



Adaptation

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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!

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?"

Minks narrowed his eyes at the objects under question.

"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 would be dead, decayed, and useless by the time the ship made it back.

He finally shrugged. "Get them, Mills. I think it is rocks, but they're along the streambed, as 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 in his voice. "The readings indicate the object is soft."

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

"It's by the water," Waters murmured. "That would seem to imply that, wouldn't it?"

"Water birds nest close to water," Sonja Rice

pointed out. "Some mammals, too."

"If it was earth, it could be any of those 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?"

* * * *

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 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.

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.

Noo climbed down from the pod where they had 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 pods? Dae asked. Even things that should not be in pods?

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

Noo tilted his head up and stared at the sky. I do not see Sheva. Nor any sister stars. The sky looks like the ground. He frowned. It is another pod. We 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.

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 guickly, 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.

He'd made it almost halfway up when he stepped 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!

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?"

As if the question she'd voiced had unlocked 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.

"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 readyyou 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 pointed out shakily as they started down the corridor.

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

"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.

"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 crossbreedings 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!"

Chapter Two

"Don't get too close!" Bill snapped. "This could 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. 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 many!-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 guard 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 plan worked so smoothly that it was almost as if 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 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 the sounds that the humans made. More 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 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 not confident that we could do so convincingly 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.

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

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 for they had very little strength to oppose threats, 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 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-curty 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 thoughtswhich 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 collecting. With them, it was easy enough to pass 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 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 said wryly. "I could use a little down time to unwind myself. Maybe a couple of drinks would help me sleep."

Sissy managed a smile. "Great! I really hate 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 from the shuttle and paid the driver. She pointed 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"

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. 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.

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 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, 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 fairly clear. Anger and disgust flickered through 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 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 at the moment than the process of human mating.

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

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 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

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."

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."

Sissy uttered a snorting laugh. "What kind of problem?"

"Don't laugh! I'm serious here! I can't relax enough to enjoy it."

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.

I also find her appealing. In fact, I believe she is what the humans think of as beautiful, Dae said.

How would you know that?

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.

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.

Chapter Four

"Oh my god! Don't look now, but I think those transvestites are headed our way!"

Kate whipped a look around and spied the three tall, brawny males headed toward them. "Fuck! I made eye contact with the one in front!" she whispered, looking away quickly.

"I told you not to look, damn it!"

"You really think that's them?"

"Did you see anybody else built like that?"

"Are they still headed this way?"

"I'm not going to look! They'll take it as encouragement!" Sissy flicked a quick look out of the corner of her eye. "Shit! They are! Let's duck into the lady's room!"

Kate jolted out of her seat and looked around a little wildly. "Where is it?"

Sissy grabbed her arm and started hauling her through the throng in the other direction. "I don't know. We'll find it."

"Actually, the one in front was kind of good looking."

"They're transvestites!"

"So? They're straight, you know. Why would they approach us if they weren't?"

"I don't care if they are. I can't get 'in' to men that like to dress like women."

Kate considered it. "Good point. It's a damned shame that that one is way better looking than anything else I've seen tonight."

"I wouldn't call him handsome. His face is too angular."

"Well, I would!"

"Attractive, not handsome."

Kate decided it wasn't worth arguing about. They finally spotted the lady's room and darted toward it. Obviously, the trio was a lot more determined than they'd considered, though. The men managed to intercept them before they could take cover.

Since she didn't want to make it really obvious that she was fleeing, Kate smiled up at the men, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu sweep over her as she looked at them. "Excuse us. We were headed to the lady's room."

They frowned, all three of them, and she could see that they were struggling to digest what she'd said. Either they were really drunk-and they didn't seem to be-or they hadn't heard her clearly enough to understand.

The one in the forefront seemed to discard the effort. "You fuck me, yes?"

Kate felt her jaw slide to half mast even though she was certain she'd heard him wrong, and it

wasn't just the thick, almost incomprehensible accent that convinced her of it. She cut a look at Sissy to see if she'd completely misunderstood what the man had just asked her.

"We fuck you, no!" Sissy snapped.

The man glared at her. "No ast you! Ast Kat!"

Maybe she was drunker than she'd realized? "Uh ... you don't speak English very well, do you?"

Uneasiness flickered in his eyes. "No say right?"

Kate bit her lip, struggling with amusement she knew she shouldn't be feeling. It occurred to her, though, that as blunt as the question was, she had to give him points for honesty. Actually, she supposed he just wasn't familiar enough with the language to do anything except go straight to the point.

"You're supposed to at least pretend you have some interest in something besides fucking!" Sissy said indignantly.

He looked confused and glanced at the other two men as if seeking help. Kate took pity on himbecause he really was cute! And built beautifully if the material stretched over his massive frame was any indication! "Actually, I don't mind."

She glanced at Sissy and shrugged. "You know they couldn't get in without a psyche eval and disease clearance. I'm sure it'll be alright and that was all I was looking for, after all."

Sissy looked unconvinced, but she finally shrugged. Leaning down, she spoke next to Kate's ear. "Just don't forget to reset your alarm system when you get to your place. The guy's a monster-no way you could fend him off if you changed your mind-and people can fake those psyche evaluations, you know."

"I won't. See you later, ok?"

Sissy looked unhappy, but she merely nodded. Shaking her head, she moved past the men and headed into the lady's room.

Kate smiled up at her hunk. So he was 'in' to dressing in women's clothing! It wasn't as if she was looking for any kind of commitment! She just wanted to get laid and he was the best looking man she'd seen all night-including the dancers! "Come on, cutie! Let's go to my place and fool around."

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"Dis mean fuck?"
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Kate snickered. "We'll get to that."

He still seemed a little confused, but the moment she tugged at his arm and started toward the exit, he seemed to grasp the situation. In the blink of an eye he went from passive to aggressive, leading the way. It wasn't until they stopped on the curb outside to wait for a shuttle that Kate realized his two friends had followed him. Uneasiness slithered through her, but she dismissed it. They probably just figured there was no point in hanging around when Sissy had been so nasty to them. They probably couldn't speak English as well as the guy she'd picked.

"What's your name? I'm Kate." She frowned as soon as she'd said it, recalling abruptly that he seemed to know her name already. She couldn't remember that Sissy had called her by name when they'd been standing by their table, but she finally decided she must have and he'd overheard.

"Noo."

Kate frowned. "You knew already?"

He looked confused. "Name Noo."

Kate blinked at him, as confused as he seemed to be. "I'm lost."

He stared at her for a moment and looked around. "Are here."

Kate compressed her lips in an effort to crush the urge to chuckle. "Let's try that again, shall we? My name is Kate. What is your name?" she asked slowly, enunciating each word carefully.

He looked like he would say something, but then he paused and seemed to think it over. "Ronan."

A jolt went through Kate. How freaky was it that his name was the same as the one she'd chosen for the alpha Sirian? She met his gaze and felt another wave of uneasiness when she saw that he was studying her intently ... almost as if he expected a reaction. That same odd sense of déjà vu traveled through her again, but she dismissed it. It had to be the alcohol. She didn't feel drunk enough to be hallucinating, but obviously her judgment was way off and her imagination working on overtime. "Man! I am so drunk!"

"What dis drunk?"

Kate shook her head, diverted by the arrival of the shuttle.

And then she was distracted when Ronan's companions climbed into the shuttle with them.

Trying to convince herself that they hadn't, somehow, gotten the idea that they were all invited to her place, she gave the computer directions to her cabin and settled back a little uneasily. She was so preoccupied with her own tension and the thoughts darting through her mind that they'd been traveling a while before she emerged sufficiently to see that the men were also tense.

This was a lot more awkward than she'd expected!

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea after all? Bolstered by the drinks she'd had, surrounded by so many other people in the club with pretty much the same goal in mind, it had seemed perfectly reasonable to pursue her interest in appeasing her sexual needs. It had seemed completely safe, given the precautions they took in clubs these days to insure the health and safety of their patrons, despite Sissy's warnings.

The small home she thought of as her little cabin in the hills, though, was fairly isolated. Unlike the city where everyone was practically stacked on top of everyone else, or even the immediate surroundings where homes still stood shoulder to shoulder, close enough if you tossed anything out the window it was liable to land in the neighbor's living room, her place was yards from the nearest neighbors. Surrounded by jungle-like plant growth, it didn't just give her the illusion of being miles from anyone else, the thickly planted vard that surrounded the little house prevented her from seeing or hearing her neighbors and vice versa.

Beyond that, most of her close neighbors were fellow scientists working on the colony project, just as she had been, except unlike her they were still on the space station.

She'd even left Sissy back at the club-which meant the only neighbor she knew for a fact had returned to Earth was beyond range for any sort of distress call.

She didn't think those thoughts would've made her quite as uneasy if she hadn't noticed that the men were nervous and begun to wonder why they were.

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You should not have used the name that Kate gave you, Dae said irritably. She is suspicious now.

Noo had been thinking pretty much the same thing and it still annoyed him to have Dae point it out. My name was too unfamiliar to her. Many on the space station shared the same names. There is no reason to suppose she will guess who we are only because I used a human name that happens to be the same as the one she chose for me.

She looked startled when you verbalized it, Rak said. What do you suppose this thing is? And where do you think it is taking us? I have to say I do not particularly like being closed inside such a small space or traveling at this speed. I feel like it will slam into one of the other things any time and shatter.

Do not look and it will not bother you, Dae advised him. Clearly the humans consider it safe or they would not pile into them and ignore the way that it darts at such crazed speeds and narrowly misses the others.

Rak glared at him. I do not see that it will help not to look when I already know what this thing is doing. In any case, each time it suddenly stops and takes another direction, my belly knots and I feel the sudden change even if I do not watch it! My dick crawled into my belly the last near miss and I am doubtful I will be able to coax the damned thing out to breed even if we find a place for it.

I will have no trouble and I am alpha so that is not of any great importance, Noo said coolly.

It is of importance to me, gods damn it, Rak snapped!

You will have plenty of time to coax it out, Dae said. Noo is first and I am second.

Rak sent him an indignant glare. This darting and

twisting and suddenly stopping does not bother either of you?

No, Noo and Dae replied almost at the same instant.

Rak did not believe that it did not, but he had already volunteered the fact that it did bother him and there was no retracting that now. It pissed him off, especially when he did not believe for a moment that it did not bother them at all. Maybe it did not unnerve them as much as it did him. but this was not the same as traveling in the humans' spacecraft! They could not feel the speed until the Earth mother had embraced them and even then there were no obstacles that the craft had to avoid! It had made him feel sick the way that thing had dropped toward the ground, but this was much worse! Even though it was not moving nearly as fast, the sudden shifts in speed and direction were far more disorienting and far more unnerving!

He transferred his attention to Kate after a few moments and saw that she was looking a little sick herself. "Wha dis ting?"

She flicked a startled look in his direction and

stared at him blankly for a long moment. "You mean the taxi?"

Rak frowned, but he knew she had not used that word before. "Sut-tal."

She blinked at him, still looking blank. "They don't have shuttles where you're from?"

Dae slammed his elbow into his side, knocking the breath from him before he could attempt an answer.

"Hab tings like dis," Noo said tightly, sending Rak a warning look.

Kate glanced from one man to the next and returned her attention to Ronan. "The accent confuses me. Where did you say you were from?"

The urge to choke the life out of Rak swept through Noo. He struggled for a moment to come up with an answer that would not make her more suspicious and decided that claiming any of the place names he recalled probably was not a good idea. He formed his lips into a smile. "No say."

Kate smiled back at him. "So ... where are you from?"

Noo felt his smile stiffen. There seemed no hope for it. "Ra."

Her expression went blank. She frowned. "I'm not familiar with that. That's a town?"

She seemed more confused than disbelieving, which was some relief, but Noo could see that he needed to distract her. The trouble was, he could not think of any way to distract her. Ruefully, it occurred to him, belatedly, that his lack of facility with their method of communications was liable to create problems he had not anticipated. In the memory, none of the fathers had ever encountered such a problem so there was nothing there to aid him now. There was no comfort in the realization that the problem had not arisen because their clan rarely came upon a species that appealed to them that had intelligence to equal or surpass their own. He had to deal with the problem. "No say N'glish very aoot."

To his surprise, relief, and delight, Kate chuckled.

He was a little miffed, as well. Even to his own ears, he was well aware that he had not

successfully verbalized the sounds they made, but he had been convinced he could manage closely enough to pass for one of them.

"I think it's cute."

Discomfort wafted through Noo and heat traveled with it. The desire, he had no problem with. He had coveted Kate on many levels from the first and begun to want her on a sexual level even before his body had matured to a degree to allow him to breed.

The heat he felt in his face and ears was not a byproduct of desire, however. It was directly connected to his discomfort and the dismaying certainty that he was not passing as human well at all.

Thankfully, before he could think of anything else to try to verbalize to distract her, they arrived at their destination. His interest was fairly caught when he turned to study the view beyond the bubble pod they had traveled in and saw a thick, luscious growth of plant-life. Pleasure wafted through him-not just to see something so reminiscent of the clan memory bestowed upon him of his home world, Ra-for even though he had never actually seen his home world with his own eyes, the clan memory was passed to each new generation as a matter of course-but because Kate had chosen such a familiar place to breed with them.

She would make a perfect queen for their brood!

As appealing as he had found her in so many ways, some of the differences between his clan and hers made him uneasy. He wanted, desperately, to bring the strengths of her clan into his own. He had not been greatly disturbed about the weaknesses he had also detected because he had believed-still believed-that the strengths of his clan would overcome. He had worried that Kate, herself, might have difficulty growing accustomed to their ways, though, and she would have to since humans, he had learned, gestated their young within their bodies-which meant that the only way they would be able to guard their 'nestlings' would be to guard Kate as the nest.

And they could not properly do that without taking her back to Ra.

That was a problem for another time, however. The craft that had brought them to Kate's world had taken humans back to his home world, he knew-which made it all the more imperative to his view to adapt traits of the human clan. They would have to find another to take them home, but breeding her was more vital at the moment.

He was ready for that-more than ready-eager! Impatient from the many months of waiting for an opportunity and more so because he had sensed Kate was ready and eager, as well.

He discovered when they emerged from the traveling pod she called a shuttle, though, that Kate was now wavering between the eagerness he had sensed in her before and the uneasiness he had also sensed-except that the uneasiness seemed to have become dominant.

"Uh ... I don't want to sound mean ... but I really only expected to have sex with you."

Noo was not unfamiliar with the word sex. The problem was that he had never entirely grasped the precise meaning of it. At times when he had scanned it in their minds, it had seemed to refer only to whether or not a particular entity was male or female. At times it appeared to be a reference to breeding and still other times it seemed some sort of recreation. He interpreted her current meaning fairly quickly to pertain to the breeding he had on his mind and although he was pleased that she had confirmed that she meant to breed with him, he was not particularly happy that she also seemed to be refusing to breed with the others.

Naturally enough, being the alpha, he considered his own seed far more important. He was more likely to breed an alpha being one himself than they were, but he had also begun to realize that three hybrids would be better for the clan than one. He glanced at Dae and Rak speculatively, but he did not see giving up the opportunity to secure the future of his clan only because she had become uncertain, now, that this was something she wanted. "Dese" He hesitated, trying to summon a word she would grasp. "Broders. Goot ... uh ... sexers."

Kate blinked at him and then abruptly struggled with a mixture of amusement, interest, and dismay when his meaning finally sank in. "Are they?" she managed to ask.

He nodded-they nodded vigorously-convinced that they could be regardless of a lack of actual experience.

"Yes, well Oh! What the hell! This should be interesting at the very least!" Kate said, abruptly capitulating and turning to lead the way inside. "Just so we're working on the same page-this isn't just for your entertainment! I expect plenty of foreplay."

She was nervous. Her buzz from the alcohol she'd consumed seemed to have completely worn off-a fact not supported by her decisions so far! Still, it was more because of her nervousness than eagerness that she went straight to her room as soon as she was inside without pausing to play good hostess and offer her guests-the invited and uninvited-any sort of refreshments.

A jolt went through her that was an interesting mixture of pleased surprise and dismay when she turned around and discovered that all three men were already naked and, from the looks of things, ready!

My god they were beautifully built, though! The exotic dancers didn't have a thing on these guys!

And hung like young stallions! There was definitely a strong familial resemblance on that

part of their anatomy even though she'd felt somewhat doubtful about Ronan's claim that these were his brothers.

"Wha dis foreplay mean?"

The question brought Kate's focus from the magical horns to the 'trumpeteer' that had asked her about the taxi. She'd been too focused on Ronan to notice much about the two men with him-maybe a little too high, too-and it had been too dark inside the shuttle to tell much about any of them beyond the fact that they were all built like bouncers and at least appeared to be very muscular beneath their clothes.

His features weren't as harsh and angular as Ronan's. In point of fact, they leaned close to 'pretty boy'. She struggled with the cliché that leapt to mind-pretty equaled dumb as dirt! But it was hard to set that aside considering the questions he'd asked even though she told herself that Ronan had already proven his grasp of English wasn't all that good.

A mixture of resentment and resignation settled in her as she transferred her attention to the middle brother. This one looked like a cross between the first two. His features fell somewhere between the harshly male features of Ronan and the 'pretty boy' good looks of the 'dumb' one.

"Please tell me it's just the word you aren't familiar with," she muttered, then added dryly and a little more loudly. "It's called getting me ready. I hope you guys don't think this is going to be a whambam thing! I want to enjoy it, too! I need some warm up time."

The three exchanged a look she found hard to decipher, but she figured she'd made her point. Discarding her outer clothing, she climbed into the middle of her bed in her bra and panties and settled to wait.

Which was when they began to do the most peculiar thing!

Dancing!

Not just any kind of dance! They were imitating the exotic dancers!

Kate sat up and gaped at them for several moments, too stunned at first to do more than stare at them blankly. There was no question in her mind that they were imitating the dance moves of the exotic dancers. She wasn't certain of why they were-even the alcohol in her blood didn't make that seem at all reasonable-but she was certain that that was where they'd gotten the moves.

Actually, they were a good bit better at it than most of the dancers she'd seen-and that still didn't prevent an exquisite sense of discomfort from enveloping her. She felt herself blushing all over the moment her shock wore off.

She could understand foreigners having a problem with the language-even some confusion over customs-but this went way beyond incomprehensible!

She had to fight the urge to close her eyes or pull the cover up over her head to spare her own blushes. It was only the reflection that she would make them feel badly that made her clench her hands in her lap instead. She was so relieved when they finally danced their way to the bed and climbed in with her, too grateful to have those embarrassing moments behind her, to consider pointing out that that wasn't her idea of foreplay. In any case, she hadn't expected all three to pile into the bed with her at the same time! She had envisioned a night filled with sex and anticipated that somewhere along the way she was bound to get her cookie even if they totally sucked at foreplay, but she'd been thinking more along the lines of a parade of hunks.

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It was disturbing that the mating dance did not seem to have the desired effect and Ronan was still debating whether to continue or discard that effort to interest her when he reached the bed where Kate was sitting. It seemed to him that she was only becoming more tense rather than lessand not in the sense of preparing to receive him. She seemed to relax fractionally when he paused beside the bed, however, and it occurred to him that the mating dance probably had not been necessary at all. She had already accepted them.

He felt like a dunce when that occurred to him.

He decided to put it down to eagerness to claim her, his anxiety because she was an unfamiliar creature and therefore her particular breeding methods completely unknown to him, and the inevitable doubts that he was as physically prepared to perform as he was eager to try.

It brought to mind the fact that he was no more, at this point, than a visual imitation of the humans since he had not, yet, absorbed the essence that would allow him to complete the transition. He would not be able to successfully breed her until he did that!

It relieved him that she seemed ready to accept him when he settled on the bed beside her.

There was something to be thankful for even if it did bother him that the human senses were so inadequate!

Expelling a pent up breath, he lifted a hand and settled the pads of his fingertips lightly on her bare forearm. Surprise flickered through him. As smooth as her skin had looked to him, he had not expected it to be so soft to the touch. Even the muscles beneath the skin felt far more malleable than he had expected.

He debated briefly, but although the male skin had seemed to be the same, the muscles beneath had appeared to be harder-or at least the muscles of the mating males had. Focusing, he manipulated his skin texture to match hers, leaving his muscles as they were. He was still debating what part of her would offer him the best opening to collect a sample of her essence when Dae and Rak decided peel her protective skins from her to examine her more thoroughly.

Noo tensed, more than half expecting Kate to object since she had not taken them off herself. Instead, she helped them remove them. The moment she settled back again, Noo focused on her mouth as his objective. Capturing her face with one hand, he leaned down to align his mouth with hers just as Dae and Rak each grabbed one of her legs and pushed it out of the way to examine her genitalia.

She sucked in a quick breath, either to object or from surprise, but Noo forestalled her by covering her mouth with his. Triumph assailed him as he instantly detected the chemicals that were both unique to her clan and to her alone. He sucked at her mouth and tongue, absorbing her essence with a mixture of relief and pleasure as he felt his body changing, aligning itself to hers so that he could complete the mating cycle. There are three holes here, Rak said, a mixture of triumph and confusion threading his voice. We were right! It will require penetration. I wonder which hole is the right one?

The one in the middle, Dae said confidently, ignoring Kate's attempt to evade him and examining all three with his finger. These other two are too small.

How do you know, Rak demanded? She seemed to like it when you stroked this one.

The members of the mating males would not fit in either of these, Dae informed him impatiently. They cannot morph themselves into other forms. He pushed his finger into the hole experimentally and felt a surge of triumph.

There is no point in finding the correct hole, Noo said irritably, until you have taken her essence and completed the transition. You cannot mate with her as you are!

There is essence here, Dae said tightly. When he had examined the moisture on his finger, he poked the digit into his mouth and sucked it. Rak dove for the place, but Dae blocked his attempt to take possession, shoving one finger from his other hand into the hole to plug it. Mine, he snarled.

Rak growled low in his throat.

Stop it, Noo snarled! Find another place to gather her essence!

Rak sat back, glaring at Noo and Dae in angry frustration for a moment, but he had detected pleasure wafting from her when Dae had stroked the little bud at the top of her cleft and there was no doubt in his mind that it was an entry into her body whether it was a mating hole or not. Unfortunately, Dae had decided to replace his finger with his tongue to gather her essence and he was blocking access. Leaning down again, he squeezed his head past Dae's and ran his tongue over the little bud. Kate stiffened. Doubt flickered. through him but almost immediately he detected a wave of pleasure from her and he caught a trace of the essence he had been seeking.

Ignoring the waves of hostility wafting from Dae, he fought to get close enough to suck the bud into his mouth and pull her essence into himself. She bucked several times, but he was too focused on drawing forth enough of her chemicals to make the final transition to think past that need.

There are eggs here, Dae exclaimed, feeling strangely hot and light headed. Hundreds of them!

That news startled Noo so much that he broke off his exploration of Kate's mouth and turned his head to look at Dae. You are certain?

I smell them. Only one is close. The others are trapped within two little nests in her belly.

We need more!

Dae lifted his head reluctantly. I have detected a chemical that will bring more forth.

Then give it to her!

Dae studied Kate doubtfully. She cannot carry many in such a small nesting area. Maybe only one egg is free because she can only carry one?

While Noo considered that with a mixture of uneasiness and frustration, he discovered that Kate had begun to thrash and groan. Curious, he lightly touched her mind. The pleasure flooding her mind struck him like a punch to the belly, rolling through him and producing a reaction that seemed to magnify her pleasure many times within his own body. He began to shake with dizzying waves of heat. A sense of desperation seized him to enter her immediately. He struggled with it.

Three then, he said hoarsely. Surely if they are small she can nurture three? If you do not think so then the one is mine!

Dae was not convinced that even three small ones could be nurtured there, but he was torn between a building need to claim his own egg and his anxiety that she could not bring three to full fruition and his need rapidly silenced his anxiety. Leaning down again, he forced his tongue inside of her and focused on excreting the chemical he had detected. Even as he did so, Kate arched toward him, uttered a long, low groan and then began to shake all over and he could feel the muscles within her channel contracting, as if to suck the chemical deeper into her body. That discovery sent a heady wave of excitement through him.

Surely he had miscalculated, he thought, else her body would not so eagerly draw the chemicals in?

By the time he lifted his head, she was uttering hoarse cries that made his flesh pebble all over.

Noo planted his hand on Rak's head and shoved him away, rolling her toward him and searching a little frantically for the place. She is ready to breed! Move, he snarled, more worried that he was going to spill his seed outside her body if he did not hurry to insert his member than he was concerned that he would miss her breeding frenzy, for he felt as if it would erupt any moment.

Dae discovered he was in almost the same state. He nearly erupted as he watched Noo insert his member. A wave of heat and then cold washed over him as he struggled to hold his seed. He'd begun to think he might pass out from the effort when it occurred to him that, as tight as the hole had felt, the flesh was malleable. If it was designed to accommodate the emergence of a fully matured off-spring he could not think of any gods damned reason it could not also accommodate two male members when two were not nearly as big as that! Giving Rak a shove to get him out of the way, he scooted up behind her and began probing with his member, thinking that he might at least manage to wedge it partially inside before he spewed his seed and lost it altogether. Noo uttered a warning snarl, but he ignored it for once, struggling until he managed to wedge his cock into her alongside Noo's. Dimly, he heard Kate utter a sound that might have been one of distress, but he was as near to blacking out as made very little difference at all. His instincts took over, his hips jerking as if they had a mind of their own to pump into her. He felt a sudden rise in the heat and moisture inside of her as Noo's cock began to spew. It set his own organ off and a mixture of agonizing pleasure and relief filled him as he felt his body yield up his seed.

Feeling alarmingly weak and exhausted once his body had finally stopped convulsing, he sucked in a shuddering breath and rolled away, pulling Noo's now flaccid member out of Kate even as he withdrew his own.

I will kill you when I have the strength, Noo growled, panting for breath.

Dae discovered he was too weak to care about

the threat at the moment. Unfortunately, he also discovered the moment he settled against the surface of the bed that there was an unpleasant wet patch beneath him. What the fuck?

I spilled my seed while I was watching, Rak said, climbing over Dae and sprawling on top of Kate's limp form.

Gods damn it! You could not have spewed the fucking mess over the side? You had to leave a sticky puddle for me to roll into?

If you have lost your seed what the hell are you doing, Noo growled?

There is more, Rak snarled. I will get this inside her!

Your member is limp! You will never get that inside her!

Was! It is hard again, Rak corrected him, pumping furiously even before he had managed to get completely inside of Kate. Pleasure instantly assailed him, making his member as rock hard as it had been before. He discovered that, whereas he had not been able to hold his seed before, however, he had to work hard to produce more. The effort made him hotter, made moisture erupt from the pores of his skin. Before he had quite reached the explosion point, Kate began to thrash beneath him and groan. Abruptly, he felt her body squeezing his, massaging his cock in a milking motion that drew his seed from him in a sudden rush that took his breath.

A groan escaped him at the sheer magnitude of the bliss that overtook him. It was like nothing he had ever imagined and it seemed to suck every ounce of strength from him. He almost felt as if he melted over Kate when his body finally ceased to seize with the paroxysms of pleasure.

He was barely conscious when Noo uttered a challenging growl, bounded over him and seized Dae by the throat. Struggling for dominance, the two of them rolled off the bed and landed on the floor.

Kate, who'd given every appearance of being as near death as he was, jerked all over at the sound, trying to lift her head. "What? What's going on?"

Discovering his reasoning abilities had sunk to lowest ebb, Rak wrestled with his instinct to try to

roll off Kate when she began shoving at him and the dim realization that, as alarmed as she seemed at the moment, she might be more alarmed by the battle Noo and Dae were engaged in if she could see what was going on. He compromised by shifting most of his weight off of her, but keeping her pinned to the bed with one arm and leg. "Noo's alpha," he muttered.

"News alpha?" Kate echoed blankly. "What?"

Discarding the idea of trying to explain the situation to Kate, Rak focused on Noo and Dae instead. You are alarming Kate!

Noo, who had one hand around Dae's throat and his other fist drawn back to punch Dae in the face, halted mid-swing and flicked a look toward the bed. Dae used his distraction to punch Noo in the belly, knocking the breath from him. Noo uttered a growl of rage, punched Dae twice in the face in quick succession, shook him, and then released him. If my seed does not capture an egg, I will carve your heart out of your chest, he snarled.

Stalking around the bed, he flung himself down beside Kate, shoved Rak out of the way, and gathered her close to examine her scent. Dae grabbed one of Rak's limp arms, dragged him off the bed, and then stepped over him and climbed into the bed behind Kate, sending Noo a challenging look when he lifted his head to glare at him.

Kate uttered a groan when she felt herself sandwiched between the two men again. "That was really something else, guys, but I'm not up to another round right now," she mumbled, patting both of them to soften the blow. "Later, ok? I'm sleepy."

Noo felt some of his hostility wane when he realized Kate did not seem to have taken exception to both of them mating with her at the same time. That had been responsible for at least part of his anger-the fear that Dae's frenzied coupling had been totally unacceptable to her. She had sounded ... pleased, though. "Kat like dat?"

Kate's lips curled upward at the corners. "Mmmm, Kate liked that a lot. I came three times! Wow! Now I want to sleep. K?" Anticipation was already stirring to life as Kate rose towards consciousness, warmth stealing over her, her nerve endings tingling with alertness, her belly fluttering with hopefulness. There was no disorientation or uneasiness despite the fact that she was not accustomed to waking with a man in her bed, let alone three, for she'd passed from awareness sandwiched between Ronan and his more aggressive brother.

A pique of discomfort flickered through her as she reached for a name and realized she had no idea what his name was-his or the brother that had taken her from the brink of unconsciousness to another explosive climax that rivaled the one she'd had when Ronan and the other brother had both penetrated her-at the same time-vaginally! She couldn't even recall that Ronan had called them by name at any point.

She struggled to throw off the discomfort and simply enjoy their curious, exploratory touches that were rapidly bringing her toward the same sense of desperation that they had before, but her conscience refused to be completely silenced. It didn't matter that pretty much everyone she knew made it a practice to seek carnal pleasure whenever and where ever the mood took them and considered it perfectly acceptable behavior. She had never been in that habit.

Of course that wasn't due to any sense of moral superiority. Sex was a natural part of being human and everyone had needs. It was absurd to consider it as a moral issue at all. She had needs! It was simply a matter of sex with complete strangers being outside her comfort zone and basically useless as a method of assuaging her needs. Ordinarily, she had to build some sort of rapport if not an actual relationship before she could relax enough to actually enjoy intercourse.

That certainly hadn't been the case with the three she'd picked up at the club!

Then again, she'd had just enough alcohol in her system to lower her inhibitions and relax her.

Bull shit!

She'd had enough to make it seem reasonable to invite Ronan to her place for sex, not enough to lay waste to her inhibitions. She'd still been tense and even more so when she'd realized they all expected a turn with her!

She was reasonably certain that if she'd had any inkling that they all meant to have a turn at the same time she would've gone into a blind panic!

To think she'd been worried about getting stirred up enough to actually come!

Maybe she actually had made a connection with them, though? She must have on a chemical level even though she hadn't been aware of it on a conscious level. Otherwise, she still didn't believe they could've gotten her aroused enough to come-once, let alone three times!

It pleased her to think fate had landed her in the arms of three men that she was attracted to on the most basic level-the most important level, really. She knew from personal experience that if there wasn't a chemical reaction the conscious mind was fighting a losing battle. She was surrounded by men with whom she had a lot in common. Science had always been dominated by men and still was and probably always would be. Similar interests only made good friends, though, even if that connection was bolstered by good looks and a pleasant personality, if there wasn't also a chemical attraction. She could certainly attest to that with nearly a half a dozen failed relationship attempts under her belt. There was just no spark and no amount of effort could produce it. As often as she'd been tempted to simply accept that that special connection was never going to come along and contract with the closest facsimile she could, though, in the end she just hadn't been able to convince herself to take the leap.

It occurred to her abruptly that fate was a sick bitch if what she suspected was true.

She doubted she had a damned thing in common, as far as interests, with any of the three men currently driving her up the wall with the light stroke of their hands-and tongues!

Maybe she was being a bigot, but she didn't believe they were scientists, despite the fact that the club was a local haunt of the single scientific community. It certainly wasn't exclusively for scientists. It just happened to be located handily for the scientists that worked in and around the spaceport and on the space-station.

They weren't built like the typical scientist for one thing. There were plenty of scientists, especially

those who spent a lot of time on the space station, who worked hard to stay physically fit. They had to because if they failed their physical they were going to be grounded until they could pass, but these guys went beyond merely being fit. They were built like bodybuilders and there certainly weren't many scientists willing to dedicate that sort of time to fitness!

For another, Ronan seemed the most articulate of the three and he could barely string together a comprehensible sentence in English. They didn't necessarily need English to work in a scientific field, but they'd damn well need it to work within this particular community!

So, prejudiced or not, she concluded that they definitely weren't scientists-which meant a very small likelihood that they would have anything in common, beyond a mutual attraction in bed.

Which meant fate was a sick bitch! She'd finally stumbled upon that special spark she'd been hoping to find and it seemed likely that that was all she could count on! And the chemical attraction without a meeting of minds, without similar interests, was as bad in its own way as the other-maybe worse! It occurred to her with something of a jolt when she finally opened her eyes to meet Ronan's gaze that it probably wasn't something she needed to worry about one way or the other. It suddenly seemed highly likely that her handsome trio was bent on nothing more than appeasing their own physical needs and that she wasn't likely to get the chance to pursue anything of a more longterm nature.

Disappointment pierced the heat they'd generated inside her with a cool shaft of unwelcome reality. It flickered through her mind to wonder if there was any possibility that she could convince them to hang around long enough to decide whether or not a relationship might actually be worth pursuing. She would at least like to get to know them a little better to see if there was more between them than the chemical attraction-or could be.

Well, she thought, reaching up to hook one hand behind Ronan's neck and draw him down to her, the road to any man's heart was through pleasure and comfort. Sex first, and then she could feed them, and then more sex. At the very least, she thought as she matched her lips to Ronan's, she could thoroughly explore that spark!

They might not have much of a grasp on English, she reflected hazily, but they didn't have a bit of trouble interpreting her 'signals'. Ronan responded instantly to her unspoken invitation, covering her mouth and kissing her stupid. God! He had a wonderful mouth, she thought dizzily, feeling her heat index shoot upwards at the feel of his mouth on hers.

A drop of doubt flickered through her as he dragged her close almost immediately and began to probe her cleft for a deep connection to match the play of his tongue within her mouth, but even that tiny doubt that she was ready vanished as soon as she felt his flesh merge with her own. Pleasure immediately blossomed and began to grow as his thick flesh glided along her channel. She debated equally briefly over whether or not she wanted to experience the double penetration she had before with Ronan and his brother. That had been beyond spectacular and she 'wrestled' to hold a position to invite the brother again, reaching blindly behind her when he didn't immediately accept the unspoken command.

Luckily, her hand found what she'd been seeking.

Closing her hand around his erect member, she tugged just enough to give him an idea of what she wanted. A thrill of expectation rushed through her as she felt him shift toward her and the heat of his groin against her ass. A moment later, she felt her flesh straining to encompass his. As it had before, a few moments of doubt and uneasiness assailed her when she felt her flesh strain to the point of burning, but then he had penetrated and her body adjusted with a fresh flood of moisture.

It was almost as frustrating as it was exciting to be pinned between the two of them and feel their thrusts. She couldn't move-and she wanted to, struggled with the urge. But the twin, pounding thrusts along her channel left no nerve ending untouched or unstimulated and her mind quickly shifted focus to pure enjoyment of the wonderful friction of tender skin to skin. A climax rocked her, shuddering through her entire system and making her mind darken with the clouds of pleasure chemicals released at the moment of ecstasy, and then she felt her body gathering to take another leap.

She nearly missed her chance for a second climax. She was so close, though, when she felt both of their cocks begin to vibrate in release, that it pushed her over the edge in spite of the fact that they'd ceased the pumping motion she thought she needed to make it over the top.

* * * *

Confusion blended thoroughly with the jumble of random thoughts swirling through Noo's mind as he settled back on the bed beside Kate, struggling to regulate his heart and lungs to a more normal rhythm. That circumstance alone, and the strange weakness that seemed to invade every muscle, was disturbing. There seemed no rational or simple explanation for it. He had not expended enough energy to account for the effect. It seemed to have taken far more than he considered reasonable to perform the mating act, but even at that the debilitating weakness that followed seemed excessive and no search of the memory produced a satisfactory explanation. For it seemed none of the fathers before him had experienced such a thing.

Just as none of them had experienced the pleasure he had in the act

It had to be the body, he decided.

Without a doubt, the human form was far more fragile even than he had imagined.

That conclusion bothered him a great deal when he weighed the benefits likely to accrue for his clan against the clear defects.

And yet The pleasure he had experienced through the form he had assumed had exceeded his expectations to such a degree that his head was still swimming and every nerve ending in the body he had assumed seemed to have experienced an overload of sensation.

No father in the memory had experienced anything approaching that either!

He was inclined to consider that circumstance as a gift that made up for the weakness that followed copulation-at least to a degree. The weakness was dangerous. Kate seemed to experience it, as well, which meant that, if their off-spring did, mating time would leave them far more vulnerable than usual.

Not that that was not always a dangerous time. When they were focused upon mating they certainly were not as alert to potential danger around them as they should be. In the memory, however, the fathers had copulated, focused on their surroundings long enough to search for danger and then repeated the process until they were certain they had seeded the female sufficiently to reproduce.

And that was another thing he found disturbing!

He could not tell from her scent whether he had succeeded or not.

He felt his heart execute a strange little leap at that thought, though, that could not be interpreted as anything but anticipation. If he could not be certain that he had succeeded, he reasoned, then he must continue until he was certain.

Dae's mind was following a similar route as he lay on Kate's other side recovering. He was less disturbed about the weakness since it seemed of short duration to him and more inclined to dwell on the pleasure he had experienced with both a sense of wonder and anticipation to experience it again. He also had no idea whether he had successfully bred Kate or not, but it did not take him nearly as long to arrive at the same conclusion that Noo had-that he was actually pleased he did not know. He thought he would be entirely happy to continue working at breeding her until she grew round bellied with the growth of their off-spring and there was no longer any doubt at all that he had succeeded. In point of fact, he had discovered he was fond enough of the practice that he wanted to continue to mount her whenever the opportunity arose and he could pen her down for it whether she was breeding or not.

Uneasiness flickered through him when it occurred to him that he might not be able to mount her once she was breeding without risk to his off-spring. If that was the case, she would fight him and not allow it until she was ready to breed again, and although he was hazy on the period of time that would be required for gestation, he was certain he was going to be very miserable indeed before he had another chance to sex her if that was the case.

He had had his doubts about the wisdom of breeding with humans, but he saw now that there was one benefit to it that none of them had anticipated. He did not think his clan would consider the gift they brought insignificant in any way. In the memory, there was satisfaction in the accomplishment of their goals and the minor pleasure of relief in spilling their seed, but what the old ones had experienced in mating paled in comparison to mating with a human in the form of a human. Either their bodies had a greater capacity for pleasure or it was their minds that enabled them to experience greater heights. He thought it was both, for it seemed to him that his mind had released powerful, euphoric chemicals into his system in conjunction with his release that had magnified the effect tremendously.

Truthfully, he did not particularly care how it worked. It was enough that it did and, in doing so, had radically changed his perception of life. Survival and the continuation of his clan in general and his own line in particular, were no less important, but he began to see that there could be far more to life that mere existence. Maybe that was the true gift that they had stumbled upon?

He wondered if Noo had sensed that when he had focused so obsessively on Kate.

Maybe he had judged too soon when he had sneered at the ways of humans?

Not that he saw them as superior to his own clan! He still thought that they had erred in not insuring physical superiority as his own clan had while they were about the business of survival and continuation of their species. He still thought that their focus upon changing their environment to suit their needs was a recipe for disaster of their species. What if their cleverness and all of their machines failed them? Then where would they be? Did they have the strength to survive without all the things that they had built?

He didn't think so. He thought that they had miscalculated and that the mother world that had given them life would turn on them one day and show them how much more powerful she was.

On the other hand, he began to see that their own ways also left something to be desired. Mother Ra was still more powerful than her children, regardless of his clan's efforts in gathering the gifts of all her creatures to themselves. He thought that Noo was right. It could only strengthen their own clan to gather the gifts of the humans to add to what they had gathered already and their clan would be stronger for it and have far more than existence. They could enjoy more than fleeting comfort with the things the humans made and they could then pursue more of life than just survival.

He thought it was worth considering. He did not know if the rest of the clan would agree, but he was certainly not as inclined to dismiss their 'things' with the contempt that he had at first.

* * * *

Kate felt an odd mixture of disappointment and relief when she woke to the discovery that it was morning and she had her bed to herself. Struggling to dismiss the disappointment over being abandoned, she turned over onto her belly and sprawled out, telling herself she was more relieved than surprised. It felt good to stretch even if that immediately brought the night before back to mind in the form of abused muscles that hadn't been given such a thorough workout in a while.

Well, that wasn't the only reminder of the night before. Her linens still carried the faint scents of her lovers-enough that the faint throbbing in her nether regions from the pounding punishment it had taken the night before increased.

And then there was the sticky residue that proved

they'd enjoyed themselves as much as she had!

Thank god men were required practice birth control these days! The procedure was simple, painless, completely reversible and did not damage their fragile ecosystem as the chemicals used for birth control for women had. Of course nothing but abstinence was one hundred percent guaranteed to prevent pregnancy, but the margin of error was infinitesimal now that the procedure had been taken completely out of human hands.

She'd just rolled to the edge of the bed to head for the shower when the sound of rushing water abruptly broke the silence surrounding her followed almost instantly by a sharp male gasp. Amusement flickered through Kate. If that sound of dismay and surprise was any indication, whoever had decided to make use of her facilities wasn't familiar with the temperature adjustment feature.

After a brief debate as to whether she should intrude or not, Kate got up and crossed the bedroom to the door to her bath and tapped on the panel. "If you don't mind company, I'll adjust that for you." She nearly fell in at the door when he snatched it open. Disconcerted, she righted herself after she'd plowed into him and discovered 'pretty boy'. She felt her cheeks heat with discomfort. Moving past him, she went to adjust the water temperature. "Uh ... you know, I didn't catch your name last night. This is a little awkward."

She discovered when she glanced at him that he was frowning. For a few moments she thought it was because he was digesting her comment and trying to 'interpret' and wondered if he'd understood her at all.

"Jarek," he responded finally, studying her piercingly.

The name sent a jolt through her. Her eyes widened on his face, but despite the wave of heat and then cold that swept over her, she swiftly dismissed the unnamed fear that had generated it and pursued the half-formed suspicion that rose in her mind. What were the odds that two of the guys she'd picked up at the night spot would have two of the names from her recent studies? Astronomical! She knew it had to be! "That's ... odd," she said a little stiffly. "By strange coincidence" She broke off as it hit her with another wave of cold that her project was a security level four and she wasn't allowed to discuss it even if the project had been terminated.

He had to know something about it, maybe a lot about it, but that didn't change the fact that she wasn't allowed to 'leak' information!

It wasn't as if any of the names she'd chosen were commonplace. Besides, in a very real sense, the Sirians had given her their own names. They weren't inclined to make much in the way of verbalizations, but Noo, Dae, and Rak were some of the sounds they did make when they were together and she'd chosen familiar names for them that included those sounds-Ronan, Dax, and Jarek.

She was still trying to figure out a way to discover what he, or they, knew about her project without giving him any information she shouldn't, when he surged toward her. She tensed, but he merely stepped past her and into the shower. When she turned to look at him questioningly, he reached for her, curled the fingers of one hand lightly around her upper arm and urged her to join him.

She'd actually lost interest in that particular

activity, but she didn't resist. After lathering a bathing cloth, she handed Jarek the container of liquid soap and focused on her own bath. "What's your brothers' names?" she said, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

"Ronan firs. Dax sec'd."

Kate sent him a sharp look. He returned her look with a gaze that seemed calculatedly guileless rather than actually innocent. Even though she'd more than half expected the answer she got, though, it threw her into a state of turmoil that made it difficult to produce a coherent thought. He didn't give her a chance to recover. Dropping the container, he surged closer, plastering himself against her as he crowded her against one wall of the shower.

Given the suspicions that had gathered in her mind, Kate's foremost reaction was alarm. The adrenaline was still racing through her when he began to explore her soapy/wet skin with his hands and dipped his head to suck at a patch of skin just beneath one ear. Her skin pebbled all over in reaction, his touch creating more havoc as her mind and body struggled to assimilate the conflict between assessed threat and rising desire. The confusion seemed to catapult her almost instantaneously into a state of high arousal. It flickered through her mind that she shouldn't be feeling any desire at all, but her body had a mind of its own. The slippery friction of his skin gliding against hers in his restless moments made her hyper-aware of every point where their bodies touched and pleasure poured through her system and into the pleasure centers of her brain in such a rush that it was impossible to fully assimilate it all.

Fortunately, she didn't need to. She had a dim idea that keeping her wits about her would have been far safer for her, but her mind had dismissed 'threat' and determinedly focused on pleasure and she was lost and not particularly sorry for it. By the time he shifted her up the wall to mount on her his thick shaft, she'd produced more than enough moisture to allow the claiming.

It was still a delightful labor to encompass his thick flesh and by the time she'd managed it, she was well on her way toward fireworks! She focused on her goal fiercely until it seemed her entire being registered little besides the intimate friction of his cock along the walls of her sex. Pleasure radiated through her with each plunge and retreat, gathering, building, pooling until her breath began to hitch in her chest in anticipation. Blindly, she sought his mouth in demand for the impetus she needed to boost her over the top. His reaction was gratifyingly prompt. Almost the moment he opened his mouth over hers and pierced the cavern of her mouth with his tongue, the volcano began to erupt. She sucked his tongue a little frantically. It touched off the explosion she'd been awaiting with so much anticipation and she groaned around his tongue as molten, white-hot ecstasy poured through her.

Her orgasm seemed to light his own powder keg. He tore his mouth from hers, uttering his own animalistic groans of satisfaction and began to mutter to her in his native tongue.

Jarek's struggle to prevent himself from connecting his mind to Kate's as he was inundated with rapture was only partially successful. The discovery that her mind was as filled with pleasure as his own and that it magnified his own made it even harder to draw back and ignore the urge to voice his pleasure in coupling with her. In the end, it was only the reminder of the effect Noo's probing had had on the woman at the mating place that inspired caution and made him withdraw. He couldn't risk damage when none of them fully understood why the connection had had such a profound effect on that woman when it had never seemed to cause harm before.

Instead, he found himself struggling with her tongue for a few moments. Giving up the effort when he realized it was nearly impossible to think coherently even in his own language, he told her how pleased he was that she'd accepted him and would carry his off-spring and that he would protect her and their child from harm with his life if necessary. Even knowing she didn't understand, it gave him a sense of peace and pleasure to make the vow to her.

She smiled, almost as if she understood, when he knew she couldn't possibly understand any of it. She confirmed it when she finally spoke.

"That was nice ... better than nice, actually," Kate murmured and then chuckled. "Now we'll have to bathe again, though, and I'm not sure there'll be enough hot water for your brothers."

Jarek turned the comments over in his mind as he reluctantly yielded to her urging to disengage his

body from hers and release her. "Dey used to cold," he managed to respond after a few moments and was pleased that he had managed it. He needed to practice vocalizing anyway, and in her tongue, he reasoned, since it did not seem entirely safe to try to communicate with her with his mind. It made his chest and throat feel strange to make sounds, though, and he was not entirely certain he liked the vibrations in his chest and throat.

She sent him a strange look, which made him a little uneasy.

"No spek right?"

Her lips trembled on a smile for a moment. "I'm not entirely sure," she responded with a slight chuckle. "Why would they be used to cold water? Or did I misunderstand?"

Jarek frowned. Moving away from her, he retrieved the small thing she had given him and focused on trying to get the foaming stuff out. "Like cold," he muttered finally when he saw she was still waiting for an answer, and then shrugged. She lifted her brows. "But you don't if that sharp gasp I heard before was any indication," she said, amused.

He grinned at her and shrugged. "Used to cold, too. Like hot better."

Kate's uneasiness returned to tease her as she dried off and left the bathroom to get dressed. It couldn't be sheer coincidence that she'd met three men who had the same names she'd given the Sirians. The odds were just too astronomical to calculate that that sort of a coincidence was possible.

So where did that leave her?

She couldn't believe there was any way, when they could barely speak English, that the brothers could have infiltrated security and learned about her project. It also seemed too farfetched to believe they were some kind of spies. Granted, her project-everything to do with the project-was top level security, but what possible use could spies make of the information?

Besides, most of the world governments were united in the project and those that weren't were

way too poor to make use of any of the technology or discoveries that had come out of the project. Of course their lack of familiarity with so many things she took for granted did point in that direction, and yet that still took her back to why would they?

One of the lunatic organizations that was trying to prevent colonization?

The chill that thought produced created a rash of goose bumps.

Everyone rarely agreed on everything-or even much of anything-despite the fact that they'd formed a world government under the United Nations umbrella. The nations had finally hammered out an agreement, but the people of the various nations certainly hadn't embraced colonization wholeheartedly. She'd figured the protests and complaints were mostly from random kooks and troublemakers, though. She certainly hadn't considered the possibility that there were enough of them out there to organize any sort of resistance to colonization!

All in all, though, she conceded that it was possible that the factions opposing colonization

had managed to organize themselves under a common flag, even if their reasons differed. It seemed unlikely that the religious nuts who opposed colonization on the grounds that it was 'playing god' and the naturalists who believed humans shouldn't sully other worlds with their wasteful ways and the economists who felt like it was an outrage to put money into the project when the money would be better spent in making things better on Earth would agree with each other on any level. However, the fact remained that they certainly had one thing in common! None of them approved of colonization! And all of them wanted to prevent it.

She studied Jarek surreptitiously as he left the bathroom-already fully dressed although she didn't recall noticing his clothing in the bathroomtrying to decide if he seemed to 'fit' any of the groups.

She hardly knew anything at all about him, but she decided his comments might indicate a naturalist. Maybe it wasn't that he came from a country too poor to have much in the way of technology. Maybe he was a hardliner who eschewed all technology except what was essential for survival? He hadn't actually seemed particularly disapproving of the technology, though, she realized. He'd seemed disconcerted but curious.

That assessment was supported by the fact that, when she emerged from her room with Jarek, she discovered that Ronan and Dax seemed to be exploring her home thoroughly. It seemed to go way beyond mere curious snooping and they didn't seem the least bit discomfited at being caught in the act. Both of them glanced at her, frowned at Jarek, and then continued their intense scrutiny of her belongings.

Kate was more than a little irritated. She was accustomed to her privacy-paid dearly for it! She dismissed it with an effort, however, and decided to play hostess. "You guys hungry?"

That caught their interest. "Yes," Ronan agreed for all of them.

They followed her into her tiny kitchen. Kate's irritation and her uneasiness increased, but she did her best to ignore their rapt attention as she went about the business of preparing food for the four of them. It struck her as she settled at the eating bar to share a meal with them that there was one possible explanation for the 'coincidence' of their names that she might have dismissed far too quickly.

They might actually be Ronan, Dax, and Jarek-the Sirian beasts that had slaughtered an entire squad of well trained security guards without much, apparent, effort!

Chapter Six

That thought occurred to Kate forcefully when she realized that the intent scrutiny of the men coupled with the fact that they seemed to be going to great effort to mimic her could easily add up to a complete lack of familiarity with human behavior.

She dismissed it again.

Like a boomerang, the suspicion returned more forcefully when she met Ronan's gaze across the

counter as she got up to clear away the clutter from their meal. Trying to behave nonchalantly with that thought riding her was next to impossible, but she made the attempt purely out of reflex.

"Kat 'fraid. Why?"

Kate sucked in a sharp breath and dropped the dish she'd been rinsing. She'd been too focused on the thoughts colliding in her brain and trying to behave as if nothing was wrong to actually notice what the men were doing. She sent Ronan a startled hare look, trying to force her brain to function.

His own gaze became shuttered. He seemed about to speak and then apparently thought better of it. "We go now."

All the starch seemed to flow out of her and puddle on the floor beneath her feet as Kate watched Ronan, Dax, and Jarek file out of her kitchen, cross the living area and disappear through her front door. A wave of dizziness followed it. She gripped the edge of the sink for several moments and finally decided she might be able to make it to the closest stool. Her muscles were uncooperative and it was all she could do to plant her ass on the stool once she'd reached it.

She lay her head on her arms on the countertop, focusing for some moments on calming herself and pushing the fear back that was creating havoc with her attempts to assert reason and sort things out. Even when she'd beat the fear into abeyance, though, she found herself struggling.

Was it possible that she was right?

She laughed a little hysterically and then clamped a hand over her mouth as the sound of her own laughter gave rise to a horde of pebbled flesh along her arms and back.

Not in her world, but the Sirians weren't of her world.

How could they change themselves to look human, though?

She pondered that for a few moments, summoning the results of the test after test that they'd conducted on the Sirians and realized she wasn't getting anywhere at all. The tests had shown that the Sirians had almost preternatural abilities to regenerate cells and yet ... could that extend to an entire body? And, even if it didwhich, granted was actually probable-how could that extend to altering their natural structure to something completely different?

As bizarre and completely unbelievable as that thought was, could it possibly explain how the Sirians had managed their disappearing act aboard the space station? Because, as of the last report, they still hadn't been located.

Of course it could! But did it?

She found she simply couldn't accept it, but neither could she completely dismiss it. It calmed her to ponder the situation and try to find another explanation. It didn't seem any more improbable, she finally decided, that they'd managed, somehow, to sneak out and hide themselves on one of the shuttles heading for the surface than the insane idea she'd had that they'd 'disguised' themselves as humans and managed it. If she dismissed everything except the fact that they were animals and had the keen sense of smell most animals had, then they could have used those natural abilities with the canniness she'd already attributed to them to make their escape.

They would've sensed danger. No one had ever figured out exactly what the process was that animals used to do that, but they were rarely caught off guard. It took a great deal of effort on the part of humans to trick them when they weren't nearly as intelligent.

The idea comforted her, but only briefly. Not only did she realized that, as crazy as it sounded, even to her, that she did believe that her Sirians had escaped and then tracked her down, she realized she had to assume that the possibility/threat was real.

The question was, what should she do about it?

Or maybe the real question was, did they realize that she suspected and what sort of danger did that put her in?

* * * *

Ronan struggled with his reluctance to leave Kate as he led his pod mates to a safe distance from Kate's living pod to consider the situation. When he had found a place surrounded by dense vegetation that would allow him to watch her pod without being seen, he stopped. What is this about? Dax demanded angrily as soon as they had settled to watch Kate's pod.

Ronan glanced at him angrily, his lips tightening at the demand.

He needs to think, stupid! Jarek answered testily.

Dax punched him, sending him reeling backward several steps.

We cannot afford to draw attention to ourselves! Ronan snapped when he saw Jarek right himself and tense for retaliation.

You do not think he already did! Jarek said indignantly. Tell him! He punched me in the face! I think he may have loosened a tooth!

Tighten it, Ronan advised coolly.

Yes, but

As you pointed out, I need to think, Ronan snapped. I do not need a distraction.

You deserved it for calling me stupid, Dax said coolly.

You have called me stupid many times! Have I punched you?

No, because you know you are stupid, Dax responded indifferently.

Jarek looked like he might explode for several moments. I did not because I am not stupid, he countered after a lengthy pause. I know we cannot afford to draw attention to ourselves and so I ignore your stupid taunts!

Dax shrugged.

Jarek clenched his hands into fists and relaxed them several times, as if debating whether to throttle Dax or not.

Ronan glared at Jarek until he subsided.

Maybe it would help to share your thoughts so that we could help figure out the problem? Dax suggested in a neutral voice after a few moments.

Ronan glared at him for a long moment but finally capitulated. She is afraid of us. I believe she may have figured out that we are those they call the Sirians. Dax stared at him in disbelief. Well! We know that she is not stupid! You did not think she was bound to figure it out when you gave her the name that she had given you?

Ronan flattened him with a punch to the face.

Jarek grinned down at Dax smugly as he lay on the ground. Before Dax could leap to his feet and beat the shit out of Jarek for gloating, Ronan planted a foot in the middle of his chest. I said no fighting, he growled.

There is no one around! Dax snapped indignantly.

That does not mean they do not have the long seeing eyes here. They did not just use them to watch us. They used them to watch each other. They were everywhere on the space station. Why would they not have them here, as well?

Dax was about to argue with that assessment when he recalled that he had seen things in the mating place that were very like the long seeing eyes on the space station. We do not know that she was afraid because she knows who we are, he countered. In any case, she accepted us as mates. She cannot undo that now. Ronan's lips tightened in annoyance. She is human! They are not like us! They are not like any of the creatures in the memory! How do we know she cannot reject us? It is almost certain that the other creatures that we have taken gifts from would have if they had sensed the difference! We do not make the change only to align with the chosen for the purpose of breeding! They must believe we are the same or they will not allow it!

Beyond that, we have only begun the mating process. I do not know that we have successfully bred on her and you do not know it!

I was actually hoping that we had not, Jarek volunteered. I would not mind at all if we found that we had to seed her many times before it takes.

Ronan and Dax exchanged a speaking glance.

We will not get that chance if we are dead, Ronan said dryly.

Both Jarek and Dax sent him a sharp look at that. Dax frowned. You think they will believe her if she tells the others? That is what I am trying to decide and also if she feels threatened enough to tell at all. I could smell her fear. It was not merely anxiety. She has guessed. I am certain of it. What I am not certain of is how likely it is that she will tell the others so that they can finish what they had planned.

Dax studied Ronan for a long moment when he fell silent. You are thinking that we may not survive to complete the breeding cycle, he said bluntly.

Ronan stared at Kate's place grimly. That was always a possibility.

Jarek frowned, thinking hard. After a moment, his brow cleared. She had fondness for us when we were little more than hatchlings. She had fondness for us when we were in her care even as we matured. Why would she not still have fondness when we have a mating bond now?

Ronan and Dax both stared at him blankly.

She thought we were dumb beasts! Ronan and Dax both said at almost the same time and with nearly the same degree of disgust.

She thought that she was nurturing, Ronan said dryly. It was no more than that and not the sort of bond that a female would feel for her own offspring at that! She will not feel the same even that she did then because we are not the same to her mind.

It was not just that, Jarek said indignantly. The humans develop affection for the creatures they nurture. They call it love or fondness or liking. She felt pleasure whenever she was with us. I smelled it. It was not the same as the pleasure in the mating bond, not as strong, but the same.

You do not understand humans any more than we do, Dax said with disgust.

I did not say that I did! Jarek snapped. But I have studied them just as you and Ronan have and I detected the shift in her scent and the way she behaved. She liked the female she calls Sissy. She would smile and relax whenever she was around Sissy and often feel amusement. As we matured, I often detected wariness and sometimes a little fear, but mostly pleasure. Around the others that came to the lab, her scent and her behavior was different. And she often thought that she was too fond of us. I did not completely understand at the time. I am not certain I completely understand now, but this body feels emotions. I feel them. And I think that I feel fondness for her and if it is the same then she would not want to harm us or do anything to cause harm to come to us.

Ronan frowned thoughtfully but finally shook his head. Now that you mention it, I also detected the shift in her scent when she thought about feeling affection for us, but that will not matter now. She associated the way we appeared to her then with affection. We are different to her now and she was not just afraid that we would be destroyed or worried about the punishment to her for trying to prevent that. She was afraid when she learned that we had killed to survive. I do not think this affection you speak of will make a difference because I do not think she feels it now.

* * * *

It shouldn't have taken Kate five seconds to arrive at a decision once she'd reached the conclusion that the men she'd just had a wild night of fabulous sex with weren't men at all, but the 'missing' Sirians her government wanted to get hold of so badly. It no sooner popped into her mind to call security, however, than she was filled with dismay and reluctance.

What if she was wrong? She'd be a laughingstock! She'd be lucky to get a job as a janitor!

And they would kill the Sirians on sight.

Quite aside from the fact that she still didn't want that, couldn't bring herself to have a hand in it, she could easily be caught in the crossfire and she sure as hell didn't like that idea!

The impulse to call Sissy and seek moral support was almost overpowering, but she resisted it. It wouldn't be fair to drag Sissy into her mess!

In any case, she had a feeling that Sissy would instantly insist on calling security and dumping the matter in their hands.

Well, she knew what they meant to do to 'clean up' the mess!

It wasn't right!

Was it?

It was against the laws of man to kill and the punishment was generally life imprisonment. At the very least, even with extenuating circumstances-like self-protection-they would be imprisoned for years.

That wasn't going to happen, though. They wouldn't be tried. They'd been convicted and sentenced to death before they'd killed for selfpreservation!

So ... if they didn't have the rights that humans had, and they weren't from Earth at all, or even human, how did the laws pertain to them when they didn't also protect them?

She wrestled with that moral dilemma for hours, but no matter how many times she told herself that they should be punished for taking the lives of the men sent to kill them, it simply didn't feel right. No matter how many times she told herself that they should have tried to simply overpower them and escape, she kept remembering that they'd been trapped, cornered, and that the law of nature-survival-always trumped manmade laws in the end.

If she'd been in the same position and capable of

killing to insure her own survival, would she have?

She thought it was entirely possible that she would have. She didn't think she would've considered the moral dilemma either-maybe afterward, but not in the heat of the moment. Afterward, she thought she would have suffered a great deal of guilt.

She didn't think they felt the least bit guilty about it.

But then, why should they? They'd been ... kidnapped from their home world, and poked and prodded and studied-and then scheduled for death only because someone had decided they were a potentially dangerous species that shouldn't be allowed to live. Wasn't that in itself an act of nature? Hadn't they decided to kill because they thought the Sirians might be a threat? Or worse, that it simply didn't matter at all whether they lived or died? That they weren't important enough for their lives to matter?

After a while, she gave up on trying to reason through right and wrong where the Sirians were concerned. She hadn't felt that it was right any of the time. She couldn't make herself accept that it was right now to kill them when she was responsible for putting them in the position of having to defend themselves with lethal force.

She was the guilty party in this. She was the one that had to make it right.

The question was how?

The answer presented itself the moment the question popped into her mind.

She had to see to it that they were returned to their home world.

She didn't have the power or the means to insure that, though! She couldn't just waltz into the space center and demand it. She didn't think any amount of arguing their case would make a difference either. She'd argued until she was hoarse already and no one seemed inclined to listen.

It was late in the day before she finally arrived at the conclusion that she was going to have to, somehow, figure out a way to sneak them back to their home world. There was a piece of that equation that she wouldn't have to figure out at all. She had signed up to become a colonist long ago. She was in the queue already and scheduled to ship out with the next transport.

Actually, she was supposed to leave with the group that had just left, aboard Eden II, but she'd been bumped because of her project. She should be on the roster for Eden III, though!

Assuming they hadn't taken her off because of the fiasco in her lab.

As soon as she thought of that an avalanche of problems presented themselves. First and foremost was the problem of getting the Sirians to cooperate with her in getting them aboard and directly behind that was the problem of securing passage for them without letting anyone else know what they were.

She decided to shelve those problems for the moment, however. There wasn't any point in worrying about those issues until and unless she had transportation herself. Unfortunately, by the time she arrived at that conclusion, it was too late in the day to get the information she needed. She left early the following morning to check her status. Without surprise but with a great deal of dismay, she discovered that although she was still on the ship's passenger list, she was on hold. It took most of the day to cut through all the red tape and get that hold removed. As accustomed as she was to the nightmare of trying to deal with the bureaucracy that surrounded every aspect of life, she was frustrated, exhausted and her nerves so tattered by the time she managed to get everything in order that she was in no mood to try to tackle the next problem-finding the Sirians and convincing them that they wanted to go back to their own world and that she could and would get them there.

It was tempting to simply lay the matter out to them, assuming she could find them, and try reasoning with them straight out. The problem with that was that if it didn't work, she didn't have a fall back plan that was acceptable to her. She wouldn't have any choice then but to notify authorities.

She had managed to 'bait' them up when she'd gone to the club and it occurred to her that that might work a second time, but she was in no state of mind to attempt it after trooping from one department to another all day trying to get her papers in order. Instead, she decided to focus on getting her affairs in order for the move to the new colony. It was something that had to be done anyway, she reasoned, since it was to be a permanent relocation.

The task, she discovered, was just the sort of thing to steady her nerves since it was mostly pure drudgery. Three days later she had pretty well wound up her affairs on Earth, however, and packed up everything she would be allowed to take and she was back to trying to work out a plan to entice the Sirians onto the ship with her.

After a great deal of soul searching, she called Sissy for moral support and made plans to visit the club again. There was no reason that she could see to tell Sissy exactly why she wanted to go and she didn't think Sissy would be too keen on accompanying her if she did know.

To her relief, Sissy was bored stiff and ready to leap at the invitation.

* * * *

Kate was a nervous wreck by the time she and

Sissy arrived at the night spot. Fortunately, Sissy seemed to interpret her anxiety as nervous anticipation rather than pure old fashioned terror.

It wasn't altogether fear-just most of it. Kate had tried very hard to reassure herself. After all, she'd not only spent a year studying them and never seen, let alone experienced, the destruction the Sirians were capable of, she'd spent the night with them with no more ill effects than a few muscles twinges from

She preferred not to think about that, actually. Even allowing those thoughts to dance around the periphery of her conscious mind made her stomach feel strange.

It disturbed her that it wasn't nausea from disgust. She thought it should be. They were an intelligent species. She knew that, but they weren't the same species as she was. It should make her flesh crawl to think about the fact that they'd not only been all over her, they'd been inside of her!

It disturbed her a lot that the jitteriness in her belly at those memories seemed a good deal more like pleasure than revulsion. She didn't want to think about it, but she couldn't avoid acknowledging, in the most dissociated way she could manage, that she was probably going to have to experience that and a good deal more to get the Sirians back to their home world. She was the bait, after all-at least, she hoped/feared she was-and when all was said and done, romping in the bed with them beat the hell out of being eaten ... up.

She wished that thought hadn't popped into her mind because she could distinctly recall that Jarek and Dax's attentions to her sex had been mind-blowing!

It occurred to her for the first time as she stood in line with Sissy waiting to get into the clubbecause she hadn't allowed herself to dwell on it before-to wonder how the Sirians had come to know and understand so much about human sexuality, let alone physiology. They'd not only hit every erogenous zone she possessed with deadly accuracy, they'd found spots she hadn't even known about herself!

How would they know what to do?

Instinct?

They had some instincts going for them if that was the case!

She didn't believe that. She supposed it was possible, but she thought it was unlikely and, unless they'd somehow picked the knowledge up from the humans around them, it couldn't be anything else. The one thing she was almost positive about was that the Sirians had hatched from those eggs she'd had collected and that meant that they'd had no chance to interact with their own species and 'learn'.

So, did that mean some of the people on the space station had sneaked into the habitat to screw?

That seemed wildly improbable. Not that she would put it past some of the personnel to indulge if the opportunity presented itself, but in the habitat? She didn't think so. With the exception of her and Sissy, pretty much everyone else on the space station had considered the Sirians a dangerous species almost from the first. They'd certainly been unnerved by them once they'd begun to mature and had grown so big everyone began to refer to them as sasquatches. They couldn't have seen humans interacting, she decided, so where did that leave her?

Instincts.

She still couldn't digest that, but since she and Sissy finally reached the door at that moment, her thoughts were redirected toward the hope/fear that she was going to find the Sirians inside. She was too paralyzed, she discovered, by the thought that they might be to formulate any kind of plan other than to look for them, but then she had been since she'd hatched the insane plot that had brought her here.

She discovered why the club was so packed before she even got inside. There was a popular band entertaining.

Her disappointment seemed way out of proportion to the situation, but she told herself she was relieved. "I think I need a double," she muttered, heading toward the bar for a drink as soon as she and Sissy got inside.

Sissy sent her a speculative look. "Rough week?"

"Mmmm," Kate responded non-commitally.

"So ... how did your night turn out?"

Kate felt heat light up her face and then her entire body. She cleared her throat, trying to think up a response.

Sissy laughed. "That good, huh?"

Kate squirmed inwardly. She didn't actually want to admit that it had been a mind-blowing experience ... in several ways. "I ... uh ... he was nice. His brothers, too."

Sissy gaped at her. "You're not saying ...? You are! You dog! Now I'm jealous! I ended up with dregs and you got ... caviar?"

Kate could've kicked herself. "I didn't say"

"Don't even try that! You just said they were all nice!"

"Yes ... but nice."

Sissy studied her in patent disbelief. "I do not believe you had a foursome and it was just 'nice'!"

"I never said I had a foursome!" Kate said uncomfortably.

Sissy's eyes widened. "But you did, didn't you! Oh! You dog!"

"Can we talk about something else?" Kate said irritably as she took her drink and took a big enough sip to choke.

"But I want to talk about this!" Sissy said plaintively, taking her own drink and following Kate as she made an attempt to escape. "I can't believe you didn't call me the very next day and give me all the dirty little details!"

"Uh ... you know I don't remember it all that well," Kate hedged.

Sissy snorted, choking on her drink, and coughlaughed for several moments. By the time she'd recovered, Kate had spied a small table near the back of the club. She made a bee-line for it, hoping something would distract Sissy before they managed to get seated. Something didbriefly.

"Why are we sitting way back here?" Sissy demanded as she settled on a stool.

"I don't want to have permanent hearing loss,"

Kate muttered. It was true. The music was deafening. Mostly, though, she'd lost her nerve and she wanted to hide. The back corner seemed the place for it since the club was so crowded.

She told herself that it would give her a good vantage point to spy out the land and see if the Sirians had returned to look for another 'victim'.

That thought dismayed her. She told herself that was only because it would make it hard, or impossible, to carry her plan through, but the jab that went through her felt an awful lot like jealousy.

"I don't think you're going to escape that anywhere in the club," Sissy responded dryly. "So ... have they called?"

"Who?" Kate asked, trying to pretend she had no idea what Sissy was talking about.

Sissy rolled her eyes. "Lame! You know who-Those hunks that picked you up last time we were here and gave you a night to remember!"

Oh it was a night to remember alright! "Oh them! No. Haven't heard from them since." Sissy patted her hand in commiseration. "It's only been a few days. That doesn't mean they won't."

Kate didn't know if she'd looked and sounded disappointed and that was what had elicited Sissy's sympathy or if Sissy had merely assumed she was, but she realized she was actually a little miffed that they hadn't tried to contact her since.

Not that she could see them calling now that she was pretty sure she knew who and what they were!

She pretended indifference, waving her hand dismissively. "Oh, it was just a ... thing, you know? I didn't expect anything to come of it besides a good time." She considered a moment and then added hurriedly, "or want it. I mean, really, you know I'm scheduled to leave for the new colony. What could possibly come of it?"

Sissy lifted her brows. "So you are going? I thought, maybe, after that little incident on the space station that you might have changed your mind."

Kate shook her head. "No. That little incident only made me more determined to go. I've been getting

everything in order all week."

Sissy chewed her lip. "In that case, I'm going, too," she said decisively.

Kate looked at her in surprise. "Seriously? I thought you'd decided to stay here?"

"Yes, well I figured if people were leaving in droves it would make things better here, you know? Thin the population so we could catch our breath. I think that's what the government thought, too. And it might ... eventually, but people aren't exactly signing up to go in droves, if you know what I mean-despite the propaganda the government's been pelting everybody with. From what I heard, the next transport is only a little more than half full now, and scheduled to leave next week! And they've barely begun to fill the one after that. There are rumors that the government is going to start 'drafting' colonists."

Kate blinked at her. "Are you serious?"

"I'm serious I've heard rumors. I don't know how true it is. It could just be more bullshit from the groups against colonization." She shrugged. They would really be uneasy if they knew what she suspected! Guilt flickered through Kate again, but she shrugged it off. She was going. She would be in a position to study the Sirians and make a more knowledgeable determination as to whether they were dangerous or not and, when she had that information, she would share it.

It wasn't as if anyone with half a brain wasn't expecting to encounter some danger and a lot of discomfort and inconvenience in colonization, regardless of all of the efforts that had been made to make things go as smoothly as possible.

For that matter, it wasn't as if that wasn't already a fact of life on earth with the population explosion. There were just too many people now for the ecosystem or the economy to comfortably support anyone! Colonization at least offered jobs and those were damned hard to get and even harder to keep!

"Do you think you have time to put your affairs in order before the ship leaves?" she asked a little doubtfully.

Sissy shrugged. "It isn't like I've got that much-or that they'll let anybody take a lot of stuff, for that

matter. If I hump it, I think I can manage it."

Kate smiled at her friend. "I didn't want to try to talk you in to it when I thought you might regret going, but I'm glad you decided to go. It'll be nice to have a friend when I get there. At least there'll be one familiar face!"

Sissy grinned back at her, but Kate could see that she was still wavering on her decision and more uneasy at the prospect of becoming a colonist than thrilled about the idea. "Ditto-but maybe your hunks are going, too? Wouldn't that be cool?"

Kate's smile was forced that time. "Oh, it would be super cool, but what are the odds?" Unless she could stack them in her favor.

"Stranger things have happened," Sissy said lightly.

Kate couldn't agree more-like discovering she'd had a wild night of sex with her three 'subjects'!

"Hey! I think I see them! Isn't that the guys you picked up the other night?"

Kate felt a cold sweat break out. "Where?"

"Over there near the dance floor. They're looking this way."

Kate stared at the men, hard, when she spied them. It was them! She knew it was, and a mixture of sheer terror and relief filled her. As she watched them plow through the crowd and straight toward her, she tried to banish the image of herself as a lamb tied to the stake as bait for hungry predators.

She was stunned, to say the very least, when the men finally got close enough for her to see them well. "That isn't them. I don't recognize them."

When the men finally paused beside the table she was sharing with Sissy, however, she discovered it actually was them-Ronan, Dax, and Jarek. They just weren't 'wearing' the same faces they'd been wearing the first-no make that the second-time she'd met them!

Despite the fact that it seemed unlikely, to say the least, that another trio would single her out and that the three men were the same heights and builds as the Sirians, as far as she could see, a good bit of doubt lingered in her mind that they actually were the Sirians-until they started dancing.

That was not only a dead giveaway, it was embarrassing as hell! She hadn't drunk nearly enough of her drink to prevent a painful blush from climbing all the way up to her hairline and all the way down to her toes.

"Oh my god!" she muttered, wishing she could escape, struggling with the urge to leap to her feet and dash off or slide under the table and hide.

She might have tried if they hadn't surrounded her, making escape impossible and she wasn't too paralyzed with discomfort to duck under the table.

Chapter Seven

Clearly we failed to breed her, Ronan said with a mixture of anger and disgust. She has come back to this mating place to look for another.

I was not in favor of leaving before we had accomplished it, Dax pointed out angrily.

Ronan glared at him in tightlipped silence.

No. You would have died in the attempt if she had decided to alarm the others because you had no sense of the potential danger! Jarek paused, considering the situation. Not that I would not have been willing to stay and try a few more times before withdrawing. Now she will pick another and we will have to find another mate, he added glumly, and I do not want to pick another mate!

I am not going to pick another mate, gods damn it! Ronan growled. I chose Kate and I am going to breed her.

How will we do that when it is obvious she has come to find another mate? Dax demanded angrily.

Ronan frowned, too angry for many moments to consider possibilities. It occurred to him after a little thought, however, that the situation might be a blessing in disguise. We will make ourselves look different and then she will not know us. Then we will be able to stay as long as it takes to breed her without concern that she will raise the alarm. I am not convinced that she knew that it was us, but this will be far safer if she was suspicious as I believe.

Dax looked startled and then thoughtful.

Jarek discovered he was not at all pleased with the notion but it took him several moments to realize why he was not pleased. Then she will mate with three males she believes are not us!

What is the difference as long as she does, Dax demanded testily?

I want her to accept me, Jarek said indignantly!

She will be, stupid. She just will not know it.

Jarek glared at him. I will punch you in the face if you call me stupid again! I know she will not know the difference. That is why I do not like it.

You cannot fight here, Ronan growled. They will attempt to throw us out again like they did earlier! And then we will have to change our faces again and I like the one I have now!

I do not know why, Dax muttered. It is a very

unremarkable face. Mine is much more handsome.

Ronan glared at him. What is wrong with it?

Nothing except that the females are looking at me and smiling and not you. I do not think they consider it a handsome face.

Maybe they are smiling because you have a stupid face, Jarek suggested smugly, and it makes them want to laugh?

Dax slammed his elbow into Jarek's belly.

If you two get thrown out, I am not going, Ronan said coolly. I will stay here and court Kate.

I will beat the snot out of you later, Jarek growled, stalking off as Ronan left the two of them and headed toward the table where Kate sat with her friend from the space station. He glanced at Ronan uneasily as he caught up with him. What are we to say? I am not completely comfortable that I understand the mating practices of the humans.

Ronan was not confident that he did either, but he was loath to say so when he was the alpha and

expected to lead. I will tell her I have decided that she will suit me as a mate.

The uneasiness on Jarek's face deepened.

I have not heard any of the others say that, Dax volunteered as he fell into step beside them.

Then what do you suggest, Ronan asked sarcastically?

Dax shrugged. The mating dance, he said doubtfully?

Ronan frowned. He was not convinced that she was favorably impressed the first time they had performed the mating dance for her.

Jarek echoed his own doubts. She did not look terribly pleased the time before, he said slowly. In fact, it seemed to me that she was more uncomfortable than aroused.

She accepted us, didn't she? Dax pointed out testily.

Jarek and Ronan exchanged a questioningly look. Ronan finally shrugged. Perhaps she was uncomfortable before because she had already accepted and taken us to her nesting place? This is the mating place where the dance is performed.

I had not thought of that! Jarek exclaimed, relieved.

You are right, Dax agreed. I had not thought about that either.

Ronan still felt a niggling of doubt that he completely understood the human mating practices-or at least the choosing part-but the fact that Dax and Jarek had agreed with his assessment soothed the bulk of his anxieties. The important thing, to his mind, was that she had agreed. They must have done it right or she would not have. As soon as they had reached her, therefore, and caught her attention, he began to imitate the dance that he recalled that had won her favor before.

She gave him the same glassy eyed stare as before, a myriad of emotions flickering across her features and began to flash color in her face. Relieved that she had reacted the same as before, he straddled her lap as he had seen the other males do and imitated the sex act to be sure she completely grasped his intent. He would have performed the sex act except that he discovered very quickly that the position not only did not allow him to align their genitalia, but the clothing she was wearing also prevented an actual connection.

He discovered that she was staring at his chest and he could not read her expression to judge whether he had convinced her to accept him or not. "We go to your place and fuck?"

She made a strange sound. Her friend, behind him, made an even stranger sound.

Kate cleared her throat, fighting down the urge to giggle hysterically. Either she as mad as a hatter for feeling the urge to laugh when she could well be in extreme, deadly peril, or she'd had just enough alcohol to impair her judgment. She cleared her throat and struggled to steady her voice while she searched for a response. "I ... uh"

"You aren't seriously considering going off with this Neanderthal, are you?"

Ronan dismounted from Kate's lap and sent a confused look at her companion. Her tone was

negative. He had no idea what a Neanderthal was, but he was certain he would not find the reference flattering if he did. The only thing he was sure of, and that was a relief, was that she did not seem to know that he was not human.

"You don't even know his name!"

Anger flickered through Ronan at that because he had been in such a rush to claim Kate before any of the other males could that he had not considered that he would need a name. He could not very well use the one that he had before when he had a different face. He searched the minds around him a little frantically for a name and finally smiled at Kate. "Shirley."

Kate looked like she had tried to swallow something and it had stuck in her throat.

Sissy uttered a choked sound that he strongly suspected was laughter.

"Charlie?" Kate asked in a strange voice.

"He said Shirley!" Sissy piped up, snickering.

Kate frowned at her friend. "You must have misunderstood him. Shirley is a woman's name,"

she said, emphasizing the word in warning. "He said Charlie, didn't you? Or did you say surely?"

Ronan frowned, trying to detect the subtle difference in pronunciation, but he was in no mood to sort through the problem at the moment. "Charlie."

"And your two ... uh ... friends?"

Ronan glanced at Dax and Jarek. She wants names. It must be part of the mating ritual, he prompted them.

Dax and Jarek stared at him blankly.

Say something, you idiots! She's waiting!

"Jar Ugn," Jarek began only to have Dax knock the breath from his lungs with the point of his elbow to his ribs.

"Jared?"

Relieved when Kate supplied a possibility, Jarek nodded, ignoring the urge to rub his throbbing rib.

"And your name?" Kate asked, staring at the last

man.

Dax grinned at her a little woodenly, struggling to pick up a name from the people around them. There was such a cacophony of thoughts, however, that he could not single out any sounds that he thought were name sounds. "Da ...vi," he said finally.

Kate beamed at him approvingly. They were actually getting very good at mimicking the sounds of humans, she thought absently. It was the Sirians. She had no doubt about that despite the fact that they'd changed the appearance of their faces-and she didn't want to think about that particular trick of theirs at the moment! "I'm Kateshould have been Kathryn, I guess, but I ended up with just Kate and this is my friend, Terry, but everybody calls her Sissy."

The Sirians looked confused, as well they might. She had a feeling that it was hard enough for them to grasp one name without the confusion of nicknames.

Ronan-she was almost certain just by his behavior that the one who'd picked the name Shirley was Ronan-grinned at her. It was a surprisingly sexy smile. "We go fuck now?"

Kate compressed her lips, struggling with the odd mixture of amusement and fear-and anticipation, as much as she hated to admit it-that she'd felt from the moment the Sirians approached her. "Why don't we do that?" she managed to say shakily.

"You aren't serious?" Sissy objected.

Kate gave her a look and then smiled tightly. "Sorry. They look like the pick of the litter, though. I don't see that I'm likely to do better by hanging around longer."

Sissy gaped at her. "But"

Kate got up. "Sorry," she said again. "I'm going with them."

"All of them?" Sissy gasped after staring at her speechlessly for several moments.

Kate looked at the men questioningly. "We're all going to my place, right?"

The Sirians all nodded.

Kate felt her belly clench. A tingling mixture of heat and cold washed over her from the combination of dread and anticipation. She felt weak, as if adrenaline had rushed through her and then abandoned her.

Did she really want to do this, she wondered?

Did she actually have a choice if she wanted to prevent bloodshed?

"We're going to take the party to my place," she said decisively, suggesting she would explain all later. "I'll give you a call tomorrow."

Sissy stared at her blankly but finally nodded at the silent communication.

Kate had no idea what sort of explanation she was going to concoct, but she figured she had time to consider it and come up with something that sounded fairly reasonable.

Maybe she could just tell Sissy that she'd discovered she had a 'thing' for multiple partners? Of course, from what Sissy knew of her, her current behavior bordered on the bizarre. It had been excusable the first time since neither of them were aware that all three 'men' intended to follow her off and both of them had been flying high from way too much booze, but then maybe Sissy would imbibe enough that she wouldn't be very clear on what had happened by tomorrow?

Dismissing that problem for the moment, gathering her courage with an effort, Kate led the way out of the club and summoned a taxi. All sorts of thoughts and emotions pelted her as she waited for the shuttle to arrive. Foremost, however, was jitters over her decision to play baitmost specifically the part where she had accepted that she would use sex to lure them onto the ship.

She realized that she hadn't actually accepted that that was what it was going to take and that her decision to act as lure really left her no choice at this point. She'd carefully shuttled specifics to the back of her mind and focused on the main objective. Finding herself standing among them now, though, images of their first time kept pelting her. Interspersed with those memories were images of the Sirians as she had known them-as beasts.

She couldn't reconcile the two, she discovered. She couldn't conjure images of having sex with the beasts. She remembered fairly vividly having had sex with Ronan, Dax, and Jarek, but her mind neatly divided the two into imagination and reality. She knew it was the same. Regardless of their form at the time, she had had sex with the Sirians, but although her mind accepted that on one level, on another it was fixated on the human forms she'd seen and interacted with as if that was their true form and the other was merely a disguise.

For all she knew, she still hadn't seen their true form, she realized abruptly.

What were the odds, now that she'd begun to realize their abilities, that the form she'd considered their true form actually was? Would they have had the ability to change their form so drastically from birth? Or hatching, as the case was?

Assuming they had, why would they have appeared to them as they did?

Had they sensed that form would be more acceptable? Less threatening?

Before she could follow those thoughts off and analyze them, the shuttle arrived and she was

completely diverted. The fear that she would have the long ride to her place to dread what was coming dissolved upon the discovery that they had no intention of waiting. She'd barely had time to instruct the robotic driver when Ronan hauled her across his lap.

"Dis work," he muttered, planting a hand along the back of her neck and dragging her close to plant his mouth firmly over hers.

Work how, she wondered briefly?

Logistically according to their anatomy!

She barely managed that coherent thought, however. She had expected to be repulsed now that she knew what they were. It didn't happen that way. Her mind sent up warning flags, flashed a brief image of the Sirians through her mind, and then the image of the Ronan she'd accepted, and that was the end of even token resistance. She experienced spontaneous combustion almost as quickly as her mind registered the feel of his mouth on hers and his taste invaded her. It was like combining the key ingredients of TNT. She struggled against the heated tide of desire that enveloped her almost instantaneously, but the fight was woefully brief. Her body knew his chemical signature and remembered the pleasure he'd given her before and responded with keen anticipation. He didn't feel or taste alien. His touch, his scent, his taste registered in her mind and body as human animal, as a perfect match for her own physiology.

She wondered, briefly, how he could possibly grasp the human kiss, let alone execute it with such devastating effect, but the euphoria scouring her blasted rational thought, leaving her at the mercy of her own basic instincts-those assuring her that he was perfect mating material.

She was dimly aware of the tug and pull at her clothing while she drowned in Ronan's kiss, but that merely prompted her to help rid herself of the impediments to experiencing his touch. A flicker of surprise went through her when her bare skin coasted along his and she discovered that Ronan had somehow rid himself of his own clothing without any difficulties whatsoever. Alarm flared briefly when the tug at her clothing reached a point of discomfort to distract her and then produced a tearing sound when her position astride Ronan's lap prevented simply removing it, but it never moved to the next level. He pulled her tightly against his chest so that they were plastered together breast to breast and divine sensations moved along her nerve endings to soothe the beginnings of alarm with heated desire.

She was as eager as Ronan was when she felt him glide a shaking hand along her cleft to find her opening, or perhaps to test her readiness. She was ready, almost embarrassingly so. The moisture her body had produced to ready itself for him was abundant enough to make a wet, sucking noise as he sawed one thick digit in and out of her passage a couple of times and then replaced it with the far thicker member she'd begun to crave. A conflicting mixture of emotions rattled her when she felt the first probing of the head of his cock. felt his flesh stretch the mouth of her sex. Her heart fluttered madly in her chest in response to the mixture of anticipation and anxiety that swept through her, forcing the breath from her lungs in harsh pants. She couldn't contain the mewling, animalistic sound that scraped from her throat as her body struggled to accommodate his girth.

"Is an assault in progress?" a mechanical voice asked abruptly.

The question was asked in English and then translated into several other languages before Kate's mind could make any sense of it. "Oh god!"

"Is that an affirmative? Shall I summon the police?"

The word 'police' cooled Kate's blood sufficiently to jog her mind into operation. "No!" she grunted as Ronan finally achieved full penetration. "I'm alright. I don't need assistance."

Not that kind of assistance, god forbid! The intrusion of the robotic driver's voice briefly dried up all moisture, however, and when Ronan lifted her it felt for several moments as if his cock had welded to the flesh of her channel. Thankfully, the stimuli was enough to prompt her body to produce more, though, and he glided more smoothly into her the second time because he didn't seem to notice the brief lack of lubricant.

Her mind switched tracks from alarm at the possibility of being caught by the authorities screwing in the backseat of the taxi to an awareness that Ronan hadn't been distracted as she was and that he was going to achieve climax before she could. For a few moments she wavered between a reluctance to pursue what began to seem like an impossible to achieve goal at this point and the determination to reach it before he could leave her behind. Jarek or Dax decided to participate at that moment, however, and shoved a hand between them, teasing her clit with a fingertip. The touch on her clit slingshot her over the hump, erasing her doubts that she could reach the finish line before Ronan's cock deflated and left her with nothing to get her there.

She groaned as the first tremor quaked through her, promising Armageddon, teetered for a moment between sliding back down the hill and pitching over the mountain top and then soared over it when she felt Ronan's cock jerk with imminent release. His driving thrusts and grunts of pleasure as he achieved release thrust her into intense rapture. Waves of such powerful euphoria quaked through her that it made her skin pebble all over. She shuddered, gasped for breath, and then leaned weakly against him as all of the tension left her at once.

She wanted nothing more than to bask in the aftermath of a stupendous climax, to lay plastered against Ronan, enjoying the heat radiating from

him and the musky scent of their love play. She felt like a ragdoll when someone-Dax she decided-hauled her off Ronan's lap and planted her firmly on his own. She was so hypersensitive that every touch was almost as much agony as ecstasy as he fondled her keenly sensitive breasts briefly and then began struggling to mount her on his hood ornament. The moisture that lingered wasn't sufficient to overcome the clenched muscles along her channel from her recent climax. She discovered he wasn't the least bit discouraged by the lack of a warm, wet welcome, however. He persevered and she thought, briefly, that she was going to get a full lower body skin lift from his efforts.

Fortunately, her skin yielded to his determined efforts to connect with her on the deepest level. Moisture abruptly flooded her channel and he sheathed himself inside her, the intimate abrasion of his skin along her inner flesh sending out shockwaves of intense, completely unexpected sensation.

She'd mentally yielded to the inevitable, braced herself to endure the semi-torture of having her hypersensitive flesh stimulated when it had already experienced a surfeit of pleasure. She was surprised and not terribly pleased when she felt a rise in her body toward a second release. She had little choice but to ride it out, however. Dax, or as he was calling himself at the moment, Davi, was feverish with the anticipation of his own release. The steady, pounding thrusts forced her over the edge once more. Any thoughts she might have had that a second climax couldn't possibly compare to the first were shattered. She was shattered with the force of it.

Her hoarse screams of release prompted alarms in the robotic driver again. "Is this an emergency?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Ronan growled.

"I'm ... I'm ... oh god! I'm coming!" Kate gasped insensibly.

"Coming where?" the computer inquired.

"With ... uh ... Never mind! I'm fine! No danger here!" Kate managed to get out in a drunken, slurred voice. Unless one counted the possibility of passing out!

"You are intoxicated, yes?"

She was, but not from alcohol! She roused sufficiently, however, when Ronan shot forward on the seat, clearly with the intention of permanently silencing the robot guiding their vehicle, to grab his arm. Not that it would've worked as a restraint if he hadn't stopped himself! "We'll be stranded here if you disable the robotthen the cops will come. Destruction of property," she gasped warningly.

Ronan subsided, but anger radiated from him.

Clearly, he didn't appreciate the robot trying to interfere with the mating process!

He grabbed her and passed her to Jarek.

"Oh god! Not yet! Give me a few minutes to catch my breath!" Kate gasped as she felt Jarek envelop her in a passionate embrace. He tensed but eased his hold on her.

"You are not ready?"

"I'm ready to pass out," Kate muttered, ignoring the twinge of guilt she felt at the disappointment and doubt in his voice. "You have broken her!" Jarek snarled, shifting around, she suspected, to glare at either Dax or Ronan or both.

Despite her weariness, Kate felt amusement drift through her. "I'm not broken. I'm just ... not up to screwing again right now."

"You will tell me when you are?"

"You'll be the first to know!" Kate assured him wryly. To her relief, that seemed to pacify him. He relaxed and spent the remainder of the trip to her place driving her insane by focusing on fondling her and sucking passionate welts on the tender skin of her throat and breasts. She ground her teeth and endured the best she could, struggling to ignore the stimulus to her oversensitive flesh.

She was relieved when the shuttle halted in front of her place-briefly. The Sirians piled out, fought a short round over who was going to carry her inside, and then Jarek slung her across his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and raced the others to her door. It was unfortunate-for her door-that she was in no state of mind to verbalize the pass code. Jarek plowed in to it when it didn't open, took a step back and then kicked it in with his foot. She didn't hear the door hit the floor inside. The security alarm blared, deafening her and sending the Sirians into a brief, panicked search for the source.

"Disable alarm!" she yelled above the din, hoping to save at least some of the property from Sirian destruction since she could see they were quite willing to take the place apart until they found the source of the noise and silenced it. The moment silence reigned, Jarek dismissed the distraction and headed toward her bedroom. She caught a glimpse of Ronan as he lifted the door from the floor, examined it, and then carefully propped it against the broken frame.

Any doubts that might have lingered that she'd found the Sirians vanished in those few momentsand there hadn't been a lot of doubt to begin with. Jarek knew precisely where her bedroom was and headed toward it unerringly. He wouldn't have known if he hadn't already been in her place.

"You are ready to fuck now?" he asked as he tossed her onto her mattress and followed her down.

Their English was improving by leaps and

bounds!

She was tempted to tell him she might be ready by the next day-or maybe the next week-but the 'foreplay' he'd treated her to while he was waiting for her to be ready was enough to convince her she was probably as ready as she would ever be.

It was just as well. He caught her ankles, played 'make a wish' with her legs and tested her readiness with his dipstick before she could catch her breath and say anything at all. She uttered an inelegant grunt when he plowed inside, aided by the copious moisture she'd gathered inside her channel, with enough force to push the air from her lungs. It was all uphill from there. After two mind-blowing climaxes, her body responded with some sluggishness to the possibility of a third, but it did respond. Her lack of interest as to whether he made it to the finish line before her and thus left her choking on his dust, vanished fairly quickly. She experienced several tingling jolts that she decided was all her body could muster in response and then hit orbit when the big one erupted.

Thankfully, that seemed to pacify them. When she'd finally stopped screaming hoarsely and

Jarek had stopped shuttering with his own release, she fell back toward earth like a comet burning up in the atmosphere, hovered briefly in a semi-comatose state, and then dropped into a deep pit of darkness.

She woke to daylight and a heavy mound of man flesh, feeling as if she was going to burn up or suffocate or both. When she finally managed to lift her head to try to figure out why she was so damned hot, she discovered all three men were piled around and on top of her. It was the heavy weight of muscular arms and legs that made her feel as if she was being crushed to death and the heat their bodies were giving off that inspired the sense of lying in a campfire.

Grunting with the effort, she tried wiggling out from under the pile and then began shoving weakly at the weights when that didn't work. Ronan roused first and shifted toward her rather than away, staring into her eyes. She couldn't quite decide what might be going through his mind or what he was looking for, but she felt a strange sensation inside her head.

He shifted away from her abruptly, shoving at Dax.

Feeling distinctly unsettled, even a little dizzy, Kate struggled off the bed, looked around with a strange sense of disorientation and finally located the door to the bathroom.

"Way too much glory," she muttered as she braced herself against the lavatory and examined her reflection in the mirror above it.

Ronan frowned, trying to decide what she meant by that comment, but his uneasiness at her reaction to his attempt to probe her mind quickly redirected his thoughts. As instinctive as it was for him to try to communicate mind-to-mind, it dawned on him abruptly that he had never actually probed Kate's mind-any of the humans-in an attempt to communicate.

Except the woman at the mating place and that had not gone well at all, he recalled. Her mind had almost seemed to shut down completely at his attempt to probe.

He could, and had, captured random thoughts that they had seemed to project when they were reasoning things out in their minds, but the fact that the humans verbalized their communications had made it immediately clear that mind-to-mind exchanges were alien to them and useless as a possibility of communicating.

That was why they had worked hard to learn the human way of communicating.

He had not actually considered that it would be impossible to communicate with them mind-tomind, though, and he certainly had not considered that it might cause damage to try.

In a sense, being around her was no different than being around his own kind. Unless they were trying to communicate, they guarded their minds from intrusion by others. Occasionally, one might catch an unguarded thought, but by-and-large they only shared when they wanted to.

He felt a need to know Kate's thoughts, however. Their survival might depend upon the turn of her thoughts, for it was extremely doubtful that she would inform them of any suspicions that arose in her mind. Beyond that, and as little as he liked to admit it even to himself, Jarek's remark in the mating place bothered him.

In the scheme of things, it did not matter whether

Kate knew and acknowledged them as her mates. Regardless, it was their seed that she would carry to fruition and their off-spring and their clan that would benefit from the union.

She had already acknowledged and accepted them as her mates, however, and as Jarek had pointed out, she had just accepted three others, as far as she knew, to take their places. Granted, they had not, apparently, succeeded in sewing their seed in the first attempt and it was not uncommon for females of many species to chose another mate if the first did not successfully impregnate her, but it still rankled. No matter how many times he assured himself that it did not matter since, in the end, they would breed with her, it was a source of dissatisfaction that made it very difficult to feel the sense of triumph and satisfaction that he had expected to feel.

He did not like it, he decided. It did not matter why he did not like it only that he did not!

Unfortunately, he was not in any position to inform her that they had spiked her attempt to replace them by assuming another guise!

Chapter Eight

Much of the strange disorientation had vanished by the time Kate had completed her morning ritual, but her search for an explanation for it still hadn't turned up an answer that satisfied her. She felt hung-over. Since she wasn't actually in the habit of drinking, she supposed she could put the odd weakness and confusion down to the drink she'd had the night before, but that didn't completely satisfy her either. Adding the sex she'd indulged in to the equation seemed a little more convincing as an explanation and yet still left her with a niggling of uneasiness.

Illness? That thought sent a hot/cold adrenaline rush through her that sped her heart up uncomfortably. Like all of the scientists on the project, however, she'd been inoculated against everything they could think of including several new immunizations developed specifically for colonists from the microbes that had been collected directly from Sirius. In any case, they hadn't actually encountered anything, as of yet, that differed tremendously from microbes they were at least somewhat familiar with.

They'd been relieved but not extremely surprised to discover that the theory of panspermia had been proven beyond doubt by their research into the microbes of Sirius. Colonization beyond their own star-system might be a new development, but they'd been a multi-planet species for decades now, and a great deal of research had been done on every world they'd conquered to date. Granted, the worlds to date that had been colonized had all been in their own system and it had seemed more reasonable that they hadn't encountered microbes that hadn't differed a great deal from those that resided on Earth itself. However each new environment they studied that had yielded up the same, or cousins of, familiar virus and bacteria that was already known had cemented their understanding of life in the universe and convinced them long since to accept panspermia as a fact and not just a theory.

Between that fact and the immunizations, she ought to be able to dismiss any fears that she'd come down with something completely unknown and possibly deadly.

It was next to impossible to reason the fear away,

though, once it had planted itself in her mind even though a somewhat frantic internal selfexamination produced the information that she didn't feel anything else that seemed to be a symptom-just weak and vaguely disorientedwhich could be explained away with the night she'd just had.

There were always new mutations, the evil side of her brain reminded her. Even on Earth itself, environment played a role in producing new strains of old enemies that could be deadly.

She'd been studying the Sirians for over a year, though, with no ill effects.

Of course, in the beginning, she'd taken care to wear protective gear when she went into the habitat. Despite the fact that they continued to take precautions not to cross-contaminate their environment with the alien world they were studying, however, they had not only relaxed a great deal once their research had assured them that the microbial life of Sirius was much the same as Earth's. There was also the inescapable fact that they were embarking on a massive colonization project that was going to make it nearly impossible to prevent cross-contamination for very long at all.

She still couldn't completely dismiss her uneasiness, but she finally managed to push it to the back of her mind with the reflection that she was risking raising alarms in the Sirians by 'hiding out' in the bathroom. She discovered that anxiety was misplaced once she left the bathroom. The Sirians had deserted the bedroom, but she discovered them in the living area of her home, examining everything curiously.

They didn't seem the least bit alarmed about the discovery that she'd packed up most of her belongings since their first visit, however, merely curious-and maybe a little confused.

It dawned on her abruptly that she knew almost nothing at all about them. She'd spent a year studying them with the mindset that they were animals and that preconception had skewed her findings so radically that she might as well not have studied them at all. The scientists that had studied their biology had probably reached as many false conclusions as she had, and were probably still more knowledgeable about them than she was. It occurred to her as she watched them, however, that they seemed more guileless and innocent than lacking in intelligence. A layman might arrive at the conclusion that they weren't particularly bright given the fact that they clearly didn't understand what the half of her stuff was let alone what it was for, but she'd been enlightened. She wasn't going to jump to such a conclusion again!

Guileless, though. Subterfuge, despite their behavior of late, didn't seem to be intrinsic to them. Otherwise, she thought it might occur to them that their behavior alone was a dead giveaway that they were aliens and that everything was completely unfamiliar to them.

Acknowledging her presence finally-She didn't think they had only just noticed her arrival-Ronan paused in his examination of her packing crates and straightened, studying her face with a piercing look that made it abundantly clear that he knew something was up even if he hadn't figured out what.

A wave of dizziness washed over her. It suddenly seemed surreal that she had concluded these 'men' were aliens when they looked nothing like the creatures she'd studied. Almost as bizarre as the fact that she knew-knew-that the one staring at her was the one she'd named Ronanregardless of the fact that the face was unfamiliar to her now.

"What dese?"

Kate blinked back to reality, relieved that the wave of dizziness passed off so guickly that she was left wondering if it hadn't been physical at all but rather disorientation from her conclusions. Briefly, she debated whether to admit what they were or not. It occurred to her forcefully, however, that she'd been presented with the opening she needed. "Packing crates," she managed, forcing a bright smile. "I'm a colonist-Well, will be." Discovering she couldn't maintain the pretense that she was completely unaware of who and what they were, she looked away and then headed toward her kitchen. "The next colony ship leaves for Sirius next week. I plan to be on it," she added, trying to sound both excited and off-hand at the same time

She was a little surprised, and disappointed if it came to that, that they didn't immediately leap on the lure she'd thrown out. Instead, when she nerved herself to peek at them to gauge their reaction, she discovered that they'd returned to examining the crates.

"You guys hungry?"

That suggestion brought them into the kitchen.

Her skin prickled when they spread out rather than settling on the stools to wait and watch while she prepared food.

"Splain," Ronan said, propping against the counter beside her and folding his arms.

The tone of his voice, even the stance he'd assumed, was so very human-like-so very alpha, commanding Earth male-that it set Kate's back up.

It also made her uneasy since it abruptly occurred to her that the Sirians might not have realized the motive behind their abduction. If they were as guileless as she'd concluded earlier there was no reason for them to have reached such a determination. Clearly, regardless of their superior understanding, the Sirians had no civilization even approaching that of Earth. Otherwise, something would have been detected in the surveys. Even if that wasn't the case, these Sirians would certainly have no way of reaching such a conclusion, she thought unhappily. They'd never actually even been to their home world!

Maybe that was a good thing, though, she thought hopefully? Maybe they wouldn't see past the opportunity to return to their world? Maybe they wouldn't instantly become hostile when they realized humans were invading their world with an eye to claiming it for their own?

"Well," she said a little shakily, focusing on the food she was preparing, "I'm sure you must know about the new world we discovered in the Sirian system and that it's been opened for colonization? They say it's a lot like Earth-actually like Earth before Earth became so overpopulated and destabilized because of the strain on its resources."

She was babbling in her nervousness, she realized, but maybe that wasn't all bad? Maybe they would put it down to excitement rather than the fear it actually was? "Anyway, I didn't have any interest in becoming a colonist on any of the moons we've settled in this system. I mean, they call them worlds, but let's face it the environment is totally hostile for humans."

She immediately regretted her choice of words and hastened onward in the hope of glossing over it. "I've seen pictures of this place-the world they've named Sirius A. And it's just beautiful. I think I could actually feel at home there. I hope so, anyway. Of course, it's going to be a lot different from living here on Earth, but that isn't all bad considering ... considering how bad things are here now."

She stopped and flicked a glance at Ronan to see how he was taking her babble. He was frowning, but she couldn't decide whether it was because she'd completely lost him because she was talking too fast for him to grasp her language, or if he was angry. He didn't seem angry.

"Dey take spaceship back to You go to dis odder world?"

For the life of her, Kate absolutely could not prevent her color from fluctuating at his near slip. She wasn't worth a damn at subterfuge herself! "Yes, I'm going to the new world to live," she said quickly. "I don't suppose that's why you and your bro ... uh ... your friends are here? Dare I hope that you plan on going, too?"

Inwardly, she kicked herself. He'd told her they were his brothers, she reminded herself, the time before! Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!

He studied her for a long moment, long enough she knew he hadn't missed her slip, and then glanced at the other two. "Yes. We go, also."

She wasn't going to be able to pull this off! She should have known she couldn't, she thought despairingly. She was a scientist! She didn't have the experience or the disposition for subterfuge on this scale! Maybe social deception, but even that was debatable!

"But ...! That's just wonderful!" she exclaimed with what enthusiasm she could muster. "And here I was thinking I wouldn't get the chance to see you guys again!"

They didn't receive that well she discovered when she turned to include all of them in her smile of pleased surprise.

Jarek, who was currently calling himself Jared, looked confused and not terribly happy. "We are mated"

Kate felt heat wash over her. Complete confusion followed for a handful of moments before it struck her, forcibly enough it almost seemed like a physical blow that knocked the breath from her, that, to his mind, they hadn't had a wild night of sex. He thought he had mated with her.

They all did.

Oh god!

She didn't know why it hadn't occurred to her that they probably wouldn't consider sex in the same light that humans did.

Maybe because she was human and was used to thinking like one?

Her horror was so profound as it sank in that they thought they'd mated with her-mated in the sense that most lower animals considered sex-that she couldn't formulate a rational thought for many moments. Even when her shock wore thin enough to allow for a little reason she couldn't think of a way to react or anything to say to cover her 'slip'. She chuckled a little hysterically, trying to force her mind to produce something useable. "Well ... uh ... yes." She chuckled again, still struggling with something to say that wouldn't give away the fact that she knew they were Sirians and at the same time would soothe their obvious anger and eliminate their confusion. "We certainly did ... uh ... mate! And it was ... fabulous, really! I just didn't dare assume that you wanted it to be more permanent."

All three of them frowned at her ferociously, scaring her badly enough that her mind went blank for several moments.

She chuckled again, feeling cold sweat pop from her pores. "I mean, I just assumed you'd move on and mate again, you know?"

Oh god! Why hadn't she sat down and tried to reason through the way they might consider this?

Not that it would have done her any good, really! Because she didn't understand them at all!

Calming herself with an effort, thinking frantically, she finally decided that she should consider their reactions as an indication that they must see sex in the same, or at least a similar way, to many of Earth's creatures. They thought they'd mated and they would expect to stay with the female they'd chosen until she produced. As distressed as she was, it certainly seemed to her that that was what they were suggesting.

That thought was almost as frightening in implications as it was a relief on another level.

She didn't think that she could have made herself try such an insane thing if that had occurred to her when she was considering luring them onboard the colony ship with sex!

The food she'd been preparing began to burn. The smell distracted her, but the ruination of the food also threw her into more disorder. She was shaking by the time she managed to clean up the mess and dispose of it. Fortunately, it didn't produce enough smoke to alert the fire department!

She wanted, in the worst sort of way, to retreat and lock herself in her room to collect herself and her wild thoughts into some semblance of order, but she didn't have that luxury. She'd taken this upon herself. She had to handle it. The thought that she might actually be in danger because of her reaction did occur to her, but she shuttled it quickly to the back of her mind.

That certainly wasn't going to help her think!

"Well, then That's settled!" she said with an effort at cheerfulness. "Now that we're mates, I suppose I should ask if the three of you plan to colonize?"

They stared at her blankly and it occurred to her that their understanding of her language might not include 'colony' and 'colonization' in their vocabulary.

Of course, it might and the blank looks might be imminent explosion over the plans to colonize their world. She searched her mind for some tale that might not anger them, but the plain fact was that she simply didn't know them well enough to know how they might react to anything she said and she was too upset to think up a convincing lie. "I'm a scientist. It's my job to go with the people that are moving to the new world to live so that I can help them understand it. I have to go. If you're ... uh ... If you plan to pursue the mating bond, then you'll have to go, too. I suppose it wasn't fair of me to accept the ... uh ... the mating without explaining all that first, but I was Well, it is really hard to think rationally during the mating ... uh ... process, you know?" she added hopefully.

Something she said seemed to sooth their tempers. They visibly relaxed.

"We will go," Ronan informed her.

She relaxed fractionally herself and forced a smile. "Well! That's wonderful! That's just great! I certainly didn't want us to fight about it!

"You know, I'm actually not feeling very well at the moment. I'm sure it's nothing, but I think I'll go lie down a little while."

To her dismay, the three men followed her as she scurried back to her room in the hope of having a little time to recover.

"You have not eaten."

She thought it was Jared that spoke, but she had her back to the three men when he spoke and she wasn't certain. "I'll eat after I've rested."

They stood in the doorway, making it impossible

for her to close the door like she wanted to, stared at her for a few moments and then, to her relief, they retreated. Settling weakly on her bed, Kate closed her eyes. In all truth, she felt more than a little faint, but her mind was just as alive with frantic thought as it had been when the conversation had begun. She focused on trying to calm herself until she sensed the men had ceased to stand in the doorway staring at her. When they finally left, she began to achieve at least a modicum of the calm she'd sought. For a time her thoughts revolved around selfcastigation that it hadn't occurred to her before that the Sirians might be bent on mating but she was able to dismiss that as useless after a while.

She'd made a dangerous mistake. There was no getting around that, but even in her current state she could see that berating herself wasn't getting her anywhere.

It still seemed beyond bizarre that they'd focused on her as a mate, but there wasn't much point in worrying that fact over either. It was actually reasonable when she considered the fact that they'd clearly reached that phase in their development and added the fact that she was not only a female but had spent the most time around them.

It was probably an association thing, she decided. There weren't any females of their own species around for one thing and the mating process in most species, on Earth, was a pretty powerful motivation. In any case, they had been very young when they had been captured. They probably identified with humans because of that in the same way that Earth creatures tended to identify with the first face they saw after birth.

It was a documented fact that confusion resulted from such experiences. A kitten reared by a dog, or vice versa, identified with the 'mother' that had raised them. That had been the case with many young animals reared by a parent not of their species.

It was a problem for another time, however, and it began to look like she would have plenty of time to sort through that.

At the moment, the best course to take seemed to be to focus on getting to their world. If they reacted with hostility when they saw just how many humans had decided to take up residence on their world Well, she would have help in dealing with that.

Hopefully, by the time they got to Sirius and she 'released' them, they would simply accept their freedom and take off to join the others of their kind!

* * * *

Jarek stared in dismay at the hole Kate had tossed the food down. His stomach growled. What do you suppose she did that for?

Ronan was frowning, staring toward Kate's room and trying to 'pick up' any thoughts she might project.

Some sort of custom or ritual? Dax speculated.

Jarek sent him a sharp look. With food? he demanded, outraged. You are saying she gave our food to the gods? What are they going to do with it?

She suspects, Ronan said emphatically.

Jarek blinked at him uncomprehendingly. She threw the food in that hole because she suspects? He considered it. What do you think she suspects?

Ronan looked at him blankly, glanced at Dax and then shook his head. Do you never think of anything but food? he demanded dryly.

Jarek gaped at him. I think about food when I am hungry! I do not think about food when I am not hungry. He frowned. Except when I am considering what I might eat the next time I am hungry.

I think I will check the pods to see if there is something to eat.

Cabinets, Ronan corrected Dax absently. Or lockers. I think I will check on Kate.

Why are you checking on Kate? Jarek asked as Ronan strode away. Clearly she is not hungry or she would not have sacrificed the food to the hole god and left.

Dax glared at him. Ronan is right! You think of nothing but your stomach! She said she was not feeling well. He is worried about our mate and you should be, too!

She is not sick, Ronan contradicted him without

pausing. I am worried about what is causing her to be anxious.

It is the way her mind churns with thoughts, Dax said, studying the contents of the cabinet he had opened. I would not feel well either if my mind was always leaping from one thing to another and back again. It is enough to make her dizzy and that is enough to make her feel ill.

That is stupid! Jarek snapped. Why would she feel ill because of that? How could that make her dizzy?

Dax swiveled slowly around to glare at Jarek in fuming silence for a moment. Finally, his brow cleared. You would know nothing about it since there is never more than one thought in your head at the time, he said coolly.

What is that supposed to mean? Jarek demanded indignantly.

That you are stupid.

No fighting, Ronan growled.

Dax hurled a hard container of food at Jarek's head. There you go. Eat that.

Jarek managed to catch it before the container smacked him in the face. He glared at Dax, who missed it since he had turned his back to Jarek, and threw it back at him. It narrowly missed clocking Dax in the back of the head. Fortunately, he had seen something on a lower shelf and bent over to study it more closely an instant before the container would have made contact. He jumped when the container collided with the contents of one shelf and created a small avalanche. Straightening, he turned to glare at Jarek threateningly.

You eat it, Jarek said tightly. I will find my own food.

Dax ground his teeth, sent a speculative glance at Ronan, who had paused in the doorway to Kate's chamber, and decided against pursuing the matter. He ground his teeth but managed to subdue his irritation. Suit yourself. Grabbing the container that had caught his interest, he moved to the counter and settled to trying to figure out how to open it. It was different from the ones he had seen Kate open before and he examined it for several moments before he decided on a way to open it up. Extending a talon, he used that to rip a long slit along the crackling container. The food inside was hard and dry ... and looked nothing like the image on the outside. Shrugging, he tipped his head back and shook a portion of the mixture of powder and hard white things Kate had called pasta into his mouth.

It tasted ... strange, but then pretty much all of the food the humans ate tasted nothing like he expected-except the food they had foraged for when they had been living in the Earth jungle. Instinct, and racial memory, had told them that that food was much like the food of their ancestors. It had certainly tasted better and settled more easily in his stomach!

Jarek watched the expressions that flickered across Dax's face for a few moments and finally approached the pod-the cabinet, he reminded himself-and began his own search for something to appease the rumbling in his stomach.

Dax was the one who was stupid, he thought angrily. Everything that Kate had fed them before she had taken and poured into another container and then added liquid of some kind and usually raw, unrecognizable pieces of meat and then she had made heat with that thing she had burned the other food on. He knew it was not supposed to be eaten directly from the containers!

Unfortunately, he had no idea what he was supposed to do with it, because Kate had done something different each time she had prepared food for them.

Shrugging that off, he moved away from the cabinet and opened the pod she referred to as a fridge. Inside was food that was cold but more easily recognizable to him. He started with the eggs, cracking them carefully and sucking the egg from inside. He had eaten perhaps half when Dax shouldered him aside and took the remaining eggs for himself.

He had already drawn a fist back to punch Dax for stealing his food when he remembered what Ronan had said. Instead, he contented himself with ramming his shoulder into Dax's to shove him out of the way. When he did, the jarring movement made Dax drop three of the eggs he had stolen. They hit the hard floor and cracked open.

Dax sent him a deadly look.

Jarek managed to keep from smiling his satisfaction. Ronan said no fighting.

Dax flicked a glance in Ronan's direction, saw that he was still outside Kate's room and would be able to see which of them had started the fight if he punched Jarek in the face, and decided against it. Instead, he gave Jarek a counter nudge with his own shoulder.

It was just hard enough to force Jarek to shift his feet to regain his balance. Unfortunately, when he shifted his foot, he planted it on one of the eggs that he'd knocked from Dax's hands. His foot skidded in the gooey mess and threw his center of balance off. He grabbed for the door of the fridge to catch himself. It moved, swinging away from him and throwing his balance off even more.

He still might have caught himself if his sliding foot hadn't slammed into Dax's, throwing him off balance. From that moment, their battle for balance was lost. Dax made a grab for the edge of the fridge to catch himself, but the weight of the two of them was too much. The fridge not only didn't help them regain their balance, it tipped toward them under their weight, crashing into both of them and emptying everything on the shelves inside onto the floor at their feet just as they sprawled out on it.

Gods! Ronan bellowed in their minds. Did I not tell you not to fight? Clean up that mess before Kate discovers the two of you have wrecked her cabinuh-kitchen!

Jarek and Dax turned to glare at Ronan but since they both decided that Ronan was likely to interpret their shoving match as instigating a fight, they decided not to attempt an explanation. Instead, they got up very carefully, trying to maintain their balance in the mixture of liquids all over the slick stone floor, and pushed the fridge upright once more.

Dismissing them, Ronan focused on Kate again. Despite every effort to carefully probe her thoughts, he realized after a few moments that Kate could feel his probing and that it was making her dizzy, making her begin to feel unwell. He did not think she actually had felt ill before he had begun trying to connect with her mind, because that was the one thought of the myriad of thoughts that had not been there beforeawareness of feeling disoriented and nauseated because of it. He withdrew, frowning thoughtfully. It occurred to him after a few moments that Kate's thoughts were neither random nor chaotic-even though it had often seemed that way to him. Her mind was sorting.

And he had been right. She did suspect. He thought she more than suspected.

Anger welled inside him, frustration. None of the other humans suspected that they were not! How was it that Kate seemed to know at once that they were not as human as she was?

The mating bond?

Much of his frustration vanished at that thought. If that was how she always knew, then they had no hope of convincing her otherwise, but was that a bad thing? If it was the bond that helped her to recognize them, did that not mean that she was bound? And if she was bound, could they not trust that she would not betray them to the others?

It seemed reasonable. He did not know why he was uneasy accepting it as fact.

Except that the humans he had come to know were never to be trusted.

None of them except Kate.

They were not the same to her mind, though. She was afraid of them when she had not been beforebecause they had killed to escape death.

He knew that she believed that they were not wrong to protect themselves, but he also knew that she was torn between that sense of justice and her own people's interpretation of it. And her people did not believe that they had the right to defend their lives with lethal force.

He did not like the direction of her thoughts, but he was at a loss for many moments as to what to do about it. He had the sense that the doubts that remained in her mind as to whether she was right about them or not were a source of comfort. If she had wanted to remove all doubt in her mind, he thought she would have confronted them.

If he was right about that, then it might be worse to force certainty upon her by trying to convince her that they meant her no harm. He did not particularly want to leave her to dwell upon her anxieties, however, and abruptly gave in to the urge to distract her.

* * * *

It unnerved Kate when Ronan ceased to hover in the doorway and entered her room. She watched him warily as he approached the bed where she lay and then climbed into bed beside her. She stiffened when he reached for her, wary because of her thoughts, but she didn't put up any resistance as he pulled her against his length.

Relief flickered through her when he lowered his head to hers and fitted his mouth against hers. Heat quickly followed it, winding through her as she absorbed his taste and scent with a mounting sense of pleasure. She'd more than half expected him to demand an explanation for her strange behavior.

Maybe he didn't think it was strange, though? Maybe he was just too unfamiliar with human behavior, still, to realize she was acting strange at all?

For a few moments, images flitted through her

mind as her brain struggled to reject him in spite of the potent chemical reaction of her body, but the image that finally settled firmly was the Ronan she'd first met in the club, the one that had initiated her 'chemical addiction'. On the most basic level, he was not only familiar, he was deeply desirable to her.

He warmed her from the inside out with his touch. He glided his hands over her body with shaking impatience that found an echo within her. She succumbed to the urge to explore him with her hands as they kissed just as he was exploring her.

And made a discovery startling enough to penetrate the warm haze already enveloping her.

He was naked!

Total confusion sent her mind reeling as he began to strip her clothes away. Between the heated desire he'd already managed to generate and her bafflement, her efforts to help him in ridding her of her clothes was clumsy at best. She cooled as she struggled with the task that should have been so completely familiar to her as to make it unnecessary to figure it out. About the time they finally managed the feat of removing her clothes, though, the answer hit her between the eyes like a sledge hammer.

He hadn't undressed. He didn't need to. None of them did-because they weren't wearing clothing! They made themselves appear to be wearing clothing just as they made themselves appear to be human!

He pulled her close again and kissed her stupid. She resisted the seduction of her senses more forcefully that time, but the results were the same. A distance alarm sounded in her head. The anxiety flickered through her mind that he had other abilities she hadn't even considered, that it might be far more than 'normal' desire he generated within her, more than a 'normal' ability to stimulate the release of the natural pleasure drugs in her mind.

What if, she thought dizzily, he could produce natural chemicals that acted like a potent aphrodisiac?

He wasn't human. He wasn't even of Earth. There was no telling what he was capable of! She certainly didn't have a clue! Stupid! She had been so unbelievably stupid and arrogant to think she was in control, that she was so intellectually superior to them that she could manipulate them!

She didn't have to try hard at all to submerge her sudden wariness with the reflection that she had committed herself already and that it was too late to turn back. She had to proceed as she'd begun. She didn't think if she had struggled in the other direction that she could've managed it. His kiss and his touch was enough to seize control of her, to master her senses and send her IQ spiraling down to as close to zero as it had ever been. In a matter of moments, she was putty in his hands, completely malleable-worse, eager.

She was so ready for his possession by the time he shifted over her to penetrate her that her mouth was bone dry from gasping for air. She spread her legs eagerly to welcome him, tense with expectation as he settled his hips between her thighs and probed her cleft with his erection. She was dizzy, clinging to him, pulling at him to urge him on, ready to grasp his cock and force it inside of her. She would have if she could have reached it but despite a frantic search she discovered her arms were too short for her to grasp his cock. She uttered a sharp gasp when she felt the head pressing against the mouth of her sex, forcing the tender flesh to yield.

"Oh god! Ronan!" she gasped, thinking 'hurry'.

A jolt rippled through him, but she barely had time to register it before she felt him penetrating her flesh, felt the welcome stretching, the fullness as her flesh yielded to him, enveloped the hard shaft she was so desperate to engulf.

The realization flickered through her mind that she'd said something 'wrong' but she was in no condition to search for the reason it seemed wrong. It was impossible to drag her mind from its focus on the intimate invasion as he drove deeper and began the rhythmic strokes that built pleasurable tension.

The rest of the world shifted out of focus. Awareness of anything outside of the glide inward and out along her channel was peripheral at best, certainly beyond Ronan. His weight on her, the heat that radiated from him along with his scent, the glide of his skin against hers with his movements all added to the sense of being absorbed by him and becoming a part of him, of absorbing him into herself.

The pressure built, spawned a sense of desperation as she reached for the goal luring her. It was a beautiful, wonderful struggle and it still caught her off guard when she was swept up in the rapture of exploding sensation. She sucked in a sharp gasp, bowed as her body seized and then sucked in another sharp breath as the next wave hit her. It amplified her own pleasure when she felt him reach his own zenith and convulse with pleasure.

The draining away of all tension in the aftermath left her with a sublime sense of floating. She savored it when Ronan had shifted off of her and then curled possessively around her, drowsing.

It wasn't until she got up and went to the kitchen a little later to prepare the meal she'd abandoned that it dawned on her that she'd called him by name in the throes of passion-the name she'd given him instead of the one he was currently using.

And he'd noticed. With the best will in the world she couldn't convince herself that he hadn't.

* * * *

Kate wasn't certain what was more unnerving, wandering through the city's seedy underworld, or being escorted by the three Sirians. Ironically, she felt safer with them, in a way, than she would have felt if she'd had to make, or been allowed to make, the trek alone. That was only insofar as her certainty that the Sirians could handle pretty much any kind of attack, though, and that it was highly unlikely anyone would be stupid enough to attempt an assault, crazed on drugs or not.

They made her uneasy, though, especially since she had no idea whether they would be able to grasp the significance of her taking them to such a place for their papers or not.

"Dis not a goot place," Ronan announced grimly, making no attempt at tact by lowering his voice as he surveyed the filthy alley they had turned down.

Pretend she had no idea what he was talking about, Kate wondered? Or maybe she could just pretend she was so intent on finding the place she was looking for that she hadn't noticed the filth, the stench of things she didn't want to identify, or the withered, probably disease ridden, inhabitants sprawled here and there like figures from a painting of hell?

"I was told this was the place to go," she muttered finally, deciding some response was necessary.

She flicked a quick look at the men surrounding her when she spoke. Ronan was scowling, his expression both angry and deeply suspicious. Both Dax and Jarek were also frowning, but they looked more disgusted and confused than angry.

Thankfully, Kate spied the landmark she'd been told to look for-graffiti in psychedelic shades of blue, pink, and green scrawled against one wall of the alley suggesting the current president do something physically impossible to himself. "I think this is it!"

Relieved that her online contact seemed to know what he'd been talking about, she hurried forward, looking for the steel door with the green, peeling paint. It was only a few yards beyond the 'artwork' and she relaxed a little more and then tensed with anticipation as she reached the door and tapped out the 'code' she'd been advised to use on the hard surface. She flicked a weak smile up at Ronan when the three men crowded around her. Ronan looked downright skeptical and she felt a sinking sensation in the region of her belly.

A scraping sound made the hair on the back of her neck prickle and she jerked her head toward the sound, feeling her heart clench painfully as she stared at the bloodshot eye pressed to the tiny view window. "Yeah? What the fuck do you want?"

Kate gulped, trying to draw moisture into her suddenly dry mouth. "Butt-munch told me I could get papers for my friends here," she said in a hoarse, wobbly voice.

The eyeball shifted to study her 'friends'.

Ronan, Dax, and Jarek all glared at the eyeball suspiciously and sniffed.

After a prolonged, tense few minutes, she heard scrapping on the other side of the door indicating antiquated locks being disengaged and the door opened a few inches. A gun barrel was extended. "You cops?"

The question was addressed to her companions and Kate felt her knees go weak with fear as she

awaited a response.

"No," Ronan growled.

Kate had just dragged in a breath of relief when Jarek asked in a loud whisper, "What dis ting? Cop?"

The man with the gun flicked a sharp look at him and then grinned abruptly. "Foreigners, huh?"

"You have no idea," Kate muttered.

The door was opened wide enough to admit them. Ronan eyed the man with the gun like he was considering whether to squash him like a roach or not. Neither Jarek nor Dax looked particularly friendly for that matter.

"It's alright," Kate murmured shakily. "They have to be careful."

"Why?" Ronan demanded brusquely.

"'Cause everybody don't appreciate Raphael's artwork," the guard said dryly. "You got the stuff?"

Kate extended the bag she'd brought. The man

snatched it from her and opened it to study the contents-an assortment of trade goods that she'd managed to scrape up for the black market.

"There are only three packs of cigarettes!" the man growled.

Kate felt the blood rush from her face. "It's all I could get! They said one per packet and I brought the electronics."

"Well there's only enough stuff here to pay for three."

"I already have my papers," Kate said a little stiffly.

The man eyed her coldly for a long moment and finally shrugged and jerked his head in a commanding motion. A second man stepped from the shadows at the other end of the small room and then a third, both holding weapons, and advanced on them.

The first man moved to the door and bolted it behind them.

"You got any weapons on you?" one of the newcomers demanded.

"We don't have permits," Kate said a little stiffly.

"Well, you won't mind if we don't take your word for it?" the man countered sarcastically, jerking his head at the third man.

Ronan, Dax, and Jarek all stiffened as the man approached her. It was Ronan who spoke, however. "Touch Kat, I break you," he growled in a low, threatening voice.

Kate was surprised when the man halted abruptly and cast Ronan an uneasy look.

On the other hand, Ronan would have made two of the scrawny man-weapon or not.

"It's alright. They just want to be sure we aren't carrying any weapons," Kate said, her voice breathless with the fear that they might yet get mowed down by the men carrying the guns.

"No touch Kat," Ronan reiterated and that time both Dax and Jarek uttered a low, threatening growl.

The man sent his comrades a questioning look. The man who'd admitted them studied Ronan, Dax, and Jarek for a long moment and finally shrugged. "Check the men."

It was as clear as day that none of Sirians liked the man who skimmed a hand over them either but, to Kate's relief, they allowed the search.

She was still sweating with anxiety when they were finally escorted from the room and down a long hallway that looked almost as bad as the alley they'd just left. They ascended a set of rickety stairs to the second floor and then were allowed into a room filled with the fruits of the resident 'artist's' labors. Raphael examined the four of them. "You got the names?"

Kate nodded jerkily and produced the list she'd brought with her-three of the names from the passenger manifest that had been listed as draftees pending location.

Sissy, she'd discovered, had been right. The government had begun 'drafting' colonists when they saw they weren't going to be able to fill the ship with volunteers. The three men had been 'drafted' as farm laborers but had apparently managed to evade the authorities-so far. She just hoped they didn't decide to present themselves at the last minute-or weren't captured. They were all going to be in deep doo doo if the men showed up after she'd falsified papers for the Sirians!

Chapter Nine

The situation might have been amusing under any other circumstances, Kate thought as the shuttle carried her and her Sirian 'mates' to the space center.

She was pretty sure that at some point over the past week the Sirians had figured out that she knew and yet neither she nor they acknowledged it-as if it would simply go away if they didn't.

Wryly, she admitted to herself that it just might at that-if it wasn't for the situation they found themselves in. It was human nature to adjust to most any state of affairs, after all, a protective mechanism of the mind help cope with even the most dire circumstances without damage to the mind. And she was by no means immune to it. They had been, to all intents and purposes, living with her since the last time she'd picked them up at the club and she was very quickly adjusting to their presence. Primarily, she knew this was because they'd done nothing to make her feel threatened and reasoning with her instincts wasn't possible.

There were no overt signs of danger and that primitive part of her mind had dismissed them as a threat.

She'd grown so used to having them underfoot and in her bed, in point of fact, that it was all she could do to keep her wits about her to prevent herself from removing all doubt from their minds. That was the only area where the higher functioning portion of her brain still held sway over the instincts.

She could see that they could feel threatened if she made it clear she knew who they were and that in turn could increase her own danger exponentially.

They'd annihilated the security guards sent to kill them, after all. She had no reason to doubt that they would still be just as aggressive in preserving their lives as ever, no matter how sweet and passionate they behaved toward her. The fact that they perceived her as their mate might protect her-and it might not.

She didn't want to find out!

So she had carefully avoided saying or doing anything at all to make it clear she knew who they were. And that need to watch herself was probably the only reason she hadn't succumbed completely to the illusion they'd created to convince her they weren't alien at all, she acknowledged wryly.

Because they were either picking up human behavior very, very quickly or she was getting used to their 'oddness' very, very quickly.

She hoped it was the former because they were about to be put to the test. She had a bad feeling, though, that it was actually a combination of the two-her growing accustomed and basically ignoring the strange unhuman behavior and the Sirians picking up more human-like behavior from being around her.

They were all about to find out!

Her stomach knotted with anxiety as the shuttle pulled up to the passenger terminal at the Space Center.

She glanced at the Sirians as the shuttle stopped and forced a weak smile. "If we get separated for any reason, don't worry about it. We can meet up again once we're aboard the ship."

Ronan frowned and then lifted his head and stared hard at the busy port. "We will stay close to you."

A mixture of relief and more anxiety flickered through Kate. His 'accent' was still thick, but he was doing well with his English!

"Why we would separate?" Dax asked with just enough suspicion to unnerve her. Well, the question and the fact that his English wasn't nearly as good as Ronan's.

"Ronan should do the talking if possible," she responded before she thought better of it and then added hurriedly. "His English is the best. So it isn't as likely that you'd be misunderstood and get the wrong instructions ... about where to go, I mean." "Fifty credits," the robotic driver enunciated in a flat tone. "Please remove any personal items when you depart the taxi. Exit the vehicle now."

Jarek glared at the robot. She had a feeling that he still hadn't fully grasped that it wasn't a living thing and took exception to being given orders by it.

She sat forward and stared at Jarek expectantly until he climbed out of the open taxi door. Dax shifted across the seat and climbed out behind him and then she and Ronan got out. Her knees felt wobbly as she straightened on the sidewalk outside the space port. Her belly went weightless as it sank in that this could well be her last view of anything on Earth.

Dismay, not anticipation, flickered through her.

She had decided long before she discovered the Sirians that her future was on an alien world-not Earth. Her home world had too many problems to cope with them and it was in everyone's best interests to colonize. As a colonist, she had a far brighter future to look forward to and every person that left Earth made it a little more comfortable for those who staved. And she still felt like weeping at the thought of never seeing her true home again, never breathing the air of Earth or feeling its soil beneath her feet. It was familiar. It was dear to her heart.

She thought that Sirius would always seem alien to her, no matter how long she lived there.

"We go now?" Jarek asked, studying her worriedly.

Kate forced a smile as she met his gaze and abruptly wished that he would change back to the 'human' he'd been the first time around. She supposed she should be more used to the way he looked now, but the way he'd looked before was the way she thought of him-all of them.

Shaking the thought, she nodded and struck off toward the passenger entrance. Ronan shouldered the single bag she'd brought with her. Everything else that she was taking to start her new life had been sent to baggage the day before.

She hoped to hell she didn't arrive on Sirius with half her stuff missing! She was going to be

seriously pissed off if they had misplaced any of her crates!

It wasn't like she'd be able to dash down to the mall and get anything to replace anything she'd lost!

She glanced up at Ronan when she sensed he was studying her. "You remember what I told you guys about checking in, right?"

Something flickered in his eyes. "Yes. You are worried."

It was a statement not a question. It was amazing how easily he seemed to read her no matter how hard she tried to pretend nothing was wrong! It must be some sense that humans didn't have, she thought distractedly. Because humans never seemed to be that observant or intuitive-unless it was with someone they'd known a very long time.

She forced a tremulous smile. "It's really unnerving to think about leaving Earth and probably never coming back. I keep feeling like I've forgotten something important and left it."

The Sirians surrounded her as they went through

the automatic doors and filed into the terminal. All three lifted their heads and surveyed the huge building packed with people for several minutes and then seemed to relax. It wasn't until they gave her more room to move that it hit her that they'd formed a protective wall around her until they could determine whether there was any danger or not.

An odd sensation fluttered in her belly. She thought it was more than that telltale sign that they weren't human. She felt ... sheltered, protected in a way she never had before-like she had her own personal bodyguards!

She had mixed feelings about that, she decided. It was nice in a way.

On the other hand, prisoners were also guarded and that didn't produce as nice a feeling as the sense of being protected.

In fact, she didn't like that feeling at all!

Dismissing it with an effort, she studied the instruction bulletins on the overhead monitors. "Draftees are supposed to report down there," she said, pointing to the other end of the terminal. "I have to check in over there. I'll meet up with you guys at the café over there when we're done ... unless they want you to go ahead and board the ship. It that's the case, then I'll see you when I get on, ok?"

Despite the fact that she'd carefully explained the boarding procedure to them when she'd found out that fully half of the passengers on this ship would be 'draftees', none of the three looked pleased at all that they were going to have to leave her.

To her relief, Ronan finally nodded, although his expression was grim. Settling a hand at the small of her back, he herded her toward her own destination. She tried to convince herself he was just walking her to the line and meant to continue from there to the place where he and Dax and Jarek were supposed to check in, but there was a possessiveness to his body language that made her uneasy.

Actually, she amended after glancing at Jarek and Dax-all of them had this 'mine' attitude about them, glaring at any man that happened to glance even casually in their direction. To her relief, though, once they reached the check-in line, they only paused briefly to stare down any men they happened to notice looking in her direction and then moved away. She watched them as they left, her uneasiness shifting to worry as to whether they were going to be able to carry off the 'disguises' she'd managed to round up for them. She'd been trying not to think about the fact that this was going to be the most dangerous part of her plan to return them to their home world. She had been trying to convince herself that they wouldn't give themselves away or that the papers she'd paid for wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny.

The chances were that she'd be arrested right along with them if the papers weren't as good as she thought they were or she'd been told! She was very much afraid that it wouldn't take the authorities long to track the purchase back to her!

She was clammy with fear when she turned resolutely away and focused, or tried to, on going over a mental list of her preparations for departure to make sure she hadn't left anything undone. The line in front of her had inched up a few paces when a voice finally penetrated her abstraction and she looked up to discover that Sissy was about a dozen people in front of her in the line and trying to get her attention. A surge of pleasure went through her as she recognized her friend and then abruptly did a nosedive as her mind leapt from Sissy to her 'mates'. She smiled with an effort and waved.

Sissy waved at her in a summoning motion.

Everybody between the two of them gave them both dirty looks.

She smiled with an effort and shook her head. "I need to keep my place. I don't want to be standing here for hours."

"I've already been standing here two hours," Sissy said irritably. She seemed to debate with herself and finally shrugged. Stepping out of line, she walked by to where Kate was standing. "I'd begun to think you were going to miss the ship!"

As glad as she was for the company, Kate met Sissy's look warily. "You know me-check and recheck. I'm always convinced I've missed something. Looks like I'm still going to have plenty of time to wait."

Sissy nodded. "You'd think the way they're going

that they were worried about somebody getting on the ship that didn't have a ticket," she said dryly.

"You never know."

Sissy's lips flattened with wry disgust. "You aren't serious?" she responded, nudging her chin in the direction the Sirians had disappeared. "I guess that means you didn't notice the long, long line over there of 'draftees'."

Relieved that Sissy obviously hadn't seen her arrive with three of the draftees, Kate glanced in that direction with pretended surprise. "You mean they really are forcing some people to colonize?"

"Tut tut! Our government wouldn't do that! It's a free world! No, no, no! They just didn't realize they wanted to colonize until the military picked them up! And they're under guard because the government is worried someone might try to take their place."

That comment startled Kate. She actually hadn't noticed the military presence. She'd been too focused on Ronan, Dax, and Jarek to notice the armed men pacing the area around the draftee

station!

Oh my god! Guards, she thought! What if the real owners of those names she'd given the guys had been picked up! She hadn't been able to checkhadn't considered that she needed to make an effort to see if they had been!

They are here.

A wave of dizziness washed through Kate when she heard the voice in her head. It wasn't just a voice, though! She knew it was Ronan.

Disbelief followed-the certainty that she was imagining the voice and a refusal to accept the fact that they were all in deep trouble.

They are here. I have scanned the thoughts of the guards.

Kate didn't just feel dizzy that time. She felt a wave of nausea that was terror inspired.

She could worry about the fact that Ronan seemed to be telepathic later!

Leave! Go! As casually as you can, step out of line and ... uh ... pretend you think you got in the

wrong line and look around and then leave!

You will leave also.

Sissy was talking to her, making it nearly impossible to concentrate on the danger they were all in! Closing her mind to Sissy's chatter, she focused on trying to resolve think of a way to resolve the situation.

You're going to have to think of a way to take the place of the men whose papers I got for you! There won't be another ship leaving for Sirius for almost a month! And we'd run the same risk next time! I'd have to get more papers for you. You can't go without papers!

A few moments passed before he responded. We will find a place to watch and then we will remove the others if there is an opportunity.

Kate felt like she was going to throw up for several moments. You don't have to ... hurt them. They don't want to go. If you could ... just ... knock them out"

"Are you ok?"

The sudden concern in Sissy's voice finally

penetrated Kate's abstraction. She smiled with an effort. "Just feeling a little weak. I was too nervous to eat this morning before we ... uh ... I left."

Sissy didn't seem to notice the slip-thankfully!

"Good thing for you I'm a nibbler!" she said, digging through the bag she was carrying. "I have snacks!"

Kate thought she would throw up if she tried to eat anything at all with her stomach in knots, but she took the treats Sissy offered and smiled with an effort. "Thanks!" Can you see what's going on?

The guards are sending everyone into a pod-a room with doors. I cannot see but I hear the thoughts of those inside. They are thinking it is a jail. There are no windows and no door except the one they entered through.

Ronan studied the flow of humans into the room they believed was a jail cell. He, Dax, and Jarek had moved out of the line as Kate had suggested. After a few moments thought, he had joined the longest line near where they had been before, relieved when he discovered that Kate had not betrayed them. The guards had watched them, but then had dismissed them when they got into another group.

This did not solve the problem, however, if what Kate had told them was true and he saw no reason to doubt it. They still had to find a way to take the place of the men whose papers she had given them.

Unfortunately, he saw no way to do that when those men would be locked inside with the others and were watched so carefully now.

He had at least managed to locate the men, which was something.

What are going to do now, Jarek asked grimly? The papers are no good if the men are already here.

We need a distraction, Ronan agreed tightly.

It might have been better if we had attracted attention then, Dax pointed out. Then we could have run and drawn the guards away. We can still do that. We can attack the guards and then flee. They will chase us and then we can change ourselves.

Ronan considered it, mostly because he was angry and frustrated enough that it appealed to him to attack the guards. He reluctantly dismissed it, however. We would run the risk that they would realize we are the ones they call the bigfoot and the Sirians. That might cause more of a distraction than we would want. We need to find a way that will not draw as much attention.

The guards will escort the prisoners onto the ship, Jarek pointed out. Maybe it would work best to replace three of the guards and then take the place of those men? At least if we take the place of the guards we would be able to get onto the ship.

Good point, Ronan agreed. Still more risky than I like-and we do not know that we can do that--but I cannot see an alternative.

We will have to kill the guards, Dax objected. Otherwise they will alarm the others and then they will search for us. And Kate will be distressed if we do that.

Ronan frowned, thinking, trying to dismiss the

reluctance he felt in the pit of his belly at the thought of distressing Kate in that way. She seemed to have accepted them-finally. If they killed again The idea that was taking form in his mind also did not appeal to him a great deal, however, and he examined it as the pieces slowly fit together.

They will panic if they see us as they have come to think of as our true appearance, he finally said slowly. All of the humans will panic and that will create a very big distraction. I do not like it but think we must risk doing that and then change ourselves again and remove the men we must replace and allow ourselves to be taken.

Dax looked at Jarek to see what he thought of Ronan's plan and finally shrugged when he saw that Jarek looked as dismayed as he felt, deciding that he preferred to agree with Ronan than to agree with Jarek. This is a good plan. What do you think we should do?

What we must not do is allow them to see us change, Ronan said decisively. We do not want them to know that or they will check everyone more carefully. We will try to leave without drawing attention to ourselves and then change into the beast forms that they are searching for and allow them to see us. If we cannot leave without attracting attention, then we must elude them long enough to make the change so that they do not know that we appeared to be humans before.

Dax frowned. They will try to shoot us with those rifles they carry.

I had thought of that, Ronan retorted dryly. I do not, however, see another way and we cannot let Kate get on that ship without us. I am almost certain that she is carrying our young in the nest of her body. We must protect her and them.

I would be more happy if we could think of a way that would not stir up the humans so much, Dax responded. But I think you are right and there is no other way.

Which direction, Jarek asked tautly.

We will go to the men's room, Ronan said decisively, having been giving that particular part of the plan a good deal of thought. There are many going in and out. That should not attract unwanted attention. He hesitated and then reached out to Kate again since she seemed not to have had any ill effects from their communication before-at least not anything that unnerved him. We must create a distraction. I do not see another way.

What kind of distraction, Kate responded, the question laced with enough fear that Ronan was almost sorry he had decided that he must warn her.

He decided to ignore the question. Instead, he stepped out of the line where he had been standing and headed directly toward the men's room that he had pointed out to Dax and Jarek. They followed him-and it instantly drew the attention of several of the guards. He moved unhurriedly, hoping they would lose interest once they realized that he and the others were only headed toward the men's room.

They had almost reached their destination and Ronan felt his tension easing when he realized that one of the guards had decided to follow them-just to be certain they didn't plan to sneak out the window.

It was unfortunate, because that had been his

plan exactly.

There was no window he discovered when they went inside and the room was occupied by humans. Only a handful, but any was too many for them to shift forms without being seen. There were small pods within, however. Jarek and Dax had already followed him through the door one the one he chose before they discovered the pod was too tiny for all of them to fit comfortably and still shut the door. Ignoring the stares of the men inside, gritting his teeth, he wedged the door shut just as the guard reached the outer door and began to push it open.

There was no hope for it. They would have to shift forms or formulate a new plan and he did not think they had time for that.

Focusing inwardly, he summoned to mind the image of the form they had taken when the humans had captured them, struggling to make the full transition before the guard reached the door of the tight pod where they had hidden themselves. He could tell from the mixed signatures of excitement and fear that the man was close even if he had not been able to hear the stealthy steps. The others who had been in the room darted toward the door as the guard entered.

Ronan hesitated, knowing that neither Jarek nor Dax had completed their transformation, but he did not want the three of them wedged so tightly together that they could not fight either. When the guard was nearly upon them, he summoned every ounce of strength he possessed and slammed his palms into the door. The hinges broke and the entire door flew outward and across the room, slamming into the lavatory and shattering it.

"What the fu ...?"

Bounding out behind the door, Ronan seized the surprised guard and his weapon, lifted the man from the floor and pitched him toward the exit. The door cracked as the man struck it and flew outward. Uttering a challenging bellow, Ronan charged behind his victim, leapt over the unconscious man and headed for the nearest exit. The commotion of the flying guard and door had drawn the attention of everyone within the building. Either the bellow he had uttered or the sight of him created total pandemonium.

Humans began to shout or scream and run in

every direction. Ronan was a little stunned at their reaction. He had hoped, indeed planned, to create disorder, but he had not anticipated the violent eruption he got. Screaming humans flew toward the exits and piled upon each other in their frantic haste to escape, blocking every exit.

We will have to make a hole, Dax growled grimly as he surged from the room behind Ronan.

Kate! Ronan called to her, in a panic himself when he saw the results of his plot to create mayhem.

Run! For god's sake!

You are alright? I cannot see you!

l'm ok! Go!

She did not sound alright to him, but he realized he could help her more by leaving and allowing the humans to settle than to charge toward the already terrified humans and perhaps stir them up more. In any case, the guards began to fire upon them, driving the humans even more crazed with terror. Whirling abruptly, he charged toward the opposite side of the building from where he had last seen Kate. The humans fighting one another to get out by that route spotted him and surged away, thankfully. Shoving the slower moving people aside and leaving over the fallen, he cleared the way for Dax and Jarek and crashed through the door when it did not open quickly enough.

His memory of their first flight from the humans served him. There was a garden area on that side and beyond that a narrow strip of woods. He had not even covered half the distance to his goal when he felt a burning sensation along his side that almost knocked the breath from him. Dax caught him beneath one arm as he charged past him and curled an arm around his waist, assisting him for several steps until he managed to catch his breath. One of the blasts caught Jarek on one shoulder just before they reached the wooded area, pitching him into a forward roll that took him the remainder of the way.

We will never find the men we are supposed to mimic in this madness! Dax said grimly, gasping for breath as they slowed their steps.

I had not counted on creating the disorder that we did, Ronan responded a little sheepishly.

They are terrified, Jarek agreed, then added a little indignantly. The humans on the space station did not react like that when they saw us. I would not have thought that they would behave that way either! I knew that the guards would give chase, but

I do not understand it either, but there is no hope for it now. They are coming. We must make tracks for them to follow away from this place and then lose them and circle around.

I am tired of running and my shoulder hurts. I am more in favor of mimicking something here, waiting for them to pass, and then going back the same way, Jarek argued.

Ronan considered that suggestion, briefly, and nodded. No animals. They are as likely to shoot them, I think. The trees.

They studied the trees around them as they moved a further from the oncoming guards and finally halted, reaching out to examine the texture. They did not need more to mimic them since they only needed the outward appearance, but none of them had considered how difficult it would be to mimic a living thing that did not breathe with lungs until the guards were virtually upon them and they were all somewhat winded from their race.

For himself, Ronan was very sorry that he had not tried to absorb the tree closely enough to breathe as it did.

The gods bedamned guards moved slowly and quietly through the wooded area, their weapons held ready to fire. It took all he could do to remain completely motionless until they had passed. If he had not had to focus so completely on remaining still, he would have spent that time berating Jarek for his brilliant idea! He was near to passing out from the little air he dared allow himself while they waited for the guards to pass.

I will beat you to a pulp later for this stupid idea! Dax growled as soon as the guards had passed.

You may try! Jarek growled back at him.

I will help him, Ronan snarled.

Jarek sent him a resentful look.

When they were certain the guards had moved far enough that they could transform without

detection, they resumed human form, except this time they mimicked the men that they were to replace.

Let us return to the building and find the men, Ronan said. We will not have much time to find a place to hide them.

They discovered they had no time. They had gotten no further than the edge of the garden when they encountered another group of guards.

"Hey! That's three of the draftees!" one the guards shouted. "I was just about to put them in the hold when all hell broke loose and they ran. Grab them!"

Satisfaction flickered through Ronan. Before he could decide whether he ought to offer token resistance or not, the guards surrounded them and placed cold metal around their wrists, binding their arms behind their backs. Ronan tested the strength of the metal around his wrists and then forced himself to relax.

We are captured, Kate.

Oh my god!

We are captured as those we were to replace.

Oh! OH! Well that's good, then, I guess.

She did not sound as if she thought it was good and uneasiness flickered through Ronan. Is this not what you had said we must do?

Yes. It's exactly what you needed to do. What happened to the men ... uh ... the ones you replaced?

I do not know. The guard said that they ran.

Well, thank god for that! They're probably halfway back to where ever they came from!

* * * *

Kate wasn't just feeling vaguely unwell by the time she was finally processed and allowed to board and find her quarters. She was exhausted and her head was pounding with the worst headache she recall ever having. A good deal of that, she was sure, was due to the fact that she'd been battered by the hysterical mob that had rioted inside the space center and pretty well destroyed it-well, the mob and the militia. She hadn't been able to see much after Ronan, Dax, and Jarek burst from the men's room as the beasts she remembered. She'd been too busy trying to escape being trampled in the stampede of panicked people trying to avoid being mowed down by the militia in their enthusiasm to shoot the Sirians, but it seemed pretty obvious what had happened. She'd certainly heard the militia firing and seen the laser impacts!

She was pretty sure the Sirians hadn't had any idea that the 'distraction' they planned would turn out as it had. She wouldn't have expected anything like the panic that had ensued if she'd known what they meant to do!

To say it had been a disaster was an understatement. She'd heard there were at least three people killed in the riot, but there was no telling how they'd been killed-whether they'd been trampled or killed by a stray shot from the militia. The Sirians certainly hadn't hurt anyone, but hundreds had hurt themselves trying to escape.

She'd been trying very hard since the incident not to think about what that reaction meant in terms of relations between the Sirians and the colonists.

If all they had to do, though, was appear to send

everybody in a blind panic!

She would've liked to think that everyone had already been on edge to the point that it needed only a spark to set them off, but she didn't think that could explain the melee. Her nerves had already been near the breaking point, but she had far more reason to be in such a high state of anxiety than anyone else.

She decided once she'd reached her cabin that she just wasn't up to trying to figure it all out, though. A hot shower might have helped ease some of the soreness and relax her, but she knew better than to think there was any possibility of that. The ship wouldn't be equipped with anything but particle showers. Water would have to be carefully rationed for the voyage, because once they left Earth they wouldn't be able to get supplies of any kind.

Instead, she found something for pain in her baggage and took it, undressed, and climbed into her bunk to try to relax and wait for the painkiller to kick in and ease some of her aches. She didn't allow her mind to drift so much as she focused on avoiding her thoughts to settle on any of the things bothering her. As the tension and pain began to ease, though, her thoughts began to coalesce despite her efforts to avoid facing what she knew she had to.

The Sirians communicated telepathically.

If she was honest, she had suspected something of the kind-except it was deeply in the realms of the unknown and paranormal and as hard to accept as the fact that they could change their entire appearance at will. It had seemed too fantastical to seriously consider it.

She had to accept it now, though, or consider the possibility that she'd completely lost her mind and she didn't think she'd gone off the deep end.

Accepting that they could and did communicate telepathically opened up a whole new world, though. She had conceded that they were an important, intelligent species. She'd had to! They'd shown a remarkable ability to adapt and understand the alien world they'd been introduced to.

The ability to communicate complex concepts took them beyond that, though. It meant that they had been communicating the entire time. It meant that their species was a lot more advanced than even she had realized they were.

The disturbing part, to her, was that she had no idea how that worked. The brain wasn't her field of expertise. She had a vague idea that the brain, or at least the human brain, had separate spheres that dealt with different functions. Deep inside the brain was the part that dealt with instincts and habits. It was preprogrammed in a sense. It dealt with unconscious thoughts and urges, making decisions that the conscious mind wasn't even aware of most of the time.

Then there was the cogent part of the brain, the conscious mind where all accumulated data was sorted and conscious decisions made.

Speech, of course, was connected to that-at least part of the time!-but controlled by another part of the brain.

She realized that what she really wanted to knowneeded to know-was whether their ability allowed them to probe parts of her mind that she expected to be private.

She thought she could safely assume that they

had a way to separate the private from the public since they'd developed telepathy as a way of communicating. She didn't know that, but she thought it could be assumed. They didn't work together, as far as she could see, collectively, as a 'hive' type species that seemed to share one mind. They were individuals, with very different personalities.

She was human, though, and they didn't have that ability in general. There had been cases of a few individuals that had latent telepathic abilities, very underdeveloped, but those were extremely rare. Her brain wasn't 'wired' for it, which she supposed explained why it made her head hurt when she tried it.

Could she find comfort in that, though? Since her brain wasn't wired for it and it had given her a headache trying to do it, could she assume that her private thoughts were her own?

That thought reminded her of several times when she'd experienced a strange disorientation, almost felt like she could feel something moving inside her brain-a tingly, tickling sort of sensation. She realized abruptly that that must have been the Sirians either trying to probe her thoughts or communicate with her.

A little thought produced the unwelcome suspicion that they'd been more interested in her private thoughts than communication, however.

That both angered her and frightened her. She didn't know how successful they might have been in reading her thoughts and she'd been worried and frightened that they might realize what she was up to.

It was some comfort to think they must not have been able to read her mind or they would've known what she was up to. Unfortunately, that still didn't mean that they hadn't picked up some things she didn't want them to know.

Was there a range, she wondered? If she was a certain distance from them would they limited in how much they could 'hear'?

She needed to find out, she realized. She felt violated in an indescribable way that they could invade her privacy and might already have done so.

Chapter Ten

You've been snooping inside my head! Kate thought angrily.

It had taken a good deal of consideration to come to the decision to try to communicate with the Sirians telepathically. Partly, she'd decided she needed to see if she actually could. She didn't know if she would've been able to before in the space center if Ronan hadn't been reaching out to her and she wanted to know if she could do it herself, reach him, or if it could only be done when he entered her mind.

But mostly it was because the more she thought about the intrusion without her consent, the angrier it made her.

In any case, there couldn't be a safer time to discover what she could about the situation. It had been a week since they had left Earth and the Sirians were still locked in the hold with the other draftees who'd refused to present themselves and had had to be picked up by the military. She certainly didn't want to wait until the authorities decided to release them to confront them about it!

Ronan? She thought for some moments that all she'd managed to do was either prove that she wasn't capable of 'talking' to the Sirians at all or that she'd imagined the entire thing.

I did not! Ronan responded finally.

Kate considered his vehement denunciation with some skepticism. She knew, somehow, that it was Ronan, but did she really? Could she actually tell the difference between them? It wasn't an actual voice, after all, and individual voices were as recognizable as faces.

Then it was Dax? Or Jarek?

Pain shot through her head when both Dax and Jarek instantly responded with denials. It was almost like someone had bellowed in her ear. She clutched her head with both hands, countering the pressure inside. Don't yell at me! I know it was one of you! I didn't know what it was then, but I do now! I could not, Ronan responded, his mental voice laced with a mixture of indignation and wariness. Because it was most definitely a voice. It made you dizzy and ill when I tried.

That's your idea of an apology? An excuse for ... peeping inside my head like a damned peeping Tom? Kate shot back at him in outrage. You tried but it didn't work?

What is apology?

The question irritated the hell out Kate for a second before it hit her that she was talking to them as if they were humans just like she was-and they weren't. It's what we're required to do to get along with other people when we do something that's wrong. We're expected to apologize to the person we wronged. She thought that over. And we're supposed to feel regret, remorse, guilt about wronging them to start with so it isn't just saying you're sorry. It's regretting the action or words.

I regretted that it made you feel ill. I did not intend to hurt you.

Kate considered letting it go at that. That's only

half an apology, she said finally, slightly mollified. You aren't supposed to go inside a person's mind like that-even if you can! Some things are private! If I wanted you to know, I would've told you!

He didn't respond for so long that she decided he wouldn't. We did not know if we could trust you. Your people want to kill us.

That was really hard to argue with, Kate decided with some pique. I didn't know if I could trust you, she responded after a moment. Wouldn't it have bothered you if I'd tried to get inside your head?

You cannot.

Her irritation mounted. But you have thoughts you don't share with Jarek and Dax, right? And you wouldn't like it if they could hear them, would you?

It is not hearing.

I know that! And you're being deliberately dense! You know what I mean!

You are angry.

Kate rolled her eyes. I thought I'd already

established that! We are not going to be friends if you intrude again.

We are mates.

Kate was pretty sure that was Jarek. The statement was threaded with doubt and she didn't think either Ronan or Dax would have left any room for debate. Ronan was the clear alpha of the three and Dax was nearly as dominate and forceful as Ronan. Only Jarek seemed more inclined to coax rather than insist.

The doubt and confusion in his voice gave her pause when a flat statement of possession daring her to object might have set her back up-probably would have. It appealed to her nurturing instincts, reminding her of the young, frightened creature he had been when she'd found him. She wanted to soothe his anxieties, but she realized she'd allowed the misconception far too long as it was. They were on their way to Sirius now. The Sirians would be returning to their own world and their own kind. It would be far kinder, she decided, to help them to realize that it was inevitable.

I'm human. You aren't even though you're able to make yourself appear to be. I'd like for us to be

friends, but we aren't physiologically compatible. Even if we were compatible on other levels, we could never be mates in the sense you mean. We're going to your home world. You'll find a female of your own kind there. It's my fault you were taken to begin with and I'm sorry, but I'm trying to make it right by helping you to get home.

We are the same and we are mated, Ronan responded.

It was just as she'd feared! They were identifying with humans and it was all her fault that they were so messed up! The realization didn't just distress her, however. It was unnerving and she couldn't think how best to handle it. She didn't think that she could just trust that they would be able to adjust once they reached their home world. She had to do something to help them adjust.

She just couldn't think what that something might be.

They were intelligent, though. Maybe, if they could remain friendly, they would trust her enough to actually listen?

It was important to remain on friendly terms with

them for more than just personal reasons or even because she saw it as a moral obligation to try to help them since she was primarily responsible for the situation. The colonists needed to make friends and allies of the natives or they could be looking at disaster.

She struggled with how to respond when he seemed ready to argue the matter with her if she disagreed and finally decided that it was worth a try to see if the male ego of the Sirian was similar to the human male. Yes, we mated. And it was ... wonderful! I've never felt like that with any human male-not that I've been with that many, she added hurriedly. And all of you are so handsome as humans! It's a shame, really, that you just look human ... for me. Because I really do like the three of you! But I know you really need to be with your own kind and that you're going to feel that way once we get to Sirius. It's alright. Really! I understand that you belong with your own kind and that, even though you look human, genetically we aren't the same.

I know you guys don't understand about genetics How could you? Trust me, even a lot of humans don't really understand it! Only our scientists that have studied it really understand it. But that's why we could never truly be mates. We aren't the same inside even though you can make yourselves look the same on the outside.

None of the Sirians responded right away and Kate found herself struggling to read their thoughts since she couldn't see their expressions. Naturally, she couldn't, and she realized that she was still at a disadvantage even if she could communicate with the Sirians better telepathically than she could verbally. She didn't think she'd ever properly appreciated how important visual clues were to conversation. And it went beyond the way a person spoke, the emphasis they put on certain words that could radically change what they said to a different meaning entirely. The expressions that flickered across a person's face or that were reflected in their eyes were just important to understanding their meaning, or the thoughts behind what they said-even their body language played a part.

You are wrong-on all counts. We do understandcompletely. Long ago, in the distant memory of the oldest fathers and mothers, we could only change ourselves a little and that was to make it easier to protect ourselves by hiding from predators. But that was not enough. We saw other creatures that could do things we could not and we knew that if we could do those things it would protect us more from the whims of the gods-Mother Ra, our world, her sister, Ne, who brings the storms, and Father Sheva, our star.

And so those fathers who could gather, aligned themselves with the other creatures and took their gifts for our tribe. It has been our way as far back as there is memory.

I chose you to bring the gifts of your people to our clan. We do not just look human. We took your essence and aligned ourselves to mate with you, to give you our offspring so that they would bring the gifts of your clan to ours.

Disbelief flooded through Kate, but a cold wave of fear carried it. The thoughts that instantly bombarded her sent her reeling almost literally. Getting up abruptly, she fled her quarters, trying to outrun the thoughts before they could coalesce in her mind, trying, too, to flee any possibility that the Sirians could read her thoughts-whatever they were.

She had no idea where she was going beyond

'away'. Escape was the dominate instinct guiding her, not actual thoughts. It wasn't until she reached the recreation hall that she realized her instincts had guided her to join her own 'herd', that she'd sought the safety of numbers her primate herd represented.

Her clan.

She pushed that thought aside and looked around blindly, trying to decide what she might do to feel safer. She discovered that Sissy was there and had spotted her. Reluctance immediately assailed her. She didn't feel up to trying to uphold her end of a conversation. She needed to consider what Ronan had told her.

She didn't want to, but she needed to.

"Hey stranger!" Sissy greeted her gaily when she'd managed to run Kate to ground. "I guess you didn't see me waving madly?"

Kate met her friend's gaze, struggling to look happy to see her. "I'm a little distracted," she managed to say finally.

Sissy lifted her brows questioningly. "Oh?"

Kate shook her head, searching Sissy's face for a clue of what might be on her friend's mind-if anything.

Sissy grabbed her arm, looked around, and dragged Kate to a small table and with chairs near one wall. "You're going to think I'm nuts," she said, her voice filled with some unidentifiable emotion.

Kate forced a chuckle. "I've always thought you were nuts ... but in a good way!"

"Well ... you know what they said during orientation that first day?"

Kate blinked at her. "They went on for nearly two hours," she responded dryly. "Which part?"

Sissy looked vaguely irritated as if Kate should've instantly picked up on what she was getting at. "The part about the success of the colony hinging as much on children as the other things they talked about before that. And that special privileges would be given to colonists who were qualified and chose to have children?"

She didn't wait for Kate to comment that time.

"Well ... I went for an assessment and they told me that I was qualified and I signed up for fertilization!"

Kate felt her jaw drop. She blinked at Sissy, trying to assimilate what she'd said. "You're ... uh ... you're ...," she stammered.

Sissy laughed, although she looked somewhat unhappy with Kate's reaction. "I've decided to have a baby. They said it'll be a boy. They want to make sure that the ratio is balanced, you know? And, unfortunately, I was a little slow applying and a lot of the women in front of me had decided to have girls. The good news is that the second can be a girl."

Kate stared at her, trying to decide what to say.

"You're speechless. I never thought I'd see the day!" Sissy said jokingly.

Kate blinked several times, trying to get her bearings. "It's just It's just" To her horror, she abruptly burst into tears. She couldn't hold back the tide then, though, couldn't hold in the information she knew she had no business sharing-with anyone. "I think ... I think I might be pregnant!" she said baldly.

That time it was Sissy that gaped at her, clearly too flabbergasted to think of anything to say. She wasn't in nearly the state of shock that Kate was in, however. "You mean You think those guys you picked up at the club ...?"

Kate struggled to contain her loud sobs as much from embarrassment at the scene she was making as to enable herself to talk. "Yes," she wailed.

Sissy seemed to come out of her amazement and dismay sufficiently to realize that they were in a public place discussing something they shouldn't. Her chair scraped the floor as she jolted to her feet abruptly. "Come on. We'll go to my quarters to talk."

Kate wasn't sure she wanted to talk when she hadn't had a chance to think things over on her own, but Sissy was insistent and half dragged, half guided her from the Rec Room and down the hallway to her quarters. As large as the ship was, it didn't take nearly as long to reach Sissy's quarters as Kate needed to compose herself. Sissy pushed her toward a chair and headed to her tiny kitchenette. "I'll get you something to drink to help you compose yourself," she muttered, clearly more to herself than to Kate. She stopped abruptly when she'd pulled out a bottle of gin to mix a drink and turned to look at Kate doubtfully. "You shouldn't be drinking if you're preg, right?"

Kate stared at her a moment and burst out crying again.

Sissy got her a small glass of water, fixed herself a mixed drink, and returned to the couch that became her bunk during the sleep periods, flopping down beside her. "Drink. It's just water."

Kate struggled with her composure again and drank the water. By the time she'd drained the glass, she felt somewhat less hysterical. Sissy took the glass and set both Kate's empty glass and her own drink on the table beside the couch. "Now! Explain to me why you think you're pregnant!"

Kate sniffed. "They told me I was." She thought that over and added on a wailing voice, "And I believe Ronan!" "Wait! Don't start that again!" Sissy said commandingly. "Come on, Kate! You know it's illegal for men to have sex when they aren't fixed! You're talking about the guys you met in the club, right? Well they wouldn't have been allowed in if they didn't have clearance stating they were disease free, infertile, and psychologically sound of mind. You know that!"

Kate stared at her, calm enough by that time that she realized she really shouldn't confide in Sissy. "I know that, but"

"You think because they were foreigners that they might not have their paperwork in order?"

Kate laughed a little hysterically.

Sissy frowned. "They're onboard?"

Kate sniffed, considered if she should admit even that much, and finally nodded.

Sissy's frown deepened. "The first three? Or the last three?"

Kate burst into tears again. "It was the same three!" she said baldly and then bit her lip, but she

realized she couldn't handle the stress alone-not anymore-not after what Ronan had said. Truthfully, she'd felt way out of her depth when she'd undertaken the task of 'fixing' her mistake to start with. It was only hardheaded determination to make things right that had given her the backbone even to try. "It's the Sirians."

Sissy recoiled from her as if she'd swung at her. She sat gaping at Kate for a full five minutes after Kate had dropped that bombshell. "You think ...," she managed finally.

Kate sniffed. "I know!"

"But ... but That isn't even possible, Kate!" she said angrily, surging to her feet and beginning to pace her quarters. "It isn't possible. It is NOT possible! This is crazy!" She stopped in front of Kate finally and stared at her accusingly. "When was the last time you went for a psyche eval?"

Anger flickered through Kate. "They aren't human, Sissy! Do you know how ... arrogant it is to assume they can't do anything we can't do?"

"I know the Sirians weren't human!" Sissy

snapped. "But I also know what they look like and those men you picked up at the club certainly weren't Sirians!"

Kate stared at her, struggling with her own anger and the guilt that was assailing her for endangering the Sirians because she suddenly didn't feel capable of handling the situation by herself anymore. "You mean the same ones that caused the riot in the space port? It doesn't seem the least bit strange to you that they showed up there when we were about to leave Earth?"

Sissy gaped at her again in shock, clearly struggling to find a more palatable explanation than the one Kate had given her. "We knew they were smart. They were undoubtedly smart enough to figure out they needed to get on a ship to return home. They've probably been hanging around the space port since they escaped."

"You don't believe that!"

Sissy glared at her. "I also don't believe it was any kind of plan! They aren't that smart! They're beasts! Smart beasts, maybe, but not that smart. And that's a good point, now that you bring it up! You saw them! They didn't even look close to human!"

"Because they changed!"

Sissy gaped at her. "Oh common, Kate! That isn't possible."

"It wouldn't be possible if they were human! Or even if they were from Earth! We don't have anything even close to them! Well, sort of close, I suppose, except the chameleons on Earth can't change that radically."

Disbelief-angry disbelief-was in every line of Sissy's expression and in her stance. "You want me to believe"

Kate surged to her feet. "I don't want to believe it! It's true nevertheless!"

Sissy stared at her a long moment and then moved to retrieve her drink glass. Downing the contents in one gulp, she headed back to her kitchenette to fix herself another drink. "Want one?" she asked absently.

Kate thought it over. The truth was she not only didn't know whether she really was pregnant or not, or if it would hurt the fetuses if she was, but she just didn't care at the moment! "Yes." She hesitated. "Nothing too strong."

Sissy lifted her brows at her, but she mixed two drinks and handed one to Kate. "Supposing I believe you. I'm not saying I do! But supposing ... How long have you known ... or suspected?"

Kate massaged her head with one hand. "I began to suspect after that first night I took them to my place. At first, I just thought they were foreigners and that explained why they were so Strange! I mean, they didn't seem to know anything they should have known! Well, not much, anyway. The more I thought about it, though, the more convinced I was that the only thing that explained their alien behavior was that they were alien.

"And I got to thinking about what we had found out about them-the almost supernatural cell regeneration they were capable of. I don't think, deep down, that I had completely accepted it until I picked them up the second time at the club. I mean, I went there for that reason"

Sissy gaped at her. "Are you completely out of your fucking mind? You went there because you thought it was the Sirians? To pick them up?" "It's my fault they're here! Were on Earth, I mean!" She thought that over. "Well, it's because of me that they're here on the ship! But that was what I planned to do! I figured the only thing to do was to get them back to their world ... somehow."

"They killed all those security guards on the space station!"

"They didn't have much choice, did they? It was either that or just die!" Kate snapped angrily. "I put them in that position! It was my fault-all of it!"

Sissy stared at her for a long moment and finally looked away. "It's no more your fault that anyone else's on that project," she muttered. "I think there's enough guilt there to go around, if it comes to that. Not enough for you to risk your life to ... collect them and take them home!"

"Except that I was the only one willing to do that!" Kate pointed out. "The others just wanted to hunt them down like ... wild, dangerous animals and kill them."

"They are wild, dangerous animals!" Sissy snapped.

Anger filled Kate. "They aren't. No more than we are, anyway. They're an intelligent species!"

Sissy compressed her lips. "Yeah, I heard the intelligent conversation! Cave men could have done better!"

An odd sense of both protectiveness and resentment filled Kate. "They're a telepathic race. They aren't used to communicating the way we do-verbally. And besides that, they don't speak English. Why would they? They're not from Earth! Even we don't all speak the same language! We don't presume that people that can't speak our language aren't intelligent!"

Sissy waved a hand. "Because we know we're all human and intelligent-some less than others."

Kate narrowed her eyes at her friend. "If you're suggesting I'm an idiot ...!"

"You're not an idiot! You're crazy as hell! What possessed you to ... play with the aliens?" Sissy demanded angrily. "You suspected they were aliens and you still let them ... screw you?"

Kate felt the blood surge into her cheeks and

pulse in a hot tide. "I didn't know they were that first time," she muttered.

"But you said you were pretty sure the second! Isn't that what you said?"

Kate wouldn't have thought it was possible to blush harder, but she did. "They had mating on their mind! I had to use something as bait to get them to the ship, didn't I?"

Sissy's eyes bulged with horror and disbelief. "So you fucked them?"

"It wasn't like that!" Kate said angrily.

"What was it like then? No! Don't tell me! I don't think I want that in my head!"

"Everything about them seemed human," Kate snapped angrily. "It didn't seem like I was making lov ... having sex with aliens! And it was real! Ronan said they made themselves human." She studied Sissy's expression for a long moment. "I think they must be able to produce some sort of chemical that ... well, that excites females sexually."

She was almost convinced that that was true, and

yet she knew she was trying to make excuses for her behavior as much for her own peace of mind as to convince Sissy she wasn't some kind of freak.

Sissy went to make herself another drink. "So you're not just saying that they're chameleon and can change their appearance but they can also ... What? Mimic human DNA? Closely enough to reproduce?"

Kate stared at her unhappily. "They seem to think so. I would dismiss it except you know we couldn't pin down their genus-at all! They seemed to be a mixture of species. And that's what Ronan claimed."

Sissy turned to stare at her. "When did you talk to Ronan? He's the alpha, right?" She frowned. "How did you talk to Ronan?"

"I told you they were telepathic," Kate said a little resentfully. "I discovered that in the space port. I hadn't even suspected it before that. I mean, why would I? We can't do that. Nothing on Earth can ... that we know of."

Horror flickered across Sissy's face. "You were

responsible for that ... disaster at the space port?"

Kate gasped in shocked dismay. "I certainly was not! I didn't know they were going to do that!" She considered that and realized it sounded as if she was pushing the blame off on the Sirians. "They didn't know that would happen!" She knew they hadn't expected it and certainly hadn't planned it the way it happened. "I'd gotten them the papers they needed to get on board and then they discovered that the men they were impersonating had been captured and were in front of them. I just thought 'oh my god! Run!' and then Ronan responded-inside my head. Actually, that was when I found out the men they were impersonating had been captured. All I told him was that they would have to figure out a way to remove the real men-without harming them!-and replace them. Don't look at me like that! If you'll just give it some thought, you know there wasn't any other way!"

"Oh my god! You had papers forged for them?"

Kate glared at her resentfully. "As if they could travel without papers in this day and time! What else was I supposed to do?"

Sissy blinked at her. "Turn them over to the authorities?" she said sarcastically.

"So they could be exterminated like ... like insects?" Kate shot back at her, outraged. "We're talking about an intelligent, important species here! I had a moral obligation to do what I could for them when it was my fault they ended up here to start with!"

"Through proper channels!"

"We tried that, remember? They weren't willing to listen."

Sissy stared at her for a long moment. "This is so crazy," she muttered. "Do you hear what you're saying?"

"This wasn't an impulse, Sissy! I considered what I was doing and the danger-well, the dangers I could think of," she muttered, recalled abruptly to the subject that had started her discussion with Sissy to begin with.

"Except now you're pregnant-At least those ... things think you are. And you're carrying one inside of you! You didn't think about that, did you?"

Kate's anger flared but it wasn't until the words were out of her mouth that she realized exactly what it was that had angered her. "Baby," she ground out furiously. "Don't you dare call my baby a thing!"

Sissy stared at her stupidly for several moments, looked around a little vaguely, and finally went to her easy chair and collapsed weakly in it. "It isn't human, Kate," she said almost gently. It everything else you've said is true, you have no idea what it is."

Fear sent an icy trickle through Kate, but she thrust it aside. "It is human. If it's there at all, then its human. They couldn't make a baby if they didn't have the capability of entirely mimicking a human. And its part mine, let me remind you."

Sissy gaped at her, clearly searching her mind for arguments. "How would they know that? How do you know what they told you is true for that matter? I mean, they might know it isn't the truth and just lied to you!"

Kate was tempted to polish off her drink and get

another one. Instead, she set it aside and returned to the couch to plop weakly on it. "You're right. I don't know anything for sure. The problem is that I can't even find out, damn it-not without exposing them! And I'm not going to do that. I've managed to get them this far. I mean to see to it that they get home."

She looked at Sissy earnestly. "Promise me you won't do or say anything about this? Please?"

Sissy sent her a sour look. "Oh don't worry about it! No way in hell do I plan to get involved with any of this! I don't want anything to do with it!"

* * * *

Sissy was true to her word. She didn't say anything to anyone about the Sirians-including Kate. Kate felt depressed and guilty about Sissy's angry defection, but it certainly gave her plenty of alone time to think about things.

The possibility that Ronan actually knew what he was talking about and that she really was pregnant dominated her thoughts for days, but when she finally got past the initial shock, she realized that she didn't feel any different. That was hardly conclusive. Even if they'd succeeded, she couldn't be very far along-probably not far enough along to tell a difference and she certainly couldn't go to the clinic and have them check her. Unlike Sissy, she hadn't applied for permission to reproduce. If she was pregnant, she would be in violation of her contract and the chances were good that she wouldn't have a choice about whether to terminate or not.

And she hadn't had time to decide whether she wanted to do that or not.

She supposed it was a sign that she wasn't as mentally stable as she should be that she wasn't certain that that was what she wanted to do. In her first panic stricken hours, she'd thought a lot about doing just that, but she kept coming back to what Ronan had said about them being completely human and

Well, they couldn't be completely human! She knew that, but she was, and if what Ronan had said was true, then they were-at the moment.

So maybe it would just be human since that was the main ingredient?

She discovered thinking about it that way made it a lot harder to come to a decision, which brought her to the realization that she'd been thinking, from the first, strictly as a woman-not a woman who was a scientist. She hadn't, in point of fact, been thinking as a scientist from the moment the Sirians had escaped. Clinical analysis of the situation had gone right out the window!

That sobered her.

She'd been trying to tell everyone at the center that the Sirians were not only too important as representatives of their species to destroy them, but they had to think about the plans for the colony. They were going to be living among the Sirians-and she had seen firsthand that they could be a formidable enemy. She might not be able to convince anyone else, any time in the near future, that that was a fact, but she knew it for a fact. She was pretty certain that human arrogance would prevail if she even if she tried again to alert the colonists. Everyone would be so certain that they were so superior in intelligence and technology that the Sirians didn't represent any kind of threat that they wouldn't listen to anything she might say.

As completely alien as their shifting abilities were, she hadn't had that much trouble accepting the truth when it was staring her in the face. She had managed to convince Sissy with very little argument. The Sirians' ability to make themselves look anyway they wanted to look made them particularly dangerous, however, and she doubted anyone not as closely connected to the project could be convinced at all. They would underestimate the Sirians, maybe provoke them, and that could be disastrous for everybody.

She didn't just have an opportunity to begin to understand the Sirians, she realized. She had a moral and ethical obligation to learn what she could while she had the opportunity and to try to promote friendly relations.

Discomfort wafted through her at that thought.

She'd certain been friendly! Really friendly!

She'd been so friendly, in fact, that she stood a good chance of completely ruining her career as a scientist! No one was going to consider her objective when she'd been having wild sex with the subjects! She pushed those thoughts aside. None of that mattered at the moment. The important thing that she had to keep in mind was that their species could be a threat to every colonist on Sirius and she had to do what she could to prevent any kind of bloodshed.

More bloodshed!

That brought her to the fact that she'd deliberately shut the Sirians out after her discussion with them about her possible pregnancy. Partly that was due to her fears about the pregnancy. Partly it was because she was still angry about her discovery that they'd been trying to read her thoughts and partly it was an instinctive need to protect her privacy.

The Sirians were still in lockup, though, and had been abandoned, completely, by the only human they had any kind of bond with!

Stupid! Stupid! That was the worst thing about thinking strictly as a woman and ignoring the scientist!

Humans hated being confined and they were from a society where they were used to closing

themselves off from others and living in small spaces! Granted, the Sirians hadn't experienced their natural setting, but they certainly didn't live like humans did!

She needed to try to secure their release, she realized, before more damage resulted from their confinement! Truthfully, she'd been relieved that they'd been locked up and she didn't have to try to deal with them, but she couldn't afford to be a coward about it. She was the only one that could or would try to learn how to deal with the Sirians on friendly terms.

That settled in her mind, she left her quarters and headed to the holding area determinedly before she could lose her nerve.

* * * *

"Yes, I know they're being held until the colonial council can decide whether they represent a risk or not," Kate responded testily to the officer in charge of the colonial militia onboard ship, Colonel Stalvey. "That's exactly my point. I'm willing to vouch for them and to keep an eye on them and make sure they don't get into any trouble." "You need to talk to the committee about that. My orders come directly from them. I don't have the authority to release them without an ok and, I'll be honest with you, I'm not inclined to let them go any damned way!"

Dread knotted in Kate's belly. "Why is that?"

The colonel gave her a look. "They got pissed off when we let the first batch loose and they weren't included-trashed the area we had set up as a Rec area for the prisoners. It took five men-on each of them-tasing the hell out of 'em-to get 'em down and lock 'em in solitary. They were just as pissed off when we let them out of solitary a week later and got into a fight with some of the other men in lock up. So now they're back in solitary confinement and if it was up to me that's where they'd stay until we get to Sirius. In fact, I'm considering petitioning to have them sent back to Earth. I don't think they're colonist material. They don't play well with others," he ended dryly.

"Oh no," Kate said in dismay.

"Oh yes, so run on down to the council if you want to, but I already gave them a report on those three." Ronan! Kate focused hard on reaching out to him.

Kate! They have locked us in these small pods and we cannot get out.

Dax?

I am here also.

Jarek? What about Ronan?

I am here.

Irritation flickered through Kate as soon as she got past the anxiety that Ronan had been hurt by the taser. I thought you guys knew better than to attract attention to yourselves! I came to try to get you out and now I discover you've been fighting and they've put you in solitary confinement!

You cannot open the lock? It is on the outside, Jarek responded, clearly puzzled.

I'm not allowed to unlock it! Even if I could get to it, it wouldn't do any good to let you out! They'd just round you up and put you back in! We're on a ship, you know! There isn't any place to hide where they wouldn't find you. We could change

That seemed to be Jarek again. Ronan was being unusually quiet-probably still totally pissed off! Don't even think about it! That wouldn't work here and it would probably just end up creating more of a mess! They'd take the ship apart looking for you and then they'd begin to think things I'd rather they didn't!

She calmed herself with an effort. Please, just don't get into any more trouble! I'm going to go talk to the council and see if I can get you out, ok?

Chapter Eleven

Kate had begun to think that the case was hopeless, and it was difficult to make the Sirians understand when they knew so little about the politics of the human race, particularly when she didn't completely understand it herself.

No one seemed to. Bureaucracy had become a monster of nightmarish proportions decades

earlier and continued to grow out of control until dealing with anything connected in any way to the government was like moving through quicksand. Like the mythological Hydra, every head seemed to act independently and yet conspired together in such a way that there seemed no way of passing through the maze of red tape that had been created over the decades of ever tightening government control over every aspect of life.

Colonel Stalvey was in charge of the colonial militia, but he didn't have the authority to release a prisoner without an order from the council. When she presented herself to the head of the council to petition for their release, she was told she had to go through 'channels' and was sent to another council member-who had no idea where she was supposed to go beyond the fact that it wasn't her call. Hours turned into days and days into weeks while she tracked down and spoke with first one member and then another until she finally found the council member who could get her petition 'in the works'. For almost a week, she was under the impression that she was merely waiting for that councilor to review the petition to secure their release, only to discover when she was finally summoned that she was to take the petition to six

other council members for approval.

Then it would be reviewed by the entire council at the next meeting and ruled on ... after a vote.

It took every ounce of willpower Kate possessed to keep her temper under control when she was told that. She sought Sissy out in the Rec room and settled across from her at a small table Sissy had commandeered where she 'people watched' much of the time since no one had much in the way of duties to perform until they reached their destination.

"This is why the world is falling apart," Kate said tightly.

Sissy merely lifted her brows, silently giving her permission for Kate to unload.

Their relationship had been strained since Kate had confessed about the Sirians, and Kate doubted Sissy would sympathize with her plight at all. It wasn't as if Kate had anyone else she could complain to, however.

"Still no luck?" she prompted when Kate didn't say anything else.

Kate plopped her elbows on the table top and massaged her aching head. "Oh! I'm making progress!" she said with heavy sarcasm. "Only four more approvals and then I get to take the petition to the council at large so that they can review it and vote on it ... the next time they meet. If I can't get all six approvals before the next scheduled meeting, though, then I'll have to wait until the meeting after that."

"Well thank god they all take their responsibilities so seriously!" Sissy said dryly. "Just think where we would be if things were actually easy!"

Surprised that Sissy seemed to commiserate with her, Kate shot a look at her friend, trying to decide from her expression if she actually did agree.

"How are the ... Sirians holding up?"

Kate chewed her lip. "They're miserable, angry, and deeply suspicious that they've been tricked."

Sissy shifted uncomfortably. "How do they figure they've been tricked?"

Kate sighed. "Well, I don't know that for a fact, but I can see where they would. Most of the others have been released."

Sissy shrugged. "Most of the others haven't been in fights in holding," she pointed out testily.

Kate felt her face redden. "They've been behaving."

"They're still in solitary confinement aren't they?"

Kate blushed harder but irritation had joined her discomfort.

"I rest my case! It's hard to misbehave when you don't have anyone to fight with."

"They could still give the guards a hard time," Kate muttered, "and they haven't ... not since I spoke to them about it. They just didn't understand what was going on and they didn't start the second fight."

"No, they just finished it," Sissy said dryly. "I don't know why you're working so hard to get them out. Clearly they're prone to violence. They'll just end up in lockup again."

"That is completely unfair. You know as well as I do that they hadn't shown any disposition toward

violence until they were thrown into lockup to start with. And, I might add, they were locked up to start with for something they didn't do!"

"Yeah, I know-for the actions of the men they just happen to be impersonating! And if the authorities had any clue of who they actually are, they would've been shot instead."

"Whose side are you on anyway?" Kate said crossly.

"The human side."

Anger washed through Kate, but she tamped it with an effort. "It so happens that I'm also on our side. It isn't in our best interests to throw away the opportunity to form friendly relations with the natives of Sirius!"

"Speaking of friendliness Have you figured out yet whether you're pregnant or not?"

She was almost positive she was, but she wasn't certain whether it was safe to admit that or not. She shrugged, evading Sissy's gaze by training her own at some distant point across the vast room. "It might be a blessing in disguise," Sissy said thoughtfully.

Kate shot her a questioning look and Sissy shrugged.

"Well ... it could be a connection. I suppose that really depends on whether or not we kidnapped princes or something like that."

Kate stared at her blankly. It hadn't once occurred to her that there was any chance that her Sirians might have powerful connections of their own on their world. She frowned, thinking it over. "In all honesty, I don't have a clue whether they would have any influence at all on their own clan. I don't know anything about the Sirians."

"Au contraire! You know that three of them are damned good in bed!"

Kate blushed. "If you're going to be nasty"

Sissy settled a hand on her arm when Kate made to rise and stalk off. "Sorry! It just slipped out."

Kate sent her an angry look.

"I didn't mean it, ok?"

"Yes, you did. Maybe you didn't mean to say it, but it was what you were thinking."

Sissy flushed. She struggled with herself for a few moments. "You're right. I was thinking that you'd been sleeping with the enemy and you were hardly in a position to make any kind of sound judgment. You're biased, Kate, and everybody else is going to look at it the same way."

"They aren't our enemies, Sissy ... yet! And we're going to be in a world of trouble if it comes to that. We're going to be pretty much on our own once we get to Sirius. You know that, don't you?"

"People aren't going to want to accept a species that's so different from ours! You know that, don't you? I mean Just look how much we've fought among ourselves! And we're the same species! Different races, different countries, different customs, different religions-all it takes is just being a little different and there's food for war."

"We don't have a chance of getting along if we don't try!" Kate said anxiously, settling in her seat again. "I don't expect to ... save the world in one fell swoop, Sissy! I just think we need to make a push to start out on a ... hopeful note."

Sissy stared at her for a long moment. "Historically speaking, we haven't done too well at that, you know," she said dryly. "Look what happened when the Europeans moved in on the American Indians. First they made friends, then they made war."

"And we could be a lot worse off if we start out with that same superiority complex!" Kate said tightly. "I might not know much about the Sirians, but I know enough to see that we could be the Native Americans in a showdown on Sirius!"

"Depending on how many of them there are."

Kate stared at her. If she couldn't even get the danger through to Sissy, who was a 'friend', what hope was there?

Sissy shook her head. "No. You're right. I know you are. I don't feel friendly toward them, though, Kate. I can't help it. I feel threatened and I just wanted to point out that you-we-are going to have a real battle on our hands-with our own people. You saw how they reacted when they got their first look at the Sirians! If they felt that threatened by three, on Earth, how do you think they're going to react to ... hundreds, maybe thousands, on an alien world where they don't have the backing of a superior army?

"We're researchers, Kate-scientists! We don't know anything about politics-beyond the fact that dealing with the government is like pounding your head on a brick wall! You can't even get them released, for god's sake!"

"So you're saying we shouldn't even try?"

"I'm not saying that at all! I'm saying I wish to hell this mess had been dropped in somebody else's lap-somebody that might have a better chance of making things turn out than me and you do! I'm saying I'm scared because I know you're right and I wish I could just run away. I'm saying I'm totally pissed off that you didn't tell me so that I knew what I was walking in to!" Sissy said angrily.

Guilt washed through Kate, but she dismissed it. "You're right. I should have warned you, but the fact is that if I hadn't gotten involved with them I wouldn't have known at all and you wouldn't have and it could've been a lot worse! Not knowing damned sure wouldn't have protected anybody! Knowing might not help, but there's at least a chance it will."

* * * *

Kate didn't know if it was Sissy's additional influence that finally did the trick or if she'd just managed, finally, to satisfy the colonial officials-or if they had managed, together, to simply annoy the council members until they got tired of seeing them. The bottom line, though, was that they succeeded in getting Ronan, Dax, and Jarek released.

Sissy went with her to deliver the release papers to Colonel Stalvey. He looked them over skeptically, looked like he wanted to dispute them, and finally simply shrugged and summoned one of the MPs to bring them out of holding.

As they waited, Kate discovered that she had very mixed feelings but the one thing that was dominant and shouldn't have been was that she hadn't actually seen any of the men in nearly a month and a half and she wasn't happy about the fact that Sissy was going to be with her when she did. She tried to shrug it off. She tried to convince herself that she was really glad to have Sissy with her for moral support.

She didn't actually realize that she'd been anticipating a joyful reunion with her 'mates' until they arrived and she found herself staring at three complete strangers. Her spirits dipped so sharply that the smile she pasted on her face felt wooden.

Ronan studied her face piercingly and finally nodded. What is wrong?

Kate shook her head slightly and glanced from him to Dax and Jarek. We'll talk later ... when we aren't being watched.

When she glanced at Sissy, she discovered her friend was staring at the Sirians with the wideeyed glassy look of a hare caught under the spell of a predator's gaze. She elbowed her friend and glared at her when that caught Sissy's attention.

Sissy blinked at her several times and then pasted a bright smile on her face. "We thought we'd show you guys to your quarters and then give you a little tour ... so you know where everything is!"

Kate nodded at the Colonel as the five of them left

the holding area and headed toward the lift, trying not to look like they were fleeing the scene. She was so tense by the time they had all gotten into the lift cubicle, though, that every movement felt awkward. Her shoulders slumped with relief when the doors closed without any alarm being sounded.

"It is these faces," Dax said flatly.

Kate shot Dax a quick look.

"For god's sake, don't change them!" Sissy gasped.

All three men turned to glare at her with varying degrees of surprise and anger and Sissy shrank back until she was plastered against the back wall.

"We know we cannot do that," Ronan said tightly.

"Why not?" Jarek demanded at almost the same moment, drawing Dax's and Ronan's disapproving gazes. If Kate does not like them

Because we are supposed to be the men whose faces we have mimicked! Ronan pointed out irritably.

"Oh."

"You're supposed to be" Kate broke off and rubbed her head. "I can't even remember the names you're supposed to be using now ... I mean the men you're supposed to be," she said unhappily.

We are the same, Kate.

"But you don't look the same."

Sissy glanced from Ronan to Kate. She chewed her lip a moment and finally came to a decision. "You guys are going to have to work on that or we're never going to pull this off," she said shakily.

Kate glanced at her without comprehension.

Sissy's lips tightened. "He didn't speak, Kate-not out loud-but you answered him as if he had! People are either going to think you're crazy as a loon if you keep that up or Well I don't know what else they might think, but it's for damned sure these guys aren't going to 'blend in' if they go around talking to you telepathically and you answer them!" "We work on dis," Jarek assured her.

Sissy gaped at him. "Oh god, Kate! We are so screwed!"

Ronan frowned.

"Dis mean 'nglish bad?" Dax asked uneasily.

Sissy covered her face with her hands. "This is a nightmare!"

"Stop it, Sissy! Like Jarek said-we'll work on it," Kate said testily.

Sissy dropped her hands and glared at Kate. "He isn't supposed to be Jarek, damn it! They're impersonating three bumpkins-Earth men!"

Kate blushed when Sissy pointed out her mistake. "We'll all work on it."

* * * *

Kate didn't know who was most relieved when they finally reached the cabin that had been assigned to the ... Williams brothers, she reminded herself, Sam and his twin brothers, Derik, and Eric.

At least, she thought she recalled that that was their names!

Sissy didn't seem particularly relieved, but she certainly was and it was clear that the Sirians were-not terribly happy about their cramped quarters-but relieved that they hadn't been recaptured and hauled back to jail.

Ronan looked the cabin over with distaste and sniffed. "Dis look like de jail."

"Is ok we change now?" Jarek asked hopefully.

Kate hesitated, but even though she knew it was dangerous to allow it, it disturbed her on a deep level to be with the three men who looked nothing like the three she'd come to know. She nodded.

Sissy turned white when they morphed-right down to their clothing. Looking vaguely ill, she glanced around and finally wobbled to a chair and collapsed on the seat. "I think I'm going to throw up."

"I'll get you something to drink!" Kate exclaimed, springing into action and rushing toward the

kitchen area to grab a glass of water.

"Maybe I'll just faint," Sissy said vaguely.

Ronan looked her over as Kate rushed to hand her friend the glass of water. "Is breeding."

Sissy's eyes widened on his face in horror. "You can tell that?"

"Yes."

Shoving Kate out of her way, Sissy leapt to her feet, looked around a little wildly, and then raced to the bathroom when she spotted the door leading to it. Kate clamped her lips together, trying to decide whether she should go see about Sissy or not, but the sound of vomiting was the deciding factor. Her own stomach lurched in commiseration. She wobbled to the seat Sissy had vacated and took a gulp of the water she'd gotten for Sissy, struggling to shut out the sounds and focus on taming her own stomach.

Dax knelt in front of her, studying her face. "You is sick?"

Kate closed her eyes. "That's a really bad place to be right now," she said through clenched teeth.

"You do dat, too?" he asked, amusement threading his voice.

"God! I hope not!"

"Is breeding, too," Jarek said, grinning.

"Uh oh! Move!" Kate gasped, jumping up and racing to join Sissy in the bathroom.

Sissy had reached the point of gagging unsuccessfully by the time Kate joined her, but as soon as Kate puked, it set Sissy off again. When they finally managed to regain control and stood up weakly, Kate discovered that all three of the Sirians were standing in the doorway, watching them curiously and somewhat anxiously.

Anger flickered through her.

"Dis practice for feed baby?" Jarek asked curiously.

"Oh my god!" Sissy gasped in horror. "I don't think I can do this, Kate!"

Kate put her hand on her stomach, fighting a battle with a fresh wave of nausea. "No!" she

snapped. "We don't ... regurgitate to feed babies!"

Ronan sent Jarek an irritated look.

"Stupid!" Dax said with disgust. "'Course dey not!"

Jarek balled his hands into fists but apparently thought better of punching Dax.

Ignoring them, Kate rinsed her mouth and splashed water on her face.

"I'm going back to my quarters to lie down," Sissy said agitatedly.

"Why don't you just use one of their bunks?" Kate suggested.

"I need ... distance!" Sissy snapped, a hysterical edge to her voice.

Kate considered arguing with her that they didn't have a lot of time to work with, but she finally merely nodded and Sissy darted out of the cabin.

"What mean dat?" Ronan demanded, clearly suspicious.

Kate bit her lip and moved to one of the bunks. "She isn't feeling well."

She could tell from Ronan's expression that he wasn't convinced that that was what Sissy had meant. When she'd settled on the bunk, she considered whether there was any point in trying to explain and if she even ought to try. "What does that mean," she corrected him wearily.

"I say dat."

Kate let out a weary breath and opened her eyes. "I know that's what you meant but it isn't what you said. Say it correctly."

He frowned at her but carefully repeated it.

"Better." She paused. "You aren't supposed to be foreigners, understand? If you were it would be ok to talk like that. People wouldn't expect any different if English wasn't your native tongue-but it's supposed to be." She sighed. "I guess it would've been better if I'd found some foreigners for the three of you to disguise yourselves"

Ronan settled beside her on the bunk. You did not explain what that female meant.

Sissy.

What that Sissy meant?

Kate bit her lip to keep from smiling but then thrust her amusement aside and studied his face seriously. "Sissy's right. You guys aren't going to pass for humans if you interact with the other colonists."

"Learn spek better."

Kate glanced at Dax when he spoke. "There's so much more to it than just being able to enunciate the words correctly and construct sentences correctly I hardly even know where to start."

"No matter when get to Ra," Ronan said easily.

Kate bit her lip. "What do you plan to do when we get to Ra, then?"

He frowned a question.

"If you don't plan on fitting in with the rest of us, what do you plan to do?" she asked a little testily.

She could see from the flicker of doubt in his eyes that he hadn't actually considered that. Or maybe

he just didn't want to tell her his plans?

"Stay till younglings hatch. Tak dem to clan," Jarek said helpfully.

Kate stared at him while that sank in and then sat up so abruptly she nearly butted her head against Ronan's. "What?"

"Nurture younglings. Faderz ... do dis."

It took Kate a few moments to decipher that. "You're saying that, in your culture, the fathers take care of the babies?"

"Yes."

"Over my dead body!" she growled, surging off the bunk and facing the three men angrily. "This is my baby! Like hell you're taking it any damned where!"

The shock that registered on all three faces might have been comical if she'd been in any mood to appreciate it.

Ronan recovered first. His jaw jutted belligerently. "Fader ... job."

Kate narrowed her eyes at him. "It's the mother's job!"

"Tak later?" Jarek asked uneasily.

"You aren't taking it at all!"

"Dey clan younglings!" Ronan said tightly.

"They're Wait! They? How the hell many did you put inside me?"

Ronan, Dax, and Jarek exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Stupid!" Dax snarled and punched Jarek on the shoulder. "Now mak Kate mad!"

Jarek punched him in the face, sending Dax reeling backwards several steps.

"Don't you dare start fighting!" Kate gasped with a mixture of horror and anger as Dax righted himself and stalked toward Jarek purposefully. "The MPs will be here to lock you up again ... and I'm damned well going to let you stay this time!"

"No fighting. Kat no like!" Ronan added.

Kate whipped a look at him. "It isn't just a matter of not liking! It isn't acceptable behavior ... among humans."

Ronan studied her skeptically. "Shoot instead."

Kate felt her face flush. "There's a difference between keeping order and Never mind! Let's get back to the 'they' thing."

"Tree."

Kate sat weakly on the bunk again, struggling for acceptance. "You put three inside me?" she finally managed angrily. "Three? How the hell ...? Never mind! Why?"

"One each," Jarek supplied uneasily. "All mate."

"That's why Never mind! Three! Damn it!"

"Dis not goot?" Dax asked uneasily. He glared at Ronan. I told you that it was a small nesting place!

Ronan glared at him. You were not so worried that you did not coax another for yourself!

Because you insisted that it would not be a problem!

I told you to use your best judgment! Clearly you did not consider anything beyond your own desire to spawn on my mate!

Our mate! Jarek reminded him.

"Two would've been bad enough!" Kate snapped. "But three?"

Ronan and Dax turned to glare at Jarek accusingly.

You should not have bred one!

"Will you guys stop doing that, damn it? I know what you're doing! No telepathing and leaving me wondering what the hell is going on! We are going to have a real problem."

"Three bad?" Ronan demanded. "Two not bad? I beat Jarek senseless."

Kate gaped at him. "Why?"

"He fader tird."

"Oh come on! How the hell would you know that? Maybe you fathered the third one?" He looked indignant. "Alpha. Fader fust."

Kate rubbed her throbbing temples. "I don't see any point in arguing that ... now," she added angrily. "You didn't even check to see how many babies human women typically have, damn it?"

"Many eggs," Ronan pointed out.

"Small belly!" Kate snapped. "We carry them inside, in case you didn't even do that much research!"

"Know dat," Ronan said tightly.

"You just ignored it."

"Dis stretch," Ronan said pointedly, gliding a finger along the skin of her arm.

She slapped his hand away. "Not that damned much!"

"What do?" Dax asked uneasily.

"I don't really have a choice now, do I?" Kate said angrily. "It isn't like I could remove any of them without risking losing all of them! Besides, I'm not supposed to have even one without a damned permit!"

All three of them gaped at her. It was Ronan who spoke, however. "Need paper dat too?" he demanded, clearly outraged.

"Yes we need papers for that, too!" Kate responded angrily. "We need permits for every damned thing-especially reproducing! In case you didn't notice we have a population problem!"

"So ... ok tree?" Jarek asked hopefully. "Just no ... paper? You get paper, yes? Like did us?"

"No it isn't ok three!" Kate snapped. "It isn't ok with me, damn it! And its three times as much trouble as I'd be in if there was only one!" She thought about it. "You're sure there are three?"

She could tell from the looks the three of them exchanged that they were debating whether to admit it or not. "Never mind! Don't bother to tell me different now!"

Truthfully, she hadn't even figured out what she was going to do about being pregnant at all when she hadn't gone through channels. She'd had a vague idea that, maybe, it wouldn't be the issue on the new world that it would've been on Earthprobably more hopefulness than anything approaching reason-but she thought having triplets wasn't going to be received well-at all! Even if attitudes changed once they began to build their colony and accepted that they were on a new world and the old ways they were used to just didn't matter as much when they had new things to worry about, she doubted people would relax that much!

They had, after all, been subjected to orientation for the colony that included the warnings that they had to protect their new world. They couldn't afford to behave as generations of the past had on Earth or they would be making the same mistakes and, in time, the new world would be in pretty much the same trouble as the one they'd left. They did have to adjust their thinking regarding children. They could not only afford to have children-each of them-but new colonists would be needed since they would have to rely a lot more on manpower than they had on Earth. Balance was the key, though! No one was allowed to make any decisions that could affect the colony as a whole.

Not that she had made any decision to have a

baby at all, much less three!

What the hell was she going to do?

It flickered through her mind that the Sirians had actually given her a possible solution, but her emotional reaction was sufficient to convince her without thinking about it, at all, that that was not acceptable to her. She hadn't planned to have children. Like pretty much everyone else, she suspected, there'd been the biological urge from time to time, but she'd dismissed it.

Genetically speaking, she'd been tentatively approved to have a child if she wanted one, but all that meant was that she had no genetic defects that couldn't be easily removed and she had desirable traits that made approval a higher probability. It didn't mean she would actually get all the way through the process and attain final approval. There were waiting lines so long that a lot of women were beyond the most desirable childbearing years before they got approvedwhen they got it at all.

She'd accepted the unlikelihood that she would have a child of her own long ago and, mostly, put it from her mind and focused on her career. The career that was pretty much in shambles now!

"I don't know what we're going to do," she said finally, "but Earth customs-I am not giving up my babies! Regardless of what you're used to" She stopped, frowning, and then looked at the Sirians. "How do you know that your ... uh ... the father usually nurtures the young? How do you know anything at all about your home world? You weren't even born ... uh ... you've never actually been there."

Ronan looked surprised. "Memories."

"How could you have ...? Wait! Are you saying ...? You are saying that you have ... memories that aren't yours?"

Ronan and the others shared a look. "You no have dat neider? How younglings ...?" He stopped and seemed to struggle with what he was trying to ask her. I cannot explain in your language. I do not know the words.

So explain telepathically! And while you're at it, explain to me how it is that the fathers are supposed to nurture the young and there was no father around when we ... uh ... took the eggs. There should have been three, right?

They must eat! Jarek said a little defensively.

Kate glanced at him. But there should have been one, at least, that stayed to protect, right?

The three of them looked uncomfortable and defensive at the same time.

Sometimes the males follow the queen to seed her again ... or try. Usually the queen will not allow it, but sometimes If she is young and has not produced before. There were only three. She could not be sure all would survive.

Well that certainly wasn't likely if she abandoned them to be taken care of by three males that abandoned them to follow her off to screw again!

The males were young, too, Ronan said tightly.

How the hell do you know that?

"Do not know. Guess," Jarek said.

Ronan and Dax both sent him an irritated look.

They would not all have left if that was not the case, Dax said. They were more driven by their instinct to reproduce than the caution of the old ones to protect the young they had already spawned.

"The old ones?" Kate asked blankly. "You're talking about memories again? You have actual memories from ... ancestors?"

Gathered knowledge passed to off-spring, Ronan said. Humans do not do this? They are not truly memories-not the way you think of memories. We did not experience these things. We simply know because it is written in the mind.

Kate stared at him, digesting that. They'd always suspected that some animals had 'racial' memory coded into their genes. There had never been any solid proof of it-except for the fact that a lot of animals could be separated completely from their parents and still have the same behavioral traits. But those things couldn't be actual memories either.

She had a lot to learn about the Sirians, she realized in dismay, and not a lot of time to process it!

She shook her head, trying to shake the suspicion that she'd taken on an impossible feat. It could take years and years-maybe generationsto understand the Sirians, and vice versa! It was mind boggling to think how very different they were from one another!

And depressing!

They had to have a place to start, though, she decided, and the most important one to her, at the moment, was an understanding of their current situation. "The babies stay with me. If they're human like you said-or mostly human-they'll need me. I'm not saying that the three of you can't stay Always assuming you don't decide to hunt another ... queen ... to breed." And she didn't think she would be sorry if they did-at least not at the moment!

"Why need?" Ronan asked curiously.

Kate stared at him as it abruptly sank in that the reason the females of their 'clan' tended to abandon their young was simply because their young didn't really need a mother! They were clearly capable of surviving pretty much on their own as long as they didn't fall prey to a predator. A very little thought convinced her that it might not be a good idea to point out to the Sirians just how weak and vulnerable a human baby was.

They had bred weakness into their young, she realized abruptly. Early human primates wouldn't have been as weak-no more than the primates of Earth were now. It was their tendency to nurture that had resulted in babies that had to be nurtured just to survive.

* * * *

Ronan made it clear that he wasn't at all pleased at the discovery that the quarters they'd been assigned to was for them alone and that she had her own quarters. They had a brief, semi-heated 'discussion' about that when she had finished a cursory 'orientation' of the amenities of their quarters, told them she thought it would be best, for the time being, if they stayed in their quarters, and headed for the door to go to her own cabin.

"Where Kat go?" Ronan asked-actually demanded although his tone wasn't exactly argumentative. Kate sent him a look of surprise, struggling with a rise of resentment. "To my quarters."

His lips tightened. "Mate. Stay here."

Kate flicked a glance at Jarek and Dax, saw from their expressions and body language that they weren't any happier about the situation than Ronan was, and focused on Ronan. "I've already been assigned a cabin of my own-And I signed on as single. There isn't room in my cabin for the three of you-or enough room here for four."

Ronan glanced around. "Not enough room for three," he said dryly. "Cannot protect nestlings from dis place, though, you no stay."

Kate gasped indignantly. "Your nestlings are safe!" she snapped. "I'm not going to ... drop them or anything!"

"Protect mate den nestlings be safe," Jarek pointed out.

His tone was at least somewhat mollifying even if the comment was as insulting as Ronan's. "You three have been locked up since we got on board! We're halfway to Sirius! I think I can manage the other half by myself, thank you!"

"No could protect den," Dax said tightly. "Caged before. Can now. Must."

"Don't think for one minute that the three of you can gang up on me and get your way!" Kate snapped. "I'm not only perfectly safe, it isn't practical to consider changing things around at this point. Besides, we need to try not to attract attention to ourselves-any more than we can help."

Ronan studied her through narrowed eyes for a long moment and seemed to capitulate. "I go with. You stay in cabin."

Kate was about to object, but she decided it would be better to agree to his compromise than to stand arguing with them. Finally, she merely nodded.

By the time they reached her quarters, however-in a completely different quadrant of the ship-his expression was as dark as a thundercloud. The polite smile she'd pasted on her lips as she turned to tell him bye fell flat. "What?" "We go in."

She didn't particular want to invite him with that look on his face!

On the other hand, he looked ready to explode and she didn't think the corridor would be a good place for that. Reluctantly, she led him in to her quarters. He looked the small space over with an expression of disgust.

"I told you it was too small to share. It wasn't made for sharing."

Ronan studied her assessingly. "Mak baby wid" You said the females of your clan nurture the younglings. The males do nothing but breed? They do not stay nearby to protect their mate and their younglings?

Kate hesitated. The truth wasn't going to support her argument, but she had taken on the task of teaching them the ways of humans. If she lied when it was more convenient to her, she was going to create as many misconceptions as she was trying to eliminate.

"We don't do a lot of mating," she hedged.

Ronan sent her a skeptical look. "Why so many humans den?"

She frowned at him. "I didn't say we never had! We spent generations making the mess, though! It'll take generations to repair the damage, too!" she informed him testily.

"No answer question."

Kate released a huff of irritation. "We contract. We don't call it mating-because it often isn't about mating at all, not in the sense you mean. We aren't allowed to reproduce indiscriminately. We pair upusually male and female-for companionship and economic reasons. And, yes, the males and females live together-share living space. If they decide to have a child and if they're granted permission, then they usually stay together and take care of the child together-at least for the duration of the contract and sometimes longer."

That explanation seemed to throw him for several moments. "Pair up but no have young ... baby? Why?"

Kate rolled her eyes. "You like fucking, right?" she said dryly.

His brows rose and then descended. A speculative gleam entered his eyes. "Share libing space for dat?"

"I strongly suspect that's the main reason men do!" Kate said sardonically. "They like having it handy for when they want to have sex so they don't have to work as hard for it. It's really difficult to find jobs, though, and keep them, so that's part of it, too. It takes credits to live and nobody can count on being employed all the time. So they pair up and share expenses. Sometimes they contract with several partners, in fact, for economic security."

He studied her thoughtfully and moved closer. Kate eyed him warily, but he'd reached her before she even thought about retreating. Settling his hands lightly on her upper arms, he pulled her closer still, lowering his head and covering her mouth just as she opened it to demand to know what he was doing. A jolt went through her at the contact. The muscles low in her belly fluttered. Heat wafted through her. Her mind clouded.

Her instantaneous reaction was almost more disorienting because he now looked nothing like the man she'd come to think of as Ronan but rather a complete stranger, and yet on a primal level she knew him. With her eyes closed, every other sense was more alert and absolutely convinced she knew him on the deepest level. Her mind identified him as Ronan and reacted accordingly

Then it is your custom that mates share living space. And this is not so that the male can protect?

He had an unfair advantage, she thought with a flicker of resentment quickly drowned by the pleasure wafting through her. He could kiss her and communicate at the same time using his mind! She couldn't talk with his mouth on hers and she couldn't think worth a damn either! Sort of ... I guess, she managed finally.

He lifted his head and studied her frowningly. What is 'sort of'?

We rely on the police and the military for protection ... mostly. Kate opened her eyes reluctantly and peered up at him through her lashes.

Ronan's lips curled faintly at the corners. He

leaned close again and sucked lightly at her lips. Curling his arms around her at the same time, he lifted her off her feet and headed toward her bunk. If it is not for protection and not to breed younglings, then the only reason that humans shave living space is for sex? He asked as he settled on her bunk with her.

" To share life, companionship, living expenses-to be helpmates," Kate murmured as she reached for the closure of her jumpsuit and opened the one piece suit from neck to crotch. This is one very nice way to settle a disagreement.

Ronan sent her a quizzical look, but dismissed further discussion.

Chapter Twelve

Kate was all in favor of actions speaking louder than words. She'd forgotten just how much she enjoyed everything about Ronan. His scent and taste were branded on her psyche, though, and brought memories of her pleasure in him to the surface as he peeled her suit off and explored the flesh he exposed with feverish lips and hands. The weeks of separation might never have happened. She was alive as she had never been before, feeling everything more keenly.

There was no surprise, this time, to discover he was as naked as she was by the time he'd peeled her suit away, just gladness that there was no impediment to the momentum he'd gathered along the way to disrobing her. She was readymore than ready. The moment he peeled the suit from one leg, freeing her of restrictions and dove over her again, she curled it around him and bumped her pelvis against him in invitation.

It was no stranger's cock that plowed her cleft and anchored its head in the mouth of her sex. The familiar tug of her flesh as he seated himself and curled his hips to probe deeper had her gasping with anticipation. She squeezed her eyes more tightly to focus on the sensation, shifting and undulating against him to help him fully sheathe himself inside of her.

A profound sense of pleasure enveloped her when he achieved full penetration and set a rhythm that rang with the same desperation that filled her. She didn't suffer a moment of doubt that she was going to reach her goal. She was halfway there by the time he entered her and climbing faster than the ship they were in had when it left Earth's orbit.

Her climax still swept through her with a swiftness and magnitude that caught her off guard enough to drag a cry from her. She sucked in a breath and held it as shudders rattled through her, her skin prickling all over as he achieved his own orgasm.

Breathless from the battle, she lay panting beneath his weighty bulk in the aftermath, trying to push any thought at all from her mind that might interfere with the glorious sense of completion. They came anyway, settling like an unwelcome flock of crows in a freshly planted field.

He'd blindsided her. She'd had some vague notion that she would eschew intimacy now that there was no hope whatsoever of pretending they weren't what they were, that she would backtrack and achieve the objectivity she'd lost somewhere along the way.

No such luck!

"And let that be a lesson to you," she muttered dryly. She'd already let them breach any defenses she might have been able to gather to herself before that first time. There would be no going back.

Ronan uttered a muffled chuckle that sent a jolt of surprised pleasure through her. "Dis lesson I no mind, Kat. You teach me more, I like much better."

She didn't know what surprised her more-that he had a sense of humor, or that he seemed to instantly grasp the irony in her comment.

* * * *

"Our nutritional requirements are probably a little different than yours," Kate said once she'd shown Ronan, Dax, and Jarek the workings of their kitchenette in their cabin and explained what each fixture did and how it worked. "We don't ... uh ... forage for food ... uh ... anymore. People used to, but that was a long, long time ago. We have plants that grow everything and other plants that package everything and then, once we get it from a store, we have to prepare it. A balanced diet is a healthy diet! And for us that means a serving of protein, vegetables, dairy and fiber. Fiber is really important since everything is so processed."

"Fi ... ber?" Jarek asked curiously. "What dis? Why im ... port?"

Kate felt her face reddening. He would focus on that! She cleared her throat. "Important for digestion and it's ... uh ... well, fiber. Something hard to digest. Actually, impossible-that's why it's good for you-well, us."

"What dat odder stuff?" Ronan asked.

"Meat ... uh ... animal flesh and plants and the dairy comes from milk. We're omnivores. That means we have to have some of both to be healthy. We could get by on one or the other for short periods of time, but to be healthy we need both."

Ronan frowned. She thought he was trying to figure out what milk was, but he surprised her. "Dat not animal," he said, nudging his chin toward the package of meat she was holding.

"Of course it is!" Kate said briskly. "It's just processed meat. That's why it doesn't look familiar. Well, factory cultivated. It isn't actually an animal. We don't raise farm animals anymore. They take up too much room, breathe too much air, and produce too much ...uh ... methane ... and this is better anyway. Just enough fat to be healthy and none of the bad stuff."

"What mean digest?" Dax demanded.

Kate cleared her throat. "When the body processes the food?"

Jarek, she saw, was frowning thoughtfully. "Why eat food no process? No make sense. Just go out again."

"Yes, well, it helps us process the other stuff," Kate said briskly, hoping to divert any more questions by directing their attention to the food preparations. "All of the packages tell you how to prepare the food."

Ronan took the package she was holding and looked it over in frowning concentration. Any hope she'd had that they had somehow managed to learn to read vanished. He tapped at the instructions with one index finger. "Dis spek? How make talk?" Dismay flickered through her. "It doesn't actually Never mind! Why don't the three of you just study the package and memorize what it looks like? Then I'll show you how to prepare the meal and we'll go from there?"

Ronan looked the package he was holding over cursorily and passed it to Dax who passed it to Jarek.

"Oh come on! I said memorize! You aren't going to be able to tell this package from the others!"

Ronan sent her an unreadable look. "Will."

"That fast?"

"Yes."

"Fine! You can show me." She snatched the package from Jarek and presented her back, blocking their view while she shuffled the package with the others inside the food locker. Then she stepped back. "You first," she said, crooking her finger at Ronan.

He sent her a sardonic look, stepped forward and picked up the package.

"You saw me! Or you read my mind."

His lips flattened into a thin line. "Memorize-You say no read mind. I no do dat."

Kate was still skeptical. Either they were reading her mind or they had photographic memories, though. She tried shuffling the packages with each one and each of them picked the package out unerringly and within moments.

Shrugging it off with the reflection that they were the ones that were going to suffer if they were 'cheating', she focused on preparing the meal.

She discovered after a few days, though, that they actually did seem to retain anything they saw once. They watched each meal she prepared, but no matter how complicated it was, they could repeat the process without any trouble at all.

It was admirable in a way.

In another way it was downright unnerving.

* * * *

"What in the world ...?"

Dax sent her a wary look from the floor in front of her cabin door where he'd obviously been sitting for a while.

She thought it was Dax.

Recovering, she leaned out the door and looked both ways down the corridor and then motioned him inside. "Dax?"

He morphed into the form she was familiar with.

She was never going to get used to that!

And it occurred to her that there was nothing to stop any of them from taking any form they wanted to!

"You are Dax?"

He frowned. "No look like?"

Kate frowned back at him. "That isn't an answer! And how am I supposed to know when you guys can and do change the way you look to anything you want to look like ...?" The comment redirected her mind. "You can do that, right? I mean, make yourself look like anything at all?" He seemed to hesitate. "Muss be same size."

As brief as it was, she thought that hesitation was significant. She noticed he hadn't actually answered either question. He moved closer, however, while she was distracted by her thoughts. She flinched all over when he embraced her, nuzzling his face along the side of her neck. Her breasts tingled as her nipples hardened with the warmth that instantly flooded her.

"You fuck me, yes? No hurt baby?"

Kate stiffened and then released an irritated huff of breath.

Dax leaned away from her to study her face. "No say right?"

She had to give him points for being swift on the uptake!

She shook her head, more at herself than him. No matter that she knew he wasn't even human and could certainly not have any understanding of romance-human males weren't that damned good at it themselves!-she still couldn't help but be disappointed. Worse, she could tell him the right words to say and she didn't doubt that he'd remember and use the right ones the next time, but it meant even less than a human male telling a woman what she wanted to hear just so he could get in her pants! He wouldn't understand that! She seriously doubted he was capable of feeling any of the human emotions, or what everyone thought of as purely human emotion.

They were far more in touch with their animal side than humans were, far less tame, and thus far less likely to feel more than animal urges. In a way, she supposed that taste of wildness might be at least part of their appeal. She would never have thought such a thing would appeal to her, but it certainly didn't turn her off!

"It hurt baby?" he persisted. "Dis what wrong?"

Kate sighed again. She at least needed to make an effort to teach them some of the finer points of social behavior or they didn't have a chance in hell of getting along. She could just imagine their reception if they made a habit of asking any female that appealed to them if they wanted to fuck!

It was her fault anyway! She should've corrected

them to begin with! "It's offensive to ask like that," she said a little irritably. "A woman at least wants the pretense that a guy cares something about her ... even when she knows better."

You are my mate. I care. You cannot tell that I want to mate with you?

"You're never going to get good enough with your English to pass if you keep reverting to telepathy!"

He frowned. "Hard."

Amusement flickered through Kate in spite of her irritation. She knew he was talking about how hard it was for him to communicate with her in her language-and she really did empathize with his difficulties-but she couldn't resist 'misinterpreting' the comment. "So I noticed," she said dryly, giving in to the impulse to cup his erection and stroke it.

His hands tightened on her. "Feel goot, Kat. No feel goot to Kat? Dis why no want?"

She was a total sucker! She knew his earnest questions had a lot more to do with what he

wanted than any anxiety that she wasn't pleased with him, but she decided he'd been convincing enough.

Besides, she was horny. As much as she hated to admit it even to herself she hadn't just gotten used to having the guys around in the time she'd spent with them. She'd enjoyed every minute of the things they'd done with her.

What possible difference could it make now if she couldn't resist the urge to be intimate with them? She'd already succumbed to Ronan's persuasion. Granted, she'd been trying to convince herself ever since that it was just a minor lapse and that she could still recover her distance, but she knew better. She'd known better when she fell right into bed with Ronan!

She was already pregnant. He couldn't get her more pregnant-hopefully! He wasn't going to get the idea that he was her mate because he was already convinced of that!

She pulled away from him resolutely. He didn't make any attempt to stop her and that settled it in her mind. Whatever he was, he wasn't inclined to force his will on her. Taking his hand, she led him across the room to her bunk and then released her hold and removed her clothing.

He watched her keenly. That made for a few awkward moments because it flickered through her mind to wonder what she looked like to him.

Of course, he'd never seen a woman of his own clan, but did that mean he actually found her desirable? Or was she only desirable because she had a warm, wet hole he wanted to get in to?

He distracted her from her unpleasant thoughts by reaching for her. She was almost surprised when he didn't snatch her off her feet, toss her onto the bunk and start rutting.

She didn't think she would've been surprised or particularly alarmed if he had.

The plain fact was, she had no idea what to expect from any of them ... except surprise.

She'd spent almost a week with Dax and the others, pretending she had no idea that they were the Sirians and treating them like Earth lovers. She'd spent the past several days since she'd finally gotten them out of jail trying to figure them out and trying to acquaint them with Earth/human customs. And they still regularly blew her mind because their minds were so different.

He redirected her attention by coasting his cupped palms lightly along her arms and shoulders. The fine hairs all over her body reacted instantly by standing erect, creating a prickling sensation that sent a light shiver through her. Blood rushed into surface capillaries, warming her skin. It engorged her nipples, making them harden and stand erect and throbbing for a touch.

Drawn by her reaction, he cupped her breasts, massaging them with his hands as he squeezed them lightly, lifting them. After a moment, he shifted his focus to the tips, pinching them as if testing the hardness and then rolling them between his thumb and forefinger. Sensation arrowed from the tips of her breasts straight to her sex and the muscles along her channel clenched and relaxed, forcing heated moisture into the passage.

He dragged in a shaky breath and met her gaze for a long moment.

Releasing her breasts, Dax pulled her down onto

her bunk with him, settling on his side and directing her with his hands onto her back. Bending one arm, he propped on it and studied her body as he examined her flesh with his hands and fingertips, touching, lightly stroking, kneading.

She watched his face, allowing his exploration, wondering what was going through his mind. Was it purely curiosity? Or was it arousing him as much as it was her? Or was it a little of both?

How different was she, truly, from his people? If she could see his true form, would she be terrified? Repulsed?

How different could they be from one another if he found her desirable?

Or was the Sirian male like their Earthly counterparts? Aroused by their own needs and able to copulate when that need was high, regardless of the female, by simply focusing on their need rather than their partner?

Was she any different when all was said and done? Despite her doubts, his touch created warming currents that drifted through her and

seemed to collect and increase the longer he simulated her nerve endings with his touch until she found herself wanting to urge him to do more.

As if he read her thoughts, he ceased to caress her with his hand and leaned closer, teasing her with the movements of his lips along her skin.

Had he captured her thoughts, she wondered as she felt herself sinking more deeply under the spell of mounting pleasure?

She discovered she didn't really care when his questing mouth found the tip of one breast and his lips closed around it. Her breath left her in a gasping rush. Her eyes slammed shut to embrace the exquisite sensation bombarding her.

He released her nipple at the sound and lifted his head. She sensed his gaze on her face and struggled to lift her eyelids. Even as they parted, she watched the descent of his dark head once more through her lashes, watched his mouth close around the tip once more and then his cheeks sink inward as he sucked on it.

The heated current that flowed through her was more pronounced that time. She squeezed her

eyes closed again and lifted a hand to cup his head to her breast, silently urging him to give her more. Her mind clouded with the surge of pleasure drugs into her system. She held her breath, focused completely on the curl of his tongue around her nipple and the tugging sensation as he drew on it with the suction of his mouth. The muscles low in her belly fluttered madly in response. Her clit, as engorged and sensitized by now as her nipples, began to ache with the pulsing rhythm of her heart.

As he shifted his attention from one nipple to the other, she searched blindly for his hand, tugging on his arm until she could guide his hand to her clit. He broke off, watching as she cupped his hand over her mound and guided his movements until she found the rhythm that produced the hardest jolts of almost electric current from her clitoris and into her womb.

Apparently satisfied after a few moments that he'd mastered the rhythm she wanted, he took her nipple into his mouth again and sucked it as he had the first.

He'd certainly mastered it! For a few minutes Kate luxuriated in the twin stimulations, her breath

hitching in her chest each time a fresh wave clashed inside of her like colliding cymbals. Abruptly, it wasn't enough, and it was too much at the same time. Her body leapt from satisfaction in the acute pleasure to impatience for more, from passive enjoyment to the certainty that she was going to come if he continued.

The hollowness in her lower belly began to beg to be filled. The certainty filled her that disappointment was going to leaven her pleasure if he wasn't inside of her when she came.

"Dax!" she gasped.

He ceased his play and lifted his head.

He didn't know what she wanted!

She surged toward him, pushing him onto his back with her weight and straddled his hips. Lifting up onto her knees, she searched for his cock a little frantically, grasped it and guided it to the mouth of her sex. The muscles there seemed to clench in an effort to swallow his flesh, ached with the need to feel it.

Despite the copious moisture she'd produced, it

was a struggle for a few moments to engulf his rigid flesh. He seemed disconcerted, briefly, that she'd opted to mount him, but he steadied her by gripping her hips with his hands as she teetered above him.

She lifted and settled again until she'd managed to sheathe him completely, until she could feel the roughness of his pubic hair brushing her throbbing clit. A low groan of pleasure escaped her as she ground herself against him.

She didn't want to move. The feel of his thick flesh deep inside of her and the brush of his hair against her clit sent her spiraling closer to climax and she focused on attaining it, rotating her hips and grinding against him. With each movement of her hips, she felt her goal almost within her grasp. She lifted slightly away from him and ground her hips tightly against his belly again and again, over and over, gasping, holding her breath each time she felt tremors that warned of explosion.

Abruptly, she was seized by the convulsions she craved. She sucked in a sharp breath and released a long, low, almost animalistic groan as her body quaked. Dax's hands tightened on her hips almost bruisingly as the muscles along her channel convulsed. She was too mindless with the waves of rapture clashing inside of her to have much awareness of anything else, her muscles beyond her ability to command to assist him as he began to lift her and settle her rhythmically in search of his own release. She struggled to obey the command of his hands anyway, awkwardly rising and falling so that her body stroked his cock.

He arched abruptly, lifting her, and then holding her as he thrust upward into her in a frantic, pounding rhythm. He began to come as her own climax reached a crescendo and began to abate. As weak as water in the aftermath, struggling between consciousness and unconsciousness, she wilted against him when he finally drove deeply inside of her and held her pelvis tightly against his as he pumped the last of his seed into her.

A different sort of pleasure invaded her as she lay against his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his ragged breaths, listening to the pounding rhythm of his heart. There was something deeply satisfying about knowing she'd given pleasure and not simply received it. It was almost more fulfilling to know he'd found pleasure in her than achieving her own climax. It was certainly as gratifying.

He curled his arms tightly around her and her satisfaction deepened-briefly-with the display of affection.

Then he turned over and she was left wondering if it had been nothing more than a reluctance to toss her off while he shifted into a more comfortable position. The brief flare of confusion and disappointment abated when he snugged her against his chest instead of releasing her completely.

She settled her cheek more comfortably and allowed herself to drift toward sleep. As she lay drowsing, though, she recalled what had aroused her from sleep to start with.

She'd heard faint, almost furtive movement at the door of her cabin and gotten up to investigate-and found Dax.

"Why were you at my door?" she asked drowsily.

Tonight was my night to guard you from harm.

Kate rolled that around in her mind for a few

moments. His night? Indicating they took turns? A mixture of emotions flitted through her. "What do you think might harm me? We're on a ship. There's no threat here. Everyone was carefully screened."

How do you know this?

Kate released a sound of indulgent amusement. "It's standard procedure. Believe me our government screens everyone carefully. Everyone has to go through rigid examinations to determine their health-both physical and mentaltheir skills, and their genetics to become a colonist. Only the best of the best will do."

How do you know that their objective is to send only the best? Maybe they want the best to stay and want to remove the least desirable?

Uneasiness crawled along Kate's spine. "That certainly isn't very flattering to me!" she said in an attempt to lighten the vague sense of anxiety that had crept into her mind to wonder if he knew something she didn't.

You and the others like Sissy applied to become colonists. What of those that were brought

onboard by the military? Those that you said the government had forced to come? There were those among the humans caged with us who were certainly not the best of humans that we have encountered-not in any way. Some had come from other prisons before.

Kate pulled away from him abruptly and stared at him. "You're sure?" She realized she didn't actually need him to confirm, however, and she didn't feel even a flicker of doubt that he was telling the truth.

It made too much sense. Why, indeed, would the government only want to send the best of the best away and keep society's dregs for the home world?

"Oh god! Oh my god!" They were going into a potentially hostile environment with people who couldn't be trusted to behave in a socially acceptable manner on their own world-with all of the controls they had in place there!

Cold fear crept over her as she considered the implications.

Dax gathered her close again. You belong to me. I

will not allow harm to come to you.

It was comforting and yet left her with a strange sense of loss, too. It wasn't until she was on the edge of sleep that she realized why it made her sad.

It hinted at true feelings for her and yet she knew deep down that it was nothing more than the primal instinct to protect his young. Dax wasn't human. He couldn't possibly understand, or feel, the bonds of affection that humans built between them.

* * * *

Kate debated whether it would be more practical, and safer for the Sirians, if she simply moved into their cabin with them, but it was already cramped, as Ronan had pointed out. On the other hand, she didn't think it was a good idea to allow them to stand guard outside her cabin during the 'night' periods either.

And she didn't feel nearly as safe being alone after the discussion that she'd had with Dax.

She compromised by insisting that if they were

determined to stand watch over her, they were going to have to do it inside. She had a feeling that that was a great deal more appealing to them than standing outside her door anyway.

She had mixed feelings about it herself. She didn't actually object to having a sleeping partner at night. It made her feel safer and the sex was good even when she wasn't particularly in the moodand great when she was.

There was a downside. It seemed there always was one.

The downside was a biggy in this case, however.

No matter how many times she told herself that the growing closeness she felt between herself and the Sirians was an illusion-that Ronan, Dax, and Jarek were merely following their natural instinct to guard 'their nestlings', she couldn't convince her heart.

She tried to tell herself that it was a sort of transference thing, that she'd grown fond of the Sirians when they were her test subjects and dependent upon her. It was just that affection, already developed, her pleasure in mentoring when they were so quick to learn, and her enjoyment of them as lovers that made her feel ... way more fondness than she should have.

"You're too attached to them," Sissy observed one day when Kate met with her in the Rec room to update Sissy on their progress. "You've lost any objectivity you might have had. And, truthfully, I'm not sure you ever were as objective as you should have been."

Kate felt herself blushing with a mixture of guilt and resentment. "So ... you're saying I'm giving them more credit than they deserve? You don't think they've made as much progress as I do?"

Sissy released an irritated huff. "I'm not disputing that. As bad as I hate to admit it, I think you were right. The Sirians have a capacity for learning that leaves us humans in the dust. What I'm trying to point out is that they are imitators, Kate. They've picked up absolutely everything you've set out to teach them. Even their language skills are vastly improved. Granted, they're still a bit rough around the edges as far as social skills, but they could pass for an uncouth human pretty easily."

Kate's anger flared a little higher. "I'm not so

prejudiced that I can't see that they haven't entirely grasped some of the finer points of polite behavior, but-honest to god, Sissy!-they haven't had years to learn these things! It's only been a few weeks."

"Plus a year more or less. They were just as busy studying us while we had them in the habitat as we were studying them."

Kate's lips tightened. "So a little over a year! Except I wasn't trying to teach them then. And they didn't have a lot of humans to learn from-or situations."

"They haven't had a lot of situations to learn from lately either-not when they don't interact with anyone but you. And you're completely missing my point," Sissy said, anger threading her voice despite the fact that she kept her tone low since they were in a public place. "I'm worried about your ... attachment to them, Kate! I'm particularly worried when you seem determined to ignore the most basic, known fact about the Sirians! They are natural born imitators. I'm not trying to pry into your personal life, but"

"But you're going to just the same."

"No, I'm not! I've no desire to hear the gritty details, thank you! I'm just curious to know if you, as a scientist, have actually learned a damned thing about them or if they're the ones reaping the entire benefit of your little experiment! I'm afraid that you're going to get hurt if you allow yourself to believe that they ... reciprocate your feelings."

That comment struck a nerve despite Kate's anger and she felt her emotions take a sharp dip. It was enough of an indicator that Sissy was right. She wasn't objective at all. She was emotionally involved.

She cleared her throat. "I'm fond of them. I'm not even going to try to deny it. But you know as well as I do that it isn't safe for them to interact with any of the other colonists until they can pass as humans."

Sissy stared at her. "Well maybe it hasn't occurred to you-since you're so focused on their protection-that you might well be training them to be more dangerous enemies if this ... project goes sour? They will know all about us and we still know damned little about them!"

"How much do you think they can tell me when

they've never been on their home world and never had any chance to interact with their own kind?" Kate said angrily. "If you're insinuating that they're gathering intell"

"They could be. That's the problem, Kate, the one vou refuse to see. You've been totally focused on teaching them how to completely fool us-when you haven't been focused on ... bedroom gymnastics! Have you got some crazy idea that you can ... mold them into human beings and live happily ever after with them? Because they aren't human! They are never going to be human even if they can imitate us right down to the smallest molecule-they'll still be imitations mimicking human behavior." She snapped her fingers. "And just like that they could change the way they look and even you would never know them if they walked by you!"

Kate was so distressed and angry that she couldn't think straight but, as badly as she hated to admit it, Sissy had raised some valid concerns ... and planted seeds of doubt that she wanted very badly to dispute.

Even she had worried about the fact that their minds seemed to work so totally different from the

human mind. Everything about them was different.

"The morphing is a defense mechanism," she said finally, defensively.

"Which they also used to ensnare you in their mating/gathering agenda. What makes you think any part of that original scheme has changed? How can you possibly guess what other situations might arise that would convince them to use their abilities in defense of their species? What if their clan members have no interest in befriending humans? Whose side do you think they'll be on then?"

Chapter Thirteen

If Kate had had her rathers, she would have far preferred that the pseudo Willams brothers remained in their cabin for the duration of the trip. Sissy had planted more doubts in her mind than she liked. Much of it, she'd managed to dismiss for the simple reason that she was convinced that Sissy was way off the mark in her suggestion that the Sirians in general might be inclined to be hostile toward humans. If any of them had reason to feel hostility, Ronan, Dax, and Jarek certainly did. They'd been plucked from their home world, caged, and not just treated like animals, but guinea pigs-poked and prodded with a complete, clinical disregard for any pain or suffering that might be inflicted.

Of course, she supposed that most people, Sissy included, might view their annihilation of the guards sent to destroy them as an act of violent hostility, but she didn't. They'd acted to preserve their lives and they hadn't attacked at any time since. It hadn't been an unprovoked assault to start with.

If they were representatives of their species, then she didn't see that they had a tendency toward aggression.

Humans did, unfortunately, and she thought that would be their biggest problem-not the Sirians who had every right to feel threatened by the human invasion, but her people.

The doubts Sissy had sewn revolved around her

objectivity as to whether they were capable of interacting with humans without giving themselves away. Had she just grown used to their ways? Or was their behavior now at least close enough that, at the very worst, people would just think they were a little odd?

Their accents were still fairly thick and they still spoke like English wasn't their first languagewhich could be a bad thing if there was anyone on board who actually knew the men-the real ones-because they were supposed to be white, English speaking Americans.

She didn't see why they couldn't pretty much avoid speaking at all, though. They could nod and mouth the canned pleasantries she'd taught them and refuse to be drawn into conversation. That certainly ought to work unless they did run into anyone that knew them.

In which case, they were in trouble.

Otherwise, she didn't believe there would be a problem. They'd become familiar with the accoutrements of human society and their 'things'. They didn't eat with their hands-or faces. They'd very carefully mimicked her from the first time they'd shared a meal and no longer looked awkward handling utensils and such. They knew how pretty much everything worked and no longer stopped and examined everything 'new' that they discovered.

She wasn't as convinced as she wanted to be, however, when it was announced that there would be a party to celebrate the Eden III having reached the outer edge of their new solar system.

Everyone was expected to attend.

They might be more conspicuous by their absence than their presence or she would've insisted that they not go at all. She toyed with the idea that there would be so many people at the party that the absence of a handful would go unnoticed but, unfortunately, Ronan, Dax, and Jarek had already gained a certain notoriety from their stint in the onboard colony jail.

She was on edge long before they reached the Rec Room where the party was being held. She'd tried to time their arrival so that there would already be a large enough gathering to make it less likely they would attract attention but not so late as to be noticed as last to arrive. The refreshments are being served buffet style, she told the men without glancing at them. Just follow me and do what I do, ok?

She was a little miffed that Sissy hadn't met up with them and arrived with them at the party and more miffed when she spotted Sissy and Sissy made a great pretense of not seeing her. Coward, she thought angrily, deciding to snub Sissy since she was clearly trying to distance herself in case of trouble and moving purposefully toward the serving tables through the people already thronging the room.

You speak of your friend? Ronan said curiously.

Kate uttered a snort of irritation. "I'm beginning to wonder," she muttered.

I do not understand, Jarek responded.

"I'll explain it another time," Kate said distractedly as she reached the table and took a plate. She discovered when she glanced down the table to see what the selection was that the woman nearest to her had glanced at her when she spoke and then glanced at the Sirians. She smiled at the woman automatically and then looked up at Ronan and smiled more easily. "This all looks delicious. Hopefully, it is. I'm starving."

Ronan returned her smile with one of his own, flicked a look at the woman, and merely nodded.

Relief flickered through Kate. Finger food. Great! We won't have to worry about finding a table to sit down to eat-which is good because that doesn't look like it's going to happen. Balancing the plate and a beverage might be a challenge.

Sissy had disappeared by the time they'd made their way down the serving table and paused to look around for a place to settle. Dismissing her friend from her mind with an effort, Kate focused on trying to find a quiet, out of the way, spot. There wasn't one. There seemed to be twice as many people in the Rec room by the time they'd gotten to the end of the buffet and grabbed a glass. There were also very few tables or chairs. The room had obviously been cleared of as much of the furnishings as possible to allow standing room.

How thoughtful of whoever had planned the party!

With the sense that she was doomed to stand around with a glass in one hand and a plateful of food she could only stare at in the other, Kate discarded the notion of any privacy at all and began a search for anything that might make eating possible. They finally found a tiny table full of empty glasses near one wall-or bulkhead as they were referred to on the ship. Setting her glass down on the tabletop, Kate pushed the empties more tightly together to clear an opening so that the guys could set their own glasses down.

In silence, they ate. The food might as well have been cardboard for all Kate noticed. It hit the bottom of her stomach when she chewed and swallowed like so many rocks. She didn't realize she was searching the crowd for the one friendly face she knew until she met Sissy's gaze across the room. She looked away immediately and pointedly. "Pretty good, huh?" she asked when she noticed the Sirians had already cleaned their plates.

They'd also emptied their glasses and it wasn't until she took a sip from her own that she discovered that it was wine. She glanced at the men sharply as it occurred to her to wonder what effect the alcohol might have on them.

They'd completely adopted a human physiology, though, she reassured herself. It shouldn't affect them any more than it would anyone else.

All three men were looking somewhat longingly at the table laden with food, she discovered. She wrestled with her anxiety about them striking off on their own and finally dismissed it. If she left the table unguarded someone else would get it before they got back and they'd have to search again for a place to prop. It's alright to get more if you want it. It looks like pretty much everyone has at least gone down the line once. Just leave the plate and get another one.

Do you want more? Ronan asked.

She shook her head. "I'm still working on this."

They left her. She watched them make their way through the crowd toward the buffet, but couldn't see that anyone paid them much attention and she relaxed fractionally and focused on trying to eat without choking. She noticed a man across the room staring at her as she scanned the crowd. He didn't look the least bit familiar to her, however, and she quickly moved her gaze onward, wondering if he was actually looking at her or it had just seemed that way and he was only scanning the crowd as she was.

She discovered when she glanced in his direction again, though, that he was still staring at her and uneasiness flickered through her. She looked away again and saw Sissy heading in her direction. She hesitated, but she was still pissed off at Sissy for her defection and looked away again.

That time Sissy ignored the snub. "I didn't think you would come with them," she said by way of greeting.

"I told you I planned to. Everyone was expected to come. It might have been more noticeable if they hadn't."

Sissy looked skeptical. "I don't know about that."

Kate set her plate down. She didn't see any point in debating the wisdom of it, not when they were already there and doing fine, particularly when they were nearing their destination and the moment of truth anyway. "There was a man across the room staring at me," she said, changing the subject abruptly.

"Where?" Sissy asked, instantly distracted from her obvious intention of giving Kate indigestion.

"Just glance casually across the room and see if he'd still looking this way."

"Sort of seedy looking character with frizzy, carrot colored hair-built like a bruiser?"

"That's the one," Kate said uneasily. "Is he still staring?"

"No. He's coming this way."

"Shit!" Kate muttered in consternation, hoping against hope that the man wasn't actually approaching them but afraid to look. "What about the guys? Are they on their way back?"

"Yep. We may see fireworks."

Kate sent her friend an irritated look. "Despite your opinion of them, they aren't inclined toward violence."

"So you say. I think we might be about to find

out."

The red headed stranger reached them first. His smile was almost as unpleasant as the rest of himand he was unlovely to behold. His complexion was pitted with scars and his face bore the marks of an excessive life regardless of the fact that his build seemed robust-to say the least. That was rather reminiscent of a gorilla-long, muscular arms; short stocky legs; and broad, muscular shoulders and chest. His 'table' muscle was broadest of all, rather barrel shaped. Her skin crawled as he looked her over with dark, almost black, glittering eyes that seemed almost reptilian. He nodded pleasantly enough. "I couldn't help but notice you lookin' my way and thought I'd come over and introduce myself."

Kate just managed to keep her jaw from dropping in indignation. She certainly hadn't been staring at him! What a conceited ass! It was almost more provoking that she didn't see anything about him to warrant his excessive self-confidence.

"Name's Willy Turner, but my friends call me Lucky."

Kate wrestled with her manners and finally

managed a thin smile. "Dr. Drexel and this is my friend, Dr. Carter."

The man chuckled, ignoring the subtle snub. "Smart, huh? I like smart women."

Kate didn't know whether to be relieved or not when Ronan and the others arrived. "And these are ... uh ... friends of mine." Horror washed over her when she discovered she couldn't recall the names they were traveling under.

Ronan gave the stranger a stony look. "We met already."

Turner grinned at him. "Hey! Your English is a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you." He flicked a look at Kate. "We shared a cell when we were kidnapped by big brother and brought on board. Ain't that right?"

"Excuse me," Sissy said shakily. "I see a friend across the room that I wanted to talk to."

Kate sent her a disbelieving look, but Sissy merely grimaced at her and took off.

'Lucky' turned and watched Sissy's ass for a few moments as she beat a retreat and then returned

his attention to Kate and the others. It was both a relief that Ronan, Dax, and Jarek had ranged themselves around her and disturbing. Their stance was protective and guarded which made her feel better in a way and yet it also indicated that her own instincts hadn't been off. They clearly saw the man as a threat just as she did.

It didn't take much imagination at all to conclude that this was at least one of the men Dax had warned her about.

"So ... just how good a friends are the four of you?" Lucky asked, grinning at her. "'Cause I was told you was one of the singles. This place we're goin' sure don't sound like a good place for a woman alone and I'm considerin' findin' myself a woman. A woman could do worse than have me as a partner."

But not much worse, Kate thought, deciding in that instant that, regardless of the possible consequences, she was claiming the Sirians as living partners. "Actually," she said with a nervous chuckle, "we're really good friends. We've been discussing the possibility of contracting as life partners." Anger glittered in Lucky's eyes. "Aww, come on! A smart lady like you with yokels like these?" He leaned closer and she smelled some kind of potent alcohol on his breath as he added conspiratorially. "In case you ain't noticed, they ain't too smart. You're gonna need brains and brawn where we're goin'."

She didn't know if the alcohol had contributed to his brazen behavior or not. He struck her as the kind of man that rarely allowed any situation to dampen his aggressiveness in getting whatever he wanted and currently that seemed to be her. She rather thought his admission that jail wasn't anything he was unfamiliar with was a good indicator of that assessment.

"He call me stupid?" Jarek demanded in a low growl.

"Call all dat," Dax responded tightly.

Kate glanced from Jarek to Dax and finally looked at Ronan as he bared his teeth in a menacing grin. "You go now."

Lucky stiffened but held his ground, returning Ronan's feral grin with one of his own. "This is a

bad place to consider what you're thinkin' about," he said. "We could take the discussion somewhere else if you want to. Me, I seen enough of the jail on this trip."

"We don't want trouble, Mr. ... uh ... Lucky," Kate said tightly. "I'm flattered by your offer, but as I said, we're together. I'm sure there are plenty of other single women that would be happy to consider your offer." Bullshit!

His smile that time wasn't pleasant. "Probably but I done seen what I want." He glanced at the guys. "An' if you're still thinkin' about contractin' then nothin's settled. That's all I needed to know."

As he turned and swaggered off a wave of déjà vu swept over Kate. She tried to dismiss it but the abrupt certainty that she'd seen him before refused to be banished.

She'd already turned away from him when it hit her that she had seen him before-or was pretty sure she had.

No wonder he'd been staring at her! No wonder he felt so cocky!

He was one of the men that worked for the forger, Raphael!

A cold fear washed over her as that thought did. In the next instant, she realized that, even if she was right, he couldn't possibly recognize the guys. They looked nothing like they had when the four of them had gone to that awful place to get traveling papers.

She did, though, she realized in the next instant. And he recognized her. As gloomy as the interior of that building had been, she knew he did. She'd been too frightened at the time to really register what any of them looked like. She'd been too focused on the guns they were carrying to really look at the men holding them.

And he thought he could use that to blackmail her into doing whatever he wanted.

* * * *

Kate had been in favor of leaving the party as soon as Lucky Turner retreated. She was sorry she hadn't yielded to that impulse when the fight broke out. She wasn't certain what started it, but she was sure the Sirians weren't involved-to begin with. Nerves were stretched pretty thin after the months on board, though, and when beer, wine, and hard liquor were added to the equation it spelled disaster.

Her first indication that they were all about to be embroiled in a battle of epic proportions was the sound of angry male voices raised above the general din of chatter of so many people and the sharp feminine gasps of alarm. Even as she craned up on her tiptoes and looked around for the source of the disruption, fists began flying. A wide circle appeared around the two men as those closest made room. A few seconds later, Kate was carried toward the melee by the surge of gawkers that rushed to watch.

The battle spread like wildfire as men who were either friends of the two fighters joined the battle or bystanders got caught up in the heat of the moment. What began with two became four, and then eight and then a seething mass.

Lucky, easily recognizable because of his bright hair, was in the middle of it. Kate had an uneasy feeling that that was what inspired Ronan, Dax, and Jarek to join the fight. She'd scarcely identified him when the trio surged past her and waded in to the middle of the battlefield before she even realized their intention.

She clapped a hand over her mouth when she saw it was too late to try to reason with them.

Sissy appeared beside her. "Oh my god! We need to get out of here!" she exclaimed, clamping two hands on Kate's forearm and tugging at her.

"I can't leave!" Kate gasped, struggling to free herself of Sissy's grip.

"The militia is on their way here to clear the riot! You do not want to be here when they get here!"

She didn't, but she didn't want Ronan, Dax, or Jarek there either! Ronan! She called out to him mentally when she caught sight of him.

He whipped his head in her direction and caught a fist to the side of his head that had been aimed at his face. He rocked back on his heels, drew his lips back in a snarl, and retaliated hard enough the man that had hit him cleared a path into the crowd as he flew backwards. They're coming, for god's sake!

Sissy had started dragging Kate toward the nearest exit while she was distracted by her efforts to alert the Sirians to the danger they'd thrust themselves in to.

Who is coming?

That was Dax. She knew it. The militia! They're going to be tasing everybody to put down the riot!

Even as she struggled to warn them, the militia burst through the main entrance of the Rec room. Ronan, Dax, and Jarek whipped a sharp look in that direction and instantly broke off their fights, plowing their way through the seething mass of fighting men and then through the crowd of spectators surrounding the battle. They morphed even as they moved away, arriving near the rear of the crowd as three different men than the ones involved in the fight.

If Kate hadn't been staring straight at Ronan she wouldn't have seen the transformation it had been so smooth.

She hoped to god nobody else had seen it!

A mixture of relief and horror flooded her-brieflybefore she and Sissy were carried away by the tide of people fleeing the riot with more enthusiasm even that they'd shown in rushing to watch the fight. Every exit was instantly clogged with people trying to get out before the militia could get to them.

"Where did they go?"

Kate shot a sharp glance at Sissy. "I didn't see," she lied.

* * * *

As anxious as everyone was to reach their destination, including the crew, it had been decided not to risk the maximum speed the ship was capable of on their voyage. For people who'd never been in space for more than the occasional pleasure cruise or work assignment on one of Earth's outposts-and the vast majority hadn't even experienced those short trips in space-even the four month long cruise to reach their colony planet was almost too much for taut nerves to endure. As huge as the colony ship was, it was also stocked to the gills and packed with colonists in accommodations even more cramped than those they were accustomed to dealing with on Earth.

Having only recently finished a long tour of duty on the space station, Kate thought she fared better than most and even she was sick to death of the ship and a bundle of nerves besides long before they began the final approach to Sirius.

The circumstances were entirely different, of course, and that played a significant part in her anxiousness to be off the ship and on world. Her research on the space station had been tedious at times, but her mind and hands had been fully occupied with tasks that were familiar even if her particular project hadn't been.

The fear that someone would discover the Sirians-or the Sirians would give themselves away-had totally wrecked Kate's nerves, however, and the riot in the Rec Room did nothing to allay her fears. No one had seen the progress through their new solar system for the simple reason that everyone on board had been under 'house' arrest after the celebration party and thus didn't have access to the viewing ports. The ban was only lifted a matter of hours prior to landing when the announcement was made over the ship communications channels that colonists were to begin preparations to deboard the ship.

Kate's belly instantly knotted when she heard the announcement. Trying to ignore her jitters, she focused on packing up her belongings and then searching for her claim tickets for her belongings in the hold. Relieved when she found them after only a short, frantic search of her purse, she secured the bags she'd packed in the lockers for landing and settled in the easy chair her cabin boasted that doubled as a landing/takeoff seat, fastening her safety harness. She'd already been seated and strapped in a good fifteen minutes before the announcement was made to prepare for landing.

She hadn't felt their entry into the planet's gravitational pull, but then they had slowly been acclimating to Sirius' gravity and atmospheric pressure throughout the voyage. It wasn't a great deal different from that of Earth, but it was different and it was far better to arrive conditioned for the difference and prepared to set to work than unprepared and in need of months to adjust.

Not that they wouldn't have some adjustment issues anyway. They hadn't been born on Sirius.

The denser gravity and air pressure was going to be a challenge even as slight as it was. They'd been acclimated as much as possible by the shipboard artificial gravity, but none of them had actually worked as they would have to to build the colony.

She was still trying to calculate what she would weigh on the new planet as opposed to Earth when she felt the uncomfortable jolt that told her the ship had landed. Almost immediately, instructions began to flow through the communications speakers.

Her quadrant of the ship was to be allowed to exit last, she discovered in dismay.

And the quadrant where the Sirians were housed was to be first.

Throwing off her harness, Kate got up and began pacing her small cabin nervously while she waited. It seemed an hour dragged by before she heard the announcement that the passengers in the next quadrant could begin to exit. Each time the announcement was made, the colonists were instructed to gather their belongings from their cabin and take them to the temporary shelters they were being assigned to.

Depression settled over her, ousting the jittery sensation in her belly, replacing the nervous energy that had set her to pacing with exhaustion. She finally plopped down on her bunk, staring at the floor and trying to empty her mind of the troubling imaginary scenes that kept materializing one after another.

She was worried about how Ronan, Dax, and Jarek were handling their release from the ship without her there to explain everything to them.

A faint flutter in her rounded belly distracted her. She held her breath, focusing on the point where she'd felt it, wondering if it was her imagination that made it seem ... detached from her. She'd just begun to think it was nothing more than her own body when she felt a similar flutter in another region of her belly. That time it was more pronounced and impossible to explain away as body function.

The babies were stirring, she realized, feeling both a sense of exhilaration and fear wash through her. She hadn't realized until that moment that she'd almost convinced herself that there was nothing there at all, despite the undeniable changes she'd noticed in her body-the thickening of her waist and the noticeable, to her at least, bulge her lower belly had taken on.

Was she confusing gas with foreign, purposeful movement, though?

It hadn't seemed to be her at all.

Could she really tell the difference, though? Even if she was pregnant, they couldn't be very big at all-certainly not if there actually were three.

She was so focused inwardly on trying to identify the source of what felt like movement that the announcer was halfway through the spiel about deboarding before she realized it was the cue she'd been waiting for.

It was her turn to get off the ship and see her new home for the first time.

Getting up shakily, she gathered her bags and exited her cabin, squeezing into the corridor that was already clogged with people slowly shuffling toward the lifts, stopping to wait for the return of the cubicles carrying those in front down to the hanger level and then shuffling forward a few more feet.

It wasn't until she finally managed to squeeze into one of the lift cubicles and felt the motion as it carried her down that she realized why depression had settled over her.

Would Ronan, Dax, and Jarek be waiting for her, she wondered? Or would they, as she'd envisioned when they began to trek back to their world, have rushed off already to explore their home and find the rest of their clan?

Chapter Eleven

Kate had begun to think that the case was hopeless, and it was difficult to make the Sirians understand when they knew so little about the politics of the human race, particularly when she didn't completely understand it herself.

No one seemed to. Bureaucracy had become a monster of nightmarish proportions decades

earlier and continued to grow out of control until dealing with anything connected in any way to the government was like moving through quicksand. Like the mythological Hydra, every head seemed to act independently and yet conspired together in such a way that there seemed no way of passing through the maze of red tape that had been created over the decades of ever tightening government control over every aspect of life.

Colonel Stalvey was in charge of the colonial militia, but he didn't have the authority to release a prisoner without an order from the council. When she presented herself to the head of the council to petition for their release, she was told she had to go through 'channels' and was sent to another council member-who had no idea where she was supposed to go beyond the fact that it wasn't her call. Hours turned into days and days into weeks while she tracked down and spoke with first one member and then another until she finally found the council member who could get her petition 'in the works'. For almost a week, she was under the impression that she was merely waiting for that councilor to review the petition to secure their release, only to discover when she was finally summoned that she was to take the petition to six

other council members for approval.

Then it would be reviewed by the entire council at the next meeting and ruled on ... after a vote.

It took every ounce of willpower Kate possessed to keep her temper under control when she was told that. She sought Sissy out in the Rec room and settled across from her at a small table Sissy had commandeered where she 'people watched' much of the time since no one had much in the way of duties to perform until they reached their destination.

"This is why the world is falling apart," Kate said tightly.

Sissy merely lifted her brows, silently giving her permission for Kate to unload.

Their relationship had been strained since Kate had confessed about the Sirians, and Kate doubted Sissy would sympathize with her plight at all. It wasn't as if Kate had anyone else she could complain to, however.

"Still no luck?" she prompted when Kate didn't say anything else.

Kate plopped her elbows on the table top and massaged her aching head. "Oh! I'm making progress!" she said with heavy sarcasm. "Only four more approvals and then I get to take the petition to the council at large so that they can review it and vote on it ... the next time they meet. If I can't get all six approvals before the next scheduled meeting, though, then I'll have to wait until the meeting after that."

"Well thank god they all take their responsibilities so seriously!" Sissy said dryly. "Just think where we would be if things were actually easy!"

Surprised that Sissy seemed to commiserate with her, Kate shot a look at her friend, trying to decide from her expression if she actually did agree.

"How are the ... Sirians holding up?"

Kate chewed her lip. "They're miserable, angry, and deeply suspicious that they've been tricked."

Sissy shifted uncomfortably. "How do they figure they've been tricked?"

Kate sighed. "Well, I don't know that for a fact, but I can see where they would. Most of the others have been released."

Sissy shrugged. "Most of the others haven't been in fights in holding," she pointed out testily.

Kate felt her face redden. "They've been behaving."

"They're still in solitary confinement aren't they?"

Kate blushed harder but irritation had joined her discomfort.

"I rest my case! It's hard to misbehave when you don't have anyone to fight with."

"They could still give the guards a hard time," Kate muttered, "and they haven't ... not since I spoke to them about it. They just didn't understand what was going on and they didn't start the second fight."

"No, they just finished it," Sissy said dryly. "I don't know why you're working so hard to get them out. Clearly they're prone to violence. They'll just end up in lockup again."

"That is completely unfair. You know as well as I do that they hadn't shown any disposition toward

violence until they were thrown into lockup to start with. And, I might add, they were locked up to start with for something they didn't do!"

"Yeah, I know-for the actions of the men they just happen to be impersonating! And if the authorities had any clue of who they actually are, they would've been shot instead."

"Whose side are you on anyway?" Kate said crossly.

"The human side."

Anger washed through Kate, but she tamped it with an effort. "It so happens that I'm also on our side. It isn't in our best interests to throw away the opportunity to form friendly relations with the natives of Sirius!"

"Speaking of friendliness Have you figured out yet whether you're pregnant or not?"

She was almost positive she was, but she wasn't certain whether it was safe to admit that or not. She shrugged, evading Sissy's gaze by training her own at some distant point across the vast room. "It might be a blessing in disguise," Sissy said thoughtfully.

Kate shot her a questioning look and Sissy shrugged.

"Well ... it could be a connection. I suppose that really depends on whether or not we kidnapped princes or something like that."

Kate stared at her blankly. It hadn't once occurred to her that there was any chance that her Sirians might have powerful connections of their own on their world. She frowned, thinking it over. "In all honesty, I don't have a clue whether they would have any influence at all on their own clan. I don't know anything about the Sirians."

"Au contraire! You know that three of them are damned good in bed!"

Kate blushed. "If you're going to be nasty"

Sissy settled a hand on her arm when Kate made to rise and stalk off. "Sorry! It just slipped out."

Kate sent her an angry look.

"I didn't mean it, ok?"

"Yes, you did. Maybe you didn't mean to say it, but it was what you were thinking."

Sissy flushed. She struggled with herself for a few moments. "You're right. I was thinking that you'd been sleeping with the enemy and you were hardly in a position to make any kind of sound judgment. You're biased, Kate, and everybody else is going to look at it the same way."

"They aren't our enemies, Sissy ... yet! And we're going to be in a world of trouble if it comes to that. We're going to be pretty much on our own once we get to Sirius. You know that, don't you?"

"People aren't going to want to accept a species that's so different from ours! You know that, don't you? I mean Just look how much we've fought among ourselves! And we're the same species! Different races, different countries, different customs, different religions-all it takes is just being a little different and there's food for war."

"We don't have a chance of getting along if we don't try!" Kate said anxiously, settling in her seat again. "I don't expect to ... save the world in one fell swoop, Sissy! I just think we need to make a push to start out on a ... hopeful note."

Sissy stared at her for a long moment. "Historically speaking, we haven't done too well at that, you know," she said dryly. "Look what happened when the Europeans moved in on the American Indians. First they made friends, then they made war."

"And we could be a lot worse off if we start out with that same superiority complex!" Kate said tightly. "I might not know much about the Sirians, but I know enough to see that we could be the Native Americans in a showdown on Sirius!"

"Depending on how many of them there are."

Kate stared at her. If she couldn't even get the danger through to Sissy, who was a 'friend', what hope was there?

Sissy shook her head. "No. You're right. I know you are. I don't feel friendly toward them, though, Kate. I can't help it. I feel threatened and I just wanted to point out that you-we-are going to have a real battle on our hands-with our own people. You saw how they reacted when they got their first look at the Sirians! If they felt that threatened by three, on Earth, how do you think they're going to react to ... hundreds, maybe thousands, on an alien world where they don't have the backing of a superior army?

"We're researchers, Kate-scientists! We don't know anything about politics-beyond the fact that dealing with the government is like pounding your head on a brick wall! You can't even get them released, for god's sake!"

"So you're saying we shouldn't even try?"

"I'm not saying that at all! I'm saying I wish to hell this mess had been dropped in somebody else's lap-somebody that might have a better chance of making things turn out than me and you do! I'm saying I'm scared because I know you're right and I wish I could just run away. I'm saying I'm totally pissed off that you didn't tell me so that I knew what I was walking in to!" Sissy said angrily.

Guilt washed through Kate, but she dismissed it. "You're right. I should have warned you, but the fact is that if I hadn't gotten involved with them I wouldn't have known at all and you wouldn't have and it could've been a lot worse! Not knowing damned sure wouldn't have protected anybody! Knowing might not help, but there's at least a chance it will."

* * * *

Kate didn't know if it was Sissy's additional influence that finally did the trick or if she'd just managed, finally, to satisfy the colonial officials-or if they had managed, together, to simply annoy the council members until they got tired of seeing them. The bottom line, though, was that they succeeded in getting Ronan, Dax, and Jarek released.

Sissy went with her to deliver the release papers to Colonel Stalvey. He looked them over skeptically, looked like he wanted to dispute them, and finally simply shrugged and summoned one of the MPs to bring them out of holding.

As they waited, Kate discovered that she had very mixed feelings but the one thing that was dominant and shouldn't have been was that she hadn't actually seen any of the men in nearly a month and a half and she wasn't happy about the fact that Sissy was going to be with her when she did. She tried to shrug it off. She tried to convince herself that she was really glad to have Sissy with her for moral support.

She didn't actually realize that she'd been anticipating a joyful reunion with her 'mates' until they arrived and she found herself staring at three complete strangers. Her spirits dipped so sharply that the smile she pasted on her face felt wooden.

Ronan studied her face piercingly and finally nodded. What is wrong?

Kate shook her head slightly and glanced from him to Dax and Jarek. We'll talk later ... when we aren't being watched.

When she glanced at Sissy, she discovered her friend was staring at the Sirians with the wideeyed glassy look of a hare caught under the spell of a predator's gaze. She elbowed her friend and glared at her when that caught Sissy's attention.

Sissy blinked at her several times and then pasted a bright smile on her face. "We thought we'd show you guys to your quarters and then give you a little tour ... so you know where everything is!"

Kate nodded at the Colonel as the five of them left

the holding area and headed toward the lift, trying not to look like they were fleeing the scene. She was so tense by the time they had all gotten into the lift cubicle, though, that every movement felt awkward. Her shoulders slumped with relief when the doors closed without any alarm being sounded.

"It is these faces," Dax said flatly.

Kate shot Dax a quick look.

"For god's sake, don't change them!" Sissy gasped.

All three men turned to glare at her with varying degrees of surprise and anger and Sissy shrank back until she was plastered against the back wall.

"We know we cannot do that," Ronan said tightly.

"Why not?" Jarek demanded at almost the same moment, drawing Dax's and Ronan's disapproving gazes. If Kate does not like them

Because we are supposed to be the men whose faces we have mimicked! Ronan pointed out irritably.

"Oh."

"You're supposed to be" Kate broke off and rubbed her head. "I can't even remember the names you're supposed to be using now ... I mean the men you're supposed to be," she said unhappily.

We are the same, Kate.

"But you don't look the same."

Sissy glanced from Ronan to Kate. She chewed her lip a moment and finally came to a decision. "You guys are going to have to work on that or we're never going to pull this off," she said shakily.

Kate glanced at her without comprehension.

Sissy's lips tightened. "He didn't speak, Kate-not out loud-but you answered him as if he had! People are either going to think you're crazy as a loon if you keep that up or Well I don't know what else they might think, but it's for damned sure these guys aren't going to 'blend in' if they go around talking to you telepathically and you answer them!" "We work on dis," Jarek assured her.

Sissy gaped at him. "Oh god, Kate! We are so screwed!"

Ronan frowned.

"Dis mean 'nglish bad?" Dax asked uneasily.

Sissy covered her face with her hands. "This is a nightmare!"

"Stop it, Sissy! Like Jarek said-we'll work on it," Kate said testily.

Sissy dropped her hands and glared at Kate. "He isn't supposed to be Jarek, damn it! They're impersonating three bumpkins-Earth men!"

Kate blushed when Sissy pointed out her mistake. "We'll all work on it."

* * * *

Kate didn't know who was most relieved when they finally reached the cabin that had been assigned to the ... Williams brothers, she reminded herself, Sam and his twin brothers, Derik, and Eric.

At least, she thought she recalled that that was their names!

Sissy didn't seem particularly relieved, but she certainly was and it was clear that the Sirians were-not terribly happy about their cramped quarters-but relieved that they hadn't been recaptured and hauled back to jail.

Ronan looked the cabin over with distaste and sniffed. "Dis look like de jail."

"Is ok we change now?" Jarek asked hopefully.

Kate hesitated, but even though she knew it was dangerous to allow it, it disturbed her on a deep level to be with the three men who looked nothing like the three she'd come to know. She nodded.

Sissy turned white when they morphed-right down to their clothing. Looking vaguely ill, she glanced around and finally wobbled to a chair and collapsed on the seat. "I think I'm going to throw up."

"I'll get you something to drink!" Kate exclaimed, springing into action and rushing toward the

kitchen area to grab a glass of water.

"Maybe I'll just faint," Sissy said vaguely.

Ronan looked her over as Kate rushed to hand her friend the glass of water. "Is breeding."

Sissy's eyes widened on his face in horror. "You can tell that?"

"Yes."

Shoving Kate out of her way, Sissy leapt to her feet, looked around a little wildly, and then raced to the bathroom when she spotted the door leading to it. Kate clamped her lips together, trying to decide whether she should go see about Sissy or not, but the sound of vomiting was the deciding factor. Her own stomach lurched in commiseration. She wobbled to the seat Sissy had vacated and took a gulp of the water she'd gotten for Sissy, struggling to shut out the sounds and focus on taming her own stomach.

Dax knelt in front of her, studying her face. "You is sick?"

Kate closed her eyes. "That's a really bad place to be right now," she said through clenched teeth.

"You do dat, too?" he asked, amusement threading his voice.

"God! I hope not!"

"Is breeding, too," Jarek said, grinning.

"Uh oh! Move!" Kate gasped, jumping up and racing to join Sissy in the bathroom.

Sissy had reached the point of gagging unsuccessfully by the time Kate joined her, but as soon as Kate puked, it set Sissy off again. When they finally managed to regain control and stood up weakly, Kate discovered that all three of the Sirians were standing in the doorway, watching them curiously and somewhat anxiously.

Anger flickered through her.

"Dis practice for feed baby?" Jarek asked curiously.

"Oh my god!" Sissy gasped in horror. "I don't think I can do this, Kate!"

Kate put her hand on her stomach, fighting a battle with a fresh wave of nausea. "No!" she

snapped. "We don't ... regurgitate to feed babies!"

Ronan sent Jarek an irritated look.

"Stupid!" Dax said with disgust. "'Course dey not!"

Jarek balled his hands into fists but apparently thought better of punching Dax.

Ignoring them, Kate rinsed her mouth and splashed water on her face.

"I'm going back to my quarters to lie down," Sissy said agitatedly.

"Why don't you just use one of their bunks?" Kate suggested.

"I need ... distance!" Sissy snapped, a hysterical edge to her voice.

Kate considered arguing with her that they didn't have a lot of time to work with, but she finally merely nodded and Sissy darted out of the cabin.

"What mean dat?" Ronan demanded, clearly suspicious.

Kate bit her lip and moved to one of the bunks. "She isn't feeling well."

She could tell from Ronan's expression that he wasn't convinced that that was what Sissy had meant. When she'd settled on the bunk, she considered whether there was any point in trying to explain and if she even ought to try. "What does that mean," she corrected him wearily.

"I say dat."

Kate let out a weary breath and opened her eyes. "I know that's what you meant but it isn't what you said. Say it correctly."

He frowned at her but carefully repeated it.

"Better." She paused. "You aren't supposed to be foreigners, understand? If you were it would be ok to talk like that. People wouldn't expect any different if English wasn't your native tongue-but it's supposed to be." She sighed. "I guess it would've been better if I'd found some foreigners for the three of you to disguise yourselves"

Ronan settled beside her on the bunk. You did not explain what that female meant.

Sissy.

What that Sissy meant?

Kate bit her lip to keep from smiling but then thrust her amusement aside and studied his face seriously. "Sissy's right. You guys aren't going to pass for humans if you interact with the other colonists."

"Learn spek better."

Kate glanced at Dax when he spoke. "There's so much more to it than just being able to enunciate the words correctly and construct sentences correctly I hardly even know where to start."

"No matter when get to Ra," Ronan said easily.

Kate bit her lip. "What do you plan to do when we get to Ra, then?"

He frowned a question.

"If you don't plan on fitting in with the rest of us, what do you plan to do?" she asked a little testily.

She could see from the flicker of doubt in his eyes that he hadn't actually considered that. Or maybe

he just didn't want to tell her his plans?

"Stay till younglings hatch. Tak dem to clan," Jarek said helpfully.

Kate stared at him while that sank in and then sat up so abruptly she nearly butted her head against Ronan's. "What?"

"Nurture younglings. Faderz ... do dis."

It took Kate a few moments to decipher that. "You're saying that, in your culture, the fathers take care of the babies?"

"Yes."

"Over my dead body!" she growled, surging off the bunk and facing the three men angrily. "This is my baby! Like hell you're taking it any damned where!"

The shock that registered on all three faces might have been comical if she'd been in any mood to appreciate it.

Ronan recovered first. His jaw jutted belligerently. "Fader ... job."

Kate narrowed her eyes at him. "It's the mother's job!"

"Tak later?" Jarek asked uneasily.

"You aren't taking it at all!"

"Dey clan younglings!" Ronan said tightly.

"They're Wait! They? How the hell many did you put inside me?"

Ronan, Dax, and Jarek exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Stupid!" Dax snarled and punched Jarek on the shoulder. "Now mak Kate mad!"

Jarek punched him in the face, sending Dax reeling backwards several steps.

"Don't you dare start fighting!" Kate gasped with a mixture of horror and anger as Dax righted himself and stalked toward Jarek purposefully. "The MPs will be here to lock you up again ... and I'm damned well going to let you stay this time!"

"No fighting. Kat no like!" Ronan added.

Kate whipped a look at him. "It isn't just a matter of not liking! It isn't acceptable behavior ... among humans."

Ronan studied her skeptically. "Shoot instead."

Kate felt her face flush. "There's a difference between keeping order and Never mind! Let's get back to the 'they' thing."

"Tree."

Kate sat weakly on the bunk again, struggling for acceptance. "You put three inside me?" she finally managed angrily. "Three? How the hell ...? Never mind! Why?"

"One each," Jarek supplied uneasily. "All mate."

"That's why Never mind! Three! Damn it!"

"Dis not goot?" Dax asked uneasily. He glared at Ronan. I told you that it was a small nesting place!

Ronan glared at him. You were not so worried that you did not coax another for yourself!

Because you insisted that it would not be a problem!

I told you to use your best judgment! Clearly you did not consider anything beyond your own desire to spawn on my mate!

Our mate! Jarek reminded him.

"Two would've been bad enough!" Kate snapped. "But three?"

Ronan and Dax turned to glare at Jarek accusingly.

You should not have bred one!

"Will you guys stop doing that, damn it? I know what you're doing! No telepathing and leaving me wondering what the hell is going on! We are going to have a real problem."

"Three bad?" Ronan demanded. "Two not bad? I beat Jarek senseless."

Kate gaped at him. "Why?"

"He fader tird."

"Oh come on! How the hell would you know that? Maybe you fathered the third one?" He looked indignant. "Alpha. Fader fust."

Kate rubbed her throbbing temples. "I don't see any point in arguing that ... now," she added angrily. "You didn't even check to see how many babies human women typically have, damn it?"

"Many eggs," Ronan pointed out.

"Small belly!" Kate snapped. "We carry them inside, in case you didn't even do that much research!"

"Know dat," Ronan said tightly.

"You just ignored it."

"Dis stretch," Ronan said pointedly, gliding a finger along the skin of her arm.

She slapped his hand away. "Not that damned much!"

"What do?" Dax asked uneasily.

"I don't really have a choice now, do I?" Kate said angrily. "It isn't like I could remove any of them without risking losing all of them! Besides, I'm not supposed to have even one without a damned permit!"

All three of them gaped at her. It was Ronan who spoke, however. "Need paper dat too?" he demanded, clearly outraged.

"Yes we need papers for that, too!" Kate responded angrily. "We need permits for every damned thing-especially reproducing! In case you didn't notice we have a population problem!"

"So ... ok tree?" Jarek asked hopefully. "Just no ... paper? You get paper, yes? Like did us?"

"No it isn't ok three!" Kate snapped. "It isn't ok with me, damn it! And its three times as much trouble as I'd be in if there was only one!" She thought about it. "You're sure there are three?"

She could tell from the looks the three of them exchanged that they were debating whether to admit it or not. "Never mind! Don't bother to tell me different now!"

Truthfully, she hadn't even figured out what she was going to do about being pregnant at all when she hadn't gone through channels. She'd had a vague idea that, maybe, it wouldn't be the issue on the new world that it would've been on Earthprobably more hopefulness than anything approaching reason-but she thought having triplets wasn't going to be received well-at all! Even if attitudes changed once they began to build their colony and accepted that they were on a new world and the old ways they were used to just didn't matter as much when they had new things to worry about, she doubted people would relax that much!

They had, after all, been subjected to orientation for the colony that included the warnings that they had to protect their new world. They couldn't afford to behave as generations of the past had on Earth or they would be making the same mistakes and, in time, the new world would be in pretty much the same trouble as the one they'd left. They did have to adjust their thinking regarding children. They could not only afford to have children-each of them-but new colonists would be needed since they would have to rely a lot more on manpower than they had on Earth. Balance was the key, though! No one was allowed to make any decisions that could affect the colony as a whole.

Not that she had made any decision to have a

baby at all, much less three!

What the hell was she going to do?

It flickered through her mind that the Sirians had actually given her a possible solution, but her emotional reaction was sufficient to convince her without thinking about it, at all, that that was not acceptable to her. She hadn't planned to have children. Like pretty much everyone else, she suspected, there'd been the biological urge from time to time, but she'd dismissed it.

Genetically speaking, she'd been tentatively approved to have a child if she wanted one, but all that meant was that she had no genetic defects that couldn't be easily removed and she had desirable traits that made approval a higher probability. It didn't mean she would actually get all the way through the process and attain final approval. There were waiting lines so long that a lot of women were beyond the most desirable childbearing years before they got approvedwhen they got it at all.

She'd accepted the unlikelihood that she would have a child of her own long ago and, mostly, put it from her mind and focused on her career. The career that was pretty much in shambles now!

"I don't know what we're going to do," she said finally, "but Earth customs-I am not giving up my babies! Regardless of what you're used to" She stopped, frowning, and then looked at the Sirians. "How do you know that your ... uh ... the father usually nurtures the young? How do you know anything at all about your home world? You weren't even born ... uh ... you've never actually been there."

Ronan looked surprised. "Memories."

"How could you have ...? Wait! Are you saying ...? You are saying that you have ... memories that aren't yours?"

Ronan and the others shared a look. "You no have dat neider? How younglings ...?" He stopped and seemed to struggle with what he was trying to ask her. I cannot explain in your language. I do not know the words.

So explain telepathically! And while you're at it, explain to me how it is that the fathers are supposed to nurture the young and there was no father around when we ... uh ... took the eggs. There should have been three, right?

They must eat! Jarek said a little defensively.

Kate glanced at him. But there should have been one, at least, that stayed to protect, right?

The three of them looked uncomfortable and defensive at the same time.

Sometimes the males follow the queen to seed her again ... or try. Usually the queen will not allow it, but sometimes If she is young and has not produced before. There were only three. She could not be sure all would survive.

Well that certainly wasn't likely if she abandoned them to be taken care of by three males that abandoned them to follow her off to screw again!

The males were young, too, Ronan said tightly.

How the hell do you know that?

"Do not know. Guess," Jarek said.

Ronan and Dax both sent him an irritated look.

They would not all have left if that was not the case, Dax said. They were more driven by their instinct to reproduce than the caution of the old ones to protect the young they had already spawned.

"The old ones?" Kate asked blankly. "You're talking about memories again? You have actual memories from ... ancestors?"

Gathered knowledge passed to off-spring, Ronan said. Humans do not do this? They are not truly memories-not the way you think of memories. We did not experience these things. We simply know because it is written in the mind.

Kate stared at him, digesting that. They'd always suspected that some animals had 'racial' memory coded into their genes. There had never been any solid proof of it-except for the fact that a lot of animals could be separated completely from their parents and still have the same behavioral traits. But those things couldn't be actual memories either.

She had a lot to learn about the Sirians, she realized in dismay, and not a lot of time to process it!

She shook her head, trying to shake the suspicion that she'd taken on an impossible feat. It could take years and years-maybe generationsto understand the Sirians, and vice versa! It was mind boggling to think how very different they were from one another!

And depressing!

They had to have a place to start, though, she decided, and the most important one to her, at the moment, was an understanding of their current situation. "The babies stay with me. If they're human like you said-or mostly human-they'll need me. I'm not saying that the three of you can't stay Always assuming you don't decide to hunt another ... queen ... to breed." And she didn't think she would be sorry if they did-at least not at the moment!

"Why need?" Ronan asked curiously.

Kate stared at him as it abruptly sank in that the reason the females of their 'clan' tended to abandon their young was simply because their young didn't really need a mother! They were clearly capable of surviving pretty much on their own as long as they didn't fall prey to a predator. A very little thought convinced her that it might not be a good idea to point out to the Sirians just how weak and vulnerable a human baby was.

They had bred weakness into their young, she realized abruptly. Early human primates wouldn't have been as weak-no more than the primates of Earth were now. It was their tendency to nurture that had resulted in babies that had to be nurtured just to survive.

* * * *

Ronan made it clear that he wasn't at all pleased at the discovery that the quarters they'd been assigned to was for them alone and that she had her own quarters. They had a brief, semi-heated 'discussion' about that when she had finished a cursory 'orientation' of the amenities of their quarters, told them she thought it would be best, for the time being, if they stayed in their quarters, and headed for the door to go to her own cabin.

"Where Kat go?" Ronan asked-actually demanded although his tone wasn't exactly argumentative. Kate sent him a look of surprise, struggling with a rise of resentment. "To my quarters."

His lips tightened. "Mate. Stay here."

Kate flicked a glance at Jarek and Dax, saw from their expressions and body language that they weren't any happier about the situation than Ronan was, and focused on Ronan. "I've already been assigned a cabin of my own-And I signed on as single. There isn't room in my cabin for the three of you-or enough room here for four."

Ronan glanced around. "Not enough room for three," he said dryly. "Cannot protect nestlings from dis place, though, you no stay."

Kate gasped indignantly. "Your nestlings are safe!" she snapped. "I'm not going to ... drop them or anything!"

"Protect mate den nestlings be safe," Jarek pointed out.

His tone was at least somewhat mollifying even if the comment was as insulting as Ronan's. "You three have been locked up since we got on board! We're halfway to Sirius! I think I can manage the other half by myself, thank you!"

"No could protect den," Dax said tightly. "Caged before. Can now. Must."

"Don't think for one minute that the three of you can gang up on me and get your way!" Kate snapped. "I'm not only perfectly safe, it isn't practical to consider changing things around at this point. Besides, we need to try not to attract attention to ourselves-any more than we can help."

Ronan studied her through narrowed eyes for a long moment and seemed to capitulate. "I go with. You stay in cabin."

Kate was about to object, but she decided it would be better to agree to his compromise than to stand arguing with them. Finally, she merely nodded.

By the time they reached her quarters, however-in a completely different quadrant of the ship-his expression was as dark as a thundercloud. The polite smile she'd pasted on her lips as she turned to tell him bye fell flat. "What?" "We go in."

She didn't particular want to invite him with that look on his face!

On the other hand, he looked ready to explode and she didn't think the corridor would be a good place for that. Reluctantly, she led him in to her quarters. He looked the small space over with an expression of disgust.

"I told you it was too small to share. It wasn't made for sharing."

Ronan studied her assessingly. "Mak baby wid" You said the females of your clan nurture the younglings. The males do nothing but breed? They do not stay nearby to protect their mate and their younglings?

Kate hesitated. The truth wasn't going to support her argument, but she had taken on the task of teaching them the ways of humans. If she lied when it was more convenient to her, she was going to create as many misconceptions as she was trying to eliminate.

"We don't do a lot of mating," she hedged.

Ronan sent her a skeptical look. "Why so many humans den?"

She frowned at him. "I didn't say we never had! We spent generations making the mess, though! It'll take generations to repair the damage, too!" she informed him testily.

"No answer question."

Kate released a huff of irritation. "We contract. We don't call it mating-because it often isn't about mating at all, not in the sense you mean. We aren't allowed to reproduce indiscriminately. We pair upusually male and female-for companionship and economic reasons. And, yes, the males and females live together-share living space. If they decide to have a child and if they're granted permission, then they usually stay together and take care of the child together-at least for the duration of the contract and sometimes longer."

That explanation seemed to throw him for several moments. "Pair up but no have young ... baby? Why?"

Kate rolled her eyes. "You like fucking, right?" she said dryly.

His brows rose and then descended. A speculative gleam entered his eyes. "Share living space for dat?"

"I strongly suspect that's the main reason men do!" Kate said sardonically. "They like having it handy for when they want to have sex so they don't have to work as hard for it. It's really difficult to find jobs, though, and keep them, so that's part of it, too. It takes credits to live and nobody can count on being employed all the time. So they pair up and share expenses. Sometimes they contract with several partners, in fact, for economic security."

He studied her thoughtfully and moved closer. Kate eyed him warily, but he'd reached her before she even thought about retreating. Settling his hands lightly on her upper arms, he pulled her closer still, lowering his head and covering her mouth just as she opened it to demand to know what he was doing. A jolt went through her at the contact. The muscles low in her belly fluttered. Heat wafted through her. Her mind clouded.

Her instantaneous reaction was almost more disorienting because he now looked nothing like the man she'd come to think of as Ronan but rather a complete stranger, and yet on a primal level she knew him. With her eyes closed, every other sense was more alert and absolutely convinced she knew him on the deepest level. Her mind identified him as Ronan and reacted accordingly

Then it is your custom that mates share living space. And this is not so that the male can protect?

He had an unfair advantage, she thought with a flicker of resentment quickly drowned by the pleasure wafting through her. He could kiss her and communicate at the same time using his mind! She couldn't talk with his mouth on hers and she couldn't think worth a damn either! Sort of ... I guess, she managed finally.

He lifted his head and studied her frowningly. What is 'sort of'?

We rely on the police and the military for protection ... mostly. Kate opened her eyes reluctantly and peered up at him through her lashes.

Ronan's lips curled faintly at the corners. He

leaned close again and sucked lightly at her lips. Curling his arms around her at the same time, he lifted her off her feet and headed toward her bunk. If it is not for protection and not to breed younglings, then the only reason that humans shave living space is for sex? He asked as he settled on her bunk with her.

" To share life, companionship, living expenses-to be helpmates," Kate murmured as she reached for the closure of her jumpsuit and opened the one piece suit from neck to crotch. This is one very nice way to settle a disagreement.

Ronan sent her a quizzical look, but dismissed further discussion.

Chapter Twelve

Kate was all in favor of actions speaking louder than words. She'd forgotten just how much she enjoyed everything about Ronan. His scent and taste were branded on her psyche, though, and brought memories of her pleasure in him to the surface as he peeled her suit off and explored the flesh he exposed with feverish lips and hands. The weeks of separation might never have happened. She was alive as she had never been before, feeling everything more keenly.

There was no surprise, this time, to discover he was as naked as she was by the time he'd peeled her suit away, just gladness that there was no impediment to the momentum he'd gathered along the way to disrobing her. She was readymore than ready. The moment he peeled the suit from one leg, freeing her of restrictions and dove over her again, she curled it around him and bumped her pelvis against him in invitation.

It was no stranger's cock that plowed her cleft and anchored its head in the mouth of her sex. The familiar tug of her flesh as he seated himself and curled his hips to probe deeper had her gasping with anticipation. She squeezed her eyes more tightly to focus on the sensation, shifting and undulating against him to help him fully sheathe himself inside of her.

A profound sense of pleasure enveloped her when he achieved full penetration and set a

rhythm that rang with the same desperation that filled her. She didn't suffer a moment of doubt that she was going to reach her goal. She was halfway there by the time he entered her and climbing faster than the ship they were in had when it left Earth's orbit.

Her climax still swept through her with a swiftness and magnitude that caught her off guard enough to drag a cry from her. She sucked in a breath and held it as shudders rattled through her, her skin prickling all over as he achieved his own orgasm.

Breathless from the battle, she lay panting beneath his weighty bulk in the aftermath, trying to push any thought at all from her mind that might interfere with the glorious sense of completion. They came anyway, settling like an unwelcome flock of crows in a freshly planted field.

He'd blindsided her. She'd had some vague notion that she would eschew intimacy now that there was no hope whatsoever of pretending they weren't what they were, that she would backtrack and achieve the objectivity she'd lost somewhere along the way. No such luck!

"And let that be a lesson to you," she muttered dryly. She'd already let them breach any defenses she might have been able to gather to herself before that first time. There would be no going back.

Ronan uttered a muffled chuckle that sent a jolt of surprised pleasure through her. "Dis lesson I no mind, Kat. You teach me more, I like much better."

She didn't know what surprised her more-that he had a sense of humor, or that he seemed to instantly grasp the irony in her comment.

* * * *

"Our nutritional requirements are probably a little different than yours," Kate said once she'd shown Ronan, Dax, and Jarek the workings of their kitchenette in their cabin and explained what each fixture did and how it worked. "We don't ... uh ... forage for food ... uh ... anymore. People used to, but that was a long, long time ago. We have plants that grow everything and other plants that package everything and then, once we get it from a store, we have to prepare it. A balanced diet is a healthy diet! And for us that means a serving of protein, vegetables, dairy and fiber. Fiber is really important since everything is so processed."

"Fi ... ber?" Jarek asked curiously. "What dis? Why im ... port?"

Kate felt her face reddening. He would focus on that! She cleared her throat. "Important for digestion and it's ... uh ... well, fiber. Something hard to digest. Actually, impossible-that's why it's good for you-well, us."

"What dat odder stuff?" Ronan asked.

"Meat ... uh ... animal flesh and plants and the dairy comes from milk. We're omnivores. That means we have to have some of both to be healthy. We could get by on one or the other for short periods of time, but to be healthy we need both."

Ronan frowned. She thought he was trying to figure out what milk was, but he surprised her. "Dat not animal," he said, nudging his chin toward the package of meat she was holding.

"Of course it is!" Kate said briskly. "It's just

processed meat. That's why it doesn't look familiar. Well, factory cultivated. It isn't actually an animal. We don't raise farm animals anymore. They take up too much room, breathe too much air, and produce too much ...uh ... methane ... and this is better anyway. Just enough fat to be healthy and none of the bad stuff."

"What mean digest?" Dax demanded.

Kate cleared her throat. "When the body processes the food?"

Jarek, she saw, was frowning thoughtfully. "Why eat food no process? No make sense. Just go out again."

"Yes, well, it helps us process the other stuff," Kate said briskly, hoping to divert any more questions by directing their attention to the food preparations. "All of the packages tell you how to prepare the food."

Ronan took the package she was holding and looked it over in frowning concentration. Any hope she'd had that they had somehow managed to learn to read vanished. He tapped at the instructions with one index finger. "Dis spek? How make talk?"

Dismay flickered through her. "It doesn't actually Never mind! Why don't the three of you just study the package and memorize what it looks like? Then I'll show you how to prepare the meal and we'll go from there?"

Ronan looked the package he was holding over cursorily and passed it to Dax who passed it to Jarek.

"Oh come on! I said memorize! You aren't going to be able to tell this package from the others!"

Ronan sent her an unreadable look. "Will."

"That fast?"

"Yes."

"Fine! You can show me." She snatched the package from Jarek and presented her back, blocking their view while she shuffled the package with the others inside the food locker. Then she stepped back. "You first," she said, crooking her finger at Ronan.

He sent her a sardonic look, stepped forward and

picked up the package.

"You saw me! Or you read my mind."

His lips flattened into a thin line. "Memorize-You say no read mind. I no do dat."

Kate was still skeptical. Either they were reading her mind or they had photographic memories, though. She tried shuffling the packages with each one and each of them picked the package out unerringly and within moments.

Shrugging it off with the reflection that they were the ones that were going to suffer if they were 'cheating', she focused on preparing the meal.

She discovered after a few days, though, that they actually did seem to retain anything they saw once. They watched each meal she prepared, but no matter how complicated it was, they could repeat the process without any trouble at all.

It was admirable in a way.

In another way it was downright unnerving.

"What in the world ...?"

Dax sent her a wary look from the floor in front of her cabin door where he'd obviously been sitting for a while.

She thought it was Dax.

Recovering, she leaned out the door and looked both ways down the corridor and then motioned him inside. "Dax?"

He morphed into the form she was familiar with.

She was never going to get used to that!

And it occurred to her that there was nothing to stop any of them from taking any form they wanted to!

"You are Dax?"

He frowned. "No look like?"

Kate frowned back at him. "That isn't an answer! And how am I supposed to know when you guys can and do change the way you look to anything you want to look like ...?" The comment redirected her mind. "You can do that, right? I mean, make yourself look like anything at all?"

He seemed to hesitate. "Muss be same size."

As brief as it was, she thought that hesitation was significant. She noticed he hadn't actually answered either question. He moved closer, however, while she was distracted by her thoughts. She flinched all over when he embraced her, nuzzling his face along the side of her neck. Her breasts tingled as her nipples hardened with the warmth that instantly flooded her.

"You fuck me, yes? No hurt baby?"

Kate stiffened and then released an irritated huff of breath.

Dax leaned away from her to study her face. "No say right?"

She had to give him points for being swift on the uptake!

She shook her head, more at herself than him. No matter that she knew he wasn't even human and could certainly not have any understanding of romance-human males weren't that damned good at it themselves!-she still couldn't help but be disappointed. Worse, she could tell him the right words to say and she didn't doubt that he'd remember and use the right ones the next time, but it meant even less than a human male telling a woman what she wanted to hear just so he could get in her pants! He wouldn't understand that! She seriously doubted he was capable of feeling any of the human emotions, or what everyone thought of as purely human emotion.

They were far more in touch with their animal side than humans were, far less tame, and thus far less likely to feel more than animal urges. In a way, she supposed that taste of wildness might be at least part of their appeal. She would never have thought such a thing would appeal to her, but it certainly didn't turn her off!

"It hurt baby?" he persisted. "Dis what wrong?"

Kate sighed again. She at least needed to make an effort to teach them some of the finer points of social behavior or they didn't have a chance in hell of getting along. She could just imagine their reception if they made a habit of asking any female that appealed to them if they wanted to fuck! It was her fault anyway! She should've corrected them to begin with! "It's offensive to ask like that," she said a little irritably. "A woman at least wants the pretense that a guy cares something about her ... even when she knows better."

You are my mate. I care. You cannot tell that I want to mate with you?

"You're never going to get good enough with your English to pass if you keep reverting to telepathy!"

He frowned. "Hard."

Amusement flickered through Kate in spite of her irritation. She knew he was talking about how hard it was for him to communicate with her in her language-and she really did empathize with his difficulties-but she couldn't resist 'misinterpreting' the comment. "So I noticed," she said dryly, giving in to the impulse to cup his erection and stroke it.

His hands tightened on her. "Feel goot, Kat. No feel goot to Kat? Dis why no want?"

She was a total sucker! She knew his earnest

questions had a lot more to do with what he wanted than any anxiety that she wasn't pleased with him, but she decided he'd been convincing enough.

Besides, she was horny. As much as she hated to admit it even to herself she hadn't just gotten used to having the guys around in the time she'd spent with them. She'd enjoyed every minute of the things they'd done with her.

What possible difference could it make now if she couldn't resist the urge to be intimate with them? She'd already succumbed to Ronan's persuasion. Granted, she'd been trying to convince herself ever since that it was just a minor lapse and that she could still recover her distance, but she knew better. She'd known better when she fell right into bed with Ronan!

She was already pregnant. He couldn't get her more pregnant-hopefully! He wasn't going to get the idea that he was her mate because he was already convinced of that!

She pulled away from him resolutely. He didn't make any attempt to stop her and that settled it in her mind. Whatever he was, he wasn't inclined to force his will on her. Taking his hand, she led him across the room to her bunk and then released her hold and removed her clothing.

He watched her keenly. That made for a few awkward moments because it flickered through her mind to wonder what she looked like to him.

Of course, he'd never seen a woman of his own clan, but did that mean he actually found her desirable? Or was she only desirable because she had a warm, wet hole he wanted to get in to?

He distracted her from her unpleasant thoughts by reaching for her. She was almost surprised when he didn't snatch her off her feet, toss her onto the bunk and start rutting.

She didn't think she would've been surprised or particularly alarmed if he had.

The plain fact was, she had no idea what to expect from any of them ... except surprise.

She'd spent almost a week with Dax and the others, pretending she had no idea that they were the Sirians and treating them like Earth lovers. She'd spent the past several days since she'd finally gotten them out of jail trying to figure them out and trying to acquaint them with Earth/human customs. And they still regularly blew her mind because their minds were so different.

He redirected her attention by coasting his cupped palms lightly along her arms and shoulders. The fine hairs all over her body reacted instantly by standing erect, creating a prickling sensation that sent a light shiver through her. Blood rushed into surface capillaries, warming her skin. It engorged her nipples, making them harden and stand erect and throbbing for a touch.

Drawn by her reaction, he cupped her breasts, massaging them with his hands as he squeezed them lightly, lifting them. After a moment, he shifted his focus to the tips, pinching them as if testing the hardness and then rolling them between his thumb and forefinger. Sensation arrowed from the tips of her breasts straight to her sex and the muscles along her channel clenched and relaxed, forcing heated moisture into the passage.

He dragged in a shaky breath and met her gaze for a long moment.

Releasing her breasts, Dax pulled her down onto her bunk with him, settling on his side and directing her with his hands onto her back. Bending one arm, he propped on it and studied her body as he examined her flesh with his hands and fingertips, touching, lightly stroking, kneading.

She watched his face, allowing his exploration, wondering what was going through his mind. Was it purely curiosity? Or was it arousing him as much as it was her? Or was it a little of both?

How different was she, truly, from his people? If she could see his true form, would she be terrified? Repulsed?

How different could they be from one another if he found her desirable?

Or was the Sirian male like their Earthly counterparts? Aroused by their own needs and able to copulate when that need was high, regardless of the female, by simply focusing on their need rather than their partner?

Was she any different when all was said and done? Despite her doubts, his touch created

warming currents that drifted through her and seemed to collect and increase the longer he simulated her nerve endings with his touch until she found herself wanting to urge him to do more.

As if he read her thoughts, he ceased to caress her with his hand and leaned closer, teasing her with the movements of his lips along her skin.

Had he captured her thoughts, she wondered as she felt herself sinking more deeply under the spell of mounting pleasure?

She discovered she didn't really care when his questing mouth found the tip of one breast and his lips closed around it. Her breath left her in a gasping rush. Her eyes slammed shut to embrace the exquisite sensation bombarding her.

He released her nipple at the sound and lifted his head. She sensed his gaze on her face and struggled to lift her eyelids. Even as they parted, she watched the descent of his dark head once more through her lashes, watched his mouth close around the tip once more and then his cheeks sink inward as he sucked on it.

The heated current that flowed through her was

more pronounced that time. She squeezed her eyes closed again and lifted a hand to cup his head to her breast, silently urging him to give her more. Her mind clouded with the surge of pleasure drugs into her system. She held her breath, focused completely on the curl of his tongue around her nipple and the tugging sensation as he drew on it with the suction of his mouth. The muscles low in her belly fluttered madly in response. Her clit, as engorged and sensitized by now as her nipples, began to ache with the pulsing rhythm of her heart.

As he shifted his attention from one nipple to the other, she searched blindly for his hand, tugging on his arm until she could guide his hand to her clit. He broke off, watching as she cupped his hand over her mound and guided his movements until she found the rhythm that produced the hardest jolts of almost electric current from her clitoris and into her womb.

Apparently satisfied after a few moments that he'd mastered the rhythm she wanted, he took her nipple into his mouth again and sucked it as he had the first.

He'd certainly mastered it! For a few minutes Kate

luxuriated in the twin stimulations, her breath hitching in her chest each time a fresh wave clashed inside of her like colliding cymbals. Abruptly, it wasn't enough, and it was too much at the same time. Her body leapt from satisfaction in the acute pleasure to impatience for more, from passive enjoyment to the certainty that she was going to come if he continued.

The hollowness in her lower belly began to beg to be filled. The certainty filled her that disappointment was going to leaven her pleasure if he wasn't inside of her when she came.

"Dax!" she gasped.

He ceased his play and lifted his head.

He didn't know what she wanted!

She surged toward him, pushing him onto his back with her weight and straddled his hips. Lifting up onto her knees, she searched for his cock a little frantically, grasped it and guided it to the mouth of her sex. The muscles there seemed to clench in an effort to swallow his flesh, ached with the need to feel it. Despite the copious moisture she'd produced, it was a struggle for a few moments to engulf his rigid flesh. He seemed disconcerted, briefly, that she'd opted to mount him, but he steadied her by gripping her hips with his hands as she teetered above him.

She lifted and settled again until she'd managed to sheathe him completely, until she could feel the roughness of his pubic hair brushing her throbbing clit. A low groan of pleasure escaped her as she ground herself against him.

She didn't want to move. The feel of his thick flesh deep inside of her and the brush of his hair against her clit sent her spiraling closer to climax and she focused on attaining it, rotating her hips and grinding against him. With each movement of her hips, she felt her goal almost within her grasp. She lifted slightly away from him and ground her hips tightly against his belly again and again, over and over, gasping, holding her breath each time she felt tremors that warned of explosion.

Abruptly, she was seized by the convulsions she craved. She sucked in a sharp breath and released a long, low, almost animalistic groan as her body quaked. Dax's hands tightened on her hips almost bruisingly as the muscles along her channel convulsed. She was too mindless with the waves of rapture clashing inside of her to have much awareness of anything else, her muscles beyond her ability to command to assist him as he began to lift her and settle her rhythmically in search of his own release. She struggled to obey the command of his hands anyway, awkwardly rising and falling so that her body stroked his cock.

He arched abruptly, lifting her, and then holding her as he thrust upward into her in a frantic, pounding rhythm. He began to come as her own climax reached a crescendo and began to abate. As weak as water in the aftermath, struggling between consciousness and unconsciousness, she wilted against him when he finally drove deeply inside of her and held her pelvis tightly against his as he pumped the last of his seed into her.

A different sort of pleasure invaded her as she lay against his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his ragged breaths, listening to the pounding rhythm of his heart. There was something deeply satisfying about knowing she'd given pleasure and not simply received it. It was almost more fulfilling to know he'd found pleasure in her than achieving her own climax. It was certainly as gratifying.

He curled his arms tightly around her and her satisfaction deepened-briefly-with the display of affection.

Then he turned over and she was left wondering if it had been nothing more than a reluctance to toss her off while he shifted into a more comfortable position. The brief flare of confusion and disappointment abated when he snugged her against his chest instead of releasing her completely.

She settled her cheek more comfortably and allowed herself to drift toward sleep. As she lay drowsing, though, she recalled what had aroused her from sleep to start with.

She'd heard faint, almost furtive movement at the door of her cabin and gotten up to investigate-and found Dax.

"Why were you at my door?" she asked drowsily.

Tonight was my night to guard you from harm.

Kate rolled that around in her mind for a few moments. His night? Indicating they took turns? A mixture of emotions flitted through her. "What do you think might harm me? We're on a ship. There's no threat here. Everyone was carefully screened."

How do you know this?

Kate released a sound of indulgent amusement. "It's standard procedure. Believe me our government screens everyone carefully. Everyone has to go through rigid examinations to determine their health-both physical and mentaltheir skills, and their genetics to become a colonist. Only the best of the best will do."

How do you know that their objective is to send only the best? Maybe they want the best to stay and want to remove the least desirable?

Uneasiness crawled along Kate's spine. "That certainly isn't very flattering to me!" she said in an attempt to lighten the vague sense of anxiety that had crept into her mind to wonder if he knew something she didn't.

You and the others like Sissy applied to become

colonists. What of those that were brought onboard by the military? Those that you said the government had forced to come? There were those among the humans caged with us who were certainly not the best of humans that we have encountered-not in any way. Some had come from other prisons before.

Kate pulled away from him abruptly and stared at him. "You're sure?" She realized she didn't actually need him to confirm, however, and she didn't feel even a flicker of doubt that he was telling the truth.

It made too much sense. Why, indeed, would the government only want to send the best of the best away and keep society's dregs for the home world?

"Oh god! Oh my god!" They were going into a potentially hostile environment with people who couldn't be trusted to behave in a socially acceptable manner on their own world-with all of the controls they had in place there!

Cold fear crept over her as she considered the implications.

Dax gathered her close again. You belong to me. I will not allow harm to come to you.

It was comforting and yet left her with a strange sense of loss, too. It wasn't until she was on the edge of sleep that she realized why it made her sad.

It hinted at true feelings for her and yet she knew deep down that it was nothing more than the primal instinct to protect his young. Dax wasn't human. He couldn't possibly understand, or feel, the bonds of affection that humans built between them.

* * * *

Kate debated whether it would be more practical, and safer for the Sirians, if she simply moved into their cabin with them, but it was already cramped, as Ronan had pointed out. On the other hand, she didn't think it was a good idea to allow them to stand guard outside her cabin during the 'night' periods either.

And she didn't feel nearly as safe being alone after the discussion that she'd had with Dax.

She compromised by insisting that if they were determined to stand watch over her, they were going to have to do it inside. She had a feeling that that was a great deal more appealing to them than standing outside her door anyway.

She had mixed feelings about it herself. She didn't actually object to having a sleeping partner at night. It made her feel safer and the sex was good even when she wasn't particularly in the moodand great when she was.

There was a downside. It seemed there always was one.

The downside was a biggy in this case, however.

No matter how many times she told herself that the growing closeness she felt between herself and the Sirians was an illusion-that Ronan, Dax, and Jarek were merely following their natural instinct to guard 'their nestlings', she couldn't convince her heart.

She tried to tell herself that it was a sort of transference thing, that she'd grown fond of the Sirians when they were her test subjects and dependent upon her. It was just that affection, already developed, her pleasure in mentoring when they were so quick to learn, and her enjoyment of them as lovers that made her feel ... way more fondness than she should have.

"You're too attached to them," Sissy observed one day when Kate met with her in the Rec room to update Sissy on their progress. "You've lost any objectivity you might have had. And, truthfully, I'm not sure you ever were as objective as you should have been."

Kate felt herself blushing with a mixture of guilt and resentment. "So ... you're saying I'm giving them more credit than they deserve? You don't think they've made as much progress as I do?"

Sissy released an irritated huff. "I'm not disputing that. As bad as I hate to admit it, I think you were right. The Sirians have a capacity for learning that leaves us humans in the dust. What I'm trying to point out is that they are imitators, Kate. They've picked up absolutely everything you've set out to teach them. Even their language skills are vastly improved. Granted, they're still a bit rough around the edges as far as social skills, but they could pass for an uncouth human pretty easily." Kate's anger flared a little higher. "I'm not so prejudiced that I can't see that they haven't entirely grasped some of the finer points of polite behavior, but-honest to god, Sissy!-they haven't had years to learn these things! It's only been a few weeks."

"Plus a year more or less. They were just as busy studying us while we had them in the habitat as we were studying them."

Kate's lips tightened. "So a little over a year! Except I wasn't trying to teach them then. And they didn't have a lot of humans to learn from-or situations."

"They haven't had a lot of situations to learn from lately either-not when they don't interact with anyone but you. And you're completely missing my point," Sissy said, anger threading her voice despite the fact that she kept her tone low since they were in a public place. "I'm worried about your ... attachment to them, Kate! I'm particularly worried when you seem determined to ignore the most basic, known fact about the Sirians! They are natural born imitators. I'm not trying to pry into your personal life, but" "But you're going to just the same."

"No, I'm not! I've no desire to hear the gritty details, thank you! I'm just curious to know if you, as a scientist, have actually learned a damned thing about them or if they're the ones reaping the entire benefit of your little experiment! I'm afraid that you're going to get hurt if you allow yourself to believe that they ... reciprocate your feelings."

That comment struck a nerve despite Kate's anger and she felt her emotions take a sharp dip. It was enough of an indicator that Sissy was right. She wasn't objective at all. She was emotionally involved.

She cleared her throat. "I'm fond of them. I'm not even going to try to deny it. But you know as well as I do that it isn't safe for them to interact with any of the other colonists until they can pass as humans."

Sissy stared at her. "Well maybe it hasn't occurred to you-since you're so focused on their protection-that you might well be training them to be more dangerous enemies if this ... project goes sour? They will know all about us and we still know damned little about them!" "How much do you think they can tell me when they've never been on their home world and never had any chance to interact with their own kind?" Kate said angrily. "If you're insinuating that they're gathering intell"

"They could be. That's the problem, Kate, the one you refuse to see. You've been totally focused on teaching them how to completely fool us-when you haven't been focused on ... bedroom gymnastics! Have you got some crazy idea that you can ... mold them into human beings and live happily ever after with them? Because they aren't human! They are never going to be human even if they can imitate us right down to the smallest molecule-they'll still be imitations mimicking human behavior." She snapped her fingers. "And just like that they could change the way they look and even you would never know them if they walked by you!"

Kate was so distressed and angry that she couldn't think straight but, as badly as she hated to admit it, Sissy had raised some valid concerns ... and planted seeds of doubt that she wanted very badly to dispute. Even she had worried about the fact that their minds seemed to work so totally different from the human mind. Everything about them was different.

"The morphing is a defense mechanism," she said finally, defensively.

"Which they also used to ensnare you in their mating/gathering agenda. What makes you think any part of that original scheme has changed? How can you possibly guess what other situations might arise that would convince them to use their abilities in defense of their species? What if their clan members have no interest in befriending humans? Whose side do you think they'll be on then?"

Chapter Thirteen

If Kate had had her rathers, she would have far preferred that the pseudo Willams brothers remained in their cabin for the duration of the trip. Sissy had planted more doubts in her mind than she liked. Much of it, she'd managed to dismiss for the simple reason that she was convinced that Sissy was way off the mark in her suggestion that the Sirians in general might be inclined to be hostile toward humans. If any of them had reason to feel hostility, Ronan, Dax, and Jarek certainly did. They'd been plucked from their home world, caged, and not just treated like animals, but guinea pigs-poked and prodded with a complete, clinical disregard for any pain or suffering that might be inflicted.

Of course, she supposed that most people, Sissy included, might view their annihilation of the guards sent to destroy them as an act of violent hostility, but she didn't. They'd acted to preserve their lives and they hadn't attacked at any time since. It hadn't been an unprovoked assault to start with.

If they were representatives of their species, then she didn't see that they had a tendency toward aggression.

Humans did, unfortunately, and she thought that would be their biggest problem-not the Sirians who had every right to feel threatened by the human invasion, but her people.

The doubts Sissy had sewn revolved around her

objectivity as to whether they were capable of interacting with humans without giving themselves away. Had she just grown used to their ways? Or was their behavior now at least close enough that, at the very worst, people would just think they were a little odd?

Their accents were still fairly thick and they still spoke like English wasn't their first languagewhich could be a bad thing if there was anyone on board who actually knew the men-the real ones-because they were supposed to be white, English speaking Americans.

She didn't see why they couldn't pretty much avoid speaking at all, though. They could nod and mouth the canned pleasantries she'd taught them and refuse to be drawn into conversation. That certainly ought to work unless they did run into anyone that knew them.

In which case, they were in trouble.

Otherwise, she didn't believe there would be a problem. They'd become familiar with the accoutrements of human society and their 'things'. They didn't eat with their hands-or faces. They'd very carefully mimicked her from the first time they'd shared a meal and no longer looked awkward handling utensils and such. They knew how pretty much everything worked and no longer stopped and examined everything 'new' that they discovered.

She wasn't as convinced as she wanted to be, however, when it was announced that there would be a party to celebrate the Eden III having reached the outer edge of their new solar system.

Everyone was expected to attend.

They might be more conspicuous by their absence than their presence or she would've insisted that they not go at all. She toyed with the idea that there would be so many people at the party that the absence of a handful would go unnoticed but, unfortunately, Ronan, Dax, and Jarek had already gained a certain notoriety from their stint in the onboard colony jail.

She was on edge long before they reached the Rec Room where the party was being held. She'd tried to time their arrival so that there would already be a large enough gathering to make it less likely they would attract attention but not so late as to be noticed as last to arrive. The refreshments are being served buffet style, she told the men without glancing at them. Just follow me and do what I do, ok?

She was a little miffed that Sissy hadn't met up with them and arrived with them at the party and more miffed when she spotted Sissy and Sissy made a great pretense of not seeing her. Coward, she thought angrily, deciding to snub Sissy since she was clearly trying to distance herself in case of trouble and moving purposefully toward the serving tables through the people already thronging the room.

You speak of your friend? Ronan said curiously.

Kate uttered a snort of irritation. "I'm beginning to wonder," she muttered.

I do not understand, Jarek responded.

"I'll explain it another time," Kate said distractedly as she reached the table and took a plate. She discovered when she glanced down the table to see what the selection was that the woman nearest to her had glanced at her when she spoke and then glanced at the Sirians. She smiled at the woman automatically and then looked up at Ronan and smiled more easily. "This all looks delicious. Hopefully, it is. I'm starving."

Ronan returned her smile with one of his own, flicked a look at the woman, and merely nodded.

Relief flickered through Kate. Finger food. Great! We won't have to worry about finding a table to sit down to eat-which is good because that doesn't look like it's going to happen. Balancing the plate and a beverage might be a challenge.

Sissy had disappeared by the time they'd made their way down the serving table and paused to look around for a place to settle. Dismissing her friend from her mind with an effort, Kate focused on trying to find a quiet, out of the way, spot. There wasn't one. There seemed to be twice as many people in the Rec room by the time they'd gotten to the end of the buffet and grabbed a glass. There were also very few tables or chairs. The room had obviously been cleared of as much of the furnishings as possible to allow standing room.

How thoughtful of whoever had planned the party!

With the sense that she was doomed to stand around with a glass in one hand and a plateful of food she could only stare at in the other, Kate discarded the notion of any privacy at all and began a search for anything that might make eating possible. They finally found a tiny table full of empty glasses near one wall-or bulkhead as they were referred to on the ship. Setting her glass down on the tabletop, Kate pushed the empties more tightly together to clear an opening so that the guys could set their own glasses down.

In silence, they ate. The food might as well have been cardboard for all Kate noticed. It hit the bottom of her stomach when she chewed and swallowed like so many rocks. She didn't realize she was searching the crowd for the one friendly face she knew until she met Sissy's gaze across the room. She looked away immediately and pointedly. "Pretty good, huh?" she asked when she noticed the Sirians had already cleaned their plates.

They'd also emptied their glasses and it wasn't until she took a sip from her own that she discovered that it was wine. She glanced at the men sharply as it occurred to her to wonder what effect the alcohol might have on them.

They'd completely adopted a human physiology, though, she reassured herself. It shouldn't affect them any more than it would anyone else.

All three men were looking somewhat longingly at the table laden with food, she discovered. She wrestled with her anxiety about them striking off on their own and finally dismissed it. If she left the table unguarded someone else would get it before they got back and they'd have to search again for a place to prop. It's alright to get more if you want it. It looks like pretty much everyone has at least gone down the line once. Just leave the plate and get another one.

Do you want more? Ronan asked.

She shook her head. "I'm still working on this."

They left her. She watched them make their way through the crowd toward the buffet, but couldn't see that anyone paid them much attention and she relaxed fractionally and focused on trying to eat without choking. She noticed a man across the room staring at her as she scanned the crowd. He didn't look the least bit familiar to her, however, and she quickly moved her gaze onward, wondering if he was actually looking at her or it had just seemed that way and he was only scanning the crowd as she was.

She discovered when she glanced in his direction again, though, that he was still staring at her and uneasiness flickered through her. She looked away again and saw Sissy heading in her direction. She hesitated, but she was still pissed off at Sissy for her defection and looked away again.

That time Sissy ignored the snub. "I didn't think you would come with them," she said by way of greeting.

"I told you I planned to. Everyone was expected to come. It might have been more noticeable if they hadn't."

Sissy looked skeptical. "I don't know about that."

Kate set her plate down. She didn't see any point in debating the wisdom of it, not when they were already there and doing fine, particularly when they were nearing their destination and the moment of truth anyway. "There was a man across the room staring at me," she said, changing the subject abruptly.

"Where?" Sissy asked, instantly distracted from her obvious intention of giving Kate indigestion.

"Just glance casually across the room and see if he'd still looking this way."

"Sort of seedy looking character with frizzy, carrot colored hair-built like a bruiser?"

"That's the one," Kate said uneasily. "Is he still staring?"

"No. He's coming this way."

"Shit!" Kate muttered in consternation, hoping against hope that the man wasn't actually approaching them but afraid to look. "What about the guys? Are they on their way back?"

"Yep. We may see fireworks."

Kate sent her friend an irritated look. "Despite your opinion of them, they aren't inclined toward violence."

"So you say. I think we might be about to find

out."

The red headed stranger reached them first. His smile was almost as unpleasant as the rest of himand he was unlovely to behold. His complexion was pitted with scars and his face bore the marks of an excessive life regardless of the fact that his build seemed robust-to say the least. That was rather reminiscent of a gorilla-long, muscular arms; short stocky legs; and broad, muscular shoulders and chest. His 'table' muscle was broadest of all, rather barrel shaped. Her skin crawled as he looked her over with dark, almost black, glittering eyes that seemed almost reptilian. He nodded pleasantly enough. "I couldn't help but notice you lookin' my way and thought I'd come over and introduce myself."

Kate just managed to keep her jaw from dropping in indignation. She certainly hadn't been staring at him! What a conceited ass! It was almost more provoking that she didn't see anything about him to warrant his excessive self-confidence.

"Name's Willy Turner, but my friends call me Lucky."

Kate wrestled with her manners and finally

managed a thin smile. "Dr. Drexel and this is my friend, Dr. Carter."

The man chuckled, ignoring the subtle snub. "Smart, huh? I like smart women."

Kate didn't know whether to be relieved or not when Ronan and the others arrived. "And these are ... uh ... friends of mine." Horror washed over her when she discovered she couldn't recall the names they were traveling under.

Ronan gave the stranger a stony look. "We met already."

Turner grinned at him. "Hey! Your English is a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you." He flicked a look at Kate. "We shared a cell when we were kidnapped by big brother and brought on board. Ain't that right?"

"Excuse me," Sissy said shakily. "I see a friend across the room that I wanted to talk to."

Kate sent her a disbelieving look, but Sissy merely grimaced at her and took off.

'Lucky' turned and watched Sissy's ass for a few moments as she beat a retreat and then returned

his attention to Kate and the others. It was both a relief that Ronan, Dax, and Jarek had ranged themselves around her and disturbing. Their stance was protective and guarded which made her feel better in a way and yet it also indicated that her own instincts hadn't been off. They clearly saw the man as a threat just as she did.

It didn't take much imagination at all to conclude that this was at least one of the men Dax had warned her about.

"So ... just how good a friends are the four of you?" Lucky asked, grinning at her. "'Cause I was told you was one of the singles. This place we're goin' sure don't sound like a good place for a woman alone and I'm considerin' findin' myself a woman. A woman could do worse than have me as a partner."

But not much worse, Kate thought, deciding in that instant that, regardless of the possible consequences, she was claiming the Sirians as living partners. "Actually," she said with a nervous chuckle, "we're really good friends. We've been discussing the possibility of contracting as life partners." Anger glittered in Lucky's eyes. "Aww, come on! A smart lady like you with yokels like these?" He leaned closer and she smelled some kind of potent alcohol on his breath as he added conspiratorially. "In case you ain't noticed, they ain't too smart. You're gonna need brains and brawn where we're goin'."

She didn't know if the alcohol had contributed to his brazen behavior or not. He struck her as the kind of man that rarely allowed any situation to dampen his aggressiveness in getting whatever he wanted and currently that seemed to be her. She rather thought his admission that jail wasn't anything he was unfamiliar with was a good indicator of that assessment.

"He call me stupid?" Jarek demanded in a low growl.

"Call all dat," Dax responded tightly.

Kate glanced from Jarek to Dax and finally looked at Ronan as he bared his teeth in a menacing grin. "You go now."

Lucky stiffened but held his ground, returning Ronan's feral grin with one of his own. "This is a

bad place to consider what you're thinkin' about," he said. "We could take the discussion somewhere else if you want to. Me, I seen enough of the jail on this trip."

"We don't want trouble, Mr. ... uh ... Lucky," Kate said tightly. "I'm flattered by your offer, but as I said, we're together. I'm sure there are plenty of other single women that would be happy to consider your offer." Bullshit!

His smile that time wasn't pleasant. "Probably but I done seen what I want." He glanced at the guys. "An' if you're still thinkin' about contractin' then nothin's settled. That's all I needed to know."

As he turned and swaggered off a wave of déjà vu swept over Kate. She tried to dismiss it but the abrupt certainty that she'd seen him before refused to be banished.

She'd already turned away from him when it hit her that she had seen him before-or was pretty sure she had.

No wonder he'd been staring at her! No wonder he felt so cocky!

He was one of the men that worked for the forger, Raphael!

A cold fear washed over her as that thought did. In the next instant, she realized that, even if she was right, he couldn't possibly recognize the guys. They looked nothing like they had when the four of them had gone to that awful place to get traveling papers.

She did, though, she realized in the next instant. And he recognized her. As gloomy as the interior of that building had been, she knew he did. She'd been too frightened at the time to really register what any of them looked like. She'd been too focused on the guns they were carrying to really look at the men holding them.

And he thought he could use that to blackmail her into doing whatever he wanted.

* * * *

Kate had been in favor of leaving the party as soon as Lucky Turner retreated. She was sorry she hadn't yielded to that impulse when the fight broke out. She wasn't certain what started it, but she was sure the Sirians weren't involved-to begin with. Nerves were stretched pretty thin after the months on board, though, and when beer, wine, and hard liquor were added to the equation it spelled disaster.

Her first indication that they were all about to be embroiled in a battle of epic proportions was the sound of angry male voices raised above the general din of chatter of so many people and the sharp feminine gasps of alarm. Even as she craned up on her tiptoes and looked around for the source of the disruption, fists began flying. A wide circle appeared around the two men as those closest made room. A few seconds later, Kate was carried toward the melee by the surge of gawkers that rushed to watch.

The battle spread like wildfire as men who were either friends of the two fighters joined the battle or bystanders got caught up in the heat of the moment. What began with two became four, and then eight and then a seething mass.

Lucky, easily recognizable because of his bright hair, was in the middle of it. Kate had an uneasy feeling that that was what inspired Ronan, Dax, and Jarek to join the fight. She'd scarcely identified him when the trio surged past her and waded in to the middle of the battlefield before she even realized their intention.

She clapped a hand over her mouth when she saw it was too late to try to reason with them.

Sissy appeared beside her. "Oh my god! We need to get out of here!" she exclaimed, clamping two hands on Kate's forearm and tugging at her.

"I can't leave!" Kate gasped, struggling to free herself of Sissy's grip.

"The militia is on their way here to clear the riot! You do not want to be here when they get here!"

She didn't, but she didn't want Ronan, Dax, or Jarek there either! Ronan! She called out to him mentally when she caught sight of him.

He whipped his head in her direction and caught a fist to the side of his head that had been aimed at his face. He rocked back on his heels, drew his lips back in a snarl, and retaliated hard enough the man that had hit him cleared a path into the crowd as he flew backwards. They're coming, for god's sake!

Sissy had started dragging Kate toward the nearest exit while she was distracted by her efforts to alert the Sirians to the danger they'd thrust themselves in to.

Who is coming?

That was Dax. She knew it. The militia! They're going to be tasing everybody to put down the riot!

Even as she struggled to warn them, the militia burst through the main entrance of the Rec room. Ronan, Dax, and Jarek whipped a sharp look in that direction and instantly broke off their fights, plowing their way through the seething mass of fighting men and then through the crowd of spectators surrounding the battle. They morphed even as they moved away, arriving near the rear of the crowd as three different men than the ones involved in the fight.

If Kate hadn't been staring straight at Ronan she wouldn't have seen the transformation it had been so smooth.

She hoped to god nobody else had seen it!

A mixture of relief and horror flooded her-brieflybefore she and Sissy were carried away by the tide of people fleeing the riot with more enthusiasm even that they'd shown in rushing to watch the fight. Every exit was instantly clogged with people trying to get out before the militia could get to them.

"Where did they go?"

Kate shot a sharp glance at Sissy. "I didn't see," she lied.

* * * *

As anxious as everyone was to reach their destination, including the crew, it had been decided not to risk the maximum speed the ship was capable of on their voyage. For people who'd never been in space for more than the occasional pleasure cruise or work assignment on one of Earth's outposts-and the vast majority hadn't even experienced those short trips in space-even the four month long cruise to reach their colony planet was almost too much for taut nerves to endure. As huge as the colony ship was, it was also stocked to the gills and packed with colonists in accommodations even more cramped than those they were accustomed to dealing with on Earth.

Having only recently finished a long tour of duty on the space station, Kate thought she fared better than most and even she was sick to death of the ship and a bundle of nerves besides long before they began the final approach to Sirius.

The circumstances were entirely different, of course, and that played a significant part in her anxiousness to be off the ship and on world. Her research on the space station had been tedious at times, but her mind and hands had been fully occupied with tasks that were familiar even if her particular project hadn't been.

The fear that someone would discover the Sirians-or the Sirians would give themselves away-had totally wrecked Kate's nerves, however, and the riot in the Rec Room did nothing to allay her fears. No one had seen the progress through their new solar system for the simple reason that everyone on board had been under 'house' arrest after the celebration party and thus didn't have access to the viewing ports. The ban was only lifted a matter of hours prior to landing when the announcement was made over the ship communications channels that colonists were to begin preparations to deboard the ship.

Kate's belly instantly knotted when she heard the announcement. Trying to ignore her jitters, she focused on packing up her belongings and then searching for her claim tickets for her belongings in the hold. Relieved when she found them after only a short, frantic search of her purse, she secured the bags she'd packed in the lockers for landing and settled in the easy chair her cabin boasted that doubled as a landing/takeoff seat, fastening her safety harness. She'd already been seated and strapped in a good fifteen minutes before the announcement was made to prepare for landing.

She hadn't felt their entry into the planet's gravitational pull, but then they had slowly been acclimating to Sirius' gravity and atmospheric pressure throughout the voyage. It wasn't a great deal different from that of Earth, but it was different and it was far better to arrive conditioned for the difference and prepared to set to work than unprepared and in need of months to adjust.

Not that they wouldn't have some adjustment issues anyway. They hadn't been born on Sirius.

The denser gravity and air pressure was going to be a challenge even as slight as it was. They'd been acclimated as much as possible by the shipboard artificial gravity, but none of them had actually worked as they would have to to build the colony.

She was still trying to calculate what she would weigh on the new planet as opposed to Earth when she felt the uncomfortable jolt that told her the ship had landed. Almost immediately, instructions began to flow through the communications speakers.

Her quadrant of the ship was to be allowed to exit last, she discovered in dismay.

And the quadrant where the Sirians were housed was to be first.

Throwing off her harness, Kate got up and began pacing her small cabin nervously while she waited. It seemed an hour dragged by before she heard the announcement that the passengers in the next quadrant could begin to exit. Each time the announcement was made, the colonists were instructed to gather their belongings from their cabin and take them to the temporary shelters they were being assigned to.

Depression settled over her, ousting the jittery sensation in her belly, replacing the nervous energy that had set her to pacing with exhaustion. She finally plopped down on her bunk, staring at the floor and trying to empty her mind of the troubling imaginary scenes that kept materializing one after another.

She was worried about how Ronan, Dax, and Jarek were handling their release from the ship without her there to explain everything to them.

A faint flutter in her rounded belly distracted her. She held her breath, focusing on the point where she'd felt it, wondering if it was her imagination that made it seem ... detached from her. She'd just begun to think it was nothing more than her own body when she felt a similar flutter in another region of her belly. That time it was more pronounced and impossible to explain away as body function.

The babies were stirring, she realized, feeling both a sense of exhilaration and fear wash through her. She hadn't realized until that moment that she'd almost convinced herself that there was nothing there at all, despite the undeniable changes she'd noticed in her body-the thickening of her waist and the noticeable, to her at least, bulge her lower belly had taken on.

Was she confusing gas with foreign, purposeful movement, though?

It hadn't seemed to be her at all.

Could she really tell the difference, though? Even if she was pregnant, they couldn't be very big at all-certainly not if there actually were three.

She was so focused inwardly on trying to identify the source of what felt like movement that the announcer was halfway through the spiel about deboarding before she realized it was the cue she'd been waiting for.

It was her turn to get off the ship and see her new home for the first time.

Getting up shakily, she gathered her bags and exited her cabin, squeezing into the corridor that was already clogged with people slowly shuffling toward the lifts, stopping to wait for the return of the cubicles carrying those in front down to the hanger level and then shuffling forward a few more feet.

It wasn't until she finally managed to squeeze into one of the lift cubicles and felt the motion as it carried her down that she realized why depression had settled over her.

Would Ronan, Dax, and Jarek be waiting for her, she wondered? Or would they, as she'd envisioned when they began to trek back to their world, have rushed off already to explore their home and find the rest of their clan?

Chapter Fourteen

Kate couldn't decide whether anxiety or excitement was most dominant as the lift descended toward the hold where the colonists for the new world were disembarking. Both emotions crested, however, as the lift doors opened and she caught a glimpse of Sirius through the open bay doors. Smells she was completely unfamiliar with wafted to her on the air that gusted through the opening. The natural light of the system's red dwarf battered her along with the myriad of scents and she found herself so overwhelmed by the assault to her senses that for some time she was completely focused on trying to sort and catalogue the unfamiliar.

The unnamed fears that had besieged her before as she paced her cabin awaiting her turn to disembark returned when she finally neared the gangplank, however, overshadowing the excitement still threading her veins.

Everything was new and different and that thought was as frightening as it was exciting, promised as much danger as pleasure in discovery.

She had no home.

This was her home.

Everything familiar was gone.

A whole new world of possibilities had opened to her.

She was pregnant and would have the family she had always wanted and knew she would never be allowed to have.

She was carrying the unknown and would very likely have a battle on her hands for that reason alone.

And the chances were probably very good that she would have to face it alone.

Even as that frightening thought settled over her, though, her gaze was snagged by the trio of men standing near the foot and to one side of the gang plank. Her heart leapt at the sight of them. She'd been certain they would immediately strike off to explore their true home and abandon her! Relief flooded her. She was shaky and weak with it by the time she reached them.

Ronan's gaze was piercing and she knew he at least sensed her doubts and was offended.

Kate! They are saying we cannot choose our own place, Jarek said indignantly.

Relieved at the distraction, Kate smiled at him instead of reminding him that he needed to

verbalize. We were told that during orientation, but of course none of you were there. We'll be assigned temporary quarters until the colony is lain out. Once they finish the survey, though, we'll get to draw for a quadrant of land. It's the only fair way to do it.

Draw? Dax asked suspiciously.

They'll number each quadrant and then we'll pick the number at random. Otherwise people might fight over specific pieces, you know?

Why would they fight when there is all of Ra?

Kate looked at Ronan when he spoke. "I didn't mean that literally," she said a little testily. "I meant argue over the best spots. The council decided drawing for land lots would prevent disharmony. We'll need to work together to make the colony a success."

Several people nearby glanced at her when she spoke and then looked at the men curiously. Uneasiness flickered through Kate when she realized she'd responded out loud to a comment no one had heard but her. "Have you guys been assigned temporary quarters yet?" "We wait here for you," Ronan said.

"You haven't even looked around?" Kate responded in surprise.

"Stand here look around," Jarek said.

Kate hesitated, but the processing looked to be something that would take hours and nobody would be assigned to work details until living arrangements could be made. She was already among the last to leave the ship and the guys, too, since they'd waited for her. Why wait in line when they could be exploring?

"Why don't we look around a bit? We probably shouldn't go far, but it will give us a chance to begin acclimating to the environment."

The three exchanged a look that Kate had a hard time deciphering and then looked around. Shrugging inwardly, she scanned the area, as well. Spying what looked to be a stream not too distant, she dropped her carryon bags and struck off in that direction.

It wasn't easy going. Despite the efforts to help everyone acclimate to their new home, she very quickly began to feel the strain of breathing Sirius' atmosphere, pressure, and gravity. Beyond that, although the ship had landed at the chosen site-a fertile valley thick with low growing vegetation-the 'low' growth was waist high on her and grew thick enough that moving through it was like slogging through a bog. The temperature was a bit warmer than she'd grown accustomed to on the ship, as well.

There were others who'd opted to do a little exploring. Most of them seemed to have headed toward the stream as she had, but she saw and heard others who were examining the variety of vegetation and collecting specimens. She paused to catch her breath after a little while and turned to study the activity behind them. It surprised her to discover that they'd been steadily climbing as they progressed and that the landing site was now below her. The valley they'd chosen for their settlement seemed to be roughly bowl shaped.

It made her feel somewhat better, though, to know that there was an excuse for her breathlessness beyond simply walking through heavy brush.

You are tired? Ronan asked, studying her with a frown.

She couldn't decide whether the look denoted concern or if it was disapproval. "Just wanted to catch my breath. The atmosphere is ... heavier than I'm used to."

It is not because you are breeding?

Dax's comment seemed more concerned, but she still wasn't convinced there wasn't a touch of disapproval. She smiled faintly in appreciation anyway. "I'm not that far along. I mean, this is new to me, but I wouldn't think that it would have that much effect on me."

I will carry you and then you can rest, Jarek volunteered.

Kate chuckled. "I don't need to be carried! I thought we'd just wander around. Are you in that big a hurry to explore?"

Some emotion flickered across his featuresdisappointment, she thought. You do not want me to carry you?

"Do you want to carry me?" she countered.

Ronan slipped his arms around her and lifted her

against his chest. The moeth grows too high in this valley, he said, resuming their trek toward the stream.

Kate blinked up at his face in surprise. "What does moeth mean?"

Ronan frowned but in a moment his brow cleared. "Brush."

"Oh. I thought, maybe, it was a name for the plants in your language."

It is a name, Dax countered, amusement threading his voice.

"Yes but" Kate broke off when she met his gaze, realizing he'd been teasing her-she thought. "It doesn't have an actual name? Or you just don't know it?"

Something flickered in his eyes.

We do not need to name everything as you do, Jarek responded cheerfully.

Kate was almost as surprised by his shift in mood as she was the comment. He hadn't seemed happy at all when Ronan had nixed his offer to carry her. "There's a reason we name everything," she said pointedly.

"What is this?"

Dax, she saw when she turned to him, had plucked a branch from the vegetation and was holding it up. She frowned at him. "We haven't named it. We just got here," she said dryly.

He lifted his brows at her.

"We give everything names to help identify them," she said a little testily. "It's especially important with plants. Some can be eaten and some are dangerous-or poisonous."

He stuck the vegetation in his mouth, chewed it experimentally, and spat it out. Not good to eat.

Kate couldn't help but chuckle, but it also unnerved her a little. "A lot of plants are poisonous! At the very least they can make you sick. At the worst-well, they can kill you-and often in a very unpleasant way!"

We identify what is safe to eat by the smell, Ronan said, sounding downright indulgent.

"Well, if it's all the same to you I'll stick with the food we brought until the botanists have had a chance to analyze the local vegetation!"

The sound of machinery caught their attention as they finally reached the bank of what was, Kate discovered, far too large a body of water to refer to it as a stream and Ronan set her on her feet. Distracted by the noise, she glanced back toward the encampment and saw that the heavy equipment had been brought from the ship to begin clearing. She studied the machines for a few minutes and finally turned her attention to the water they'd discovered.

She thought at first that it was a lake, but as she strained to make out the far side and the perimeter, she decided it was a river after all-far larger than any that were familiar, but it seemed to stretch too far into the distance to be anything else-and it seemed to be moving water. She discovered when she glanced at Ronan that heactually all three-were still watching the clearing.

And not happily.

She cleared her throat. "It has to be cleared before we can begin building."

Ronan met her gaze. There will be no plants for food.

Or for shelter, Dax added.

"We'll build shelters and plant food," Kate pointed out.

And waste what is already there and provided by Mother Ra, Ronan said grimly.

"It won't be wasted ... exactly," Kate said a little defensively. "We don't waste things. They'll gather up the vegetation and use it." She frowned. "You ... your clan doesn't clear vegetation and build structures to shelter in?"

Ronan's lips tightened. We do not build ... cities as humans do.

Surprise flickered through Kate. She'd thought they didn't build at all. They had certainly not discovered any signs that they did, but what he'd said seemed to imply that they did build rather than support her assumption-everyone's assumption that there were no beings on Sirius that had anything approaching civilization. "But you build?" Ronan frowned thoughtfully. We are what you call nomads. Ra provides ... usually, in times when shelter is needed from the wrath of Ne when she brings the ice storms. When she does not, then we construct shelters.

A jolt went through Kate and then embarrassment that they'd overlooked such a simple explanation for the lack of any evidence of higher life forms. It was human arrogance all over again and an inability to see past their own sphere. There had been-still were-nomadic peoples on Earth. Nobody in the 'civilized' world thought that they were terribly civilized, but they certainly weren't considered lower life forms!

Something still didn't fit, though, she realized. "But ... you don't nurture your young."

She could see immediately that she'd managed to piss all three men off.

The father's nurture, Ronan said tightly.

She didn't see much point in arguing about that! Their father, or fathers, certainly hadn't! "I didn't mean it that way," she lied uncomfortably. "I'm trying to understand the mating and breeding process. The three of you were left in a nest And there wasn't a sign of any adults around at all."

Life is hard on Ra, Dax responded. Better the weak die quickly than to endanger others, weaken the clan with their seed, or die slowly because they are too weak and sickly to survive.

Kate's hand went instinctively to her belly where her own babies rested. It was a protective gesture and one she was hardly conscious of. "If you loved them you'd want them to survive even if they needed help. You don't feel things like we do!"

In these forms, we feel everything that you do, Ronan said tightly. And it is very little different than the things we felt before we took these forms. Your clan does not observe the same traditions as other clans on your world. Do you think they do not feel things as you do? Just because they have different beliefs?

Discomfort wafted through Kate and not just because she knew he was right-everybody thought the way they did things was the 'right' way. But also because, once again, she had judged by her own ruler. "I'm just trying to understand," she said unhappily and somewhat defensively. "I'm not trying to make judgments, but I can't understand if you don't tell me and explain. Put that way, I can see your point and I'm not saying our ways are better-just different.

"And don't tell me you haven't been doing the same thing-comparing your ways to ours and passing judgments!"

He studied her for a long moment and turned to survey the river and the banks on either side. She thought he was simply enjoying the view as she was.

Your people chose a very bad place to build their city, Dax commented after a few moments.

Kate looked at him in surprise. "It looks like a good place to me. It's clearly a very fertile valley if the growth is any indication and it's close to a good water source A very good one. We'll be able to use the river for power, not just for water."

And when the river floods? The water will flow toward your settlement, Ronan said grimly.

Fear rippled through Kate. She studied the river and the terrain with dismay then, not the appreciation for its beauty that she'd felt a few moments before. "You think it'll flood?" she asked doubtfully.

There is nothing here that has grown for more than one or two seasons, Jarek pointed out. The older growth is there, along the ridge, and even at that many of the trees growing lower on the slope are dead. There is a very good chance that that is because they have drowned. If it were anything else there would not be a line of dead trees that follows the edge of the jungle in that way.

Kate chewed her lower lip, feeling the sudden certainty that they were right even though she was reluctant to believe the engineers hadn't taken the topography into consideration. "Maybe we should talk to the authorities and find out?" she said slowly.

The guys looked doubtful, which irritated her. On the other hand, she supposed she could see their point. They hadn't exactly had a very good experience with the authorities.

She still wanted to at least see what she could

find out about the plans. They had to have one. They wouldn't have overlooked anything with that potential for disaster!

Ronan wanted to carry her back, but she pointed out that they'd beaten a path down that she could follow that would make walking far easier and that it was also all downhill.

Not that it hadn't been sort of nice to have him carry her-disconcerting, but enjoyable because she got the chance to cuddle and also because she felt protected. But she didn't actually want to attract attention. She wouldn't have wanted to under other circumstances. She was uncomfortable drawing curious attention at any time, but she definitely didn't want to draw attention to her aliens.

And that had already been noticed more than she liked. The Earth people were struggling with the difference between Sirius and their home world. She doubted there were many men among those present that could've carried her so far even without the unaccustomed strain on their bodies, but it certainly made the Sirians stand out that they weren't having any difficulties at all! As they headed back, those thoughts led to curiosity of the scientific kind and she struggled to understand why the Sirians didn't seem to be affected. They'd hatched in space and matured on a space station equipped with Earth conditions. It seemed to her that they should be having as much trouble as everyone else, but there was no getting around that they didn't seem to be.

The landing zone, when they reached it again, was ordered chaos. It actually looked like complete chaos, Kate thought wryly, but it was ordered. Most of the colonists had been assigned their temporary living guarters by the time her party returned from their excursion and had already picked up work assignments and were busy helping setup their temporary encampment. They'd landed early enough in Sirius' day cycle to allow them a full fourteen hours of natural light to setup their encampment for their first night on their new world, but everyone knew it would be a feat to accomplish what they needed to, even with the robots, before the night closed in. While the civilian population divided their attention between clearing, unloading essential cargo, and erecting the temporary shelters, the colonial militia focused on setting up a safety perimeter.

After a brief debate, Kate led the way to the group making housing arrangements in the hope that she could kill two birds with one stone-acquire her temporary quarters and find out where to go and who to speak to about her concerns. They'd been standing in line for almost an hour when Kate noticed the Sirians sudden tension. When she glanced at Ronan, she saw he'd lifted his head and seemed to be sniffing the air.

Alarm instantly went through her. She glanced sharply at Dax and Jarek and discovered that they, too, seemed to sense some kind of threat that she couldn't begin to guess at. It was enough that they did to increase her alarm tenfold. She whipped a frightened look around, straining to pierce the vegetation in the direction that the men were so focused on. It didn't make her feel one whit better that she couldn't see anything.

"What is it?" she gasped in a low voice.

Jarek glanced at her when she voiced her question, but neither Dax nor Ronan seemed to hear her. People.

Kate gaped at him blankly. His projection had barely settled in her mind, however, when

Ronan's mental voice filled her head with a sound so explosive that she sucked in her breath on the edge of a scream and clamped her hands to her head at the sharp pain.

Go! There is danger here for you!

By the time Kate managed to unclench her eyelids, all three had vanished. Dizzy, fighting an abrupt descent toward darkness, Kate whipped a look around to see where they'd gone. With the surrealistic time suspension of shock, she saw people frozen all around her in a similar state, eyes wide, mouths agape. When she finally spotted Ronan, Dax, and Jarek, she saw that they were charging toward a small group of soldiers perhaps two dozen yards from where she stood. In slow motion, the soldiers brought their weapons up to firing position.

Horror washed through Kate. She reacted instinctively, racing after the men as it hit her that the Sirians were racing toward their deaths. She'd lost any ability to command her movements in anyway and her cognitive abilities were so hampered by her shock that she couldn't understand what had brought about the apparent attack by the militia against the Sirians. It finally dawned on her as she raced to try to avert disaster, though, that the soldiers had pointed their weapons away from the Sirians, toward the higher vegetation along the nearest slope to the jungle. Following the direction, she searched for what it might be that had prompted the soldiers to lift their weapons. An explosion of sound from the vicinity of the soldiers drew her attention back to them before she spotted whatever it was, however, snapping her attention from the jungle to the men just in time to Ronan begin to change.

Time slowed by shock seemed to shoot forward beyond normal play to fast forward so that everything seemed to happen at once, too swiftly to completely grasp. Instead of the men she'd grown familiar with. Kate saw three creatures the likes of which was so alien to her that even a fertile imagination couldn't have concocted them. The people around her began to scream and shout and rush in every direction, slamming into her and nearly knocking her down. Through the melee of rushing people, though, Kate saw the Sirians reach the soldiers, engage them, and wrest their weapons from them after a briefwoefully brief for the soldiers-battle for

possession of the weapons.

Her first indication that the battle wasn't localized was a peppering of rifle launched projectiles that flew past her like a swarm of furious bees. She dove toward the ground, slamming into the dirt hard enough that if she hadn't had her shock to cushion the blow she thought she might have lost consciousness. As it was, the impact knocked the breath from her, sending her hurtling toward blackout. It was only her need to see what was happening, to assure herself that none of the Sirians had been mown down by the shower of bullets that kept full darkness at bay.

The soldiers, she discovered, were on the ground and the Sirians had vanished from the scene of battle. A short search for them in the surrounding area revealed no sign of them, but when she glanced toward the jungle again, she saw them ... airborne. They'd taken flight with the wings she'd never believed actually functioned, but there were nearly a dozen of them now and she simply couldn't grasp for many minutes how it was that her three mates had become so many winged, almost dragon-like creatures.

And then she recalled the words Ronan had

shouted just before he had raced away.

Go! There is danger here for you!

The Sirians had found their clansmen.

* * * *

How much time passed after the Sirians had vanished into the forest before Kate came to her senses sufficiently to realize the entire encampment was in an uproar, she had no idea, but her focus was drawn from her efforts to watch the retreat of the Sirians into the jungle to her own circumstances first. The pain her shock had held at bay infiltrated every pore. With an effort, she struggled upright and began a visual search for wounds. The sight of blood on her chest sent a wave of fear through her, but when she'd searched her chest for a hole, she realized the blood was dripping onto her clothing, not seeping from her chest

Her nose was bleeding, she discovered when she'd examined her face with her hands. She stared at her bloody hand blankly for several moments, trying to decide whether she'd bumped her nose when she'd dived toward the ground for cover or not. Some of the blood had already darkened, however, and that discovery sent her mind back over the events that had preceded her dive for shelter.

Her head had felt like it was going to explode when Ronan had shouted his warning-to the people, she realized. Jarek had told her that and she'd been completely bewildered since they were, and had been, surrounded by people. He hadn't meant her people, though, she realized belatedly, recalling the way all three men had suddenly tensed, lifted their heads, and looked around. He'd meant their people.

The activity at the settlement had drawn curious Sirians to see what was happening.

She frowned, trying to decide if that made sense. Any animals in the area would have fled, but the Sirians weren't animals. They were intelligent beings.

Which made her wonder why they would have approached so close so incautiously that they'd been spotted by the soldiers.

Children, she realized after a moment-or at least

young Sirians who wouldn't be as experienced or cautious as a fully mature adult. She couldn't be certain, of course, but she recalled abruptly that, of the Sirians she'd seen flying away, three had been notably larger than the others.

And Ronan, Dax, and Jarek had been so focused on protecting the younglings that they'd abandoned their own protective forms in order to save them from the soldiers.

The realization that everyone in the camp must have seen the transformation abruptly shifted Kate's focus from her focus on sorting her own confusion and she looked around in dismay. The encampment was virtually deserted, she discovered after she'd scanned the entire area. Approximately half of the soldiers had retreated to the ship's ramp and taken up guard positions. She discovered the rest creeping warily toward the point at the edge of the jungle where the Sirians had disappeared.

"Oh god! Oh my god!" she gasped, surging to her feet. They hadn't been on Sirius more than a couple of hours and they'd already had a confrontation with the Sirians that could bring the two species to all out war! She had to do something! She had to stop what was happening before it escalated completely out of control!

With no idea what to do, she headed as quickly as she could toward the ship, trying to ignore her battered, bruised body and her painfully stiff joints. She caught the attention of the soldiers as she headed toward them and a small group detached themselves from the others and hurried toward her.

"Are you injured? Do you need to be carried?" one of the men barked at her, his voice showing evocative of the strain clear on every face.

"I'm alright," Kate responded shakily. "I need to talk to someone in charge."

He either didn't hear her or he ignored her. "We'll get you to safety so you can be checked by a medic."

"I need to talk to whoever is charge!" Kate insisted when the man gripped her arm and began hurrying her back toward the ship.

"You can give a statement later," the man said

distractedly.

"I don't want to" Kate broke off the halfhysterical denunciation, realizing it was worse than useless to try to talk to the man. He was only focused on handing her off to someone else.

She discovered when she'd been thrust onboard the ship that the colonists were gathered in the hold-and so badly shaken by their experience that fully half of them were still babbling in terror. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest at that discovery.

Despite every effort by the government to prepare the colonists mentally and physically for colonization of a new world, they weren't at all prepared for their first encounter with the natives. From the comments Kate heard as she passed, she thought it wouldn't be a stretch to say that half of the colonists were ready to head back to Earth right then.

"Did you see those ... things? They were huge!" a woman close by exclaimed to the group of women she was standing with.

"They lied to us! They said they hadn't found

anything dangerous! No way in hell am I going to believe something that big and that ... scary isn't dangerous!"

"They came out of nowhere! One minute they weren't there, the next they were right on top of us!"

"Did you see how they mowed the soldiers down and took their weapons? It was like ... the soldiers were ... children! They didn't stand a chance!"

"Monsters!"

"Flying ... apes!"

"They looked like dragons."

"They didn't look like dragons, moron!"

"They sure as hell didn't look like apes! They weren't hairy! They had ... well, they looked almost scaly."

"They looked like people with wings!" someone else insisted. "Yeah the skin was different, but I saw their faces and they looked like human facesonly the skin was different." A medic had surged forward as she was escorted inside by the soldier. The woman had grasped Kate's arm and began leading her toward the lift at the back of the hanger bay. By the time Kate and the medic reached the lift and entered, so many doubts had filled her mind that she was no longer certain of what to do.

Maybe it would be better to wait until things calmed down a little before she tried to talk to the council? Or tried to approach whoever was in command of the militia?

She didn't realize the medics intended a full examination until she was told to remove her clothing. Even then she was too distracted by her worry about the Sirians to fully grasp what an examination might mean to her. She balked for the simple reason that she didn't believe she had any injuries to worry about and she was too tense and worried to feel like being poked and prodded. They overruled her objections and insisted and she didn't feel up to fighting them.

She would have, though, if it had occurred to her that the last thing she needed to add to her problems was an examination. That didn't occur to her until, unfortunately, until they'd already started the scan. She made an aborted attempt to abandon the examination table as the scan reached her breasts-aborted because she knew it was useless to attempt when she was restrained for the scan.

She squeezed her eyes closed, trying to convince herself that either the scan would turn up nothing or the medics wouldn't be aware, or wouldn't report, her state. It was a forlorn hope-completely unrealistic. They would have her file and nowhere in that file did it say that she'd obtained a permit to breed.

The medic's face was grim as he turned to her. "Were you aware that you're fourteen weeks pregnant?"

Kate gaped at the man operating the scanner, struggling to come up with an answer that wouldn't incriminate her. "Fourteen?" she echoed faintly.

The man frowned. "I don't see a permit in your file."

His voice was carefully neutral, but she knew he didn't think for a moment that she couldn't have

been aware or that there was some mix up to explain the lack of a permit. "They haven't updated my file yet?" she said weakly, knowing the lie she'd suggested wouldn't hold her long but desperate to put off the consequences as long as possible.

"You're saying you did apply and were granted a permit?"

Kate licked her dry lips, trying to think if she'd ever heard exactly what the penalty was for unsanctioned breeding. All she could remember, though, was that the fine was enormous. Could she possibly be in more trouble if she lied at this point? Tried to brazen it out and convince the authorities that it was their error? "Yes," she lied.

His look was both skeptical and assessing. "You're in violation, regardless, and will be fined. There are three fetuses in your womb."

Kate gaped at the man in disbelief. "You cannot be serious?" she gasped. "You're saying even if I have the permit I'm going to be fined for three? Like I had some control over that!"

The man had the grace to look uncomfortable. He

shrugged. "It doesn't matter what I think-or that nature screwed you. A permit to breed a child is a permit for one. You'll be fined for the other two. I'll have to report this." He looked almost sympathetic for a moment. "If I don't, they'll find out anyway and then I'll be charged with failure to report the violation."

"But ...! That was a law on Earth, for god's sake! Why would it apply here when everyone has been encouraged to produce!"

He shook his head as he released her from her restraints. "Indiscriminate breeding can't be allowed ... even here. You know that. If we don't follow the protective guidelines the government has enacted we run the risk of creating the same mess here that we had on Earth."

She knew that and she also knew it was pointless to argue with him. He was certainly right when it came to reporting. The scan would go into her file automatically and it wouldn't do any good to try to bribe him to delete it. Eventually, she was going to have to face the consequences.

She just wanted to wait for 'eventually' as long as she could!

Her personal dilemma pushed her anxieties so far to the back of her mind that it wasn't until much later that she even remembered her intention to try to reason with the council about the Sirians. Even then, it loomed over her until she couldn't nerve herself to walk into the 'lion's den'. All she could think was that it might already have been reported and she would be accused the moment she appeared.

Once everyone had calmed down somewhat, they were sent back out to work. It was obvious no one really wanted to and that nobody believed the militia's assurances that, whatever it was that 'had attacked' was long gone.

That attitude both frightened her and angered her. She supposed she could see their side of it, but the truth was that all Ronan and the others had done was prevent the soldiers from killing the young Sirians for nothing more than curiosity. They hadn't attacked! They'd merely been watching ... and they had every reason to be both curious and alarmed. It was their world after all. They'd never seen a human anymore than the majority of humans had ever seen a Sirian. They had probably been frightened themselves to see

the strange creatures busy building in their backyard!

Those thoughts led Kate to a memory she hadn't examined earlier. Between her shock at what had happened and the fears the medic had brought to the forefront of her mind, she'd been too shaken to think about the fact that Ronan, Dax, and Jarek had not only assumed their forms for the first time, they'd done it in broad daylight where anyone could have seen the transformation. Even the realization that she'd seen their true forms for the first time, as jolting as that was, paled beside the fearful certainty that someone must have seen them. Maybe the witness or witnesses were still too shaken to fully assimilate what they'd seen, but she had a terrible fear that, eventually, they would remember. And whether the rest of the colonists believed them, she was afraid, depended upon just how many witnesses there had actually been.

* * * *

No one was actually keen on the idea of staying in the temporary shelters after the upset at discovering they didn't really have the planet to themselves-particularly when most of the settlers had spent the remainder of their first day on Sirius convincing themselves that the 'horrible monsters' were just waiting to come back.

Kate wasn't convinced they wouldn't come backwith more of their clansmen. If she was right and the soldiers had fired on a group of curious youngsters, they could be looking at retaliation by some really pissed off parents. She didn't think any of them had actually been hurt-thanks to Ronan, Dax, and Jarek-but she didn't know that they hadn't. And even if they hadn't been hurt, she wasn't sure that would weigh with the Sirians. They'd tried to kill them.

If the shoe had been on the other foot, and the children had been hers Well, she was pretty sure she would have wanted blood.

That brought her back to her earlier fears that they had immediately done what she'd feared would happen all along. The first shots of a war had already been fired before anybody even understood what they might be bringing down upon everyone.

Guilt swamped her and yet, despite that, she knew that it wouldn't have done any good at all to have

approached the council with her fears. No one had taken her seriously that had been on the actual project and had had at least some evidence that the Sirians were more intelligent that they'd been given credit. She thought it likely that, if she had approached them, they would've dismissed her concerns on the grounds that no one with more authority had thought it necessary to warn them.

She should have tried.

But that would have put Ronan, Dax, and Jarek at risk of discovery and she couldn't have done that. She hadn't been willing to take the chance that her warning might lead to their discovery.

Because she didn't want to lose them, she realized abruptly, stopping in the middle of her temporary quarters and looking around at the bunks that had been set up for her and the men to share a habitat.

The empty bunks.

She felt the abrupt urge to cry. A painful knot rose in her throat. Her eyes stung, and her chest felt tight. She'd almost convinced herself before she got off the ship that they would abandon her. She hadn't managed to convince herself, though, that it was what she wanted. After all the time she'd spent trying to do just that, telling herself it was just going to be a relief to get them safely home, somewhere along the way she'd stopped thinking in terms of 'doing the right thing' to ease her conscience for interfering in their lives and endangering them and gotten used to having them around.

She couldn't even assure herself that they'd just become a habit.

She thought that almost as soon as she'd discovered they'd impregnated her, she'd begun to see them as her safety net. She was in trouble, but it wasn't as bad as it would have been if they weren't there, determined they were going to take care of her.

In all the time they'd been together, she'd thought of herself as taking care of them. She'd thought about them needing her to ensure their safety until she could get them back to where they belonged. But she had only to envision the prospect of facing a judgment for violating the reproduction laws to know absolutely that she'd been counting on them to protect her and the babies.

Moving to her bunk, she plopped down on the surface and covered her face with her hands. What was she going to do now?

She had no idea what the penalty was for the violation beyond the fact that it was awful. They could, and usually did, order an abortion and then a huge fine and sometimes jail time and the huge fine.

And that was for one. As unfair as it seemed to her, she realized the medic was right. They were going to consider triplets a multiple violation! She was going to be fined for each one and there was no way she could come up with the credits to pay a triple fine. She might have some hope of paying one-she had her savings-but not three.

She couldn't even comfort herself with the thought that they might not demand an abortion. She thought they still might, however unlikely-but it was just a maybe. And if they had any idea that the babies were part Sirian-there was no way they were going to let her keep them!

And she was very much afraid that they were going to figure that out.

Ronan had transformed himself, she knew, to protect the young Sirians, but in doing so in front of some many witnesses, he'd also exposed her.

And Dax and Jarek, naturally enough, had followed his lead. They always did.

And as hard as she'd worked to keep them 'hidden' on the voyage, they'd been seen together. It wasn't going to take a rocket scientist to connect the dots.

A sob escaped her. She was in so much trouble!

Chapter Fifteen

It didn't take nearly as long for the axe to fall as Kate had hoped and actually expected given the enormous task of settling. It took them three full days even to finish setting up their temporary home and get the supplies unloaded from the ship. The following day the colonists were allowed to rest up while the surveyors got down to laying out the city they intended to build. Like most everyone else, Kate had gone to watch, trying to convince herself that she was as excited about the possible home sites as everyone else seemed to be.

The truth was, she couldn't conjure an ounce of enthusiasm. She was far more miserable than she'd ever been in her life, lonely when she'd never even acknowledged loneliness before. She was pretty sure she'd never actually felt alone, felt a lack of companionship.

Beyond that, home had never meant family to her before she'd realized she was pregnant. Now it did and she feared it was only a matter of time before the little family growing in her belly was taken from her.

What was home when there was no one to share it with?

Empty, she thought glumly.

Just like her life.

She didn't even have friends and colleagues anymore. The one friend that had come with her had pretty much abandoned her for fear that she would get tarred with the same brush once the authorities discovered she'd smuggled aliens aboard the colony ship.

She supposed she shouldn't blame Sissy for being a spineless, sniveling, self-centered coward.

But she did.

It made it worst that Lucky had noticed her protectors were gone. He hadn't approached her, but she feared it was only a matter of time and she wasn't certain how to handle it when he did or even if there was anything she could do to fend him off.

And it was a very bad thing that he'd noticed the guys had disappeared about the same time the Sirians had appeared. He might not have witnessed the transformation, but he'd already noticed, and commented, on the fact that they seemed 'foreign'. He'd already pointed out that he knew she'd had their papers forged-because he'd been there when she'd paid for them. If he'd listened to the gossip circulating after that first encounter with the natives, then he might be putting two and two together and that spelled very, very bad for her.

She wasn't sure she dared summon the authorities when he already had dirt on her.

Of course, he might not want to risk them finding out that he'd been a thug.

Then again, she couldn't believe the council members weren't aware of the fact that criminals had been transported with the colonists. He'd probably been pardoned just to get him to 'volunteer'.

She was so busy trying to pretend she didn't notice Lucky staring holes in her from just a few yards away that she didn't notice the man that came to stand over her at first.

"Dr. Kate Drexel?"

Startled, Kate looked up in automatic response. When she saw it was a soldier, fear instantly twisted in her belly and the impulse rose to deny her identity.

"You are Dr. Kate Drexel? I need you come with me."

Kate gulped. "What is this about?" she asked faintly, getting up from the ground where she'd been seated on legs that felt wobbly weak.

"You've been charged with a violation of the reproduction laws."

Kate felt faint even though she'd been expecting it ever since she'd been examined. She felt her face heat when she glanced around and discovered he'd been overheard and everyone close enough to hear had turned to stare at her like she was some kind of nasty bug.

Nodding stiffly, she went with the soldier, wondering if they were going to lock her up in the hold of the ship until she could be 'processed'.

She should have tried to find an advocate, she thought dismay. Now she wouldn't have anyone but a court appointed advocate who didn't know a damned thing about her and probably wouldn't care whether they won or lost her case.

Of course, it was a slam dunk anyway. She was pregnant, and she hadn't gone through channels and obtained a permit.

She wasn't the least bit happy to discover she'd been right. The soldier escorted her directly to the jail in the hold of the ship and locked her up. She sat down on the hard bunk that didn't even have a thin pad on it, hugging herself and trying not to think.

She couldn't prevent it, unfortunately.

The medic had said that she was fourteen weeks along. Ordinarily, they didn't order an abortion past the sixteenth week, and she'd hoped against hope that she could keep her secret until she passed that magic number. Of course, even then, when they allowed the baby to be carried full term, the mother was generally jailed for the infraction and not allowed to keep the baby, but she didn't know what the colonial council might decide to do when there was no institutional facilities to place the babies in.

Not that that was likely to be an issue for her, but

she thought she would've been happier even if she'd had to give them up in the end.

Ronan and Dax and Jarek could have saved her and the babies, she thought mournfully. Why hadn't they come back? They could've taken a new identity! She just didn't understand why they hadn't come back when they'd waited for her after they'd arrived.

The fear that they'd been injured-or worse-and couldn't occurred to her, but they hadn't seemed to be hurt when they'd fled.

She didn't know how much she could trust her recall of that time, though.

Maybe they had been hurt? Maybe they'd been mortally wounded and had only managed to escape.

The militia hadn't managed to catch up with them. If they had, then everyone would have known.

But that didn't mean they hadn't encountered some of their own clansmen in the jungle. They might not have been welcomed by their own people after living so long with humans. Anything could have happened. They didn't know their own world. Granted, they seemed to have 'built' in knowledge of all sorts of things, but that might not have been enough when they had no actual experience of their world.

She'd finally worried herself into exhaustion by the time the advocate finally arrived.

He didn't reassure her.

"I don't see that we have a case to argue here," he said tiredly when she'd settled across the conference table from him in the room they were given to discuss her case. "According to the examination, you're fourteen weeks along. The fact that there are three-and you have no permit seems to indicate traffic with the black marketwhich is only going to make you look worse. If there was anything to indicate a failure on the part of the technician that performed your partner's sterilization we might have something to fight with, but as it stands"

Kate felt her first surge of hope. "But ... it was an accident! I didn't go to a black market clinic to get impregnated! I didn't even know I was pregnant-not for sure, anyway, until the medic examined

me."

The advocate looked skeptical, but slightly less hostile. "Do you know who fathered the fetuses?"

Kate gaped at him, struggling with the insult. At least, she considered it an insult! "Of course" She broke off abruptly when she realized that she couldn't use the only defense, apparently, that was available to her. She cleared her throat, unwilling to give up on the possibility that had been offered. "He was ... uh ... a foreigner. From a ... uh ... less advanced country."

The advocate's brows rose. "Which country?"

Kate felt her face redden. "I didn't find out. He had a really thick accent, though. He barely spoke English."

He nodded. "I don't suppose there's any chance he was on board?"

Kate chewed her lip, debating whether to grasp that straw or not. "I thought he might be," she lied. "I met him at the club near the space center and I thought he must be there because he was a colonist, but we didn't actually get around to discussing that. And I don't think he was on this ship."

Her advocate frowned. "I don't know what the chances are that we could track him down even if he is here on Sirius. We don't have communications established with the other colonies and probably won't for months. And, unfortunately, you don't have that long. You're to appear before the council tomorrow."

Kate felt the blood rush from her face. "Tomorrow?" she echoed.

The advocate shrugged. "They don't have a lot of cases to preside over at the moment and you're far enough along anyway that they don't want to delay the hearing."

Meaning she was convicted even though she hadn't actually been tried yet.

The advocate heaved a heavy sigh and closed his notepad. "I'll do what I can for you, Dr. Drexel, but I have to be frank with you. They might be willing to accept the fines and give you probation if you have the credits to cover it. If you don't ... well, you're looking at jail time. How much is going to depend on their mood at the time. And that probably won't be good unless I can convince them that it was not a deliberate violation."

Kate struggled with the urge to break down and weep. "How much is the fine?"

"Fifty thousand credits ... for each violation."

Kate felt her jaw drop in horrified disbelief. "Fifty ... each? Oh my god!"

The advocate looked almost sympathetic. "I guess that means you don't have that much?"

Tears filled Kate's eyes in spite of all she could do. "I don't even have half that much!"

The advocate got up abruptly. "I'm sorry. I'll do what I can, but you need to prepare yourself."

She stopped him as he fled toward the door. "The babies ... Is there any chance they'll allow me to keep them? I mean, will they order an abortion?"

"I'm afraid so. That's mandatory in cases like this. That isn't something I'll be able to do anything about." Kate managed to fight back the urge to cry when the guard came to return her to her cell, but as soon as she was alone, she gave vent to the need clogging her chest until she could barely breathe. She cried until she was completely exhausted and fell into a fitful sleep. She didn't know how long she slept, but when she awoke a sense of urgency filled her.

They were going to take her babies! She had to do something! There must be something she could do!

It occurred to her that she hadn't tried to reach out to the guys, not once, since they'd left.

She hadn't because she had been certain that it was useless even to try. She'd thought they would have come back without that if they'd wanted to and were able to, but what did she have to lose now?

Sitting up on her bunk, she closed her eyes and tried to focus completely on the voice inside her head, trying to think how she would make that inner voice a shout that they might somehow hear. She called their names over and over in her mind. She begged them to help her save the babies.

It was exhausting and very quickly began to seem futile, but she had nothing else. For hours and called out to them, hoping against hope that they might be close enough to hear her.

She passed from desperation and begging to anger and accusation. They had gotten her into this mess! They couldn't just abandon her when she needed them!

She'd all but given up by the time she heard the voice she'd been so desperate to hear.

Kate! Where are you?

I'm here, inside the ship, Ronan!

Where?

In jail! I told you we couldn't have babies without a permit! They're going to order an abortion!

What is abortion? Jarek asked suspiciously.

They're going to ... kill them.

Because they are ours? Dax demanded angrily.

They don't know. I didn't tell them. I didn't get papers to breed.

Humans and their stupid papers! Ronan growled angrily.

Kate couldn't have agreed with him more at moment! She knew why the laws had been created and she also knew that it had been the only thing that had prevented them from breeding themselves into extinction. The laws had to apply to everyone to keep everyone safe.

And she still resented the threat to her babies!

We are coming!

She didn't recognize the guard that opened her cell door, but the moment she realized that there were three she knew it had to be her Sirians. "Ronan?"

He frowned at her. "You will give us away."

Kate hesitated, uncertain of her welcome, and finally rushed to him, throwing her arms around him and hugging herself tightly to him. To her surprise, he curled his arms around her and tightened his hold on her as spontaneously as if embracing was natural to him.

"You is alright, Kat?" Jarek asked.

Kate pulled back to look at him. "I think I will be now," she said shakily.

Ronan shook his head. "You will only be safe when we take you from here."

Kate met his gaze realizing he was saying that she would have to give up her own people to save her babies. She would have to give up everyone and everything she'd ever known, but she realized that she'd already been prepared for that. She might regret the decision, but she didn't think she would. She was ready to do whatever it took to make sure her children survived.

Beyond that, she wasn't willing to give up her Sirians. They might not love her as she did them. They might not be capable of it, but she could love them and she didn't think they would let her down.

"You think your people will accept me?" she asked doubtfully.

Ronan lifted a hand and brushed his knuckles lightly along her cheek. "If they will not then we will form our own clan."

Kate felt her heart soar. Neither what he'd said or the look in his eyes might be love, but it was close enough!

We should go before they sound an alarm, Dax said abruptly.

Kate followed them out of the cell into the empty corridor beyond. "You didn't ... kill anyone?"

Ronan's lips tightened. I wanted to kill them all, but, no. We have locked them in another cell.

Kate touched his arm. "Thank you for that."

Dax shook his head. There might yet be bloodshed.

The comment was enough to set Kate's nerves on edge, but despite her fears they managed to get off the ship without incident, primarily because the Sirians had locked the guards on the ship in one of the cells and the main force was outside the ship guarding the settlement. It helped that it was night and they fled into a near stygian darkness with no moonlight to expose them and very few artificial lights within the camp. They didn't manage to get completely clear of the encampment without incident, however.

Dax had scooped her up into his arms as soon as they descended the gangplank and they moved around the ship away from the encampment, but the guard they'd disabled on their way in was discovered before they managed to escape completely and the alarm went up. The moment the alarm siren cut loose, all three men transformed themselves into their natural forms, sprang forward at a run and then abruptly became airborne.

Kate's stomach went weightless as they left the ground and her heart seemed to leap into her throat, trying to choke her. She clutched at Dax frantically, burrowing her face against his neck. I will not drop you, beloved.

Surprise pierced Kate's sheer terror. Beloved?

It was as well that the thought that he might not only know what he'd said but feel it warmed her, because the air very quickly became frigid as they shot upwards almost vertically. "You can't climb high enough fast enough to reach a safe distance," Kate gasped. "There weapons have a long range and they have infrared. It can detect your body heat."

We can try, Ronan said grimly.

To Kate's relief, and despite her doubts, they succeeded. She thought it wasn't their flying capabilities so much as the fact that they'd been so close to crossing the guard perimeter before they discovered. It was relief that they managed to get away without being filled full of holes, however.

Kate's teeth were chattering with a mixture of shock, fear, and cold by the time they began to descend. The Sirians alit in small clearing beneath trees whose overhanging branches created a cave-like effect, blocking out the little light the stars above them created.

"Where are we?" Kate whispered when Dax set her on her feet.

"Home," Ronan responded.

Kate glanced toward him when he spoke. All she

could see, however, was a deeper shadow within the shadows and the faint, white glint of teeth that told her he was grinning. Hopefulness surged through her. "Home?"

We had to make a place for our delicate little human queen, Jarek said, amusement threading his voice.

Kate chuckled in response to that amusement as well as the comment even though she felt just a little insulted at the same time. "I'm not delicate. Or a queen."

She felt like one, though, when they'd led her inside the 'home' they'd built for her-sort of. As soon as the light came on, she discovered they were inside a natural cavern, or at least what had begun as one. They'd transformed it.

Kate glanced at the glow light Ronan held and then looked around at the 'room' that had been illuminated, immediately recognizing much of the furnishings as her own. Chuckling in pleasure, she turned to look at the men. "You got my things!"

She was a little disconcerted when she

discovered they were still in their natural forms. She didn't realize that she'd given herself away until, one by one, they shifted into the forms she was more familiar with. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry. I'm still trying to get used to the way you really look. I mean naturally. You don't have to make yourselves look like me-or human-you know. I'll get used to" She stopped, wondering if she was making things worse the harder she tried to reassure them.

Ronan approached her slowly, she thought because he was worried that she might reject him now that she'd seen him as he really was. I do not want you to be afraid of me as the others are.

Kate released a shaky breath and closed the gap between them, hugging him. "I'm not afraid of you. You've never given me any reason to be afraid." She pulled away to look up at him. "The others are afraid because they don't know you and you're different. But I think I like ... I think I love you because you are ... different."

She turned to look at Dax and Jarek. "All three of you. Or maybe I love you in spite of it," she added teasingly. She shook her head, looking away. "I thought ... when you didn't come back, I thought you weren't going to."

"You doubted?" Ronan asked, looking far less pleased than he had a moment before.

"I thought something might have happened. I thought all sorts of things, but mostly I thought about how very unhappy I was that you weren't there and how much I missed you."

We thought that you would not want to leave your people and come with us and I was very unhappy when I thought that, Jarek said, abruptly surging toward her and gathering her tightly against his length.

Truthfully, she wasn't sure she would have been as willing to leave a few days earlier, but that had changed the moment the soldiers had tried to kill them, she realized. She'd stopped feeling the kinship to her people she'd always felt, begun almost to think of them as aliens. She understood why they'd acted the way they had and she still didn't forgive them for it.

She squeezed him affectionately. "We're here together now."

She shook her head at them when Jarek released her to explore her new home and she discovered they'd filched far more than the things she'd brought with her. "You guys have been busy!" she said laughingly. "Have you been raiding since you left? It must have taken a while to collect all this-without getting caught."

She could see from their expressions that they weren't entirely certain what she meant by 'raiding'.

We had to make a place first, Dax said. We knew it would no longer be safe to live among the humans with you-not safe for you. We can still pass among them without being detected, but we had given ourselves away when we rushed to protect the younglings and in doing that had also given you away.

It occurred to Kate to wonder what had become of the younglings they'd rescued, but she decided that could wait. She wanted to become deeply reacquainted with her lovers. Smiling at them, she moved purposefully toward the huge bed they'd put together against the back wall of the cavetheir home, she corrected herself-stripping off her clothing as she went. She discovered when she'd climbed to the center that she didn't have to issue an invitation. All three of them had piled into the bed before she'd even settled completely.

Amusement flickered through her, but it was short-lived. Ronan made it clear that he'd missed her as much, or more, than she'd missed him. The near savagery of his hunger in his kisses and his touch was almost frightening.

Almost.

It was far more thrilling, however, and she was so wet and ready for his possession by the time he moved over her and pressed his turgid flesh inside of her that she came within moments. She was still shuddering with the convulsions of release when he followed her into ecstasy.

Before she could catch her breath, Dax dragged her into his embrace and stoked the dying embers of her desire into a new flame.

"Wait!" she gasped when he pushed her to her back. "I want Jarek, too."

Dax sent Jarek a deadly look, but he didn't object when she rolled onto her side to face him.

Dragging her upper leg across his hip, he thrust inside of her with a minimum of effort. She felt Jarek move tightly against her buttocks and moment later the burning stretch as he entered her with Dax. She moaned in pleasure, closing her eyes to focus on the twin penetrations as they set a rhythm.

She was so busy enjoying the play of their cocks inside of her that they almost left her behind. As she felt first Jarek and then Dax tense and felt the heat of their semen bathe her womb, however, it set her own climax off.

This, she thought a little mindlessly, was true bliss!

* * * *

No one was prepared for the birthing because none of the four had ever experienced anything like it. Kate had some idea what to expect, despite her lack of actual experience, and she still wasn't prepared for labor in all its painful glory.

The Sirians had some inkling of what would happen because of the clan 'memory'. For although their own queens, after carrying her eggs inside of her for nearly the same term of gestation as humans did, birthed her young while still inside their pods, their gatherers crossed species. And some of the species they had crossed with in generations past birthed their young just as most mammals on Earth did.

The memory, or knowledge, wasn't nearly specific enough to truly prepare them for birth, however. They'd emerged from their pods with no mother around-no fathers either-and it was a far less messy affair.

They were appalled and nearly as frightened as Kate was when she suddenly went into labor, by her reckoning, weeks before she should have. She wasn't completely certain that the babies were early. The days on Sirius were longer than Earth days by nearly six hours and that made counting difficult even with her knowledge of the gestation cycle and the fact that the medics had pinpointed her progress for her.

She thought they were early, however, and that sent her into a panic.

Ronan had wanted to 'raid' the colony for a medic to attend the birth. Kate had flatly refused to agree

to the kidnapping, not because she didn't want medical help-she did. And not because she was particularly worried that the medic would come to any harm. She was afraid that Ronan, or Dax, or Jarek would come to harm in the attempt, however, and she was also afraid that the raid would set in motion the hostilities she had worried about.

It was natural. She could do it.

As soon as her pains began to escalate, though, she changed her mind.

Fortunately for the hapless would be kidnap victim, she discovered it was far too late to change her mind. The babies were ready to be born and they weren't going to wait for any of the men to kidnap a medic for her and she damned well wasn't about to let any of them escape when it was clear they all wanted to run the moment they saw blood and amniotic fluids gush from their very most favorite place.

She was pretty sure they were also appalled when the tiny, squalling infants made their appearance, one by one, squeezed from her body by her contractions to lie in a bloody mess on the bed, their tiny arms and legs flailing as they screamed their displeasure at being shoved their warm, dark place into the cold, cruel world.

Exhausted almost to the point of unconsciousness by her labors, Kate instructed them in a slurred, almost drunken voice, to wrap the babies snuggly in the receiving blankets she'd made by cutting up a coverlet and give them to her.

Ronan immediately looked at Dax and belayed the order. Dax turned to Jarek and told him to do it.

"Damn it, Ronan! Dax! One of them is supposed to be yours! They aren't all Jarek's! Just be careful with them!"

"The biggest is mine," Ronan said unhappily, obviously not impressed with the 'biggest'. The claim inspired them to examine the babies a little more closely, however, to make sure they'd identified their own offspring.

The little queen is mine, Jarek said happily.

Dax sent him a resentful look.

The babies also weren't impressed with their

fathers. They squalled more loudly when Ronan, Dax, and Jarek haphazardly wrapped them in the blankets and then scooped them up and deposited them with obvious relief close enough that Kate could reach them. Unconvinced that they'd been as gentle as they should have been, Kate promptly pulled the blankets off, examined each of the babies carefully, and then bundled them snuggly. They began to quiet as soon as they were wrapped tightly and brought close enough they could feel Kate's warm and smell her scent.

Ronan's boy immediately began a slightly frantic search for a breast to suckle. Surprised but pleased to see he was strong despite his size, Kate chuckled and guided him to her breast. She fell asleep before he'd given up the tit he'd staked a claim on, but roused again when the other two babies began to demand to suckle.

"They're beautiful," she murmured happily. "I knew they would be."

The men exchanged doubtful looks.

They are still bloody, Ronan pointed out.

And very red and ... spotty, Dax observed.

And wrinkled, Jarek said a little doubtfully. Their skins are too big.

Kate managed to glare at them. "They're beautiful."

Ronan eyed her a little warily. "You are beautiful."

She looked like hell because she'd just been through hell, but she decided it was really sweet of him to lie to her. "I love you, too," she said sleepily. "I've fed them. It's your turn to nurture while I sleep."

None of them looked particularly anxious to assume their duties, but they took the babies and after watching them for a few moments to assure herself they were holding them carefully, Kate gave up the effort to stay awake any longer.

"I love you, Kate," Jarek murmured, bending down to nuzzle her cheek.

Kate smiled. She occasionally suffered doubts, still, that they really understood love as humans did, but then again so very many of her own people seemed utterly confused about it that it hardly mattered when they seemed willing and eager to express all the 'trimmings' that went with her own concept of love-affection and protection, companionship-hot sex. They didn't even stint her on giving her the words she so enjoyed hearing. She doubted there was a single being on Siriuscolonist or native-that was a happy and content as she was.

Dax nuzzled her other cheek. "I love you."

"I'm glad you guys picked me for your mate. I love all of you. I love my beautiful babies, and I love the dwelling you built for me. I never dreamed when I left Earth that I would be coming home."

The End