When I load my family on the first ship I can find and take them back to Earth.

Talree's irritated voice suddenly filled my head.

Gail Koger

Come to me. Now.

No. Not only no, but hell, no, I snarled back and broke the link.

He popped into the nursery, eyes glittering a fiery red and fangs extended. *I will no longer tolerate your disobedience.*

Splat! Tae's web ball slammed him back against the wall. With a roar of fury, he fought to free himself from the sticky webbing.

My best friends chattered with glee as the more he struggled, the more he got entangled.

Chest heaving, he finally stopped and growled, *Not. Funny.*

I glared up at him. *Just about as funny as you snatching my family from Earth.*

Did you think we would leave them unprotected? Risk them being killed or eaten by the Rodan? Or allow them to fall into Malik's hands? They are safe now. Your family is on Tanith, helping my mother prepare for our bonding ceremony. I was going to surprise you with their presence.

What about the rest of my people, huh? You got what you wanted, so the hell with 'em?

You think I would leave them unprotected?

You're a fucking Warlord. You take what you want. What am I suppose to think?

You could trust me.

Like you trust me?

Talree stared at me for a long moment and I thought I saw a flicker of anguish in his eyes before his face hardened into a grim mask. *There are two*

Just My Luck

warbirds, an Alliance battle cruiser and an Askole destroyer orbiting your world. Your people are well protected. I never made it a secret that I intended to take the females of your clan. I will do what I must to save my warriors.

Okay, now I felt like a total jerk. Earth's United Command just welcomed you with open arms?

Once Uncle Saul presented our case to them, yes.

Uncle Saul? He had already adopted my family? The Overlord has been worming his way into my family's confidence, hasn't he? Making them believe he's a good guy.

We needed to gain their trust so no one was injured in the transition.

How do you think they'll react when they find out the truth?

We are prepared for their anger.

Good luck with that. You have no idea what my family is capable of.

Talree snorted. I think we do. We used you as an example and planned accordingly.

My family is very resourceful.

Of that, we have no doubt.

You think the men in my family will just leave their womenfolk behind?

No. To protect and serve is part of who they are. We are going to offer them a better way to fight the Rodan. A way to make them stronger, faster, harder to kill.

Omigod! You're going to convert them? How?

The same way you were converted.

Gail Koger

Ewwwww. You're gonna butt fuck 'em?

Talree looked at me in total horror. *As you so graphically put it. Ewwwww. No. We are not lovers of males. They will be injected with our enzymes and, if necessary, forced to drink our blood.*

Two dozen babies suddenly skittered into the nursery and swarmed all over me. Their sticky little tongue smacking me like tiny hammers, they chittered in excitement, *Auntie K.*

I stroked them. How are my babies?

They spotted Talree and fell silent. *Was Uncle T bad? Do we get to eat him?*

No, we all shouted. No eating Uncle T.

They swarmed up Talree's legs and perched on his chest and shoulders. *You bad, Uncle T?*

Your mom and Auntie K are being bad. Very bad, he growled.

Bet you taste good.

I grinned, enjoying Talree's discomfort. Babies off. Now. No tasting Uncle T.

They reluctantly crawled down. We hungry.

There's some Rodan left, Tae commanded. Go eat it.

K. Bye. They scampered off.

Could I please talk with Kaylee? Alone.

My very best friends stared at him for a moment and then crawled off. *Thanks for all your support,* I yelled after them.

Tae laughed. *You need to talk and he's not going anywhere.*

Cut me loose.

I took one look at his glowing red eyes and

snorted. *You think I'm stupid or something?*

I have summoned Datlow.

Good for you.

Talree strained mightily, trying to break the webbing and let out a hiss of rage when not one of the strands broke.

His burning gaze settled on me. *A Warlord is never afraid. In all the battles I fought, I never knew what fear felt like until I met you. You, Teka, scare the hell out of me. The risks you take. Your utter fearlessness. You defy the odds. Look death in the face and never flinch. My own little Warlord. I cannot lose you. I will not lose you. Do you understand that?*

I know how to fight. I can take care of myself.

You have a warrior's heart. I know you will stand beside me in battle without flinching. But I must know you will obey my commands without hesitation. We are going to war. In the heat of battle, you must do as I say. Do you understand that?

Yeah, I get it. I don't like it. But I get it.

You are my heart, Teka, but I will do what I must to ensure your survival.

The hair on the back of my neck literally stood up. *And that is?*

I can and will force your obedience.

I recoiled in horror. Why didn't he just rip my fucking heart out while he was at it? *Okay. Since I'm such a disappointment and have so little value as a mate, why don't you just mind wipe me? Turn me into some kind of vacant-eyed doll you can*

Gail Koger

fuck. I'll pop out a kid every year. You got yourself a handy-dandy blood bank.

I'll always be where you left me. I'll never argue with you. The perfect mate. What more could you want?

Must you twist everything I say?

And when are you going to get it? I want a partner. Someone who'll be there for me. Someone who doesn't think I'm a fucking screw-up and who will actually listen to what I have to say. Someone who will love me, warts and all. I sure as hell don't need a daddy who tells me what to do and puts me in a corner when I'm bad.

To my horror, I felt a tear run down my cheek. I'd rather be dead than live like that. I teleported out before I lost control and bawled like a baby.

His roar of fury echoed in my mind as I popped into the landing bay. Taking a deep breath, I fought to get my emotions under control.

That went well, Tae commented on our private link.

A hysterical giggle escaped me. Oh, yeah. Once he gets loose, there's gonna be hell to pay.

I would suggest hiding until he calms down, but...

The tracker, I finished, wiping the tears off my face. How long before Datlow cuts him loose?

I've got the babies slowing him down but probably three or four minutes.

Great. I walked over to my makeshift classroom and picked up one of the batons Zye had made me. Maybe I could beat some sense into his thick head.

A hard-ass, dictatorial Warlord?

Yeah, it'd never work. My radar flared to life. I opened my senses and scanned for the source. Zandar? Two glowing red eyes glared at me from the shadows. *Holy hell. How did he get loose?*

Who got loose?

I flashed her his image. *I think I need a little girl power.*

Tae's chitter of amusement sounded in my head. *Some quality time in a nice quiet environment would do wonders for him.*

You gonna muzzle the kids?

Honey, with a little venom, he'll never know they're there.

I kinda think the Overlord wants him alive. I stiffened. Holy hell! There was some kind of connection between us. I could feel his rage. His hunger. His need. And he was getting ready to pounce... *Now!*

The eyes disappeared.

"We are women, hear us roar." I back flipped ten seconds before he popped back in and slammed my boot into his chin.

Zandar staggered back a step, and then leapt at me like a cat.

I popped in and out in a deadly dance around him. Ducking, dodging and evading his blows and lunges. *Any time now. This sucker's fast.*

We have a nice quiet spot all picked out for him.

I teleported into the nursery and dropped to the floor.

Zandar popped in behind me, eyes glittering in fury and fangs fully extended. Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! The web balls slammed him back against the webbing and he was stuck tight. He howled his rage.

Take a chill pill, Tae advised.

That's a Warlord for ya. Bad-tempered sonovabitches.

A hard hand clamped painfully on my shoulder. *Maybe we have good reasons.*

Shit. Talree was getting way too good at sneaking up on me. *Fancy meeting you here.*

He shoved me back against the wall. *Hang around, I'll be back.*

I gave him my best woebegone look. I was hoping like hell that he had forgotten that I never paid the nursery a visit without coating myself with Shrek's version of Pam. I'd figured out that it kept me from being glued to the floor when I played with the little guys.

With Datlow's and Bey's help, Talree wrapped the loudly protesting Zandar in a tight cocoon and teleported out with him.

I looked at my girlfriends and we all burst into laughter as I stepped free of the webbing.

Very clever, daughter.

Yikes! For a fleeting second I considered running for it.

Zarek, the ultimate predator, raised an eyebrow and waited.

Tae and the girls scurried behind me. Like I could protect them? An icy trickle of fear ran down

my spine. Holy hell. Under that calm exterior, he was pissed as hell. Having one Warlord on the warpath was bad enough. Two? Suicidal.

He held out his hand. *We need to talk.*

Talk? Was that another way of saying total mind wipe? I reluctantly placed my hand in his. *It's not about the birds and the bees, is it? My mom already told me about the facts of life.*

Not all of them. He clamped me to his rock hard chest and teleported.

We appeared in Zarek's quarters. The walls were covered with instruments of death. I saw swords, knives, and an assortment of laser pistols. In one corner, there was a sleek platinum desk with a high tech computer gadget and two silver and onyx chairs. The rest of the room was dominated by an enormous bed covered in black silk.

I wiggled against his hold. Being this up close and personal with the Overlord was seriously freaking me out. I could literally feel the power thrumming through him. This guy had more power in his little finger than I did in my entire body.

He released me, pointed to the chair in front of the desk and, in perfect English, commanded, "Sit."

I sat and almost sprang right back up when I noticed the blood splatters on the front of the desk. I caught the Overlord's amusement at my horror. That sneaky bastard. He had done it deliberately. Great scare tactic.

He touched the computer screen. "Show surveillance feed." A second later, a holograph

image appeared in midair. I got to watch myself doing an almost choreographed ballet around Zandar, countering his every move easily and teleporting in and out at the exact instant he did. “Where did you learn that technique?”

I shrugged. “I have some kind of connection with Zandar and I was just countering his moves.”

“That technique is one of the most difficult to learn. Only the most seasoned warriors have mastered it.”

“Osmosis maybe? I’ve merged with both you and Talree.”

“Why didn’t you ask for his help when Zandar attacked?”

He would bring that up. “Talree was sorta tied up at the time.”

“And whose fault was that?”

I cringed and cleared my throat nervously. “Uh. Mine.”

“Every time you engage the enemy alone, you undermine Talree’s confidence in himself.”

“No way. That’s not true. Talree’s the ultimate big bad. I mean, outside of you, he the toughest, meanest fighter I’ve ever met.”

“Then why has Talree come to believe his own mate doesn’t think he’s capable of defending her? That he is no longer the warrior he once was?”

“Get out of here! He doesn’t think that, does he?”

The Overlord just looked at me.

Omigod. I knew Malik had done a number on him, but... I never thought. I never realized... Shit.

“Talree’s a lot stronger than he was.”

“Yes, his powers are growing and will soon exceed mine. But he needs to know you believe in him. You cannot continue to act like a rebellious child and allow your guilt to blind you to the truth.”

“That I’m a fucking screw-up?”

“You do have a talent for finding trouble but you are a formidable warrior with very unique gifts. Never doubt that you are a valuable asset to the clan. You have brought us great honor.

“But Talree must know that you have confidence in his abilities. That you will never leave him. That you will fight with him and for him.”

“All I want to be is his partner.”

“You are,” Talree growled in my mind. A second later he popped in and leaned down to kiss me. “Forever and always.”

Aw. He said the sweetest things. I just love that in a Warlord.

Chapter Twenty-Five

My head pillowed on Talree's chest, I stroked the hard ridges of muscle. "Seeing my parents butchered just about destroyed me. It left me with this awful hole in my heart, a suffocating guilt and a rage that never goes away."

"And sometimes gets the better of you?"

I slanted him an irritated glare. "Yeah. The berserker thing. Nice of you to point that out. Are you gonna listen or not?"

He planted a kiss on my nose. "All ears."

God, I had to get my confession out before I lost it and started bawling like a baby or jumped his bones. It was a toss up at this point. "No matter how many Tai-Kok I kill, it's never enough to stop the pain. I can't... I won't risk anyone else dying because of me or for me. So I do what I must to protect my family. I take the risks, so they don't have to."

I grabbed his chin and looked him square in the eye. "I've never doubted you or your abilities. I'll never leave you. I'll fight at your side and for you." I bit my lip. "Crap, how do I say this without royally pissing you off? I'm trying to protect you in the only way I know how. Do you understand? I can't lose anyone else I love."

His large callused hand wrapped around my neck. "Are you trying to ruin my image? Warlords

are destroyers of worlds. We terrorize the universe. We take what we want. We kill any who defy us. We are the eaters of babies.”

I punched him. “Eaters of babies? C’mon, get real, you marshmallow. You would never harm a child.”

“Perhaps. But nowhere in the Warlord’s handbook does it state that our mates protect us from harm.”

“Yeah, I know. The big bad. What can I say? It’s a character flaw. I know it drives my brothers nuts.”

Pain roared to life as memories of that day came pouring back into my mind. “My Dad was the best fighter in our family. He never lost. Ever. Until then.” Tears rolled down my cheeks. “I can’t, okay, won’t stop trying to protect those I love. So, I guess you’re gonna have to deal with it.”

He pressed a gentle kiss on my mouth. “Deal with it, huh?”

I kissed him back. “Yeah, survivor guilt’s a bitch.”

Talree brushed away my tears with his thumb. “Mind wiping is starting to sound better and better.”

I smacked him. “Har. Har. You’d be bored spitless in a week’s time.”

He kissed his way down my stomach. “Would I?”

My radar went on red alert. Aw, hell. Talk about bad timing. I grabbed his head. “Bad guys are coming. Rain check?”

He groaned. “Rain check. Who’s ruining our sex

life?”

“Other than your dad?” I opened my senses and scanned the fun spoiling jerks. “We’ve got a squadron of Tai-Kok fighters coming to pay us a visit. Cloaked Tai-Kok fighters.”

And in a blink of an eye, Talree went from my gentle lover to menacing Warlord. Damn. Wonder if he could teach me that? I’d always wanted to scare the bejesus out of people. I scrambled into my clothes and weaponed up. “Malik seems to be good at making new friends.”

“Doesn’t he?” He wrapped an arm around me and popped us to the bridge.

I gaped in horror. Omigod! There had to be three dozen babies scampering around the bridge, leaving bits of webbing everywhere. Chittering madly, Bo and Zi chased after them, which only seemed to provoke the little brats even more.

Glued to their consoles, Jubal and Zye added to the commotion by yelling angrily, “Bad babies. Bad babies! Go back to the nursery.”

I linked with Tae. *I think you’d better get to the bridge.*

Wassup?

I showed her.

Fuck!

Talree roared, *Babies off the bridge. Now!*

His bellow, of course, terrified the little guys and they started squirting webbing in every direction. Soon, everything on the bridge, including us, was draped in thick gooey webs. I took one look at Talree’s glittering eyes and quickly linked with

Shrek. *Bring all the baby Pam you have. Big emergency.*

Yes, my lady.

Datlow, Bey, Tae and a dozen of my girlfriends rushed in and came to a stunned stop.

A Tai-Kok attack force is coming and we can't defend ourselves, Talree stated calmly.

A little too calmly. I really didn't think he'd hurt the little tykes but to be on the safe side I hurriedly linked with the Overlord and filled him in on the situation.

I'll deal with it, he growled. He was not a happy camper, either.

While the womenfolk rounded up the babies, Datlow and Bey worked on getting Talree loose.

Shrek rushed in, took one look and started spraying baby Pam everywhere.

As soon as I could move a bit, I inched over to the tracking scanner and pointed. "They're here now. If we play fat, dumb and happy, bet we could lure them into a trap."

Talree smiled. It was the most terrifying thing I'd ever seen. He was really tapping into his inner beast. "The Askole have some Deben mines in their hold. We can plant them in their path."

I flinched. "Good, that's really good. Should do the trick. I'm sure they can use your help. I'll just take care of this... uh, mess while you go do your Warlord thing. Okay?"

His furious gaze settled on Datlow. *We'll discuss this situation when I get back.*

Yes, my lord.

Gail Koger

Talree teleported out and everyone sighed in relief.

Holy shit. This can never happen again.

I'm sorry, girlfriend.

How did they get out?

Someone left the door to the nursery open and children being children...

They decided to go exploring. I gestured around the bridge. How do we get rid of all of this?

We eat it.

Better call in reinforcements, then. It's gotta be cleaned off before Talree returns or there'll be hell to pay.

Bey snorted, Petka, *I know there will be hell to pay.*

While two hundred Tabors busily chewed webbing, I monitored the situation. Within a very short time, my very lethal mate and his father had efficiently coordinated the transport of the mines, had teleported to all the allies' ships, gotten them onboard and had a squadron of fighters ready to launch at a moment's notice. I was pretty damned impressed.

The view screen suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree. The trap had been sprung. The Tai-Kok who survived being blown into itty-bitty pieces by the mines got an up close and personal introduction to the new Coalition. I watched as the Askole, Coletti and Alliance fighters swarmed all over them like flies on honey.

Jubal and Zye hooted every time another Tai-Kok ship bit the dust but my inner voice kept

getting louder and louder. “Too easy,” I muttered.

“Someone just scanned us, Lady Warrior,” Zye announced.

“Can you track the source?”

“No, they’re cloaked.”

Fuck. The fighters were a diversion. The real attack was coming now. I flashed the information to Talree, opened my senses and searched for the enemy. There. A dozen of them. Forty thousand kilometers and closing. I put the coordinates into the firing controls and started shooting. *Okay, guys, I have a bad feeling they’re gonna try another snatch and grab.*

Thirty seconds later, a dozen heavily-armed rogue Coletti warriors popped onto the bridge, roaring ferociously. I have to admit that the surprised alarm on their faces was kinda comical. Personally, finding myself nose to nose with a bunch of angry Tabors, would scare the crap out of me.

One of them twitched and... Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! It sounded like a Gatling gun going off. Within seconds, the rogues were covered in so much webbing all you could see was their eyes. Eyes that were now full of horror as they realized breathing was going to be a big problem.

You guys picked the wrong day to board this ship. Huge mistake. Really huge.

Tae tittered, *Big mistake. Really big.*

Jubal and Zye exchanged glances and chortled, “Tremendous mistake.”

Gail Koger

Shrek joined in. "Horrible mistake."

Datlow crawled up to stare one in the face.
Fatal mistake.

Everyone burst into laughter. That laughter died an abrupt death when Talree, Zarek and Voss popped in. Their fierce gazes swept over the room in utter amazement.

A faint smile touched Talree's mouth. *Well done, warriors.*

I watched the bright orange ball grow larger and larger in the view screen. Tanith, my new home, was not quite what I had expected. Skeletal remains of long dead cities were scattered across the seemingly endless ocean of burnt orange sand. Ghastly testaments to a millennium of war. Gaunt, wind-tortured peaks of black stone surrounded the emerald seas. No animals. No birds. Not a single tree or bush or even a weed dared to sprout in that utter desolation.

A little computer research and I discovered that six hundred years ago, the Coletti race had almost been wiped out. Their cities were in ruin, millions of people dead and dying. Zarek, a young Warlord, had gathered the survivors and moved them into a natural system of underground caverns. Almost single-handedly, he had rebuilt the Coletti Empire into what it is today.

Unfortunately for the females of this galaxy, chemicals used in the Great War created a genetic anomaly and only one female baby was born for

every one thousand males. The Coletti women were going the way of the dodo bird. That rarity also explained why the Overlord let the traitor Mogok's females live. Can't kill off any Colleti breeding stock, now can you?

Facing extinction, Zarek did what any good Warlord would do: he started raiding other species for their women. This is where the slogan 'We do what we must to survive' came from. The good news for us war brides is, once the bond is forged, they're driven to care for us, protect us and provide for us.

In the last hundred years, Zarek had negotiated with, conquered, and assassinated his fellow Warlords until all but one clan were united under his banner. All in all, the Overlord had some pretty impressive accomplishments, but he was still a dictator who ruled with an iron fist.

What the Coletti Empire seriously needed, as I saw it, was a little truth, justice and the American way. Empire building was one thing, but winning the people's hearts and minds was another.

Equally impressive were the pictures of the huge subterranean cities complete with their own version of a sun, parks, thunderous waterfalls, lakes and critters of every type. A Roman-like Eden buried deep within the earth, complete with blast doors.

The palace was pretty damned spectacular, too. I know, la te da. A palace, same old, same old. This one was like something out of a fairy tale. Intricately carved black stone rose gracefully from

Gail Koger

a turquoise lake. The structure came complete with arched gateways, flower covered terraces and colonnaded streets.

From Talree's memories I knew Detja, the Overlord's better half, had had a major hand in its design. I couldn't wait to meet Talree's mom and see if she had any pointers on how to keep our very lethal mates under control.

I blinked. Whoa! Talk about overkill. The space around Tanith and its two moons literally bristled with death satellites. I guess when you run amok through the known universe, taking things that don't belong to you, you make a lot of enemies. Maybe this Coalition with the Askole and Alliance would have the Overlord rethinking his warring ways. Yeah, who was I kidding? Not a chance in hell.

Tae skittered down the wall and dropped into my lap. *I can't wait to meet your family.*

I wished I shared your excitement. I mean, I really want to see them but at the same time it scares the bejesus out of me. How are they going to react to my fangs? Or the changes in my appearance? I know they'll be excited about my ability to teleport and my increased strength. I brightened. Betcha I could even kick Caleb's and Ethan's ass now. Okay, I'm a vindictive bitch. But they so had it coming.

They're your family. It won't matter.

Maybe. My stomach clenched in dread. *Until I tell them the truth. I feel like a fucking Judas goat.*

Just My Luck

*You're saving your family, not betraying them.
By changing them into something they're not?
They'll live. Isn't that better than watching
them die, one at a time?*

We could have defeated the Rodan.

Maybe. But at what cost?

*I don't know. I just don't want them to hate
me.*

*They won't hate you. Talree and the Overlord,
maybe, but not you. The Warlord gave you no
choice when he claimed you.*

Doesn't make it any easier.

*Talree popped onto the bridge and arrogantly
held out his hand. It is time.*

Yeah, time to face the music. I took his hand.

Chapter Twenty-Six

We appeared on a sunny terrace draped with a bright riot of flowers. In the distance, a silvery waterfall cascaded down the cavern wall. I looked around in disbelief. The pictures didn't do it justice. Below us, a flock of pink duck-like birds floated peacefully on the turquoise water. Friggin' amazing. It was truly an underground paradise. Who would have thunk it?

"Talree! My son. My beloved son," a musical voice cried.

I turned and watched a petite woman in a moss green tunic race towards us.

"Mother!" Talree caught her, spun her around and hugged her tightly as she rained kisses over his face.

Detja was not what I expected. For one thing, she didn't look a day over forty, she had skin to die for and long, beautiful silver hair that emphasized her high, exotic cheekbones and delicate features. The silken material of her tunic accented her great figure. Her makeup was perfect. Her voice was melodious. Everything about her was perfect. The Overlord knew how to pick 'em.

Shit. And here I was, wearing a torn, blood-stained body suit with scuffed up boots, my hair a mess and my face adorned with multi-colored bruises. I stared down at my chipped pink nail

polish. Yep, I was gonna make a great first impression.

Talree set his mother on her feet and smiled at me. "Mother, this is Kaylee, my heart, my Lady Warrior. Kaylee, this is Detja, the Overlord's right hand and the most feared female on Tanith."

"A real pleasure to meet you, ma'am." I wanted to smack myself in the forehead. A pleasure to meet you, ma'am? How lame was that?

Detja's bright amber eyes surveyed me from head to toe and to my utter surprise she hugged me. "Thank you for giving my son back to me."

I hugged her back and whispered, "You've gotta tell me your secret for dealing with Warlords."

She laughed. "Yes, we have much to discuss. But first we must do something about your clothing." She slanted Talree a glare. "My son has not been providing adequately for you."

"Detja!" The Overlord's voice was sharp with exasperation as he suddenly popped in.

She stiffened and gave a low bow. "My lord, how kind of you to grace us with your presence."

Uh-oh. Trouble on the home front.

Zarek quickly scooped her up and kissed her passionately.

My chin hit the floor. Whoa! The Overlord had a romantic streak? Who knew?

Talree reached over and closed my mouth. "You seem surprised."

"Uh, yeah. Just a bit."

"My parent's union has been blessed by the Goddess."

“I can tell.” And the freakin’ fertility goddess. To my horror, their kiss deepened and the Overlord’s hands began to roam. And just before I shouted, ‘good God, get a room’, they broke apart.

A very satisfied expression on his face, Zarek murmured something into Detja’s ear. She smiled a smile that promised the Overlord a lot of hot monkey sex.

That image gave me the absolute willies. It was a side of Zarek that I never, ever wanted to see or think about. God, it was like finding out your parents did it. Yuck!

Detja straightened her tunic and held out her hand. “Come, daughter. Our Warlords have much to discuss.”

I’ll bet. Conquering the known universe took a lot of planning.

My mother-in-law led me into a palatial bedroom. A huge four-poster bed draped in black and silver dominated the room. All the plush furnishings were black and silver. The only feminine touches were the bouquets of flowers.

One wall was covered in battle axes, swords, knives and laser pistols. Yep, had to be the Overlord’s room. My feet sank into the thick silver carpeting as I took a closer look at what appeared to be dried blood on the swords. Guess they weren’t all for show.

Detja touched a wall and a panel slid back to reveal hundreds of outfits. “We’re about the same size. Ah, this one.” She plucked a turquoise tunic and navy blue body suit from the rack and held

them out to me. "Perfect with your coloring."

I backed away from her as my nerves got the better of me. "I... can't." I sank down on a plush bench in abject misery. "I can't face them. How do I explain..." My voice broke and tears leaked down my cheeks.

Detja sat beside me. "Explain what, daughter?"

"I knew what Talree and Zarek had planned. I should have figured out some way to warn my family. To stop them."

She looked at me as if I had lost my mind. "Stop them? You? Alone? Not even the Alliance or the Askole have been able to stop the Overlord."

Well, if you put it like that, it did sound pretty stupid. "It was my job to protect them."

She took my hand and stroked the tattoo. "You must accept the destiny the Goddess has given you. Your world and your people now belong to the Overlord. There is nothing you can do to change that. Even if you had managed to warn your family, it wouldn't have made a difference. Warlords are utterly relentless. They never stop in their pursuit until their prey either surrenders or is destroyed."

"Did you think your capture so quickly after Talree linked with you was a random occurrence? That you just happened to be thrown into his cell?"

Holy hell. "He manipulated everything?"

"You were his chosen. His prey. Once he marked you, you were his. There was no escape. No place you could run. I know. I tried. I ran from my Warlord for seven months but, in the end, there was no haven. No sanctuary."

"I am bound to Zarek as tightly as you are bound to my son. Once your family merged their minds to yours and you in turn merged with Talree and Zarek, your family became theirs. Warlords can track and control them. Any time. Any place."

"Never had a chance, did we?"

"No. When the Overlord discovered your blood's ability to heal our cellular damage, he immediately seized control of your planet and all your females."

"We're fucking brood stock?"

"A crude way to put it, but accurate."

Crap! It just kept getting worse and worse.

She stood and, with pure steel in her voice, said, "You need to be strong for your family. You can make their adjustment to our ways easier or you can watch as they are forced to the Warlord's will."

I had been in Zarek's mind and I knew exactly what he was capable of. I didn't even want to think of the horrible things he would do to save his people from extinction. I shuddered. God, we were so screwed.

I suddenly felt my family's reassuring touch. Their love surrounded me, blanketed me with comfort. Oh, hell. I could also feel their anger, alarm and horror. Shit! I'd been broadcasting again. So much for breaking it to them gently.

Kaylee, get your butt out here, girl, Sam hollered in my head. We brought all your favorite stuff.

Beer? Chocolate? Chips and salsa?

All of the above, Caleb said.

Detja smiled. "Go. Be with your family."

"Thanks." I focused on them and teleported. I popped in on a terrace that had a terrific view of a wooded park. Caleb's strong arms enveloped me. "No one blames you, runt."

Ethan pried me loose and squeezed the air out of me. "Still got those enlistment papers for you to sign."

"I'll sign them, but you get to explain it to my Warlord."

Jake butted in, "I wanna see your fangs."

"Omigod! How did you...?"

Sam gurgled, "Remember that hot monkey sex you were having with Talree?"

I felt my face burning. God, how could I ever forget? "Yeah. What about it?"

"You used your fangs to give him the big O." Sam fanned herself, "Whoo, boy, and what a ride."

"So, let's see them," Jake commanded, sticking his fingers in my mouth.

I snapped at him and then bared my teeth while everyone examined them. "Satisfied?"

"Get to use them yet?" That was Casey. Face of an angel, figure of a runway model and the heart of a street brawler.

"Yeah, took a big chunk out of a Rodan with 'em."

"Way to go!" Everyone roared and clapped.

I looked around. "Where's Uncle Saul?"

"Back on Earth. He's the Overlord's go-to guy," Ethan answered.

“Oh.”

Caleb grabbed my arms and examined the tattoo, then my warrior’s bracelet. “Way to go, short stuff. From what we’ve been told, no female has ever received such honors.”

“Just in the right place at the right time. No big.”

Aunt Tess looked me over carefully and I could tell she was in her surrogate mom mode. “Good thing we brought some of your clothes with us. Frankly, hon, you’re a mess.”

I rolled my eyes. Tess, damn her, never had a hair out of place, was always dressed in the latest fashions and was a dead ringer for Lauren Bacall. “Thanks, but tromping through a slimy swamp and fighting bad guys is kinda hard to do in five inch heels and a skirt.”

With a grin, Sarah handed me a beer. She always reminded me of an oversized Barbie doll. “So, how much stronger are you?”

I smiled. Nothing Sarah liked more than a good fight and being a hard-ass Marine lieutenant, she could kick butt with the best of them. I jerked my head towards Caleb, Jake and Ethan. “Strong enough to kick their asses.”

“Oh, yeah?” A scowl tightened Caleb’s handsome face. “Bring it on.”

Hmmm. Sounded like someone had gone toe-to-toe with a Coletti warrior and lost. Big surprise.

Uncle Derek quickly stepped between us. “Give the old man a hug.”

I wrapped my arms around him and noticed the

extra gray in his hair. At fifty, he was still one hell of a good looking man. For an older guy. “I’m so sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

He tilted my chin up. “It’s not your fault. None of it is.”

A hard voice growled, “If she had come to the bunker when I ordered her to, we wouldn’t be dealing with a bunch of blood sucking vampires.”

Shit! Quinn was in one of his tempers. He could give Talree and the Overlord a run for their money. I took a deep breath and turned to face him. All of us had the same red hair and green eyes, but not him.

Oh, no. My eldest brother was a genetic throwback to a Scottish chieftain called the Black Devil. His silver eyes burned with fury and his long ebony hair was in warrior’s braids. Whoa! Bet there was a story there.

“Don’t listen to him, he got his ass handed to him and he’s still sulking,” Sam said, coming to stand next to me. Her sweet, innocent girl-next-door looks were the perfect camouflage.

Samantha is, as my grandmother used to say, ‘a hellion’. She’s impulsive, easily bored and likes working without a net. Since she’s a bomb-tech, that character flaw has created a few issues. Really scary, raise the hair-on-the-back-of-your-neck kinda issues.

Like the time she blew up our garage with one of her little experiments. Did I mention that she was only eight at the time?

She also has a rather nasty, vengeful streak if

you piss her off. Just ask her ex-boyfriend, Jed. She blew his pride and joy, a '68 canary yellow Mustang, to itty-bitty pieces. Can't say I really blame her, she did catch the low-down snake in bed with a blonde hussy.

I studied Quinn's stony expression. "Wild guess, someone drank your blood? And what's with the warrior's braids?"

"Detja spanked him," Sarah said with a touch of glee.

"Detja! Get out!"

"She's one tough bitch," Sam grinned. "She didn't like Quinn's attitude and, when he insulted the Overlord, wham! She dropped him to his knees and without laying a finger on him, held him in place as she sampled his blood. The best part was when she forced him to sit quietly while she braided his hair and lectured him about proper behavior."

"You were damn lucky you didn't pull that shit with Talree or Zarek."

Quinn snarled, "Everyone has a vulnerability. If they can bleed, they can die."

"You got a death wish? They can kill you with a thought. I've been in their minds, I know what they are capable of. How powerful they are. Don't believe me, ask Tess."

"She's right, hon. The Overlord's power is off the scales."

Unimpressed, Quinn folded his arms and glared at me. "They can be defeated."

"By a whole shitload of Askole? Maybe. But not

by you.”

“Brainwashed you real good, didn’t they?”

My temper flared and I grabbed Quinn’s mind and took him on a grand tour of Talree’s and Zarek’s powers and abilities. I showed him their utter ruthlessness, how incredibly strong they are and how terrifying it is to merge with the Overlord.

Do you get it now? If you challenge them, they can kill you with a thought or simply mind wipe you. Is that what you want? To lose who you are? What you are?

A guttural groan tore from Quinn. *No.*

Aunt Tess’s calm voice sounded in my head, *Kaylee, honey, you’re hurting him.* My eyes popped open and I was stunned to see Quinn sprawled on the ground, his face a ghastly white mask. “Omigod! I’m so sorry.” I knelt down and pulled him into a sitting position. “You okay? I’m really sorry. I’m a whole lot stronger than I used to be.”

“No shit,” Jake said with obvious awe.

Ethan fixed a speculative gaze on me. “Pretty damn impressive, Kaylee. Think we can amp up, too?”

“Without a doubt. How do you feel about fangs?”

Quinn struggled to his feet. “We have to suck their blood?”

“Yeah, among other things.”

A worried look on his face, Uncle Derek asked, “Other things?”

“They... umm excrete an enzyme that alters our DNA to match theirs. We get their increased

strength, longevity, never fall ill to the diseases that plague our planet, and if we're injured, we'll heal quickly. And my personal favorite. Teleporting."

Ethan fired off, "What's it like? Is it hard to learn? If you screw up, can you end up in a wall? How far can you teleport? Is there a weight limit?"

"Fun. Not really. Yes. A rookie like me? A couple of miles. I've teleported about four hundred pounds of dead weight. Like a demo?"

I was suddenly crushed against Ethan's chest. "Hell, yeah."

"Link with me." He mind touched mine and, poof, I teleported us. We popped out in the wooded park. "Fun, huh?"

He grinned. Yeah, let's do it again."

I popped us back to the terrace and promptly found myself giving everyone a ride. After an hour of popping hither, thither and yon, I called it quits. "Enough! No more. You're wearing me out." I sank down at the table, drained my beer and realized that everyone was staring at me expectantly. "What?"

Uncle Derek sighed. "We aren't going to have a choice about this conversion, are we?"

"No. It's a done deal. With or without your cooperation. But..." I grabbed a handful of M&Ms and popped them in my mouth, savoring every morsel.

At my family's killing glares, I continued, "Being a sneaky bitch, I decided the only way to win is to make changes from the inside. Bring in a

little truth, justice and the American way.”

Quinn scowled. “Truth, justice and the American way?”

“Got a better idea? ‘Cause, buddy, we’re up a creek without a paddle.”

“She’s got a point,” Caleb said. “Assimilating our culture is going to create a ripple effect. We just help it along.”

I smiled at him. “Exactly. But getting them to agree to a Bill of Rights for the conquered ain’t gonna happen overnight. Also, we have the bigger issue of Malik and the Rodan. Plus, he’s just recruited the Tai-Kok and now has his own axis of evil.”

“Kaylee’s right. Our first priority is to take the bad guys down,” Jake commented. “We’re gonna have to suck it up and do what’s necessary. Even if it means a set of fangs.”

Quinn erupted to his feet. “Hell, no! There’s got to be another way. I’m not giving up my humanity and becoming a blood sucking fiend.” He stormed off.

I stood. “He’s gonna get himself killed.”

Ethan pushed me back down in my chair. “We’ll talk to him.” With that, Uncle Derek, Jake, Caleb and Ethan went after him.

Casey handed me another beer and waited until I took a long swallow before asking, “What’s their equipment like?”

I spewed beer all over the table. “What?” All the girls crowded around me and waited with expectant looks on their faces. I threw a quick look

at the guys, good, far enough away.

“Ah, well, their members are a bit different than our men’s. Works the same.” My face felt like it was on fire. “Just different. A lot different.”

Aunt Tess raised an eyebrow. “C’mon, give us a little show and tell.”

Holy hell. She must be having a really long, dry spell. So I gave them a mental picture of Talree’s “equipment.”

Sam hollered, “Are you shittin’ me?”

“Hey, I hear ya. Kinda weirded me out the first time I saw it, too. But it does get the job done.”

Casey giggled, “I’ll say.”

Sarah shook her head. “Oh, hell, no. That scary snake thing’s not coming anywhere near me.”

“You want scary? I’ll show ya scary.” I flashed them the image of Tihar’s huge ass boner. “Now that’s scary.”

Everyone one of them shrieked with laughter. All of the men’s heads swiveled around to stare at us.

“Girl talk,” I yelled at them. They all shuddered and went back to their “man” talk.

Sam held her hands out about a foot apart. “Wow! That big?”

“Believe me. It was huge. I’ve never seen anything like it. Can you image having sex with him?”

“Yeah, I can,” Sarah sighed.

We all looked at her like she was nuts.

“What? It’s better than the snake.”

Casey snorted. “Right. Like walking wouldn’t

be a major problem after he impaled you on that sucker?”

She shrugged. “Wouldn’t mind giving it a shot.”

“Are you blind? Jeezus, he looks like the result of some kind of freaky science experiment. I mean, c’mon. And those creepy tentacles.” I twitched at the memory. “It was like being groped by a freakin’ octopus.”

Aunt Tess threw a cautious glance around. “He groped you and the Warlord let him live?”

“Ah, well, I didn’t exactly tell Talree.”

“Smart move,” Tess agreed. “He does seem a tad bit possessive.”

I fingered my neck band. “You have no idea.”

Casey eyed the band. “What is that?”

Oh, hell. I took another swallow of beer and blurted it out, “An ownership band.” At their horrified expressions, I added quickly, “It’s their version of a wedding ring. Okay?”

Sarah slammed her bottle down and hissed, “Ownership? Like we’re property or something?”

“Ah...women’s lib hasn’t really hit this part of the galaxy yet.”

Sam rocketed to her feet in outrage. “Are you shittin’ me? So Detja’s right? We’re nothing but fucking brood stock? We don’t have a choice or say in any of this?”

I rubbed my suddenly aching forehead. God, I was doing a piss poor job of explaining. “No. Once they do their mojo on you, it’s over.”

“Mojo?” Aunt Tess asked pleasantly, but her eyes glittered dangerously.

Oh, hell. "It's a bit like mind control."

"Mind control?" they all yelled in outrage. Each one suddenly had a big ass toad sticker in their right hand, ready to gut the first male that touched them.

I felt Detja pop in behind me and glanced over my shoulder. One look at her stern, ice queen demeanor and I groaned. The shit was about to hit the fan.

"Sit down and put your weapons away," Detja snapped with a hard mental push.

Eyes wide with startled alarm, they obeyed. Detja slid into their minds and gave them the nitty-gritty on the bonding process from the initial contact, to the mental possession, to the psychic seduction and, finally, the sex act.

Once they have chosen you, marked you, there is no escape. You cannot fight them. When the bond is completed, you will burn for your mate's touch. Crave it. His body will be a source of comfort and stability. His mental touch will become as necessary as breathing. You will fight for him and with him. You will belong to your mate, mind, body and soul. Forever.

My internal radar went on full alert. I jumped to my feet and scanned for the source. A tall, stick thin Coletti female wearing a pointy metal hat and a bronze breastplate over a screaming red body suit appeared on the terrace and surveyed us like we were dog poop she had accidentally stepped in. And what was with the getup? Some kind of Genghis Khan wannabe?

“Lilkee”, Detja said, her voice terse and unfriendly. “Zarek is not here.”

She smirked and stroked her gem encrusted sword. “I know. I came to see the pitiful female your half-breed son has chosen.”

Half-breed? Pitiful? I narrowed my eyes. One more insult and the skinny bitch was gonna get her ass kicked.

Her contemptuous gaze surveyed me from head to toe. “You are nothing but a filthy little primitive whose pathetic planet should be wiped from existence.”

“And you should leave before I kick your sorry ass.”

“I am Coletti, daughter of Zarek. You could never defeat me.”

I punched her hard in the mouth, knocking her on her ass. “Wanna bet?”

Suddenly, two dozen Coletti warriors, dressed in scarlet armor and armed with huge swords, popped in around us.

Oh, hell.

“Kill her,” the skinny bitch commanded.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

In unison, all twenty-four warriors pulled their swords and advanced on me. Shit! *Talree! Need some help! Like now!*

I teleported out a second before I became a pincushion. When I popped back in, the scarlet warriors were a second behind me. Ducking and dodging sword thrusts, I popped all over the terrace like a crazed jack-in-the-box. *Anybody? A little help here!*

“Kaylee!” Detja tossed a sword to me.

I snatched it out of mid-air and deflected a sweeping blow. My blade clashed with another warrior’s sword. God, who knew those fencing lessons in college would come in so handy? Caleb and Ethan tackled the soldier trying to hack me into itty-bitty pieces and proceeded to beat the living snot out of him.

One down. Twenty-three to go. I parried another blow and leapt backwards as a blade came within an inch of my face. Shit! Shit! Shit! *A bit outnumbered! Could use some help here!*

A black blur zoomed by and bits and pieces of three warriors went flying in every direction. I wiped the blood off my face and whooped as Tihar plucked a scarlet goon off of Sarah and turned him into sushi.

Splat! Splat! Splat! Three more warriors went

down, cocooned in webbing. Datlow grumbled in my head, *Wherever you go, Petka, chaos soon follows.*

Yeah, well. Shit happens.

“All too often around you, Lady Warrior,” Major Zan said as he blasted several more warriors with his laser pistol.

I saw the girls kicking, punching and stabbing another hapless warrior, while Derek, Quinn and Jake whaled on two more.

Avoiding a lethal thrust, I blocked a second and flung myself sideways as a third blade whizzed by.

I rolled to my feet and gasped in horror. Detja and Lilkee circled each other, their swords clashing violently in a flurry of lunges and vicious cuts. Her rage evident, Detja forced the skinny bitch back, blow by blow. Holy shit! Some bad blood there.

I blocked a deadly thrust, pivoted on the balls of my feet and drove my left foot into a warrior's knee. He went down. A black blur zipped by and beheaded the guy. I flinched as more blood sprayed me. Ewww!

A bloodcurdling scream had me whirling around. Lilkee, her face contorted with fear and rage, was flat on her back with Detja's sword at her throat. The remaining scarlet warriors charged Detja, their swords held high. Oh, hell, not good. My little army and I rushed them.

The cavalry abruptly appeared between us and the scarlet goons. Something dark and terrifying in his merciless eyes, Talree swept me out of the way and beheaded the moron trying to slice and dice

me.

His face etched with fury, Zarek cut two goons in half and tossed Detja at me. I let out an ooof as we went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

Lilkee grabbed her sword and scrambled into a corner. The pampered princess's hiss of scorn sounded in my mind. *My warriors will kill your feeble half-breed.*

Livin' in a dream world, bitch. My eyes widened in horror as Voss grabbed Tess and hurled her at us. She smashed into me and down we went again in a big heap. What? Did they think we were a bunch of frisbees?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jaylan chuck Casey our way and rolled frantically to the left. A second later, she crashed into Tess. "Are you putting on weight?" Tess groaned, shoving her off.

His eyes a glittering red, Zandar seized Sam and flung her right on top of me. "Knee. Stomach," I moaned.

"Sorry," Sam crawled off, flinching at Zandar's furious roar. We got the hell out of his way as his swinging sword made chop suey out of the bitch's warriors.

Zan, Datlow, Tihar and the rest of my family joined us in our corner as we watched the Warlords slaughter the remaining scarlet warriors.

"They are the ultimate killing machine," Major Zan said grimly. "In battle, they are unstoppable."

I looked up at Quinn. "Do you get it now?"

He grimaced. "Yeah. Fangs are good."

The last goon fell and our fierce warriors

looked around for more bad guys to kill. The utter silence was broken by Tess's jittery laugh. "Jeezus, it looks like a fucking bomb went off."

She was right. Blood, body parts and corpses were scattered like broken dolls around the terrace.

With the cold unblinking stare of a killer, the Overlord surveyed us and gave a slight bow to Tihar and Major Zan. "I am in your debt."

Major Zan returned the bow. "We could not ignore the Lady Warrior's cries for help."

A faint smile touched Zarek's cruel mouth. "Yes, quite ear-shattering."

"Hey! We were outnumbered and unarmed." I spun around at my Warlord's ferocious growl. Uh-oh.

His face a terrifying bloody mask, Talree advanced on Lilkee. "You have gone too far this time. Did you think I would let you live after you dared to attack my mate? My mother?"

"You miserable half-breed, you cannot defeat a full-blooded Coletti," the skinny bitch screeched, striking him mentally, over and over again.

It was like a kitten striking a lion. The fucking idiot actually believed she could defeat a Warlord. Her pitiful mind roiled with anger and hate. She was obsessed with cleansing the Coletti bloodline of all the tainted hybrids. And get this. She thought her power rivaled Zarek's. Wonder who fed her that line of bullshit?

Talree bared his fangs in a truly frightening smile and seized her mind. *You did not inherit our*

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father's powers, sister.

The pampered princess's eyes bugged and her mental scream was one of pure terror. *It cannot be! He told me... He promised... Father, please! Help me!*

Not an ounce of mercy in his face, the Overlord snarled, "To raise a weapon against my mate is to raise a weapon against me. I renounce you. You are no longer clan. You have no rights. No privileges. You are dead to me."

For a long moment, Lilkee stared at him in stunned disbelief and then she started laughing. A weird, demented kinda laugh. A glittering blue light engulfed her and she vanished.

Talree let out a roar of pure fury.

I opened my senses and scanned for the pampered princess. Zip. Nada. Nothing.

"Sorry, babe, I can't track her."

He gave me a rib cracking hug. "Not a problem. I'll find the...skinny bitch and when I do, I'll take her mind and turn her into one of those vacant-eyed breeders you're so fond of."

Okey-dokey. "Any beer left?"

Jubal, Shrek, Sariel, Valdirk and about a hundred Tabors came charging around the corner. They skidded to a stop and examined the gory mess.

Shit! More would be rescuers. Probably heard me all the way back on Earth, too. "Hey, guys. Thanks for coming. Would you like a beer?"

You need a keeper, Petka, Bey groused.

Hello? Shit magnet.

Uncle Saul suddenly linked with me. *Kaylee! Are you okay?*

Just fine. Had a little situation. It's under control now. Nothing to worry about.

You're sure?

I surveyed the growing number of warriors rushing in. *Oh, yeah. Got plenty of back-up now. Sorry I worried you.*

He gave me a mental peck on the cheek and was gone.

Shrek asked, "Any of that blood yours?"

"Nope, not this time."

Caleb opened a cooler and started passing out beer. In a very short time, we had one hell of a party going. Everyone just sorta ignored the blood and the bodies and got roaring drunk.

Even Detja and the Overlord got a little tipsy. A tipsy Overlord is a frisky Overlord. Oh, gag me. They definitely needed to get a room.

It seems Earth beer has quite an effect on alien physiology. When did I figure that out? When Talree, Jaylan, Voss and Tihar started playing their version of soccer with the dead guys' heads. Real gross out.

I was on my second bag of chocolate kisses when I felt Sam's startled horror. *What's wrong?*

He's in my head. I can't get him out! Shit, he wants my blood. I felt her brief fierce battle with Zandar, the almost feral dude who was also head of Clan Sobek. *Omigod! Help me!* she cried in panic.

I shot to my feet in alarm. Holy hell, Sam never, ever panicked. I could feel Zandar in her

mind, possessing her, marking her. That sonovabitch! I concentrated and popped into a nearby courtyard. The fucking creep had her pinned against the wall, his fangs buried in her neck. I hauled off and gave him a brutal mental punch.

He swung around, every inch a deadly predator. Oh, hell! Not good to piss off the scary Warlord. Menace radiating from him, he stepped towards me. I gulped and fought down the urge to run screaming into the night.

Mine.

Great. One syllable answers. The feral was too damned close to surface.

Okay. Easy. No one is taking her away.

I winced at Sam's shriek of outrage. *What!*

Shut up, Sam. I linked with Zandar. You are a powerful Warlord. You are not Malik's beast. Do you hear me? You will never be Malik's beast.

I know who I am, tiny female, and you are correct. I will never be Malik's beast. He snagged Sam by the neck as she tried to sneak off. *This one is mine and I will not give her up.*

The Overlord might disagree with ya.

Then one of us will die.

Fuck.

Sam tried to break free. *Let go of me.*

Never. He pinned her to his side.

Just friggin' terrific. I grabbed a chair, dragged it over to him and climbed up on it.

Astonished amusement in his eyes, Zandar met my gaze.

“You hurt her,” I said in high Coletti. “And I will kill you.” I poked him in the chest. “Got it?”

Talree’s furious roar sounded in my head. *Kaylee!*

Zandar’s hand clamped over mine. “You think you can defeat me, little one?”

“Yeah, I cheat.”

He threw back his head and roared with laughter.

A hard, muscular arm wrapped around me and jerked me off the chair. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Just having a friendly chat with Zandar.”

“You threatened to kill him!”

“So? He hurts her and I will.”

Zandar grinned. “I think she would try. Is all her clan this loyal?”

“Hell, yes,” Sam spat. “We’re like the Three Musketeers. All for one and one for all.”

“Very admirable and very foolish.” Zandar glared down at Sam. “You bite me and you will not like the consequences.”

Talree stiffened in anger when he realized Sam had been claimed. “Nor will you like the consequences.”

The Overlord’s menacing presence suddenly registered on my radar. I took one look at his bared fangs and groaned.

“You marked one of my females? Without asking my permission?”

Zandar bared his fangs. “I am a Warlord. I do not ask. I take.”

Sam squirmed against his punishing grip. "Like hell."

Oh God, here we go again with the testosterone bullshit. Through my link with Zandar, I knew he was almost as strong as Zarek. If they started fighting, someone would end up dead. Time for some more show and tell.

I slammed Zandar's mind with the image of an injured and bloody Sam surrounded by butchered corpses, desperately fighting off a shitload Tai-Kok. Of me and my brothers battling our way to her. I showed him the slaughterhouse on the Rodan ship, our burning cities and the terrible image of the grade school littered with children's mangled bodies.

While you guys are trying to prove who's got the biggest balls, cities are being destroyed. Hundreds of thousands innocent souls are being slaughtered every fucking day. Who gave the Rodan and the Tai-Kok the cloaking technology and a bunch of nifty new weapons? Malik, the lying, conniving traitor who tried to turn his own brother feral, who captured you, and laid waste to your world.

Courtesy of the Overlord, the images of his destroyed cities suddenly popped my mind. I flashed them to Zandar. *Are you going to let Malik get away with slaughtering your people? Is your pride more important? We have a common enemy and we need your help to defeat them. If you join our family, you'll get the help you need to rebuild your world.*

So, what's it going to be? A chance to make Malik pay for what he's done or do you have a death wish?

Zandar stared at me in utter shock. "You are a very dangerous female."

"That's Kaylee. More balls than sense," Quinn growled.

I looked around in surprise. Whoa! We had drawn quite a crowd. All of them were eagerly waiting to see if the fight of the century was about to start.

"Swear allegiance to me and the female is yours," the Overlord inserted. "Join with us and I promise that you will have all the resources you need to rebuild Sobek."

"Think about your people, Zandar," I added. "They need you. Alive."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but Kaylee's right," Sam interjected. "We need your help to defeat Malik." Her eyes widened in horror. "Omigod! If you die, they'll mind wipe me and give me to another warrior."

I slanted Talree a dirty look. *Not nice.*

It is the truth.

Zandar let out a long breath and dropped to one knee. "I, Zandar, Warlord of Sobek, swear my allegiance, my services, my sword to Zarek, Overlord of the Clans."

Zarek held out his hand. "Welcome to the family, Zandar."

He took the Overlord's hand and stood. "What is the situation on Sobek?"

"I have all the satellite scans and survivor information in my office." Zarek turned his gaze to Detja. "Please take our family inside and see that they stay out of trouble."

She bowed. "As you wish, my lord."

Talree leaned down and growled, "You will do as my mother commands."

"Sure. Anything you say, boss."

Zarek fixed his deadly gaze on me. "Do not disappoint us, daughter."

"No, sir. Wouldn't think of it, sir." I let out a sigh of relief when they popped out.

"Come, daughters, it seems we have two ceremonies to plan for."

"Fuck," Sam groused but followed obediently after Detja.

I stepped gingerly around a headless torso and then it hit me. Where the hell was Sarah? I opened my mind, searching for her and inhaled in horror.

Holy shit! She was with Tihar. And...

"Omigod!" I teleported to her.

Tihar's tentacles clamped around her face, Sarah moaned in ecstasy while his claws made short work of her clothing.

"No! No! No!" I grabbed Tihar's balls with my mind and squeezed.

He gave a startled yelp and released Sarah.

Have you lost your mind? You haven't negotiated for her. You had no right to mark her. Zarek's gonna be so pissed.

She calls to me as no female ever has, Lady Warrior.

Clutching her shredded shirt to her chest, Sarah yelled, "Hey, I'm a consenting adult, back off."

"Consenting adult? You're acting like a horny teenager! Do you realize what you've done? Just because he has a big dick..." My voice died when I realized Talree, Zarek and Zandar were breathing down my neck. Oh, hell.

"Daughter, you will take this one to Detja and tell her there will now be three bonding ceremonies."

"Yes, sir. It's not entirely Tihar's fault. Sarah's got a thing for big dicks."

Talree frowned. "How would she know the size of his... dick?"

"Because me and my big mouth told her."

A red glow bled into Talree's eyes. "When did you see Tihar's member?"

"When I found him naked and chained to a wall. Kinda hard to miss."

Zandar grinned and asked, "Is it a habit of the females in your clan to discuss a male's size?"

"Uh, sometimes. They wanted to know what a Coletti's member looked like, so I showed them. Ya, know, girl talk? Then one thing led to another and I gave them a peek at Tihar's big ass boner."

A look of horrified embarrassment on his face, Talree asked, "You showed them my member?"

Whoa! Warlords could get embarrassed. Who knew?

At Talree's growl, I hurriedly added, "Seemed like a good idea at the time. I mean... you didn't want them getting all freaked out, now did ya?"

Gail Koger

To my utter relief, Sariel and Valdirk arrived.

Sariel took one look at the red marks on Sarah's face and roared in outraged fury. *You bring disgrace upon our clan.*

Tihar dropped to his knees. *I offer no excuse, Father.*

The High Commander jerked out his sword. *Are you prepared to die for this soft skin female?*

Yes, Father.

No! Sarah jumped in front of Tihar. *You can't kill him.*

Silence, female.

The damage is done, Sariel. But I think we can negotiate a proper bridal contract, Zarek said with a hint of smug satisfaction.

Sarah let out a gasp of horror. "Bridal contract? Are you shittin' me?"

Zarek seized Sarah in a punishing grip and shoved her at me. "Take her back to the palace. Now."

"Yes, sir." I grabbed Sarah's arm and dragged her off.

"I'm not marrying him. They can't make me."

"Yeah, they can. Didn't you listen to anything Detja told you? Once they mark you, it's over. You belong to them. Forever."

"But he's Askole," Sarah cried.

"Who are very much like the Coletti. They first mate with you mentally, then physically."

"But we're not even the same species!"

"Hey, you were the one fixated with having sex with him. Now you're getting your wish. You're also

gonna get some nice fangs and claws out of the deal, too.”

Sarah wailed, “You mean I’m gonna look like them?”

“Oh yeah, they can alter your DNA just like the Coletti.”

“Omigod. Omigod. Omigod. What have I done?”

“You did a mind meld with an alien warrior, you idiot. Lucky for you, Tihar’s one of the good guys.” I wrapped my arms around her and teleported us back to the palace.

Detja examined the red marks on Sarah’s face and hissed in displeasure. “You choose an Askole over a Coletti?”

Sarah burst into tears. “I’m so sorry. I never thought... I never meant...”

Casey, Sam and Tess gathered around her and enfolded her in a group hug. “It’s gonna be okay, hon,” Tess murmured.

I met Detja concerned gaze. “Looks like we’re having three ceremonies now.”

She sighed and touched Sarah’s head. “You must accept the path the Goddess has given you. There is no turning back now.”

She was right. We couldn’t go back. Our fates were intertwined with all of these strange alien races. For better or worse, to survive what was to come, we had to embrace our destiny and become a freakin’ alien. Sometimes to protect and serve was a real bitch.

But, on the bright side, we could use that power to change the system. Introduce a little

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truth, justice and the American way. If we failed, not only would Earth be destroyed, but countless other worlds would fall, too. So not happening on my watch.

Just My Luck

About the Author

*I was a 9-1-1 dispatcher for thirty-one years and to keep insanity at bay, I took up writing. Not to worry. The insanity isn't catching - much. Other than the addiction to chocolate and the twitch in my left eye, I'm good. I've had my weird but true stories published in newspapers and magazines. My first book was **The Ghost Wore Polyester**, a murder mystery/comedy set in Sedona, Arizona. **Just My Luck** is my second book and I'm currently working on **The Warlord's Comeuppance**. I've also worked with producer, Bonnie Forbes of Fortress Features on several reality TV series.*

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