

Genus: Unknown (Part One) Adaptation

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Kaitlyn O'Connor

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Dedication:

With warmest regards for the many readers whose loyalty and enthusiasm for my world building make it possible for me to continue to explore the universe through my imagination. Special thanks to my friend, Marie P. in France, for her helpful insight and suggestions in my ongoing efforts to improve my writing skills. And congratulations to my dear friend, Trucking Barbie, who always makes me laugh no matter how down in the dumps I might get, on the birth of her handsome little stud muffin! The girls will be standing in line to fight over him in a few years!

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Chapter One

"Wait! Go back!" Dr. Kate Drexel exclaimed. When the robot seemed to continue to advance, she turned from the display and looked at the tech operating their robotic sample collector in annoyance. "Can you back it up?"

Her annoyance deepened as the tech glanced at the project leader, Dr. Sam Waters, for confirmation. Waters studied her a moment and finally nodded.

"What are we looking for?" the tech asked as he programmed the robot to retrace its steps.

"I don't know. It looked like it might be eggs. It could've been rocks, I suppose, but it looked out of place. Back up, back up ... There!"

"I don't see anyth" Dr. Waters broke off as Kate strode forward and tapped the display screen.

"Zoom in there."

- "I see them-looks like rocks to me," the tech muttered.
- "We've got enough rocks," Rodriquez agreed.
- "They look too symmetrical to be rocks," Kate disputed and then glanced at her own team leader, Minks, for support. "What do you think?"
- question.

Minks narrowed his eyes at the objects under

- "It's a streambed," Waters said dismissively. "The moving water could've shaped them like that."
- "But ...! They aren't smooth!" Kate argued. "Wouldn't they be smooth?"
- The tech glanced at Waters again. Waters frowned but finally nodded and the tech moved the robot a little closer, zooming in more tightly on the objects under dispute.
- "I don't see anything that looks 'nest-like' at all,"
 Minks said after a moment. "They do look
 somewhat egg shaped, but they still look like
 rocks to me."
- Impatience and anger wafted through Kate. So far,

she had zilch as far as she was concerned. "I thought the idea was to collect as wide a range of samples as we could to get a picture of the environment? I'm not disputing the importance of studying the atmosphere, geology, and soil, but colonists are going to need to have some idea of what they'll be dealing with insofar as flora and fauna, too! So far we've got a great selection of rocks, dirt, water, and air samples-and microorganisms-and a handful of insectoid organisms that we just happened to capture in the process of snatching a few plant clippings. If those are eggs, it could give us a chance to study a higher life form. If they're rocks-then you'll have more rocks!"

Waters' expression was tight with annoyance when she glanced at him, but the bastard knew it was true! It was just her luck that the mission leader, Waters, was a geologist and far more interested in collecting samples for himself and his part of the team than living organisms for the xenobiologists on the team. He excused his blatant favoritism by pointing out that they didn't have facilities on board the ship to preserve living organisms since they hadn't known enough about the planet to prepare for them and that they

everyone pointed out. There might be something useful attached to them."

"Careful!" Kate cautioned as she watched the robotic arm reach out and the 'fingers' close on the first object.

"She might be right," the tech, Mills, said, surprise

would be dead, decayed, and useless by the time

He finally shrugged. "Get them, Mills. I think it is rocks, but they're along the streambed, as

the ship made it back.

soft."

"Reptilian?" Minks speculated, excitement now threading his voice. "Something like a snake or a crocodile?"

in his voice. "The readings indicate the object is

- "It's by the water," Waters murmured. "That would seem to imply that, wouldn't it?"
- pointed out. "Some mammals, too."

 "If it was earth, it could be any of those possibilities." Kets said trying to keep her voice.

"Water birds nest close to water," Sonja Rice

possibilities," Kate said, trying to keep her voice neutral. "But this is Sirius. The chances are that it

won't be anything we're at all familiar with."

"You've got a point, Dr. Drexel," Waters agreed.
"And yet, so far, we've seen a lot of similarities.
Sirius may not be Earth's twin, but it's starting to look close enough to be a kissing cousin."

"Except there don't seem to be any beings of higher intelligence," Mills said. "Isn't that weird considering the other similarities to earth that we've found and the age we've calculated of the system?"

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Noo had been aware of movement and felt the threat of danger but until he managed to break through his pod and examine his surroundings he had no idea how serious the threat was. Alarm went through him as soon as his eyes adjusted enough to allow him to examine his surroundings. His nose had already told him the worst, however. There was no scent of water and none of food.

Weak from his struggles, he lay where he fell, trying to gather the strength to search for food and water before he became too weak to do so. His nest mates, Rak and Dae broke from their

pods and tumbled onto the hard surface before he'd had time to gather his strength, and lay weakly on the hard, cold surface as he had, struggling for breath.

Where are we?

Not on Ra, he responded, rolling over at last and pushing himself to his feet. While they rested, trying to regain their own strength, he shuffled painfully around the hard pod in search of an opening. There wasn't one, but he found a surface that was pliable. It was long and very thin, covering an opening too narrow, he was afraid, to allow them to escape, but he examined it anyway. Hooking his talons in it, he began tugging at it and finally managed to tear it a little. When he did, air wafted to him that contained all the smells he'd expected to detect when he'd emerged from his pod.

Rak! Dae! There is food and water here!

Encouraged by their needs, his nest mates struggled up and joined him, helping him tear at the strange thing until they had shredded it. Noo peered through the opening they had made. This is a strange place.

- Very strange, Rak agreed.

 And definitely not Ra, Dae said. How did we come to be here?

 I felt movement. You did not?

 Dae frowned. I did, but I thought we had been
- carried away by a flood.

 Mayhap we can figure it out later-if we live. I smell food and water, but I do not see any.
- Rak pushed his nose to the narrow crevice. It is in those strange pods.
- Father! Dae called out when he realized they were trapped. Help us!
- We cannot get to the food and water! Noo yelled.
- We are trapped! Rak added.
- The three paused, tilting their heads to listen.
- The father is not near, Rak concluded finally. He has followed the queen to seed her again.
 - We are not on Ra, Noo pointed out.

But we would be if the father had not followed the queen, Dae said angrily. He would have guarded the nest otherwise.

That seemed inarguable. In any case, they were on their own regardless of what had happened to put them in that position.

The three of them began tearing at the oddly hard and flat side of the pod they were trapped in, alternately battering against it. Abruptly, it simply fell away. They inched to the edge of the opening and peered around for predators. Relieved when they saw none, nor smelled anything threatening, they climbed out and allowed their noses to lead them to the food and water they needed.

They were almost too weak to eat and drink by the time they'd managed to tear open the strange, hard pods where the food and water had been hidden. They began to feel better once they'd filled their bellies, however-stronger, but sleepy from their full stomachs.

I need to sleep, Noo announced.

I also, Rak agreed.

I smell something strange, Dae pointed out. You do not smell it?

It passed this way long ago, Noo said. The scent is old and stale.

I am tired, too, Dae told them indignantly, but someone needs to watch for predators.

There are none in this strange place, Noo said dismissively. We would have smelled them.

found food and discovered the ground was as strange as the pods. It was hard and cold, but it did not look like stone. It looked like the same thing the pods were made of. This is a very strange place, he said uneasily. Everything is the same!

You do not think it is strange that everything is in

Noo climbed down from the pod where they had

It is ... not warm either, Rak complained. Why is it not warm?

in pods?

pods? Dae asked. Even things that should not be

Noo tilted his head up and stared at the sky. I do not see Sheva. Nor any sister stars. The sky looks

are inside of an even larger pod.

Mayhap we are on Ra but inside this strange pod and if we break out then we will find the father?

Rak suggested hopefully.

like the ground. He frowned. It is another pod. We

Noo stared at him for several moments. I am going to climb back into the pod where we woke and sleep. When I am not tired anymore, then I will see if there is a way out of the big pod.

Rak and Dae stared at one another questioningly when Noo started to climb back into the strange pod where they'd woken. Shrugging after a moment, they followed him. They were still not warm, even when they had curled tightly together, but it was not nearly as uncomfortable.

Noo felt a good deal stronger when he woke-and a good deal hungrier than before. Rising, he stretched and left his nest mates to search for food. They joined him when he had finally managed to break open the pod by himself and he glared at them a little indignantly as they went inside and helped themselves to the food. He dismissed it after a moment and focused on filling his own belly. He was sleepy again by the time he

finished eating, but he decided it was time to explore the great pod they were in. There was food and there was water, but there was not a great deal of either and three of them to share. They might yet starve or die of thirst if they could not find a way out of the great pod and into the forest.

In any case, they would need to find a queen to breed once they reached maturity and he had not seen another beast of any kind beyond his nest mates. The search for a suitable female might be a long one.

Rak and Dae followed him as he left the area where the small pods were. They found that the great pod they were in was sealed in the same strange way as the smaller pod where they had hatched and the pods where they had found food. This one was far bigger, however, and although they clawed at it and beat themselves against it, it didn't budge.

Dae settled, curled in a tight ball, and went to sleep. He was angry, though, to discover yet another impediment and decided as soon as he woke to examine it to see if he could find a spot where the soft stuff was thinner. He discovered

very quickly, however, that he could not dig his claws into the hard surface and climb. His wings were too small to fly. Closing his eyes, he focused on his hands and feet and changed his claws into the soft, rounded pads of the merlie, a climbing creature absorbed into the clan long ago. This time when he pressed his hands against the slick, hard surface, they clung. Triumphant, he carefully picked his way along the vertical surface, stopping to check the thin, soft stuff from time to time.

on something that yielded beneath his hand. When he did, the barrier fell away. He stopped, staring at the hole and the darkness beyond as lights began to flicker and the area brightened. Look! Light!

He'd made it almost halfway up when he stepped

Rak was already looking, his lower jaw sagging in surprise.

Dae snorted and lifted his head, blinking. Sheva?

It is not warm, Rak responded, tipping his head to look up at the source of the light, and that does not look like Sheva.

Noo glanced uneasily at the pods where their food lay. If this closes as it opened then we may not be able to reach the pods where the food is.

How did you make it open before, Dae asked curiously?

With this moving stone. He removed his foot to show Dae and it promptly closed-with Rak on the other side!

Panic gripped him for a moment, but as soon as he pressed on the stone again, the pod opened up as it had before. He eased his head around the edge to see if there was a similar stone on the other side, more than a little fearful the thing would close on him and cut him in half. Relieved when he saw there was another small stone like the one he'd already found, he waited until Dae had gone through and joined Rak and Dae on the other side

It was the strangest, most confusing thing imaginable. It seemed to be a world of pods, within pods. They weren't surprised that it was confusing to them when they had only recently escaped their own pods, but none of them could summon a memory from the father, the queen, or

the old ones that explained what they found.

This is someplace different, Noo said finally. It is not Ra.

We knew that, Rak pointed out.

We thought that, Noo corrected him. I am more certain than ever.

I am also more certain, Dae said, his voice sounding strange.

Noo looked up and saw that Dae had made his hands and feet like the merlie and climbed up one of the vertical sides. He was peering through a hole he'd found. Excitement flickered through him and he changed his own hands and feet as he had before and climbed up eagerly to look through the hole Dae had found.

It was not a hole at all, he discovered. It was as hard and slick as everything else, but he could see through it-and all he could see was sky, a night sky-and it looked nothing like the night sky of Ra was supposed to look. It seemed to go on forever and there was no sign at all of Mother Ra or their forest-or even Father Sheva, whose light

and warmth they depended upon for life.

An air of almost hysterical excitement gripped the entire space center community as the UNSS Nostradamus successfully docked. Expelling a collective sigh of relief as control announced a successful docking, everyone almost instantly burst into wild jubilation, laughing, crying, jumping up and down, and hugging each other exuberantly. The Nostradamus, the prototype for the first colonist ship, had successfully completed its maiden voyage to Earth's prime target planet and back with flying colors! The hyper-drive had performed beautifully, taking the ship to the target planet in less than six months and returning in threel

Kate suspected that even the engineers who'd designed and built the new hyper-drive had had their fingers crossed when the decision came down to test the ship at full speed on the trip back. She certainly had! All she could think about was their specimens and whether they were going to make the trip to earth in one piece! But then, that was part of the reason for the decision to start with. They had living things aboard on the

trip back. Not only were they anxious to get them back while they were still living-or at least had some chance of it-but the project leaders had thought it would be a good thing to see the effect the hyper-drive would have on living things-if any.

Hopefully, they weren't going to have to scrape their specimens off the walls and view them under microscopes, she thought uneasily as soon as the first thrill had died down.

Kate didn't realize everyone else was as uneasy as she was until the sudden, piercing alarm sounded and the computer announced a level red lockdown.

"Containment breach aboard Nostradamus," the computer announced calmly. "All stations-Warning! Alien biological hazard. Executing protocol five-seven-one-one-zero-station lockdown in five, four, three, two ... Lock-down executed. Doors sealed. Potential biological hazard contained."

Kate's ears rang in the dead silence that followed as someone managed to shut off the warning Claxton. Her heart took the place of the earpiercing screech, pounding against her ear drums in a deafening tattoo. Emerging from her shock a few moments before the majority of the scientists who'd gathered to watch the docking of Nostradamus, just returned from its historic voyage to the first Earth-like planet on the agenda for colonization, she dragged her gaze from the image on the viewing screen and looked at Bill Warner, who was manning the controls. "What happened?"

everyone else from frozen stasis, shouted questions began to ping back and forth across the control room-shouted, no doubt, due to a combination of consternation and temporary deafness from the Claxton-but as disruptive as that had been.

As if the question she'd voiced had unlocked

"Hold it down!" Warner bellowed from his console.

The order jolted Kate and she stared at the back of his head with a combination of surprise and indignation. The bellow effectively silenced everyone, however, and for a few moments silence reigned.

"The breach is aboard the Nostradamus. As far as

the computer can ascertain, the seals on the docking station are holding."

The scientists, Kate included, breathed a collective sigh of relief.

It might well be premature, but at least they had the illusion of safety for the moment.

She still felt as if invisible bugs were crawling all over her and it took an effort to convince herself it was purely imagination.

Howard Keel, who was in charge of the scientific expedition, moved to stand directly behind Warner, leaning over him to read the monitor. He straightened after a moment and glanced at the communications officer. "Execute Protocol One. Notify ground control that the space station is in quarantine until we can complete an investigation."

There was an immediate rumble of voices as everyone began speculating, aloud, as to what had happened and what needed to be done.

Keel rounded on them. "Clear the control room. You'll be notified once we have a better idea of

what's happened and a plan has been formulated. Group leaders should plan to meet in the conference room at 2100 unless otherwise notified."

Dismissed, everyone simply gaped at him for several moments. Finally, a few of the scientists in the rear ambled toward the lift. When they did, it created a general exodus from the control room.

Kate lingered. "We aren't going to sterilize the Nostradamus, are we?"

Keel glanced at her a little absently, his mind obviously elsewhere. "You'll be notified once a decision is made," he said dismissively.

"Yes, but"

Keel's lips tightened. "No one wants that."

Slightly appeased, Kate nodded and turned to follow everyone else from the control room. She was only minimally reassured, however. If they'd lost everything they'd collected it could have more disastrous repercussions than anyone wanted to think about. Teams had already been assembled to re-outfit the Nostradamus for the

first colonist venture, at which time it would become Eden I-the first, hopefully, of many colony ships that would carry the children of Earth 'back to Eden'.

* * * *

As anxious as Kate had been to retrieve their specimens intact if possible, she was cold with fear as the airlock opened and she, Simmons, and Carter stepped cautiously into the Nostradamus, flashing their portable lights around to examine the Nostradamus' airlock before Simmons moved to the manual control to open the door to the ship's interior. To everyone's surprise, he didn't have to. As soon as he moved within range of the motion sensor, the door opened.

Simmons whipped a grim look in their direction and Kate felt the hair on the back of her neck prickle.

"Now that's just creepy," Terry 'Sissy' Carter muttered. "How would the door work if the computer's malfunctioning? It's almost like ... we've been invited in."

Chill bumps crept up and down Kate's spine at

her friend's comment.

"Obviously it's just some kind of short," Bill Simmons muttered, doubt threading his voice and making it clear he was trying to reassure himself as much, or more, than he was them. "Micro meteor damage?"

"The computer didn't detect any hull breaches," Kate pointed out.

Simmons sent her a tight lipped glance and turned to train his flashlight on the area beyond the airlock. Kate noticed he had his stun gun in his free hand, however, when he waved it in an attempt to activate the lights on the other side. Switching her own portable light to her other hand, she grappled to pull her own stun gun from its holster. Sissy dropped hers as she struggled to juggle her light and get her weapon out at the same time. The sound as the weapon struck the deck was like a gunshot in the eerily silent ship and both Kate and Simmons jumped, whipping around to search the area immediately around them for any kind of threat.

"Sorry," Sissy muttered, dropping to a crouch quickly to retrieve her weapon.

"You scared the shit out of me!" Simmons muttered sullenly. "It's for damned sure if there's anything in here we aren't going to surprise it now!"

"I said I was sorry!" Sissy snapped.

"Let's just get on with it, shall we?" Warner said testily over their com units.

Kate, Bill, and Sissy exchanged speaking looks.

"Easy for him to say when he's sitting all safe and comfy in there," Sissy muttered with a complete disregard for the fact that Warner was monitoring the conversation.

Amusement flickered through Kate. "Let's get to the bridge and see if we can get the lights on. I don't like the idea of stumbling around in the dark with nothing but a flashlight if I can help it."

"It's probably a waste of time, but you have a point," Bill agreed. "I'll take lead. Weapons ready-you two watch our backs. Let's keep it close until we know what we might be up against."

"We didn't pick up any higher life forms," Sissy

"That we know of," Bill retorted.

"There shouldn't be anything in here big enough to worry about," Kate said reassuringly.

"There could be a big difference between

pointed out shakily as they started down the

corridor.

"Are you trying to scare the piss out of us?" Sissy snapped, her flashlight wavering along the floor, walls, and ceiling and crisscrossing the beams from Kate's and Bill's lights as they made their way through the cave-like interior of the ship.

shouldn't and isn't." Bill pointed out.

"I'm just saying we can't afford to make any assumptions. Keep your eyes open and your weapon ready-and quit walking on my damned heels, Sissy!"

"Sorry," she muttered, but she continued to follow him as closely as she could, bumping into him when he stopped to examine the controls on the lift.

Bill flicked a glare at her when she jostled him and then focused on the panel. "This is probably a

waste of time, but I don't see taking the stairs without trying it."

It should've been reassuring when the lift doors opened instantly in response of Bill's touch on the screen. Instead, it sent another wave of uneasiness through Kate. When they'd carefully examined the cubicle, they stepped inside and Bill pressed the level the bridge was on.

Kate continued to flick her light around the

compartment as the lift rose swiftly to the level they'd chosen, trying to convince herself that she was jousting windmills. The ship had responded to everything up until it docked with the space station. There was no reason to suppose the malfunctions they'd discovered were anything more than some sort of glitch with the onboard systems, possibly shorts due to some smaller life form getting into the electronics, or even nothing more than human error. And yet the anomalies almost seemed ... premeditated. She couldn't shake the sense that something with intelligence had set a trap. The ship had docked without a hitch. All of the life support systems appeared to be functioning on par. The door to the airlock had responded as it should. The lift appeared to be working just fine. Why weren't the lights working? And why was it that only selective doors, those that should have contained the specimens, were malfunctioning? The bridge was creepier than anything they'd

encountered thus far. A vast room filled with equipment and consoles, it seemed empty of any kind of habitation and yet was cluttered enough that, with nothing but flashlights, there were deep shadows everywhere, creating 'caverns' of darkness where anything might be hiding. Struggling with her uneasiness, Kate flicked nervous glances at the shadows as she followed Bill and Sissy to the main control console. Once they'd reached it, she and Sissy took up guard positions while Bill focused on the console.

Kate had been trying her best to dismiss from her mind the fact that it had been she who'd argued for the retrieval of what had appeared to be eggs from the surface of Sirius. As unlikely as it seemed to her that they might actually have hatched, she knew it had to be a possibility that they had and knew also that those eggs

represented an alien creature of a size substantial enough to be dangerous if they had hatched. The measurement and weight of the eggs suggested a creature roughly the size of a very large human

baby and with animals of the Earth variety that could spell trouble.

If they actually were eggs and had hatched soon after the ship had left Sirius, how big might they be now? Twice as big? Four times? She would've liked to have been able to convince herself that they'd picked up something relatively harmless and that, even if they were eggs and had hatched, they were only going to find some small, weak baby something on the ship-or dead something. They hadn't actually detected any odors of decay, however.

And they were dealing with alien species. As closely as Sirius resembled Earth in many ways, they couldn't count on anything being like beasts they were familiar with.

"This looks like" Bill didn't complete the thought and Kate and Sissy both flicked a questioning look at him.

"What?" Warner barked impatiently.

"Well ... the only thing I can see that's been tampered with is the lights. Doesn't that seem ... odd?"

"Tampered with?" Warner demanded. "You're saying it looks deliberate?"

"Oh it was definitely deliberate," Bill responded.

"As in ... intelligence?" Sissy asked in a quavering voice.

"We didn't see anything," Warner said dismissively. "You're suggesting something of intelligence managed to bypass security and hitch a ride?"

"I'm saying it's damned strange that nothing else has been touched. Could be a fluke. Could be that whatever switched the lights to manual override didn't actually know what it was doing and it frightened it off when the lights went out."

He was tapping furiously at the key pad while he spoke and it still startled the hell out of Kate when the lights abruptly came on. Sissy sucked in a sharp breath and whipped a frantic look around the bridge, blinking against the sudden illumination. The lights dazzled Kate for several moments, as well, and her heart rate shot up as she struggled to adjust her vision. Her hand was shaking when she switched her portable light off

and shoved it back into her utility belt.

"Well, now that we have some light it should make the search a little easier," Bill said with a touch of satisfaction. "I'm betting Kate's eggs really were eggs and they've hatched."

Kate glanced at him sharply, feeling guilt waft through her.

"It would be something reptilian or amphibious, though, most likely," Warner said pointedly. "Possibly bird-like-highly unlikely to be very intelligent-certainly not intelligent enough to have deliberately sabotaged the lights. Most likely, it was a fluke, as you said. Let's not jump to the conclusion that we've got anything dangerous on our hands."

"If it's reptilian, it could damned well be dangerous!" Sissy said testily.

"I'm not jumping to any conclusions," Bill responded almost at the same time. "I just pointed out that the eggs were the only thing that might have contained something that could present a physical threat-beyond something viral. We need to keep our eyes open for anything that might

- attack."
- "It would still be a baby, whatever it is," Kate argued.
- "Baby snakes, if they're venomous, are still deadly," Bill said pointedly.
- "We aren't going to know anything until you find whatever was responsible for the breach," Warner reminded them.
- Bill's lips tightened. "I say we set the stun a little higher. We don't know how it might affect ... whatever it is."
- "It could kill them!" Kate objected.
- "Better them than us!" Sissy snapped.
- "The idea was to capture whatever it is for study," Kate reminded her.
- "So we fucking study the corpse!" Bill said tightly. "I think, since we're already here and we know something breached containment, we should work our way back to the specimen lab room by room, closing it off."

"I think we should stick together," Sissy whined as Bill left them.

"It'll take less time if we split up," Bill responded pointedly.

"It won't be as safe, however," Warner countermanded him.

"Fine! Let's just get this done!"

Kate followed Bill and Sissy, torn between the fear that Bill or Sissy would shoot the creatures on sight and eliminate any possibility of a true study of the species and the fear that it would turn out to be some kind of monsters and attack them. Images flickered through her mind as she searched the places where something might be hidden-beneath chairs and consoles-alternating between visions of cute, rounded babies with fluffy feathers, and monsters that bore no resemblance to anything in her experience. As it turned out, her fears weren't entirely unfounded.

This is a very strange world, Rak said. It does not look at all like the things that we saw on their

talking machine. Do you suppose it is like that inside?

Noo was frowning as he studied the thing the pod-no the space craft-carrying them had attached itself to. It is not their world. This is that thing they called a station-a space station.

This may be a problem, Dae said thoughtfully. There will be no escaping them from this place when it is not even on their world.

We do not want to escape, Noo told him, excitement underlying his thoughts. Clearly we were meant to be gatherers for the clan or we would not be here, so far from Ra. When the time comes we will breed with one of them and they will give our off-spring many things that we could not give them by breeding a female on Ra. The abilities the clan has culled from past cross-breedings will not begin to compare. We may gather things from them that are even more useful than our gift of flight.

Dae looked doubtful. We do not even know that they have gifts that will be desirable to pass to our kin. Noo sent him a cool look. They made this thing and that thing out there. I will breed with one and bring their abilities into our clan. I am certain that I was meant to be a gatherer, but perhaps you and Rak were not. You two should wait until we return to Ra and find a gueen to breed with. He could see that neither Dae nor Rak were happy with his assessment, which was no great surprise. It was the gatherers that had brought their clan the greatest gifts, the ability to survive most anything that Mother Ra and her sister, Ne, who brought the storms, could throw at them. While others perished, their clan thrived-because they had gathered the best of all creatures great and small that Mother Ra had deemed worthy of life. And because the old ones had been clever enough to gather all the best that Mother Ra had to offer. they would have the chance to gather more gifts from this world. Or he would. He would have a place in the memory that they would not, because he was going to gather wondrous new gifts for the clan!

I do not see that this making things would better the breed, Dae argued. Ra provides all that we need. We have no use for these things these creatures make. What could they bring to the clan that would be of use?

Knowledge, Noo pointed out. Beyond that, I cannot say until I have had time to learn of them.

I think that we will have time to do that soon, Rak said a little uneasily. They are coming into our pod. They are afraid of us. The male one has decided that he will kill us as soon as he sees us.

Noo sent Rak a startled look, discomfited by the fact that he had been so focused on gathering when he was not even mature enough to breed yet that he had not been 'listening' for the approach of the creatures. Worse, he had distracted Dae, too. It was just as well that Rak was standing guard or they would have no opportunity for anything!

I cannot 'listen' well because of the stuff this podthis craft-is made of, he lied, since he hadn't been 'listening' at all. I think we will have to get closer to them so that we can see them and hear their minds, then we will know what form will seem least threatening to them.

It would be better, Dae immediately argued, to find a form that would frighten them. Then they will run

away.

After they slay us with those things they have!
Noo told him sourly. The old ones would not think
to challenge until they knew what they were up
against, especially when they were young and
weak as we are!

We may still be strong enough to overcome them, or have gifts that would make that possible, Rak pointed out.

We might, but we do not know that, Noo said! I am eldest and a gatherer. It is my decision and I say that it will be better to observe and learn and then make a decision.

They have strange skins, Rak pointed out as soon as they had found a place to watch the creatures.

Noo had noticed that and he was privately appalled, but of course he did not tell the others. I do not think it is their skin at all, he said after many moments of studying them. I think they are wearing the skin of another creature. They are so clever to protect themselves in such a way!

It does not seem clever to me, Dae argued. Think

how many creatures they must have slain, only to take their skin for protection! If they were clever like us, they would have bred for it instead and it would be theirs to pass to their young!

Noo shrugged. He was also appalled, but he stubbornly refused to acknowledge it when he had been bragging that he would take their gifts for the clan. I did not expect their ways to be the same. There would be no point in breeding one if that was the case.

Dae snorted. You are obsessed with breeding and you will not even be able to for many more months!

It is the prime directive beyond survival, Noo pointed out irritably. You should be obsessed, as well.

We will none of us survive if the two of you do not focus on that, Rak observed.

Irritation flickered through Noo. He decided it was beneath him to argue with his second beta, however. It was beneath him to argue with Dae for that matter, since he was also beta, even if he was closer to being an equal. He would have to reach full maturity to establish himself firmly and indisputably as the alpha, though, and, as they kept pointing out, that was many months away.

Instead of belaboring the point, therefore, he

turned to studying the strange creatures that had brought them from Ra. It was difficult to 'listen' to their minds, not because of the skins they wore, but because the images were of things that he had no understanding of. He had had the same trouble with their talking thing-mostly because it thought at amazing, disconcerting speed-faster than he could capture with his own mind. Thankfully, it also produced images-in the airstrange, wavering images like clouds, that his eyes could study or he would never have figured out how to make the lights go away.

They did not need them, but he knew because of the knowledge of the old ones, that many more creatures needed the light to see than did not. That meant that the odds were very much in their favor that they would have the advantage if there was no light for the creatures to see. They had brought light, though, in little sticks that shot narrow rays across the pods-the craft!-as it did when the light had come on before. Fortunately, those sticks could not seem to produce more

than beams and that left many shadows for them.

There was one male and two females, he decided, once he had studied the images in their minds. He could feel the emotions attached to the images even when the images confused him and he knew the male by the sense of aggression that accompanied the smell of fear even if not for the images of violence. He dismissed one of the females right away. She was too fearful and that would make her as dangerous as the male, more dangerous. She would be far less predictable. The male was very predictable. He would attack if he felt threatened-instantly. The fearful female might, or she might run instead.

The second female, the one that drew his interest, felt fear, as well, but there was a thread of excitement and anticipation that accompanied the images that flashed through her mind. It took him a little while to realize that there was a consistency in those images. She was imagining young creatures, babies. His first reaction when he realized that was indignation. They had escaped their pods months ago! He might still be a long way from full maturity, but he was certainly no weak, helpless youngling!

When he finally managed to subdue his anger over that insult, it occurred to him that that was why she was not as fearful as the others. That was why she felt excitement and anticipation in spite of the fear. She wanted to find younglings!

As soon as that dawned on him, he began to study the images that flashed through her mind more carefully, trying to decide which appealed to her the most. He gave the image to Dae and Rak. If we take this form, the small female there will not be afraid and she will protect us from the others.

He felt the revulsion of the others immediately.

That is no surprise, Dae agreed. This looks like a new hatchling. Nothing would fear such a useless blob of flesh!

Exactly! Noo said triumphantly. She wants to see something like this and the others will also not feel fear of it, so they will not attack!

Dae shared a look with Rak and finally shrugged. The three of them focused on trying to assume the form. It was a struggle. The image was flat-not an entire image as they would have if they had actually seen the creature they were trying to

mimic. Beyond that, it seemed far smaller than they were, but that was actually an advantage, they discovered. It was not at all difficult to appear fat and round when they had to compress themselves into such small things.

Noo thought, at first, that he had made a serious error in judgment when the female halted and sucked in a sharp breath. Relief flooded him, however, when the first reflex of fear almost immediately began to diminish and interest took its place.

"I've found-something!" Kate announced in a loud voice, shaky with both excitement and fear. "I think it must be what was in those eggs!"

?

be a very dangerous species! We don't know anything about them! Dr. Warner-we're going to need some cages down here-something that would be big enough for a large dog, I'd guess. We've found three ... creatures. Very likely the culprits for the damage," he added, switching to direct communications with the team leader.

Kate exchanged a questioning look with Sissy.

"Don't get too close!" Bill snapped. "This could

Sissy was looking doubtful. "They're ... actually, they're kind of cute, aren't they? I was expecting something ... horrible, with maybe five eyes and really long teeth-reptile-like."

Kate returned her attention to the creatures cowering in one corner and felt a flicker of empathy. She could see they were shaking. She didn't think it was because they were cold. "Poor little things," she murmured. Moving very slowly, she crouched so that she was more on a level with them and, hopefully, not as intimidating. "It's ok. Nobody's going to hurt you."

After a few moments, Sissy crouched down to get a better look. "Can't tell much about them-except it looks like there are three of them. I think they must be from the eggs we found. They don't look much like birds, though, do they? That looks a lot more like fur than down."

Kate smiled faintly. "Except for the wings-or at least they look like they might be wings. To be honest, they look like a cross between primates, canine, and Aves. Not reptilian, though."

She spent the time while they waited for the cages trying to soothe them with her voice. Oddly enough, it did seem to soothe them. They stopped shaking and after a few moments, the one closest to her lifted his head and began to sniff the air. She smiled wryly. "You won't catch my scent through this suit unless you have an extremely sensitive olfactory system."

The creature met her gaze when she spoke that time. An eerie sensation fluttered through her. As strange as it sounded, even to her, she almost felt as if something tangible passed through her mind. Dismissing the sensation with an effort, she focused on the eyes. They were very similar to the eyes of Earth creatures, at least from what she could see. The pupils were elongated like cat eyes and quite possibly for the same reason-excellent night vision for nocturnal hunting, but except for the strange color, which she had trouble pinning

down, they didn't look alien. She finally decided to categorize the shifting colors of the eyes as hazel even though the predominant colors weren't green and gold but rather purple, blue, and green.

"Don't look it directly in the eyes," Bill cautioned.
"A lot of animals consider that a challenge and will attack."

Too late, Kate thought wryly, but it didn't seem to

antagonize the creature. She discovered when she redirected her focus to the creature again that it seemed to be studying her as intently as she was studying it. It took an effort to break eye contact with it, in point of fact. She discovered when she had that the other two were studying her just as intently.

"How old do you suppose they are?" Sissy asked.

Kate frowned and shook her head. "We know they can't possibly be more than a few months. Unless they somehow managed to get onboard when the robot was loading, they would have to be what was in the eggs we brought onboard ourselves. We can't be sure of that since the cams malfunctioned, but I think it's as good a guess as

any."

"The eggs weren't big enough to hold anything that size," Bill put in. "If they came from the eggs, then they've been out a while. They're certainly not newly hatched."

"That would put them in the bird category, then, wouldn't it?" Sissy said speculatively.

"It would if this was something from earth since they certainly don't look reptilian or amphibian. We don't know what to expect from Sirius."

Two techs arrived carrying the cages Bill had called for. Without surprise, Kate saw that the new intrusion alarmed the creatures. Directing the men to set the cages down, Kate, Bill, and Sissy settled to discussing how to capture the creatures with Warner giving directions via the com units. The first thought was to try to coax them into the cages with food. The problem with that was that they didn't have a clue of what would entice them since they didn't have a clue of what the creatures ate

Bill finally left with the techs to search the specimen locker to see if they could determine

what the creatures had been subsisting on since they'd hatched. His expression was grim when he returned a little later. "I'd say they eat pretty much anything," he said dryly. "Most of the specimens we collected are gone. It looks like they got into the food storage lockers, too."

Guilt flickered through Kate. It didn't take a lot of imagination to know she was going to be in hot water with everybody who was waiting for specimens to study.

"There was food onboard?" Sissy asked blankly.

"It's standard procedure to always have emergency rations onboard any outgoing ship," Bill reminded her. "Anyway, they wanted to see what effect, if any, the hyper-drive might have on organic materials."

Kate shrugged her discomfort off. "Well, if they've already eaten our food and it hasn't had any adverse effects on them, we could bring something from the station to entice them."

"I sent the techs to get something."

They want us to get into those strange pods, Rak

said uneasily. I don't like the way this seems to be going.

Me either," Dae agreed.

Noo was studying the pods they'd called cages. They're made of the same stuff as the craft, he said finally.

Which means we won't be able to get out of them, Dae said testily.

Noo sent him a look. They open. I watched them open one side. If they can open them, then we can.

So, you're saying we should just get inside them without a fight?

Noo considered the situation. They aren't fearful of us now. If they'd meant to kill us, they would have tried already. I think they're only trying to figure out what we are, just as we are them.

The pretty female doesn't want to hurt us, Rak said slowly. I'm not sure about the other two.

The male thinks they can study us just as well dead, Dae said flatly. I don't think it's a good idea

to get into those things. We'll be trapped.

I don't like it either, Noo said reluctantly. But I don't think we have a choice. They'll bring more or they'll use those sticks they have to make us sleep. The male wants to do that and we won't be able to defend ourselves if they make us sleep.

So we just go in, Rak asked uneasily?

Noo sent him a disgusted look. If we do that they'll know we understand them, stupid! They're bringing food. When they bring that, then we'll go in

Rak glared at him, but decided to ignore the insult. I hope they bring something good. I'm hungry.

Noo and Dae exchanged a speaking look. When Noo returned his attention to the alien creatures, he saw that the pretty female was watching them and uneasiness flickered through him at the speculation in her gaze. He sent her a limpid look and uttered a soft sound to imitate one of the sounds she'd made. Her brows knit together above her nose for a moment and then the look of suspicion disappeared. "They almost seem tame," she murmured.

"They're wild animals," Bill reminded her sharply.
"They just don't feel intimidated by us. I don't
know if that's a good thing or not."

Despite the fact that Noo had decided that their safest option was to allow the creatures to believe they'd been lured by the food that was brought, it irritated him when that was their immediate conclusion. He settled in one corner of the cage when they'd slammed the opening closed and fastened it, trying to pretend an interest in the food that he didn't feel at the moment, trying to ignore the resentment that they clearly considered him an inferior creature of little intelligence even though he'd deliberately given them that impression. He was also uneasy about their intention and trying hard to ignore that fear. Even though he'd convinced Dae and Rak that they would be safest to take this route, he wasn't as convinced as he wanted to be.

They had an advantage, he told himself. The alien creatures had obviously underestimated their intelligence, which was a weapon they could use to their benefit. Beyond that, they weren't as weak as they'd allowed the aliens to believe.

Unfortunately, they didn't have nearly the strength

they would have when they reached full maturity either and that worried him. He thought that they were still far stronger than this species, but that was only a guess. Until he'd studied them more, he couldn't be certain that he could count on strength as a weapon.

* * * *

Kate rubbed her eyes and leaned back in her chair, staring thoughtfully at a point near the ceiling of her lab while she went back over the data she'd collected on the Sirian beasts over the past year. There was something fundamentally wrong with her conclusions. Deep down, she knew there was, and it made her uneasy-and not just because she'd been pressured to produce a conclusion when she'd known she wasn't ready, that she hadn't studied the creatures nearly long enough to arrive at scientifically accurate conclusions. She just couldn't figure out what, exactly, it was that she'd missed or even pinpoint why she felt so uneasy or, more importantly, the odd sense of urgency that had been nagging at her ever since the Eden convoy had left for Sirius with the first load of colonists.

Leaning forward again, she propped her elbows

on her console and cupped her hands together to rest her chin, examining the collection of images that she'd selected from the thousands they'd taken over the past year documenting the growth and behavior of the 'Sirian Sasquatch'.

They hadn't been able to come up with a name for

the beasts because it was just about impossible to pin down a genus they seemed to match-they had class characteristics of so manyl-but as they'd grown to maturity, someone in the lab had called them Sasquatch and it had stuck not only because, outwardly, they seemed closer to that beast than anything else but also because they'd gotten really big, really fast.

That wasn't the source of her uneasiness, though. It was actually a relief that they seemed to follow the typical maturing process of medium sized earth mammals when they didn't 'fit' anything else. They seemed to be, at least primarily, mammals, so the similarity of their maturing process to earth primates was almost hailed as a break-through discovery.

Shaking her head after a moment, she got up from her chair, stretched the kinks out and moved to the door of the habitat that they'd designed for their aliens. She'd already disengaged the lock and grasped the handle when a sudden thought struck her.

Frowning, she released the handle and moved back to the console, searching the data bank

again for the image that had popped into her mind. She found nearly a dozen similar images, taken at different times before she found the one she'd been looking for. The uneasiness deepened as she studied it and the other images. After a few moments, she was on the search again. An hour later she had pulled up enough images to completely fill her holographic monitor and spread them out in the sequence they'd been taken.

A chill began to seep into her as she carefully studied each image and verified the camera that had taken it.

She was actually surprised to see that they'd managed to catch so many-considering their 'beasts' obviously knew exactly where the cameras were and what they were for.

It occurred to her directly behind that realization that she'd unlocked the door leading to the habit.

She'd designed and built it in the hope that they'd be able to observe the Sirian beasts under more natural conditions and thus get a better understanding of their behavior in their natural habitat.

She wondered if they'd found that amusing or insulting, but the certainty had settled in her that they weren't dealing with beasts at all. The Sirian Sasquatch was no animal-it was an intelligent species. She was certain of it.

Whether she could convince anyone else was a matter of debate, but she was a believer.

Even as she surged up from her seat and headed to the entrance to the habitat, however, Sissy flew the door of her lab and skidded to a breathless halt. Kate, already unnerved by the direction of her thoughts, whipped around instinctively at the sudden intrusion. Sissy's hair was askew from her rush, her eyes as wide as saucers and her face pale. "They're going to terminate the project! They're on their way down here now!"

"What?" Kate exclaimed in disbelief.

Sissy gulped. "Warner said he had the order from

headquarters and it was out of his hands. I tried everything I could think of to convince him we hadn't studied the Sirian Sasquatch nearly enough, but he wouldn't listen. What are we going to do?"

Kate was so blank with absolute shock for several moments that she could only stare at Sissy. "They can't do that!"

Sissy was ringing her hands. "They can! We can't stop them! He called security-they're on their way down here now!"

Fear swept through Kate, completing her descent into complete disorder. "You mean terminate as in ... kill? They're going to destroy them?" she gasped in disbelief.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!"

"Like hell!" Kate snapped, surging toward the door. "I'll talk to him, make him see reason! They're an important species! They can't do this!"

Sissy followed her as she surged out of her office. They hadn't made it to the end of the corridor when the tone sounded on the lift and the door opened. When it did, a half dozen armed security officers stepped out. Kate and Sissy braked to a halt.

"Just hold on right there!" Kate said a little hoarsely. "I'm going to talk to Warner. Don't you dare do anything before I've had the chance to talk to him!"

The officer in charge glared at her. "You don't have the authority to countermand Warner's orders-and he was clear."

"Then I'll go over his head and talk to high command!"

"The order came from high command, from General Hart himself!" he retorted. "Step aside!"

"No!" Kate said stubbornly. "You can't do this, damn it! They aren't animals! They're an intelligent species! We need to understand them better! We've got colonists on the way to Sirius now. We don't have any idea what they might be up against!"

The officer studied her grimly and finally nodded his head at one of the other officers. "Take her

into custody-both of them."

"You can't just shoot them down like animals!" Kate gasped as the security guard advanced on her and tried to subdue her, wrestling with the man to keep him from capturing her wrists. It was a short battle and she lost. Even as the quard secured her wrists, though, she suddenly remembered she'd left the containment door. unlocked and Sissy had distracted her when she'd gone to secure it. A mixture of guilt, hope, and fear flooded her as her mind leapt to the possibility that the Sirians might have escaped when she and Sissy had abruptly abandoned the lab. She didn't think they'd been fooled by the habitat for one moment, despite her efforts to carefully construct it from the images they had of the surface of Sirius.

Even as she watched the security team hurry down the corridor, however, she realized that there hadn't been enough time for the Sirians to escape even if they'd heard anything and been able to understand, and she doubted that. The guilt switched poles from her fear that she might have released a potentially dangerous species to guilt that she was the one who'd fought to have them brought back to start with and she was

ultimately responsible for their deaths. She began struggling again against the man restraining her. "Don't do it! They're peaceful! They haven't hurt anyone or even tried, damn it! You don't need to do this! We could just send them back to Sirius with the next shipment of colonists!" she shouted after the security team.

The team leader paused at the door to her lab and hope sprang into her that she'd swayed him. Instead, he sent another man back to help the first. "Take the two of them down to lock up until Warner decides whether he wants charges brought against them or not."

Kate gaped at the man in disbelief. The comment took the fight out of her, however, not the anger and resentment, not the sense of guilt that she was responsible for the creatures' deaths, and not the nausea that followed that thought. She saw that struggling was useless, however.

As she and Sissy were hauled into the lift, though, she wished fervently that she'd had enough sense to lock the doors and change the codes. That would've held them off a little while

Not that it would do the Sirians any good, she

realized in dismay. They were trapped, regardless, defenseless against the armed team of well trained security officers.

* * * *

They are coming. They have their weapons set to kill, Dae said grimly.

Noo didn't answer. He was studying their habitat for the best vantage point to launch an offensive attack. They will split into two teams as soon as they enter. We may not have to kill them. If we can catch three together, we can use their weapons to stun them, hide them, and take their forms. It may give us the time we need to escape. Let us take up positions near the entrance. They will only become more agitated if they must search for us.

We do not know how long they will be stunned! Noo pointed out. If we only stun them we run the risk that they will escape and sound the alarm before we can escape!

If we kill them they will certainly retaliate in kind, Noo said tightly. They communicate with one another through those things they carry. We cannot allow them to alert the others and if we attack we cannot be certain that we can take them all down before one of them manages to sound the alarm.

They mean to kill us now! Rak retorted. You think that they will be more determined to kill us if we kill three of theirs?

I think that if they find out that we have killed three of theirs that they will lock down the space station and make it harder for us to escape!

If that is true, then it seems to me that we must kill all of them. We can take the forms, but they know one another. They will know we are not those whose forms we have stolen.

Noo considered that while they were settling into the positions they had chosen. We will kill them if we must. I did not say that you could not if you find it necessary. I said not to kill them unless it is. But Dae is right. I think we must take them all out. They will know that we are not their team mates when we can only assume their forms. We will use that, however, to, hopefully, take out the other half of the team once we have secured the first half.

No one was more surprised than Noo when his

the humans had planned it themselves. On the other hand, the humans had no idea that they could change forms because the humans not only could not, but they had not observed them changing forms. They merely blended with their surroundings, waited until the moment was right and managed to seize the first three and shoot them with their weapons before they could do more than to begin to struggle. It was unfortunate, for them, that they had set their weapons to kill, but since their own survival depended upon making certain the humans were not able to sound an alarm Noo did not waste a lot of time agonizing over it or suffer any qualms once done. After studying his own kill carefully for several

plan worked so smoothly that it was almost as if

moments, he mimicked it as closely as he could and then carefully hid the body. When Dae and Rak had completed their own transformation and hidden the other two guards, they sought the remainder of the team out. Guided by their thoughts, they had no trouble locating them even with the distracting scents that surrounded them.

They discovered one had been left to stand guard at the entrance. That one was nearly their undoing since they had not figured out, yet, how to make accurately, they had studied them very carefully and understood their communications, but they had not had any opportunity to practice it themselves. He had not considered it safe to do so when they were so closely monitored. Fortunately, although the guard was almost immediately suspicious when they did not respond to his verbal hail, they still managed to prevent him from sounding an alarm.

As exhilarated as he was to finally achieve freedom and to have escaped the fate intended

the sounds that the humans made. More

for them, he was disgusted that they had not been able to manage it without killing. He had begun to understand the species and whether Dae or Rak agreed with his assessment or not, he knew that the humans would be far more alarmed and frantic to hunt them down and kill them when they discovered the bodies. Not killing the guards would not have prevented a hunt. The humans would still have hunted them, but they might have done so with the intention of merely recapturing them otherwise. Now, they would be determined to kill them on sight.

That thought put him in mind of the devices they used to record them and he took the time to

destroy the machine they used to make their recordings. He was not happy about the necessity. It would have been far better if they had had time to merely disable the devices for recording that were inside the habitat, but they had not had enough time to do that once they discovered the intent of the humans.

Now they risked the possibility that the humans

would realize why they had destroyed their machine, but that was still better than removing all doubt. Destroying the machine might make them suspect they were more intelligent that they had been given credit, but it would still prevent the humans from learning about their ability to change forms and that was their best weapon at this point. The humans would be looking for the forms they were familiar with.

What do we do now? Dae asked. They are bound to realize before long that six went in and only three came out.

I know, Noo responded grimly, and when and if they decide to investigate and find the bodies they will lock down the space station. We need to discover a way off before that. I would not worry about that if we could mimic their sounds, but I am when we have not had a chance to practice. I know the sounds and, I believe, most of the meanings. I feel that I could imitate them, but I do not know that I could do so closely enough to fool them.

not confident that we could do so convincingly

He had decided long since that she suited him as a mate. He had only been waiting for the opportunity to present itself to breed her, for he had reached the maturity to do so months before and it was next to impossible, he discovered now, to focus on finding a way to abandon her when that was as important to him as his survival.

He did not like the idea of leaving Kate, however.

There will be others on her world, Dae told him sharply. Survival must take precedence or there will be no opportunity for breeding.

Anger flickered through Noo, partly because Dae had dismissed Kate as if she was not the most ideal breeder when he was convinced that no other would do and partly because he had been so distracted that Dae had read his thoughts. His lips tightened. You two go and see if you can discover a way off of the space station that will take us to their world. I will go and see if I can

discover a way to take Kate with us.

Dae looked as if he might argue with him but finally merely shook his head, motioned for Rak to follow him, and left.

Kate's scent lingered in the corridor, so delicate and masked by the scent of others that it was almost undetectable. It was marked with fear and anger and hardly recognizable as Kate's at that. He thought if he had not come to know her as he had that he might not have recognized it, but he had memorized everything about her in the time since he had been brought to her world.

He followed it to the pod they called a lift and stepped inside when it opened for him.

The machine recognized him as being a human and he felt a flicker of relief that he had mimicked the form well enough to pass that test. The form he had taken was only an exterior façade. Without taking the essence of a human into himself, he could not fully transform, would not be able to align himself closely enough to breed with Kate, but he had not dared risk an attempt to acquire what he needed for that final and total transition.

In any case, he wanted Kate's essence to take that step. He had no need or any desire to make a full transformation except to breed her for he would be giving as well as taking. The sharing would form a bond between them, a very tentative one, granted, but still a link that he had no wish to form with another human.

He was not nearly as impressed with them as a

species as he had been when he had arrived for he had been little more than a hatchling then and far more impressionable. Captivity had changed that. He had begun to think that they would take him apart piece by tiny, painful piece with their collection of 'samples' to study. There was no growing accustomed to such things, but he had come to understand that as long as they held him he could expect it to continue and it went beyond discomfort even though it fell shy of actual torture.

He had learned much about them while they were trying to learn about him, though, and it was easy to see that, despite their intelligence, they were weak, fragile beings. They had made themselves that way as far as he could see. They depended upon their ability to make things to protect them. Without their 'things' they would not survive long

no gifts beyond their intelligence, and no physical shielding against the harshness of nature. Sheva's light and heat would bake the flesh from their bodies. Mother Ra would freeze it when she turned her face away from Sheva and Ne would tear their breath from their lungs when she blew the rain and wind across Mother Ra's surface.

He had, in fact, considered discarding the notion

for they had very little strength to oppose threats,

of breeding upon one, begun to question whether adding their gifts to his clan would actually be beneficial. Beyond their intelligence, their form, as fragile as it was, was an adaptation that would be of benefit, though, he decided. True, it had been adapted for making things so that they could conform their world to their needs instead of conforming themselves to their world as his clan had, but he thought it would be good to have that ability if they ever had need. The gods could be unpredictable and harsh. There had been times in the past when they had conspired together to make survival for his clan very difficult, when so many had perished that their numbers had dwindled to little more than a handful. The gifts of this species, he thought, just might make the difference between surviving or not if and when

the time came again that the gods decided to test them.

He was brought from his thoughts when the lift halted and more humans climbed on. He tensed when they glanced at him but relaxed again when they merely presented their backs to him and spoke to the wall. It took him several moments to realize that they were commanding their machine to take them to various places, for the pod/lift would stop, it would open to show a corridor that only differed by the symbol on the wall in front of the opening and then it would close and move again.

He sifted through the thoughts that he had captured from the security team and finally settled on their name for the place where they had taken Kate. He had to travel up and down many times before he had the lift pod to himself again and had the opportunity to test his ability to mimic the sounds he needed. "Z-cur-ty lok."

The pod remained stationary and irritation and uneasiness flickered through him, even a touch of panic as it dawned on him that he might be trapped in the lift/pod if he could not verbalize. Ignoring the uneasiness, he tried again. "Sss-cur-

ty lok-p."

"Holding for prisoners is on level 2. Is this destination correct?"

Noo searched his mind. "Ye-sss."

The pod/lift, to his relief, began to move again. In a moment, the doors opened. This time when they opened, he saw a human like those who had come to kill them stride past the opening. Tension instantly tightened every muscle, making it difficult to fight his instincts to transform for protection, but he ground his teeth and stepped off when he caught a stronger taste of Kate's scent and, very faintly, the chatter of her mind.

Ignoring his survival instincts, he moved along the narrow corridor, testing the air for Kate's scent and searching for a stronger connection with her mind until he reached an area where her thoughts were clear enough he could understand them. She was close. He knew she must be for the humans did not have the ability to project their thoughts and the knowledge that he was close to her made it difficult to fight the urge to find her at once.

He had to assess the situation before he could free her, however, and he found a place where he could not be seen by the other humans and could still hear Kate, a small, dark pod that contained all sorts of things he had no idea of what their use was.

She was worried about them, he discovered,

feeling a strange mixture of pleasure that he was in her thoughts and indignation that she thought they were incapable of defending themselves. It was difficult to follow her undisciplined mind for her thoughts leapt from one thing to another and back again at almost dizzying speed. It was the same with the other female, Sissy-except worse. It was easier to follow the thoughts of the males, but he had never had much interest in their thoughts-which only seemed to alternate between mating and whatever their business was at any given moment.

Images flickered through Kate's mind of him and his pod mates cowering in a corner while the security team blasted them with their fire sticks and then a new image took the place of that where they were running and beams of fire were tracking their paths. Then that image was replaced with them leaping upon the humans and tearing at

them with their teeth and hands.

Those images were insulting in another way entirely, but they disturbed him on another level, as well. She still perceived them as beasts, even though he knew that she had realized that they were not. Despite the great care they had taken to prevent the human's 'eyes' from recording anything that might give them away, Kate had seen images on her machine that did. He had 'heard' her thoughts. She knew they were not mindless beasts! Why was it that she still imagined them as such?

Not that he was above using whatever weapon he had at his disposal to protect himself. He could not use 'things' as her people did. He had to rely upon his physical superiority for defense. He saw nothing wrong with it, but she did.

It angered him. He had known that she would not receive him as a mate unless he convinced her that he was just as she was. That had always been the way of his clan. It was necessary to complete the gathering to align themselves in any case, but they had always gathered from the beasts of Mother Ra before, creatures far below them in intelligence that had abilities worth

themselves off as being the same.

The mating he had set his mind on would not be accomplished, he realized, if Kate knew what he was. It would not be enough to appear the same and align himself so that her body would be able.

collecting. With them, it was easy enough to pass

was. It would not be enough to appear the same and align himself so that her body would be able to nurture his seed. Despite the fact that she had appeared to accept them and even to care about them-for she had nurtured them when they had needed it, protected them from real harm-she believed they were inferior beasts.

He was so angry at that discovery that he almost missed the leap of her thoughts in another direction. She had, in fact, been vocalizing for some moments before her thoughts caught his attention once more and, at that, it was the emotion that caught his attention rather than the thoughts themselves.

His heart leapt at the discovery that she was to be moved to the 'surface'-when he discovered what that meant. The rest of her thoughts confused him, but he realized finally that she was afraid because they meant to 'detain' her on the surface and that it had something to do with punishment because she had tried to prevent the security

team from slaying them.

Rage and fear poured through him with the understanding that punishment meant harm. He did not know what kind of harm they had in mind, but he would not allow it. He was so unsettled by that discovery and the instinctive urge to rush to protect her at once, that it took all he could do to restrain himself and consider the situation.

They would not harm her here. That would come once she had been taken to the surface and since he and the others must find a way down to the world below anyway, then he would need to wait. As little as he liked that idea, an attempt now would most likely result in failure and death.

Closing his mind to Kate with an effort, he focused on trying to locate Dae and Rak within the space station. He did not think he would have been successful except that he discovered that they were also trying to locate him. After waiting until the corridor beyond his hiding place was clear, he returned to the corridor and made his way back to the pod/lift, ignoring the reluctance coiling tightly in his belly the further he got from Kate. The pod went up and came down, filled and emptied of humans, several times before he

reached a level where he felt Dae and Rak strongly enough that he knew he was as near to them as he would get on the pod/lift.

He stepped off and found himself in the part of the station that he had been brought through when he had first come. He felt his hackles rise at that discovery and had to struggle to maintain his guise once more as he moved quickly toward Dae and Rak. He found them in a space so wide and high that it almost did not look like a pod at all. It was filled with pods of many shapes and sizes, including some that were similar to the spacecrafts that had brought them to the space station, although these were much smaller.

It is what they call a hanger, Dae responded. The spacecrafts they use to travel from this place to their world are here and that one is to leave shortly to pick up passengers and supplies.

Excellent! They are going to take Kate down to their world. She is charged or to be charged. I did not perfectly understand that except that she is afraid of punishment. We will hide ourselves there and find a way to free her.

What is this punishment, Rak asked, uneasiness

threading his thoughts?

Harm, Noo responded grimly. I do not understand it myself, but she is afraid. What else would she be afraid of?

Rak considered that and finally shrugged. You must be right, he agreed tightly. We will not let them do that ... whatever they mean to do.

I think we must make ourselves look like those humans and go inside carrying something and then hide ourselves, Dae said. The skins they are wearing are different from these that we have imitated.

Then we should hasten to do so, Noo agreed. It will not do to linger. They are bound to find those we killed and then we might not be able to leave this place. Do not try to verbalize. I tried to verbalize for their machine and it did not understand. It is a machine, though, and it was not alarmed or suspicious. They will be both if we are not able to make ourselves understood.

Chapter Three

Nothing that had happened since she'd discovered the project was to be scrubbed and the specimens destroyed had seemed entirely real to Kate. She hadn't, in point of fact, been able to focus on much of anything beyond her discovery and the helpless anger and nausea that washed over her as her imagination supplied her with one nightmarish scenario after another of what was happening in the habitat. She'd demanded, over and over, to speak directly to the commander, General Lawrence Hart, and yet when she was escorted to the command center to speak to him less than an hour after they'd reached the surface, she was so unnerved by the frenetic activity around her in the command center that she had trouble gathering her thoughts.

It seemed to take General Hart a few moments to place her when she'd been introduced to him by

the guard that had escorted her. His gaze slowly focused on her face, however, and his expression became even grimmer. "The Sirian beasts have escaped," he said tightly. "If you know something, now's the time to spill it."

Kate felt her jaw slide to half mast in shock. Her

thoughts went chaotic. Dominant among her thoughts, however, was the sudden realization that she'd left the containment door unlocked when she'd dashed off to protect her project. She felt her face flash with guilty heat and then all the blood rush away as the enormity of her breech of protocol struck her. "Escaped?" she echoed faintly, visions of long term imprisonment replacing the horrific images of the slaughtered beasts.

The general's lips tightened. "They found the bodies of the security team that was sent in to destroy the animals."

The shock that hit Kate that time almost felt like a physical blow. She reeled, felt as if the room around her did a slow spin. Blindly, she reached out in search of some sort of support as her legs went rubbery. "The Sirians ...? How ...?" she asked through numb lips.

"Nobody knows what happened-yet!" Hart growled. "I was hoping you could shed some light on it"

Kate blinked at him. It descended upon her abruptly that she was being accused, that the general thought she'd had something to do with the slaughter. Indignation flickered through herbut a sense of caution, as well. "They took me into custody before they even went to my lab. How could I possibly know what happened?"

"The security electronics had been disabled-and your lab system had been wiped clean. You don't know anything about that?"

The coldness Kate had felt when she'd realized the behavior of the Sirian wasn't the acts of 'smart' animals, but intelligent beings, swept through her again. "If you're suggesting I had anything to do with that, you're way off the mark!" she snapped. "Everything was working when I left the lab. Sissy ... Dr. Terry Carter, had come to tell me the project was being terminated. We left together to go to speak with Dr. Warner and we were intercepted by the security team."

The general studied her assessingly for several moments, but apparently he decided she wasn't lying. "Just what kind of animals are we dealing with here, Dr. Drexel?"

Kate compressed her lips, wrestling with her theory. Was it really no more than a theory now, though? Hadn't the Sirians proven themselves that they weren't mere animals? "I don't think we're dealing with animals at all," she said. "I think we're dealing with intelligent beings."

That time the general reeled in shock. "And you didn't think to mention this theory of yours to anyone?" he roared when he recovered from his momentary shock.

"I didn't realize it myself until just before Sissy arrived to tell me the security team was on the way!" Kate bellowed back at him furiously. "I tried to tell them! I couldn't get anyone to listen! Instead, they hauled me down to the brig and locked me up!"

Discovering that their heated conversation had the attention of everyone else in the command center, the general dismissed the guard, grasped Kate's upper arm and escorted her to his office adjacent the command room. Urging her toward the chair in front of his desk, he moved to his own chair and dropped heavily into it. "Tell me what you know."

Kate wrestled to bring order to her mind. "In all honesty, we haven't managed to make much progress with them at all. They seemed docile," she added a little defensively. "They haven't shown any signs of aggression. Sissy and I have both interacted with them."

General Hart's face contorted with rage. He pulled up a series of holo images on his computer. "Does that look like the work of docile animals?" he growled.

Bile rose in Kate's throat as she stared at the twisted bodies hidden among the plants she'd so carefully arranged to imitate the Sirian jungle where the eggs had been recovered. She dragged her gaze from the images after a moment. "They went in to kill them," she said shakily, gesturing toward the observation window in the common wall of the command center. "Any animal will attack when they're threatened. If it had been me, or you, or anybody out there, they would've defended their life!"

"Do you see any sign at all that the team attacked? They didn't get off one single shot! They were ambushed. They never knew what hit them!"

As convinced as she'd been that the Sirians were intelligent, that information still sent a jolt through her. Her mouth went dry. "They knew they were coming," she said in a hoarse whisper.

The general stared at her blankly. "How would they know?"

"I don't know how!" Kate said, shooting up from her seat and pacing agitatedly. "They must have heard, or they were intelligent enough to deduce the intent when the team went in. What do you think happened? I rushed in and warned them before I dashed off to try to stop it?"

"Did you?"

"I did not!" Kate snapped. "It didn't occur to me that they could understand that much! We haven't tested their intellect. Everyone assumed they were animals. We haven't had time to observe them enough to collect nearly enough data on their behavior-certainly not enough time to

measure their intelligence!"

"Your team has had over a year! I thought the job of a scientist was to make no assumptions?"

"We're still human!" Kate snapped. "We may be trained to collect the data and analyze it before arriving at any conclusions, but we had no reason to suspect that we were dealing with anything but the flora and fauna of Sirius."

"They breached containment before they even arrived. No one considered the possibility, then, that they were a higher intelligence life-form?"

"They hatched. As far as anybody could determine, they hatched from the eggs we'd brought on board and their natural instinct would be to find food. I'll admit there was some speculation to begin with that they were 'smart' animals, but they didn't display any particular aptitude when we ran preliminary tests on their intelligence."

The general looked disgusted. "So, you're saying we don't really know what we're dealing with?"

Kate bit her lip. "If they deliberately sabotaged

those specific systems aboard the ship and they've been playing us ever since-I'm guessing highly intelligent-at least on a par with humans and possibly even a higher intelligence."

General Hart studied her for a long moment. "I think that's doubtful," he finally said dismissively. "What made you suspect that they were more intelligent than we'd considered?"

Kate didn't agree with him. It was possible that

they were just intelligent enough and intuitive enough to figure out what was going on around them, but she was beginning to think they might have a far larger capacity than humans. After all, they'd been mere babies when they arrived. If they'd figured out how to disable systems aboard the ship to protect themselves, then didn't it follow that they were extremely intelligent? "The data I'd collected," she answered finally. "I'd been going over it, trying to figure out what was bothering me and it suddenly dawned on me that they always seemed to know right where the cameras were ... even though we moved them regularly because they had a way of hiding, making it hard to observe them. When I began searching for the image that had stuck in my mind, I found dozens of them and I realized it

wasn't just coincidence that they always managed to have their backs to the cameras any time they were doing anything. I saw something else, too, that I hadn't noticed." She paused, wondering whether to voice that suspicion or not.

The general lifted his brows questioningly.

Kate shrugged. "I could be wrong, but it looked like they were communicating with one anothersomehow. The alpha-the one we named Ronanalways had his back to the camera-so I don't know if he used hand signals or not, but there were certainly no sounds that I could detect. They could make sounds that aren't detectable to human ears-they might even be capable of speech, have their own language. All I do know is that he seemed to be directing Dax and Jarek-the other two. He would look at them and then they would go off and perform some task as if they'd been told to do it."

The general considered that thoughtfully for a while and finally shook his head. "That seems a little farfetched. Well!" He got to his feet. "That's for someone else to worry about. My job is to have our teams locate them and eliminate the threat."

Kate gaped at him. "You're still going to destroy them? After all I've told you? If they're intelligent, we need to try to communicate with them!"

General Hart's face contorted. "They killed an entire security team, Dr. Drexel! I'm not interested in anything but finding them and eliminating the threat they represent as quickly as possible!"

"But ...! But ...! We have colonists who'll be arriving on Sirius any time now! And more due to ship out! They need to know what they're up against! If they are an intelligent species, we need to try to set up some kind of communications with them!"

* * * *

"They seemed so ... gentle! I still can't believe they ... did that!" Sissy shivered although it was a warm night. "To think I've been going in and out of that habitat for months! They could've I need a drink."

Kate was still in a state of shock herself, but Sissy's comments spawned a surge of anger. "Anybody-any animal is capable of killing given the right circumstances and I'd say survival would bring that out. I heard once about this rabbit that killed a rattlesnake. They'd put the rabbit in the cage with it to feed the snake and the snake chased the poor thing around and around until it finally got it cornered and then the rabbit leapt on the snake and killed it."

Sissy stared at her, blinking a little owlishly. "Seriously?"

"The guy that told me said it was true. He'd paid to watch the snake feed and then he started feeling sorry for the rabbit and told the guy he'd pay him more if he'd take the rabbit out, but the guy refused.

"So you're saying maybe we weren't wrong and maybe they are gentle?"

Kate sucked at her lower lip. The truth was they had shaken her up and she didn't know what to think anymore. She struggled with her thoughts for a moment. "I just don't know. All I'm saying is we can't necessarily judge them as violently aggressive by that incident. Clearly they felt threatened and you and I both know that it wasn't their imagination."

Sissy studied her for a long moment. "But you think they're a lot smarter than we gave them credit for-which means they could've been playing us the whole time, just waiting for a chance to escape. I seriously need a drink. I'm going to the Stargate Lounge. Want to come?"

Kate considered it. Ordinarily, she didn't particularly care for the club scene, but it had been a hell of a week. She struggled with the temptation. "I don't know. I was thinking about heading out to my place to think."

"I don't want to think anymore! We've been cooped up in that damned holding cell for damned near a week-and on station for more than a year! I don't know about you, but I've been doing way too much thinking lately. I need some down time. I seriously need to unwind before I lose it. You're sure you don't want to go with me?"

Put that way, Kate decided it might not be such a bad idea after all. She'd been having nightmares ever since the incident and it certainly hadn't helped her stress level to be left kicking her heels in a cell wondering if she was going to be sitting in jail for months-or years. "You have a point," she

drinking alone!"

The club Sissy had mentioned wasn't far from the space port. Leaving their cars, they took a shuttle over to the club with the intention of getting soused enough that they wouldn't be in any shape to drive home afterwards.

"Hot damn!" Sissy exclaimed when they climbed

said wryly. "I could use a little down time to unwind myself. Maybe a couple of drinks would

Sissy managed a smile. "Great! I really hate

help me sleep."

at the marquee. "It's dance night!"

Kate smiled. "I don't know that I feel like dancing. I might after a couple of drinks"

from the shuttle and paid the driver. She pointed

Sissy laughed. "I mean male dance night! Strippers!"

Kate's belly knotted. "Are you serious? I didn't know they had strip shows here."

"Boy are you out of the loop! You've been serious

way too long. This is really going to be fun!"
Grabbing Kate's arm, she hurried toward the

entrance.

The music was so loud, it was impossible to talk even at the entrance and the level rose several decibels as they passed through the foyer and into the club. Despite Kate's initial reluctance, she felt a surge of excitement swell inside of her as the sound of women screaming with excitement rolled over them. Sissy, who'd paused near the entrance and rose to her tiptoes to crane for a look, bellowed at her. "Let's grab a drink at the bar first. I think we'll have to stand up. I didn't see any place to sit."

Despite her rising enthusiasm, Kate wasn't convinced that she wanted to get in the middle of the mob of women screaming their heads off, but she didn't object when Sissy tugged her toward the bar to grab a drink. As a distraction, she didn't think they could've stumbled upon anything more guaranteed to divert them from their worries, with or without an alcoholic chaser.

Noo settled into the deep shadows at the rear edge of the parking lot, folding his wings. Dae and Rak settled just behind and to either side of him,

but he was only peripherally aware of them as he focused on the building Kate had disappeared inside, trying to decide what sort of place it was.

We are liable to be seen here and I have not seen that they have birds as large as we are, Dae pointed out after a moment.

Their eyes are not made for seeing in the dark, Noo said dismissively. Why do you suppose they are screaming? They do not seem to be frightened or in any sort of distress. All I can detect is excitement.

Rak dragged in a deep breath, struggling for a moment to decipher the scents. "They are

aroused ... this must be a mating place."

Noo and Dae both sent him a sharp look.

Noo's first impulse was to refute the comment, but he had detected the faint scent, as well. Fury welled inside him. For days they had hidden themselves in the Earth forest, taking on the forms of the first beasts they had seen that were large enough to accommodate their mass-some sort of grazing beast-searching for a way back inside so that they might free Kate and take her.

We will have to take a form that appeals to her before that, Rak said.

Dae sent him an irritated look. I did not think she would want us as we look now, he said testily. We could not mate with her in this form if she was

And now that she apparently was free, she had immediately headed toward a mating place!

Well if she is ready to mate, all the better, Dae pointed out as if he had been following Noo's thoughts. All we need do now is separate her from

the others.

interested!

- I do not hear anything inside but females, Noo growled. Maybe this is not a mating place?
- If that is not a mating frenzy I hear I cannot imagine what it would be! Dae snapped irritably, angry that Noo had dismissed his assessment of the situation, particularly when he was becoming aroused from the faint scents he could detect.
- I think we will have to go inside and see what is happening there.
- They immediately hit a roadblock when they tried

to enter through the same portal that Kate and Sissy had used.

"Women only until the show is over. You guys will have to come back in an hour," the woman at the front yelled at them.

Noo, Dae, and Rak retreated to their observation point once more, more puzzled than they had been.

Clearly you were both wrong and this is not a mating place, Noo said, disgusted.

There are males inside, gods damn it! Dae growled. I caught the scent of many males and beyond that I heard the voice of a male!

Do you think the female realized we were not really human males, Rak asked worriedly?

Noo stared at him blankly for a moment before it sank in what Rak was asking, too wrapped up in his thoughts to assimilate the question at first. He considered it briefly. She did not seem alarmed in any way. I do not think she suspects anything. They do not have a very keen sense of smell either. I think we will have to take the form of

females to get inside.

Dae immediately balked at the suggestion. We cannot mate with Kate as females! And I do not

want to be a female, if it comes to that!

Noo glared at him. I want to know what is happening inside! I believe they have males inside already and that we have only been excluded ... for some reason. I am not going to wait here and discover that Kate has already been bred when she leaves this place!

They have strange mating practices, Rak observed.

Noo shrugged a little uncomfortably. It is not that unusual. The dirg and the mybi gather to mate once a year on Ra.

Yes, but they are solitary creatures most times. If they did not gather during the mating season they would have no one to mate with!

These are alien creatures, Dae pointed out. We cannot expect them to behave as Mother Ra's creatures do!

We are wasting time here, Noo said impatiently.

You two stay here. I will make myself appear as a female and discover what I can.

Dae and Rak exchanged a look.

I suppose you expect us to believe you will not seize the opportunity to mate with Kate if it presents itself, Dae said sarcastically?

Noo narrowed his eyes. I am the alpha. I will mate first in any case.

We will go with you, Rak said hurriedly. Closing his eyes, he summoned an image of the female form and struggled to conform his mass into that shape. He discovered when he had managed the transformation that both Noo and Dae were looking at him strangely. He looked down at himself, but he thought that he had managed the shape well enough. What?

Noo and Dae exchanged a look.

You are a very tall female, Noo said finally.

Rak frowned at him. If I am not tall, then I will have to be wide and I do not want to be wide!

You are an ugly female, Dae said tightly. You

might just as well be wide also! And it is not a bad thing. You do not want the males inside to try to mate with you.

They hit another snag when they tried to go in the second time.

"The show is nearly over-I'll let you go in for ten credits," the woman at the front told them.

The three exchanged uneasy looks, trying to

recall some reference to credits that would explain what the woman wanted. Angry when he could not, Noo focused on the woman and searched her mind. A blank look crossed her features after a moment. Surprised, Noo sent a questioning look at Dae.

Dae shrugged. Her mind has gone blank. What do you suppose caused that?

She is not accustomed to speaking with her mind. Perhaps it is that?

I think we should go before anyone notices that you have fucked up her mind, Rak said uneasily.

I have not fucked up her mind, Noo snapped, but he turned and strode briskly toward the entrance

to the mating hall.

Rak had turned to leave, but when he saw that Noo and Dae were hurrying inside, he followed them. All three of them jolted to a halt once they were inside, stunned at the teaming, screaming mass of females.

Gods! There are so many, Rak exclaimed!

It is just as I suspected, Noo growled, scanning the room. There are males in here!

Those are for security, Dae said dismissivly, and then froze when he spied the males that seemed to have captured the attention of all of the females. Those are performing ... a mating dance!

Noo studied them for several moments. Gods! There are only six of them and there are hundreds of females here! They cannot all expect to mate with those few, he said angrily, far more worried that Kate had come here to be part of the mating ritual than he had been before he had seen the males.

Dae was studying the reaction of the females to the gyrating males on the platform. We could

imitate them, he said doubtfully.

Why are they stripping off their protective skins.

Why are they stripping off their protective skins, Rak asked doubtfully?

To incite the interest of the females, clearly, Noo retorted tightly. Do you not see the way they scream and jump up and down with excitement each time the males take another piece of the skins off?

Dae studied the females for a while and transferred his attention to the males again. I did not think they would look like that without the skins. I am certain the males on the space station did not-not just as these do, at any rate. These are more muscular and undoubtedly far stronger. Maybe the security guards, he added doubtfully.

Obviously this is why the females are here, Noo responded tightly. These must be mating males and the others are only for ... whatever it is that they do on the space station.

The males are moving from the dance area to choose females, Rak observed. He had no sooner pointed that out than Noo began to force his way through the crowd, searching. Where are we

going?

Noo flicked him an impatient glance. To guard

Kate from the mating males, he growled.

Like this?

Noo halted abruptly and looked down at himself, then surveyed the crowded room. There is no place to transform ... and no time when the males are choosing!

They all spied Kate and Sissy at almost the same moment and the male moving steadily in Kate's direction. Galvanized by the certainty that the male would home in on their prize, they hurried to reach her first and surround her. Noo blocked the male's advance, fixing him with a challenging stare. The smile the male had pasted on his face began to look a little strained as he surveyed Noo.

"You want a private dance, baby?"

Noo narrowed his eyes at the male, sorting the sounds he had learned in an effort to grasp the meaning. "No," he enunciated finally.

He had failed to grasp the precise meaning of the question, but he thought the male's intention was

him that the human male's senses were so poor that, even in mating fever, he could not tell that he was also a male, but then it had not taken long to discover that none of the humans had very keen senses.

Looking relieved, the male tried to step around

fairly clear. Anger and disgust flickered through

him. Dae moved to intercept him and the male looked Dae over as he had Noo.

"I want a lap dance!" Sissy called out from behind them.

Noo stiffened as the male grinned and tried to push between him and Dae. He did not particularly care if Sissy mated with the male, but he was damned if he would let the male that close to Kate! He gripped the male's arm and jutted his head forward threateningly until he was almost nose to nose with the male. "Mine woman!" he said in a low growl. "Fuck off!"

The male sent him a startled look. "Hey! No problem."

A little surprised that the male had yielded so easily but satisfied, Noo released him.

"Fucking bull dike," the male muttered under his breath as he turned and surveyed the immediate area for a likely female.

Anger flickered through Noo at the insult. He was not certain what the fuck it meant, but the tone was enough to assure him it was an insult. He tamped his anger with an effort. Fighting over females suitable for mating was not unusual once the fever had the males in its grip, but he was not so focused on his own female that he had failed to notice that there had not been a single challenge. He supposed, with some disgust, that it was due to the fact that these mating males had so many females to choose from. They merely moved from one female to the next, hovered long enough to mate and moved to another.

They are very quick to seed the females, Dae said thoughtfully, his voice carefully neutral.

Yes, but how are they seeding them, Rak asked? I cannot see that they do more than rub against them and I do not see any exchange of fluids.

They are pumping the seed into them. See the movement of the lower body, Noo said dismissively, far more interested in guarding Kate

I cannot see that they inserted anything, Rak said testily. How could they pump it into the female if they did not?

at the moment than the process of human mating.

- That comment effectively caught Noo's attention, but when he looked around he saw that the males were now moving away from the females. Why would they pump if not to eject seed?
- I am not disputing the logic of that, only saying I did not see them actually seed any of the females, Rak said somewhat indignantly. Maybe they impregnate the females differently than we have ever encountered?
- We have not impregnated any females, Dae said dryly. That would not be difficult.
- Rak glared at him. In the memory, he said tightly. The fathers before us always inserted their member into the female to impregnate them.
- Dae rolled his eyes. There is nothing wrong with my memory! I know that! But the fathers before us never mated with any creatures like these!
- Frustration emanated from Rak. I know that, gods

damn it! You are missing the point! The point is that they must mate differently and how are we to manage it when they do and we do not know how they do? Maybe we should ask one of the females to explain the process?

Noo frowned. Too dangerous. We should know. If we give away the fact that we do not then they will know that we are not actually one of them.

There is no reason for them to think that. Their senses are not keen enough to detect the difference and, as far as we know, there are none here able to transform their appearance. Why would it occur to them that we had?

Noo flicked an impatient glance at Dae. You do not think they will be wondering by now how we managed to escape? Their senses may be pathetically inadequate, but they are intelligent and inquisitive. They will be trying to figure it out and they know that we are very different from them. We do not want to behave in any way that might alert them.

I believe that I will follow the mating males and see if I can find out what we need to know. There are so many voices here that I cannot focus on the minds of the males.

Should I stay to guard Kate, Rak asked?

Noo glanced around and shook his head. She should be safe for now from mating minded males. They have all gone that way and if there are three of us searching, I believe we will find out what we need to know more quickly.

"They scared the guy off!" Sissy said indignantly. "Did you see that?"

Kate was studying the glass in her hand, trying to decide whether it was a very bad idea to finish her drink or not when she already felt as high as a kite. All she could say was that they either mixed some damned strong drinks in the place or she'd lost any tolerance for alcohol she'd ever had. She was sure she shouldn't be this drunk with only two drinks! "See what?"

Sissy blinked at her. "Those women were huge! They looked like ... bouncers in drag! How the fuck could you have missed them?"

Kate stared at her friend hard for a long moment

well. I'm horny already. I'd just be more horny and I don't see a handy pole to climb."

"Show's over. They'll let the men in now," Sissy said with a shrug. "Could be we'll find something worth taking home."

and finally snickered a little drunkenly. "They weren't transvestites? Are you serious?"

"I'm seriously pissed off I didn't get a lap dance!"

Kate considered it and finally sighed. "Just as

Kate did a mental inventory and decided that she really was horny, not just wishful. "Ok! I'm in! Let's stay and see if we see anything interesting. I think I'll have another drink. I'm going to have to be really relaxed to hook up." She leaned closer to Sissy and lowered her voice. "I have this problem with strange dick."

problem?"
"Don't laugh! I'm serious here! I can't relax

enough to enjoy it."

Sissy uttered a snorting laugh. "What kind of

Sissy nodded sympathetically. "That is a problem seeing as how you don't have a boyfriend."

"Exactly! And seeing as how I haven't had a damned boyfriend in ... Fuck! What year is it?"

Sissy snickered. "I don't know Wait! How long were we on the space station?"

"I should look up my ex," Kate said abruptly. "He won't mind giving me a little dick."

"His companion might mind him giving you a little dick." Sissy snickered. "And that's all he could give you anyway if what you said about him was true."

Kate frowned. "I told you that? I don't remember telling you that. Guess I was pissed off and felt like being nasty. It wasn't little. It was average. The dick just didn't know how to use his dick!"

Sissy patted her hand. "Well, he's somebody else's problem now! Just as well you ditched him. I don't know why you'd want to look him up anyway if he didn't know how to please you."

"Good point! Strange dick it is! Sort of a roll of the dice," Kate said agreeably.

"Odds ought to be at least fifty-fifty that you'll get

something good."

"Maybe they ought to be," Kate said glumly, "but I've been fucked by the fickle finger of fate more times than I can count!"

Sissy uttered another snorting laugh. "Well we'll just wait until they've knocked back a few drinks. Most guys have a hard time getting off when they've had a few. It'll give you more time to get yours."

Kate considered that. "Yeah, but if I get any higher I'll pass out in the middle and start snoring ... and if I get too sober I'll be tense."

Sissy patted her hand. "I'll watch your back and keep you in the goldilocks zone."

* * * *

Finding himself in an empty corridor, Noo stopped as soon as they had stepped through the door the males had gone through and assumed the form of one of the security guards he had seen when he had entered the building. Dae and Rak followed suit, clearly relieved to discard the female forms they had taken. Noo glanced at them

and frowned. We cannot all have the same face! They do not look the same!

Shrugging, Dae summoned another face to mind and changed his appearance. Rak, he saw, was having some difficulty. He projected an image into his nest mate's mind.

Rak shifted, but he was not happy. This is an ugly face, he said somewhat indignantly.

What does it matter, Dae asked indifferently?

I do not want to be ugly! Kate will not like this face!

How do you know, Noo asked, equally indifferent?

I think it is ugly! Why would she not think so?

Because she is human? They have a different perception of what is appealing and what is not.

Rak frowned, thinking that over as they proceeded along the corridor. I think Kate's face is very appealing and I am not human.

I find her very appealing, too," Noo agreed.

what the humans think of as beautiful, Dae said.

How would you know that?

I also find her appealing. In fact, I believe she is

Dae shrugged. The way the human males look at her and the things they think when they look at her. Those others on the space station may not be suitable mating males, but they have thought about breeding her.

Rak considered that indignantly for a moment before he recalled what had started the conversation. But this face belongs to one of them and clearly Kate does not consider it appealing, gods damn it!

How do you know?

Do not start that again, gods damn it! You just said they were not suitable mating males!

We are assuming that because they did not. We do not know that for certain, Noo said somewhat distractedly. I think there is a lot more that we do not know than there is that we do know for certain.

All three of them halted when they reached a room

where the mating males had gathered. A little disconcerted that they had been so preoccupied with their discussion that they had not realized they would simply walk right up upon the males, they glanced around, trying to decide whether they should retreat or not.

Discovering that the males were in the process of stripping the last of the skins off or replacing them with other skins, Noo decided they might as well discover what they could while the opportunity presented itself.

It was something of a relief to see that the human males had members not unlike their own. They were not precisely the same, naturally, but he thought close enough in appearance and functionality. Of course, even the human males were not all the same. Just as they varied in height, breadth, overall shape and size and muscle mass-and the appearance of their facetheir members also varied.

Mindful of the effect his probing had had on the female at the entrance, Noo carefully skimmed their minds in search of the information they sought. He had just focused on one who clearly had mating on his mind when one of the males

noticed them and uttered a string of sounds.

"What's up?"

"Problems?" another asked.

Noo glanced at Dae and Rak for help.

"No," Dae said, pleased with himself for a handful of moments that he seemed to have uttered the sounds correctly. The mating males exchanged questioning looks that made him uneasy, however.

"The show's over," one of the mating males growled, a challenge in his voice. "As you can see, we don't have any of the women backstage."

Noo nodded as he had seen them do and turned around, urging Dae and Rak out before him. They paused when they had covered about half the distance between the room where the human males were changing skins and the other room where the mating females were. The images in their minds were not clear. I still do not know how they breed. Did either of you catch anything?

I did not try, Rak responded uncomfortably. I thought you would search their minds for the

information.

Non sent him a look of discust and turned to Dae

Noo sent him a look of disgust and turned to Dae. Did you capture anything?

Nothing clear, Dae said evasively. Only more of the humping.

Noo's lips tightened. Well, they have members. Clearly they are designed to stick them in to the females and pump their seed inside! They cannot be that different from the females our clan has mated with. They will have a hole to receive! We will figure it out, he finished decisively.

We are going to attempt a mating now, Rak asked uneasily when Noo strode decisively toward the door once more?

Noo flicked an impatient glance at him. Of course! She is ready to mate or she would not be here!

Yes, but She will not like this face and she will not want to take me as a mate!

We already discussed that, Dae pointed out dismissively.

And I am still not satisfied! Rak snapped.

Noo halted as they reached the door. He may have a point, he said thoughtfully. Well, not actually a point in that, but it puts me in mind of an important thing that I had not considered.

What point?

If we use a face that she recognizes, she will expect us to be that human. Rak cannot use that face.

You took yours from that guard that is here, Dae pointed out.

And you took yours from that guard on the space station. We cannot use any of these faces.

What faces are we to use, then?

Noo thought it over. I think we must use our own.

She will certainly recognize those when she has seen them every day for more than an Earth year, Dae objected.

Noo sent him a look. Those are not our faces! Those are only the forms we took to make them not afraid of us. Our real faces, you mean, Rak said doubtfully? But ... they are not human faces. She is more likely to be afraid, it seems to me, than to agree to a mating.

Noo uttered an irritated huff. They are not very different from human faces. We must have human bodies and human skin. They will appear to be human faces to her with human skin!

Yes! Very ugly human faces, Rak muttered.