

SASHA DMITROV sat at the desk in the captain's ready room of the *North Star* and wondered for the thousandth time what the fuck he was doing there. In the six weeks since he had become captain of the ship, all hell had broken loose. Repeatedly.

He knew the damn Gavenelians were sadistic bastards, and he knew their weapons were different from what the Confederation was used to—he'd seen the early reports when Admiral Keller was still at the helm of the fleet's flagship and Sasha was his exec during the initial attacks—but he hadn't been prepared for the carnage of facing them in battle. They didn't negotiate. They didn't warn. They didn't make demands. They simply attacked and then disappeared. He didn't even know what they looked like!

Blaise Risner, the only man known to have seen the Gavenelians and survived, had told Sasha over and over not to underestimate the power of the enemy ships, but Sasha had naively trusted in the size and reputation of the Confederation armada. He'd made all the updates Risner had suggested to their weapons—okay, Lieutenant Royce, the chief engineer of the *North Star*, had made most of them. Sasha had been a decent engineer before making his way up the chain of command, but Billy Royce was uncanny in the way he grasped concepts. He'd taken one look at the specs Risner had brought back about the enemy shields and had torn the ship's weapons system to pieces, reassembling it with the new technology.

Sasha thanked his lucky suns Royce had done so because they'd been the only ship whose weapons had worked effectively the next time they faced the Gavenelians. That hadn't helped Brian Dascoll or any of the crew of the Sasha had watched in helpless horror as the Gavenelian weapons ripped through the Libra's shields and destroyed the vessel in minutes, killing everyone aboard. Royce was still analyzing the data from the attack, trying to figure out how to boost their shields, but Sasha didn't hold out much hope. Sensor data was all well and good, but they needed to get their hands on the actual technology so they could take it apart and experiment with it. His request to remain in the battle area and salvage the Gavenelian wreckage had been denied, though—the Admiralty wanted the North Star and its other battleships actively searching for the enemy, despite the cost of their losses whenever they'd found any of the Gavenelian ships.

Sasha stared at the vid screen on his desk, willing it to light up with an incoming transmission, willing Risner to return his message from two days before. The former smuggler (Sasha *hoped* he wasn't smuggling anymore) had brought the Confederation the two breakthroughs they'd had in this war so far, and Sasha prayed he could pull a third from somewhere. Out of a hat, out of his ass, out of thin air, it didn't matter, as long as it gave Sasha a way to repay the Gavenelians for his friend's death.

The vid screen stayed dark, though, as dark as Sasha's thoughts. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head against the back of the chair and tried to get some rest.

An insistent beeping woke Sasha from his nap several hours later. He scrubbed his hands over his white skin as he tried to remember where he was and what was going on. Finally focusing his eyes, he realized the noise he heard was the comm informing him of an incoming transmission. With a bleary gaze, he looked at the signal identification and felt his heart jump. "Risner!"

"Hey, Sasha," the pirate's voice said, the vid feed coming into focus more slowly. "Sorry I didn't get back to you sooner. I haven't been on the *Stallion* in a couple of days. What's up?"

"Did you find the Admiral?" Sasha asked, thinking of the desperation he had heard in Risner's voice the last time they spoke, a misunderstanding having sent the smuggler and Admiral Keller flying off in opposite directions. The grin that split Risner's face was all the answer Sasha needed.

"Yeah, I found him. Your guess about asking High Justice Perry for information about his location was right. She gave me a lead on where to find him." Sasha smiled, glad his guess had panned out.

"How is he?" The last time Sasha had seen his former commander, Admiral Keller had been badly burned from a plasma explosion, the scars disfiguring his face and one of his arms.

"He's doing better," Risner replied. "Turns out he knows a really good healer who's helping him. He's having a treatment right now, but when they're done, I'm sure Peter would like to talk to you. I don't think you called to check on the Admiral, though. What can I do for you?"

"I need your help," Sasha said bluntly. "The technology you brought us is helping, but the Gavenelians are still destroying two of our ships for every one of theirs we take out. I was hoping you'd learned something new we could use."

"You know I didn't figure that stuff out," Risner reminded him. "I just delivered the information from a friend."

"Then has your friend learned anything new?" Sasha asked impatiently. "People are dying here. Good people."

The Admiral appeared suddenly behind Risner, pulling a shirt on over scarred flesh. The plasma burns had done more damage than Sasha realized, extending down Keller's neck and across his chest, areas that had been covered by his uniform the last time Sasha had seen him, though he seemed to Sasha to be moving more easily than when he'd left the *North Star*. Sasha's eyes bugged out when he caught a glimpse of another man behind the two familiar spacers, this one with huge, dark wings. "Who is that?" Sasha asked before he could stop himself.

Risner looked back over his shoulder as Keller smiled, the expression more open than Sasha could ever remember seeing. "That's Juo. Well, Juo-ta-dar-ri, my best friend's husband and the assistant director of the medical college here. He's helping me get better."

"He has... wings!"

"And you're albino and Andromedites have tentacles," Risner interrupted with a laugh. "It's a big, big universe out there, Sasha, and life comes in all shapes and sizes."

"And you've had enough intercultural training to know that."

Sasha had to consciously remind himself that the Admiral wasn't an Admiral anymore, that he'd resigned his commission and was now just another citizen like anyone else. It didn't make it any easier not to snap to attention at that particular tone of his voice. "I know, sir," he replied, the

honorific slipping out unchecked. Sasha had lived in fear and awe of the man for too many years not to give him that respect now. "It's been a rough week, and I wasn't expecting winged beings. Dascoll is dead, sir."

Keller's face tightened noticeably. Brian Dascoll had served with them on the *North Star* for five years, until his promotion to captain of the *Libra* led to Sasha taking over his role as the Admiral's exec. Sasha wasn't surprised at Keller's reaction to the news, but he almost smiled at the immediate look of concern on Risner's face as he watched the Admiral. Not that Sasha had been actively worrying about them—he didn't have time for that—but it was still a relief to know they were together finally. "How?"

"The Gavenelians," Sasha said. "We lured them in using the homing device Blaise's friend picked apart. It worked, but they didn't just give up, and in the ensuing battle, they destroyed half the ships in the ambush."

"Did you get all of them?"

Sasha shook his head. "More than we've ever gotten before, but far too many still got away. That's why I contacted Risner. I was hoping he'd heard from his friend again."

"Harry doesn't work that way," the two men said in unison, surprising a laugh from Sasha.

"He's the most reclusive, antisocial creature I think I've ever met," Risner added. "He told me what he'd learned because of my history with the Gavenelians, but even that will only go so far. If the Admiralty hadn't paid him for his first discovery, I doubt he would have shared the second one, even with me."

"He got paid for that one, too, didn't he?" Sasha asked.

Risner nodded.

"Then maybe he'll be willing to talk to you again."

Risner sighed deeply. "He might if I could go there, but I can't, Sasha. I can't leave Petarus right now and it might be months before we can. Peter can't miss his treatments long enough for us to get to Harry's stronghold and back, and I won't leave without him."

"So the Gavenelians keep winning." The bitterness in Sasha's voice shocked even him, but he couldn't get past the image of the *Libra* exploding before his eyes.

"You could send Harry a message," Keller said to Risner. "He might be willing to transmit some information to you. Will you try? Please?"

Sasha was pretty sure he'd never heard that word come out of the Admiral's mouth in all the years they served together, but it had the desired effect on Risner. "I'll contact Harry and put in a good word for you," Risner offered. "The rest is up to you."

"Thanks," Sasha said.

Risner's expression tightened. "Wipe the Gavenelians off the face of the universe. Every last one of them. That's all the thanks I need."

Before Sasha could reply, the vid screen had gone black, just the coordinates of a comm signal flashing on the monitor. Sasha knocked his head against the chair. He hoped this worked because if it didn't, he was out of ideas.

"EEL-BITTEN defector," the Andromedite muttered to himself as he cut the communication link to Petarus. Since he was the sole resident of the compound he'd created for himself on one of the shielded planetoids of the Algol system, muttering to himself was not an infrequent occurrence, but his monologues were not usually this caustic. "Just because he's in bed with the Confederation doesn't mean I have to be. I've never wanted anything to do with the two-timing Admiralty and its minions. Why does he think I'd help them now?"

The comm pinged again before he could finish his diatribe. Harry was tempted to ignore its insistent tone, but Blaise had made him agree to at least listen to the Confederation officer's request—and despite his distrust of dealing with any type of authorities, the Admiralty had compensated him well for his findings so far. He flipped the switch, letting the message through but restricting his outgoing communications to audio only. He didn't know what Blaise had told the captain about him, but Harry didn't share his secrets with anyone willingly.

"Hello, my name is Sasha Dmitrov, captain of the *North Star*," the man on the other end began.

"I know who you are," Harry cut in. "Blaise vouched for you, or your signal would never have made it past my filters."

"Then you know why I'm looking for you," the captain said. His albino coloring, with silvery hair accented by startlingly blue eyes, marked him as a Regulosian. "We're losing ships at an alarming pace. Even with the breakthroughs Risner brought us before, they're still winning. I was hoping—"

"Hoping that I could save the Confederation's collective asses a third time?" Two of the Andromedite's tentacles twisted in what would be considered a very rude gesture on his homeworld. "I've shared everything I could squeeze out of the two bits of Gavenelian hardware that came my way. I can't extrapolate their entire technological system from a few pieces of circuitry."

Disappointment showed clearly on the officer's face. "If we found something new for you to work with? Would you be willing to help us? People are dying out here. There has to be some way to stop it."

Harry studied the captain's pale countenance. His empathic abilities didn't extend over hyperspace channels, he didn't need physical proximity to sense Regulosian's sincerity. And he'd seen ample evidence of the Gavenelians' viciousness, the nightmares that still plagued Blaise years after his escape from their clutches being the most blatant. Blaise still wouldn't talk about exactly what the mysterious aliens had done to him, but Harry had seen the marks on his friend's body, watched the way the formerly affectionate man had shied away from any touch, and that was cause enough to hate them. To Harry's relief, Blaise's time with Peter seemed to have healed some of those wounds, though Harry wasn't sure Blaise would ever be wholly free of their abuse. "I have my own reasons for wanting to see the Gavenelians defeated," Harry admitted after a moment. "If you bring me something I can work with, I'll take a look at it. That's the best I can offer."

"We'll find something," the captain said fervently, "if I have to search every battle zone between here and the galactic rim myself. We have to turn the tide in this war or there will be nothing left."

"Just keep your ship in one piece long enough to bring something back for me to work with," Harry countered. "You won't be able to arrange for my honorarium if the Gavenelians have blasted you into ion dust." This Captain Dmitrov reminded Harry a bit of Blaise in his impulsiveness—he seemed as likely as Harry's friend to take off with all thrusters blazing and check coordinates later. "Contact me when you have something. Nicodemus Vector out."

# "WHERE are you sneaking off to, Captain?"

Sasha spun around to face his chief engineer at the door to the shuttle bay. "To find something in that battle zone that we can give to Risner's contact. Studying the sensor data and the video of the battle isn't giving us what we need."

"Then you'll need someone to go with you to operate the search and rescue arm," Royce said, joining the captain on the ramp onto the shuttle. "You can't pilot and scavenge for anything that might have survived at the same time."

Sasha shook his head. Billy Royce wasn't much younger than Sasha, but his lack of social skills made him seem much younger than he was. The engineer had no interest in anything not made of metal, but his brilliance more than made up for the occasional gaffe. Sasha considered himself lucky to have Royce on board. "Fine, but keep your mouth shut. It'll be hard enough flying through that disaster zone without you distracting me."

Two hours later, hands shaking from the tension of piloting the shuttle through a veritable mine field of debris,

Sasha guided the craft back to the *North Star*, tuning out the spate of technobabble from his chief engineer. "Royce."

His name didn't penetrate the lieutenant's monologue. "Royce!"

Royce looked up. "What?"

"Can you tell what we've got?"

"No idea," Royce replied cheerfully, "but this is the first time I've gotten my hands on any real Gavenelian technology. It will take time to figure it out."

Time they didn't have.

"Pack a bag," Sasha ordered. "We're going to Nicodemus Vector, wherever the hell that is. Risner's friend has an edge on both of us because he's had time to get familiar with Gavenelian technology. Maybe he can make sense of this."

"Why am I going with you?" Royce asked, setting the tangled mass of metal aside. "Will the Admiralty approve both of us leaving the ship at the same time?"

"Because I may need someone to interpret. I know my way around Confederation ships, but anything else is outside my ken. I have a feeling this is going to qualify." Sasha's expression tightened. "And I wasn't planning to ask for the Admiralty's permission."

Royce grinned. "Cool. I've been dying to meet Risner's contact, and this may be my only chance. Anybody who can make sense of the few bits of junk we've gotten our hands on so far must be some kind of technogod."

"One hour, Royce," Sasha called after him as they left the shuttle. "If you aren't ready to go, I'm leaving without you."

Twenty minutes later, Royce was back at the shuttle. "Where are we going?"

Sasha sighed. "I haven't the slightest idea. I set the computer to trace the signal, but it hit a block and can't get past it."

Royce cracked his knuckles. "It's a computer. It's stupid. Let me try."

Sasha moved away from the console to make room for the engineer. Royce took the seat and started working, giving commands, studying the information on the screen, and muttering under his breath the entire time. Thirty minutes later, he leaned back in the chair. "Damn. I always swore there was no such thing as an untraceable signal, but I think this guy just proved me wrong."

"Risner said he was reclusive."

"This isn't reclusive. This is pathological," Royce said with a shake of his head. "Do you have any idea how many blocks I broke through before I hit one I couldn't break?"

"I have no idea," Sasha replied. "How many?"

"Twelve," Royce said. "Twelve! Nobody uses that many reroutes. Our 'secret' channels don't even use that many."

"Then I guess we need to call him back and ask him where we should bring our haul," Sasha said, hating to admit defeat, but short of calling Risner again, he didn't see what choice he had. "Let me back in there. He doesn't know you yet."

Royce vacated the seat and Sasha sat down, sending a new message to Nicodemus Vector and hoping Harry would choose to reply. THE hatch of the small shuttle snapped open almost the instant the ship settled on the landing pad at Nicodemus Vector. Harry was surprised at his irritation when the Regulosian captain was not the first being to climb out; he had assumed he would be dealing only with Dmitrov. Reminding himself of the danger of making assumptions, he watched the first man step aside to let the larger, slender, pale-skinned figure Harry had been communicating with step out of the shuttle. Before either man could speak, Harry moved forward. "I don't remember inviting you to bring a friend, Captain Dmitrov."

"I don't remember you telling me not to," Dmitrov countered, greeting Harry with the same intricate gestures as Peter had used when he first arrived on Algol V. Harry was just as impressed by the effort this time, especially if Blaise hadn't told Dmitrov that Harry was an Andromedite, though he didn't let his appreciation show. He wondered if the Admiralty coached all its officers in interspecies protocols, or if that was training Keller had enforced. Despite the sensitivity of the greeting, the Regulosian radiated desperation in a way Harry hadn't encountered in many long years. "This is Billy Royce," the captain went on, drawing Harry's attention back to the conversation. "My chief engineer. I wanted him along to make sure he understands how to adapt our systems to anything you can figure out."

"I've been dying to meet you," Royce broke in. "I've never met a man, er, well, that is to say, an individual who could block a signal the way you can. I've been tracing 'untraceables' since I was a kid, and I've never seen anything like the tricks you used. And you've actually worked on real

Gavenelian technology, not just mockups and recreations. I can't even begin to imagine the shit you must know."

Royce stuck his hand out, clearly intending to shake Harry's hand, except that Harry didn't have hands. The captain rapped the engineer on the back of the head. "Andromedites don't shake hands, Royce. Did you sleep through that section of intercultural awareness?"

Obviously not all Confederation officers were as well trained as others, Harry realized. His eyes met Dmitrov's over Royce's head, and Harry was struck again by how clearly he could read the amusement they shared emanating from the Regulosian. He had never met another of the albino humanoids before, so he had no way to know if they all broadcast their emotions this freely, or if the captain was especially emotive. Extending a tentacle to Royce, Harry curled it around the Lieutenant's hand and squeezed. He didn't read anything more than Royce's eagerness to tear into the scavenged technology. "I don't adhere to the norms of Andromedite behavior," he said before drawing the tentacle back. "That's one reason I live here and not on my homeworld."

Dmitrov looked suitably chastised, his pale face flushing with blood as he shifted from one foot to another uncomfortably. "We brought the sensor data along with the ship parts we could salvage from the most recent battle zone," the captain said, changing the subject. "Hopefully it will mean more to you than it does to us."

The tinge of color in Dmitrov's skin made it glow like a pearl at the heart of a *nacreon* shell. Harry might have abandoned most of his homeworld's customs as antiquated spaceflot, but that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate the captain's sensitivity in trying to conform to them. He was

considering what he could offer in return when the turn of his thoughts startled him. Was he seriously considering offering them refreshments as if they had come on a social visit? "We can play the sensor scans back in my lab," he said, pivoting away from the landing pad and gesturing toward a door that led to his living quarters.

The Confederation officers followed him through the passworded door, Harry making sure his body blocked their view as he typed in the complicated code. When they were inside the lab, the lieutenant set down the case he had over his shoulder and began pulling out various pieces and parts, some of which Harry recognized right away. Other pieces bore little resemblance to anything but junk. Then again, the homing devices he'd lifted from Blaise's ship hadn't looked like much either until he'd started taking them apart.

"Where'd you get this equipment?" Royce gasped when he'd set the last of the scavenged technology on the workbench and taken in his surroundings. "I've never seen some of these sensors outside a Confederation Science research lab."

"You don't really want to know," Harry answered with a glance at the captain. The Confederation might have found it expedient to turn a blind eye to the source of their previous technological breakthroughs, but it was probably best not to force the attention of one of its senior officers to the fact that not all of his lab systems had been obtained through legitimate channels. Peter hadn't seemed to care, but Harry hadn't known he was a Confederation officer at the time, and the fallout of that visit would have cost Peter his career if he hadn't chosen to resign in protest instead.

"We need a way to successfully reinforce our shields." Dmitrov had either not heard Royce's comment or had chosen to ignore it in his single-minded determination. Harry refrained from trying to find out which. "We need to be able to hold them off long enough for the new weapons systems to be effective against them."

"And the Admiralty sent you here to request my assistance?" Harry asked as he slid the data chip into a scanner, a flick of a slender tentacle downloading the information to his own files before beginning the scan. He was a firm believer that you could never have too much data. Sinuous digits danced over the controls as he studied the information feed, flagging portions of the details for further analysis.

"The Admiralty couldn't find the Triangulum Nebula with both hands and an emission spectrometer," Dmitrov muttered. "I'm here because the only breaks we've gotten in this damn war have come from your workshop. I don't mind dying to protect the Confederation and its planets if that's what it takes, but I'd rather take a few of the bastards with me, and the longer I live, the more of them I'll have taken down when I die."

Pain and anger all but vibrated from the Regulosian, assailing Harry's senses and making him realize he'd become lax about maintaining his empathic shields. It had seldom been necessary since locating on Nicodemus Vector, where his only recent visitor had been Blaise, who had as little sensitivity as a Crelixian cave slug, and Peter, who was only interested in protecting Blaise, as far as Harry could tell. Even for Blaise's sake, Harry hadn't probed beyond the surface of Peter's emotions. Reinforcing his internal barriers, he turned back to Lieutenant Royce, who was almost as much of an emotional blank slate as Blaise. "Let's see what

gifts the Gavenelians left for us this time," he said, manipulating several pieces of wreckage simultaneously.

SASHA sat back and let Royce and Harry—he hadn't had a chance to ask Harry if he had a surname—work. They would have far more luck with the alien technology than he would. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the Andromedite. He had studied the fish-like species at the Academy along with all the other Confederation races, but he had avoided close contact with them as he had avoided all empathic species as much as possible. It had been a bit of a shock when he came off the shuttle to find an Andromedite standing there. He only hoped he wouldn't give himself away. His parents had taught him from the moment they realized his abilities to hide them, so much so that he no longer thought of himself as an empath, but he had no idea if other empathic beings would be able to identify him.

Forcing his thoughts away from painful memories, Sasha focused back on the Andromedite. Harry was such a nondescript name, in no way giving away the origin of its bearer. Sasha wondered what Harry's real name was. He wasn't planning on asking, though. That would be an unacceptable invasion of privacy.

The technobabble across the room amused him, Harry as clearly fascinated by the new gadgets as Royce was. The Andromedite's tentacles moved gracefully as he worked, reaching around the workshop without Harry having to look where they were going, wrapping around handles, sliding together to function as fingers, flying around with delicate precision as they worked. Sasha was sure it was a trick of

the light in the room, but Harry seemed to shimmer as he moved, the modified sari-like garment he wore doing nothing to hide the smooth, blue skin of his torso. If anything, the white fabric made the color of his skin all the more eyecatching.

Harry's piscine features, dolphin-esque eyes on either side of a rounded nose and circular mouth, kept Sasha from interpreting his expressions except when their eyes met, as they had when Royce waxed enthusiastic about Harry's abilities to cover his tracks. Now that Harry's eyes were focused on the mechanism in front of him, studying it closely as he began to disassemble it, Sasha had no sense of what he was thinking. Desperate to know if Harry saw any real possibility of a new breakthrough and hoping he wasn't making a mistake, Sasha lowered his psychic shields, trying to get a reading on the other being.

The wash of emotions that came rushing at him nearly knocked him off his feet. Fascination, frustration, and determination mingled in Harry's mind, but so strong that Sasha slammed his shields back into place in self-defense. He had no way of knowing if Harry was especially emotive or if Sasha had blocked others' emotions for so long that he had forgotten how powerfully they could affect him. Either way, he would not take that risk again.

The flow of Harry's tentacles didn't hesitate or waver, but the smooth blue head swiveled in Sasha's direction for just an instant before inclining back toward whatever Royce was saying, making Sasha wonder if Harry had felt him lowering his shields. Keeping them in place had been second nature to him for so long, ever since he realized how rare his empathic "gift" was among Regulosians and the implications it carried in his society. When those implications had finally

driven him from his homeworld to the Confederation space academy, he had maintained his screens both for privacy and for self-protection. Even in the more contained arena of the *North Star*, he had never felt comfortable "reading" his shipmates' emotions.

Sasha wondered what, if anything, Harry could sense from him in return. Andromedites as a race possessed a certain degree of innate empathy, but he had no idea where on the possible spectrum Harry fell. He could admit to himself that he found the Andromedite fascinating. Growing up in the arid underground caves of Regulus, he had tried to imagine what a planet with oceans might be like, what it would feel like to immerse himself totally in a liquid environment. He'd visited several worlds during his tours of duty where he had been able to indulge in swimming and diving, which had only whetted his fascination. His imagination conjured an image of Harry minus the sari, his sinuous body gliding through crystal waters, the droplets adding to the iridescence of his smooth skin. The image was so clear and visceral that Sasha found himself reacting physically. He tried to will away the inappropriate stiffness, knowing his uniform would hide the evidence of his arousal but not sure if Harry would feel the sudden surge of desire.

They worked for three hours, reducing the devices to their component pieces. Harry ordered Royce to work on the schematics while he joined Sasha. "Talk me through the sensor data."

Glad to feel useful again, Sasha pulled out the data pad he'd brought with him. "These are all the readings from the last battle we fought. I don't have to tell you that I shouldn't be showing you all of this because it includes data on the *North Star*'s specifications, some of which are classified."

"I'm not about to sell it off to the Gavenelians," Harry said dryly. "And I can't think of anyone else who would be interested. Tell me about this battle. How many ships were on each side?"

"Six Confederation ships and six Gavenelians," Sasha answered. "We were able to destroy three of them eventually, thanks to the configuration changes you discovered that let our weapons penetrate their shields, but the problem is that when we're close enough to use them, we can't stop them from blasting us in return. We're losing nearly as many ships as we take out, and we can't afford to let that continue."

Sasha switched on the video feed that showed the battle, unable to stop the flinch when the *Libra* blew up again in front of his eyes. "And it isn't just ships. There were over four hundred people on the three we lost in this battle, people who can't be replaced even if we build new ships."

"Who was he?"

"What?" Sasha asked, not following the sudden turn of the conversation.

"The person you lost when that ship blew up. Was he your lover?"

Sasha laughed at that, despite the pinch in his heart at the thought of Dascoll. He didn't have to ask how Harry knew about his loss. Brian had told Sasha a hundred times if he'd told him once that he should never play poker because he showed all his hands on his face. Anyone at all familiar with human or Regulosian expressions would have seen his grief. "No, he wasn't my lover. My friend. My mentor. A man I respected more than anyone other than the Admiral. One more reason to want the Gavenelians defeated, but not my lover."

Harry didn't comment, and Sasha couldn't read the expression on the piscine features, but he wondered at the question. "What about you?" he asked in return. "What's your reason for working against the Gavenelians?"

"Other than their being vicious, sadistic bloodsharks?" Harry's attention remained fixed on the data feed, returning to study the moment the Gavenelian weapons punched through the *Libra*'s shields. Sasha gritted his teeth at viewing the replay, determined not to broadcast his reaction again. "Isn't that reason enough?"

"What about Risner?" Sasha wasn't sure why he felt compelled to ask. "He was captured by the Gavenelians." The pirate had never talked to Sasha about what he had endured at his captors' hands, but Sasha had gathered enough from the Admiral to understand it had been horrific. "Was he your lover? Is this revenge for the way they tortured him?"

Harry's expression didn't change, but Sasha thought he discerned a glint of humor in the large blue eyes. "I didn't answer that question for Blaise's mate. I'm not about to tell you."

It took Sasha a moment to realize that "Blaise's mate" meant Admiral Keller. He shook his head, still trying to reconcile the intensely private officer he'd served under with the man open enough to let Harry see his feelings toward Risner. "I can't even imagine him asking you."

"He didn't," Harry retorted. "He didn't have to. It was clear enough he was thinking it."

"Admiral Keller?" Sasha protested. "The man has the best poker face I've ever seen."

"There are more ways of reading a man than his face," Harry replied, "or have you forgotten Andromedites are empaths?"

"I haven't forgotten," Sasha said, "but I know they vary in sensitivity. I didn't know where you fell on the scale."

Harry looked pointedly around the room. "You see where I live."

It took a moment for Sasha to follow the implication. "You're here to escape the psychic noise of the universe?"

Harry nodded.

"Don't you get lonely?"

The blue eyes, as wide and deep as the endless seas Sasha had dreamed of as a boy on Regulus, studied Sasha, though he couldn't read past Harry's surface demeanor without dropping his own shields again. "I have a ship. When I feel the need for companionship, I can find it."

The prickle of reaction at Harry's comment startled Sasha. He'd known the Andromedite for all of a few hours. He couldn't possibly be feeling jealousy. Arousal he could accept; it was a normal physiological reaction, and the war had kept him from his own sources of congenial companionship for too long. Jealousy implied more than a simple physical response. He wasn't sure he wanted to admit to himself that he might be vulnerable to an emotional connection; even less could he tell whether Harry might be open to anything in return.

"You're fortunate," he said finally, not sure how else to reply. "I can't seem to escape the noise or find the companionship these days." The moment the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. They made him sound as

pathetic as he felt, but if Harry was as empathic as his living conditions suggested, he already knew all there was to know about Sasha's emotional condition anyway. Sasha had learned, mostly, to control the amount of input he received from others, but he had never been as successful at controlling his own emotional output, which was why he'd always done his best to avoid other empaths. Until now.

"TRY cross-matching the frequency of the Gavenelian weapons with the molecular dissipation of the fragments," Harry suggested. When Dmitrov had fallen silent, Lieutenant Royce claimed his attention, unleashing a flood of questions about Gavenelian technology. Harry shared what he'd learned from dissecting the tracking device he and Blaise had removed from the Golden Stallion and the other flotsam the Confederation had provided to him. It didn't take an empath to recognize that they'd quickly surpassed the captain's level of understanding, though Harry gave him credit for attempting to follow the babble as he and Royce brainstormed possibilities for strengthening the Confederation's shielding. He had put a stop to their research the night before when he found Royce nodding off on his workbench, but the man was up long before Harry the next morning, his enthusiasm renewed and his mind jumping with possibilities and avenues to explore. Harry had forgotten how powerful the synergy of working with another engineer could be, and he had gotten pulled into the conversation without a second thought.

"Do you require a period of time to rest?" he inquired after another hour had passed, his own stomach beginning to protest the lack of food. The lieutenant's energy level had shown no sign of diminishing, but Harry could sense weariness emanating from Dmitrov. "I should be able to provide nourishment compatible with your physiologies, if you would prefer that to your shipboard rations."

"No," Royce said immediately. "We're close. I can feel it. Go eat if you need to. Just bring me a sandwich or something. I'll keep working." He looked up for a moment. "Go on, Captain. I'll be fine here."

Harry looked to Dmitrov for confirmation. The captain nodded. "When he gets going like this, he can work for days without stopping. I've never seen anything like it. I could use a break, though, if you don't mind me poking through your kitchen."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Harry insisted, catching a whiff of fatigue and depression from the Regulosian. "You'll come in, sit down, and let me prepare you a proper meal. I may choose to isolate myself here on my moon, but I haven't forgotten all the tenets of hospitality my parents drummed into me as a child."

Dmitrov smiled tiredly, adding to Harry's determination to cheer him up. The man hadn't been this glum earlier in the day, and Harry wanted to know what had changed. The impulse to cajole the captain out of his bad mood surprised him. He usually didn't give a damn what people were thinking or feeling as long as they left him alone, but this Regulosian pulled at him in a way no one had since he'd first met Blaise in a bar fight that could easily have been the end of Harry's life and had instead been the beginning of a longstanding friendship.

"We're hardly guests," Dmitrov said, "but I wouldn't say no to a bit of conversation in a language I understand."

Harry laughed, the sound more of a gurgle than a true laugh, but Dmitrov smiled, clearly understanding the intent of the sound. The smile tempted Harry to lower his mental shields slightly, craving the contact with another sensitive empath. He had been surprised by the suspicion that Dmitrov was an untrained empath, but it only added to the man's appeal. Harry wanted to teach him the control he lacked, to make it easier for him to make his way in the world. That Harry was himself resigned to a solitary existence had as much to do with his inherent alienness as it did to his empathy. He could block out the rest of the universe well enough to function off his little chunk of rock, but too many other beings didn't know how to deal with him. Dmitrov wouldn't have that problem, the only thing that set him apart from the Terrans being his pale skin, and even that occurred on Earth infrequently. "Let's see what I can conjure up for you then," Harry proposed. "I think there was even some barszcz in the last shipment of supplies I got."

"You have *barszcz*?" Dmitrov asked, his eyes lighting up with such delight that even if Harry had been a complete psychic null, he would have known how much he had pleased the Regulosian with the offer of a delicacy from his homeworld.

"I think so," Harry said. "We can go check. I like unusual food, and it's easier to get Regulosian produce than it is dishes from Andromeda. The kitchen is through there."

"I don't know any non-Regulosian other than Admiral Keller who appreciates *barszcz*." Dmitrov followed Harry down the corridor to the kitchen area, looking around as Harry rummaged for ingredients to prepare for their meal.

A smile spread across his face when one of Harry's tentacles extracted a cluster of the spicy purplish tubers from one of the compartments.

"Do you have a preferred way to prepare them?" Harry asked.

"Just heated is fine, but if you have *sileyan* cream too, I can make a sauce to serve with it that will knock you on your ass." The Regulosian's skin reddened again, telegraphing his unease even through his emotional shields. "Or whatever the equivalent is in Andromedite anatomy."

"You don't have to censor your speech around me." Harry swiveled to retrieve a bottle from another compartment, setting it on the counter before Dmitrov. "If Blaise hasn't been able to offend me in all the years we've known each other, it isn't likely you can."

"How did you and Blaise meet?" Dmitrov reached for a bowl and began cleaning the *barszcz*. "You seem like such opposites, but he's obviously important to you."

"Blaise saved my life," Harry said honestly. "I'd been off Andromeda for a matter of weeks, still trying to adjust to life out in the wider universe, and I let a couple of idiot bigots lure me into an argument. I had my shields up so high because of all the people around, and I missed the fact that they were deliberately baiting me, looking for a reason to start a fight. I'm not sure what they thought they could get from me because I had a dozen credits to my name at the most, and a dilapidated ship held together with spit and hope. When they finally showed their hand and started swinging at me, I dodged the first blow, but they took me down with the second one. Blaise pulled them off me, helped me up, and then helped me kick their asses. It helps that

he's a psychic null. I don't have to protect myself against him mentally because he doesn't project. At all. Your lieutenant is only the second person I've met who's that much of a blank."

Dmitrov laughed as he handed the cleaned *barszcz* back to Harry to be heated. "Billy's only interest is technology. If you aren't made of metal and have some sort of technological purpose, you don't register with him. You got a special dispensation because you're the first person he's ever met who could outwit him in that arena."

Harry shook his head. "Technology is easier to deal with than people. I don't have to screen myself from it and it doesn't have any expectations of me. Blaise is one of the few who has always accepted me just as I am."

"He's quite an individual himself," Dmitrov agreed, starting work on the sauce he'd mentioned. "I'm still astonished that he and Admiral Keller managed to work things out between them before they killed each other."

"You served with Peter," Harry countered, surprised that any empath could have missed the signals that were as apparent to him as the exploding shell of a supernova. "Couldn't you sense how much he needed exactly what Blaise offered him?"

"I never tried to read the Admiral," Dmitrov protested, sounding shocked at the suggestion. "I wouldn't have dared invade his privacy that way. I've always been careful never to intrude on any of the crew."

"Haven't you learned how to limit what you read to surface level emotions? What kind of training do empaths receive on Regulus?" The bark of laughter that escaped Dmitrov was bitter. "Empaths are rare on Regulus and coveted because of it. The moment my parents realized what I was, they taught me to hide it until I was old enough to legitimately enroll in the space academy and get as far away from Regulus as possible. If it had become known what I was, I would have been auctioned off to the highest bidder as a pleasure slave. Everyone with power and money on Regulus wants an empath as a lover, but it isn't something anyone wants for their children."

"That's... criminal," Harry protested, even as the image of having an empath as a lover flashed through his mind. To have someone as aware of his emotions, as in tune to his needs as he was with a lover simply by virtue of his own nature.... He pushed the thought aside. Dmitrov was obviously not interested in such an encounter. "You really should develop your talent. You don't have to read deeply to get a feeling for a group of people, and as captain, you could use it to help settle disputes, to head off issues before they arise." Taking the heated *barszcz* from the warmer, he set the dish before Dmitrov, who poured the sauce over it.

"Admiral Keller always said a captain needed to be aware of the mood of his crew. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to learn a little anyway."

"After we've eaten, I should make sure Royce hasn't destroyed my lab, but I could give you a few tips while you're here," Harry offered, the words out of his mouth before he could consider the wisdom of them. "If you don't mind taking lessons from a fish."

Dmitrov laughed while Harry dished out their meal. "Don't give me that. You are far more than a 'fish' and you

know it, and you know I know it. If I'm not being too personal, though, what made you leave Andromeda?"

Harry shrugged, a gesture he'd picked up from Blaise. Even after all the time that had passed since leaving his homeworld, he was uncomfortable speaking about it, but Dmitrov's honesty deserved his own in turn. "Everyone is an empath on Andromeda, though some are more sensitive than others. I happen to fall on the high end of the scale, to the extent that the constant bombardment of others' emotions became physically and psychically draining. I had to learn to shield myself to survive." Even knowing that Dmitrov wasn't reading him, Harry tightened his screens to hold in the wave of emotions engendered by his memories of that time. "On a world full of empaths, blocking yourself from others is the worst possible insult. After all, if you cut yourself off, it must be because you've done something too terrible to let others sense."

"They criticized you for protecting yourself?" Dmitrov's indignation bled through Harry's shields. "What kind of behavior is that for supposedly empathic beings?"

"In their eyes, I had chosen to put myself outside the bounds of society. They weren't ostracizing me; I'd chosen to ostracize myself." Harry shook his head at the captain's outraged expression; he seemed more upset at the reaction of Harry's people than at the way his own would have dealt with him. "It hasn't turned out that bad. I've seen a lot of the galaxy I'd never have experienced if I'd stayed on Andromeda."

"There is some truth in that," Dmitrov admitted, albeit grudgingly. "I certainly wouldn't be sitting here talking with you if my parents hadn't helped me buck my own societal norms." Popping the last bite of *barszcz* into his mouth, he

smiled at Harry. "Though I can't understand how you went from Andromeda to such a dry world as this. Don't you miss the water?"

Harry laughed. "You're only looking at the surface again." He cleared their meal from the table. "Come with me."

SASHA felt the comment keenly after their earlier conversation, but he could do little about it now. He didn't know how to look beneath the surface without giving too much away. He rose as well and followed Harry farther into the compound. They left the finished section of Harry's home for the rougher stone of unworked caverns, moving deeper beneath the planetoid's surface. A part of Sasha he wished he could deny stirred uneasily at the thought that Harry could do anything to him and no one would ever know what had become of his body.

"It's not much farther," Harry said. "I promise. It will be worth it."

Sasha had no idea why the stock words worked, because the comment could not have been any more clichéd, but just the fact that Harry had cared enough to make the comment in the first place helped settle Sasha's nerves. Then they stepped into an underground grotto, and all thought of nervousness disappeared. The light from a sort of skylight in the roof of the dome combined with the natural phosphorescence of the stone to provide reasonable illumination. "I spend my evenings here," Harry said, drawing Sasha's attention away from the rock itself to the pool at their feet. Unselfconsciously, Harry pulled loose the

folds on his sari, tossing the garment to the side and diving into the water.

Sasha stood at the edge of the pool, staring longingly at the water until Harry broke the surface with a splash that wet Sasha's tunic.

"Why don't you take that off and join me?" Harry asked. "Even if you can't swim, I promise not to let you drown."

"I've been in the water before," Sasha answered, opening the fastening of his uniform tunic and slipping it off. "Whenever I get leave on a planet that has surface water, I make the time to swim. I may not be as agile as you, but I do all right." His gaze was frankly admiring as he watched Harry cut through the water with the ease of one born to it. The yellow stone gave the water a greenish tinge that made it easy to follow the iridescent blue of Harry's body. His legs moved in concert with the propelling tentacles, shooting Harry across the limited space in seconds. Sasha hesitated a moment longer, not entirely comfortable undressing in front of Harry, but the lure of the water was too great. He tugged off his trousers and boots, leaving himself clad in only a short undergarment. After folding his uniform and setting it aside, he slid into the water.

"It's warm!" Sasha sighed in contentment, treading water alongside Harry. "Some of the places I've visited were nearly freezing, but this feels wonderful."

"You should be careful about that," Harry said immediately. "Even sea creatures such as myself have to be careful of hypothermia. For someone like you who isn't built for the water, it can be deadly."

"I know that," Sasha replied, as touched by the concern as he was annoyed at the suggestion that he couldn't take care of himself. "I always check and take appropriate precautions. This is a luxury, that's all."

Harry shook his head. "A necessity for one of my people. We can exist outside of an aquatic environment, but frequent submersion is vital to our health and long-term well-being. I couldn't live somewhere that didn't offer some source of water."

"What do you do on a space ship?" Sasha asked, thinking of the tiny sonic shower even in the captain's cabin of the *North Star*. "You said you had a ship, so I know you travel some."

Harry smiled, rolling onto his back and floating languidly on the surface of the water. "The 'fresher on my ship uses water rather than sonic cleansing. Standing in the spray is not as good as being submerged, but it's better than the alternative."

Sasha's eyes followed Harry as he drifted, glancing away when the Andromedite met his gaze. "The waters of your homeworld must be a marvelous place, Harry." He frowned, the incongruity of the appellation striking him with more force now that he was seeing his companion in his natural environment. "That can't really be your name."

Harry laughed. "Have you ever heard Andromedite spoken?"

"Come to think of it, no," Sasha answered. "You're the first Andromedite I've met, and the few I've seen or studied before you all spoke Galactic Standard."

"There's a reason for that," Harry replied.

The sounds that came out of his mouth suddenly reminded Sasha of the clicks and whistles he'd heard while

swimming with the dolphins in the Caribbean Sea on Earth. When the sounds stopped, he asked, "What did you say?"

"My name."

"With a name like that, why do you let people call you Harry?" Sasha asked. Obviously he would never be able to reproduce the full range of sounds Harry had made, but it still seemed so mundane to call him Harry when his real name was so exotic.

"I left that name behind at the same time I left Andromeda," Harry said, the bitterness in his voice audible. "It didn't matter what people called me so I picked something as ordinary as possible. It's only the people who are close to me who call me Harry anyway."

"And who would that be?" Sasha asked, feeling that same prick of jealousy he had experienced earlier.

"Blaise." A long pause followed. "And his mate. And now, I suppose, you."

The thought of being one of the few people Harry let close to him suffused Sasha with a warm glow, though the recognition of how much Harry had given up to protect himself tempered the emotion. He wondered if Harry ever felt lonely, then flushed when he realized that his companion was probably able to read the range of Sasha's expressions. Not for the first time, he wished he could keep every strong emotion from showing so readily on his face.

"I'd rather teach you how to better read others than how to block yourself," Harry said, as if he could read Sasha's thoughts as well as his feelings.

The words startled Sasha enough that he lost the rhythm of his swimming, sinking below the surface and thrashing slightly as he felt strong tentacles wrap around him, drawing him back to the surface. Harry's body pressed the length of his beneath the water, supporting him so he could not sink again. Longing surged through Sasha, the simple contact more than he'd had in months, but he bit it back. He was here to do a job, not scratch an itch, especially not with the one person whose help he desperately needed to fulfill his mission.

"So where do we start?" Sasha asked.

"We start by swimming over to the shallows so I don't have to worry about your concentration wavering during our exercises," Harry said firmly. "I promised I wouldn't let you drown, and I keep my promises."

"I can swim on my own," Sasha said as Harry started toward the shallows of the pool, though he made no move to free himself from the embrace of Harry's limbs. It felt too good, despite his orders to himself.

"I'm sure you can," Harry said, "but we're already here now."

The bottom of the pool, which Sasha's feet could now touch, was covered with soft sand. Stopping at a depth that kept the lower half of his body concealed beneath the water, Sasha asked, "Now what?"

Harry floated effortlessly in the slightly deeper water. "Think of your empathic abilities as eyes. They can be all the way closed, all the way open, or you can lower your lids to just a slit. You've been stumbling through your life with your eyes closed. I'm going to show you how to take a quick look around you."

BACK alone in the lab later, well after Sasha and Royce had retired to rest-much to Harry's amusement, Sasha had been forced to order the lieutenant from the lab in order to get him to sleep—Harry set the data feed from the battle to play again, staring at it blindly as he turned the evening over in his mind. Dinner had started much as he would have expected, but nothing since then had gone according to any plan he could have predicted. He wasn't sure even Blaise knew as much of his history as Sasha—at some point during the evening, the captain had become Sasha, not Dmitrov in his mind-now did, and while he and Blaise had swum together plenty of times, they had always done so side by side rather than with Harry holding Blaise as he had held Sasha tonight. Harry wasn't celibate, but it had been awhile since he'd gone in search of a lover for a night or a few days, and the contact of skin to skin had been electrifying.

Then he'd touched his mind to Sasha's, helping guide his untrained abilities along more productive lines. As intimate as it had been to hold the Regulosian's body against his, the empathic contact had been a hundred times more so. Sasha was so eager to please, so determined to learn, that Harry wanted to tuck him away and keep him here until he'd taught the other man everything he could about using his empathic gifts. He knew that wish was futile. The very real proof of Sasha's other life, a life he would have to return to in a matter of days, played out in front of Harry on the vid screen. His heart clenched at the thought of his new friend facing the Gavenelians, but there was nothing he could do to prevent that occurrence. He would simply have to make sure Sasha was as prepared and protected as Harry's expertise could make him.

The protective, possessive thought startled him. They had known each other for a matter of days, and Sasha would leave as soon as he had what he'd come for. Harry understood that. He had always understood it, but none of that mattered in the face of this sudden need to know that the other man was safe. He had no idea where the need had come from. Even with Blaise, he had never felt this way, trusting to the pirate's self-interest to keep him alive. The hours spent coaching Sasha through empathic exercises had given Harry insight into the captain, and Harry knew Sasha would sacrifice his own life without hesitation if he thought it would be good for the Confederation. He didn't have a death wish. He'd fight as long and as hard as he could to stay alive, but he wouldn't run from a confrontation if it was more than he could handle the way Harry knew Blaise would, and that scared Harry to the depths of his being.

As the scene of destruction played out before him, Harry wondered how much of his own conflicted emotions Sasha had been able to perceive. During the exercises, Harry had tried to screen all but a surface layer of feelings from Sasha, but the Regulosian, while untrained, had proved surprisingly powerful. Even before they'd begun, Harry had been able to sense Sasha's admiration of his physical form, although he couldn't understand what there was to admire about himself. Once he started coaching Sasha on opening his empathic eyes, he realized that allowing the insight into his own feelings might have been a bad idea. It wouldn't do to let Sasha read how much Harry admired the pale, flawless skin revealed when he'd shed his uniform, or how much he wished Sasha hadn't felt the need to retain the garment that concealed the rest of his body from Harry's Fortunately, Andromedite physiology had kept his physical reaction from being visible, though a sudden widening of

Sasha's eyes had made Harry suspect he hadn't been as successful at hiding the emotional impact. He'd kept a tighter guard on his shields after that, but even so he'd felt tendrils of emotive touch from time to time as Sasha flexed his newfound skills.

A Confederation ship exploded on the vid screen, and Harry forced his mind away from the prospect of revealing Sasha's body and mind fully to his touch and back to the task before him. He needed to find another weakness in the Gavenelians' technology he could exploit. He closed his thoughts from the recognition that once he'd found it, Sasha would leave. He'd deal with that when the time came. He had plenty of experience with being alone.

# "WAIT! Try that again!"

Billy's shout drew Sasha out of the half-daze he had fallen into again after another day of no apparent progress as Harry and Billy wrangled with the Gavenelian technology. So long as Harry at least was awake and working, Sasha had forced himself to stay in the lab with him, but his own engineering background had really been a stepping stone toward command rather than a true calling. He recorded data when they gave it to him, creating the illusion of helpfulness, but Sasha felt the distinction between his abilities and theirs quite clearly. He also felt the loss of Harry's attention. The night before, in the pool beneath the planetoid's surface, he had been the sole focus of Harry's interest for the time of their swim and of their lesson, and it had felt incredible. Sasha spent his days surrounded by people but never really having close contact with any of

them. He was the captain, a tool to the Admiralty and a leader to his crew, but he wasn't a person to any of them. Maybe if his past had been different, if he hadn't always worried about his empathic skills becoming known and being exploited, he might have developed a different relationship with the other crew members before he was promoted, but his life was what it was. It had taken meeting Harry to show him that there might be something more. He only wished they had more time to explore it.

"Try what?" Harry asked, pulling Sasha's attention back to the two engineers.

"That frequency," Billy said, his voice so impatient Sasha didn't even have to lower his mental shields to catch his mood. "I think it's the right one."

Harry fiddled with whatever control was necessary to recreate the situation Billy desired. Sasha couldn't help noticing—again—the dexterity Harry demonstrated despite what should have been an unwieldy mixture of limbs. Sasha stood, not wanting to interfere, but eager to see if they had managed a breakthrough at last.

"Yes!" Billy shouted a moment later. "It worked."

Sasha consciously lowered his shields, drawing on Harry's lessons from the night before. He knew he wouldn't get anything from Billy, but he needed to know if Harry shared the engineer's enthusiasm. The emotion didn't show on the Andromedite's face, but it was clear as day in his projections when Sasha let them in. Whatever they had done, it was progress.

"What worked?" Sasha asked.

"The frequency adjustment to the shields blocked the energy signature of the Gavenelian weapons," Billy said. "We've done it."

Sasha looked to Harry for confirmation, opening his empathic eye to search for any hint of doubt in Harry's mind. He felt only the flush of success. He started to withdraw, to look away mentally, when he caught the faintest hint of regret. Startled, he turned toward Billy.

"Royce." Sasha's voice sounded strangled even to his own ears, but he was beyond caring. He would be leaving in a matter of hours, and he had one thing he needed to do before he left because if he didn't take the chance now, he might not ever work up the courage to try again. "Take what you've learned and send the necessary information to the *North Star*. We need to get the adjustments started as soon as possible. Even if the Admiralty doesn't plan another attack until we return, we have no guarantees the Gavenelians won't find us first."

"Aye, Captain," Royce said, already heading toward the shuttle, leaving Sasha and Harry alone. If Billy thought anything odd about the captain's order, he gave no indication of it that Sasha could sense. Then again, this was Royce. He probably had not even noticed.

Sasha took a deep breath, turning back to Harry and dropping every shield he had around his mind, projecting the full range of his emotions toward Harry and looking as deeply as he could in the hope of finding some of those emotions returned.

Harry remained perfectly still, nothing in his mind wavering from what Sasha had felt before. "I'm sorry," Sasha said, starting to back away as he spoke, embarrassed at

having offered himself only to be rejected. "I shouldn't have imposed like that. I'll just leave you to...." He gestured helplessly to the pile on the workbench.

A slender blue tentacle wrapped itself around Sasha's wrist, holding him in place with surprising strength. Sasha startled at the touch, not having expected Harry to stop his retreat. "Royce is contacting your ship. There isn't anywhere else for you to go at the moment." Another tentacle nudged Sasha's chin upward, forcing his gaze to meet Harry's large blue eyes. Sasha could read a desire in them every bit as strong as his own. A tug drew him forward a step, then another, until he was close enough to feel the warmth emanating from Harry's body. Flickers of heat curled through his veins from the two spots their bodies met. "You're not imposing," Harry added. "You surprised me, that's all. Let yourself feel again, and you'll know that."

Exhaling roughly, Sasha let his control slip, let Harry's emotions wrap themselves around him, almost as palpable as the physical touch of his tentacles. Buoyed now by the certainty of Harry's need, he took a step forward, closing the space between them until his chest bumped against Harry's. A cluster of tentacles closed around him, holding him in place but making no move to pull him closer. Sasha lifted a hand to Harry's face, gliding over the shimmering surface. "I'm going to kiss you," Sasha said. "Stop me if you don't want—"

A whisper-soft brush over his mouth silenced him, the digit curving around his cheek to nudge him forward. With a sigh, Sasha stopped fighting his own desires and pressed his lips to the smooth skin.

Harry didn't kiss like a Terran did, or even like a Regulosian, his mouth too different for that, but Sasha could feel, though their empathic bond, the pleasure the Andromedite derived from the contact of their mouths so he continued the embrace, reveling in the way Harry's tentacles surrounded him, enfolded him, touched him seemingly everywhere at once. His hands slid over Harry's torso, marveling at the warmth radiating from the iridescent flesh, such a vivid contrast to his own white skin. He had a moment's doubt as he wondered how such an amazing creature could possibly find him attractive. Harry obviously sensed it, the tentacles tightening even more, drawing Sasha closer as the projected feelings of desire grew even stronger.

"You think I'm special because of the way I look, but on Andromeda, I'm perfectly ordinary," Harry murmured in his ear. "In the ocean, blue is the most prosaic color of all. You, on the other hand, are like nothing I've ever seen. Only the ice caps on Andromeda are white, but you aren't cold like that. You're burning up. Burning for me. Let me help you. Let me show you."

Sasha didn't need to ask what Harry intended to show him. He could read the Andromedite's intentions as clearly as if he had spoken. He felt incredibly selfish nodding his head, but Harry's tentacles began working at the fastenings of his uniform even before he could respond, making it clear the other being felt no hesitation. Then the strong, slender appendages were sliding over skin instead of cloth, and Sasha thought he'd lose his mind. He wanted to speak, to tell Harry how incredible it felt to have all those tentacles caressing him in different locations rather than the two hands his previous lovers had been limited to. He was surrounded, every erogenous zone on his body receiving some kind of attention, and it left him reeling, struggling to find some level of control, but Harry would have none of it, exploiting every hint of a sensitive spot, probing and

encircling and thrusting and squeezing until all Sasha could do was moan and gasp and come apart in his arms, his cock shooting ropy strands of spunk all over Harry's bare chest.

It took Sasha an embarrassingly long time to recover, in part because he could still feel Harry's desire thrumming in the air between them. He wanted—needed—to make Harry feel just as good, but he didn't know where to begin.

"What can I do for you?" he finally asked.

"You don't honestly need me to tell you that, do you?" Harry countered with a grin.

Sasha loosened the fabric that had slid below Harry's torso, baring the rest of the limber body. Harry's iridescent skin was smooth everywhere, the two strong lower limbs meeting without any visible genitalia. A moment's doubt flashed through Sasha's mind as to how Andromedites classified gender, but beyond the masculine name, the sense of self he read from Harry was unquestionably male. "Not to be crude, but we don't seem to have the same equipment."

"Andromedites evolved underwater," Harry reminded him. "It isn't exactly safe to let your reproductive organs dangle freely where anything can get at them." He guided one of Sasha's hands to a fold of skin hidden in the crease between his lower limbs. Sasha stroked over it gently, coaxing a slender cock, as smooth and silken as the rest of Harry's body, to descend from its protective pouch.

A tremor shook through Harry at the first stroke of Sasha's hand over the slick flesh, but Sasha didn't need the physical confirmation that his touch gave Harry pleasure. He could feel the surge of arousal almost as strongly as he had felt his own moments earlier. Sliding to his knees, he raised the delicate appendage to his lips, his tongue flicking out to

circle the tip. Harry tasted of salt and musk and flavors Sasha couldn't put a name to. The shaft swelled in his hand as he opened his lips to take it into his mouth, winning a deep-throated gurgle from Harry. Tentacles tightened around his shoulders and burrowed into his short hair as Sasha slid his tongue up and around and over the pulsing flesh. Even if he could speak, he wouldn't have to ask what felt good to Harry—the Andromedite's emotions sang to him, guiding him to the most sensitive spots, to the licks and flicks and pressure that gave the most pleasure, his own arousal reawakening in the backwash of Harry's increasing need. Sasha wished he had more than one free hand as he tried to touch every part of Harry he could reach, searching out the places that garnered the greatest reaction to his caresses. He discovered a spot just above the juncture of Harry's limbs at his back that quivered and pulsed beneath his fingertips until Harry tensed against him, waves of raw emotion battering them both as Harry shuddered and filled Sasha's mouth with thick, salty essence.

As the pulse of emotion eased in both of them, Sasha's awareness of the situation returned. He was on his knees in front of Harry, in Harry's lab of all places, where Billy could have walked in at any second. Flushing hot with embarrassment, Sasha pulled out of Harry's grip, standing and turning his back as he straightened his uniform. "I'm sorry," he said out of habit. "I shouldn't have trespassed."

Tentacles slid around him from both sides, smooth, implacable bands that held him in place, held him snug and secure and, had they been different men in a different setting, maybe even loved. "You aren't sorry, and if you'd relax again for a moment, you'd remember that because I know you felt it every bit as strongly as I did. The one disadvantage of being around another empath is that you

can't lie to me, Sasha. Nor can I lie to you. You can refrain from mentioning something, but you can't outright lie, or I'll know. We're two consenting adults well past the age of having to answer for our actions to anyone but ourselves. This doesn't have to be anything more than two lonely beings finding a little companionship for an hour."

"Now who's lying?" Sasha said softly. He could sense the sincerity in Harry's offer, but he could also sense the underlying wish for more. "I can't stay, Harry. I'll be in enough trouble with the Admiralty when I get back to the *North Star* as it is, but if you and Billy are right, it won't matter. We'll have the final piece we need to win the war, and then they can do with me what they want. Thank you for your help. I'll make sure you get credit for your discovery."

"I won't say no to the money," Harry replied, "but what I really want is to know you're safe. When it's over, let me know you survived."

"Harry—"

"I'm not asking you to come back," Harry interrupted.
"Just a message. A quick transmission to say you survived."

"Harry—"

"Is that really too much to ask?"

Sasha turned in Harry's embrace, catching the Andromedite's face between his hands. "Now you're the one who isn't paying attention to what other people are feeling. I don't know what just happened between us, but it felt like a whole lot more than two consenting beings finding a little companionship. I do have to go back. I can't abandon my ship and my crew in the middle of a war without one hell of a valid reason, and as much as I want to see what there could be between us, that isn't a valid reason in the middle of a

war. Whatever happens, I'll make sure you hear about it. Unless... you want to come with me?"

Harry's laugh was bitter. "And do what? Be your own personal bed warmer?"

Sasha flinched. "Be a civilian consultant to our chief engineer?" he countered.

Harry shook his head. "I don't belong on a Confederation war ship. I belong on a rocky moon in the Algol V system with my gadgets and my privacy. Go save the universe. Just spare a thought for me when you're a galactic hero."

There didn't seem to be anything to say to that. If anyone was a galactic hero, Sasha thought, it was Harry, whose technological skills had led to every discovery that gave the Confederation an advantage over the Gavenelians. But as the Admiralty had proven again and again, they would never admit to owing their victories to a pirate. Harry might not be out raiding ships, but he obviously had enough shady dealings in his past to make him an embarrassment the Admiralty would never accept. Even the weight of Admiral Keller's authority and reputation had only been enough to force his superiors to compensate Harry for his findings; Sasha didn't have enough of either to convince them to publicly recognize Harry for his contributions. He was struggling for the words to explain when the door snapped open and Billy entered the lab.

"I transmitted the data to Jennings and Eriksen—they're starting the reconfigurations to the shield settings right away," Royce announced. "They should be in place by the time we get back to the *North Star*."

"Harry...." Sasha recognized that even if he could find words to express his confusion of feelings, he couldn't speak them in front of Royce. He had never been any good at masking his own emotions, anyway—he could only hope whatever Harry was reading from him was enough to convince the Andromedite of his sincerity. "We'll be in touch." He stretched out a hand, then started to draw it back, flushing at the emptiness of the gesture after all that had passed between them.

A tentacle curled around his wrist, the tip caressing his palm. "Be safe," Harry answered softly.

HARRY'S tentacle tapped impatiently against the table as he waited for Blaise to answer his transmission. The moment his friend's face appeared on the vid screen, Harry snapped. "What the hell have you gotten me into, you barnacle-encrusted son of a bloodsucking lamprey? Why did you have to drag me into this?"

Blaise's eyes widened through the tirade, but when Harry finally fell silent, laughter was his friend's answer. "What, exactly, did I get you into?"

"Dmitrov showed up on my doorstep."

"I didn't tell him where to find you, Harry," Blaise said instantly.

"I know that," Harry snapped. "I told him the coordinates, but you're the bloodshark that brought me to the Admiralty's attention in the first place. Couldn't you have left well enough alone?"

Blaise's sigh was deep and heartfelt. "No, I really couldn't. If I had, I'd still be on the *North Star*, caught up in a war there'd be no way any of us would survive."

"You didn't have to tell Dmitrov how to get in touch with me."

"What happened, Harry? I've never seen you like this."

Harry scowled. "Dmitrov and his engineer showed up here three days ago with a pile of Gavenelian junk they'd dredged out of a battle zone. I think we figured out how to reinforce their shields to limit the damage the Gavenelian weapons can do. The minute he had the information, Dmitrov disappeared."

"And what, exactly, did you want him to do beside just that?" Blaise asked, amusement coloring his voice even over the space waves. "You've spent the past ten minutes complaining about him being there in the first place."

"No good comes from messing with the Admiralty."

Blaise's head turned as Peter walked into the room behind him. Blaise scooted aside to make room for his mate at the vid console. "I don't think I can agree with that one."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Your mate's the exception that proves the rule. Look what happened to him when he bucked the system. He would've ended up as a desk jockey if he hadn't had the good sense to get out."

"Sasha showed up on your doorstep," Blaise reminded him. "I doubt he had permission to do that."

"And he disappeared as soon as he got what he came for."

"He's the captain of a battleship in the middle of a war," Peter interjected. "There's no way he would be able to stay, especially if you really made another breakthrough. But don't convict him of my sins. I've never known anyone who feels his obligations as strongly as Sasha does. Whatever promises he made to you to get your help, he'll keep them."

And that was just the problem. They hadn't made any promises, but try as he could, Harry couldn't banish the image of the Regulosian captain from his thoughts. He'd kept busy during his waking hours, tinkering with the Gavenelian wreckage on the chance he could learn anything more from it, though even that kept Sasha in the forefront of his mind. During his rest period, though, his memories returned to the image of Sasha on his knees before him, pale skin shining like the rarest of pearls, blue eyes bright as he brought Harry to a bliss he had never known before. Even more than the physical pleasure, Harry remembered how clearly he had sensed Sasha's emotions, the unquestioned certainty that his lover wanted to do this for no other reason than it brought Harry joy. Knowing that Sasha could sense him in turn, could use that connection to redouble the pleasure he gave to Harry, intensified their joining beyond anything Harry had shared with any of his former, non-empathic lovers. And he was afraid he could never again be satisfied with anything less.

"I just hope he manages to get back in one piece to arrange my payment," Harry growled, his façade fooling no one.

"I still have the private comm code Sasha gave me when I was looking for Peter," Blaise offered. "It would let you get in touch with him if you have to."

"I wouldn't want to do anything to distract him," Harry protested.

"I'm sending it to you anyway," Blaise insisted, pressing the keys to initiate the transmission. Knowing Harry, he'd figure out a way to trace the comm channel even if he never contacted Sasha directly.

"And give Sasha some credit," Peter added. "There isn't anyone I'd trust more to bring the *North Star* safely home."

"Let's hope you're right," Harry muttered as he closed the channel.

"You do realize you just gave the secured comm channel of a Confederation flagship to a pirate," Peter said to Blaise with a wry smile.

"You of all people should know not to believe everything you hear about pirates."

### "STATUS report."

"Two Gavenelian ships destroyed, Captain. We took minimal damage. The *Southern Cross* has more damage than we do, but no reports of casualties coming in," the comm officer reported.

"Good," Sasha said. "I'll be in my ready room. Notify me if anything changes. Lieutenant Yebra, you have the helm."

Leaving the bridge, Sasha walked into his ready room, waiting for the door to whoosh shut behind him before he collapsed into his chair, head falling back in exhaustion. Everything had spun out of control, it seemed, since he left Harry on Algol V. They'd reached the *North Star* to find the modifications all but complete. Royce had insisted on testing them before they shared the information with anyone outside

their immediate armada, but they had come away from this battle the clear victors, so now Sasha had to deal with Galactic Command and explain where he'd gotten his new information.

That brought his thoughts squarely back to Harry. He'd had weeks to forget, but the memories of Harry's tentacles on his body had not faded. It was more than that, though. It was the incredible rush of minds and emotions blending, pleasure echoing back and forth between them until it was so powerful that even the memory of it left Sasha hard and aching.

He'd never wanted to use his abilities with a lover because of the cultural taboo he'd grown up with, afraid that if he let his empathy come into play, he would be giving in to the lifestyle his parents had saved him from. His feelings had changed the instant he felt Harry's mind pushing against his, felt Harry's pleasure at his touch. Suddenly he'd wanted nothing more than to read as deeply as he could, to find out what would add to Harry's pleasure.

Wrenching his thoughts back to the matter at hand, Sasha activated his comm channel, instructing Lieutenant Yebra to contact Galactic Command. The sooner they could get more ships fitted with Harry's modifications, the sooner they could bring this damnable war to an end.

IT HAD taken Harry longer than he'd expected to crack the Confederation comm code so that he could monitor the *North Star*'s transmissions. It would probably earn him a conviction for espionage if anyone caught him at it, not that the Admiralty had anyone with the skill to trace his tracks—

if they did, they'd have designed a more secure code in the first place. Harry didn't have any interest in the undoubtedly confidential information he could have intercepted, anyway. All he wanted was a chance to hear Sasha's voice, to prove to himself that the Regulosian was still safe.

The news of the Gavenelians' surrender had been announced more than three Algolian months ago. The shielding modifications Harry and Billy Royce had developed had proved to be enough to turn the tide. Confederation battleships armed with the modified shielding had been able to take out their opponents with minimal damage in return. After a half dozen battles in which Gavenelian forces were decimated, the vicious aliens had withdrawn Confederation space. A series of subspace negotiations had led to a treaty which threatened dire consequences for any new Gavenelian intrusions. Harry didn't know whether the Gavenelians were truly defeated or had simply withdrawn to lick their wounds and work on enhancing their weapons before trying again, but at the moment that wasn't his concern.

His concern was that this time, when he tapped into the Confederation comm channel for the one instance he allowed himself to verify Sasha's safety every five days, he heard a different voice on the channel that was reserved for the *North Star*'s captain. His heart froze, listening anxiously for news of Sasha, but whatever events had led to the change in command, the new captain didn't feel any need to update Galactic Command because Sasha's name was never mentioned. Cursing volubly for having missed whatever happened, Harry closed the connection.

He had heard the strain in Sasha's voice during the weeks and months since the Regulosian had left Nicodemus

Vector, strain Harry had attributed to the stresses of battle. It was obvious that even with the reduction in casualties resulting from the shielding modifications, Sasha felt each crewmember's injury or death keenly. The distress in Sasha's voice tore at Harry, making him wish there was a way he could comfort the captain, or at least help him better shield himself from the war's emotional impacts. Not that he wanted Sasha to become callous-the artless honesty of Sasha's reactions was one of the things that had attracted him to the Regulosian in the first place. At least Harry knew each time he tapped into the Confederation communications that Sasha was unharmed. Harry had last heard Sasha's voice five days earlier, discussing ship repairs and crew status, and everything had seemed normal then. He hadn't heard any discussion of a promotion at that time, but that had to be what happened or else Sasha would still be on the North Star. It made sense that the Admiralty would want to publicly reward the hero of the Gavenelian campaign.

Harry twisted his tentacles together to keep them from tearing apart the offending comm system. Obviously their encounter had meant far less to Sasha than it had to him. There had been ample time since the cessation of hostilities for Dmitrov to have sent Harry the simple message he'd asked for, letting him know Sasha had survived. A satisfyingly large honorarium had shown up in Harry's fund account shortly after the Gavenelian treaty had been finalized, the captain having kept that much of his word, at least, but there was no personal communication. Dmitrov couldn't know that Harry had his own means of knowing Sasha had made it through the war alive. He'd either forgotten the promise completely or never meant to keep it in the first place. For all he knew, Regulosians, or Dmitrov as an individual, might not equate sex with intimacy the way

Harry did. He'd met aliens from cultures for whom sex was a bodily function, nothing more, nothing less. The fact that Harry had felt a connection on an emotional level that had nothing to do with his body didn't mean Dmitrov had felt the same connection.

This wasn't the first time Harry had been fooled into trusting his empathic senses where an alien was concerned, only to find out his reading of the situation was mistaken. *Only a fool swims into a bloodshark's cave twice*, he thought bitterly. His reading of Dmitrov had been way off the mark.

He needed to accept that and move on. Dwelling on it was pointless.

SASHA piloted his shuttle into the Algol system, but he knew from his previous approach that he couldn't go any farther without contacting Harry. He'd gone back and forth with himself since he'd resigned his commission a month ago, but whether Harry wanted him or not, Sasha knew he couldn't continue in the Confederation. He'd tried to follow Harry's advice and open himself more to his crew, but the fear, the grief, the anger he'd felt as they fought the Gavenelians, combined with the horrors he'd seen on both sides of the war, had been more than he could handle. He didn't want to spend his life that way. He couldn't.

It had taken far longer than he wanted to deal with the paperwork of his resignation. He hadn't dared to pull the same trick Admiral Keller had done and simply walk out. He needed the pension. When that was finalized, he had gone back to the little apartment he maintained for use during his leaves and emptied it, putting it on the market and going in

search of a ship. All of which had required time he didn't feel like he had. He only hoped he wasn't putting too much confidence in the possibilities Harry had opened up for him. He'd thought about contacting Harry during the intervening time, but the chance of being rejected over a subspace channel was more than he could bear to contemplate. He took a deep breath and punched the button to activate the comm.

"Nicodemus Vector, this is Sasha Dmitrov. Harry, are you there?"

Silence.

"Nicodemus Vector, requesting permission to land. Harry, can you hear me?"

More silence. Sasha tried stretching out his senses to reach for Harry, though he didn't know if they were limited by distance or required physical presence. He felt nothing, cursing himself for not learning more about his abilities than how to suppress them. He had no way to know if Harry had left his compound in search of more congenial company, or if he was there and just choosing to ignore Sasha's presence. Sasha wasn't sure which would hurt more.

"Nicodemus Vector, this is Sasha. Harry, if you're there, please answer me, even if it's just to tell me to go to hell."

Another moment of silence stretched out, and then Sasha heard a crackle as the channel came to life. "Unidentified ship, this is Nicodemus Vector." Sasha's breath caught in his chest. "Prepare to receive landing coordinates."

Sasha exhaled and turned back to the controls, bringing his ship in as instructed. As soon as the landing gear settled on the pad, he cracked the hatch, not even waiting to extend

the boarding ramp before jumping down to the ground. "Harry!"

Sasha stretched his senses as wide as they would go, but all he got was a blank wall. "I hope you don't mind that I came back," Sasha said, enthusiasm muted by Harry's silence.

"What are you doing here?" Harry's voice was as restrained as Sasha had ever heard it.

"I resigned my commission," Sasha said. "I can't spend my life that way."

"That didn't answer my question." Sasha still couldn't read anything from Harry. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't get you out of my head," Sasha admitted. "I don't know what the future holds, but I want a chance. I want to see if we can be as good together as I think we can be."

"What about your career? What are you planning to do now?"

"I don't know yet. I don't have all the answers," Sasha replied. "I have my pension and a little money saved. If that's not enough—well, I was hoping you might have a place for me."

"As what?" Harry asked, his expression still impassive, though Sasha was starting to feel a touch of warmth infusing his senses, like a limb that had gone numb beginning to tingle back to life.

"As your personal bed warmer?" Sasha asked hopefully.

The light dancing in the depths of Harry's eyes was unmistakable. "I might be able to find an opening for you," he answered, his tentacles spreading from his sides in

invitation. Sasha was quick to accept, stepping into Harry's embrace, his emotions singing as the shields separating him from Harry's feelings dropped and he felt once more the connection that rivaled the heat of the sun on Regulus. Their mouths met, Harry's tentacles slipped inside his clothes, and Sasha knew he was home.

THE intensity of the emotions Harry could feel pouring off of Sasha stole his breath as he returned the kisses. He had given up on feeling this connection again, sure Sasha didn't want him anymore, but if he was reading the other man's projections correctly, Sasha more than wanted him. Sasha loved him. "We can't do this here," Harry gasped, pulling his mouth free from Sasha's. "The sun is setting, and when it does, the ion storms kick up. It isn't safe to be outside after dark."

"My ship's right behind us," Sasha offered immediately, but Harry shook his head.

"I'm sure it's a very nice ship, but even the luxury liners have small cabins and hard beds. I have a much more comfortable room inside."

"What are we waiting for?" Sasha asked, starting toward the entrance to Harry's compound.

Harry punched in the passcode, for the first time not blocking it so his guest could see his tentacles flying over the keypad. Harry doubted Sasha would be able to follow the code the first time he saw it, but the deliberate act of allowing Sasha to see what he was doing marked a conscious admission of the change in his attitude toward Sasha. The moment the door slid shut behind them, Sasha's hands slid

over Harry's back again, making his desires obvious, but Harry needed more than the empathic sense of commitment before he crossed this one last line.

The lessons Harry had given Sasha in reading others must have worked, or Harry was broadcasting his hesitance more than he realized, because Sasha's hands stilled, though his arms didn't release Harry from their embrace. "This means something to me," Sasha said, his breath warm against Harry's skin. "I can't guarantee where it will lead, but I want to find out. I have to give us this chance."

That assurance was all Harry needed to hear. "I don't know either, but we'll find out together." Wrapping a tentacle around Sasha's wrist, he tugged him forward. He'd never brought anyone into his personal retreat—he'd set up a guest room for Blaise to sleep in when he'd stayed on Algol V—and was a little unsure of what Sasha would think of his private space, but not unsure enough to want to bring him anywhere else.

They followed the twisting corridors downward, turning aside where the hallway continued to slope toward the pool. A short distance farther, a natural arch in the rock opened into the large cavern Harry had transformed into his sleeping chamber.

The painted silk curtains parted easily as they passed through, the translucent cloth a visual barrier without being a physical one. He had never needed a door this deep in his compound because he had never allowed anyone ingress this deep. Until now.

Sasha's gasp caught Harry off guard. He turned to see what had upset his lover, only to be caught by the look of wonderment on Sasha's face. "It's beautiful."

Harry looked around the now familiar cavern, trying to see it through an outsider's eyes. He had chosen this space because of the water that streamed down the quartz-infused granite on the far wall. Lights set in the floor shone on the flow, reflecting the glimmer of the water and of the stone back into the room, providing a soft illumination reminiscent of sunlight filtered through the oceans of home. His bed stood on a platform to one side, the rigid sides and base covered in the smoothest silk Harry could find. Anything else abraded his skin as he slept.

"Thank you," Harry said, stepping behind Sasha and embracing him, the cloth of Sasha's shirt rough against his skin. He wouldn't worry about it now since he fully intended there to be nothing between them before long, not even air, but he would have to work on Sasha's wardrobe, or he wouldn't be embracing his lover except when Sasha was naked. He hoped Sasha would be amenable to changing his wardrobe because he really wanted to be able to embrace the other man as often as possible.

Sasha turned in Harry's embrace, his hands moving to the folds of Harry's sari. "I don't want even this much fabric between us."

"Then you have more disrobing to do than I do," Harry answered, the sari falling to the floor unheeded. His tentacles made short work of the fastenings to Sasha's garments. Sliding the tunic from his shoulders, Harry slipped the trousers down Sasha's hips. Sasha staggered as the fabric pooled at his ankles. With a slight nudge, Harry pushed him onto the bed so that he could free his legs from the trousers and boots, admiring the sheen of Sasha's ivory skin against the rich midnight blue of his bedding.

"It bounces!" Sasha exclaimed, lying back, a vision of desire to Harry's eyes.

"It's filled with water," Harry explained. "Normal bedding is too hard to be comfortable for me. Does it bother you?"

"It feels soothing," Sasha said. "Like the sway of a ship at anchor."

"And what would you know of a ship at anchor?" Harry teased, flowing onto the bed next to Sasha. "I thought Regulus was a desert planet."

"It is," Sasha affirmed, "but I served in the Confederation for nearly twenty years. I may not have made it to Andromeda in that time, but I have visited plenty of planets with oceans and seas. The novelty of them became a fascination over time."

Harry smiled and ran the tip of one tentacle down Sasha's cheek. "I should have known you were meant for me when I saw your reaction to my underground pool."

Sasha's eyes lit with delight and desire. "Are you planning on doing anything about that any time soon?"

"And what do you want me to do?" Harry teased in return, kneeling next to Sasha on the bed. He balanced easily on widespread limbs, one tentacle pressed to the mattress for extra stability.

Sasha reached up, twining his arms around Harry's neck and drawing him down into a kiss. "Anything and everything you desire."

"If you open your senses, you'll know what I desire." Harry didn't need to probe Sasha to know that his partner's desire was every bit equal to his own. His tentacles roamed over Sasha's body, seeking out the places that garnered the

greatest response, stoking Sasha's arousal. Sasha's hands explored Harry in turn, the limitation of his two limbs keeping him from reaching as many places at the same time as Harry could, but the sensations they engendered were fully as powerful. Harry's skin rippled in bliss at Sasha's touch, his organ swelling with need beneath its protective pouch.

Harry curled a limb around Sasha's cock, hard and slick against his flat belly. Sasha groaned, the sound resonating in the chamber's acoustics and thrilling along Harry's auditory senses. He stroked the sensitive shaft, the surge of pleasure Sasha felt at the contact redoubling Harry's own arousal. Sasha writhed against the silky bedding, his smooth skin rubbing against Harry's, his fingers clutching into Harry's sides. Harry worked three more tentacles between them, two teasing at the nubs of flesh that extended from Sasha's chest while the third tenderly probed the declivity just below Sasha's waistline. A fine line of hair trailed downward and Sasha shivered as Harry traced it with the tip of another limb until it met the crimped silvery curls at the base of his cock.

The surge of desire from Sasha stole Harry's breath, reminding him that most other beings could not provide the same stimulation as his own multiple limbs. *Good*, he thought possessively. He didn't want anyone else touching his Sasha this way. Not turning away from the delectable sight of Sasha writhing against the dark sheets, Harry reached for the thick cream he used to protect his skin from the harsh elements of his chosen home. He hoped the concoction would be safe for Sasha since it did not irritate his own incredibly sensitive skin.

"What is that?" Sasha gasped, turning his head to look at the container in Harry's grasp.

"Something to help ease my way if you'll have me," Harry explained.

Sasha's legs parted in invitation. "I'll have you."

Harry screwed open the lid on the thick lotion and let the unguent coat his limb. Sensing Sasha's desire for a kiss, even if the gesture was a learned one for Harry rather than a natural one, Harry lowered his head and mated their mouths at the same time he smoothed the cream over Sasha's entrance.

Sasha opened to Harry on every level: his lips, his legs, his emotions. Any doubts Harry might have had about Sasha's willingness to accept him were set to rest by the unmistakable surge of pleasure as Harry eased the tip of the The heat and inside Sasha. digit surrounding him fed back along Harry's senses. He could feel the pleasure his touch brought Sasha as he probed delicately, until he found a spot that made Sasha cry out against Harry's mouth and arch up from the bedding. Harry brushed against the spot until Sasha wrenched himself from the kiss and clutched at Harry. "Now," Sasha rasped, the deeper tone of his voice arousing Harry as much as any caress. "Don't make me beg, damn it, Harry."

His own need as strong as Sasha's, Harry freed himself from his protective pouch and aligned himself to slip into Sasha, the limb he had used to prepare his lover sliding free as he entered. Harry's gasp blended with Sasha's as they joined, the wave of emotion—of love—binding them even more fully than their physical bonding. Harry wrapped every free limb around Sasha, mating their bodies as closely as he

could, the glide of skin against skin its own source of passion.

They moved together in concert, the differences in their bodies only adding to their mutual desire as they strove for release. Harry could feel the tempest building inside Sasha as it built within him, a veritable maelstrom to rival the sea storms on Andromeda. When it finally exploded between them, Harry feared he would lose all awareness. He wanted to focus on Sasha's face, Sasha's emotions, to etch onto his mind and heart every aspect of this moment rather than losing it to oblivion.

Collapsing against Sasha, Harry breathed deeply of their mingled scents, the combination enough to trigger his need again, though he pushed it aside given the satiation he felt radiating from Sasha. Snuggling down next to Sasha, Harry surrounded his lover in his embrace.

Eventually Sasha stirred against him, shifting position without sending out any signals that he truly wanted to move away. Harry relaxed his hold until Sasha settled against him more comfortably.

"That makes twice you've taken over and stolen my senses," Sasha murmured against Harry's torso. "Next time, it's my turn to discover what steals your wits."

Harry rubbed his cheek against Sasha's silky hair. "All that I am is yours to explore. I look forward to many mutual explorations."

SASHA stared out the window of Harry's ship at the lush green forests of the planet they approached. After six months

of being Harry's personal bed warmer and trying to be helpful in his lab, he had jumped at Peter and Blaise's invitation to visit Petarus. He loved Harry to distraction, but after twenty years of living on a Confederation ship, he missed the companionship of being surrounded by others.

"It's beautiful here," Harry said as he guided his ship toward the landing pad at the Planetary Liaison Office where Peter's best friend Ryan Nelson worked. Peter had explained that while the landing pad near their house would hold a ship of Harry's size, Petari protocol dictated that all first-time visitors to the planet pass through Ryan's office. Sasha suspected Harry would have ignored that completely if he'd been alone, but Sasha had been too well trained in interplanetary diplomacy to ignore such a relatively minor request as landing their ship at a specified location.

"Peter says it's very tropical," Sasha agreed, "with thick tree cover and very humid. Hopefully that won't be a problem."

"It won't be for me," Harry assured him. "The moisture in the air will keep my skin from getting dry."

"Does this mean you won't need me to rub lotion on your back as often?" Sasha purred, thinking of the number of times he had helped Harry with the very necessary care of his sensitive skin only to have it turn into passionate lovemaking.

Harry projected his love and amusement through the empathic bond they maintained constantly. "You know better than that."

The ship settled into the landing pad and after locking the controls—Harry still hadn't lost his protective instincts they opened the hatch. A tall, brown-haired man with a mustache, who must be the Admiral's friend, stood waiting to greet them.

"Welcome to Petarus, gentlemen. I'm Ryan Nelson. Peter and Blaise have told us so much about you, I'm anxious to see if half their stories can possibly be true."

Sasha hesitated, wondering what kind of stories Admiral Keller might have told about him, but Harry laughed. "You can believe about half of what Blaise tells you at any given time—the rest is bluff and exaggeration."

Ryan laughed in return and offered Harry the series of gestures that comprised an Andromedite greeting. Harry extended a tentacle in return. "I haven't been greeted formally this often since I left my homeworld."

"Petari society tends toward formality as well, at least until they get to know you. I hope that will be soon," Ryan added, grasping Harry's tentacle and then offering a handshake to Sasha in turn.

"As long as it took us to get here from Nicodemus Vector, we'll certainly stay for a few weeks before we head home," Harry agreed. "The climate here is most welcoming after the aridity and storms of my current home."

"Petarus is many things, but arid is certainly not one of them," Ryan said. A comm link on his belt beeped. He glanced at it and smiled. "Peter wants to know what the hell we're talking about that's taking so long. He expected you at their place ten minutes ago. If you'd like to get your bags, we can take my skimmer. You could probably set your ship down at Peter and Blaise's place, but there's no reason to fire it up again when I've got mine right here and ready to go."

The ride across the city and out into the more rural area where Ryan and Juo and the Admiral and Blaise made their

homes was an eye-opening experience for Sasha. He had visited a great many planets, but somehow Petarus seemed more untouched than most. He knew from talking to Blaise occasionally that the Petari were technologically advanced, but the planet did not seem to have suffered the usual ravages of industrialization. The buildings, surrounded by soaring greenery and trailed with flowering vines, tended toward pale stone, each level having openings to the sky. "Entrances?" he asked Ryan.

"Very good," Ryan said. "Most people who arrive on Petarus the first time don't make the connection. With their wings, the Petari don't need stairs or elevators the way we're used to and their architecture reflects that. Don't worry, though. They've gotten used to having the rest of us around and are making adjustments on buildings we're likely to use. See the external stairs on the hospital?"

Sasha followed the line of Ryan's finger and found the black metal that snaked up the side of the building. "It's a shame, in a way, because it mars the lines of the architecture."

"On newer buildings, they're putting them inside, the way we're used to. If it were just me, it wouldn't matter as much because Juo—my husband—would just carry me where I need to go, but many more offworlders are coming to Petarus now that the Petari healing abilities have become known, and most visitors aren't comfortable with that degree of intimacy. Honestly, I'm not sure even Peter and Blaise would be comfortable with it."

As they left the city center, the buildings changed to lower structures surrounded by larger patches of untouched verdure. "Private residences are usually built on a single level," Ryan explained. They crossed over a sizeable lake, which drew Harry's attention like a lodestone.

"Is the water public or private property?" he asked. Sasha could feel the allure of the water to his mate, placing a hand on Harry when he leaned forward. If the lake was public property, he'd be sure they included a visit there while they were on planet.

"A little of both," Ryan replied. "Some private homes are built around a pond or stream, but there are also public bathing areas at the larger lakes and at the ocean. For all that they look like birds, Petari are surprisingly fond of water."

Sasha could sense amusement behind Ryan's words, though he didn't understand what the other man found humorous. In the months he'd lived with Harry, he'd continued to exercise his empathic abilities, but this was the first chance he'd had to try reading the surface emotions of anyone but Harry. Not that any empathic contact with Harry stayed at a surface level for very long. Harry turned his head and stroked the back of Sasha's hand with a tentacle, and Sasha knew the frisson of arousal he'd felt at the thought was mutual.

After a few more minutes of flying, Ryan set the skimmer down gracefully between two houses, the landing pad close enough to be shared by both but far enough away to minimize any noise or disruptions. Sasha picked up their bags and followed Ryan toward one of the houses. Before they'd gotten halfway, he could see three people sitting on an open patio waiting for them. A moment later, one of them was at their side, large dark wings fluttering behind him.

"It's about time you got here—you know Peter is deficient in patience at the best of times," the man said, dropping a kiss on Ryan's lips.

"My husband, Juo-ta-dar-ri," Ryan began to introduce them.

"You must be Sasha and Harry. We've been looking forward to meeting you. Please, call me Juo."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Sasha said, his diplomatic training kicking in as he met a new race of being. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Juo, you oversized canary, stop monopolizing them and let them get out of the sun!"

The Admiral's teasing tone of voice surprised Sasha. He had never known the other man to make jokes of any kind other than bitingly. At that distance, he couldn't read Keller's emotions, but both Ryan and Juo laughed, making it clear the joke was a familiar one.

"Perhaps we should join them," Harry said. "If he's already shouting insults, we don't want to know what's next."

"You'll know he considers you a friend when he starts insulting you," Ryan said with a grin. "But you're right, because when he's done with the insults, he'll start throwing the dinner rolls, and then we'll all be hungry."

Sasha smiled, hoping this visit would be as good for Harry as he could already tell it would be for him.

THE afternoon sun was hot, even in the shade, but the breeze kept it from being intolerable. Blaise, Harry, and Juo cavorted in the water, leaving the other three to lounge on the blankets they had brought for the picnic at the private lake a friend of Juo's had agreed to let them use for the day.

"Damn, I'm not ready to get on a ship for another long haul," Peter said, stretching his bad arm over his head. "Even with everything Juo's been able to do, it still gets stiff in space, no matter how warm we keep the ship."

"I thought you were going to look into hiring another pilot so you and Blaise could just worry about the business end of things here on the planet," Ryan said. "You've certainly got enough demand to pay someone and have plenty of money left over."

"Blaise isn't ready to give up the stars completely," Peter said, "and I'm not sure I am either. We really need someone part-time, but that's hard enough in the heart of the galaxy. Out here on the galactic rim, the only pilots are Petari and the few I've met are even more of a homebody than I'm becoming."

"What are you thinking about as far as a schedule?" Sasha asked. "I still have some contacts with others who have retired from the Confederation. I could ask around and see if anyone might be interested."

"Actually," Peter said slowly, "we wondered if you might be interested."

"Me?" The offer took Sasha by surprise, leaving a welter of emotions in its wake. He understood Peter's comment that he and Blaise weren't ready to give up the stars—during the trip to Petarus, Sasha had realized himself that he'd missed being in space during the months he'd spent on Nicodemus

Vector. More than that, he'd missed the companionship of others—not that Harry wasn't enough for him, or that he'd have much companionship on a deep space run without Harry. Unless Harry might want to accompany him, at least occasionally? Still, Petarus was a long way from Algol V, which would mean even more time apart if Harry didn't choose to join him.

The confusion of emotions must have shown on his face, because Peter laughed. "Your lover is rubbing off on you—you're gaping like a fish."

Ryan knocked Peter on the back of the head at the insensitive comment while Sasha could feel his cheeks darkening in embarrassment. The Admiral's arrangement with Blaise had never been any secret, at least among the senior officers of the *North Star*, and he'd had ample evidence of the easy affection between the two, and between Ryan and Juo for that matter, during their time on Petarus, but that still didn't make it any easier to discuss his relationship with Harry with his former commander.

"I'd have to talk with Harry about it," Sasha said.

Harry must have sensed Sasha's agitation through their empathic bond, surfacing from below the water in a graceful arc and joining them on the shore. "Talk with me about what?"

Peter nodded at Blaise, who settled on the blanket beside him as Juo showered Ryan with the droplets of water he shook from his wet wings. "Blaise and I would like to hire Sasha as a pilot for Stallion Transport."

Sasha could feel Harry's surprise as clearly as he had felt his own when Peter first mentioned it. "That would be quite a commute," Harry said slowly. "It took us almost ten days to get here on my ship."

Sasha didn't know if any of the others, besides Blaise, anyway, would realize exactly what that meant, but Sasha had seen the modifications Harry had made to his cruiser. Nothing outside the Confederation's fastest ships could outfly Harry's little runabout.

"I've never understood why you were so attached to that ball of rock anyway," Blaise said. "You'd be much more comfortable here on Petarus."

Ryan smacked Blaise in turn. "You two have as much sensitivity as Crelixian slugs. You don't just ask people to uproot their lives like you ask them what they want for dinner." He turned to Harry and Sasha. "Obviously this isn't a decision you're going to make spur of the moment this way, but I can tell you that Petarus is a wonderful place to live, and I happen to know the right person to get you permission to relocate here *if* you decide that's what you want to do."

"Who is that?" Sasha asked.

"Him," Juo replied wryly, indicating Ryan. "I haven't been to Nicodemus Vector, so I don't know what you'd be leaving behind, but the architects and engineers here have done a fabulous job adapting available materials to the needs of a diverse group of immigrants. You've been fine staying at Blaise and Peter's, but if you have needs in a permanent dwelling, I think you'd find that if you're specific in your requests, they can be accommodated."

"You've talked about this," Sasha said, looking from one sincere face to another. "Why?"

"For a lot of reasons," Blaise said. "I've never liked the idea of Harry all alone on Nicodemus Vector. I understood it at the time, but I didn't like it. I like it even less now that you're there. You deserve to have friends around you, and so does Harry. I also know what it did to Peter to feel trapped and dependent here when Juo was first treating him and he couldn't work or do much of anything else." Sasha hid a grin at the way Blaise pointedly ignored Peter's scowl. Blaise had absolutely no qualms about sharing the Admiral's "private" business with Ryan and Juo, and now with Harry and himself. "I can't imagine you're any happier sitting around with nothing to do while Harry does whatever it is he does in his lab all day."

"He helps me," Harry said, but they both knew it was more for form than because Sasha was actually any help to Harry.

"You act like you've got some huge treasure hidden on that planetoid, but I've never seen anything but your lab and the pool. You can bring the lab with you, and there's obviously no shortage of free-standing water here."

Sasha waited for Harry's reply, sensing his lover's turmoil as Harry had sensed his earlier. "We don't have to decide now," he said softly, "and we don't have to do this." He understood the allure of escaping the psychic pressure of being around people. He'd retired from command for that reason among others, but being on Petarus with these new friends hadn't felt like pressure. He'd been aware of Ryan, Juo, and Peter—he couldn't get any more of a reading on Blaise than Harry could—but he hadn't felt crowded by their minds any more than by their physical presence. Instead, it had felt easy, comfortable. A surface awareness of their

minds like he was peripherally aware of them being in the room. On the *North Star*, in such constant close quarters, the pressure had grown overwhelming, but if they had their own home, their own refuge, they could retire there if it got to be too much.

"You want this," Harry said slowly, ignoring the others as he took Sasha's face between two tentacles. "I can feel it as clearly as if you said it aloud. Blaise is right. There's nothing on Algol that can't be moved, replaced, or recreated."

"The waterfall," Sasha said, thinking how accustomed he had grown to sleeping with the sound of the trickling water against the rocks in their bedroom.

"We'll find a way to recreate it," Harry said. "And if we don't, we'll find something else."

"If you can bring some of the rock from your planetoid, you might be surprised what the contractors on Petarus can do," Peter interjected. "We're thinking of having a pool dug on our own property. Juo keeps telling me that swimming will be good for my shoulder."

"I think Juo just wants to have a pool he can spend time in that's nearer than this," Ryan retorted, hugging his husband to take the sting from the words. "But Peter's right—his own home was built to his exacting specifications."

Sasha looked around the circle of faces, searching as deeply into Harry's heart as he had ever done when all he saw from the others was support. He could sense Harry's trepidation at leaving his sanctuary, but far stronger than that was determination. Whatever motivated that determination—his desire for companionship again, an unwillingness to hold Sasha back, or something else

entirely—he met Sasha's mind with such a surge of love and support that to question it would have been churlish.

"So how soon would you want me to start?" Sasha asked.

"Yesterday," Blaise and Peter said at the same time, eliciting laughter from all six of them.

Sasha reached for one of Harry's tentacles, the flexible limb twining with his hand in a fair imitation of interlocked fingers. Even as a child, he'd been a loner, afraid to let anyone close for fear they would realize what he was. Harry had done far more in the past six months than teach Sasha to control his empathy. He had taught him how to live without fear. "That's probably a little unrealistic, but...." He looked at Harry for confirmation. "We might be able to do next month."

Harry squeezed his hand. "Next month it is, although you'll have to put up with us living in your guest room until the Petari can build our new house."

Ryan smiled. "We'll start looking at land tomorrow. I happen to know all the right people."

Sasha relaxed and let Harry and Ryan discuss the details. It was good to have friends.

Growing up in Chicago, NICKI BENNETT spent every Saturday at the central library, losing herself in the world of books. A voracious reader, she eventually found it difficult to find enough of the kind of stories she liked to read and decided to start writing them herself.

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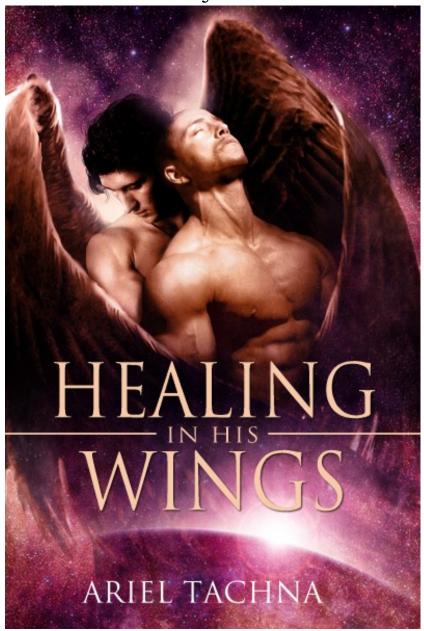
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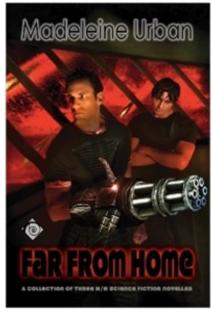
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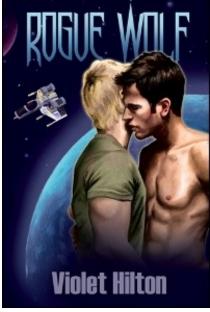
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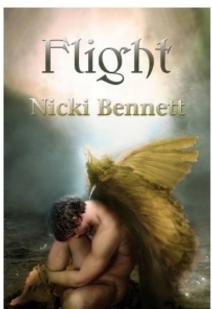


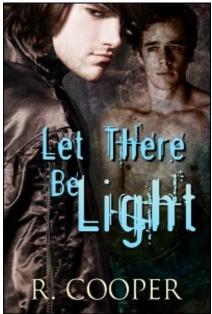
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